



# Performing pregnancy: Comic content, critique and ambivalence in pregnant stand-up comedy

**Sharon Lockyer** 

Brunel University London, UK

**Sara De Benedictis**

Brunel University London, UK

## Abstract

Stand-up comedy has recently become a primary site where representations of pregnancy are increasingly prevalent. Yet little academic work focuses on pregnant stand-up comedians and their performances. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this article examines the cultural work of pregnant stand-up comedy. Thematic analysis of pregnant stand-up comedy by Amy Schumer, Ellie Taylor and Ali Wong identifies three significant features characterising the performances: (1) Comedic Corporeality, Vulgarly and Ambiguity; (2) Breaking Silences through the 'Unruly Expectant Mother'; and (3) Critiquing Maternity Inequality through Pregnant Stand-Up? We examine how pregnant stand-up comedy interacts with and disrupts dominant cultural pregnancy representations, illustrating how pregnancy functions simultaneously as comic content and critique in the performances. Such comic content and critique are characterised by complexity as ambivalence is central to pregnant stand-up comedy. We argue it is precisely such ambivalence that provides productive means to understand the cultural and theoretical significances of pregnant stand-up comedy.

## Keywords

popular feminism, pregnant stand-up comedy, Amy Schumer, Ellie Taylor, Ali Wong, ambivalence

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### Corresponding author:

Sharon Lockyer, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University London, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, UB8 3PH, UK.

Email: [Sharon.Lockyer@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:Sharon.Lockyer@brunel.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Anglosphere stand-up comedy has expanded in the last five years due to the increasing visibility of stand-up comedians performing comedy about pregnancy while pregnant. From live fringe and YouTube stand-up comedy performances through to mainstream Netflix stand-up comedy specials, comedians like Hannah Ballou, Karith Foster, Natasha Leggero, Josie Long, Monrok, Christina P, Roslyn Ross, Amy Schumer, Kira Soltanovich, Ellie Taylor and Ali Wong have performed stand-up comedy about pregnancy while heavily pregnant – which we, following Harris (2019), call ‘pregnant stand-up comedy’. Stand-up comedy has become a primary site for contemporary pregnancy representations whereby sociocultural norms about pregnancy are highlighted, represented and critiqued.

Some pregnant stand-up comedy performances have attracted large audiences, industry recognition and commercial successes. In *goo:ga* (2016), a ‘highly recommended show’ (Craze, 2016) at the Brighton Fringe, UK, Hannah Ballou performs heavily pregnant, discovers the baby’s sex and allows the audience to name the baby live on stage. Ali Wong, ‘Comedy’s Reigning Queen Mom’ (Miller, 2019), performed pregnant stand-up comedy on Netflix specials, *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Amy Schumer also performed pregnant stand-up comedy in her Primetime Emmy Award nominated Netflix special, *Growing* (2019). In Bennett’s (2019) review of Ellie Taylor’s show *Cravings* (2019), which she performs while pregnant, he praises Taylor for breaking pregnancy taboos.

Mizejewski (2014: 6) argues that ‘women’s comedy has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back and is contested’. The examples cited highlight the contemporary appetite for comedy that explores gender issues with a feminist inflection (Mizejewski, 2014). This appetite is particularly evident in the UK and USA, exemplified by numerous feminist shows winning respected awards (e.g. Bridget Christie’s *A Bic for Her* and Adrienne Truscott’s *Asking for It* at Edinburgh Festivals), ‘a new generation of female-led comedy in America’ and the success of celebrity comedians, such as Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and Amy Schumer (Tomsett, 2017: 58). As Tomsett observes, these successes link to a broader feminist context whereby feminist campaigns and activities have become increasingly prevalent in mainstream culture (Tomsett, 2017: 57–8; see also Banet-Weiser, 2018). In addition, they link to broader market decisions based on ‘Western millennial values of inclusion’ (Bennett, 2022: n.p.).

Although the prevalence of pregnant stand-up comedy has received media coverage (e.g. Bennett, 2019; Harris, 2019; Miller, 2019), little academic research has explored pregnant stand-up comedians and their performances. This article addresses this academic gap by explicitly analysing pregnant stand-up comedy. Our central research question is: how do pregnant stand-up comedy performances link to, reinforce, subvert and/or disrupt dominant cultural pregnancy representations? To address this question we examine the content, style, functions and critiques offered by pregnant stand-up comedy. We also extend our analysis to the representation *and* production of pregnancy and labour in pregnant stand-up comedy, deepening our understanding of pregnant women as cultural workers, who, to date, are under-researched in academic debates on

the gendered politics of cultural work. We innovatively combine theoretical insights on ambivalence from feminist media studies, maternal studies, sociology and comedy studies to explore the significance of ambivalence in such performances, and thus extend our understanding of the sociocultural role of ambivalence in critiquing dominant representations and social norms concerning pregnant femininities and cultural work. In doing so, we argue that ambivalence in pregnant stand-up comedy is multi-layered and serves to articulate critiques, uncertainties and doubts about pregnancy in three different ways. Taking inspiration from and expanding mainly Connidis and McMullin's (2002) work on ambivalence, we reveal how individual ambivalence, representational ambivalence and structural ambivalence are central to pregnant stand-up comedy. Individualised ambivalence draws attention to the contradictory ways in which pregnancy is corporeally experienced by the self and how these often clash with mainstream perceptions of how pregnant bodies 'should' be. Representational ambivalence questions and challenges social and media norms, expectations and pressures about 'un/acceptable' behaviour during pregnancy and maternity. Structural ambivalence highlights inequalities during pregnancy and maternity related to the gendered division of work, labour and heterosexual relations in the comedy industry. These three types of ambivalence underpin the three themes identified in the pregnant stand-up comedy performances analysed: individualised ambivalence drives the Comedic Corporeality, Vulgarity and Ambiguity theme; representational ambivalence underpins the Breaking Silences through the 'Unruly Expectant Mother' theme; with structural ambivalence forging the Critiquing Maternity Inequality through Pregnant Stand-Up? theme. We demonstrate how the autobiographical nature of pregnant stand-up comedy uniquely enables pregnancy and pregnant bodies to move from the object to the subject of the comedy. Pregnant stand-up comedians aim to speak in, and on, their own terms, facilitating self-definition and new perspectives of pregnancy. Such comedy can facilitate the problematising, complicating and disrupting of cultural representations of pregnancy, and present a visceral understanding of pregnancy that exposes the limits of existing cultural representations of pregnancy. It can also offer a pointed no-holds-barred approach to presenting more diverse and inclusive representations of pregnancy that, to date, have not been evident in the creative and cultural industry of comedy. However, such representations are not necessarily wholly progressive either and we pay attention to the ideological contradictions that arise through pregnant stand-up comedy too.

We begin by reviewing scholarship on the continuities and changes in cultural representations of pregnancy before evaluating the position and perception of (pregnant) women within the comedy industry. The focus subsequently shifts to outlining our methodological approach before analysing the three themes that are central to pregnant stand-up comedy.

### **'Pregnant beauty' to 'love your (pregnant) body' discourses**

Representations of pregnancy in popular culture have undergone a shift in recent times from sexualised to 'more realistic' representations of pregnant subjectivities and bodies. Feminists have charted the emergence of pregnancy representations in advertising, television, film and social media (e.g. Das and Roy, 2019; Kornfield, 2018;

Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017), birth representations (e.g. De Benedictis et al., 2019; Tyler and Baraitser, 2013) and maternal femininities (Allen et al., 2015) in popular culture, uncovering that the rise in such representations is often related to neoliberal capitalism in the Global North and some Global South contexts. Tyler (2001: 81) argues that the 1990s enabled pregnancy representations to enter the mainstream as the prominence of lifestyle magazines increased and celebrities became a staple fixture within such magazines. Tyler (2001: 25) elaborates that the now iconic image of pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 1992 enabled a 'representational shift', whereby the pregnant body was 'suddenly and shamelessly everywhere', becoming sexualised and targeted for consumer markets. Since then, there has been an intensification of pregnancy representations in various mediated sites, emblematic of a 'maternal-familialism' that shapes and governs 'successful' domestic life, motherhood and the home, which support capitalist workings and hegemonic femininity (McRobbie, 2020). Crucially, scholars like McRobbie (2020) argue that within this representational shift white, middle-class subjects define successful, ideal femininities, stressing the cultural inequities that such representations may (re)formulate.

More recently since the 2010s, pregnancy representations have been marked by broader cultural discourses related to the rise of popular (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and/or neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018) and 'love your body' discourses (Gill and Elias, 2014). From 'Pregnancy: Expectation Vs Reality' memes to Mothercare's viral 'Body Proud Mums' 2019 series celebrating post-pregnancy bodies to #PushItOut campaigning for fashion advertisers to stop using prosthetic bumps in campaigns. The controlled and overtly sexualised pregnant body – embodied in 'pregnant beauty' (Tyler, 2011) – is now accompanied, or potentially overshadowed, by pregnancy representations that attempt to underscore the diversity of pregnant bodies, whereby 'more realistic' pregnant and perinatal representations have emerged. However, representing pregnancy 'flaws and all' may not offer more progressive pregnancy discourses. Gill and Elias (2014: 185) argue that 'love your body' discourses, which shape pregnancy representations too, shift disciplinary practices into 'psychic life', requiring 'psychic labour'. They argue that 'love your body' discourses, largely emerging in advertising, evidence new requirements for women to take responsibility for body dissatisfaction that they may feel. They further note that despite advertisers bombarding women with cultural discourses telling them their bodies need change, monitoring and/or improvement, the same advertisers urge women to control any self-shaming. It is within these contexts of heightened popularised discourses about feminism and the shift towards 'more realistic' pregnancy representations that pregnant stand-up comedy has emerged, which we now contextualise in relation to the comedy industry.

## **Contextualising (pregnant) women in comedy**

The view that women are not, and cannot, be funny, or that men are funnier than women, persists in some academic, media and public debates (e.g. Greengross et al., 2020; Hitchens, 2007). Gray (1994) argues that numerous myths ensure these views are perpetuated over time. These include reinforcing myths that women lack the language skills required to create and tell jokes, through to circulation of the repeated maxim that

feminists more broadly lack a sense of humour, which links to the ‘feminist killjoy’ figure (Ahmed, 2010: 581). Lockyer (2011) argues that these myths have contributed to the creation, and persistence, of a masculine discourse when discussing gender and comedy, which serves to uphold male power and dominance.

However, a body of literature highlights women’s long-standing ability to create, recognise and appreciate comedy that challenges this masculine discourse and rhetoric, underscoring women’s increasing success in comedy (e.g. Gilbert, 1997; Gray, 1994; Lockyer, 2011; Rowe, 1995; Tomsett, 2017). From Rowe’s (1995) ‘unruly woman’, through to Gilbert’s (1997) analysis of self-deprecating comedy, much of this literature focuses on the subversive potential of comedy written and performed by women and its ability to challenge and reverse dominant sex and gender stereotypes, norms and social conventions.

Yet, while female comedians have challenged gendered inequalities through their comedy, the cultural work of comedy can be problematic. Within the cultural and creative industry of comedy, stand-up comedians ‘must rely on their own abilities to develop a sophisticated repertoire of emotional stratagems to secure work, negotiate pay, and cope with ubiquitous insecurity’ (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018: 1683). More generally, existing research on cultural work in the cultural and creative industries highlights that such work is structurally patterned so that inequalities abound (see e.g. O’Brien et al., 2016). Not only is the talented creative mythologised as male (Conor et al., 2015), like the comedian (Lockyer, 2011), but the nature of informal, precarious and insecure work that such industries rely upon can disadvantage, for example, ethnic minority groups (for an overview see Malik and Shankley, 2020), mothers (Dent, 2020; for an overview see Wreyford, 2013), women (Conor et al., 2015) and working-class people (De Benedictis et al., 2017). As Saha (2018) further stresses in relation to race and the cultural industries, it is crucial to investigate the political economic structures of these industries and how cultures of production embedded within them shape such social inequalities and the representations produced.

Given the long-standing myths surrounding women and comedy, and the structural inequities that shape cultural work, it is perhaps unsurprising that in stand-up comedy, women and pregnancy have a complex and contradictory relationship. As more women have become mainstream stand-up comedians, the tensions of performing stand-up comedy while pregnant have arisen. When comedian Joan Rivers appeared on CBS’s *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1967 when pregnant, she covered her ‘baby bump’ with ‘a tent’ like dress and was required to refer to her pregnancy indirectly as ‘soon I’ll hear the pitter-patter of little feet’ (Rivers, quoted in Harris, 2019). In *Sold Out* (1991), British comedian Victoria Wood includes experiences of conceiving and using pregnancy tests. Later, in *Live in Your Own Home* (1994), Wood includes autobiographical material about ante-natal classes, birth and baby clinics. Although some of this content is about pregnancy, Wood performs this material while she is not pregnant, suggesting constraints on how, when and where pregnancy is permitted in comedy.

More recently, in 2015 comedian Ophira Eisenberg was warned by some American comedy bookers that audiences might be alienated if she joked about her pregnancy on stage (Harris, 2019). Stott (2005: 98) provides another explanation for the reluctance to refer directly to a comedian’s pregnancy, arguing that such ‘treatment of women

speaks not so much of a risible and caricatured sexuality, but a fear of female corporeality and the reproductive consequences of male fantasy'. Recent research on the representational politics of television comedy combines textual analysis with analysis of the industrial/economic context to reveal tensions and ambivalences surrounding identity-based performances (see Bennett, 2022; Krefting, 2019; Marx, 2019). In his analysis of Comedy Central comedies such as *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Broad City*, Marx observes that when Comedy Central's industrial context is considered the 'seemingly progressive and feminist meanings of these shows shift' as it serves to 'reaffirm the power of its long-time audience of straight white men' (Marx, 2019: 126). The historical masculine discourse surrounding comedy, the unequal nature of the cultural and creative industries, as discussed above, coupled with television comedy's industrial landscape, may explain how the stand-up comedy performances considered here demonstrate that historically, where pregnant stand-up comedians have been seen, they have not been permitted to comment directly on their pregnancy or have been criticised for doing so. Further, where a female stand-up comedian includes material about pregnancy in a show, this is performed when not pregnant.

However, in recent years we have seen some comedians performing stand-up comedy *while* pregnant and referring *directly* to their pregnancy. Pregnant stand-up comedy emerges from a contemporary context that centres the consumer potential of maternal femininities, comedy focusing on gender issues under 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and an inclusive 'millennial-era of resistive stand-up comedy' that celebrates a 'non-dominant perspective' (Bennett, 2022: n.p.). These new pregnancy representations warrant critical reflection. To do so, we now outline our methodological approach for analysing pregnant stand-up comedy.

## Methodology

To further our understandings of pregnant stand-up comedy and what pregnant stand-up exposes about maternal femininities, mainstream feminism and cultural work, our study focused on pregnant stand-up comedy representations that have piqued popular interest. While pregnant stand-up comedy has emerged within different comedy subgenres, as noted above, and such performances may offer alternative meanings, our interests lay in analysing mainstream formations due to the cultural reach such representations offer.

Due to the importance of the stand-up comedy shows on Netflix, the potential reach of Netflix content and the online streaming service's penchant for re/producing content around pregnancy and maternity,<sup>1</sup> we focused our analysis on Netflix pregnant stand-up comedy. Boardman (2020: 57) argues that the stand-up comedy special is increasingly cultural significant as 'more people encounter stand-up comedy through specials than at comedy clubs'. Comedy specials come with a stamp of 'quality' approval as the expectations around them have come to promise that, unlike work in progress, the material has been curated to offer the strongest comedic performance (Boardman, 2020: 58). By 2012 the Netflix's stand-up comedy special was one of three<sup>2</sup> key creative content areas that Netflix produced for its branding strategy and to compete with television channels (Wayne, 2017). Since then, stand-up comedy specials and series have become a mainstay for the streaming giant's online repertoire and its 200 million plus

worldwide subscribers (Rushe, 2021). We identified four performances by pregnant stand-up comedians for analysis: *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018) performed by Ali Wong, *Cravings* (2019) performed by Ellie Taylor and *Growing* (2019) performed by Amy Schumer. Inclusion criteria were that shows were in English and performers were visibly pregnant. Schumer and Wong's performances were Netflix specials and Taylor's performance was part of Netflix's *Comedians of the World* series. Reportedly, Wong's shows saw Netflix engage in an intense bidding war (Husband, 2018) and *Growing* saw Schumer named one of the highest paid comedians of 2019 (Shapiro, 2019). These large sums highlight the investment the online giant has in producing comic content.

We performed a discourse analysis of the programmes, considering the importance of the rhetoric of discourse, the visual aspects of the performances, and how the verbal connected to the visual. Following Gill (2000: 174), we view discourse analysis as comprising: 'a concern with discourse itself; a view of language as constructive and constructed; an emphasis upon discourse as a form of action; and a conviction in the rhetorical organization of discourse'. Our analysis was interested in what pregnant stand-up comedy reveals about contemporary pregnancy representations and how such pregnant representations aligned with recent 'popular feminist' discourses (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Following De Benedictis et al. (2017: 353), who 'assert that critical interrogations of the logics of cultural production and how these come to bear upon cultural representations are crucial', we were also intrigued by what pregnant stand-up comedy discloses about *pregnant* cultural workers in comedy and television. Guided by existing literature and continuities that emerged through the discourse analysis, ambivalence was central to the pregnant stand-up comedy performances and operated in a multi-layered manner to centre individualised, representational and structural ambivalences. The different manifestations of ambivalence generated three themes: Comedic Corporeality, Vulgarity and Ambiguity (individualised ambivalence); Breaking Silences through the 'Unruly Expectant Mother' (representational ambivalence); and Critiquing Maternity Inequality through Pregnant Stand-Up? (structural ambivalence). The multi-layered use of ambivalence was fluid across the pregnant stand-up comedy performances analysed – on the one hand it is used to refer to ambivalent feelings and thoughts about pregnancy and on the other hand it is used to provide complexity to the ways in which pregnancy is joked about. Movement from one use of ambivalence to another occurs in many ways, for example, in a single comic moment, across a comic narrative, or more broadly from the beginning to the end of the performance.

## On the importance of ambivalence

Ambivalence has a long history in psychology and sociology (Szmigin and Canning, 2014). Sociological ambivalence refers to 'simultaneously held opposing feelings or emotions that are due in part to countervailing expectations about how individuals should act ... [and] reflects the contradiction and paradox that are characteristic of social experience' (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 558). Ambivalence has been conceptualised as operating on multiple levels; upholding contradictory structural norms (Szmigin and Canning, 2014) and subjectively maintaining competing and coexistent

emotions and motivations (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). Connidis and McMullin (2002: 559) argue for reconceptualising ambivalence as ‘a feature of structured sets of social relations’ to connect the subjective to the social.

Ambivalence is a conceptual thread that runs through maternal studies too. Some psycho-social feminist scholarship underscores that maternal ambivalence, having ‘loving’ and ‘hostile’ feelings towards the child, marks the ‘internal maternal imago’, paves the way for ‘maternal thinking’ and can underscore maternal resilience when such mothers are aware of such ambivalence (for an overview of maternal ambivalence and charting of maternal resilience see Baraitser and Noack, 2007). De Benedictis and Orgad (2016: 4–5) explore how fictional characters like Bridget Jones voice maternal experience in ways that do ‘not idealise, silence or denigrate the maternal’, as she ‘rather attends to the mundane, messy realities and frustrations of motherhood, [which] may contribute to complicating dominant maternal narratives (see Baraitser 2009)’. As we illustrate below, we could similarly view pregnant comedians who perform autobiographical content as voicing maternal ambivalence.

Relatedly, ambivalence has been considered key to understanding the contemporary relevance of mainstream feminism and feminist activism. In a conversation between Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019: 19), Banet-Weiser notes that recent representations of feminism that paradoxically align with neoliberal mentalities are not necessarily ‘politically vacuous’ but rather ‘[t]hrough a lens of ambivalence, we can more clearly see the relationship between popular feminisms and populist feminisms rather than cast them as diametrically opposed’. Thus, ambivalence becomes a productive site to understand recent feminist representations and activism.

The political potential of ambivalence has also been identified in comedy studies. For example, in his analysis of racial joking in *In Living Color*, Gray argues that the sketch comedy ‘enacts a cultural politics of representation that settles around a position of ambivalence’, where, for some, the ‘ambivalence contests hegemonic assumptions and representation of race’, whereas for others it ‘perpetuates troubling images’ (Gray, 1995: 130). Similarly, in her analysis of race in the comedy *Little Britain*, Malik observes that it ‘manages, in different ways, to produce a range of readings that might be determined as either inferentially or overtly racist or anti-racist in the same episode, sketch and even representational moment’ (2010: 76; see also Lockyer, 2010 on ambivalence in class comedy). Ambivalence becomes central to understanding comedy when textual analysis combines with industrial/economic analysis to illustrate how commercial media serves to undermine comedic cultural critique (see Bennett, 2022; Krefting, 2019; Marx, 2019).

Taking our cue from these different, yet related, perspectives on ambivalence, our analysis adopts a multidimensional approach to ambivalence, interweaving micro and macro forces (interpersonal relations, industrial relations and broader socio-structural relations), while simultaneously examining stand-up comedy’s role in performing, creating and articulating maternal ambivalence within a context of heightened feminism. It is to the three themes identified that we now turn.

### **Comedic corporeality, vulgarity and ambiguity**

Underpinned by individualised ambivalence, the first theme investigates how pregnant stand-up comedy performances privilege and centre corporeality. Critchley (2002: 42)



observes that the body is ‘the butt of so much humour’. Furthermore, Stott argues that the body in comedy ‘is the medium through which humanity’s fascination with its instincts and animal nature is explored’ (2005: 83). In the pregnant stand-up comedy performances analysed, the body is centred varyingly to mediate the physicality of the maternal body so as to provide a more nuanced understanding of maternal bodies that problematises the representation of the ‘perfectly formed’ maternal body. Visually, this involves pregnant stand-up comedians wearing clothes that accentuate their body shape. In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong wears a sleeveless leopard print dress that fits tightly over her baby bump, with flat ballerina pumps, similar in style to in her earlier show, *Baby Cobra*. In *Cravings*, Taylor wears a tight sparkly dress with high-heeled sandals. Although in *Growing* Schumer wears a loose-fitting dress, within the show’s first five minutes, she emphasises her baby bump through satirical critique of the ‘show me the baby bump’ request to pregnant women. Schumer observes:

People always want to see the bump. That’s like the thing. ‘Just show me that fucking bump, bitch’. And my belly button is getting so misshapen with this baby inside that I had to put two Band-Aids over my belly button tonight.

She simultaneously lifts her dress to reveal the plasters over her belly button and ensures the whole audience can see her baby bump, flesh, plasters and pants by walking across the stage. Schumer’s literal interpretation of the ‘show me the baby bump’ request goes beyond cupping the bump to show the flesh of the bump and the plaster hiding the ‘mishappen’ belly button. Through the exposure of her bare stomach and ‘mishappen’ belly button, Schumer declines requests to show off her baby bump under her clothing while highlighting that pregnant bodies do not necessarily align with society’s dominant view of pregnant bodies as smooth and symmetrical. This mocks the fetishisation of the ‘baby bump’ by simultaneously drawing comic attention to the ‘show me the baby bump’ request by revealing more than is often meant by the request, while also fetishising the skin of the baby bump (see Tyler, 2001). By doing so, Schumer draws attention to, and holds up for ridicule, socially acceptable assumptions about pregnant bodies and offers a new understanding of the corporeal impacts of pregnancy. Additionally, Wong, Taylor and Schumer command the stage with their pregnant bodies by either bending, flexing, parading or dancing, using their pregnant bodies for comedic corporeality – in stark contrast to the concealment of pregnancy in Joan Rivers’ performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, noted above. Such performances jar with long-standing patriarchal notions that the pregnant body should be visually absent from the public sphere (Tyler, 2001), and this jarring is used for comic effect. The historical regulation of the pregnant body is contested as the comedians reclaim, centre and refer directly to their pregnant bodies.

Pregnant stand-up comedians privilege and centre corporeality of pregnancy and childbirth by also reflecting on the impact of pregnancy and childbirth on women’s bodies. In *Cravings*, Taylor discusses the ‘changes going on in my body’ and ‘lots of hormones racing through’, causing facial hair, which Taylor describes as ‘pregnancy taking the piss’. Such use of self-deprecating comedy may be interpreted as reinforcing the cultural stereotype of the hairy hormonal maternal body, which is constructed as less

desirable according to traditional notions of femininity. This comic observation illustrates Stott's (2005: 84) view that 'an ideal of physicality must exist against which the comedian can be found lacking, thereby reassuring an audience that comic substance will be found in departure from those ideals'. However, self-deprecating comedy can unsettle and challenge, rather than reassure the audience, as it can critique the values and ideals held.

In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong draws on her own ambivalence towards the maternal body by reflecting on a visit made to a friend who had recently given birth. Wong uses a grotesque lens to share her fears about her impending postpartum body and the impact of birth through grotesque characterisation of her friend's postpartum body. Wong recalls that her friend's 'pussy looked crazy ... Because her pussy straight up looked like two hanging dicks side by side ... You could French braid that shit.' Such references align with Bakhtin's (1984: 26) grotesque body, where 'stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from'. Wong's sophisticated weaving of disgust in this skit epitomises Stott's (2005: 88, emphasis added) view of the grotesque as a 'humorous mode that aims to produce an *ambiguous* feeling pitched somewhere between pleasure and disgust'. Wong simultaneously draws the audience close through explicit and direct reference to her friend's genitals, yet keeps the audience distanced through the hard-edged description of the genitals belonging to her friend. In discussing pregnant stand-up more generally, the comedian Christina P argues that: 'Anything remotely vulgar gets a bigger laugh when you're pregnant ... It's just more taboo' (quoted in Harris, 2019). Critchley (2002: 45) refers to vulgar comedy as working through a 'play of distance and proximity' (see also Tyler, 2008), where the audience 'has their nose rubbed in the physical object being described, but in a manner that is remote and resolutely unsentimental'. Wong's example of pregnant stand-up comedy content pivots on the comedian's ambivalence about the maternal body because, although the material draws attention to potential lived realities of the impacts of pregnancy and childbirth and places them centre stage, this comedy is underpinned by contradictory attitudes towards the maternal body as the skit simultaneously positions the discussion as both a progressive and disgusting revelation. Thus, the skit highlights the ideological and discursive limits to the recent shift towards 'more realistic' and 'flaws and all' pregnant representations discussed above.

The pregnant stand-up comedy performances analysed highlight how the maternal body can be read, or is positioned, through ambivalence. This can be through pregnant stand-up comedians drawing attention to the ways in which the maternal body may disrupt cultural expectations of femininity, or through their revealing, and mocking, unspoken elements of the maternal body.

### **Breaking silences through the 'unruly expectant mother'**

The second type of ambivalence identified in the pregnant stand-up comedy performances relates to representational ambivalences. Representational ambivalence underscores our second theme, which examines how the content, techniques and critiques in pregnant stand-up comedy reveal the ambivalence felt towards socially and mediated

unspoken or taboo aspects of pregnancy. Representational ambivalence offers more expansive and diverse understandings of pregnancy experiences. While there is overlap with the first theme as the examples refer to the body, our focus here is on how pregnant stand-up comedians refer to their bodies as a lens to discuss and critique pregnancy norms and break pregnancy silences.

This theme illustrates how pregnant stand-up comedians embody the ‘comic spokesperson’ function of stand-up comedy, acting as a ‘mediator, an “articulator” of our culture, and as our contemporary *anthropologist*’ (Mintz, 1985: 75, original emphasis). Pregnant stand-up comedians embrace the ambivalence felt between their own lived experiences and feelings towards pregnancy compared to societal expectations, potentially providing a space for articulating new understandings of pregnancy experiences. For example, in *Cravings* Taylor confesses:

I’m at the stage now where I can feel the baby moving inside me, and I’ll be honest, it’s fucking weird. I don’t know if I like it. You’re meant to love it, aren’t you? My husband says to me, ‘Does it feel magical? ...’ I’m like, ‘Well, if by magical, do you mean does it feels like I’ve swallowed a live fish that is freaking out inside me, and headbutting my bladder? Then, yes, it’s a regular fairy tale, darling!’

Here, the ambivalence Taylor feels towards experiencing her baby move is exemplified by her ‘honest’ feelings and uncertainty about whether she likes feeling baby movement. The question ‘You’re meant to love it, aren’t you?’ refers to established norms and expectations about how pregnant women ‘should’ feel about their growing baby, setting up what follows – the reveal of what it ‘really’ feels like, and the incongruity between the different perceptions, which simultaneously offers critique of the ‘love your body’ discourse – discussed above and ridicules the unspoken pressure on pregnant women to enjoy and embrace pregnancy. The ambivalence is extended by revealing the discrepancy between patriarchal societal norms of pregnancy (Taylor’s husband calls the feeling ‘magical’) and Taylor’s personal assessment of her experiences (a painful uncontrollable vertebra).

In *Growing*, Schumer highlights how other women and the media present a romanticised representation of pregnancy sickness, calling them ‘lies’:

I didn’t know that being pregnant could be really hard. Like, I didn’t know that because you bitches all lie about it. Women don’t tell you how hard it is ... I should have Googled being pregnant. ‘Cause it’s been really awful. ‘Cause in movies, they don’t show you. There’s just a montage where the girl’s in her office and she’s typing and then she’s like [imitates gagging]. And she runs to the bathroom, she throws up once. And then in the next scene she’s in overalls painting a barn. Like ‘Yay!’ You know. I throw up an exorcist amount every day.

Similarly, in *Cravings* Taylor considers the ‘absolute bullshit’ that her friends relay about pregnancy:

I am finding the no drinking thing quite hard, which I wasn’t expecting ‘cause all my friends who’ve had children said, ‘Oh, you don’t miss alcohol when you’re pregnant. Don’t miss

alcohol at all.' I can confirm that is absolute bullshit. People ask me if I have cravings. Yeah, two quite strong ones, Pinot and Grigio, thank you.

Taylor draws attention to the social expectations and pressures that are placed on pregnant women by wider society and also other pregnant women that collectively silence pregnant women so as to maintain the perception of the contented alcohol-free pregnant woman. These examples of sharing the lived realities of pregnancy that debunk pregnancy taboos, norms and expectations, suggest that pregnant stand-up comedians could be a type of 'unruly woman' (Rowe, 1995): the 'unruly expectant mother'. Invoking Bakhtin's (1984) transformative potential of carnivalesque laughter, Rowe (1995: 12, original emphasis) conceptualises an 'unruly woman' as a 'rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle', who facilitates '*returning* of the male gaze, exposing and making a spectacle of the gazer, claiming the pleasure and power of making spectacles of ourselves, and beginning to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere'. As the examples above illustrate, 'unruly expectant mothers' disrupt pregnancy norms through their transgressive comic content, excessive speech and direct tackling of taboos. Fundamentally, 'unruly expectant mothers' rework the visual power and disrupt the social hierarchy of mainstream media and (live) comedy where pregnancy is rarely visible due to the gender inequalities in both production and representation of mainstream comedy (Lockyer, 2020), while simultaneously expanding the pregnancy typologies that exist in mainstream media. The 'unruly expectant mother', like all 'unruly women', is a 'figure of ambivalence' (Rowe, 1995: 31). The reworking and disruption of the 'unruly expectant mother' can create ambivalence for audiences. They can evoke 'on the one hand, delight; on the other, unease, derision, or fear' (Rowe, 1995: 30) due to their disrupting of societal maternal norms.

The pregnant stand-up comedy analysed also debunks myths around age pressures to have children, difficulties in conceiving, uncomfortable fertility treatments and unequal caring dynamics. In some pregnant stand-up comedy performances, the comedian shares their experiences of conceiving, commenting on 'normal sex' and 'baby sex' distinctions. Taylor reveals she had to 'get her head around the idea of having sex in order to conceive', thinking that it sounds 'very, very serious ... No talking dirty [as t]hat'll be like bad parenting before we've even become parents.' Taylor sets up 'baby sex' as serious, solemn and ending with the couple shaking hands and lighting 'a candle in memory of your disposable income'. Similarly, in *Baby Cobra*, Wong comically reflects on how trying to conceive is 'very clinical' as opposed to 'fucking'. Later, Wong discusses the hormone pills she took to conceive that dissolve in her underwear and itch at work, and her refusals to fulfil her husband's requests to pass the remote during pregnancy as she was busy making an eyeball.

Such stand-up comedy can voice, and critique, gendered inequality due to its 'powerful form of autobiographical performance unique in its simultaneous construction of personal identity and cultural critique' (Gilbert, 1997: 317). Gilbert explains that self-deprecating material enables comedians to ridicule 'the society that creates ideals for appearance and behavior as well as individuals who subscribe to those standards' (1997: 319). As Jensen (2018: 17) argues, Wong's 'biting observations' about mothering and fathering 'reflect longer-held commonsense assumptions about who

will be “holding the baby””. These performances raise critiques and highlight ambivalent investments around gendered divisions of work, domestic labour and heterosexual relations. They emphasise comedic frustration and ambivalence because they uphold social norms that dictate that ‘aspirational’ middle-class women must work, delay motherhood (McRobbie, 2009) and maintain a ‘felicitous’ work–family balance (Rottenberg, 2018: 26) while jesting about such norms. Yet, while uncertainties are voiced about ‘having it all’, pregnant stand-up also maintains such ideals, as all the comedians analysed become pregnant within a heteronormative context, so such norms are embodied through the cultural work of pregnant stand-up comedy.

Overall, therefore, these representations could be read as, on the one hand, an attempt to illuminate, critique and disregard social norms about maternity, work, domestic labour and heterosexual relations, but on the other hand as wholly investing in and upholding such social norms. But like representations of ‘mothers behaving badly’, pregnant stand-up comedy ‘rejects the mythologies of the perfect’ but reveals a crisis too (Littler, 2020: 515). Pregnant stand-up comedy communicates issues regarding cultural work, pregnancy and inequality, which we now explore.

### **Critiquing maternity inequality through pregnant stand-up?**

The third, and final, layer of ambivalence in the pregnant stand-up comedy performances analysed relates to structural ambivalences and drives our third theme. Our third theme explores pregnant stand-up through cultural production, cultural work and pregnancy inequality, expanding work that underscores the links between representation and production (e.g. De Benedictis et al., 2017; Malik and Shankley, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2017; Saha, 2018). Pregnant comedians occupy an interesting space in terms of representation and production as they embody the very critiques surrounding work and pregnancy that they make through their performances – enacting the cultural work that they critique. From the texts identified, the pregnant stand-up comedy performances raise the issue of their working conditions while pregnant. In *Growing*, Schumer notes:

I have not had an easy pregnancy. I have hyperemesis ... [which is] extreme nausea and vomiting ... I’ve had that every day for five months. No, and people are like ‘you’re so strong, look at you out there. You’re on the road.’ I’m contractually obligated to be out here, guys. I’m not like ‘don’t care, the show must go on’. I’m like ‘I will be sued by Live Nation.’ That’s why I’m here.

Through Schumer’s repertoire she makes a pointed critique of her employers, noting that despite severe pregnancy sickness she cannot take time off and has no choice but to perform or be sued. This suggests that, when taking the dynamics of the industrial landscape of stand-up comedy into account – one which perpetuates gendered inequalities – the progressive nature of the above themes is tempered. Likewise, Wong discusses working conditions in *Baby Cobra* and *Hard Knock Wife*. In *Baby Cobra* she quips that female comics who have children ‘disappear’ as they are ‘busy’ caring, unlike male comedians, whose success blooms after fatherhood. Later the show builds up to imply that Wong has ‘snared’ her Harvard Business School-educated husband due to the financial opportunities that his status offers. However, the performance’s crescendo

reveals that *he* is in debt and, in fact, ‘bamboozled’ Wong. She elaborates: ‘why else do you think I’m performing 7 and 1/2 months pregnant?!’ This comedic critique about working conditions and pregnancy is elaborated in *Hard Knock Wife*. After a skit on the bodily toils of pregnancy, as mentioned above, Wong comments:

This is why women need maternity leave. In every other First World country – Canada, France, Germany – women get up to three years off paid maternity leave when they have a new baby. In the US, we get jack shit. In the US, there is zero federal policy for maternity leave. Maternity leave is not just to bond with the baby. Fuck the baby! Maternity leave is for new moms to hide and heal their demolished-ass bodies!

Stand-up comedy can be a ‘public autobiographical performance’ (Gilbert, 1997: 317) and through their performances Wong and Schumer comment on the unfair working conditions they experience, highlighting, first-hand, pregnancy and maternity inequality within the comedy industry.

As mentioned earlier, existing literature underscores that the comedy industry is an adverse working environment for women and marginalised groups. More specifically for our focus, Dent (2020: 549) explores how female cultural workers in other industries that she interviewed sought value through their middle-class maternal identities to compensate for the professional deficit experienced due to care: ‘caregiving responsibilities operate to devalue their economic position within the field but also provide wider benefits to both their partners and the industry through the support they continue to provide’. While pregnancy is subjectively distinct from motherhood (Tyler, 2001), and pregnancy or motherhood are not the only sites where sexism is experienced by women in the cultural and creative industries (see Conor et al., 2015; Dent, 2020), Dent illuminates an incompatibility between cultural work and caring. Through the lens of pregnant stand-up comedy, we can add the incompatibility between cultural work and pregnancy, pregnancy-related illness and recuperation after birth, which we could ascribe to a wider ‘neoliberal crisis in social reproduction marked by inequality and overwork’ (Littler, 2020: 499). The comedic performances reveal an ambivalence about an awareness of these structural incompatibilities, while at the same time having to continue working in them.

However, pregnant stand-up may support the status quo, and thus limit the critical potential of this type of stand-up comedy. These comedians critique their working conditions while pregnant in their performances and they successfully fulfil contractual obligations, reiterating neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibilisation as they individually negotiate and reconcile unfair cultural working conditions shaped by structural inequalities. Further, the question arises of who can call out Netflix’s working conditions; gendered pay gaps for comedians have been raised by Schumer and seemingly addressed by Netflix, however other comedians, like Mo’Nique, who have raised the issue of gendered and racialised pay gaps have had to sue Netflix for discrimination to resolve disputes (see Aviles and Dasrath, 2020). We could, therefore, see the critique of work that pregnant stand-up comedy offers as symptomatic of ‘weak reflexivity’ in mainstream white feminist comedy (Colpean and Tully, 2019). Analysing Schumer, Tina Fey and white feminism, Colpean and Tully (2019: 166) argue ‘weak reflexivity’ is a ‘monitoring of one’s

subjectivity with no acknowledgment of power', embodied in recent white feminist comedians simultaneously positioning themselves as feminists, superficially acknowledging their whiteness and using racial tropes through their routines, while refusing to address their complicity in reinforcing racial inequalities and power structures. Further, they note that 'weak reflexivity is not limited to white comics who address race' (2019: 166). While Wong does decentre whiteness through her performances to offer intersectional feminist comedy, when considering how pregnancy, cultural work and inequality are tackled in the pregnant stand-up performances analysed here, they could be said to produce 'weak reflexivity' about pregnancy inequalities and cultural work within a neoliberal context.

There is some ambivalence, therefore, around this comedic material. While the previous forms of ambivalence we have explored refer to individualised and representational ambivalence created through the joke content, this ambivalence speaks to a structural ambivalence around critiquing working conditions while being implicated in such contexts (see De Benedictis et al., 2017; Saha, 2012, 2013). The question arises as to how far the comic critiques can go, and how progressive the critiques can be, if they perpetuate the issues raised by working, and representing such work, within the conditions critiqued.

## Conclusion

We have explored how pregnant stand-up comedy positions pregnancy not only as a visible feature but also as a driving premise of the comic performance, departing from pregnancy's history in comedy and aligning with a broader appetite for feminist inflected comedy. In addressing our central research question – how do pregnant stand-up comedy performances link to, reinforce, subvert, and/or disrupt dominant cultural pregnancy representations? – we have revealed how pregnant stand-up comedians navigate their bodies, position and labour as pregnant women in the comedy industry in complex and contradictory ways. We have drawn on sociological, feminist media studies, maternal studies and comedy studies perspectives to illustrate how ambivalence is central to pregnant stand-up comedy. Ambivalence in pregnant stand-up comedy is multi-faceted and multi-layered, and we identified three types of ambivalence – individualised, representational and structural – that underpin the three themes identified in pregnant stand-up comedy: Comedic Corporeality, Vulgarity and Ambiguity; Breaking Silences through the 'Unruly Expectant Mother'; and Critiquing Maternity Inequality through Pregnant Stand-Up? Pregnant stand-up comedy offers a novel no-holds-barred and frank self-definition of maternal bodies and pregnancy, repositioning pregnant women as subject rather than the object of representations. Through diversification of understanding and experiences of pregnancy, pregnant stand-up comedy reveals the problematic, limiting and exclusionary nature of existing cultural representations of pregnancy, opens up the opportunities for new perspectives and understandings of pregnancy, and provides critical reflection on the internal and external pressures placed on pregnant women by carefully weaving together unreasonable and restricting expectations constructed by the self, society and the media. Due to its autobiographical nature, pregnant stand-up comedy can offer something intriguing that differentiates comedians from other cultural workers. Pregnant stand-up comedy offers the ability to critique inequalities related to cultural

work and pregnancy, while representing it – which can be a valuable springboard for discussion when thinking about inequality, cultural work, production and representation.

However, pregnant stand-up comedy highlights the limitations of making such critiques within frameworks and industries that are inherently unequal. Despite the comic criticism, pregnant stand-up comedians reify that which they critique, as all performers maintain white middle-class norms of labouring and delaying motherhood, as well as embodying the unequal working conditions that some performers raise in their performances as they perform pregnant in such conditions. These critical, ambivalent positions that pregnant stand-up comedy offers can be a privileged position too, raising questions about what such comic critique masks. For example, how does pregnant stand-up comedy critique intersect with heterosexism, whiteness, ablebodiedness and cisgenderism? Do such mainstream representations of pregnant stand-up comedy obscure marginalised meanings that might be present in alternative comedy sites? Or how might audiences make meaning through such ambivalent material and is this read in ways that might affirm or challenge dominant ideologies? These are fruitful and urgent avenues for future research to examine how pregnant stand-up comedy fully operates.


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### ORCID iD

Sharon Lockyer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4941-8067>

### Notes

1. As indicated by content search terms like: 'Birth', 'Motherhood', 'Mother and Child', 'Pregnancy for Dummies'.
2. The other two strategies being to create original television series and documentaries (Wayne, 2017).

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### Author biographies

Sharon Lockyer is a Reader in Sociology and Communications at Brunel University London. Her research interests are in mediated culture, critical comedy studies and media controversies.

Sara De Benedictis is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Communications at Brunel University London. Her research explores the cultural politics of gender, class, reproduction and feminist activism.