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Engaging with female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*:
Genres, Gender and Women's humor

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Abstract

This research bears the research gaps of Chinese stand-up comedy and female stand-up comedians in mind, aiming to contribute to the lesser researched field of Chinese female stand-up comedy. Audience research is the bedrock of this research which sheds light on how audiences define, interpret and evaluate the genre of stand-up comedy and female stand-up comedy. To narrow down the topic, *Rock & Roast 3* as one of the most popular “grassroots” stand-up comedy talent shows in China is a case in point that displays the burgeoning female stand-up comedians in China. It’s worth noting that gender is studied in a sense of concerning humor, genre and modalities of engagement which adheres to the research aim – to provide a holistic picture of the situation of female stand-up comedians within the stand-up comedy industry and comedy industry at large.

Based on the research aim, the research questions are crafted to unveil, firstly, the empowerment of stand-up comedy as a new and western-imported genre; and secondly, how audiences engage with female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*; then thirdly, the obstacles, limitations, and potential of women’s humor. Accordingly, this research employs semi-structured and in-depth interviews as the qualitative method to probe the reflections of audiences who cognitively and emotionally engage with female stand-up comedians. Further, audiences’ interpretations are transcribed into NVivo to generate thematic and analytical codes that correspond to research questions.

This research argues the genre of stand-up comedy empowers female comedians in terms of the power of discourse, which is not only downgraded in crosstalk and sketch comedy as traditional genres of Chinese comedy but also restrained in the gender segregation that is influenced by Confucian ideologies. Moreover, this research shows audiences cognitively and emotionally engage with female stand-up comedians through emotional identification and critical reflection. In addition, female audiences are prone to identify with the marginalized gender identity of female comedians. Last but not the least, it further attempts to approach women’s humor and feminist humor in the Chinese context, putting forward the women’s humor is dramatically restrained with regard to topics, aggressive humor and media censorship.

Keywords: stand-up comedy; female stand-up comedy; genre; engagement; emotional identification; humor; women’s humor; feminist humor; media censorship; gender identity; feminism

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Stand-up comedy is regarded as a “cultural indicator” (Seirlis, 2011) and its humor is the “cultural barometer” (Gilbert, 2004) of society. Also, the stand-up comedians are dubbed as “spokesman” (Mintz, 1985), “social commentator” (ibid.) and “anthropologist” (Koziski, 1984). Therefore, stand-up comedy and its performative humor, as well as the stand-up comedians, jointly mirror the contemporary popular culture which is the site where the struggle for and against a culture of power is engaged (Hall, 2002, p.192). This research delves into the field of stand-up comedy in China to reveal the power dynamic within popular culture.

Imported from the West, stand-up comedy in China is still in its infancy. It was first presented as open mics in Guangdong province around the 1990s as it is close to Hong Kong (Xiang, 2019), then it gained popularity in Beijing and Shanghai, both are international metropolises in China. Since open-mic stand-up comedy limits the space and time for audiences, stand-up comedy online TV shows can be seen as a catalyst in popularizing the genre of stand-up comedy. Led by Fun Factory (Shanghai Xiao Guo Culture Co. Ltd.), a burst of stand-up comedy shows has come to the stage within a decade. In 2016, Xiao Guo issued *Roast*, a Chinese version of the American comedy series *Comedy Central Roasts*, reaping the benefits of attracting numerous young audiences. Though it was only online, however, Fun Factory CEO He affirmed that online strategy is “to tap into a younger audience and to have the freedom to cover a broader range of topics” (cited in Li, 2016). The success of *Roast* paves the way for *Rock & Roast*, which focuses on the competition of stand-up comedians with more social topics being touched upon. *Rock & Roast* adopts the online strategy and goes popular dramatically in three years. The newest season of *Rock & Roast* in 2020 has been viewed more than a hundred million according to the website of Tencent Video (2020), its video streaming platform. Moreover, the hashtag “Rock & Roast” on Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese blogging platforms, has been viewed over 4 billion times (Zhang, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the growing popularity of stand-up comedy has brought more female comedians to the stage. Compared with the last two seasons, the number of female comedians who survive till the semi-finals has been tripled, which sparks ongoing discussion towards the stand-up comedy industry and performances of female comedians. It is argued that compared with traditional Chinese comedy, known as sketch comedy (Xiaopin) and Crosstalk (Xiangsheng), stand-up comedy appears to be female-friendly for its gender-inclusive threshold (Chen, 2020). However, stand-up comedy in China is still male-dominated

regardless of the types of open-mic or stand-up TV shows. Hence, female comedians in *Rock & Roast 3* are remarkably regarded as the milestone of breaking the boundary of the male-dominated comedy stage (Zhang, 2020). As such, it is necessary to investigate how audiences engage with female stand-up comedians and how they understand the emergence as well as performances of female stand-up comedians.

Western scholarship on female comics and female humor sheds light on the investigation of Chinese female stand-up comedians. Since the 1980s, female comedians have been playing an active role in America (Zoglin, 2008). However, only a handful of literature focuses on the relation of women and humor (Keisalo, 2018; Caliskan, 1995), the discourse of women's humor (Kotthoff, 2005) and audiences of women's comedy (Cooper, 2019), compared with rich scholarship on comedy and humor. Women's comedy remains a lesser-researched area mostly led by female scholars. Moreover, since stand-up comedy is western-centric on the back of shared cultural values (Kawalec, 2020), it seldom refers to the Chinese context under remarkable media censorship. Furthermore, the literature on stand-up comedy in China is rather scarce since stand-up comedy in China is at the outset of development, not to mention the study on female comedians. In this regard, there are two research gaps within academia. On the one hand, literature on stand-up comedy in Asian countries is fewer compared with that of western countries. On the other hand, studies on female comedians are lesser-known in China since they are emerging in public recently. The marginalization of Chinese stand-up comedy research, as well as studies of female comedy, urges this research to probe the emerging popular culture and the obstacles that Chinese female comedians are facing.

This research takes its departure of audience engagement based on three reasons regarding stand-up comedy, humor, and women's humor: 1) Audiences play a significant role in stand-up comedy (Limon, 2000; Abrahams, 2020). 2) Humor hinges upon the audience to work (Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005) 3) The designation of women's humor and feminist humor is in the mind of the beholder (Gilbert, 2004, p.137). By virtue of audience engagement with female stand-up comedians in the most popular stand-up comedy TV shows, *Rock & Roast 3*, the research reflects the dynamic relationship between audiences and female stand-up comedians, as well as female stand-up comedians and the socio-political meta-context. In this regard, the research is multi-dimensional, intertwining gender concerns with engagement and genres.

The research aim – unveil the conditions of female stand-up comedians from the perspective of audiences, entails the analytical and descriptive parameters of engagement. Dahlgren and Hill (2020) offer a toolbox of parameters that is beneficial for empirical investigation. Of note, parameters work in conjunction yet some of them may “have greater relevance for than others and relate to each other in differing configurations” (ibid.). It allows the flexibility of the researcher to craft parameters of engagement based on the specific context and research topic. As such, this research is inspired to dissect the engagement with female stand-up comedians into three research questions, relating to genres, modalities and reflections of gendered humor:

RQ1: How does the genre of stand-up comedy empower female comedians in comparison with Chinese traditional genres of comedy?

RQ2: What are modalities of engaging with female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*?

RQ3: How is women’s humor contested and framed from the perspectives of audiences?

To pin down the research questions, this research adopts the following steps. Firstly, it problematizes the literature on audiences of female stand-comedy which overemphasizes the reception without referring to media and genre context (Cooper, 2019; Kalviknes Bore, 2010; Mittell, 2004). Secondly, this research employs genre and audience engagement which are potent to comprehend the mediatization of reality based on social constructionism (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Last but not the least, marginalized identity of female stand-up comedians is foregrounded in the engagement so as to reveal power relations and the structure of women’s humor. Combing audience research with genre, identity and gendered humor, it aims to investigate the phenomenon of burgeoning female stand-up comedians who lead to controversy and attraction across China. This research hopes to contribute to the emerging stand-up comedy industry in China, and more importantly, female comedians whose humor involves distinctive engagement of audiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Contextualizing stand-up comedy

Stand-up comedy is a unique form of performance that dates back to late nineteenth America (Lintott, 2020) and burgeoned from American comedy clubs in the 1970s (Zoglin, 2008). Though being regarded as a hallmark of western culture (Kawalec, 2020) and American culture (Mintz, 1985; Limon, 2000; Zoglin, 2008), stand-up comedy is claimed to be a ubiquitous art (Lintott, 2020) that has become popular in “countries where stand-up comedy as a particular type is less established” (Lockyer, 2015, p.586). In the 1990s, numerous stand-up scenes have gained attention in non-western regions, such as South Africa (Seirlis, 2011) and Hong Kong (Tsang and Wang, 2004). More recently, media has drastically influenced the way that stand-up comedy is produced (Belanger, 2015; Sturges, 2015) and paved the way for its universal popularity. The proliferation of DVDs, TV comedy, YouTube Channels and online-streaming stand-up routines makes it possible for worldwide audiences to get a grasp of stand-up comedy as a popular genre.

The success and popularity of stand-up comedy are owed to its populist nature – an art “of the people and for the people” (Lintott, 2020, p.397). Stand-up comedy is thus claimed to be inherently democratic (Lintott, 2020; Gilbert, 2004). The democratic and populist features of stand-up comedy precisely reflect popular culture. Stand-up comedy is regarded as a cultural indicator (Seirlis, 2011) and important means of cultural expression (Lintott, 2020). Similarly, the stand-up comedian is likened to “spokesman” (Mintz, 1985), “social commentator” (ibid.) and “anthropologist” (Koziski, 1984). Hence, stand-up comedy is seen as the microcosm of popular culture, exerting the power to criticize and even change the culture.

Female comedians are distinctive within the whole range of stand-up comedians, as they are “marginalized majority” (Gilbert, 2004, p.33) who can challenge the culture of gender norms (Caliskan, 1995; Gilbert, 2004). Recently, the studies of female comedians, especially female stand-up comedians (Keisalo, 2018; Cooper, 2019; Finley, 2020) are flourishing based on the development and awareness of feminism globally. Stand-up comedy is proved to be not merely a form of entertainment, but rather a means of persuasion (Greenbaum, 1999) and a frame of incisive sociocultural critique (Gilbert, 2004). Hence, female stand-up comedians are worthy of being investigated so as to reveal gender inequality and oppression within the industry of stand-up comedy.

Since stand-up comedy closely relates to culture, it is context-sensitive. The core of stand-up comedy is humor which is context-based and culture-bound (Gilbert, 2004; Xu, 2011).

Therefore, it is imperative to foreground the context of Chinese stand-up comedy and the meta-context of feminism that influence the performances of female stand-up comedians in China. However, English literature of Chinese comedy remains rare, and not to mention Chinese stand-up comedy and Chinese female comedians as the new genre and new wave of comedians separately. Considering the insufficiency of English literature, this chapter adopts sources of English newspapers as well as Chinese literature as complements to delineate the Chinese context of stand-up comedy and feminism.

2.1.1 Stand-up comedy in China

Stand-up comedy was first presented as open mics in Guangdong province around the 1990s, as it is close to Hong Kong (Xiang, 2019), then it gained popularity in Beijing and Shanghai, both are international metropolises in China. Since open mic limits the space and time for audiences, the advent of TV shows is considered as the catalyst for popularizing the genre of stand-up comedy in China.

The earliest television show that involved the genre of stand-up comedy was *Mr. Zhou live show*, broadcasted by Phoenix TV and Dragon TV in 2010 (Phoenix TV, n.d.; DBpedia, n.d.). Mr. Zhou is known as a stand-up comedian whose performance provokes reflection on social issues (Phoenix TV, n.d.). He combined western stand-up comedy with Shanghai dialect, which was an obstacle for northerners to understand (ibid.). Such localization process of stand-up comedy can be found in Hong Kong (Tsang and Wang, 2004), as stand-up comedy highly hinges on language (Greenbaum, 1999; Tsang and Wang, 2004). In 2012, *Tonight 80's talk show* was regarded as the first American-style stand-up comedy program aired in China (Li, 2016). Although from the perspective of the genre, it is difficult to determine whether this television show is a talk show or stand-up comedy, undeniably, it promotes the perception of western stand-up comedy in China.

Since 2016, led by Fun Factory, a burst of stand-up comedy shows has been booming within a decade. As the CEO of Fun Factory, He Xiaoxi contends that he is a fan of western stand-up comedy and has noticed the subculture of western stand-up comedy in China was cultivated by subtitling groups (Li, 2016). Hence, based on the vigorous subculture of western stand-up comedy, Fun Factory accelerates the dissemination of stand-up comedy as a western genre.

In 2016, Fun Factory issued *Roast*, a Chinese version of the American comedy series *Comedy Central Roasts*, reaping the benefits of attracting numerous young audiences. However, three days after the show was aired, it was removed from its video streaming platform without explanation, which sparks the assumption that the show “crossed the line” that was set up by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (Sun, 2017). Then it adjusted and relaunched after half a year. Albeit Fun Factory adopts an online-only strategy “to tap into a younger audience and to have the freedom to cover a broader range of topics,” (cited in Li, 2016) it still faces the pressure of censorship from the top. Apart from that, self-censorship from the bottom is also noteworthy, He Xiaoxi admits that “the show avoids making political jokes and mocking someone’s ethnic background” as well as cultural taboos (ibid.). Nonetheless, the slogan of *Roast*, “roasting is a skill, to laugh at it requires courage,” puts the offense and transgression at the heart of stand-up comedy. It keeps a subtle balance between censorship and its “edge content” (Jia and Wildau, 2018).

In 2017, the instant success of *Roast* brought forth a new stand-up comedy talent show, *Rock & Roast*, aired as well by Fun Factory. It is seen as the “grassroots version” (Büchenbacher, 2019) that puts amateur and veteran stand-up comedians under the spotlight. The newest season of *Rock & Roast* in 2020 has been viewed more than a hundred million, according to Tencent (2020), its cooperative video streaming platform, and further triggers the heated discussion with hashtags on Weibo (Zhang, 2020).

Nevertheless, the popularity of stand-up comedy television shows creates “an illusion of a booming market” (cited in Yu, 2018). Less famous stand-up comedians can hardly earn a living by doing full-time stand-up comedy (ibid.). As a matter of fact, most comedians in *Rock & Roast* are part-time, taking a variety of occupations at the same time. Besides, the variety shows of stand-up comedy deviate from the purest form of stand-up comedy (ibid.). Online stand-up comedy shows have to rely on the popularity of celebrities to attract young audiences. More specifically, *Roast* revolves around roasting celebrities while *Rock & Roast* makes the celebrities “laugh leaders” to judge the performances of stand-up comedians.

It is also worth noting that female comedians are uncommon in the stand-up comedy industry. According to *Rock & Roast*, only one-fifth are female who participate in its open mics (Zhang, 2020). The condition is much more severe for stand-up comedy television shows. Before season 3 of *Rock & Roast*, only Siwen, as a female stand-up comedian that was well-known to audiences (Yin, 2018). However, in the newest season of *Rock & Roast*, there were

more female comedians invited to the first round of the competition, and four of them survived to the final round, including the most controversial figure, Yang Li, who is regarded as “the punchline queen” of this season (Feng and Wang, 2021). Her stand-up performances revolve around gender issues and cause backlash from male netizens and comedians. Discrimination and prejudice against female comedians are blamed to be reasons for gender inequality in the stand-up comedy industry (Zhang, 2020). Additionally, the backlash against female comedians reflects the “difficult path of feminism in China” (Feng and Wang, 2021).

2.1.2 Stand-up comedy as a genre

According to Double (2017), the origins of stand-up comedy as a term are obscure. Sourcing from the newspaper and magazine archive, Double (p.107) has managed to find out that the usage of “stand-up” instead of “standup” or “stand up”, appeared firstly in the trade press, both in America and Britain, “suggesting that it originated as a jargon term within the entertainment industry and subsequently spread to more everyday parlance.” The usage of stand-up indicates how genres are defined by industry and institutions that exercise the power of incorporating and evoking structures of knowledge (Frow, 2005).

Such a vague trajectory of stand-up comedy as a new genre can be found in China, where academia, television programs, and clubs use different terms to define and delimit stand-up comedy. According to Su (2021), the definition of stand-up comedy in China is relatively broad and controversial. It is entangled with talk shows and language-based programs being widely defined as “tuo kou xiu” in Chinese (ibid.). Since talk shows have appeared in the 1990s, earlier than the advent of stand-up comedy television programs, the term “tuo kou xiu” was invented through the literal translation of western talk shows (ibid.). Moreover, genre entails the formulaic and conventional (Frow, 2005). Since producers of stand-up comedy television programs have not effectively categorized the new genre of stand-up comedy, it slides into the genre of talk shows and Chinese traditional comedy (Zheng and Zhang, 2017). According to Feuer, the meanings of programs are impacted and even manipulated by genres that they are fitted into (cited in Fiske, 1987, p.110). Chinese audiences are argued to maintain a vague or even erroneous perception of stand-up comedy in terms of the western definition of stand-up comedy (Zheng and Zhang, 2017).

In a recent decade, as stand-up comedy television programs have gone viral, it promotes the popularity of open mics and stand-up arena in clubs. Stand-up clubs and scholars have advocated a more accurate translation of stand-up comedy, which is Dankou Comedy

(standalone comedy), following the narrow definition of stand-up comedy as a single, standing comedian behaving comically to audiences (Mintz, 1985). Though this term of stand-up comedy is not well-adopted, it distinguishes it from several performers in sketch comedy and dual performers in crosstalk (Zheng and Zhang, 2017). Yet, Fun Factory, the leading company of stand-up comedy industry, does not invent the new term of stand-up comedy as a genre or accept the definition of stand-up clubs. Rather, it accepts the conflation of talk shows and stand-up comedy as “*tuo kou xiu*” so as to avoid any geographical restrictions that may derive from a specific genre of comedy (CBNData, 2018).

The genre of stand-up comedy in China is a negotiable process where clubs, industry and giant companies are at play. As a process, the genre is also constructed in relation to other genres (Frow, 2005). Especially when traditional Chinese comedy, such as sketch comedy (Xiaopin) and Crosstalk (Xiangsheng) is consumed by a large population. Mittel (2001) offers a lens to situate genres within contextual practices where cultural hierarchies and power relations are at play. Sketch comedy and crosstalk are prestigious Chinese comedies that are required to be performed every year in the Spring Festival Gala, one of the most-watched annual TV shows in China. Then, how much space is left for stand-up comedy as a western-imported genre? Yet, the CEO of Fun Factory confidently states that “there is still tremendous demand for comedy in the Chinese entertainment market” (Büchenbacher, 2019), showing a promising market of stand-up comedy. Moreover, stand-up comedy is claimed to be inherently aggressive (Gilbert, 2004). Compared to traditional comedy, stand-up comedy in China touches upon taboos that are sometimes offensive yet attractive to young audiences (Li, 2016; CBNData, 2018; Büchenbacher, 2019; Chen, 2020). Fun Factory reaffirms the genre of stand-up comedy as a youthful genre of comedy (CBNData, 2018). It distances from and moves beyond the traditional Chinese comedy to pursue the commercial value of a promising western genre.

Apart from that, Chinese stand-up comedy as a genre seems to challenge traditional comedy in the sense that it is more “female-friendly” (Chen, 2020). The leading crosstalk club, Deyunshe, has announced that due to the respect of women it decides to turn down female disciples unless she is extremely talented (Ma, 2021). Sketch comedy is also criticized for the stereotypes towards women, such as women as poor drivers, vain persons and so forth (Chen, 2020). Unlike the rigorous threshold of crosstalk and sketch comedy, stand-up comedy as a new genre opens up more opportunities for women from all works of life who can be workers, freelancers, managers (Büchenbacher, 2019; Chen, 2020). Moreover, stand-up comedy

empowers women rhetorically and economically by challenging the norms and getting paid (Gilbert, 2004). Nevertheless, it is claimed that stand-up comedy is a male-dominated genre (Gilbert, 2004; Keisalo, 2018). In the Chinese context, there is also a huge disproportion of female comedians to female audiences of stand-up comedy (CBNDData, 2018; Chen, 2020; Zhang, 2020). However, as comedy enables inventions, more specifically, the invention of gender (Keisalo, 2018), it allows female comedians to speak out against gender stereotypes and challenge the norms that are avoided as taboos in traditional genres of Chinese comedy.

2.1.3 Situating female stand-up comedians in the context of Chinese feminism

Admittedly, female stand-up comedians bear the double marginalization of being a woman and a female comedian on the stage simultaneously (Kotthoff, 2005). Zoglin (2008) witnesses the serpentine history of female comedians from the prefeminist to the feminist era, wherein the pioneers like Phyllis Diller, Joan River and Elayne Boosler faced the pressure of being “a spokeswomen or a role model” (pp. 213-228). Keisalo (2018, p.555) agrees that some female comedians face the same pressure of “representing all women and just themselves.” Since female comedians are representatives of women, no matter from the view of audiences or themselves, they strategically perform their gender identities. Such a strategic way of performing female comedy is claimed to be deeply impacted by the development of feminism and the women’s movement (Mintz, 1985; Caliskan, 1995; Gilbert, 2004; Zoglin, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the feminism and women’s movement in contemporary China that impact significantly the strategy as well as performances of female comedy.

As gender is entangled with class, Chinese feminism is often investigated along with class issues (Wu & Dong, 2019; Young, 2020). In response to western post-feminism, Young (2020, p.2) focuses on the middle-class women who are “shaped by the values and practices of consumption in the neo-liberal economy” and interprets them as “consumerist pseudo-feminism.” Neo-liberal economy, underscored by Young, plays a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Chinese feminism. Notably, after the “reform and opening-up” program was issued by Deng in 1987, the transition of political economy highlights the market forces, which is criticized as rekindling patriarchal values (Wu & Dong, 2019), and even reinventing Neo-Confucian ideology (Leung, 2003). Wu and Dong (2019) sort out two strands of Chinese feminism as entrepreneurial and non-cooperative. Both strands of feminism in China underscore the importance of personal economic standing and display class grievances. Hence, Chinese feminism takes a class-based and economy-centered approach, which easily leads to the resentment of “beta men” (Banon and Carreia, 2016).

In addition, as early as 2003, Leung pointed out that feminism in China was regressing based on the fact that Deng's reform involved "a terrain of prejudicial, traditionalist and discriminatory practices" (pp. 371-372). In a recent decade, albeit waves of women's agitation flood Internet which are regarded as "Chinese feminist awakening" (Xiao, cited in Wu and Dong, 2019), feminism in China has been stigmatized and abused extensively which is considered as the backlash against feminism (Wu and Dong, 2019). Yet, backlash and regression of feminism in China are accompanied by a new individualism unique to Chinese society (Leung, 2003; Qi, 2018). Such individualism results from the policy of the one-child policy and neo-liberal economy. Qi (2018) claims that the young feminist activists who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, after the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980, are often well-educated and creative in promoting women's rights. Individualism and neoliberalism which are the significant features of stand-up comedy in the Western (Kawalec, 2020), also shape the young feminists in China.

Regardless of huge efforts made by China in educational attainment concerning gender equality, the stereotypes and bias have long been rooted in the educational system and market forces, which leads to the demonstration of young feminist activists (Leung, 2003; Wu and Dong, 2019; Qi, 2018). Compared to street-based demonstration, which is strictly censored by urban administration, young feminist activists mobilize more often on the internet (Qi, 2018), as media has equipped feminist activists with the creative strategy of "digital masquerading" to circumvent censorship (Tan, 2017). Originally, "digital masquerading" means a creative strategy to increase influence and bypass censorship used by feminists in China (ibid.). Yet it echoes the phenomenon that stand-up comedians resort to humor to prevent specific meaning-making and circumvent censorship (Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009). Coupled with the concept of masquerading, humor can be likened to the strategy of masquerading when female comedians challenge gender norms to avoid latent censorship and offense towards audiences.

2.2 Audiences and engagement

Stand-up comedy is highly audience-dependent (Limon, 2000; Abrahams, 2020), which is argued to be affected by the physical space of stand-up venues (Lockyer, 2015; Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009). Hence, live performance is the first and prominent place to manifest "stand-up comedy as true social and cultural mediation" (Mintz, 1985, p.78). Such a unique and intensive setting is a case in point to stress the rhetoric, authenticity, language, and style of the comedian that impact the reception of audiences (Greenbaum, 1999; Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009; Tsang and Wong, 2014). Scholars as observers and even stand-up comedians (Keisalo,

2018) conduct ethnography research regarding the relationship between comedians and audiences. As stand-up comedy has been mediatized, some scholars utilize the media production of stand-up comedy, such as feature recordings, YouTube clips and so forth, to investigate audiences as focus groups (Bore, 2010; Cooper, 2019; Graefer and Das, 2020). On the one side, recordings of stand-up performances simulate the on-site reaction of audiences (Cooper, 2019). On the other side, it also runs the risk of separating stand-up performance from its media context, which the whole range of contemporary stand-up comedy products has relied on. Furthermore, the embeddedness of media in the everyday life of audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Couldry and Hepp, 2017) is omitted when investigating the reception and consumption of stand-up comedy. Through the mediatization of stand-up comedy, it is sufficient to say that media context plays an important role in constructing audiences' consumption of stand-up comedy. Since mediatization of stand-up comedy and everyday life is the backdrop, this chapter relates audience engagement to previous audience research, analyzing the parameters of audience engagement as well as the engagement with female comedians.

2.2.1 Audience research and engagement

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, p.4) outline three typical phases of audience research in media, revolving around “effects”, “uses and gratifications” and “encoding/decoding”. The last paradigm proposed by Stuart Hall (1980) challenges the traditional linear model of communication, bringing forth the relatively autonomous stages of media communication. Yet, the encoding and decoding positions mainly take account of the text-audience relationship and thus are incompatible with stand-up comedy as “a contiguous entity” (Brodie, 2008, p.154). Stand-up comedy, as a form of performance, is inseparable from the context. The encoding and decoding model runs the risk of decontextualizing stand-up comedy (ibid.). Moreover, due to the pervasiveness of remote-control devices, audiences generally do not consume the whole text on television, as they “jump from one bit of programming into another” (Morley, 2006, p. 110). Such fragmentation and flexibility of audiences result in the refinement of audience research. The third generation of audience research strand, proposed by Alasuutari (1999), underscores the role of media in everyday life and the reflexivity of audiences. It does not mean to study texts in isolation, but rather to “their usage as an element of everyday life” (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 7). This emphasis on contextualizing media practices of audiences and expanding the reception analysis into everyday life is what this research agrees upon.

The practices of audiences change with the permeation of media in everyday life.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, p.68) claim “everyone becomes an audience all the time.” It means being a member of the audience is “constitutive of everyday life” (ibid.). The prerequisite of the statement as such is the mediatization of everyday life (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Couldry (2004) regards media as practices in contemporary everyday life that aims to “study the whole range of practices that are oriented towards media and the role of media in ordering other practices in the social world” (p.115). The interrelatedness of media practices themselves, along with other social practices, manifests the “nexus of relations that operate at both the individual and collective level” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020, p.2). Considering that, Dahlgren and Hill (ibid.) bring forth the concept of engagement to pin down the subjective, diverse, and relational media practices of audiences as such, linking the personal, socio-cultural and political elements.

Engagement has been a controversial word, used by both the media industry and media scholars. It is accused of being too much emphasis on users’ attention, interaction and loyalty in the industry (; Dahlgren and Hill, 2020). Yet, in academia, the term engagement has been reconceptualized as a subjective experience (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020) that is audience-oriented (Keinonen et al., 2018). Compared to traditional audience research which specifies the place and time that audiences watch television programs, the engagement-based approach “places a premium on audiences willing to pursue content across multiple channels as viewers access television shows on their own schedules” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p.116). It regards audiences as “a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value” (ibid.). Hill (2019, p.56) suggests appreciating the term of engagement as both economic and socio-cultural on the back of relations co-created by producers and audiences. The conceptualization of engagement stands at the very heart of transmedia culture and results from the fragmentation as well as the commodification of media products. It reconfigures audience power (Jenkins et al., 2013) that contains the critical mode of disengagement (Hill, 2019; Dahlgren and Hill, 2020), challenging the traditional perception of engagement as “a positive form of relationships” (Corner, 2017, p.2).

Though engagement is a relatively new term that is regarded as descriptive rather than analytical (Corner, 2017), Dahlgren and Hill (2020) consider the concept of engagement as analytical and strategic by displaying five parameters of engagement as trajectories. To flesh out the parameters of engagement, it is necessary to conceptualize and contextualize the audiences first. As Babbie maintains that conceptualization is to specify the meanings when

using a particular term in social science research, producing “a specific, agreed-upon meaning for a concept for the purposes of research” (2004, p. 122). Audiences have been long discussed by academia, from passive audiences to subjective audiences. Traditionally, interacted with a small range of audiences, stand-up comedy is regarded as a genre of intimacy (Brodie, 2008; Lockyar, 2015). Yet, mediatization continuously breaks the boundaries of space and time for audiences, eroding the intimacy of stand-up comedy (Lockyar, 2015). As such, audiences of stand-up comedy are redefined in a multi-layered way, including live audiences as simple audiences, online audiences as mass and diffused audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Silverstone (1994, p.133) maintains that contemporary audience researchers need to be “nomadic” in the sense of inquiring audiences from “a set of daily practices and discourses within which the complex act of watching television is placed alongside others.” Hence, “roaming audiences”, proposed by Hill, is a pertinent concept to describe the contemporary audiences, who are path makers and owning “a right to roam” (Hill, 2019, p. 31). In practice, as roaming audiences, they engage in multiple media platforms throughout or after the television programs. Their intensities and context of engagement also vary based on pre-existing media practices. In this sense, audiences are not only viewers or users but also producers in terms of utilizing their agency to participate bodily and conceptually in media practices (Hill, 2019, pp. 30-64).

2.2.2 Genre and contexts

Among five parameters of engagement proposed by Dahlgren and Hill (2020), the genre is persistently weaving through the engagement, linking together the interconnected yet discursive elements that affect the engagement of audiences. However, in the Chinese context, it should be cautious to cope with the ambiguous genre of stand-up comedy. As the early chapter elucidates, the genre of stand-up comedy in China is often defined by industry, institutions and academia. Yet, Mittel argues that genres are “cultural categories” that are actively used not only by producers but also audiences (2004, p.94). He urges academia to delve into the definition, evaluation and interpretation of a genre from the perspective of audiences (ibid.). By criticizing the text-centered approaches as a shortcut to restrain the audience reception to textual reception, he supports the context-based and viewer-centered approach of an audience analysis (ibid.). In light of that approach, we as scholars need to “explore the use of genres outside moments of reception, as media genres circulate and operate even as audiences are not watching television” (ibid., p.100).

As genre entails background knowledge to make meanings (Frow, 2005), media contexts are indispensable to the genre. To situate genre and other parameters of engagement into media context, Dahlgren and Hill (2020) see media engagement as “a spectrum of phenomena.” John Corner (2017, p.4) points out that the spectrum of engagement is also “the complex interplay of choices and exclusions.” It concerns how audiences allocate recreational time as part of a “lifetime” as engagement is practically embedded in the “attention economy” (ibid.). Therefore, the pre-existing knowledge, practices to relevant genres, platforms and their logic are some entry points to consider when analyzing media context (Dahlgren and Hill, 2020).

Additionally, in this research, stand-up comedy is presented within the format of a reality talent shows that are co-created by producers, audiences and performers (Hill, 2015). From industrial perspective, reality TV are formats that localize and prevail across nations; hence, it can be seen as an entertainment genre (ibid.). Yet, Corner (cited in Hill, 2015) argues that reality TV is a new kind of inter-generic space rather than a genre. Hill (2015) considers it as a container of mixing diverse elements and producing sub-genres, in which two distinct spaces, world and entertainment space coexist. It pushes audiences to immerse in the “created-for-television” competition and pulls them into an emotional connection based on real-world locations, social roles and voting process (Hill, 2019). Furthermore, the entertainment space of talent shows which revolves around artificially heightened talent, has an impact on the real-world of culture, viewers and fan production, whereas the world space serves as the fertile ground for the series production and creative labour (ibid.).

The particular generic instances of reality TV are also closely related to the meta-contexts of the economic and political systems (Corner, 2010; Dahlgren and Hill, 2020). And meta-contexts as such matter to media engagement in a sense that they entail “structural contingencies” (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). China is a case in point that emphasizes the media’s position within the political system (Corner, 2011). China is accused of rigorous censorship and the complicated filtering system on media platforms (Li, 2012; Wu, 2013; Yang and Jiang, 2015), yet subtle and creative forms of contestation survive and even bloom under the guise of satire (Yang and Jiang, 2015). Considering the Chinese unique political system, Duckett and Langer (2013) witness two strands of voices on health reform reporting, one is paternalist populism on behalf of the state, whereas the other is elitist neoliberalism. Such an argumentation dismisses the overstated emphasis on the control of the state and brings out the impact of neoliberalism with regard to media. Neoliberalism is developed with westernization in China, which brings forth the “the adoption of western terms and conceptualization about

the audience” (Wu, 2013, p.183). By analyzing the hit music talent show *Super Girl* and its fan production, Wu (ibid.) contextualizes Chinese media practices as political power against the dominant discourse of the state, thus Chinese audiences are positioned in the media sphere where the competing and contradictory discourse of agency and passive receivers coexist.

2.2.3 Character engagement

Character engagement as a mode of engagement is highlighted throughout media engagement of talent shows (Keinonen et al., 2018; Hill, 2019). It is also an entry point to study the potential influence of characters based on gender, ethnicity, race and class. Though the lack of characterization of stand-up comedy is often argued to be the prominent feature distinguished from other types of comedy, Double (2000) maintains that through routines and gigs stand-up comedians construct the characters they describe. Such a way of characterization is enhanced when stand-up comedy is mixed with reality TV.

Character engagement is embedded in the spectrum of engagement (Hill, 2017), which includes emotional identification and disidentification with characters. According to Stuart Hall (1996, p.2), identification “is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group”. It points to the shared identity between the stand-up comedian and the audience. The identity of the stand-up comedian is often the focus of research. Studies of stand-up comedy often situate it within the discourse of authority (Greenbaum, 1999), legitimacy (Gilbert, 2004) and trust (Abrahams, 2020). The onstage comedian is rhetorically in a position of control which entails the “authority” to tell jokes (Gilbert, 2004). Abrahams (2020) proposes that comedians also become the content of the joke. In this sense, the marginal identity can yield advantages (Gilbert, 2004). Female comedians are legitimized by their audiences based on their marginal identities so that they can tell jokes from the perspective of insiders (Cooper, 2019; Gilbert, 2004). Yet, it suffers the label of “women’s topic” that seems to be ghettoizing female comics (Bore, 2010). Cooper (2019) and Bore (2010) both find that female comedians are devalued based on the belief that “women’s issues” are more appreciated by women. Admittedly, in the patriarchal society where male comedians generally decide what is funny or not (Bore, 2010), it is hard for female stand-up comedians to “establish and maintain their comic positions because as women they have been socially indoctrinated not to engage in verbal roughhousing” (Greenbaum, 1999, p.35).

The research topic generally involves dual genres, the genre of stand-up comedy and the genre of reality talent show. Hence, it is equally important to look at the character engagement in reality talent show. Hill (2015) relates the contestants of reality talent show to Goffman's concept of performance, claiming they perform dual characters, as themselves and contestants who compete in a television space. Characterization is the part of the site of authenticity in reality TV, which is significant if we want to understand how audiences value the genre of reality TV (Hill, 2019). This distinctive way of characterization separates television comedians' onstage performances from their backstage characteristics. Hence, nowadays, many talent shows shoot the backstage in order to enhance the mediated authenticity (Hill, 2019).

Another important aspect of character engagement is the identity of the audience. Keinonen et al. (2018, p.65) claim that the relationship between audiences and performers also constructs "(the) form of imaginative or attributed closeness." It is different from identification based on the unique relationship between performers and audiences in talent shows, in which audiences are not only spectators but more importantly as judge for performers (ibid.). In this regard, it is a sense of referential mode of viewing (Michelle, 2007, p.199) that links to "each viewer's personal history or individual biography." Hence, on the audience's side, character engagement not only relates to the identity of audience with regard to gender, race and ethnicity but also includes the mediated moment (Hill, 2019) that involves the mood, the knowledge of genre, the time and space of engagement.

Additionally, Cooper's research on identification of women's stand-up comedy (2019) put forwards the specific ways of identification in female stand-up comedy: identification of comedians and target audiences, filling the gap of audience research in female comedy. Cooper also points out another dimension of identification – the identification of the butt of joke. In other words, it aims to distinguish between "laughing at" and "laughing with" (p.102). Identifying the butt of joke can be used for inclusion and exclusion which solidifies the community (Abrams, 2017).

The unique form of relationship between characters and audiences can be further developed into the long-term parasocial relationship (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), eliciting imaginative conversation and emulation of the character's behavior (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019). The most extreme instance of such a case is the behaviour of fans, and stand-up comedians can serve as the opinion leader. In sum, taking consideration of diverse scholarship, character engagement

within stand-up comedy talent show involves both emotional (Michelle, 2007; Hill, 2017; Keinonen et al., 2018) and cognitive (Liebers & Schramm, 2019) process that play significant roles in strengthening the tie between audiences and characters.

2.3 Humor as a lens of engagement

Stand-up comedy as a form of entertainment utilizes and manifests humor (Mintz, 1985; Brodie, 2008). Countless researchers delve into the relationship between humor and stand-up comedy (Mintz, 1985; Koziski, 1984; Greenbaum, 1999; Seirlis, 2011). Humor is also closely related to the engagement of television comedy. Kuipers (2006) claims that the engagement of television comedy is integral to audiences' taste of humor, as audiences "employ the same criteria to judge television comedy and humor in everyday life" (p. 375). Based on that, Claessens and Dhoest (2010) analyze humor as the hint of media taste in the sitcom, proposing humor is part of the class stratification of taste. Graefer and Das (2020) investigate the audience engagement of "offensive" humor within television comedy, and highlight "offensive humor as a tool for making social distinctions." Consequently, humor can be seen as the representation of taste and social classification. More importantly, since media has changed the form of humor production (Kessel, 2012), humor is investigated as the lens of television comedy engagement, by which audiences evaluate and interpret the television comedy based on their preoccupied identities.

The particularity of humor attracts researchers to investigate different contexts that humor operates. Yet, it is also a truism to say humor is universal, which means humor can be found in all societies (Billig, 2005). Though it seems paradoxical to consider humor as both particular and universal, Billig (*ibid.*) argues such a paradox can be understood from the same light of social codes. To be more precise, social codes of laughter and humor are manifested through social control and requirements. Douglas (1968) claims that these social dimensions permeate the perception of joke all the time, judging what is improper, offensive, and irrelevant humor. Therefore, researchers must ask, "what are the social conditions for a joke to be both perceived and permitted" (*ibid.*, p.367). In this regard, this chapter incorporates the Chinese context of humor into the generalized theories of humor that reflect the emotional and cognitive process. Moreover, the reflection on gender is also underlined so as to include feminist perspectives, which are more or less omitted and overlooked in humor theories (Caliskan, 1995; Kessel, 2012), into the significance of humor.

2.3.1 Humor as emotional and cognitive

According to the parameters of engagement, proposed by Dahlgren and Hill (2020), affective and cognitive work of engagement are highlighted as significant and dynamic modes of engagement. They are based on the balance of rationality and emotionality that construct contemporary politics and culture (ibid.). For Schopenhauer, rationality is constantly at odds with “the force of sensuous emotion”, resulting in the battle between the will and idea (cited in Billig, 2005, p.83). Yet, Dahlgren and Hill (2020) see such battle as the reason of considering both emotions and rationality, as they are “co-present and active in human agency”. In this regard, the mechanism of humor, revolving around the cognition and emotions (Billig, 2005) are foregrounded in the analysis of the engagement of comedy.

Regarding the mechanism of humor, three theories are adopted as mainstream, they are superiority, incongruity, and relief theory (Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005). Though mushroomed from specific history and context, these theories are argued to be universal that look beyond culture, politics, and nations (Billig, 2005). Among these theories, incongruity theory is unique as it focuses on the “cognitive process rather than emotional dynamics” (Billig, 2005, p.62). Incongruity theory of humor uncovers a conflict between what “fits our picture of the world” and what is joking (Morreall, 1987, p.189), in which jokes violate the cognitive expectations of the audiences about the world. It is thus regarded as the most similar approach to the “techniques of stand-up comedians today” by which set-up creates expectation and punchline violates that expectation (Morreall, 2020). According to Greenbaum (1999), stand-up comedy strives not only to entertain but also to persuade audiences. It means that humor in stand-up comedy can amusingly persuade audiences. Accordingly, humor in stand-up comedy has the potential to “change the situation in which we find ourselves and can even have a critical function with respect to society” (Critchley, 2000, p.10). Stand-up comedy reaffirms the right to reveal the incongruity in a sense of the negotiation between stand-up comedians and audiences (Brodie, 2008). In this regard, incongruity functions as part of the collaborative art of stand-up comedy (ibid.).

Yet, Critchley (2002) points out that the premise of incongruity is often overlooked. It is based on the ground of social congruity, if there is “no social congruity, no comic incongruity” (p.4). In Chinese context, Confucian has significant impact on regulating the proper humor. Following the spirit of the Confucian Rites, according to Xu, proper humor should be “moderate, private, tasteful, useful and benign” (2011, p.49). It has socio-political meanings for Confucians to regulate humor in order to maintain social order and harmony. Xu

further argues that Confucian is wary of “unbridled passions” and advocates humor should be expressed in a balanced way (ibid., p.70). The view of Confucian proper humor resembles the early perspectives of superiority theory, questioning the motives of humor. The difference lies in superiority theory of humor, regarded as explicit “misogelast” that holds negative attitude towards humor (Billig, 2005), claims people laugh from “feelings of superiority over other people” (Critchley, 2002, p.2). Superiority theory is dated back to Greek philosophers, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Like Confucius, they were also suspicious of the ill-natured passion that evokes humor (Billig, 2005). They maintain that the wrong kind of laughter should be restricted to bring order for “a serious philosophy or theology” (Billig, 2005, p.37). Such rationale of proper humor stems from the regulations of emotions. Regulating emotions and pursuing benign humor are appropriate ways, in both Chinese and Greek contexts, of coping with humor to achieve the righteousness of oneself (Billig, 2005; Xu, 2011).

The early insistence from philosophers on controlling humor precisely reflects humor as potentially catharsis. In a common-sense way, humor indeed entails negative or positive emotions and elicits emotional behaviours like laughing and giggling (Morreall, 1987). Whereas incongruity theory avoids emotional aspect of humor, and superiority theory fears the untrammelled emotions of humor, relief theory, instead, looks at how emotions function and being suppressed in the humor processing (Billig, 2005). Relief theory regards the laughter as a release of suppressed nervous energy (Critchley, 2000), and emotions take the physical form of such pent-up energy (Moreall, 2020). Freudian humor is representative of relief theory, which shows that emotions evoked by humor can be positive and rebellious for individuals (Billig, 2005). Though relief theory is criticized for its obsolete psychology approach and overlooking the social aspects of humor (Moreall, 2020; Billig, 2005), it reveals the positive and transgressive emotions that derive from humor. Contemporary humor researchers pay more attention to the sociological meaning of humor, revealing the collective sides of emotions that can be accounted for affect (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Besides, the contagious feature of humor serves as inclusion and exclusion with regard to race, gender and ethnicity (Critchley, 2002; Kessel, 2012), producing the symbolic power of emotions often in an unconscious way.

2.3.2 Women’s humor and feminist humor

Though the classic humor theories are assumed to be universal, yet Caliskan (1995) criticizes them for excluding women since “universal” means “male” (p.50). According to Gilbert (2004), women have traditionally been excluded from the canon of humor, as old boys’ clubs

where jokes at play predominately opened up for males. Besides, many scholars believe the stereotype, women's incompatibility with humor, encumbers the inclusion of women's humor, resulting from the imposed private sphere of womanhood (Caliskan, 1995; Kotthoff, 2005; Keisalo, 2018; Cooper, 2019). The role of women is perceived as docile, modest, family-oriented, and genteel, which is incompatible with what humor entails, especially in the form of comedy, as aggressive, vulgar, and assertive (Caliskan, 1995; Kotthoff, 2005; Abrams, 2017). It echoes the Confucian view of gendered spheres. Confucian patriarchy naturalizes the segregation of genders and assigned distinctive roles to men and women, wherein men are restricted to public affairs and women to domestic affairs (Littlejohn, 2017, p.5). Hence, under Caliskan's argumentation, it is imperative to investigate women's humourists within the pervasive patriarchy that is embedded in Chinese society (Littlejohn, 2017).

Kotthoff maintains "humor as indexing gender" since one's gendered habitus is embedded in humor (2005, p.6). This argument stands at the very heart of the criticism of the stereotypes on women, underscoring women's normative role and incapability of humor (Caliskan, 1995; Kotthoff, 2005; Bore, 2010). Considering such stereotypes and the exclusion of women in humor theories, Caliskan (1995) proposes a generic term as women's humor to generally describe the humor in women's writings and performances. History has presented the tough situation when women stepping into the male-dominated realm of humor, whatever literary works or comedy, women had to degrade their sex in order to be funny (Caliskan, 1995; Zoglin, 2008). Incipient female comedians who were eager for "the comedy of recognition" (Critchley, 2002, p.11), devalued and falsified their experiences which often lead to reinforcing social consensus of stereotypes on women (Caliskan, 1995). Hence, contemporary women's humor lies in the possibility of change which is subversive (Caliskan, 1995) and transgressive (Abrams, 2017; Keisalo, 2018) towards social norms and gender roles. It further elicits the genre of "feminist humor", which is at times indistinguishable from and thus conflated with "women's humor" (Gilbert, 2004). According to Kaufman (1980, p.13), who is the precursor investigating feminist humor, feminist humor is based on "visions of change". Further, Stillion and White (1987) complement that appreciating feminist humor requires not only the recognition that women have been oppressed but also a belief that women's status should be changed. Caliskan (1995, p.57) points out such overt identification of women's oppression and the agency to free from pleasing the oppressors is the mark of feminist humor. And the feminist humor is assumed to begin with Women's Liberation Movement that shifted

the emphasis of results of oppression to its sources (ibid.). This makes men open targets, seeking not to offend a specific male but “rather unmoor the entire system of patriarchal oppression” (Gilbert, 2004, p.67). In this sense, women’s humor or female humor seems powerless in the comparison of feminist humor which is aggressive and powerful (ibid.).

Since the academic debate on feminist humor and women’s humor is based on the identities of researchers, Gilbert (2004) argues the judgment of whether the joke is feminist humor or women’s humor is in the mind of viewers. This leads to a more gender-inclusive method of audience research on feminist humor and women’s humor since humor is socially constructed and deeply rooted in male bias (Kramare, cited in Gilbert, 2004, p.64). Stillion and White (1987) investigate people’s reactions to the humorous feminist slogan, including males and females, suggesting gender and feminist sympathy influence the reactions to feminist humor. Bore (2010) finds out that both male and female participants hold the opinion that “women’s comedy” has limited appeal for male viewers. Further, Cooper (2019) reaffirms the findings of Bore that female and male audiences suggest “women’s comedy” is targeted to women audiences. Studies as such represent gender distinction in appreciating women’s humor, yet they show the shared bias of women’s humor both in male and female audiences. The belief that women’s comedy lacks universal appeal proves the discourse that hovers over the world (Krefting, 2017), that is women are not funny as male counterparts. Krefting (2017, p.246) accuses tastemakers and producers of this deep-rooted belief, who “are trained to see male humor as humor genera” and thus “consumers will gravitate towards male comic perspectives and world view.” In this regard, audiences as consumers can reflect the prejudice of the industry that functions as the structure of oppression on women’s comics.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

3.1 Methodological inspirations

This research is fundamentally inspired by the phronetic approach which is put forward by Flyvbjerg (2001). Phronesis is one of the intellectual virtues that “emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics” (p.56). Hence, phronesis is about value judgment rather than producing law-like theories. More importantly, Flyvbjerg rejuvenates Aristotle’s definition of phronesis and includes the issues of power, concerning the questions of “who gains and who loses; by which mechanisms of power?” (p.60), which inspire the study to investigate the power relations behind the phenomenon of burgeoning female comedians.

Furthermore, the case study is highlighted as a crucial strategy to investigate “how power works and with what consequences” (p.140). The case study is an in-depth investigation about “what is common and what is particular about the case” (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). Hence, it is imperative to investigate the context within and beyond the case (Yin, 1989). That said, case study is often criticized for the lack of generalization. Yet, Flyvbjerg argues that the “generalizability” can be increased by the strategic selection of critical cases (p.78). However, there is no protocol or paradigm for critical cases, but the logic of choice that follows as “if this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases” (p.79). It guides the research to choose the female comedians within the most popular stand-up comedy show rather than offline clubs as it offers a unique stage for female audiences to be maximum exposed in public.

In addition, mediatization as a methodological way of thinking on media engagement elucidates how communication and social practices are transformed digitally. It is a concept that represents “all the transformations of communicative and social processes, and the social and practical forms built from them...” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p.15). This concept sits at the center of the digital era where we increasingly rely on media to “enact social” (ibid., p.13). It is a media-centered rather than media-centric attempt, aiming to build a holistic understanding of the social phenomenon in a media-saturated society with an emphasis on the role of media (Hepp et al., 2015). Livingstone (1998) is wary of the ambition of analyzing the culture as “the whole way of life” that may lay primary focus on the context per se, instead, she advocates the more specific account of contextualization towards the relationship between people and media. It resonates with the media-centered way of thinking mediatization, offering the backdrop that links audience research with “the analysis of other social and cultural agencies and institutions” (ibid., p.10). Mediatization is also embedded in the case of

the research, *Rock & Roast 3*. As an online streaming stand-up comedy talent show, it stimulates various types of media consumption and engagement. Different media platforms are used by roaming audiences to engage with the show and female characters in the show. Compared to offline stand-up routines, audiences may have diverse behaviors and expectations of stand-up comedy which in turn affects the engagement of female stand-up comedy within *Rock & Roast*.

Another methodological inspiration focusing on the issue of gender within *Rock & Roast* is feminist standpoint theory. By gender, Harding (2008) argues it is about the social relations of men and women, rather than only concern about women. Since gender is embedded in different kinds of social entities, individuals, institutions, social structures as well as symbolic structures that frame modernity as gendered (pp.110-112), Harding comes up with standpoint theory which urges scholars to probe science from below, from the women's experiences that has historically been marginalized. Standpoint theory is political and methodological in the sense that it produces knowledge "for women, not just about them" (pp.114-115). Harding's standpoint theory sheds light on "how the world comes to conform to dominant beliefs" (2008, pp.119-120). In this regard, analyzing the engagement of female comedians reflects gender hierarchy, the empowerment of stand-up comedy as a genre as well as the significance of female comedians as subversive power. Hopefully, it would contribute to gender equality of female stand-up comedians and even that of society at large.

In sum, choosing the case study as audiences' engagement of female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast* is based on the critical thinking of methodology that makes the case crucial. By asking how come female characters who seem to be contradictory with stand-up comedy appear on the stage and gain popularity from the perspective of audiences, the conditions of female comedians and women in China can be unveiled.

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Qualitative method

This research follows a qualitative approach in order to understand and interpret audience engagement. Inspired by Hill (2019), qualitative research claims audiences' rights to roam around and their engagement in various spectrum. Qualitative methods are often adopted in audience research, and more specifically, the studies of media engagement (Keinonen et al., 2018; Hill, 2019), as a pragmatic tool to view audiences as human with agency rather than plain numbers and codes. Furthermore, it is also argued that the qualitative method is in accordance with the aim of case study, which emphasises on the situated interrelatedness of

different features and causes within the phenomenon (Bazeley, 2013, p.5). Miles et al. (2014, p.147) claim qualitative approach is a powerful method to assess causality by identifying mechanisms and going beyond sheer association. And generalization is viable in qualitative research based on the details or the “thick” description of the samples (Seale, 1999). It again echoes the view of Flyvbjerg (2001) that phronetic research emphasizes little things. Following the qualitative approach, this research adopts the interview as the qualitative method, trying to find out how audiences engage with the genre of stand-up comedy and female comedians within *Rock & Roast 3*. Different from quantitative method, the researcher is the instrument for data collection in qualitative interview research (Salmons, 2016), which means the prior knowledge of the researcher is involved in approaching the interpretation of interviewees. Yet, the prior knowledge can be beneficial for social science research as it involves intuition, experience and judgment that are qualitatively expertise for social scientists (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Besides, self-reflective questions like “what prejudices do I have myself and what prejudices are common among the scientific community?” can contribute to the openness and transparency of qualitative research and counteract the bias of the researcher (Kuckartz, 2014).

The interview helps to investigate the reasoning behind participants’ actions, and their feelings (Seale, 1998, p.202). It is a construction site of knowledge for exploring how subjects experience and understand their world (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore, a Semi-structured interview is adopted to prepare questions based on theoretical assumptions and be open to unexpected answers or interpretation from the interviewees. Since engagement is a subjective experience (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) and subjectivity is “a site of imagination, of desire and of fear as well as practical rationality” (Corner, 2011, p.87), it is imperative to assume less and investigate more (ibid.). Hence, semi-structured interview is appropriate for this research as it balances between the assumption and openness of investigation.

Moreover, interviews in this research are all online, which adds another significant dimension of technology to the research (Salmons, 2012). The reasons and motivations of choosing online interviews need to correspond to the research questions, aims and ethics (ibid.). In this case, the research deliberates on three realistic reasons to choose online interviews: 1) Based on the impact of Covid-19, the Chinese interviewees are hard to reach out since the researchers is living in Sweden. 2) Online interviews can cross the boundary of spaces and time to expose to a diverse group of interviewees. 3) Since the *Rock & Roast* is an online streaming show, which is advertised and exposed in multiple media sites, the ICT

(information and communication technology) literacy of interviewees is to some extent ensured.

3.2.2 Sampling and piloting

The study combines inductive with deductive methods to generate the interview guide as the parameters of engagement inspire the research to delve into the context, motivation and modalities of engagement. The interview guide was revised twice with the help of the supervisor. Afterward, the research has done 1 piloting in order to further improve the interview guide pragmatically. Some questions are slightly changed to reduce the bias of the researcher. For instance, the question of “are you glad to see the growing number of female comedians in *Rock & Roast*” are replaced by a more general and open question of “what’s the general impression of female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*?” Then, the formal interview guide was translated into Chinese as the common language shared with the interviewees.

The interviewees are sorted out based on the experience of watching female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*. The wide range of criteria takes consideration of disengagement (Hill, 2019) regarding female comedians as well as their male counterparts who jointly constitute *Rock & Roast*; and the subjectivity of engagement as it varies from audience to audience regarding the channel, play speed, frequency and media practices. Due to the impact of Covid-19, the processes of recruitment and sampling are transferred into digital space. Thus, the choices of sites to recruit the interviews become more significant in this case. Considering the bias of snowball sampling that can lead to an “unrepresentative account” (Seale, 1999), this research chooses multi-site sampling combined with snowball sampling to increase the validity of snowball sampling. The research attempts to approach audiences in multiple sites of social media platforms, including Weibo, Douban¹ and WeChat. At first, the research contacted two friends to reach out to the potential interviewees who meet the criteria and are willing to accept an interview. Among them, one friend who is an active user and a small influencer who has more than 3000 followers on Douban helped to recruit e-friends on Douban; another friend who is an active user of WeChat helped to recruit e-friends as well as real-life friends on WeChat. Moreover, the researcher has spared no effort to recruit the potential interviewees on WeChat, Douban as well as Weibo, the three popular social media platforms in China. Ultimately, 14 participants were sorted out, wherein 8 participants are recruited via WeChat, 5 are recruited via Douban, and only 1 are recruited via Weibo.

¹ A Chinese rating and social platform of movies, TV shows and books etc.

Despite the unevenness in numbers, finding participants through the multi-sites can serve as a strategy to avoid the homogenous group of participants based on the single-site snowball sampling.

The study was intended to keep gender balance as to reveal the gendered engagement of female stand-up comedy (Bore, 2010). Yet, during the recruitment process, it turned out to be only three male participants, including the piloting, were willing to be interviewed. To some extent, it reflects the issues of gender in this case, the topic per se appears to be more welcomed for women. At the end of recruitment, there were 12 female interviewees and 2 male interviewees². The duration of the interview ranges from 45min to 1 hour and a half, including the greetings and the introduction of interview process. Demographical information was collected so as to provide a holistic picture of the analysis.

3.2.3 Analysis

Kuckartz (2014) contends that qualitative research does have standards to follow, and the standards are process-oriented. This research concerns the texts generated by interviews all the way through coding and analysis. Qualitative text analysis is employed as it emphasizes understanding and interpretation of the text (Kuckartz, 2014, p.50). All the data were imported into NVivo as soon as the transcription was finished.

Thematic qualitative text analysis is appropriate for the problem-centered research which highlights the research questions. It guides the process of coding from the beginning to the end. Initial coding begins from the comprehension of texts with important passages being highlighted (Kuckartz, 2014, p.81). During the initial coding, memos are created for every individual case to memorize the thing that “strike you as particularly interesting or relevant as well as any ideas you may have regarding the analysis” (ibid.). It further benefits the process of thematic coding, wherein data are subsumed into thematic categories based on abductive reasoning. The advantage of thematic coding is it helps to build the main categories then create sub-categories inductively which is efficient for this research. Yet, it inevitably involves the “cyclical” process of coding which urges the research to review codes back and forth. After coding, the model of “describe, compare and relate” (Bazeley, 2013) serves as a guide for analytical writing. The thematic codes are firstly described in relation to research question, then compared and related to the analytical themes.

² See appendix 2

3.2.4 Ethical concern

Guided by Kvale (2007), this research highly concerns ethical issues during different stages. As for the stage of thematizing, the research aims to not only generate the scientific value of knowledge regarding stand-up comedy in China but also improve the situations of female stand-up comedy. Such a humanitarian way of thinking manifests the advocacy of Kvale (p.24) that improvement of human situations should be investigated.

As for the stage of designing, all the interviews were informed beforehand and asked for the digital consent form to clarify the research aim and process. The consent form indicates the right of participants to not answer the questions that they may feel uncomfortable with as well as the right to end the interview at any time. After interviewing, all the audio recordings are stored in the researcher's laptop and as soon as the transcription is done, the audio file will be deleted.

Additionally, interviewees are given pseudonyms for privacy concerns. Also, transcription adheres to the audio recordings of interviews. It should be noted that participants have the right to choose which platforms and which way the interview will be, including audio and video meetings. During piloting, due to the issues of the internet, it transferred from video meeting to audio call, which leads to the concerns of the internet when choosing video meeting. Nevertheless, as long as the internet quality is ensured, the platform is chosen from the side of participants. The channel that indicates the features and platforms of interviews is as followed:

Channel	Interviewee
WeChat video call	Dove
WeChat audio call	Huy
WeChat audio call	Bin
Zoom meeting	Arrow
Zoom meeting	Lao
WeChat video call	Rui
WeChat video call	Sain
WeChat audio call	Ye
WeChat audio call	Arete
WeChat audio call	Xixi
WeChat video call	Han
WeChat audio call	Yao
WeChat audio call	Mi
WeChat video call	Shu

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1. Empowering female comedians: stand-up comedy as a “female-friendly” genre

4.1.1 Pre-existing knowledge of crosstalk and sketch comedy

As genre entails background knowledge to generate meaning (Frow, 2005), it relates to the pre-existing knowledge and practices of relevant genres (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). Stand-up comedy has been burgeoning in China over recent years; therefore, it is imperative to probe into the prior knowledge of relevant genres, especially that of traditional Chinese comedy which impacts the engagement of stand-up comedy as a new and foreign genre of comedy. It is also based on the argument that the spectrum of engagement is embedded in the “attention economy” (Corner, 2017, p.4). In this sense “the complex interplay of choices and exclusion” (ibid.) that audiences reflect offers a lens to investigate how stand-up comedy stands out in the sea of comedy genres, and in which aspects it distinguishes from other genres of comedy and further empowers female comedians.

The reason why Chinese crosstalk and sketch comedy are highlighted in respect of relevant genres is partly based on the experience of the researcher as a Chinese. The experiences of watching sketch comedy and crosstalk as traditional comedy since childhood are internalized as qualitative expertise that emphasizes the researcher’s intuition, experience and judgment (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Moreover, since 1983, the Chinese biggest calendrical festival, namely Spring Festival, has been bonded with CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala (Yuan, 2017, p.172). It has the far-reaching consequences to frame “an almost ‘compulsory’ mode of viewing” (ibid.) during Spring Festival due to its nationwide scale of broadcasting. Crosstalk and sketch comedy here are “crucial structuring elements of Spring Gala” (Zhu & Berry, 2009, p.116). In this respect, crosstalk and sketch comedy are critical cases to stand in contrast to stand-up comedy as an emerging genre in China. In addition, based on the semi-structured interview guide, the interviewees were encouraged to bring up other practices of comedy in their everyday life, yet it turns out to be crosstalk and sketch comedy are overarching genres of Chinese comedy that predominate the comedy industry. Interestingly and unexpectedly, the majority of interviewees recalled memories of watching the Spring Festival Gala when the experiences and practices of engaging with sketch comedy and crosstalk were asked:

I actually liked the sketches and crosstalk in the early years, but in recent years I feel that they have become more and more boring, and I can't tell why. I just feel that part of them are like those sketches on the Spring Festival Gala, which were also very funny in the early

years, but in recent years they are doing something for politics, that is, promoting this kind of stuff, and so it is not funny anymore. (Arrow)

Many interviewees like Arrow have noticed that political ideologies and agenda are embedded in sketch comedy. For Lao who is a 28-year-old Ph.D. student, sketch comedy in Spring Festival Gala is always trying to “make a mountain out of a molehill” which makes it boring to engage with. Spring Festival Gala is “too aim-oriented” regarding political agenda, according to a 28-year-old female Bin. National spirit and positive moral values as political aims are embedded in Spring Festival Gala (Feng, 2016). It directly results in the disengagement of young audiences, as many interviewees have stopped or lost interest in watching Spring Festival Gala. Given that, Spring Festival Gala, as a significant channel that promotes traditional Chinese comedy, is unsustainable per se, as many interviewees shared the disengagement with crosstalk and sketch comedy of Spring Festival Gala:

When I was young, it was usually the Spring Festival, and I would see a bunch of good sketches on TV. But when I got older, I haven't really been interested in sketches in recent years, because I don't watch much of the Spring Festival Gala these days. (Han)

The situations that I've come across sketches are usually, well, parties or just kind of family occasions. So, a lot of sketches are written with an approach for all ages in mind. (Xixi)

According to a female interviewee Xixi, Spring Festival Gala adopts “an approach for all ages,” which is another important cultural facet to point out. Sketch comedy is a case in point that comes to a compromise between different ages of audiences. It is suitable for Spring Festival yet lacks attraction for young audiences. Xixi compares sketch comedy to stand-up comedy:

If we take the current domestic stand-up comedy for example, well it should also include foreign countries, into consideration, their contents I think maybe gear towards a younger audience. Because a lot of what they've talk about, including the ground in which they develop their stand-ups, are mainly based in some cities. Like in my hometown, in the counties and towns, there is probably no such development of stand-up comedy. Nowadays, it's usually developed in big cities, so it's mainly aimed at young people who live faster and work under more pressure in big cities.

The genre of stand-up comedy, based in mega cities, stresses the difficulties and conditions of young audiences, refusing to cater to all kinds of audiences. Hence, the genre of stand-up comedy in China stands in contrast to that of sketch comedy. In this sense, genre of stand-up comedy is positioned as a cultural indicator (Seirlis, 2011; Gilbert, 2004) of young people,

rather than referring to a simplified dichotomy of new and old genres when comparing to the genres of traditional comedy in China.

More importantly, the issues of gender have been emphasized throughout the reflection of interviewees. Gender inequality is embedded in traditional Chinese comedy. Firstly, the majority of interviewees state they have rarely seen any women in crosstalk, which is sufficient to reflect gender inequality regarding quantity in crosstalk. Moreover, recently, the leading crosstalk club, Deyunshe, has refused to recruit female apprentices “due to respect” (Xu, 2020). Though the club has stated that was not discrimination against women, it is sufficient to present the deep-rooted gender stereotypes by the small number of female comedians. Secondly, gender stereotypes are also found in sketch comedy as Dove reflects:

The sketch comedy, for sure, I think is that basically every sketch will have at least one woman, but generally women are as, it just always feels like they are supporting characters, or. I can't say that, but in terms of the number of women, for sure, I think there are fewer women than men, even if it's just one less, it's still less. That's the feeling anyway. And then in crosstalk, there are basically no women, no women at all. (Dove)

Dove here points out the roles that women play in sketch comedy are usually “supporting actors.” Her view resonates the views of other interviewees:

I think it seems that in most cases the roles played by female actors in sketches are the roles of mothers and wives, and rarely do they stand out as social workers. (Han)

Well but compared to some of the sketches or comedies I've seen before, the role of the women, especially the prettier one, is mainly a stooge or a pretty face to support other characters, and I don't think they have any role to promote the whole plot. (Bin)

The supporting role, which is often family-attached, and even “stooge” as well as “pretty face” unveil the fact that female comedians are marginalized in the comedy industry as a whole. The comedy industry in this case is the institution that exerts power as “the bearers of gender” to reinforce gender inequality and stereotypes (Elson, 1999). In light of that, comedy institutions and structures of the comedy industry are not only gendered but, more importantly, gendering (Celis et al., 2013, p.14). The power of the dominant culture of comedy, is not just repressive but also productive, which is efficient in conveying normative femininity (ibid.).

4.1.2 Empowering the discourse of female comedians

There are two paradoxes within the discourse of humor and stand-up comedy. Humor is a neutral phenomenon (Gilbert, 2004) yet gendered category (Caliskan, 1995). And stand-up

comedy is a democratic (Lintott, 2020) but “male” genre (Gilbert, 2004; Keisalo, 2018; Cooper, 2019). It points to the humourists, in the case of stand-up comedy is the stand-up comedians, that render the gendered traits, often in a stereotypical way. Thus, it refers to the gender identity of a comedian or humourist who exerts the power of confirming one’s gender identity. By virtue of the salience of gender identity, the marginal identity of being a woman in stand-up comedy industry is thus foregrounded so as to reveal the dynamic power relations between stereotypes and empowerment.

Xixi relates the marginalized female identity to the cultural context of traditional values:

It feels like people are used to let men judge everything, but they're not used to let women stand on the stage and comment on current events, or life events, or men, and it just doesn't feel like people are comfortable with women standing on stage and commenting and being sarcastic.

Her comments link to the long-lasting debate on the gendered spheres. Western feminists have argued there is a separation between public spheres and private spheres with regard to male spheres and female spheres (Caliskan, 1995; Kotthoff, 2005; Keisalo, 2018; Cooper, 2019). Men are naturally regarded as public actors who are good at commenting current affairs, participating in political affairs and offering a speech in public. Whereas women are taught to be family-oriented and not encouraged to step into public spheres. The western view of gendered segregation can also be found in Chinese context, as Huy, a male interviewee reflectively shared:

In our traditional culture, the male is the master of the outside and the female leads the inside. We don’t prefer this kind of self-expression, that is open and like self-disclosure. So, under that stereotype, females are not appropriate to appear in this kind of space. Besides, stand-up comedy itself is a language-based form of performances, so it must involve the content which often comes with a point of view. And the point of view is presented in front of a large public opinion, which will be amplified and will form a voice in the whole society, so it might be the problem of discourse power. It is true that in a male dominated environment, the sudden emergence of so many women's voices will not be accepted.

Mi, a 25-year-old female addresses the similar concern regarding the traditional values that are imposed upon women:

I think that in China, because of the tradition of women, from the ancient times it has always been emphasized that women are virtuous if they are not talented, including women do not need to speak out too much, that is, in this kind of male-dominated society, it believes that women should not say too much, women are weak in expression, a bit bound

by the kind of feeling. The second thing is that she doesn't dare to say anything, because it's fine if she says it at home, but if you say it in public, you'll seem a bit too aggressive. Women are too well-behaved, and she doesn't like to express, she prefers to watch others express it.

As Huy mentioned, the “outside” is similar to the public spheres and the “inside” resembles the private spheres. Both interviewees agree that China is still a male-dominated society, wherein women are taught to “be weak in expression” and “be not talented”, which resonates the view that women are incompatible with humor and comedy (Caliskan, 1995; Kotthoff, 2005). Such gendered spheres and segregation render women as incompatible with humor and comedy. Hence, it is of importance to point out the similarity between Chinese gendered segregation and western gendered spheres, which has been hovering over China hitherto and further reinforces gender stereotypes via comedy institutions that have the power of normalizing gender identities. The segregation of gender is deeply rooted in Confucian which imposes domestic spheres on women and public spheres on men (Littlejohn, 2017). Many interviewees share the same thought as Huy, positioning female stand-up comedian as the rebellious actor within the power relations of discourse. Through the continual comparison between traditional values and values offered by stand-up comedy, interviewees are able to touch upon the structural oppression of gender and bring the gender reflections of stand-up comedy to the table. For example, Bin brings up her reflection of gender empowerment regarding stand-up comedy:

In current stand-up comedy, the narrative of a female stand-up comedian can be more positive, and then touch more upon the inner state of a woman's mind, what she is thinking, and can establish the role of a woman as more comprehensive and less one-sided than in sketches and crosstalk. It's as if the female character is expanded in the genre of stand-up comedy.

The opinion Bin holds not only resembles the views of most female interviewees, but also in accordance with Ye as a 24-year-old male civil servant:

I think if it's a female stand-up comedian, she's a person who tells jokes, a subject who actively sends information to the outside world. She's not the one being flirted with, she's the one flirting with others. Yes, that's probably the feeling.

According to Ye, female stand-up comedians have the power to reverse the systematic structures of gender oppression that targets women as the butt of jokes (Caliskan, 1995; Gilbert, 2004; Zoglin, 2008). Given that, female stand-up comedians are empowered to express themselves by the genre of stand-up comedy with regard to subjectivity and agency.

Another male interviewee Huy as a 26-year-old teacher also made an affirmative comment when talking about the values of female stand-up comedians:

The difference between stand-up comedians and sketch actresses is that domestic stand-up comedians are able to convey their values a little bit more and offered a little bit more room to perform.

Yet, Huy was using cautious wording to express the extent of the room that offered by the genre of stand-up comedy. It is worth investigating how much the room is for female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast* and further apply to the stand-up comedy industry. Nevertheless, the comparison of stand-up comedy and traditional Chinese comedy, namely crosstalk and sketch comedy, is sufficient to unravel the systematic network of gender oppression in Chinese comedy, as well as the fact that traditional comedy is gradually declining based on the disengagement and discontent towards Spring Festival Gala. More significantly, it affirms the women's empowerment of stand-up comedy regarding the power of discourse and against traditional gender segregation that enables the genre to seem more "female-friendly" compared to traditional comedy.

4.2 Engaging with female comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*

4.2.1 *Rock & Roast 3* as a platform of promoting female stand-up comedians

All interviewees have mentioned the previous experience of watching the first two seasons of *Rock & Roast*, which shows the familiarity of *Rock & Roast* as a brand of stand-up comedy TV shows. And there is a serial engagement (Hill, 2019, p.63) within *Rock & Roast* as a format which has been updated since 2017. Given that, the pre-existing knowledge and practices are indispensable to the engagement of *Rock & Roast* season 3 as well as that of female comedians within the season. Based on the context as such, many interviewees reflect that *Rock & Roast* promote the genre of stand-up comedy in China. Among them, some further support the idea that *Rock & Roast 3* has promoted female stand-up comedians within the show:

There was an increasing number and quality of female comedians, the previous season was nearly all about Siwen, not many other female comedians. It was only in the second and third seasons that more female stand-up comedians came into the limelight. (Ye)

I think there are more women compared to the previous seasons. This is a very welcome change. Secondly, I think it is because of such a change in the number of women, and I think the platform is also intentionally creating a kind of platform for people to see more

women's voices in stand-up comedy, in other words, not all the power of speech is in the hands of men, which is inclusive for female comedians. (Shu)

Ye and Shu both agree that there is an increasing number of female comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*. Yet, according to the interviewee of piloting who has been watching thoroughly the whole seasons of *Rock & Roast 3*, such growth is not obvious. To be more precise, according to Rui, a 26-year-old female, there is an increasing number of female comedians that impress people, thereby people can recall more female comedians in this show. Despite the limited number of stand-up comedians, the quality of female comedians shines through in the interviews. Several interviewees describe Siwen as an influential pioneer of female stand-up comedians who has been dubbed the “queen” of Chinese stand-up comedy (Yin, 2018). Under the halo of Siwen, there were still more female stand-up comedians in this season getting to the semi-finals, which means more chances of performing in *Rock & Roast 3* as a talent show essentially. Therefore, *Rock & Roast 3* delineates a group of female stand-up comedians rather than focus on Siwen as the only brilliant female comedian, according to Rui. Many interviewees offer positive evaluation of *Rock & Roast 3* regarding the fact that more performances of female comedians are able to be seen. Yet, the role that *Rock & Roast 3* plays in promoting female stand-up comedy has two meanings, one is offering more chances for female comedians to perform as mentioned, another is by marketing female comedians it aims to bring the economic benefits for the show:

I think when the show started, they didn't expect the topic of female stand-up comedians to become such a hot topic, but after it became a hit, both financially and in terms of the production of the show, it was moving towards it. (Rui)

The push towards female comedians in *Rock & Roast 3*, according to Rui, is prominently based on the economical concern. The argument sits at the centre of attention economy (Corner, 2017), wherein *Rock & Roast* may spare no efforts to seize the chance of exposing female comedy so as to win audiences.

Nevertheless, many female interviewees consider *Rock & Roast* intentionally promoting female comedians:

I think there are two reasons, female stand-up comedians per se, the contents of them are great, they have gone through some years of training and performances, they have accumulated experience to be able to write better jokes, the second point is that maybe the stage, such as Li Dan (the producer & the host) they are intentionally giving women some

opportunities, pushing them out and putting them on the stage, creating such a, umm....

(Bin)

Here, Bin reflects by virtue of the push from the producer and staff in *Rock & Roast*, female comedians are offered more opportunities to perform. Such push is intertwined with the so-called “female-friendly” genre of stand-up comedy (Chen, 2020) in Chinese context as it offers room for women’s power of discourse, subjectivity, and agency. Also, Bin stresses the endeavours and efforts of female stand-up comedians per se. Thus, the attraction and characterization of female comedians themselves should be considered as Arete, a 22-year-old student, believes that female comedians play a predominant role in *Rock & Roast 3*.

Therefore, the motivation of watching *Rock & Roast 3* is investigated as the way to “search for patterns of motivations and perceptions that are socially and specific to various categories of actors” (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). 5 out of 12 interviewees have stated that female stand-up comedians are their main drive or partial drives to start watching *Rock & Roast 3*. For instance:

I think I started watching, since I don't binge watching the show, I don't watch the whole episodes, I think I started watching the third season because of Li Xueqin (laughs). And I was interested in this girl, Li Xueqin, so I watched a lot of clips about her. (Yao)

Moreover, Sain, the fan of female twins stand-up comedians Yan Yi and Yan Yue, who takes in charge of managing their fan group on Weibo is an extreme case to point out. She recalled the time she was attracted by their performances in *Rock & Roast 2* and started watching *Rock & Roast 3* on that account. Audiences like Yao and Sain are pulled into the characterization of female comedians which is pushed by the producer, intentionally with economic concerns, showing the push-pull dynamic in *Rock & Roast 3* (Hill, 2016) that jointly frame the “female-friendly” stand-up comedy TV show to audiences.

4.2.2 Media censorship as an invisible constraint of *Rock & Roast 3*

Media censorship is often foregrounded when delving into media practices and engagement in China (Tai, 2014; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Also, it is found throughout the engagement of *Rock & Roast 3* as well. 8 out of 14 interviewees, that is more than half, have mentioned that media censorship impacts the topics of *Rock & Roast* and other comedy shows as well as the female comedians. Rui’s experience of watching the removed episode of *Roast*, which is produced by the same company of *Rock & Roast*, involves the fact that stand-up comedy has already “crossed the line” during the initial stages of development (Sun, 2017):

I think the first time I watched a talk show was when the *Roast* first came out, one episode was removed, that was the first episode, the guest was Zhou Jie. Then, because the topic was too crazy, the episode was blocked after being released. And I am a type of rebellious person, I became extremely interested in watching this episode after hearing many people saying this episode was blocked. After watching I thought it was really funny, and then is that issue I know Li Dang, Chi Zi (the first two famous male comedians in *Rock & Roast* and *Roast*). ... anyway, at that time there was no concept that this was a stand-up comedy, but after the first season of the show was broadcasted and after watching them roasting, I thought, “Oh my God, this is called stand-up comedy, this is so crazy,” and that was the feeling.

Rui’s case is potent and powerful, she reflects the agency as a roaming audience who bypasses the censorship to engage with the removed episode of stand-up comedy. Roaming audience is a metaphor that describes audiences as path makers in media practices, suggesting ‘a right to roam’ (Hill, 2019, p. 31). After watching this removed stand-up, she emotionally engaged with stand-up comedy, manifesting the rebellious thoughts as the “structures of feeling” (Williams, cited in Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) to contest the media censorship. Though it’s not the case for *Rock & Roast*, yet it sheds light on the agency of Chinese audiences who are reigned by the invisible and ubiquitous media censorship (Tai, 2014).

Though Rui did not refer to what contents specifically made this episode “crazy” and further led to the removal, this is indicated by another interviewee Dove who has been to the offline stand-up routine:

Because it's actually offline so there are not that many restrictions, they can talk about topics that don't need to pass censorship. But I seem to think that the so-called censored topics they talk about offline is about something a bit sexual and another is about something regional. Just those two things they might, when they're online, they are sensitive and just don't talk about them, but when they talk about them offline, I actually think they're quite lowbrow, so I also think it seems that online is better than offline.

Dove’s view indicates that the sexual and region-based jokes have been censored and filtered, and from her perspective those jokes are lowbrow and deemed to be censored. Yet, media censorship does not only constrain the “lowbrow” contents, but also the right to step deeply into the issues of politics and gender. Shu is a 24-year-old student who compared Chinese stand-up comedy to Hong Kong stand-up comedy. She shared one of the Hong Kong stand-up routines, wherein the chief executive of Hong Kong was derided:

This is probably something that is difficult to do in our mainland stand-ups. Many foreign stand-ups also talk about politics, and I think they dig a little bit deeper into their own lives than we do or discuss the issues of men and women a little more deeply.

The restriction of political topics in mainland stand-ups is probably the rigid line that one cannot cross, indicating political ideologies of authorities that predefine what is “unfavourable” (Tai, 2014). More specifically, issues of gender, referred by Shu, underscore that politics are gendered (Celis et al., 2013). This concern of gender issues being politically censored is further interpreted by Yao who shared her deep concern about censorship towards female comedians:

I actually want to say that for these two topics (appearance anxiety and emotional experience) can actually go more in depth, but I think to talk more in depth will not pass the censorship, so I quite sympathize with these female comedians, in fact, they know how and they know which topics everyone will be happy to listen to and concerned about and resonate with, but perhaps because of restrictions of topics, they can't talk in depth, for this point I have a little regret.

This concern stands at the very heart of standpoint theory (Harding, 2008), stressing the power form below. Moreover, Yao as a sympathetic female audience emotionally identifies with female stand-up comedians whose topics are somehow restrained. It shows the potential of media censorship to impact the topics of gender that female comedians revolve around as politics and gender are intertwined (Celis et al., 2013). Furthermore, Arrow points out it's not the content or stand-up comedian that authorities are afraid of, it's the laughter that threatens the legitimacy of the government:

I would think that one of my biggest personal feelings is that if Chinese stand-up comedy is in a nascent state, a lot of regulation or so-called excessive censorship would restrain a lot of very interesting points from the bud. Because I have seen before, I saw an Indian stand-up comedian on Instagram, and he was doing a stand-up, saying that some of the stand-up comedians around him were arrested by the Indian government. And then he said something I remember very well, he said why they were arrested, because their jokes were too funny? No, because the government was afraid, afraid of what? He said the government was afraid of audiences who watch stand-ups rather than stand-up comedians. It was just about a paragraph like that.

The laughter that results from humor is contagious (Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005). Arrow connects the comedy with laughter regarding media censorship and directly demonstrates the social meaning of laughter which is the latent target of media censorship. Laughter has the social significance that indicates the social congruity as the ground (Critchley, 2002, p.4). In

this sense, media censorship of stand-up comedy, in essence, is wary of the laughter from audiences that may have the power of social consensus to resist against the dominant political power.

Though media censorship does not affect *Rock & Roast 3* in a tangible way, yet Fun Factory CEO He, during the interview with Sixth Tone, unveiled the invisible hand of media censorship which further causes self-censorship. He affirmed the avoidance of political jokes and ethnic jokes, and more importantly, He points out “jokes about sex by a female comedian could only be implicit” (Li, 2016). In this regard, the impact and content of media censorship come to the surface. The consequences of such impact will further be discussed within the limitations of women’s humor.

4.2.3 Character engagement with female stand-up comedians

The character engagement is studied in terms of the spectrum of engagement (Hill, 2019), namely the positive and negative engagement as well as disengagement with the character in an emotional and affective way. The spectrum of engagement with regard to characters is further conceptualized as identification, which is constructed based on a recognition of common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group (Hall, 1996, p.2). In addition, there is attributed or imaginative closeness between audiences and characters which is different from identification, according to Keinonen et al. (2018).

Also, it is noteworthy that audiences may perform several roles at the same time, switching back and forth between positive and negative modes of engagement (Hill, 2015, p.149). Moreover, since two male interviewees are included in the study, cognitive modes of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) are also considered so as to reveal their critical modes of engagement.

More specifically, within the context of female stand-up comedy, the meaning of identification is extended to include the identification of the butt of jokes and target audiences (Cooper, 2019) which leads to the authority, legitimacy and trust of stand-up comedy (Greenbaum, 1999; Gilbert, 2004; Abrahams, 2020). Humor in this sense, is crafting the identification in stand-up comedy as it constructs inclusion and exclusion, and solidifies the community (Abrams, 2017). In addition, humor is emotional that serves a “cathartic function” (Gilbert, 2004, p.10), and also cognitive on the back of social congruity (Critchley, 2002). Hence, this research adopts humor as a lens of engagement to reflect the emotional and cognitive modes of engagement.

During the interview, interviewees are invited to talk about their favourite and least-favourite female stand-up comedians in the show. And it turns out that they mainly revolve around five female stand-up comedians, namely Zhao Xiaohui, Siwen, Yan Yue & Yan Yi (as twins), Yang Li and Li Xueqin. Among them, Yang Li is the most aggressive and controversial vis-à-vis other female stand-up comedians that is underscored and commented by all interviewees. Her punch line, “why men are so mediocre, yet so confident?” went viral on Weibo, Douban and other popular social media platforms in China (Cai, 2020; Du & Chen, 2021). She is also the most controversial figure in *Rock & Roast 3* who is accused of “repeatedly insulting all men” and “creating gender opposition” (Feng & Wang, 2021). Furthermore, her ambassador of tech giant Intel has revoked due to the resentment among men (Du & Chen, 2021). The consequences beyond the engagement of Yang Li’s performances are profound and unprecedented, which in turn affect the interpretation and perception of interviewees in this study. As Han commented:

There might be some jokes that I felt funny at that time, but the current impressive jokes are definitely the kind of jokes that will have a wide impact afterwards, and are constantly mentioned, including the one Yang Li said, that the man is ordinary and confident such like that. Her jokes would be on a variety of platforms for secondary dissemination, and then I might see them many times and review many times and get a deep impression.

Hence, Yang Li is a typical case of female stand-up comedians in *Rock & Roast 3* whose consequences are of significance to point out as those consequences clarify media practices, social and political context that affect the engagement of audiences. According to Rui, it was Yang Li who firstly sparked the discussion of gender inequality in stand-up comedy industry. Before her debut, nobody had realized the industry is unequal. At first, Rui contented with Yang Li’s performances, yet when her jokes popularized online and sparked heated debate, she was discontented with her performances:

I even feel that this kind of male-female confrontation brought by the *Rock & Roast* in fact is mainly based on Yang Li’s “efforts.” Just now looking back the third season of *Rock & Roast*, which has been finished already, if you take Yang Li out from the third season of *Rock & Roast*, without her, I think there won’t be this situation. I think now on “he is so mediocre yet so confident” has become a national reproach of Chinese women towards Chinese men.

Rui’s case vividly presents back-and-forth spectrum of engagement (Hill, 2015), wherein the consequences of character are considered during the engagement. Rui believes men is the butt of joke in Yang Li’s performances, which triggers the gender confrontation in society at large.

As a female, she is discontented with the consequences of gender opposition that result from Yang Li's performances, wherein men are pitiful in terms of being attacked and objectified (Gilbert, 2004). In this sense, Mi, as a female, describes Yang Li's humor as aggressive. Compared to Yang Li, Zhao Xiaohui, as her favourite female comedians in this season, performed a modest sense of humor:

Her style is a very girl-next-door temperament, that is, the aggressiveness will not be very strong. When she's talking, then everyone is quite happy, and will not touch upon a lot of sensitive things, it is a very moderate feeling. Although it will lose a lot of explosive points, relatively speaking it's a little more stable.

The characterization of "girl next door" manifests the imaginary closeness (Eichner, cited in Keinonen et al., 2018) with female stand-up comedian. Such characterization is a significant factor in media engagement (Keinonen et al., 2018; Hill, 2019) as well as stand-up comedy (Double, 2000). Yet it is argued that the avoidance of offence functions as a strategy for "evading responsibility and action, thereby hindering social change" (Graefer & Das, 2020, p.149). Mi prefers a mild way of performing, in other word, avoiding the offensive humor to "make everyone happy", influenced by the benign humor advocated by Confucian, Taoism and Buddhism (Yue, 2010; Xu, 2011).

Such non-aggressive humor is not only reflected by Zhao Xiaohui, Bin, as another female interviewee, puts forward the self-deprecating humor as non-aggressive. Bin emotionally engages with Li Xueqin who employs the humor of self-deprecation:

The thing about Li Xueqin is that, well, her... the topic of the relationship is very classic, and then every time she says it, it feels especially authentic, and then it feels very funny, just the way she performs. In fact, Yang Li and Li Xueqin are similar types, but she is not so aggressive, she just, sometimes may be self-deprecating ah or something like that.

Bin points out the difference between Yang Li and Li Xueqin lies in their humor, one is aggressive another is self-deprecating. Bin reflects emotional identification with Li Xueqin who seems authentic to Bin, as she can identify with the topics of relationship. This authenticity is further proved by Rui:

I like Li Xueqin because I feel she is very real; I feel that every sentence she speaks is very much like me. There is a part where she talks about how she feels that the boss of her office likes her, I can even recite this part. I feel like she was talking about me, I feel like I sometimes one of the guys in our office likes me, I feel like she was talking about me in a very realistic and grounded way. I feel that in what Yang Li said, the boys are the butt, right? because she seems to accuse of boys, but what Xueqin was offending was actually

herself, and actually when I listened to Xueqin's jokes I was putting myself in Xueqin's role, but I didn't feel offended, I just feel that she was joking really well and it's about my inner voice.

Rui feels close to the female comedian Li Xueqin, which is the case of imaginative closeness (Keinonen et al., 2018), as she can put herself into the character that Li Xueqin plays and even recite the part of jokes. Of note, Rui clarifies the butt of joke in Li Xueqin's performances is herself rather than men as the butt in Yang Li's jokes. In this regard, self-deprecating humor is a way that targets oneself rather other groups of people. The modest humor of Zhao Xiaohui and self-deprecating humor of Li Xueqin are opposite to aggressive and offensive humor that Yang Li employs. It means the benign humor are more acceptable to engage with according to several interviewees.

However, Yang Li's aggressive humor left a deep impression on Arete, as a female interviewee, she has reviewed her performances more than 5 times. She reveals the core of gender confrontation that brought by Yang Li's aggressive humor is to maintain the men's avoidance of being offended. She contends her aggressive humor in accordance with "turnabout is fair play." Of note, Huy as a male who is not offended by Yang Li's aggressive humor, holds a positive opinion towards Yang Li. His cognitive mode of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) as follows:

I think what she said here is not a reproach towards men, but a kind of voice from a female standpoint, a kind of deliberate, intentional and even excessive performance to express some women's real-life situations or problems.

Also, Huy complements that Yang Li always unconsciously and naturally presents the issues of gender. Such unconscious and natural features of gender indicate the marginality of being a female-comedian as a rhetoric strategy to serve as a subversion of the status quo (Gilbert, 2004, pp.4-5). In this sense, Yang Li's marginal identity grants her the authority to employ the 'attack-up-style' humor which empowers her to unpack the real problems women is facing. Remarkably, many female interviewees hold an opinion of "turnabout is fair play" based on the persistent oppression upon women. Lao is a case in point who is in favour of Yang Li's performances:

Because in the past, we were not willing to express such views directly in public. are was quite conservative and hidden. So maybe she was the first person, unveiling these things to tell everyone, but in fact, these words are usually what I talk to my friends, this man is speaking so highly of himself, words like that. But you will not literally speak that in front

of this male, then Yang Li's appearance may be a hit, that is, she was in a public platform loudly speaking out the feelings of many girls.

Lao's feelings reflect the emotional identification of stand-up comedians (Cooper, 2019) as the oppressed gender group. Also, it relates to the gender spheres that are significantly impacted by Confucian ideologies (Littlejohn, 2017). From Lao's perspective, Yang Li is a representative of women who has long been stereotyped as incompatible with expression in public. Moreover, Lao associates "the mediated narrative texts" (ibid., p.100) with her own life experiences, manifesting the "referential mode of viewing" (Michelle, 2007) which draws the personal experiences and knowledge of the wider context of gender stereotypes.

Nevertheless, Zhao Xiaohui as a female comedian who employs a modest sense of humor still gets empathy since she failed to get into the semi-finals:

Then I personally think that Zhao Xiaohui should not be kicked out so early, it feels like she and Yang Li should go farther than many male contestants, I think they are better than Cheng Lu and Pang Bo. There is also a very oily male, wearing glasses, what's his name...Rock, I don't like him either, I think he is so mansplaining. I do think he shouldn't go that far, and then the result of Zhao Xiaohui's leaving, makes me really sad. (Lao)

Such a feeling of injustice is rooted in the gender identity of female audiences in *Rock & Roast 3*. Since *Rock & Roast* is a talent show wherein fierce competition occurs every episode, female interviewees like Lao frequently make comparison between male and female stand-up contestants. Few interviewees such as Sain even disengaged with several male stand-up comedians and presume their poor quality of contents and possibility to be offended. When asked the experiences of being offended, she shared the reason that she was offended by male stand-up comedians prior to *Rock & Roast 3*:

Don't they always talk about female drivers and blah blah blah housewives and blah blah women and blah blah, and then do some marriage jokes, which I found boring. What's the point, heh?

Sain refuses to be offended by female stereotypes that are normalized in jokes of male stand-up comedians. Her disengagement with male comics sheds light on the subjectivity and agency of audiences. It means the pre-existing perceptions, knowledge and practices can further influence the choices that audiences make in the attention economy wherein different a great variety of media products are displayed. Though Sain is an extreme case among all interviewees, it shows how female audience base her gender identities on engaging with the female characters in *Rock & Roast* which comprises male and female contestants. In addition,

several female audiences convey a feeling to be more tolerant of female stand-up comedians in the show. Yao, who describes herself as an extremely tolerant person towards female stand-up comedians, exemplifies the emotional feelings of resonance when talking about the performance of Li Xueqin:

I feel very empathic, indeed I can fully understand the scenario she depicted, that is, her mother urged her to find a date and so on. I think it is difficult not to resonate with her as a girl, frankly speaking.

As Yao stated, women are able to easily resonate with female stand-up comedians based on shared gender experiences. Such appealing to female audiences has been found in Bore's study (2010) that femininity issues are perceived to be attracted to women. Besides, Cooper (2019) argues dominant group maintains the privilege to "remain oblivious and unaware of the marginalized group's perspective because they are not generally called to understand their worldview" (p.112). However, Ye as a male, though can't resonate with the experiences of female comedians, cognitively engages with the female comedian Yang Li:

I think what she said is in accordance with the real situation as such. She said, "the man is so ordinary but so confident", I previously read a lot of jokes about dating on Weibo, indeed there is part of the problem she was joking, I think what she said is really a problem in real life.

Ye exemplifies the cognitive mode of engagement, showing the efficacy of humor which mirrors the social structure and conditions (Douglas, 1968). The authenticity of female comedians is enhanced by the identification of comedians' identities but also the referential viewing that links to the knowledge of social and political context. Hence, the legitimacy of female comedians is built upon the identification of stand-up comedians as well as the jokes that reflects the real-world phenomenon since the audiences in this study are media savvy who concern about trending on Weibo, Douban and WeChat.

In sum, the character engagement of female stand-up comedians in this case touches upon the emotional identification of female comedians, such as empathy, injustice and inclusion of women; and comparison between male and female comedians as well as the consequences are concerned as to bring forward the holistic picture of engagement. Two male interviewees offer the critical mode of engagement regarding how male audiences engage with female stand-up comedians in the show since humor functions as the common ground that mirrors the cultural and political spheres (Gilbert, 2004; Seirlis, 2011).

4.3 Framing “women’s humor” in Chinese context

4.3.1 Gender as an intangible feature of stand-up comedy

According to Caliskan (1995), women are excluded in traditional humor theories. Several feminist scholar approach women’s humor as a resistance regarding the incompatibility of women to tell jokes (Caliskan, 1995; Gilbert, 2004; Keisalo, 2018). Caliskan (1995) argues that there is such a thing as women’s humor, yet it does not fit into “any of the known categories of humor and comedy” (p.52). Interestingly, this study notes that some interviewees at first refused to consider humor as gendered, as Ye, a male interviewee stated:

Because surely male stand-up comedians and female stand-up comedians see things differently, so I don't think there's anything wrong with that, it's just that different people have different views on the same thing, it just happens that they're different genders and that's why they're singled out.

It is sufficient to see that Ye downgrades the issue of gender as the general category of personality. Apart from Ye, Dove as a female interviewee shared the same concern:

But I don't seem to think it's a difference between men and women, it's just something that I feel is a personal, difference of actors rather than a difference between men and women. If you want to say that there is a difference between men and women, I don't seem to feel it particularly, maybe it's just that men don't talk specifically about the gender difference.

Though Dove does not think stand-up comedy is gendered and she believes it is the content and personal style that make a difference, she still reflects the subtle difference between male and female stand-up comedians – female stand-up comedians might joke about gender more often and pointedly than males. It does not mean to say that content and personal style do not matter, indeed, they play a vital role in stand-up comedy (Keisalo, 2018). Yet, the subtle difference is based on the wider social and political context of gender inequality that renders humor in a gender-sensitive way. And the reason that both Ye and Dove departures from the view of normalizing gender issues is based on the fact that gender intertwines with race, class, education and other modalities that construct one’s identity (Celis et al., 2013), which makes gender “invisible” especially as stand-up comedy is an autobiographical art form (Gilbert, 2004, p.94). Also, Judith Butler (1999) in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* mentions the complexity and problems of gender, wherein a “pregendered” person transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, yet gender is not always “constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and the intersectionality of class, race, ethnicity etc. makes it impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections (pp.4-5). The

difficulty of delimiting issues of gender is dismissed by standpoint epistemology (Harding, 2008) in which marginal groups like women are privileged over dominant groups to challenge power from below. In this sense, female humor is framed in this study as the resistance against dominant discourse and power (Caliskan, 1995). Gilbert (2004) contends that it is the gender of the humorists that makes humor gendered and further generates the label of “women’s humor” (p.94). Considering that, the gender identity of female comedians is highlighted as to frame women’s humor. Yet, before delving into the “women’s humor” in China, it is imperative to probe the development of feminism which is argued as a significant factor that influences female stand-up comedy (Caliskan, 1995; Gilbert, 2004; Zoglin, 2008)

4.3.2 The climate of feminism as the bedrock of women’s humor

Several female interviewees reflect the climate of feminism in China as a significant factor that affects female stand-up comedy and *Rock & Roast*. For instance:

I think it’s because this year, it seems like this year, before the show was aired, the issues of feminism were discussed more often on the internet, both at home and abroad, it seems to be the case. So, in this case, if the show talks about, well, feminism and men in a more direct and positive way like Yang Li did, it’s more likely to get attention. (Dove)

When the issues of feminism were asked to list in detail, Dove shared:

I think there is a trend of malephobia in China this year, which means that every week there is news of domestic violence, or men killing women, or whatever, and there is also news from abroad, where a little girl in Thailand had a speech, and so on. The birth rate is getting lower and lower, and this may have something to do with the status of women, as well as the fact that the marriage law was modified last year, and the issue of surrogacy was also brought up for discussion. The fact that these are all related to feminism.

Dove’s detailed description is fruitful to show how latest social news and policies impact feminism, including “domestic violence”, “three-child policy”, and “marriage law” etc. Yet, the emphasis on the women’s concerns has the potential of “alienating men in the crowd” (Greenbaum, 1999, p.36) and further causes a trend of “malephobia.” Such trend is concerned by Rui who is wary of feminism in China:

I now feel that people are particularly strict, I feel that people have even reached a situation of literal inquisition, that is, if you talk a little bit about girls then you will be severely abused, in fact I think girls, how to say it, we are calling for equality but I think we should also have a little, or some flexibility in equality.

Rui maintains that feminism in China is over-awakened, and she likens it to the “literal inquisition” which may hinder the offense in stand-up comedy as she believes stand-up comedy is an art of offense. Dove and Rui’s interpretation reaffirms Qi’s study (2018) on young feminist activists in China who actively mobilize on the Internet. Moreover, it indicates the despite the argument of feminism in China is awakening (Xiao, cited in Wu and Dong, 2019), feminism in China has been stigmatized and abused extensively (Wu and Dong, 2019). Nevertheless, Han, as a female interviewee, points out the interplay between awakening feminism and female stand-up comedians in China, is to some extent positive:

Well, I think that now, in the last two years, the issue of feminism in China is developing more actively, so it’s actually reflected in the stand-up comedy. A lot of female stand-up comedians take a female perspective on the creation and content of their stand-up comedy. And then they talk about more gender issues and the issues that women see from a female perspective in both sexes and marriage. And the issues that women face in life, including in the workplace. It’s something that male stand-up comedians don’t see. Then they may generate a large amount of humor departing from this direction. This includes some of Yang Li’s very popular jokes and Yan Yi & Yan Yue’s very popular jokes, all from a female perspective.

According to Han, female stand-up comedy mirrors the concerns of feminism, which in turn affects the topics of female stand-up comedy. Xixi also complements that the label of female stand-up comedians is popularizing on the back of the heated discussion of feminism. The interpretations of interviewees present a dynamic interplay between feminism and female stand-up comedians which triggers the heated discussion on the label of female stand-up comedians; and empowers female comedians to reflect upon the feminist concerns.

4.3.3 The potential and limitations of women’s humor

Gilbert (2004) points out that the humor of women can serve as “a means of facilitating in-group cohesion” (p.29). Shu, as a female, shared her feelings regarding the commonality of female stand-up comedians:

They show me a trend, or an awakening of women's power of discourse, and I can only say this is what they have in common. They are all expressing what they think, what they see, and I think this is the part that needs to be seen more in the society.

Shu confirms the values of women’s humor that is to present women’s power of discourse. Moreover, Sain who is a fan of Yan Yue & Yan Yi, stated she has influenced by their

performances, and more importantly, they have guided Sain to change the method of advocating women's power of discourse:

I used to actually, how can I say this, just don't quite agree with this kind of gentle output, I think acquiring power of discourse is through arguing, but I think after watching Yan Yi and Yan Yue, I think theirs way also seems to work.

Here, female comedians, Yan Yue and Yan Yi in this case, serve as key opinion leaders for audiences like Sain. Rhetorically, stand-up comedy is a means of persuasion (Greenbaum, 1999) which aims to persuade audiences of adapting "a particular world view" (ibid., p.45). Inspired by these female comedians, Sain agrees the implicit way of crafting feminism into stand-up comedy and believes "it seems to work".

However, Mi as a female considers women's humor as petty and too trivial:

In fact, one of my obvious feelings is that when I watch male comedians, I feel that they have a broader view, that is, the kind of the sky is the limit, they may talk to you about aeroplanes at one moment, and then give you a string of blah blah blah on the ground, and then their male view is more open, and then history, military, including technology, they talk about that a little bit more. And then as for female comedians I sometimes suddenly feel like I have to listen to her talk about men again, and about this ex again. Though I want to avoid these prejudices, I still have this habit of thinking that female stand-up comedians are more focused on women's marriage, relationships and then including this, some of them talk about careers, I guess, but there's less that kind of technology and military, a little bit of wild thinking and ideas.

Mi prefers to engage with "male's topics" which seems broader than women's trivial topics that dwell on relationship. Indeed, dwelling on relationship as well as body anxiety and emotional experiences are commonalities of female stand-up comedians in the show according to many interviewees. As Gilbert (2004) concludes, there are 11 major topics that American female stand-up comedians have covered, including sexuality, religion, politics and gynecology etc.

Remarkably. since several interviewees have rich experience in watching foreign stand-up comedy, they point out the limitations of women's comics in China:

They may have a different direction, for example, in foreign countries they may focus more on sexuality, reproduction and discrimination against women, but I don't think I've seen any of these in China so far. (Arrow)

When I saw some videos from abroad, I thought that they would talk about sex, including some workplace issues, and they would be very open, unlike the language environment in China which is so conservative. (Han)

I think for female stand-up comedians, there's a huge difference between those at home and abroad. I think foreign female stand-up comedians are obviously constrained, but at home there's still a kind of, um, feeling that the topic is constrained. The topics that girls can talk about are very very few. As for the difference between female stand-up comedians and sketch comedians, female stand-up comedians are able to convey their values and beliefs a little bit more, and the room for them to perform is bigger. (Yao)

Arrow, Han and Yao are all conscious of the constraints of female stand-up comedy compared to foreign women's comics. Sex and reproduction are hardly seen in Chinese female stand-up comedy. Apart from that, politics and religion are also hardly mentioned in the show. These topics are missed in Chinese women's humor yet it should be brought up as sexuality, productive subjectivity and politics are significant in the discourse of gender. The relatively narrowed topics of Chinese women's comic is not only frame by the power from above, that is media censorship as mentioned before, and the cultural differences of humor as well, which is referred by Huy who thinks Chinese humor is more implicit and obscure.

Considering women's humor being limited as themes are constrained, many interviewees refuse to label female stand-up comedians in this season as feminists, nor do their humor is considered as feminist humor. Han stated that the women's humor in the show can not be considered as feminist humor, since the definition of feminism is vague and obscure. Yao felt it meaningless to delimit feminist humor:

It depends on what the definition of feminism is. I think there may be a difference in the content of their materials, but I don't think I'm really in a position to comment on the label of feminist or not, but from my own point of view, I think they're both the same to me, they're both female stand-up comedians, I wouldn't define them by feminist or not. I wouldn't delimit them by feminism.

Yao also contends that the phenomenon of women stepping into the stand-up comedy is a feminist movement per se, especially in a patriarchal and media-censored society as China. Part of the reasons that few interviewees have perceived the feminist humor lies in the fact that feminist humor is often dealt with prudence to avoid any risks (Gilbert, 2004). Yet, according to Gilbert, the description of feminist humor always targets the "entire system of patriarchal oppression" rather than a specific male (p.67). In this sense, the joke of "why men are so mediocre yet so confident?" that Xixi has blamed as it becomes a national reproach

towards Chinese men is a case in point, exemplifying the aggressive female humor that has the potential to become feminist humor. Back to Yao's argument, the fact of female stand-up comedians stepping into a male-dominant genre, is sufficient to manifest feminism. Though female humor and especially feminist humor is limited by the politics and cultural context, women's humor serves a catalyst of promoting the solidarity of women, regardless of how diverse this group is, and challenging the patriarchy which has been haunting China hitherto.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Main findings

5.1.1 How does genre of stand-up comedy empower women in comparison with Chinese traditional genres of comedy?

To answer this question, it is imperative to probe the relevant genres (Frow, 2005) that reflect the dominant culture (Hall, 2002) against the emerging popular culture of stand-up comedy. Also, economically, since attention economy is affirmed to be an important factor within media culture (Corner, 2017), as a new and imported genre of stand-up comedy, it is inevitably to compete against the market share of existing genres of comedy.

To take a step further, western literature has significantly pointed out the exclusion of women in humor theories. Women are seen as incompatible with humor and comedy based on the private spheres that is imposed on women (Caliskan, 1995; Bore, 2010; Cooper, 2019). Such gender stereotypes are also embedded in Chinese context, wherein women are allocated to take in charge of domestic affairs rather than public affairs. Confucian patriarchy is argued to be a prominent ideology that naturalizes the segregation of gender and restricts women to speak in public (Littlejohn, 2017). Many interviewees reflect that the most popular traditional Chinese comedy, namely crosstalk and sketch comedy are gendered based on two dimensions. Firstly, crosstalk rarely accepts female comedians. Recently, the leading club of crosstalk, Deyunshe, refused to recruit female comedians “due to respect” (Xu, 2020), which again manifests the traditional ideology of women’s incapability of doing humorous activities. Secondly, crosstalk, as another active player in traditional comedy, often depicts women as “supporting character” and even “stooge” and “family-attached characters”, according to several interviewees. Interestingly, the theme of Spring Gala Festival as the prominent TV show to popularize the crosstalk and sketch comedy in China is emerged from many interviewees. It urges the researcher to consider the relationship between Spring Gala Festival and traditional Chinese comedy with regard to the political concern for traditional Chinese comedy.

Considering the relevant genres that may affect the perception of audiences regarding the emerging genre of stand-up comedy, this research delves into the gender impact of crosstalk and sketch comedy. It shows crosstalk and sketch comedy act as “bearers of gender” which reinforce gender stereotypes on women. In this sense, comic institutions in China are gendered based on the fact that female comedians are marginalized, not only considering

quantity but also stigmatization. Under the pervasive gender stereotypes embedded in comic institutions, the lack of gender concerns enables stand-up comedy as youthful genre to stand out. As several interviewees point out, including male interviewees, stand-up comedy offers bigger room for female comedians to self-express and reflect the inner states of women. As such, stand-up comedy as genre reaffirms the subjectivity and agency of women, which appeals to young audiences who is discontented with traditional gendered values. Moreover, as some interviewees shared, stand-up comedy as genre concerns about the socio-political issues of youngsters, such as the life experiences in mega cities, the pressure and burden they have etc. Regarding target audiences, stand-up comedy favours the concerns of young audiences, which in turn popularizes it as genre among youngsters. This reflects the accordance of choosing to stream online rather than release on television in order to “tap into a younger audience” (Li, 2016).

In sum, compared to crosstalk and sketch comedy as two giants of traditional Chinese comedy, stand-up comedy as a new genre targets young audiences and empowers female comedians with subjectivity and agency. Though stand-up comedy is regarded as “male” genre (Gilbert, 2004) or “male-dominant” genre (Keisalo, 2018) in western context, Chinese female comedians are empowered significantly in comparison with traditional Chinese comedy. The resistance of young audiences against traditional comedy is potent to reflect the democratic core of stand-up comedy (Lintott, 2020; Gilbert, 2004) which empowers female stand-up comedians.

5.1.2 What are modalities of engaging with female comedians in the show?

This question is multi-layered and intertwined with the talent show *Rock & Roast*, the male counterparts and the consequences after the show as the interview took place when the show has finished.

Media censorship is foregrounded since it functions as the invisible constraint of female stand-up comedians. Due to the fact that former stand-up comedy shows, *Roast* has been removed of one episode, it signifies the censorship that stand-up comedy has to encounter. Several female audiences convey an empathy towards female stand-up comedians whose topics are bound by media censorship. They believe it is due to the media censorship that the topics of female stand-up comedians could not go further. In this regard, *Rock & Roast* and female comedians within it are investigated under media censorship as it hinges on the media censorship to be aired.

Since all the interviewees have watched the first two seasons of Rock & Roast, they are able to find the salience of Rock & Roast 3 regarding female stand-up comedians. When comparing between the latest season and the last two seasons of Rock & Roast, they are surprised at and content with the fact that more impressive female stand-up comedians has come to the stage. According to several interviewees, Rock & Roast intentionally pushes female stand-up comedians. And several female audiences such as Yao, has been attracted to the female stand-up comedians who further become the motivation of audiences to engage with Rock & Roast 3. It shows the appeal of female stand-up comedians towards female audiences, which is also found in studies of the audience reception of female stand-up comedy (Bore, 2010; Cooper, 2019).

Bear the subjectivity and agency of audiences in mind, this research encourages interviewees to descriptively interpretate the performances of female stand-up comedians in the show. The spectrum of engagement intends to unveil the positive, negative as well as disengagement with female stand-up comedians. Yet, since essentially, Rock & Roast is a talent show, male counterparts are more or less referred in comparison with female comedians, which reflects the audiences' comprehension of talent show as genre. Several female interviewees have reflected their disengagement with male stand-up comedy, as they have been offended by or bored with male stand-up comedy. This makes female stand-up comedy as an alternative choice to selectively engage with. Moreover, the negative engagement of male counterparts in the show results in the feelings of unfairness regarding the genre of talent show. The engagement with male counterparts draws attention to the resonance with female stand-up comedians, which is underscored by many interviewees. Such resonance is a signal of positive engagement. It is based on emotional identification (Hill, 2019), such as evoking emotional feelings; and imaginary closeness (Keinonen et al., 2018), such as the characterization of "girl next door". The research further argues the shared identity of women as oppressed gender in Chinese society as the prominent facet of identification. As Gilbert (2004) maintains, female comedy creates a "community" with female audiences (p.156). It resonates the feelings of "solidarity" among several interviewees such as Yao and Arete, who describe themselves as extremely tolerant of female stand-up comedians.

Of note, the cognitive mode of engagement from male audiences, Huy and Ye, relates to the wider socio-political context of feminism in China. Though they can not emotionally engage with female stand-up comedians, they stress performances of female stand-up comedians "make sense." They bring the real-life problems of women in China to the table and enlighten

the research to dig into the context of feminism and consequences of these female comedians. Though several female interviewees point out the significance of female comedy, which is to contribute to gender equality and cross the boundaries of male-dominant discourse, Rui and Mi are conscious of this argument. They refer to the aggression and offence of Yang Li, the most controversial figure among female stand-up comedians in this season. The aggressive and offensive humor that Yang Li employs stands in contrast to the traditional Chinese humor, which is argued to proper as “benign”, “modest” and “harmonious” (Xu, 2011, p.94; Yue, 2010, p.410) influenced by Confucian, Buddhism and Taoism. Humor as a lens of engagement manifests the social control (Douglas, 1968) that have the power to judge what is improper and offensive.

Overall, this section portraits how audiences reflectively interpret the engagement with female stand-up comedians. Based on theoretical concepts of engagement and coupled with the humor and gender identity, it is sufficient to show the dynamic power relations within humor, gender traits of stand-up comedy, and Rock & Roast as a genre of talent show.

5.1.3 How is women’s humor framed and contested from the perspective of audiences?

Women’s humor is constructed as a resistance (Caliskan, 1995; Abrams, 2017) against the dominant humor which is argued to be male that has universal appeal (Bore, 2010). Also, women’s humor serves as a theoretical concept based on “women’s issues” or “female perspective” as the commonality of female stand-up comedy that interviewees reflect.

Interestingly, several interviewees such as Dove and Huy, at the beginning refuse to take consideration of gender into performances of stand-up comedy. According to their description, it is the personhood contributes to performances of stand-up comedy. Yet, when they compare the female comedians and male counterparts, they find female comedians are unconsciously sensitive to issues of gender. This gender-sensitive features of female stand-up comedy, according to several interviewees, relate to the climate of feminism in China. From Metoo to the modified marriage law, in China the conditions of feminism have also deeply influenced female comedy, which echoes the relationship between American female stand-up comedy and feminism (Gilbert, 2004; Zoglin, 2008). Moreover, the marginalized identity of being a woman in stand-up comedy as a male-dominant genre grants female comedians to talk about female experiences as an insider (Cooper, 2019; Abrahams, 2020), which further enhances the authenticity of female comedians. However, several female interviewees contend that women’s topics mainly revolve around body and relationship. More importantly,

since several interviewees have the experience of watching western female stand-up comedy, they point out the topics performed by Chinese female stand-up comedians are limited and less than foreign counterparts. This comparison provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of “women’s humor” are ghettoizing. Sexuality, politics and other important socio-political topics covered by American female stand-up comedians (Gilbert, 2014) are omitted in Chinese female stand-up comedy. One female interviewee Mi also states that Chinese female humor lays too much emphasis on the topics of relationship rather than the historical and knowledge-based topics performed by male counterparts. This statement problematizes the “women’s humor” in China where “women’s topics” are limited based on socio-political context.

Hence, women’s humor is framed as the topics of ingroup that targets female audiences, rather than universal appeal to large group. Based on the limitations of women’s humor, the research further finds out the reject of labelling women’s humor as feminist humor. As “feminist humor” entails “visions of change” (Kaufman, 1980, p.13), the description of which is often filled with hope and change (Gilbert, 2004). The avoidance of offense and the complexity of feelings, ranging from empathy to discontent, towards the limitations of women’s topics are two poles that reflect the power dynamics within women’s humor. In this regard, Yao as a female interviewee holds a positive view towards the phenomenon of women stepping into the stand-up comedy, according to her, it is a feminist activity per se. Though the ground of feminism in China is debatable and complex, the subjectivity of women’s humor should be affirmed so as to unveil the structures of feeling within the patriarchy and political censorship.

In sum, women’s humor is framed as the limited “women’s issues” and emphasis on relationship that may lack the universal appeal to larger group of audiences. Also, in the mind of audiences, they are more comfortable with labelling them as female stand-up comedians rather than feminist stand-up comedians, which resembles the academia concerns that labelling the feminist humor is too risky with regard to feminism and essentialism (Gilbert, 2014).

5.2 Summary and Limitations

Media engagement is a tricky concept to pin down through which emotions and affective patterns stand out. Yet, through analytically choosing the relevant parameters of engagement from the toolbox developed by Dahlgren and Hill (2020), the issues of gender, humor and

media context are brought into play. Combining three findings, it is potent to see how stand-up comedy as a western and youthful genre, both empowers women and reflects the shift in Chinese gender stereotypes. Yet, of note, limitations of such transition and empowerment are explicit as well. This research relates the limitations to the media censorship, the remaining gender stereotypes and perception of humor. Nevertheless, it shows a promising genre of comedy having the potential and power to transform the gender stereotypes and norms.

This study hopes to contribute to female stand-up comedians in China, which is a lesser-researched field of academia. Since the literature of Chinese female stand-up comedy is scarce, the research adopts alternative sources such as industry report, newspaper and so forth to complement the lack of literature, which is not rigorous yet beneficial to this research. In addition, since this study mainly focuses on audiences, it runs the risks of overemphasizing the interpretation of audiences. The researcher has tried to contact two female stand-up comedians in the show, yet it has failed. In this regard, the research lacks the statements and insights from the side of production which is significant to bring a holistic picture of audience engagement. Moreover, the gender of interviewees was hard to keep balance since more female interviewees were willing to join the process of interview. The only two male interviewees may run the risks of gender bias in the research, though the piloting has tried to reduce the pre-existing assumption and bias towards male interviewees.

With the limitations in mind, the research contributes to the ongoing dialogue in social science research (Flyvbjerg, 2001), especially when there is rare scholarship of Chinese female stand-up comedy. Due to the limited time of research, it encourages further research to dig more deeply into the topics of Chinese female comedy as well as the stories of female stand-up comedians. This research indicates the emergence of female stand-up comedians may have the potential to become the key opinion leader or a symbol of feminist, yet due to the research scope, it does not delve into the fan culture of female stand-up comedians. Overall, this research offers a starting point for the further research to investigate the Chinese female stand-up comedians from the perspective of audiences under the influence of mediatization and climate of feminism as well as socio-political context.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: A synopsis of *Rock & Roast 3*

Rock & Roast 3 is a phenomenal stand-up comedy talent show that aired on Tencent Video since season 1. In the newest season, the first round is about breaking out, picking up 30 stand-up comedians out of 50. There are no limitations of topics, and stand-up comedians can choose whatever he/she want to perform. Here, 7 female stand-up comedians have got to the second round. Then following the breaking out, is the thematic round where key words as themes are listed for comedians to revolve around. However, if comedians, after performances about the theme, are awaiting to be promoted, there's no limitations on topics. Here are “themes” covered by *Rock & Roast 3*:

Episode	Themes
3	It's just about money! (不就是钱嘛!)
4	Shall we get married? (我们, 结婚吗?)
5	Keep distance, keep in contact (保持联系, 保持距离)
9	Please don't be sorry to leave (请别遗憾离场)
10	As an end as a start (是终点也是起点)

However, comedians sometime do not strictly adhere to the themes, some of them use a rhetoric strategy to cover the key words yet do not revolve around the meaning of themes. This is also the reason why it is not considered in this research as the research focuses on engagement of audiences rather than texts.

In sum, 4 female stand-up comedians, Yan Yi, Yan Yue, Li Xueqin, Yang Li got to the semi-finals, and two of them survived to the final ranked as the forth place and the fifth place in the end.

The poster on Tencent Video (2020)





Consent Form

Project Title: Engaging with female comedians in Chinese stand-up comedy talent show *Rock & Roast*: genre, humor, and identity

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General Information: This consent form describes the research study to help you decide if you want to participate. This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the interview, about the risks and benefits of participating, and about your rights as a research subject.

- 1. What is the Purpose of the Study?** This study is researcher's master dissertation. The purpose of this research is to investigate audience engagement with female comedians in the Chinese stand-up comedy talent show *Rock & Roast*.
- 2. Request for Participation:** You have been asked to participate in this study due to your experience of engaging with *Rock & Roast*.
- 3. How many people will participate?** Approximately 10 to 15 people will take part in this study.
- 4. How long will it take to participate in this study?** If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last for a maximum of 1 hour and a half.
- 5. What will happen during this study?** During this research study, the principal investigators will conduct a semi-structured interview. Interview questions are related to the general comedy context, the genre of stand-up comedy compared with other comedy

genres, the engagement of *Rock & Roast* season three, and performances of female as well as male comedians within the show. The researcher has a set of questions designed to help you relate your perspectives; however, over the course of the interview, additional clarifying questions may be asked.

During this study:

- 5.1. You will be asked to sign this Informed Consent Document for Research Participation.
- 5.2. You will be offered a digital copy of this document for your records.
- 5.3. The researcher will conduct an audio-record the interview. See the next section for information about the storing of audio recordings.
- 5.4. You are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer, and you may end your participation at any time.

6. Audio Recording: One aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of your participation. The audio recording will be used to transcribe the semi-structured interview. Recordings will be made on a digital voice recorder and stored in a locked location until transcription, after which they will be destroyed. No identifying information will be transcribed. Complete transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected computer.

7.

I give you permission to make audio recordings of me during this study: Yes No

8. What are the Risks of this Study? Due to the confidentiality measures in place, there are no foreseeable physical, legal, financial, or psychological risks to participating in this study. However, during the interview you may be asked to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable or self-conscious. You are free to skip any question that you would prefer not to answer, and you may end your participation at any time.

9. Will it cost me anything to be in this study? You will not incur any costs for participating in this research study.

10. Will I be compensated for participating? You will not be paid or

compensated in any way for participating in this research study.

This Informed Consent Form is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate.

You are not waiving any legal rights by signing this Informed Consent Document. Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Interview Guide

I. Introduction

- Thank interviewees, introduce myself, project and interview process
- Ask the age, education, occupation, location, ethnic of the interviewee
- What kind of comedy are consumed in daily life?

II. Genre Work

- General definition of stand-up comedy
- What was your first encounter with stand-up comedy?
- Compared with traditional Chinese comedy (sketch comedy, crosstalk etc.), which genre of comedy do you prefer to watch and why?
- How it feels to watch stand-up comedy? What do you get from stand-up comedy?
- Do you see any differences about female comedians in stand-up comedy compared with other genres of comedy?
- In what aspects make the show a stand-up comedy? Do you think Rock & Roast is a good stand-up comedy show or not, and why?

III. Engagement

- How many episodes of Rock & Roast season three do you watch?
- Why do you stop watching the show if so?
- Which channel; how intense; with whom do you watch the show?
- Did you interact with someone or the show through the media when watching the show?
- What's the general impression of female stand-up comedians in this season do you have?
- Examples of which female comedians you like and don't like, and why
- Is there anything different to engage with female humor?

- Do you follow up female comedians after the show? Channels and reasons to follow up female comedians after the show.
- How it feels to follow up female comedians after the show if so? Examples of experiences after the show.
- Do you feel different to follow up the female comedians after the show?
- Have you found something in common with performances of female comedians? What are they (is it)?
- How do you understand the butt of the joke from female comedians? Do you feel funny about that?
- Who do you think are the intended audiences of female comedians? Do you see you as one of them?
- Can you remember a time that you felt offend? Why did you feel offend? What happened then?
- What do you think that the popularity of female comedians should owe to?

Appendix 4: The demographics of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Province
Dove	female	25	Han	Master	Master student	Zhejiang
Huyuan	male	26	Han	Bachelor	Teacher	Chongqing
Bin	female	28	Han	Master	Educational industry staff	Shanxi
Arrow	female	24	Han	Master	Unemployed	Shandong
Lao	female	28	Han	Master	PhD student	Zhejiang
Rui	female	26	Han	Bachelor	Unemployed	Beijing
Sain	female	25	Chuanqing	Bachelor	Unemployed	Guizhou
Ye	male	24	Han	Bachelor	Civil servant	Zhejiang
Arete	female	22	Han	Bachelor	Bachelor student	Hebei
Xixi	female	23	Han	Master	Master student	Hubei
Han	female	23	Han	Master	Master student	Hunan
Yao	female	24	Han	Master	Master student	Hubei
Mi	female	25	Han	Master	Teacher	Jiangxi
Shu	female	24	Han	Master	Master student	Hubei

Appendix 5: A sample of interview

Speaker key

RE Researcher

IE Interviewee

RE: What kind of comedy do you watch in everyday life?

IE: I would watch comedy movies, and I was actually quite interested in a lot of their shows before, like Mahua Fun Age. I have seen their clips, and I had thought about buying tickets to see their offline shows, but I never had the chance or time. I was also interested in offline stand-up comedy like the comedy club Danliren does, but I never had the time or opportunity to watch them.

RE: So the stand-up routines run by Danliren that you are talking about, have you seen any videos of their offline shows?

IE: Yeah, just because I watched their videos, I thought it was quite interesting.

RE: Have you followed any other stand-up clubs or organizations?

IE: Nope

RE: So how did you follow the Danliren comedy club?

IE: Because I once saw a video on the homepage of Weibo, but I can't remember which stand-up comedian specifically, but it is from the blogger who I follow.

RE: So does that mean you might have seen the clips of some stand-up comedians, and then followed their Weibo accounts, and thus might also go and check their posts, right?

IE: Well yeah, but not always in that way. Like I've seen some foreign stand-up comedy before, but I don't really get to know them personally. Oftentimes, I browse Weibo and see the updates of my homepage, I'll check. The one that I was impressed was Louis CK, I have seen his shows. And there was also another famous one, it might be a Japanese stand-up comedian, but was doing the show in America.

RE: So you usually watch these clips via Weibo?

IE: Yes.

RE: So you also watch foreign stand-ups via Weibo?

IE: Yeah, and also via Douban etc.

RE: So do you usually watch these types of comedy yourself or with your family or friends?

IE: Usually I watch it myself, because usually when browsing Weibo, and I can see it on the information flow, so I'll check it.

RE: Ok, may I ask you to recall the first time when you saw stand-up comedy? No need to be accurate, just basic information about the condition and the content that made you realize that it was the stand-up comedy.

IE: I feel like the first time I got to know this concept was Tonight 80's Talk Show. I've seen the clips of this show, and I thought it was a kind of interesting style of performance.

RE: Did you watch it via TV?

IE: Yep, via TV. But I can't remember which year it was.

RE: Alright, so did you browse it unconsciously? How often did you watch it?

IE: I might have turned to that channel unconsciously, and I would see a clip, but I didn't follow up.

RE: Ok, then I would like to ask you to talk about what the stand-up comedy is. No need to be rigorous definition, just general impression, you can probably start from its form, content or presentation or anything.

IE: I think stand-up comedy, if I'm talking about its meaning to me, then I think it is a kind of the show that makes me relaxed. I think it's also a kind of way to deliver a point of view for performers in a sense. The content of a stand-up comedy show depends on one's personal experience, and what one shows must be very personal.

RE: Hmm, so you would think that stand-up comedy is still an output of viewpoints, right?

IE: Yes, I think so.

RE: So do you watch stand-up comedy when you need relax, don't you?

IE: Yes.

RE: So since you said earlier that stand-up comedy is essentially an output of viewpoints, have you got any different views from stand-up comedy? Will you take on board their views?

IE: For me, I think I'm quite open. Probably, the views or presentation from some stand-up comedians might be different from what I used to think, or even I had never got to know what they are expressing, I don't see any problems with that. I think it's good for me to learn a lot of new views from it.

RE: Have you seen any stand-up comedy TV shows?

IE: I think I've just watched Tonight 80's show as well as Rock & Roast. I don't know if Roast counts, I don't know whether it is stand-up or not.

RE: So you've watched Roast before, right?

IE: Yes, I've watched it.

RE: Then, among different genres of comedy, such as sketch comedy, crosstalk, comedy films and stand-up comedy, which one do you prefer to watch? And which one have you watched most frequently?

IE: I think I would pay for comedy films, that's for sure, since I've already paid for that. But as for stand-up comedy, crosstalk, I have never paid for them. But if there's opportunity or time, I think I'll be interested.

RE: What about sketch comedy? Aren't you interested?

IE: As for sketch comedy, when I was young, I was more interested. Because it was usually via the Spring Gala when I watched sketch comedy in my childhood. At that time, there was some great sketch comedy on TV. But when I grow up, recently, I lose interest in sketch comedy because I haven't watched the Spring Gala in recent years.

RE: Then what are the differences between female performers in sketch comedy, crosstalk and stand-up comedy?

IE: I think for female stand-up comedians, there's a huge difference between those at home and abroad. I think foreign female stand-up comedians are obviously constrained, but at home there's still a kind of, um, feeling that the topic is constrained. The topics that girls can talk about are very very few. As for the difference between female stand-up comedians and sketch comedians, female stand-up comedians are able to convey their values and beliefs a little bit more, and the room for them to perform is bigger.

RE: Well, do you get the impression that there's a kind of stereotype existing in sketch comedy?

IE: Yes, I can't agree more. I think it seems that in most cases the roles played by female sketch comedians are that of mothers and wives, and they rarely stand out as a particular social worker. There are very few roles standing out, female characters in the family are usually portrayed.

RE: Have you seen female characters in crosstalk?

IE: I've never seen... Maybe when I was a kid, I watched the crosstalk by Jia Ling and Bai Kainan. Other than that, I don't think I've ever seen a female crosstalk comedian.

RE: Then, are there any differences in terms of threshold between sketch comedy, crosstalk, and stand-up comedy?

IE: I don't think the threshold of stand-up comedy, in China is very high. Because I've seen some videos of offline stand-up comedy, I do feel that some stand-up comedians don't seem to have a main job as a stand-up comedian. But it seems like for crosstalk comedians and sketch comedians, it must be their main jobs. The stand-up comedy is more of a casual format for me.

RE: So do you think there is a balanced ratio of gender in stand-up comedy industry at home?

IE: Well, because I don't know much of it, but I see, from the videos I've seen, it's kind of balanced. But in specific and recent TV shows, like Roast and Rock & Roast, I think the percentage of women is a bit low.

RE: So why do you think the percentage of women is a bit low in stand-up comedy TV shows?

IE: I think it's related to what I was talking about before, which is a big difference in terms of topics between female performers at home and abroad. I think the limitations of topics that female stand-up comedians can talk about in China actually limits their performance.

RE: What specifically do you think it is limited to?

IE: For example, I think, I watched one the other day, but I forget which stand-up comedians from abroad she was exactly, she would talk about her sex-related experience, and she would

use that as stand-up comedy materials to talk about, but in China, I think hardly anyone talks about the related things.

RE: So do you think it's relevant to the censorship of TV shows?

IE: Yes, I think it must be relevant.

RE: From your point of view, do you think stand-up comedy is regional?

IE: I think in China it must be more popular in big cities, because they have a better environment. And as far as I know, I think the income of stand-up comedians is related to the number of viewers, so there must be more opportunities to run shows in big cities.

RE: Since you have watched foreign stand-up comedy shows, do you think Rock & Roast is a good show in your mind?

IE: I still think the topics are too small, for me they are too small. I don't know if it's the right way to think, but I feel like the main stage was originally for stand-up comedians, and now it's slipping into the focus of stars. I don't really like it.

RE: Do you think it's because the form of performance, that is limited within 5min. Do you think it will impact on stand-up comedians?

IE: Yes, I do think it will have an impact. Because I feel like sometimes stand-up comedy needs to be improvised and oftentimes, you may encore or add a segment on the fly when it is in that mood. And if time is limited, it's really going to limit the performances of stand-up comedians. Well, I think it would have a negative impact on their performance, and I think the form of stand-up comedy must involve the atmosphere of freedom. Under this condition, you don't need anybody to judge you, do you? I think it's cruel and unnecessary to ask people to comment on whether something is funny or not.

RE: Since you mentioned that you've seen the videos of offline performances, compared to the online shows, are there any differences?

IE: I think the biggest difference is the interaction with the audiences, from this perspective, I think there is much less interaction in TV shows, there's definitely much more interaction with audiences on the spot.

RE: Have you finished watching the first two seasons of Rock & Roast already?

IE: Not really.

RE: But you've watched these, right?

IE: Yeah.

RE: So what do you think of the Rock & Roast season 3, compared to the first two seasons.

IE: I think that celebrities are becoming more and more important, the focus is all about celebrities, and I don't really like that.

RE: Well, do you think Rock & Roast is helpful in spreading stand-up comedy at home?

IE: Of course, it helps. I feel like there wasn't a kind of show like this. Its existence must have helped the stand-up comedy. And I feel obviously more and more people know the genre of stand-up comedy because of this show.

RE: Then, I'd like to ask you what attracted you to watch Rock & Roast, you can start from the first season.

IE: I think it's because Li Dan and Chi Zi are stand-up comedians that I follow, and I think their interaction is quite interesting and cute, then I watched this show.

RE: So what drives you to watch the season 3, is that based on the quality of the first two seasons?

IE: I think I started watching season 3 because of Li Xueqin, and I was quite interested in this girl, so I watched many clips of her.

RE: Did you follow her before Rock & Roast?

IE: Yes.

RE: Did you follow her Weibo?

IE: No, I don't follow her Weibo, but sometimes if I see the topics about her, I'll check her page.

RE: How many episodes have you watched about Rock & Roast season 3?

IE: I didn't watch it entirely, just some clips.

RE: On which platform?

IE: Weibo.

RE: Under which situations will you click and watch the clips?

IE: Most of the time when it comes out on trending, and then bloggers I follow retweet the most discussed clips, and I happen to browse them.

RE: And whose clips have you watched?

IE: I haven't done any specific calculations, but I've seen Yang Li and Li Xueqin these two girls definitively, and Wang Mian, others I can't remember well.

RE: And did you use the media to interact with friends or the show during watching?

IE: Nope, I haven't discussed with my friends yet.

RE: So you didn't comment or retweet?

IE: Yes, I didn't comment or retweet.

RE: Then why didn't you watch it entirely?

IE: There are some guests I'm not very interested in. I'm more interested in watching my favorite performer and how they perform. And I don't care the specific part of rating, the competition part. I don't like my own judgement to be swayed by others judgment. But at the same time, I'm not the person who will comment on other comments. I just want to keep my own subjective opinion for this clip.

RE: So how do you view the female stand-up comedians in this season?

IE: I'm very tolerant of their performances, because I'm a girl myself, and I'm really, I would say, infinitely tolerant of them. And I think what they talk about resonates with me more often, obviously, and I feel I have a deep appreciation for most of their contents. I think what they are talking about seem more interesting to me, compared to the contents of men.

IE: It seems to be so, but I can't remember what the line-up was.

RE: Do you think there is an increasing number of female stand-up comedians in this season.

RE: Then what's your favorite or impressive performance in this season?

IE: Well, because I'm most concerned about two contestants, Yang Li and Li Xueqin. And the most impressive should be Yang Li's performance, "How can men be so ordinary, yet so confident." This is the one most people feel impressed. Then it's Li Xueqin's performance talking about her mother urging her to find a date. These two clips are the most impressive for me.

RE: Why do you feel impressive?

IE: Because I think they are telling the truth, although I don't know if Li Xueqin was talking about her experience. I'm not saying facts or something like that. But I do feel I resonated with her. Indeed, I totally understand what she was portraying, it's something about her mother urging her to find a date, I think it's hard not to resonate with her as a girl.

RE: Have you seen any other female performances in the show?

IE: Well, yeah. Siwen is more like an independent and a professional woman for me, since she is a little bit older. And she used to be married, so I think her understanding of life is different from other female stand-up comedians. I've watched Siwen, but this season I haven't seen her much. But I know she would use her family, her husband and marriage as stand-up materials, I think it's quite funny and cute. As for Yan Yue and Yan Yi, their performances don't seem to leave a deep impression on me. Their impression is like they are twins.

RE: What are the things do you think that female stand-up comedians have in common?

IE: The common ground is that they always seem to talk about appearance anxiety and their emotional experiences unconsciously. I don't think it's a disadvantage, I actually want to say that they could have gone deep into these two topics. But I think if they went deeper, they wouldn't have passed the censorship, so I feel for them. Actually, they know what kind of topics people are willing to see, and concern about, but due to the limitations on topics, they couldn't talk about it deeply, I feel sorry for that.

RE: So what do you think male stand-up comedians usually talk about?

IE: I think male stand-up comedians, of course, also talk about their emotional experiences, I remember Wang Mian's most famous clip about his ex-girlfriend. Well, but I think when they talk about their emotional experiences, there is a sort of male emotional experience that is not purely and completely about the past, not completely sad, but a kind of feeling that I came out of it. I don't know if I've got it right.

RE: Do you feel that they don't go as deep as women do in talking about emotional experience?

IE: At least as a girl, I can relate more to the topics of emotional experience with girls. And as for guys, I'm not really able to put myself into their shoes too view their emotional experience. So I don't find it particularly funny in most cases.

RE: Do you think the gender of stand-up comedians affects their audiences?

IE: Yes, I do. Like the most controversial one is Yang Li, I think obviously her audiences include more girls. But actually, I don't think it should be like that. I feel what she said was not that unacceptable for boys.

RE: Do you think men are too sensitive in your mind?

IE: Yes, I think they're too sensitive, even not able to take a joke. Because like Wang Mian in his performance seems to have joked about his ex-girlfriend, something like being a fan, ah, but her face is not as good as the idol, there might be such a clip about this. I think as a girl I do not feel that this hurts me, ah, I think this is quite funny. But I don't know why Yang Li's casual joke that is completely unnecessary to be serious about can make them so serious, I do think male audiences really can't take a joke.

RE: Why do you think these men seem to be so sensitive and unable to take a joke?

IE: I think it's because they don't have anyone to speak frankly to them about these issues in their daily lives, they've been lulled by the world and society so that they think the world should go along with them. From my personal view, I think that in many materials of male stand-up comedy, they have mentioned girls many times, and joked about them. They have mentioned that many girls have the problem of being gold-diggers, and I don't think there are many girls who feel as emotionally attacked as men did, but I don't know why Yang Li's joke, which is not that much, can make them react so strongly.

RE: Have you followed these female stand-up comedians after Rock & Roast season 3?

IE: Usually, I'm interested in the information or news about them when I'm on Weibo, and I'll click and see them.

RE: Do you think Li Xueqin, because you followed her before the talk show, do you think there was a difference between the impression she had made on you before and the impression when she was doing stand-up comedy?

IE: I don't think there's any difference. She gave me the impression before that she was a very sweet, optimistic and open-minded girl, and then she does stand-up comedy in the same style.

RE: And have you ever been offended by anyone's stand-up comedy? Or feeling uncomfortable?

IE: I don't have such experience, as I mentioned before I am a person who feels that it is normal for people to disagree with me.

RE: Because you mentioned earlier that you often watch these clips through Weibo and follow these feeds, so you've probably seen some controversy or concern on Weibo about Yang Li or the hashtag of female stand-up comedians, what do you think makes female stand-up comedians controversial and popular?

IE: Until now, I actually haven't figured out until made Yang Li or her words controversial, and I'm actually puzzled by this. I don't know what she did to be able to make those males react so bad. And I'm not really interested in the reason for that, as far as I don't really care the phenomenon that she was able to get them to be that emotionally charged. Because in my case I already think she's someone who doesn't have any problems and I don't feel that what other people think of her has any effect on me.

RE: Do you think that female stand-up comedy shows in China have just emerged in recent years?

IE: I think so. I think it's only in recent years that they've had so many opportunities to be part of the industry.

RE: Why do you think it's only in recent years that female stand-up comedians have been given these opportunities?

IE: First of all, it has to do with the fact that stand-up comedy as a form of performance has widened the range of audiences, and when it gets a lot of attention, there are more people who want to know about it. If you have more audiences, you will be motivated to do your job as a producer of the show.

RE: One more point, you just said that male stand-up comedians also go for female jokes, so who do you think female stand-up comedians are making jokes about? Do you think they are making jokes about themselves or about men?

IE: I think both, and I don't think men are literally telling jokes about girls. I think in terms of stand-up comedians, their rate of self-deprecation and mocking others or trolling others

(laughs) is pretty much the same, there's not much difference, but I don't know why the male and female audiences react so differently.

RE: Do you think there is any difference between Yang Li's and Li Xueqin's performances as far as the content of the performance is concerned? Was Li Xueqin's content also feminist?

IE: Hmm... It depends on what the definition of feminism is. I think there may be a difference in the content of their materials, but I don't think I'm really in a position to comment on the label of feminist or not, but from my own point of view, I think they're both the same to me, they're both female stand-up comedians, I wouldn't define them by feminist or not. I wouldn't delimit them by their feminism.

RE: Um well, do you think stand-up comedy has to be sarcastic and offensive?

IE: Maybe not, but I think it would be more appealing to the audience because people are more interested in stand-up comedians who can poke fun at themselves or at other people or at a phenomenon, and that's what people want to see.

RE: Is there anything else you would like to add?

IE: No.

Appendix 6: A screenshot of coding in NVivo

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface for coding interview data. On the left, a table lists interviewees and their associated codes and references. The main area shows a transcript with several segments highlighted in yellow, indicating they have been coded. On the right, a sidebar shows a list of codes and a coding family tree.

Name	Codes	References
Ye	100	266
Yao	103	204
Xixi	70	135
Shu	116	239
Sain	68	135
Rui	92	201
Mi	90	159
Lao	94	207
Huy	80	156
Han	99	210
Dove	113	319
Bin	70	111
Arrow	91	172
Arete	102	220

Code List:

- relevant genres
- female stand-up comedy
- female stand-up comedy
- spheres of feminism
- spheres of feminism
- Media content
- Media content

Code Family Tree:

- relevant genres
 - female stand-up comedy
 - female stand-up comedy
- spheres of feminism
 - spheres of feminism
- Media content
 - Media content

Transcript Segments:

RE: 还有就是, 你认为这档节目, 嗯, 就是在某种程度上有没有使这些女性脱口秀演员, 怎么说呢, 就是变得比较成功?

IE: 嗯, 然后呢, 我的看法吗? 你问的是她们是不是变得比较成功的看法吗?

RE: 对。

IE: 哦我觉得她们火了。

RE: 然后你觉得使为什么呢? 她们为什么会这样子火?

IE: 感觉还是跟我刚刚说的一样吧, 就是首先这几年女权的事情变得很火, 然后她们在这个时候恰逢其时, 也的确需要她们出现的时候出现了嘛, 所以就是会火吧, 而且她们就是就算脱离女权这个东西, 她们说的话的确也是就是挺好笑的, 符合就是娱乐大众的定义, 所以肯定是会火的嘛。

RE: 你觉得这些女性脱口秀演员就是在这档节目结束之后变得火起来了之后, 她们有没有说, 就是给这种广大女性扮演一个, 怎么说呢, 就有点像KOL就有点像大V这样的感觉, 就是可以引导一些女性的意见什么的, 还是你觉得她就是还是服务于大家娱乐? 就是这样子。

IE: 我感觉, 我是感觉就是讲脱口秀的人普遍就是她们会表现得自己比较怂, 就是杨笠在之后的节目里一般都会说, 她每次说个段子就会有私人信骂她嘛, 她其实我感觉她。。。怎么讲呢, 她并不是说她很骄傲她能够主导这件事情, 而是用这种她说她很怂的方式去。。。欸, 我也不知道她的目的是什么, 反正她没有变成大V, 好像也没有人变成大V。就是讲脱口秀的人好像不太会变成大V, 然后变成公知, 然后变成我不喜欢的人。。。暂时好像没有, 就没有这么自以为是嘛。

RE: 嗯, 你觉得是那种冒犯性的段子和那种比较温和型的段子, 哪种可以有更长远的发展呢?

Appendix 7: An Excerpt of codebook

Themes	codes	subcodes	Quotes	References
Context of engagement	Media censorship	/	<i>“I would think that one of my biggest personal feelings is that if Chinese stand-up comedy is in a nascent state, a lot of regulation or so-called excessive censorship would restrain a lot of very interesting points from the bud.” (Arrow)</i>	17
	Gender inequality	Segregation of gender	<i>“from the ancient times it has always been emphasized that women are virtuous if they are not talented, including women do not need to speak out too much...”(Mi)</i>	4

		Male domination	<i>"Because men dominated the discourse, and now that women are in control of the discourse, men will think, 'Wow, how can women think like that?'" (Sain)</i>	11
	The awakening of feminism /		<i>"I think it's because this year, before the show has aired, the issue of feminism has been discussed more often on the internet, both at home and abroad, it seems like that." (Dove)</i>	17
		Quantitative inequality	<i>"I hardly ever see any female performers in crosstalk, it's</i>	11

Genres of crosstalk and sketch comedy	Gender inequality		<i>very, very rare. "</i> <i>(Huy)</i>	
		Gender stereotypes	<i>"In sketches for sure, I think it's that basically every sketch has at least one woman, but generally women are as, it just always feels like they're supporting characters. "</i> <i>(Dove)</i>	12
	Negative engagement		<i>"It feels partly like those skits at the Spring Festival Gala, which were funny in the early years, but in recent years it feels like it's all about politics and promoting that kind of stuff, so it's not</i>	15

			<p><i>funny anymore. "</i> <i>(Lao)</i></p>	
	Traditional		<p><i>"I think this is something that most people in mainland China will probably be exposed to crosstalk at an earlier age.</i></p> <p><i>When I was very young, I would watch some kind of party or something like that, and there would be crosstalk. " (Han)</i></p>	3