Stand-Up, Stand Out
Challenging Dominant Narratives Through Marginalised Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Netflix stand-up specials by Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mo Amer utilise political satire as a means to resist and negotiate identity, belonging, social hierarchies and power structures. Each comedian comes from a unique background: Minhaj is an Indian-American Muslim, Noah is a mixed-race South African, and Amer is a Palestinian refugee raised in Texas. Through their humour, they share their experiences of being marginalised whilst criticising state power, racism, Islamophobia, and the media spectacle. The primary question is: Through what discursive strategies do Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer employ humour in their Netflix stand-up specials to subvert, sustain, or reinforce stereotypes, social hierarchies and power structures, and promote solidarity, while mobilising laughter as a political act of resistance? Using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the research examines nine Netflix specials across textual, discursive, and social levels. The findings reveal that all three comedians employ methods such as mimicry, code-switching, repetition, and satirical framing to critique systems of surveillance, colonialism, and cultural erasure. Minhaj tends to focus on moral clarity and direct political critique, Noah emphasises observational storytelling and global comparison, and Amer creates intimacy through absurdity and personal stories. While their humour often challenges dominant narratives, some moments reinforce them, such as the use of exotic language or making overgeneralisations. However, each performer actively builds solidarity by referencing shared struggles among marginalised communities. Throughout their work, laughter serves as a means to co-construct meaning with the audience, resist contradictions, reclaim narrative control, and create space for complex identities that don't fit neatly into mainstream representation. This research adds to broader discussions about the cultural impact of comedy, the limits and power of satire, and the political potential of humour from the margins. It also examines the tension between entertainment and activism within platform economies and how Netflix enables a quasi-global reach while operating within commercial systems.

<u>KEYWORDS:</u> *Satire, Stand-up comedy, Netflix, Political humour, Marginalised identities, Resistance, Solidarity, Intersectionality, Critical discourse analysis, Post-9/11 culture.*

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Introduction

"...truth indeed is seldom palatable to the ears of kings; yet fools have so great a privilege as to have free leave, not only to speak bare truths, but the most bitter ones too; so as the same reproof, which had it come from the mouth of a wise man would have cost him his head, being blurted out by a fool, is not only pardoned, but well taken, and rewarded." (Erasmus, 1511/2015, p. 73). This witty critique of power and hypocrisy from *In Praise of Folly* remains remarkably relevant, reflecting the paradox at the heart of satire, where delicate truths can be spoken out under the guise of humour, and laughter can defy authority. Likewise, today, comedians from marginalised backgrounds use humour to entertain, resist, and reclaim their place in society through stand-up comedy.

This thesis examines how political satire functions as a tool for resistance for marginalised identities, with a focus on stand-up comedy as a vehicle for critique. Specifically, it examines Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer. They are comedians whose transnational identities shape their performances beyond traditional stand-up. They are relevant for study due to their intersectional identities and their use of satire to articulate marginal experiences that are often overlooked by mainstream media. Although they share common themes in their performances, such as the negotiation of identity and belonging, immigration, surveillance, racism, and the absurdities of state power, each has a distinct discursive approach worth examining.

Hasan Minhaj is an American-born and raised, ethnically Indian Muslim comedian who blends investigative journalism with personal storytelling, dissecting immigration policies, racial profiling, and the contradictions of American democracy (IMDb, n.d.). Trevor Noah, a colored South African-Swiss comedian and former host of *The Daily Show*, brings a postcolonial perspective to Western political discourse, deconstructing race, apartheid, and global power structures (Netflix, 2018). Mohamed Amer, a now US-nationalised Palestinian refugee, explores the Palestinian-American experience, addressing themes of displacement, Islamophobia, and cultural hybridity (Netflix, 2024). The thumbnails of their specials are located in Appendix A.

The societal relevance of this study lies in how digital platforms have the potential to enhance the voices of marginalised groups. In contrast to traditional state-regulated television channels, the subscription model of platforms like Netflix enables more creative freedom and reduces censorship (Lobato, 2019, pp. 24-25), allowing comedians to engage with controversial themes in stand-up shows and challenge dominant narratives. As Billig (2005, p.210) argues, humour has a dual nature in that it can reinforce ideologies or subvert them. This study examines how satire can both ironically reinforce and disrupt power structures while simultaneously building solidarity. Especially within an era of political polarisation, the expression of humorous dissent becomes a meaning-making process within a (virtual) public sphere, inviting those who consume it to take part in the co-creation of cultural understandings (Caplan and Boyd, 2016).

Academically, this research contributes to discussions on humour, marginality, and resistance. It draws on foundational humour theories, rhetorical persuasion and speech acts, as well as scholarship on discourse, the negotiation of identity, platform politics, and political resistance. A main concept of the analysis is Crenshaw's (1989, p. 149) notion of intersectionality, and how this shapes their comedic narratives. Bakhtin's (1984, p. 134) theory of the carnivalesque inversion of power and Habermas' (1989, p. 85) concept of the public sphere further set the framework for the role of humour in the reinforcement and subversion of power structures. Through the three-dimensional lens of Fairclough's (1995, p. 44) Critical Discourse Analysis, a substantiated understanding of the discursive practice of the comedic texts will be presented. Although previous analyses of individual comedians have been conducted, a comparison of their comedic strategies is novel and fills a gap in the literature.

The rationale for this research is to explore how marginality in comedy can facilitate a critical re-examination of cultural understandings and challenge traditional perspectives on social hierarchies. It is situated within the intersection of identity, media, and power. While there is more room for marginalised voices in digital entertainment, which creates increased visibility and reach, this visibility often comes with conditions, such as presenting acceptable versions of otherness, dealing with algorithm favouritism, and continuously proving legitimacy within dominant ideas. The challenge lies in the conflict between the expression enabled by platforms and the structural forces that shape whose stories are told, how they are presented, and what critiques are permitted. At the same time, there is an opportunity in satire's ability to mask sharp criticism as humour, making political critique increasingly more approachable and sustainable. This raises important questions about who gets to joke, what topics are fair game for discussion, and the impact of humour and satire in the world.

At its core, this thesis aims to answer the following question: *Through what discursive strategies do Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer employ humour in their Netflix stand-up specials to subvert, sustain, or reinforce stereotypes, social hierarchies and power structures, and promote solidarity, while mobilising laughter as a political act of resistance?* Additionally, it will further conduct a comparison of the differences in their targeting of issues, discursive resistance strategies, and framing.

The thesis will first provide a discussion of relevant research across five subsections to construct the theoretical framework for platform politics, conceptualisations of humour and satire, marginality and identity negotiation in comedy, humour theories, and discursive practices. These sections are organised as follows: (1) Netflix as a global cultural platform, (2) political humour and satire in the (virtual) public sphere, (3) comedy from the margins: identity, belonging, and discursive resistance, (4) foundational humour theories and types of humour, and (5) discursive tools in satire: rhetoric, speech acts, and performative strategies in satire.

It will then outline the research design and methods employed to analyse the transcripts, justifying a qualitative and interpretive approach as deemed essential for the flexible analysis of communicative texts. Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Framework for CDA will be used for the study. This framework enables a layered examination of language as both a textual product and a social practice shaped by power. The analysis will take place at the textual (micro), discursive (meso), and sociocultural (macro) levels.

Lastly, it will present the findings across the three dimensions for each comedian individually, highlighting key observations across themes and discursive practices, as well as social context and power structures that are challenged. A comparison of the discursive strategies across all comedians will follow this. All findings will be discussed in light of the theoretical framework, and the thesis will conclude by answering the research question and providing a discussion of the key implications, limitations, and contributions to scholarly debates on comedy, identity, and resistance. In sum, this study examines how humour serves as a powerful tool for critiquing power, bridging communities, and reimagining what belonging entails in a world of surveillance, migration, and the media spectacle.

Theoretical Framework

Netflix as a Global Cultural Platform

Netflix, with over 301.6 million subscribers worldwide, plays a significant role in the global circulation of cultural narratives (Statista, 2025). One of the categories in Netflix's catalogue is political humour and satire. Unlike traditional broadcast networks, which are constrained by regulatory frameworks and advertiser interests, Netflix's subscription-based model allows for a greater degree of creative freedom (Lobato, 2019, p. 62). This freedom enables comedians to engage in politically charged critique that might otherwise be censored. However, as Colman (2024, p. 57) argues, Netflix is far from a neutral platform. It curates content strategically, guided by principles of profitability, visibility, and global marketability. Even the most subversive comedic material is shaped by platform logic and digital infrastructures that determine what content is surfaced, shared, and amplified.

These dynamics are tied to broader debates about the nature of the public sphere. Habermas (1989, p. 27) conceptualised the public sphere as a discursive space for rational-critical debate among citizens. In the digital era, this ideal is complicated by the algorithmic filtering of discourse. Caplan and Boyd (2016, p. 11) argue that algorithmic control has fundamentally reshaped public discourse, as streaming platforms and social media prioritise content based on engagement metrics rather than democratic values. Political satire's visibility, then, is not determined by its urgency or relevance, but by its capacity to generate views, shares, and controversy.

Netflix's role as a global cultural platform is further explored by Lobato (2019, p. ix), who redefines international television flows as 'travelling narratives', mobile and mobilising stories capable of expanding our understanding of others. These narratives mediate experiences of unfamiliar cultural realities from the comfort of familiar spaces. Although Netflix does not operate as a social media platform, it shares characteristics with platforms like YouTube and Facebook, particularly in its global reach, content regulation disputes, and discursive elasticity (Lobato, 2019, pp. 39–40). The platform operates simultaneously within the digital platform economy and the entertainment industry, making it a unique player in shaping global cultural flows.

While Netflix creates the illusion of an open global marketplace for media content, its structure reflects pre-existing hierarchies of industrial and geopolitical power. Lobato (2019) reminds us that the cosmopolitan space of transnational communication "also becomes a space of domination" (p. 48). Despite its claims of diversity, much of Netflix's catalogue remains Hollywood-centric, and the service's global simultaneity reinforces unfragmented distribution without necessarily supporting a truly pluralistic media landscape (p. 70).

From an international relations perspective, Netflix can be seen as a powerful cultural actor operating within the logic of soft power. Coined by Nye (1990, pp. 31–35), soft power refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and cultural appeal rather than coercion. Colman (2024) elaborates that soft power extends Gramsci's conception of hegemony, where domination operates through both coercion and consent, offering moral and intellectual leadership (p. 47). As the largest subscription video-on-demand service (Lobato, 2019, p. x), Netflix exerts a global influence by shaping its viewers' perceptions of the world and disseminating values, identities, and ideologies across borders. In this way, it becomes a platform of soft power projection on a transnational scale (Colman, 2024, p. 46).

The cultural turn in international relations in the late 1980s further emphasised the role of culture as a vehicle for transmitting political values and norms (Colman, 2024, p. 49). Culture, however, is not a static set of artefacts, but an ongoing process of meaning-making. Stuart Hall (1997, p. 2) defines culture as the production and exchange of meaning within a group or society, thus a set of practices rather than fixed objects. This highlights how stories, narratives, and media representations function as vehicles for shared understanding, and by extension, as political tools.

Popular culture, often dismissed for its obscene commercialism, holds significant soft power potential. While high culture has traditionally been valorised for its sophistication, popular culture should not be underestimated in shaping public opinion. As Colman (2024, pp. 50–51) argues, popular culture can define national interests, construct belonging and exclusion, and reinforce binaries of 'us' versus 'them.' Its reach and emotional resonance make it a potent force in shaping how we understand the world.

The digital revolution has intensified the media's role in shaping public discourse. Today, platforms like Netflix are not merely content providers but cultural gatekeepers, navigating both entertainment and politics. To succeed in this environment, Netflix relies on its sophisticated Netflix Recommender System (NRS), an algorithm that personalises user experience, determines content investment, and influences viewing behaviour (Colman, 2024, p. 53). Striphas (2012) refers to this logic as algorithmic culture, the use of computational processes to classify, rank, and shape how people engage with content and ideas. This has direct implications for political discourse. As Colman (2024, p. 55) notes, data-driven strategies not only influence what users consume but also shape how they form opinions.

Srnicek (2017, pp. 30–32) refers to this model as platform capitalism, a system in which traditional media goods are transformed into services and monetised through subscriptions. Netflix's revenue model depends on attracting and retaining users, which reinforces the platform's reliance on network effects and data-based content curation. What counts as valuable, political, or marketable content is increasingly defined by algorithms and engagement metrics.

Caplan and Boyd (2016, pp. 1–4) further note that while the internet once promised a democratic reimagining of the public sphere where anyone could speak and participate, this ideal has been complicated by novel inequalities. The proliferation of digital platforms has expanded access and visibility, yet it still filters discourse through the lens of profitability, bias, and technological opacity. Papacharissi (2002, pp. 11-18) builds on this, as a public *space*, the internet provides access to a virtual forum for political deliberation, where discussion is enhanced. As a potential public *sphere*, the internet would facilitate public debate, where democratic ideas and opinions are exchanged (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). In the sense of a virtual sphere, we can observe Netflix as a platform that enables the distribution of political critique (discourse), but one that does so within a commercial ecosystem governed by audience behaviour, algorithmic sorting, and market incentives.

When comedians perform on stage, whether to a live audience or a global virtual one mediated by Netflix, they occupy a space that is both public and algorithmically constructed. Their work becomes part of this broader negotiation between critique and commodification. The visibility of their satire is not only a product of artistic merit but also of algorithmic recognition, platform curation, and global marketability. The viewer, although physically distant, is invited into a mental dialogue that extends beyond laughter and into reflection (Bihari & Yeldho, 2023, pp. 61–67).

Political Humour and Satire and the (Virtual) Public Sphere

As Tesnohlidkova (2020, p. 2) notes, the increasing relevance of humour and satire in politics is evident in real-world developments, such as the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, whose career began as an actor in humorous TV shows, and the emergence of satirical fictional candidates in Serbia's 2017 presidential elections. Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) describe a contemporary re-politicisation of humour within a modern period of hyper-politics. This re-politicisation is also shaped by 'humour-scandals', such as the Charlie Hebdo shooting in 2015, which shifted social attitudes towards the political consequences of humour. Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022, p. 344) argue that humour is now widely acknowledged as a practice that generates significant political and social effects, and that it can function as a powerful political tool. Their cultural studies approach to humour calls for a deeper understanding of its societal function. This approach calls for: 1) consideration of the specific cultural and historical context in which the humour is performed, 2) acknowledgement that humour can not only contribute to the negotiation and subversion of power relations, but also the enforcement of it, and lastly 3) to pay attention to the form and aesthetics that influence the meaning-making process (pp. 346-348).

Tesnohlidkova (2020, pp. 2-3) stresses that political humour and satire must be understood as autonomous cultural systems. Although humour and satire both rely on cultural symbols and norms, they differ in purpose and effect. *Humour* is primarily concerned with amusement and entertainment, often achieved by juxtaposing diverging ideas. Its effectiveness depends on the audience sharing a

cultural context with the speaker. She argues that humour is citational in nature, meaning that its meaning is always relational and contextually dependent. *Satire*, on the other hand, involves the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or exaggeration to denounce the corruption or absurdity of people, institutions, or social structures. While also citational, satire distinguishes itself by foregrounding critique. Its success likewise depends on shared cultural understanding, but it also requires that the audience grasp the speaker's moral position. Satire generates culture by interpreting and interrogating existing cultural norms and symbols, rather than simply reproducing them. It is not limited to politics but is socially grounded, drawing attention to various aspects of everyday life. Although satire frequently comments on political events and ideologies, it should not be dismissed as a pleonasm. Instead, 'political satire' is a valuable term that specifies the content and orientation of the material.

In contemporary society, mass media is the dominant distributor of political humour and satire and thus becomes an integral part of popular culture. As shown in the previous section, mass media play an essential role in shaping our understanding of cultural and political reality (Nye 1990, pp. 31–35). Satirical shows then provide the masses with "democratainment," which can be understood as the merging of informative and entertaining content. Such shows thus encourage critical thinking and engagement with political issues, seeking to improve demoralised social conditions by presenting ideals in contrast to absurd realities (Tesnohlidkova, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, Jones argues that audiences are often more fluent in cultural rather than political references, and satirical shows frequently draw on pop culture to render their critiques more accessible (Jones, 2010, p. 70). This reliance on familiar cultural signifiers helps bridge the gap between entertainment and political engagement.

Bakhtin (1984, p. 10) highlights that humour has a carnivalesque nature, meaning that it allows for a temporary inversion of power where marginalised figures take centre stage to expose the absurdities of authority. This inversion creates a unique performative space in which social hierarchies can be challenged through the use of laughter. Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022, p. 343) expand on this idea by examining how political comedy operates at the intersection of entertainment and activism. They describe it as a cultural battleground in which societal norms are contested and comedians leverage humour as a form of symbolic resistance. Through laughter, comedians can engage audiences in the negotiation of collective identity, thus transforming comedy into a dynamic tool for both social critique and cultural transformation. We can distinguish between overt and covert satirical strategies here. Overt satire directly criticises political or social events, whereas covert satire exposes the hypocrisy of public figures through ridicule and irony (Tesnohlidkova, 2020, p. 6).

According to Tesnohlidkova (2020, p. 4), the significance of political comedy in our society lies in its role as a psychological relief and a form of cleansing, thereby protecting society from authoritarian pretensions. Additionally, humour operates as an emotional strategy, making complex or

sensitive subjects more approachable. It can also lay the groundwork for the emergence of social movements. Acknowledging humour as a communicative strategy highlights the importance of interpreting the messages embedded within. Political humour often builds solidarity with those who share specific values while alienating those who do not. This boundary-making effect produces insider/outsider dynamics and has been termed 'laughtivism', or activism through laughter.

Through cultural performance, comedians initiate a social process in which they demonstrate the significance of their social positions through their performances. This process brings together systems of representation, audience dynamics, symbolic expression, staging, and power relations to create a space where collective meaning is generated (Tesnohlidkova, 2020, p. 8). Political humour can be viewed through this lens as a form of cultural performance, one that contributes to the collective construction of political and social reality. Engagement with political satire as critical entertainment can thus shape our perceptions of political life and our roles within it.

We can understand how rational-critical debate takes place through political humour and satire in this (virtual) public sphere by drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action. When comedians from marginalised communities engage their audiences through humour, they create dialogic spaces that challenge dominant narratives and appeal to shared understandings rather than coercive power (Habermas, 1984, p. 287). Through their performances, they invoke validity claims such as truth, rightness, sincerity, and intelligibility to expose contradictions within societal norms and stereotypes (Habermas, 1984, pp. 99–101). Therefore, satire becomes a form of communicative action that resists systemic domination and reclaims narrative agency. It enables marginalised voices to participate in shaping public discourse on their own terms, building solidarity and mutual understanding (Habermas, 1987, pp. 354–356).

When combined, these perspectives illustrate that political satire is more than a comedic form. It is a critical mode of engagement that plays an active role in shaping public discourse, particularly for marginalised voices. It offers a means of cultural participation that is simultaneously accessible, imaginative, and politically potent.

Comedy from the Margins: Identity, Belonging, and Discursive Resistance

Considering all the above, comedy performed by individuals from marginalised communities can serve as a tool for articulating questions of identity, belonging, and resistance in an entertaining manner. The personal and political intersect in these performances, shaping both their content and reception. Bhabha's (1994, p. 123) concept of hybridity is particularly useful in understanding how postcolonial subjects navigate spaces of both inclusion and exclusion. The negotiation of identity and belonging, particularly within diasporic contexts, often becomes a central theme in political comedy. In this light, migration and cultural dislocation are not only themes but also frameworks through which humour is produced and interpreted.

Said's (1978, p. 2) critique of Orientalism further explains how non-Western identities are persistently essentialized and misrepresented in Western discourse. These reductive portrayals shape audience expectations and often determine what is considered 'authentic' or legible on stage. This context underscores the significance of satire as a form of resistance, enabling it to disrupt dominant narratives and reaffirm self-defined identities. When comedians confront Orientalist assumptions through irony, parody, or personal storytelling, they are not merely entertaining but actively reclaiming narrative agency and challenging entrenched systems of meaning.

The intersectionality framework proposed by Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) is also essential in understanding how political satire functions from the margins. Intersectionality emphasises that social and political experiences are shaped by overlapping structures of power such as race, gender, class, religion, and nationality. It highlights how these structures interact to create unique forms of disadvantage that are often overlooked in more linear approaches to oppression. Within comedic performance, this perspective draws attention to how comedians navigate complex identities and how their humour becomes a site for expressing these layered realities. Rather than addressing identity from a singular perspective, comedians may perform jokes that reflect the compound nature of marginalisation, offering a nuanced critique of systems that attempt to compartmentalise experience.

The concept of minor discourse complements this by framing comedy as a form of expression in which a marginalised individual confirms their identity and finds dignity in their association with their group (Bihari & Yeldho, 2023, p. 71). This is particularly relevant in cases where comedians explicitly speak from their position within the margins, using humour to affirm shared experiences and resist exclusion. However, not all comedians from marginalised backgrounds engage directly with political issues. As Bihari and Yeldho (2023, p. 71) observe, figures like Kevin Hart adopt a self-deprecatory style that seeks broad appeal and intentionally avoids political controversy, which has sparked critique within their own communities. This illustrates the spectrum of political engagement in comedy and the different strategies performers use to balance visibility with critique.

To understand how comedy negotiates identity and power, Lamont and Molnár's (2002, p. 168) distinction between social and symbolic boundaries becomes valuable. While social boundaries are more formal and institutional, symbolic boundaries operate at the level of everyday interaction and self-definition. They shape how individuals make sense of their place in the world, and in performance, these boundaries are both drawn and challenged. Language becomes central to this process, particularly in comedy, where symbolic boundaries are marked through punchlines, metaphors, accents, and references. Comedians use humour to assert affiliation, draw lines of inclusion or exclusion, and subvert dominant narratives.

In satire, the notion of being 'in on the joke' functions as a marker of cultural fluency. It reveals shared political values or lived experiences and signals who belongs to the in-group and who

does not. Often, the target of satire is not simply a person but a system, an ideology, an institution, or a normative social expectation. Through exaggeration, irony, and parody, satire amplifies the symbolic lines between legitimacy and deviance. According to Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 169), these symbolic boundaries define what is acceptable or transgressive, and satire works by navigating and redrawing these lines. However, this also makes satire an exclusive form. Those unfamiliar with the cultural codes or sociopolitical context may misinterpret the joke, feel alienated, or perceive it as a form of aggression rather than critique.

Thus, the ideological work of satire is far from neutral. It can serve as a unifying force that fosters solidarity within marginalised communities, providing a space to laugh at shared struggles and reclaim narratives. At the same time, it can act as a gatekeeping mechanism, subtly reinforcing who has access to the discourse and who does not. The laughter it generates is not always inclusive. As such, comedy from the margins is not only a performance of identity but also a political act that navigates the fragile terrain between resistance, representation, and cultural legibility.

Foundational Humour Theories And Types Of Humour

To examine how comedians from marginalised communities challenge dominant political narratives, it is crucial to understand how humour operates on a cognitive and social level. Humour theory provides a foundational understanding of what makes satire effective, both as a form of critique and as a tool for negotiating discomfort. Comedic resistance does not rely solely on content but on its capacity to trigger specific audience responses, to provoke reflection, and to make complex topics approachable. Humour, in this sense, is not accidental. It is strategically utilised and understood through a range of theoretical frameworks that explain how and why people laugh.

Among the most prominent theoretical models are incongruity, superiority, relief, and benign violation theory. Incongruity theory suggests that humour arises when expectations are subverted, which allows comedians to draw attention to injustice through surprise, contradiction, or absurdity (Morreall, 2009, pp. 10–14). A politically charged joke may succeed not because it presents a new argument, but because it unexpectedly twists a familiar idea, forcing the audience to re-evaluate what they assumed to be true. Superiority theory, on the other hand, positions laughter as a form of dominance, often expressed through ridicule or mockery. This mechanism is especially useful in comedy that targets the powerful or exposes ignorance, allowing marginalised performers to turn hierarchical relations on their head (Morreall, 2009, pp. 5–6).

Relief theory centres on humour's capacity to release psychological tension. It helps explain why comedians often address taboo topics, such as racial trauma or systemic oppression, through punchlines that provoke not only laughter but also catharsis. This is particularly relevant in stand-up routines where comedians make space for laughter around painful truths, using it not necessarily to overthrow the status quo, but to process and momentarily transcend it (Morreall, 2009, pp. 6–7). In

such instances, humour functions as a collective exhale and a way of dealing with trauma without needing to resolve it directly.

Benign violation theory provides a more recent lens for understanding how comedians balance provocation and safety. According to McGraw and Warren (2010, p. 1142), humour occurs when a social or moral norm is violated in a way that still feels non-threatening or permissible. This is especially important for political satire, where comedians must push boundaries without alienating their audience. Through this lens, laughter becomes a signal that a violation has been recognised, but also accepted as non-hostile. This theory helps explain how comedians from marginalised communities mobilise laughter as a strategy of resistance. Their jokes disrupt norms while maintaining engagement, offering critique without entirely severing the connection with the audience. Bihari and Yeldho (2023, p. 72) further elaborate on how these models interact with the specific contexts of minority discourse and the politics of performance.

Identifying the types of humour used by marginalised comedians is also essential for analysing how they structure critique, express identity, and engage diverse audiences. Satirical performances often rely on irony, sarcasm, parody, hyperbole, and absurdism, each of which carries distinct rhetorical weight. Irony, for example, allows comedians to say one thing while meaning another, prompting the audience to look beyond surface-level statements and uncover the more profound ideological message (Dynel, 2013, pp. 160–161). Irony is particularly effective in political satire, where understatement or contradiction often conveys truths that are too risky or complex to articulate directly.

Sarcasm, closely related to irony, adds a more confrontational edge. It is often used to mock hypocrisy, prejudice, or willful ignorance, especially in performances that seek to hold institutions or authority figures accountable. Hyperbole exaggerates reality to expose its flaws, while parody imitates recognisable figures or narratives to ridicule their logic or cultural dominance. Absurdity and surreal humour, meanwhile, disorient expectations by presenting the familiar as strange. These strategies can render normalised injustices visible simply by framing them in illogical or extreme ways, highlighting the constructed nature of social realities (Dynel, 2013, pp. 172–173).

Discursive Tools: Rhetoric, Speech Acts, and Performative Strategies in Satire

Satire works not just through the message but also through how it is delivered. This includes factors like language, tone, timing, and performance. In political comedy, this becomes especially clear, as comedians use various rhetorical techniques and creative strategies to examine and resist dominant beliefs. Understanding these methods helps us see how people from marginalised backgrounds fight against oppression, critique society, and form connections. The basics of rhetorical theory help clarify these ideas. Aristotle (2006, p. 8) defined rhetoric as the art of using language effectively to persuade or engage an audience. His model includes ethos, which refers to the speaker's

credibility; pathos, which is the emotional appeal; and logos, which is logical reasoning. These elements continue to provide a helpful framework for discussions about persuasive communication today. In comedy, they often interact in surprising ways. A comedian might share a personal story (pathos) to enhance their credibility (ethos) or use faulty logic (anti-logos) for humour. Satirical performers are skilled at moving between these elements, creating rich meanings that can provoke laughter, discomfort, and more profound thought. Modern scholars build on these foundations, arguing that rhetoric does more than persuade; it also shapes our understanding of reality. Wróbel (2015, pp. 409–410) points out that rhetoric can determine what we see as true or desirable. This gives satire its unique strength.

By critiquing dominant narratives, satire not only highlights flaws but also alters the way we discuss issues. For marginalised communities, this means telling their stories on their terms. To understand how rhetorical effects work in performance, we can refer to Austin's (1962, pp. 94–95) theory of speech acts. He differentiates between what is said (locution), what is meant (illocution), and the effect it has on the listener (perlocution). In political comedy, a joke can serve several purposes: it might critique a policy (illocution), provoke laughter or anger (perlocution), or challenge common sense (Wróbel, 2015, p. 413). Satirical discourse operates across these levels, using humour to create emotional and ideological connections. Humour relies on a mix of rhetorical devices that are both stylistic and strategic. Techniques such as exaggeration, irony, parody, understatement, juxtaposition, and metaphor enable comedians to expose contradictions, hypocrisy, or absurdities in mainstream narratives.

Test (1991, p. 18) describes parody as a powerful tool for mocking authority, often using mimicry to distort the powerful's language for comedic effect. Similarly, irony requires the audience to engage with the underlying meaning, decoding the implied critique (Billig, 2005, p. 213). These humorous elements, especially when linked with personal experiences or broader social commentary, enable comedians to address systemic injustices while offering audiences a critical perspective. It is important to see that these strategies are not neutral; they interact with existing power dynamics. McIntosh (1988, p. 1) introduces the idea of the "invisible knapsack" to show how privilege operates quietly, affecting which voices gain recognition. When comedians from racialised backgrounds use humour to highlight the subtleties of whiteness or privilege, they reveal often-overlooked structures of inequality. Often, satire can be a more effective way to expose harsh truths than direct criticism due to its emotional impact. Bhabha's (1994, p. 86) notion of mimicry adds another layer to this discussion. He argues that mimicry is not just imitation but a twisted repetition that reveals the weaknesses of authority.

In stand-up comedy, mimicry enables performers to adopt the voice or mannerisms of those in power, only to subvert them from within. Similarly, code-switching (the shifting between languages

or dialects) can reveal cultural mixing and highlight contradictions. These approaches challenge fixed categories and emphasise the "in-between" spaces that encourage disruption and critique. Furthermore, as Said (1978, p. 2) describes, Orientalist discourse reinforces simplistic views of the East and West, as well as the distinction between civilised and barbaric. Comedians from Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Muslim backgrounds often address these narratives head-on. Their satire complicates narrow portrayals by redefining Arabness or brownness in ways that highlight common humanity, contradictions, and humour. By doing this, they resist dominant narratives and promote a more nuanced understanding of their cultures and experiences.

Research Design and Methods

This section outlines the methodological approach applied to investigate the discursive strategies through which comedians from marginalised communities employ humour in their Netflix stand-up specials. The central research question guiding this study is: *Through what discursive strategies do Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer employ humour on Netflix stand-up specials to subvert, sustain, or reinforce stereotypes, social hierarchies, and power structures, promote solidarity, and mobilise laughter as a political act of resistance?*

This research is best conducted through a qualitative approach, as it will primarily focus on the in-depth analysis of transcripts from the comedy specials and the executed performance of Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer. For clarity, a comedy special is defined within this research as 'an episode dedicated to the performance of a single comedian, as opposed to a series' (Bihari and Yeldho, 2023, p. 61). The study aims to unravel the complex ways in which their comedic performances function as sites of cultural production where meanings about identity, power, and resistance are negotiated, contested, and potentially transformed.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods and an Interpretive Stance

The multifaceted nature of humour, particularly satire, as a tool for social critique demands a research methodology that can capture its nuances, contextual dependencies, and performative dimensions. Therefore, qualitative methods offer the necessary tools and flexibility to analyse the complex interplay between humour, identity, solidarity and resistance. While *quantitative* methods might offer insights into the frequency of specific themes or words, they are insufficient to reveal the layered meanings, ironic inflexions, and performative subtleties inherent in stand-up comedy. Understanding how humour is used to subvert stereotypes, for instance, requires an interpretive analysis of language, delivery, and context that cannot be easily reduced to numerical data (Krippendorff 2018, p. 24). Moreover, as this study aims to uncover how marginality in comedy can facilitate a critical re-examination of cultural understandings and challenge traditional perspectives, Nieuwenhuijs and Zijp's (2022, pp. 346-348) cultural studies approach guides this research, as it calls for a deeper understanding of humour's societal function.

While Tesnohlidkova (2020, p. 9) argues that audience engagement is essential in understanding the meaning making process of political humour and satire, Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022, p. 349) provide a counterbalancing perspective, arguing that such an approach relies too often on the assumption that the meaning of humour can be ambiguous and depends on audience reception, disregarding that humour is not by definition polysemic and may suggest specific interpretations through rhetorical and aesthetic performance. This research aligns with the latter perspective and will therefore limit itself to an interpretation of suggested meanings by the performers, rather than

audience reception or engagement. It will do so by identifying the cues, strategies, and discursive framings employed by the comedians to invite particular understandings of their social critique and political stances. This is not to deny the polysemic potential of humour, but rather to focus the analytical lens on the structures of meaning encoded by the performer. The performative aspects, including intonation, gesture, timing, and stage presence, are considered essential to how these suggested meanings are constructed and communicated, and will be systematically noted in the transcripts and taken into consideration during the analysis.

Lastly, the performances and discursive strategies of all three comedians will be compared to each other to understand how different intersectional identities might challenge various layers of marginalisation through political humour. Each comedian brings a unique mixture of experiences related to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and immigrant status. A comparative perspective is essential in recognising the similarities and differences in their strategies, shedding light on the ways humour operates within and across distinct cultural and political contexts (Yin, 2014, p. 36).

Method of Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The research will employ Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the linguistic and discursive strategies used by the comedians to construct and perform identity, engage in social critique, and navigate power dynamics through their stand-up performances. CDA is not a monolithic method but rather a transdisciplinary approach with various streams. Fairclough's Dialectical-Relational Approach is deemed most relevant to this specific research as it emphasises social conflict and aims to identify instances of such conflict in discourse, like dominance, resistance, and differences (Mullet, 2018, p. 118).

By analysing linguistic features within the context of their broader social implications, CDA links textual analysis to social critique. This method enables an in-depth exploration of recurring themes, rhetorical techniques, narrative structures, and discursive strategies, without reducing them to mere frequency counts —a limitation often associated with purely quantitative approaches (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24). CDA functions on the proposition that the use of language carries meaning and purpose, either intentfully or not, and is part of social processes in that it is constitutive of ideologies (Mullet, 2018, p. 116). These ideologies either manifest as a direct exercise of power or an indirect influence on an individual's way of thinking and understanding the world (p. 118).

Discourse, as Mullet (2018) defines, refers to the creative use of language in society, in which knowledge is constituted and ways of making sense of reality are proposed to individuals (p. 119). It can take place in many forms and genres, including stand-up comedy (SUC). Filani (2020, p. 320) defines SUC as a performance genre that involves comical behaviour or humorous storytelling by a comedian to a live audience. Furthermore, it is noted that its meaning is shaped in the moment

through spontaneous, context-sensitive exchanges between the performer and the audience. Although the immediate aim might be to entertain, the deeper intention of providing social critique can often be identified (p. 323). While this research does not directly analyse live audience reactions, the recorded nature of Netflix specials captures a performance that has been honed before live audiences, and the comedians directly address or play off a present audience, making Filani's definition relevant.

The 'critical' in CDA is in its aim to make individuals aware of implicit or hidden power asymmetries in discourse and promote self-reflection and emancipation (Mullet, 2018, p. 119). CDA, therefore, is not merely descriptive but also interpretive and explanatory, seeking to uncover how discourse contributes to the reproduction or transformation of social inequalities. In other words, it examines the relationship between discourse and social structures, revealing the ideological underpinnings that influence power dynamics (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132). This involves a systematic analysis of texts (what is communicated and how), discursive practices (how discourse is produced, distributed, and consumed), and social practices (the broader context and power structures in which the discourses are embedded, critiqued, and contextualised).

Sampling and Data Collection

Netflix, as one of the earliest and largest streaming platforms, is a rich field for new media studies (Bihari & Yeldho, 2023, p. 60). Its global reach and extensive catalogue of stand-up comedy specials make it an ideal site for investigating contemporary comedic discourses that engage with social and political issues. The choice of stand-up shows on Netflix is further based on both practical and conceptual considerations. The high number of subscribers to this streaming platform underscores the potential reach and shareability of the satirical content this research is interested in, reaffirming its cultural relevance and impact. Given the scope of this research and the constraints of time and access, the selection of these three comedians within this digital media landscape remains a necessary yet rich demarcation.

The rationale for selection of stand-up specials by these specific comedians, Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer, is based on their unique positions and intersectionality of multiple marginalised identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, immigrant, religious) and their explicit use of humour as a vehicle for social and political commentary. Their presence on a global platform like Netflix signifies a particular form of mainstream visibility, making their discursive strategies for navigating and critiquing power structures particularly salient for analysis. As CDA requires completeness of data (Mullet, 2018, p. 120), this study examines all stand-up specials of Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah and Mohamed Amer that are available on Netflix as of the data collection period (March-April 2025). The specific specials are detailed in *Table 1;* see also Appendix A for the thumbnails. This selection ensures a diverse range of comedic forms and resistance strategies, providing rich material for Fairclough's critical discourse analysis.

Selected Netflix Stand-Up Specials for Analysis

Comedian	Special	Release Year	Duration	Key Themes
Hasan Minhaj	*Homecoming King*	2017	1h 13m	Immigration, racial discrimination, American Dream
	The King's Jester	2022	1h 20m	Free speech, media controversies, ethical dimensions of comedy
	Off With His Head	2024	~1h 15m	Political satire, power dynamics, personal responsibility
Trevor Noah	*Afraid of the Dark*	2017	1h 7m	South African heritage, Western racial politics
	Son of Patricia	2018	1h 3m	Racism, immigrant identity, cross-cultural experiences
	I Wish You Would	2022	1h 8m	Global politics, transnational belonging
	Where Was I	2023	1h 12m	Political shifts, personal storytelling, social critique
Mo Amer	*The Vagabond*	2018	56m	Refugee experience, Islamophobia, cultural displacement
	Mohammed in Texas	2021	58m	Arab-American identity, generational trauma, political satire

Table 1

The data collection process consists of two main components. First, on March 25 and 26, 2025, preliminary transcripts of the selected stand-up specials were obtained. While Netflix does not provide official transcripts, third-party subtitle files were collected from open-source website *scrapsfromtheloft.com*. For specials not available on their site, subtitle data was extracted using the Language Reactor browser extension on Google Chrome. This involved accessing Netflix via Chrome with the extension activated. Within the Language Reactor interface, the 'Subtitles' section was opened, and the export function was selected. In the settings, the options to 'Show human translation' and 'Show machine translation' were disabled, as this extension is essentially a language learning tool that provides translations to other languages. In the next step, I clicked 'Export' to generate a webpage containing the titles and subtitle text for each special, which was then copied and pasted into Microsoft Word files, formatted for clarity, and saved. While these transcriptions provided a strong starting point, they were not official. They therefore required careful manual review and correction to ensure accuracy, as it is acknowledged that they may not always perfectly capture every nuance, especially in rapid speech or overlapping dialogue (though less common in stand-up).

The process of completing and enriching these transcripts began on April 30 and was finalised on May 20, 2025. During this stage, each special was rewatched for as long as necessary to identify performative and paralinguistic elements not represented in the subtitle files. These include intonation, pitch, rhythm, accents, and the pacing of delivery, as well as strategic pauses and silences that function to shape timing, comedic effect, or audience engagement. Additionally, emotional

expressions such as sarcasm, frustration, or joy conveyed through vocal inflexion or physical expression were recorded, alongside visual gestures, facial movements, body posture, and spatial dynamics on stage. Interactions with both the physical setting and imagined scenarios were noted. Although audience responses are not central to the analysis, moments of collective laughter, applause, or direct engagement that are audible or visible in the recordings were also marked, as they contribute to the timing and rhythm of the performance (Clayman, 1992, p. 37). These observations were annotated within the transcript files using square brackets.

A critical consideration throughout this research has been ethical responsibility, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of the material and the comedians' real-life experiences of marginalisation. Since this study relies solely on publicly available content from Netflix stand-up specials, no direct contact or data collection from human participants occurred, minimising ethical risk. However, ethical reflexivity was maintained in how performances were interpreted, ensuring that jokes were not decontextualised or stripped of their intent. The analysis aims to respect the comedians' creative agency while critically engaging with the political implications of their discourse. Care was also taken to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or speaking over the communities being represented.

Finally, to contextualise the comedians' stylistic and discursive choices within broader social and cultural frameworks, secondary data, including autobiographies, publicly available interviews, and periodic news sources, will be consulted as deemed necessary. These sources offer valuable insight into the performers' personal backgrounds, perspectives, and potential communicative intentions. They are used primarily to inform the sociocultural practice dimension of Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, adding interpretive depth to the textual and performative analysis (pp. 134–135).

Operationalisation

To translate the main research question into an analytical framework, this thesis defines the key concepts of resistance, stereotype, solidarity, power, and identity by using an interdisciplinary approach that combines discourse theory and performance studies. Resistance is viewed as a form of discourse that challenges dominant ideas, disrupts powerful narratives, or creates counter-narratives (Fairclough, 1995, p. 133). It is recognised through acts of satire, parody, and highlighting power imbalances. Stereotype subversion or reinforcement is examined through representation, particularly in relation to race, religion, and nationality. These elements are either accepted as usual or questioned through mimicry, irony, or exaggeration (Hall, 1997, pp. 223–225; Sue et al., 2007, p. 272).

Solidarity is defined as a way of speaking that connects marginalised identities. This connection is evident through references to other texts, shared political experiences, or gestures of empathy across racial and cultural boundaries. While solidarity is often perceived as an emotional or

ethical stance, this thesis regards it as a rhetorical act: something performed on stage and constructed through language, tone, and audience interaction (Bihari & Yeldho, 2023, p. 66). This idea aligns with Billig's (2005, p. 210) view of humour as a space for negotiating ideas, where laughter can both unite audiences and prompt criticism.

The central concept of identity is explored through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149) and postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). Identity is seen as a dynamic performance, constantly shaped by speech, memory, gesture, and tone. Themes like racial identity, legal status, and religious visibility. Ideas such as the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype (Lee, 2015, p. 10) and postcolonial mimicry (Bhabha, 1994, p. 90) help illustrate how these identities are both presented and challenged.

The thesis uses Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This framework enables a layered examination of language as both a textual product and a social practice shaped by power. The textual dimension examines the language and rhetorical techniques employed in the specials, including code-switching, metaphor, repetition, and prosody (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 68; Dynel, 2013, p. 157). The discursive practice dimension examines how comedians interact with audiences, media narratives, and public discourse, including their strategies for creating cultural intimacy and employing meta-commentary (Aristotle, 2006, p. 112; Baym, 2017, p. 91). The social practice dimension examines the larger societal forces that influence these texts, such as surveillance, Islamophobia, the media spectacle, and empire (Alsultany, 2012; Said, 1978; Caplan & Boyd, 2016). Through this threefold lens, the study will interpret the *suggested meanings* and potential effects of the discursive strategies, rather than making definitive claims about what the comedians intended to achieve in every instance.

Analysis Process

To organise and analyse the data systematically, this study will use ATLAS.ti as a code-and-retrieve tool to assist in CDA. All transcripts of the selected stand-up comedy specials will be uploaded into the program. Each special (transcript and video) will be reviewed to gain familiarity. Initial open coding will be performed on segments of the transcripts, noting instances related to the key concepts and any emerging themes or interesting discursive features. Drawing on Fairclough's dimensions and the operationalisation table, a more focused deductive coding will be conducted. This involves systematically identifying and labelling, aiming to refine and organise the insights gathered during open coding by relating them directly to the theoretical framework. It will allow for consistent tagging of rhetorical strategies, identity constructions, ideological critiques, and affective cues across the specials. Although a thematic analysis will not be conducted, coded segments will be grouped into broader themes related to the research questions to identify discursive strategies across the nine stand-up specials, thereby assisting in my analysis.

After examining each comedian's performance individually, it will conduct a comparison to see how their different identities influence their approach to political resistance through satire. This part focuses on finding common patterns, key differences, and themes across their specials. It closely examines the topics they address, the tools they use, and how their social backgrounds influence their responses to similar political or cultural issues. It also discusses how each comedian challenges, supports, or navigates stereotypes, and how they utilise humour to create unity or offer critique. This comparison happens in stages, moving between cases to highlight shared trends, while also noting what makes each comedian's approach to power unique.

Reliability, Validity and Reflexivity

The research ensures a consistent and systematic coding process across all data sources. Recurring themes and discursive strategies are carefully tracked and compared across multiple stand-up specials, allowing for patterns to be identified and confirmed. While humour is, by nature, subjective and context-dependent, the use of established theoretical frameworks and a detailed operationalisation table anchors the analysis in recognised scholarly methodology. This grounding strengthens the validity of the interpretations by linking them back to theory-informed criteria, rather than relying solely on intuitive readings. Moreover, theoretical triangulation is conducted in which four levels of context are discussed: (a) immediate language, (b) interdiscursive relations between discourses and texts, (c) social level or context of situation, and (d) the broader societal or historical context (Mullet, 2018, p. 120).

It is further important to consider that a CDA analysis refutes the neutrality of the researcher and acknowledges that all knowledge is socially constructed and influenced by values. This implies that I, as a researcher, must remain aware of my own positionality, shaped by the social, political, and economic environment in which I inhabit. The trustworthiness of the analysis will also be dependent on the transparent articulation of my subjectivity (Mullet, 2018, p. 120).

I approach this research as a female, Gen Z scholar with a background in international relations and media studies, and as someone with a dual nationality and lived experience of migration. These intersecting dimensions of identity provide me with a particular lens through which I relate to themes of belonging, hybridity, and marginalisation. My proximity to issues of displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity formation offers valuable insider insight into the cultural codes and nuances embedded in the comedians' performances. At the same time, I am aware of the potential for bias, and I actively engage in reflexive practice to examine how my own experiences and assumptions may shape the research process.

Findings

Hasan Minhaj

Hasan Minhaj is a critically acclaimed Indian-American comedian who is known for blending personal storytelling with social critique. In his Netflix specials, he explores the intersections of race, identity, religion and politics through a lens of personal experiences. He first gained exposure and recognition as a senior correspondent on *The Daily Show*. He debuted on Netflix with *Homecoming King* (2017), in which themes of hybridity, microaggressions, and conflict of generational migrant identity are brought to the surface (Netflix, 2017). In his second special, *The King's Jester* (2022), he highlights themes of parenthood, the risks of political comedy and authenticity in the digital age (Netflix, 2022). In his most recent post-COVID special, *Off With His Head* (2024), he provides a critique of power-hungry politicians, addresses socioeconomic inequalities, and establishes an imagined audience of marginalised identities to build solidarity.

1. *Textual Dimension*

Within the textual dimension, Minhaj's performance is rich in elements that contribute to the construction of meaning and suggest specific interpretations through his delivery of humour. He switches codes across registers and languages to reflect his bicultural identity and translate interactions between him and his father that occur in Hindi or Urdu to bridge an understanding of his cultural background to the audience and reflect a dual cultural fluency (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 62; Hall, 1997, p. 2).

Minhaj also makes prominent use of prosodic play and mimicry to manipulate his range of vocal tones, conveying emotion, creating character, and setting the mood. An example is a switch to a '*low stupid voice*' (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*), marked between square brackets in the transcripts, when imitating prejudiced high school peers, pointing to their ignorant and disinterested attitudes towards immigrant children, evoking Bakhtin's (1984, p. 101) carnivalesque destabilization of dominant voices through caricature and critique.

His performance is further rich in juxtapositions that contrast American values and norms to those of immigrants, such as American individualism vs. immigrant collectivism, aimed at reframing simplified representations of complex cultures (Alsultany, 2012, pp. 15-16). Metaphors, similes, and loaded language serve to evoke deeper emotions and dramatic effects, such as Hasan's reference to the sentiment of having to endure racism in exchange for opportunities as the "*American Dream Tax*" (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*), underlining the idea of conditional citizenship (Nguyen, 2012, p. 5).

Across his specials, Hasan demonstrates coherence by recurringly referring to the persistent mispronunciation of his name in a playful dialogical ridicule of religious identity misrecognition (Lee,

2015, p. 10). By directly addressing members of the audience, as can be seen in the quote below, Hasan establishes a shared emotional register with audiences who have experienced similar microaggressions and aligns the public to build a ground for relatability and solidarity through comedy (Bihari & Yeldho, 2023, p. 66; Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

> *"Roll call was a problem. It was a big deal for a lot of us.*
> *Like, what's your name? [points at person in audience]*
> *-Jasura.*
> *Okay. What would you get?*
> *-Jasuriah.*
> *Jasuriah?*
> *-Yeah.*
> *I would get, like, 'Hanson Minaja…' [audience laughs] 'Sahan Minha.' [audience laughs]*
> *'Saddam Hussein.' [audience laughs very loud] It was my English teacher. I'm not*
> *Saddam."*
> (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*)

Minhaj repeats this frustration with name mispronunciation in 2024 in *Off With His Head* as he recalls a moment on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, insisting on the correct pronunciation of his name, *"This is the name of my ancestors"* before admitting that *"of course she couldn't say it right. Because she's Ellen… a 65-year-old white billionaire who lives in Montecito… she's not a Sufi poet."* This sharp yet humorous critique blends cultural misrecognition with power and privilege, gesturing toward white innocence and the symbolic violence of misnaming (Alsultany, 2012, p. 14; McIntosh, 1988, p. 32).

He further escalates this toward a critique of Islamophobic associations, as strangers alter his name to "*Hummus*" and "*Hamas.*" Audience laughter here emerges not just from absurdity, but from the intersection of cultural ignorance and racial profiling, emphasising the limits of representation and the persistence of racialised suspicion (Alsultany, 2012, p. 18).

2. *Discursive Practice Dimension*

Self-positioning, personal authorship, platform structures and audience engagement shape Minhaj's discursive practice. Building on the textual strategy of deliberate repetition, he establishes ground for meaning-making by framing his own intersectional identity through class, race, and cultural memory. His reference to the Toyota Camry as "*the immigrant car of choice*" links his early life and his father's discipline to a narrative of working-class immigrants. As the narrative progresses to his more successful adult years, Minhaj reclaims it with pride: "*Don't you ever forget about it. Cloth interior for life.*" (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*). Here, the Toyota Camry is reinterpreted

as a motif of cultural inheritance, modesty, and upward mobility, symbolising Minhaj's evolving negotiation of hybrid identity (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

This negotiation is further observable in the production of *Homecoming King* (2017), which took place in his hometown of Davis, California: "*I'm home. I had to bring it back here. Netflix said, 'Where do you want to do the special? LA, Chicago, New York?' I was like, 'Nah, son. Davis California.'*" confirming Bihari and Yeldho's (2023, p. 61) observation that stand-up comedy takes place in a hybrid public space where the comedian enacts both narration and dialogue, inviting audiences to co-participate in the reflective act. This engagement is further deepened through intertextual pop culture references, ranging from *Lord of the Rings* and *Drake* to *Duolingo* and *Jodhaa Akbar,* to ground his storytelling in a recognisable media landscape, while strategically generating rapport with his audience as described by Aristotle (2006, p. 112).

Minhaj further makes frequent use of self-deprecating humour to critique systemic inequalities while maintaining audience identification Bihari and Yeldho (2023, p. 66), such as when he refers to himself as "*insufferable*", or employs vulnerability as a discursive tool for resistance by reflecting on a confrontation with his father's bigotry in a moment of personal rejection: "*Come on, Dad! How many times do we complain about racism in our community?... Now the ball is in our court, we're going to be bigoted to another community? Come on dad, I promise you, God doesn't like bigotry.*" (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*). Here, an intergenerational and intercommunal contradiction is identified, pointing towards the affective cost of diasporic identity (Tatum, 1997, p. 23).

The most revealing discursive self-positioning occurs when Minhaj breaks the fourth wall and turns his performance itself into a subject of critique in *The King's Jester* (2022) and *Off With His Head* (2024). First, he reflects on the culture of digital validation in an interaction with his wife:

> "*'Baby girl…Open your phone! Likes, comments, retweets! I am trending number one again!'...*
> *She's like, 'Oh, cool, so you did this for the activists.'...*
> *Don't judge me, Brooklyn. You're just like me. Yeah, I've been watching you all night. You're fucking tweaking without your phones. [audience laughs and applauds] ...*
> *Oh, and once you get a taste of the cocaine clout, oh, the social media meth. Facebook fentanyl. I had to go harder in the paint. I'll die for these likes!*"
> (Minhaj, 2022, *The King's Jester*)

In *Off With His Head* (2024), this self-awareness escalates to a public reckoning with his fact-checking scandal:

> "*I got caught embellishing for dramatic effect. [audience laughs] Same crime your aunt is guilty of over Thanksgiving. [audience laughs] [audience cheering and whooping]*"
> (Minhaj, 2024, *Off With His Head*)

This meta-commentary not only reveals Minhaj's vulnerability as a performer seeking recognition but also satirises the very platform dynamics and audience metrics that shape his visibility. His joke about "*Facebook fentanyl*" becomes a metaphor for the addictive nature of "*clout*" and external validation. This point resonates with Colman's (2024, p. 55) argument that platforms like Netflix and social media govern public discourse by amplifying what is profitable, visible, and algorithmically engaging. Minhaj's self-exposure here is both confession and critique, implicating the performer, the platform, and the audience in the collective production of spectacle.

3. *Social Practice Dimension*

Minhaj's discourse is grounded in the realities of post-9/11 racism, surveillance, and debates over belonging. In *Homecoming King* (2017), he reflects on a generational divide in response to racism. His father's resigned advice in response to a racist incident, "*That's the price we pay for being here*," sharply contrasts with Minhaj's belief in "*the audacity of equality*" and reflects a clash between silent endurance and civic entitlement. This underscores societal hierarchies in the sense described by Nguyen (2012, p. 88) as conditional citizenship, where belonging must be constantly proven: "*As immigrants we always have to put on these press releases to prove our patriotism.*" It further illustrates how one's intersectional identity shapes the way that injustice is experienced and resisted (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

In *The King's Jest*er (2022), Minhaj revisits his discovery about the ethnic profiling of Muslim youth in the U.S. under the Patriot Act, recalling how Hamid Hayat was manipulated into giving a false confession and imprisoned for twenty years.

> "*He just got out of prison this past June. [progressively louder and angrier] Man, he's my age, he's 36. I think about Hamid all the time.*
> *I'm like, 'What if I complied that night like Hamid?'*
> *Dude, being a smart-ass saved my life. [audience laughs] That's why, when I finally got to do my own show on Netflix, I named that shit Patriot Act. [audience cheers and applauds] ...*
> *I'm gonna name my show after the same program you used to spy on us.*"
> (Minaj, 2022, *The King's Jester*)

Here, Minhaj reclaims the act of speaking out. By naming his own Netflix show *Patriot* Act, he transforms state surveillance into satire, using comedy as a platform to reclaim narrative agency within a societal structure that has traditionally criminalised Muslim presence (Alsultany, 2012, p. 24).

In *Off With His Head* (2024), Minhaj invites the audience to reflect on what he conceptualises as "*Beige guilt*," the immigrant experience of enjoying Western privilege while witnessing aggression to their ancestral homelands. He uses a Star Wars metaphor to critique U.S. imperialism, saying, "*the Empire has been bombing the shit out of the Rebellion. That's Beige-istan... And for the past 40 years, we've been funding the destruction of Tatooine. And we did all that... for a white BMW 3 Series.."* This reflects Bhabha's (1994, p. 175) concept of postcolonial mimicry, where immigrants feel both complicit and resistant to global power relations. Through satire, Minhaj challenges the hierarchies that shape immigrant identity and power, turning performance into a space for real-time reflection and meaning-making (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 67).

Trevor Noah

Trevor Noah is a South African-Swiss comedian, author, and former host of *The Daily Show,* known for blending sharp observational humour with social commentary from around the world. With his transnational upbringing and multilingual background, Noah frequently draws on personal experiences to unpack broader systems of race, class, and power. In *Afraid of the Dark* (2017), *Son of Patricia* (2018), *I Wish You Would (*2022), and *Where Was I* (2023), Noah builds a complex narrative about cultural interactions, racial identity, and postcolonial absurdities. His comedy often strikes a balance between satire and sincerity, revealing global inequalities through laughter.

1. *Textual Dimension*

Within the textual dimension, Noah's performance focuses on the interaction between prosody, mimicry, code-switching, and narrative structure. It provides deep insights into identity, colonialism, and global inequality. He employs code-switching not only between languages like Afrikaans, Xhosa, Hindi, and German, but also across different cultural tones to reflect his mixed background and comment on power dynamics. His shifts from South African vernacular to American slang create moments of linguistic tension that expose misunderstandings. At the same time, they position him as both an insider and an outsider in various cultural contexts (Hall, 1997, p. 224; Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 68).

Through mimicry, Noah develops characters and questions authority. He often impersonates different accents or social types to make them relatable and satirical. In *Afraid of the Dark* (2017), he contrasts a British coloniser's arrogant voice with the ridiculousness of 'discovering' India, turning a

history of oppression into something to mock (Dynel, 2013, p. 157). His mimicry highlights how power is constructed, using hyperbole to underline its absurdity.

In foregrounding understandings of asymmetric power relations, Noah uses metaphors and symbolism. He presents the "*white man confidence*" as a recurring theme that critiques unearned privilege and mocks Christopher Columbus for "*fail[ing] up*" to acknowledge that "*he never set foot in America, ever. Ever. And yet, he had a public holiday named after him in America* (Noah, 2023, *Where was I*). He comically exposes the unnoticed mechanisms of white privilege, demonstrating how race, class, and cultural identity shape experience and opportunity (McIntosh, 1988, p. 31).

Repetition serves further as a method to disrupt and weaken, especially concerning racially charged language. In *Son of Patricia* (2018), Noah reflects on his connection to the N-word from a South African perspective:

> "*It's a privilege I have in dealing with the n-word. You know, in South Africa, no one was called a n i g g e r. All over Africa no one was oppressed using that word. So that word has no power. Anywhere you go. 'N i g g e r, n i g g e r, n i g g e r...' Nothing. Whereas right now I can feel the tension in this room. I can feel it. Some people are like, 'Goddamn it, was that like 7 times? I get it, Trevor. That's my quota for the year. Come on.' I get it.*"
> (Noah, 2018, *Son of Patricia*)

In this context, repetition exposes the specific cultural impact of racial trauma while challenging the audience's assumptions. By repeating the term deliberately, he momentarily shifts the power it holds in the U.S. context, showing that language gains strength only through historical ties (Billig, 2005, p. 214; Sue et al., 2007, p. 272).

Ultimately, Noah's narrative structure significantly contributes to building meaning. His performances often start with personal stories that expand into broader discussions, transitioning from anecdote to allegory. In "*I Wish You Would*" (2022), a light-hearted tale about ordering Indian food in Scotland raises questions about authenticity, race, and cultural ownership. Structured from local to global and from personal to political, Noah's performance is both intimate and vast, guiding the audience through laughter toward more profound critique aligning with Aristotle's emphasis on ethos and pathos in persuasive rhetoric, where emotional engagement and personal credibility are central to moving the audience toward shared understanding (Aristotle, 2006, p. 112).

2. *Discursive Practice Dimension*

Noah's discursive practice relies on layering references, personal stories, and carefully considering how close he is to his audience. One of his main strategies is presenting himself as both an observer and a participant, primarily through travel stories that highlight cultural interactions. In

Son of Patricia (2018), for example, he critiques Western entitlement by describing the behavior of white tourists in Bali in search for an "*authentic experience*", mockingly referring to it as "*poverty porn*". He uses his position as an outsider to both tell and poke fun at the perspective of others. This approach not only shows Noah as culturally aware but also as someone skilled at navigating social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 170).

Noah's approach is friendly yet direct. Instead of shying away from sensitive topics, he uses humour to tackle them openly while keeping a welcoming tone. He strategically tackles xenophobic attitudes towards immigration by stating "no immigrants, no spice", framing it as a light comment about food, but quickly introduces critique:

> *"I know people now who'd be like, You know what? Take your immigrants, take your spice and get the hell out of here. You say that now, because you've never lived a life without spice. But don't ever forget. A life without spice was so hard, so hard, that it made white people sail around the world to find it. [whooping]*
> *And like… [whistling and applause] This wasn't regular sailing, this wasn't like a Disney cruise. These people sailed at a time when they believed if you went that way, you would fall off the edge of the Earth and die. And still, some man out there was eating some white ladies cooking and he was like, [English accent] 'I can't do this shit anymore. I'm sailing that way.' 'But what if you die?' 'At least it's exciting.' No immigrants, no spice. And definitely no tacos.*
> (Noah, 2018, *Son of Patricia*)

By exaggerating the absurdity of anti-immigrant sentiment, he encourages the audience to laugh while reflecting on the issue, underscoring Billig's (2005, p. 219) observation that humour can serve as a socially acceptable medium for critique, allowing speakers to broach controversial topics without provoking defensive reactions.

To further make his critique more acceptable and his message more memorable, Noah employs vulnerability and self-deprecating humour. In *I Wish You Would* (2022), he recalls enthusiastically ordering complex Indian dishes in an Indian accent to impress his friends. He is met with confusion by the Indian waiter, who unexpectedly speaks with a thick Scottish accent. "*His beard was Indian. But his mouth was Shrek,*" Noah jokes, before admitting, "*I Trudeau'd too much... I didn't need to try so hard.*" In this moment, he humourously reveals his own performative multiculturalism and reduces his authority while increasing relatability. This deliberate vulnerability helps lower defences and build a bond with the audience (Aristotle, 2006, p. 112).

3. Social Practice Dimension

His upbringing heavily influences Noah's comedy in apartheid-era South Africa, where he was born to a Black mother and white father. This identity was illegal at the time and continues to shape his views on race, borders, and power structures. His background positions him as both a product and critic of social hierarchies, enabling him to explore identity and belonging across national and racial boundaries. He often contrasts being Black in Africa with being Black in America, where race is highly politicised. This perspective allows Noah to shift Western conversations on race to a broader context, challenging the assumption that the American experience is universal (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Drawing from postcolonial experience, Noah uses humour to interrogate the systems that shape power, representation, and historical memory. He calls out political distraction tactics around gender and the use of public bathrooms: "*it's one of those manufactured issues... politicians have done a really good job of tricking Americans into fighting about issues that were never an issue to begin with, so that you don't pay attention to the issues that actually are.*" (Noah, 2023, *Where Was I*) He illustrates how political figures manufacture moral panics and distractions to divert attention from deeper failures, such as inflation and housing insecurity, echoing Fairclough's (1995, p. 133) argument that discourse both represents and sustains power.

Similarly, Noah highlights how global media plays a role in upholding cultural hierarchies through the spread of misinformation, criticising the BBC's portrayal of Africa as helpless during the Ebola crisis, while ignoring how African nations outperformed the West during COVID-19. He imagines a satirical reversal of this gaze, where an African news anchor reports on Western mishandling of the pandemic:

> "*Many African scientists are asking if these people do not have themselves to blame.'...*
> *'Some have even had to be shown how to wash their own hands.'... 'Savages.'...*
> *'It appears what has been increasing the severity of this problem is the fact that some do not even want to wear masks across their face, saying, quote, 'I cannot breathe through this piece of cloth.'...*
> *'This is commonly known by scientists as 'bitchass lungs syndrome.'"*
> (Noah, 2022, *I Wish You Would*)

In doing so, Noah repositions Africa as a symbol of resilience, disrupting the conventional narrative of Western superiority. Drawing on Said's (1978, p. 2) notion of Orientalism, he challenges the split between a rational, civilised West and an irrational, backwards Other by reappropriating the narrative tools of that same discourse.

Noah also engages with popular discussions on race and representation. In *Son of Patricia* (2018), he critiques the backlash against Idris Elba potentially playing James Bond, revealing the racial limits placed on fictional heroism. These moments show how whiteness remains the default in cultural representation, while Black presence is treated as an exception. Throughout his specials, Noah reframes the politics of race, visibility, and belonging, encouraging audiences to question dominant norms through global comparison and historical awareness.

Mo Amer

Mo Amer is a Palestinian-American comedian. His stand-up focuses on displacement, cultural duality, and the experience of being visibly Muslim in America after 9/11. As a former refugee from Palestine who eventually settled in Texas, Amer's comedy is shaped by his personal memories and the contradictions of fitting in. His specials, *The Vagabond* (2018) and *Mohammed in Texas* (2021), tackle issues like forced migration, Islamophobia, citizenship, and belonging in a diaspora through observational humour and wordplay. He performs from a unique Arab-American viewpoint, blending political critique with humour and intimacy, creating a space for laughter and defiance.

1. *Textual Dimension*

In his text, Amer blends personal narrative with code-switching, mimicry, and repetition. Although his shows are performed in English, he often uses Arabic expressions like "*salaam alaikum*" and "*astaghfirullah*" to ground his humour in cultural specificity. He also demonstrates his fluency in Spanish, asserting that he learned the language out of necessity for being repeatedly mistaken to be a Mexican gang member in Houston: "*I learned from being a refugee, you've gotta have plan B and C and D*" (Amer, 2018, *The* Vagabond). Through these language shifts, Amer forwards his adaptive identity and creates space for intercultural stories that are often ignored or misrepresented in mainstream discussions (Hall, 1997, p. 225).

In both of his specials, Amer uses mimicry as a strong comedic tool to reveal the absurdities in institutional interactions and racialised bureaucracy. He impersonates TSA officers, border guards, and government workers with exaggerated voices and gestures to highlight the gap between state power and the experiences of racialised individuals. In *The Vagabond* (2018), he shares a story about calling Immigration to ask about his citizenship status, mimicking a sassy female voice for the officer: "*Oh, that's cute, baby… but what's your first name?*" to which he nervously answers, only to be mercilessly rejected: "*Oh, you ain't gonna get your citizenship, baby. Please hold.*" (Amer, 2018, *The Vagabond*). This moment illustrates how Amer transforms symbolic violence into satire, reflecting Bhabha's (1994, p. 90) concept of mimicry as a tactic that blurs authority and ridicules power.

Amer repetitively comes back to jokes around his name, weaving it into his narrative strategy. In *Mohammed in Texas* (2021), Amer opens with the familiar joke:

"*As a live performer I thought it was over, to be honest. [audience laughing] And now we're here. That was the second time I ever thought my career potentially might be over. The first time…was right after 9/11.[audience laughing and applauding] Someone named Mohammed. I was like, 'It's not looking good for me out here.'*"
(Amer, 2021, Mohammed in Texas)

This callback to post-9/11 suspicion turns his name into a political battleground, both too common and too threatening in Western thought. Through this ongoing reference, Amer highlights the significance names hold in a world focused on security while pushing back against imposed meanings with humour. By blending personal identity with collective memory, he challenges simplistic views that paint Arabness as always foreign and threatening (Said, 1978, p. 2). Instead, he reclaims laughter as a way to take back political power and define culture.

2. *Discursive Practice Dimension*

Within his discursive practice, Amer's performance is shaped by a satirical framing that reveals how bureaucratic language is connected to identity, suspicion, and belonging. Instead of agreeing with institutional narratives, Amer presents them to highlight their contradictions and racial absurdities. He often shares personal experiences with immigration systems, not to gain sympathy, but to illustrate how surveillance and vetting processes reduce identity to a mere checkbox. In *The Vagabond* (2018), he reenacts his experience during a U.S. citizenship interview, where the questioning turns into a display of racial profiling:

"*'Have you or anybody else you know been involved with or given funds to the Nazi Party?'… 'What? I wasn't even born, I don't know what you're talking about.' … 'Next question. Have you or anybody else you know been involved with or given funds to any terrorist organizations, Mr. Mohammed? [emphasis on his name]'…*
I was like, 'No, of course not. And I have to ask you a question. Who the hell says yes?'"
(Amer, 2018, *The Vagabond*)

This quote reflects Fairclough's (1995, p. 133) notion of interdiscursive struggle, where language serves not just to communicate but also to control and categorise. Through satire, Amer disrupts the formal language of bureaucracy and reframes it as absurdity. By doing this, he challenges the ideological role of such language, which, masked as neutrality, fosters fear and exclusion. He turns suspicion into satire and encourages the audience to laugh not only at the system's absurdities but also at how deeply they may have accepted its assumptions.

Amer further positions himself as a cultural translator, using food as a medium to interrogate appropriation, authenticity, and erasure. He critiques how Western culture adopts Arab symbols like hummus and hookah inauthentically: "*I was on a flight and the flight attendant comes up, 'Would you like to have a little light snack?'... She's like, 'This is hummus.' I was like, 'No, it's not.'... Just metaphorically shitting on my entire lineage.*" (Amer, 2021, *Mohammed in Texas*). His view of hummus as a symbol of history, lineage, and pride supports Hall's (1997, p. 225) argument that culture is a place of struggle over meaning and representation. Hummus becomes further a metaphor for how Arab traditions are commercialised. Referring to Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 171), Amer blurs the boundaries between the modern and the traditional, the insider and the outsider.

This negotiation of his identity is continued in his narration of everyday experiences, which he turns into cultural critiques. In a routine about bidets, he mockingly asserts "*[p]lease wash your ass. [laughs] It's really weird that bidets are like not the norm, you know what I mean?... It's obvio-- Everybody's eating ass. Nobody's washing their ass.*" (Amer, 2021, *Mohammed in Texas*). Here, he questions who gets to set hygiene standards and which practices are seen as "civilised." These jokes encourage the audience to reconsider cultural assumptions and join him in a meaning-making process (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 68).

Lastly, Amer employs meta-commentary to reflect on the effects of visibility as a politically vocal Palestinian comedian. He shares his experience in Dave Chappelle's COVID-era documentary, joking that the edit made him appear as "*the villain who ruined the whole situation*" (Amer, 2021, *Mohammed in Texas*). He underscores his representation and control over the narrative, and satirically imagines that Hollywood conspired against him: "*They were like, this Palestinian's getting too powerful. Just send him this unassuming little gremlin to try and kill him with COVID.*" This light-hearted paranoia echoes Bakhtin's (1984, p. 122) theory of the carnivalesque, in which Amer reframes vulnerability as agency and temporarily inverts power structures that silence or manipulate marginalised voices.

3. *Social Practice Dimension*

Amer's performances are shaped by his lived experiences as a stateless Palestinian born in Kuwait who fled during the Gulf War. He addresses war, exile, and Islamophobia through a lens of displacement and racialization. His comedy tackles the lasting effects of imperial violence, economic inequality, and post-9/11 security measures.

His critique of U.S. foreign policy and its racial inequalities comes through in a key moment in Mohammed in Texas (2021), where he satirically imagines a dialogue with the U.S. federal government during the COVID-19 crisis and requests financial relief:

> *"What do you mean you're broke? You're the federal government... Just spit it out. How much is it?...*
> *'Twenty trillion dollars'...*
> *Who's balancing this chequebook, MC Hammer?... How did you get 20 trillion dollars minus?*
> *'Killing brown people is so expensive. [audience cries out in surprise]'"*
> (Amer, 2021, *Mohammed in Texas*)

This line emphasises not just the financial but also the moral cost of state-sponsored violence. Through parody, Amer connects military logic to capitalist absurdity, showing how brown bodies are commodified and monitored in the global conflict economy. Here, his humour aligns with Said's (1978, p. 2) critique of Orientalism, revealing how the East is seen as a source of fear, profit, and expendability.

Amer's satirical sketch of the dialogic engagement further critiques political priorities and media non-transparency. He humourously points out that instead of explaining why the stock market was rising despite widespread unemployment and hardship, the public was distracted by news like "*look, aliens are real. Chew on that for a little bit*" and "*Jada cheated on Will Smith*" (Amer, 2021, Mohammed in Texas). He highlights how spectacle can obscure real failures, which connects to Caplan and Boyd's (2016, p. 7) critique of media systems that promote sensationalism while ignoring structural issues.

Lastly, Amer's performance reflects a complex identity shaped by his experiences as a Muslim, refugee, and stateless person. His performances show how these overlapping identities increase social marginalisation. From being mistaken for Mexican in school to the frustrating process of trying to secure U.S. citizenship, Amer illustrates how racial, religious, and legal categories intersect to create exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). His family's escape from Kuwait involved dodging landmines and hiding cash in their clothing, underscoring a poignant reminder that finding refuge often comes with sacrifice. Through comedy, he creates a discursive space for intersectional identities to reclaim dominant narratives of belonging.

Comparative Analysis

This section compares the performances of each comedian to identify the similarities and differences in their engagement with comedy, satire, and resistance, according to their distinct intersectional identities and positionalities. It is interested in emerging patterns in topics, the prominence of certain discursive strategies in their performances, the building of solidarity, and their potentially distinct approach to similar issues.

Across the specials of the three comedians, political critique, identity negotiation, and cultural reflection are discussed through a satirical lens. As Tesnohlidkova (2020, pp. 2-3) explains, satire involves the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or exaggeration to foreground critique of people, institutions, or social structures. It builds on shared cultural awareness, intertextuality, and an understanding of the moral position of the comedians, generating culture through the interpretation and interrogation of existing cultural norms and symbols.

1. *Shared Themes and Discursive Strategies*

Minhaj, Noah and Amer use humour to destabilise racial and cultural hierarchies. Commonly targeted themes include post 9/11 surveillance, colonialism, absurdities of government policies and state power, and the media spectacle of distraction. Each comedian highlights negotiations of belonging in the West as people of colour, navigating identity through the lens of their specific cultural and geopolitical contextuality. The core discursive tools they employ include code-switching and linguistic hybridity, mimicry, satirical framing, repetition, and breaking the fourth wall through meta-commentary.

Overlaps occur in their narratives around marginalisation experienced through absurdities of state power, such as Minhaj's reference to surveillance programs like the *Patriot Act* which mistrusted and targeted muslim minorities in the U.S., Amer's reenactment of dehumanizing bureaucratic complexities tied to his refugee status and islamic identity, and Noah's implication of power asymmetries in a global context by bringing attention to his illegal upbringing to interracial parents in systems of apartheid. Through satire and lived experiences, these comedians reveal how combinations of social positions create a layered marginality, or intersectionality as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989, p. 149).

Government policies are also repetitively targeted through satirical framing, especially those invoked by or related to the Trump administration. They criticise the xenophobic language surrounding immigration and the building of the border wall as empty political theatre. Minhaj recalls a moment in his childhood where he finds out about having a younger sister, sarcastically narrating: "*I totally understand the wall!... these brown people... eating our Fruit Roll-Ups...*" (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*). Amer criticises the impracticality of border security by mocking the idea that creativity and resilience, especially among Mexican immigrants, could be stopped by a physical barrier: "*Put up a wall and they'll just zipline back...*" (Amer, 2021, *Mohammed in Texas*). Meanwhile, Noah highlights the contradictions in Trump's specifications for a "see-through wall," turning political drama into parody: "*I'm just worried that a contractor will come along and trick the president... 'There it is, Mr. Trump. Your invisible wall'*" (Noah, 2018, *Son of Patricia*). These examples reflect Hall's (1997, p. 225) notion of culture as a space where political meanings are

contested and reimagined. The comedians reclaim the dominant stories of exclusion and mock the logic behind them.

Another overlap can be identified in the politicisation of names and name-calling. Minhaj and Amer repeatedly emphasise the mispronunciation or distortion of their names in Western contexts, which symbolically violate and misrecognize their identity. They use repetition to reclaim agency and challenge religious stereotypes (Lee, 2015, p. 10; Alsultany, 2012, p. 18). Meanwhile, Noah subverts the racial trauma associated with the N-word through repetition in a South African context, where it has no racial connotations, revealing how the meaning of language is dependent on historical context (Billig, 2005, p. 214).

2. *Differences in strategy and Framing*

Minhaj, Noah, and Amer all critique power relations, but they do so in distinct ways, particularly in terms of tone, cultural background, and style. Minhaj takes a confrontational and theatrical approach. He often uses visual media and direct political messages. His stage setup mixes graphics and storytelling, resembling what Baym (2017, p. 91) describes as infotainment.

Noah, on the other hand, has a more observational style and uses a global perspective lens. He refrains from directly confronting the audience and relies on irony and satire to lead audiences toward critique. His framing often consists of comparisons, such as between American and African contexts, allowing audiences to laugh at their own experiences without feeling defensive. This approach connects with Billig's (2005, p. 219) idea of "banal nationalism" being subtly undermined through humour.

Amer's framing is more intimate and culturally specific. He often employs a dialogical style and positions his identity as a refugee and a visibly Muslim man. His comedic resistance is conveyed through satire, lighthearted parody, and insider jokes about topics such as bidets and hummus. Unlike Minhaj's urgency or Noah's measured tone, Amer's satire builds a connection with the audience through familiarity and absurdity, reflecting what Bauman and Briggs (1990, p. 68) refer to as emergent meaning found in shared cultural references.

Overall, the comedians differ in how their intersectional identities shape their comedic strategies. Minhaj, as a U.S.-born Indian Muslim, adopts a fast-paced, emotionally charged style rooted in civic critique. His position as both insider and outsider enables him to expose racial hypocrisy through direct address, vulnerability, and moral clarity. Whether confronting the Patriot Act, mispronunciation of his name, or "Beige guilt," Minhaj leans into satire as a form of confrontation, reclaiming political space through personal narrative. Noah, by contrast, approaches satire with a quieter irony that reflects his postcolonial upbringing. Born mixed-race under apartheid and shaped by global mobility, he positions himself as a detached observer, unpacking racism, privilege, and Western imperialism through mimicry, comparison, and soft critique. He doesn't

overidentify with U.S.-based struggles but zooms out to expose the absurdities of power globally. Amer, a formerly stateless Palestinian refugee, narrates his humour through daily interactions, family stories, and intimate moments of displacement. His comedy is less confrontational, often relying on repetition, absurdity, and cultural specificity to satirise bureaucracy, Islamophobia, and the commodification of Arab culture. These differences speak to how lived experience mediates access to humour as a form of resistance, where Minhaj confronts, Noah observes, and Amer gently disrupts.

3. *Solidarity Building*

Minhaj, Noah and Amer all further use humour to build bridges between communities who share common experiences of marginalisation. Minhaj is the most direct in discursively constructing solidarity through intertextual references like: "*[at]t least your spine isn't getting shattered in a police wagon, though it's happening to my African-American brothers and sisters to this day*" (Minhaj, 2017, *Homecoming King*), or imagining a pan-brown world like "*Beige-istan*," and asserting that "*we'll vote for you*", but "*[d]on't bomb my home country*". These gestures show a shared political awareness across racialised communities. Although not discussed in the theoretical framework, this reminds of what Benedict Anderson (2020, p. 6) calls an imagined community, one where people connect not through proximity, but through a shared sense of belonging and identity. However, we can draw on Bihari and Yeldho's (2023, p. 66) observation that comedy serves as a space for fragmented identities to laugh together at shared registers and form a community.

Noah's approach is less explicitly political yet successful. In *Son of Patricia* (2018), he talks about how we choose to respond to racism: "*shake it up with the love of Jesus, send it right back*" He further expresses love for the Indian community, jokingly telling a caucasian friend to let him order the food because he doesn not want him to "*embarrass me in front of my Indian people*" (Noah, 2022, *I Wish You Would*). Noah frames solidarity as something built through compassion, not confrontation. This fits with Aristotle's (2006, p. 112) emphasis on *pathos*, the emotional connection that makes a message land. Noah invites audiences to relate and reflect rather than resist outright, using empathy as a tool for solidarity.

Amer builds solidarity from the ground up through shared struggle, daily interactions, and the weight of systemic violence. He jokes about being mistaken for Mexican in school and expresses deep admiration for the Mexican community's resilience. His line "*killing brown people is so expensive*" cuts across individual identity and connects experiences of racialised violence, whether Arab, Latino, or otherwise. In doing so, Amer transforms his personal story into a collective one, illustrating how systems of power target individuals along similar lines. This reflects Alsultany's (2012, p. 19) critique of how Muslim and Arab identities are reduced to threat narratives in U.S. discourse and Lee's (2015,

p. 10) discussion of the perpetual foreigner stereotype that renders Asian and Middle Eastern Americans as outsiders by default.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how political satire serves as a form of discursive resistance for comedians who speak from the margins. Specifically, it examined the stand-up performances of Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mo Amer, three globally visible comedians whose intersectional identities, encompassing religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, and migration status, inform not only the content of their humour but also the structure of their critique. Each of these performers engages in intimate and politically astute narrative telling, using the comedic stage as a space to challenge, negotiate, and occasionally even reinforce social hierarchies. The central research question guiding this study was: Through what discursive strategies do Hasan Minhaj, Trevor Noah, and Mohamed Amer employ humour in their Netflix stand-up specials to subvert, sustain, or reinforce stereotypes, social hierarchies and power structures, and promote solidarity, while mobilising laughter as a political act of resistance?

This question emerged in response to a broader societal context in which racialised communities continue to be subject to systems of surveillance, cultural misrecognition, and representational violence, often within media landscapes that privilege spectacle over substance. Platforms like Netflix offer a curious paradox: They open up space for minority expression while embedding such expression within commercial and algorithmic constraints. In this setting, comedians are not merely entertainers; they are cultural narrators, public intellectuals, and, occasionally, unwilling diplomats of identity politics. The decision to focus on Minhaj, Noah, and Amer highlights both the significance and depth of their contributions, as well as the intersectional lens through which they offer comedic critiques. The theoretical framework of this study was intentionally broad to mirror the interdisciplinary character of comedy as a cultural text. Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis formed the basis of the methodological approach, enabling a nuanced exploration of textual strategies, discursive practices, and the broader social context. This analysis was further enriched by foundational theories of humour, including Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque, which sheds light on how laughter acts as an inversion of power. It also drew on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of ethos, logos, and particularly pathos, as well as Billig's (2005) notion of humour's dual role in both disrupting and maintaining ideology. The postcolonial lens was central, particularly Bhabha's (1994) insights on mimicry and hybridity, Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism, and Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work on intersectionality. These perspectives helped frame the comedians not just as performers but as cultural agents negotiating asymmetries of power through speech, performance, and subversion.

Methodologically, this thesis relied on qualitative textual analysis, guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, with each comedian's performances analysed through the textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions. The data consisted of Netflix stand-up specials selected for

their thematic richness and global reach. Transcripts were carefully annotated, with particular attention to voice, mimicry, repetition, and framing. The interpretive stance adopted throughout was reflexive, acknowledging that meaning is co-produced between performer and audience, and that the researcher, too, is implicated in this interpretive act.

Across the findings, several recurring discursive strategies emerged. Minhaj, Noah, and Amer all rely heavily on code-switching, mimicry, repetition, and satirical framing. Their narratives often fluctuate between personal anecdotes and political allegories, allowing them to connect micro-level experiences, such as mispronouncing one's name or navigating airport security screenings, to broader systems of power. They effectively break the fourth wall with meta-commentary, engage in intertextual referencing, and shift registers across various cultural codes, positioning themselves as both insiders and outsiders. Each comedian crafts a transnational voice that is deeply rooted in their individual experiences yet expansive in its reach, inviting audiences to participate in a shared process of meaning-making.

In terms of subversion, all three comedians employ humour to destabilise dominant narratives surrounding race, religion, and citizenship. Minhaj weaponises narrative structure and personal storytelling to expose the hypocrisy of American exceptionalism and the structural contradictions within liberal multiculturalism. Noah reframes Western superiority by reversing the colonial gaze, mocking British imperialism or highlighting Africa's success during COVID-19 as a moment of epistemic inversion. Amer, meanwhile, uses mimicry and bodily humour to highlight the absurdities of immigration bureaucracy and the commodification of Arab culture. These moments of subversion reflect the performative dimension of resistance, where laughter becomes a political resource that disarms authority, creates solidarity, and reclaims space.

That said, this study also found instances where the comedians' humour inadvertently reinforced certain stereotypes or power structures. At times, Amer's references to being mistaken for Mexican or joking about TSA profiling leaned into tropes that may be misunderstood by audiences not attuned to their irony. Similarly, Noah's repeated invocation of the "*white man confidence*," while a satirical motif, occasionally risked essentialising whiteness, especially when stripped of context. Minhaj's self-deprecating remarks about "*trying too hard*" or being "*insufferable*" sometimes reproduced meritocratic narratives, even while they aimed to dismantle them. These examples underscore Billig's argument that humour can be a double-edged sword, both revealing and reproducing ideology, depending on the audience's positioning.

A compelling thread throughout the analysis was the comedians' effort to build solidarity. Minhaj constructs an imagined community of "*Beige-istan*," uniting disparate brown and Black identities through shared experiences of marginalisation. He speaks directly to other racialised communities, invoking police brutality against African Americans or the emotional toll of being

politically invisible. Noah, by contrast, uses humour to forge bonds through empathy, not confrontation. His emphasis on emotional response to racism," *shake it up with the love of Jesus*," reveals a politics of compassion rooted in pathos. Amer builds solidarity from the ground up through daily experience and communal struggle. Whether it is expressing love for the Mexican community or linking American debt to "*killing brown people*," his humour operates as an invitation to see the common threads of racialised violence, bureaucratic indifference, and resistance.

The comedians' distinct intersectional identities shape their approaches to satire and resistance. Minhaj's experience as a U.S.-born Indian Muslim informs his confrontational, emotionally charged style, turning personal rejection into public critique. Noah's mixed-race, postcolonial upbringing under apartheid positions him as a global observer, using irony and impersonation to expose systemic absurdities without direct confrontation. Amer's identity as a stateless Palestinian refugee grounds his comedy in everyday absurdities, highlighting displacement and Islamophobia through intimate storytelling. These intersectional experiences onlnot just inform content but also shape how each comedian navigates and challenges dominant power structures.

The implications of this study are manifold. At a time when representation is frequently conflated with liberation, this thesis argues that the power of comedy lies not just in who is visible but in how visibility is negotiated, framed, and performed. Minhaj, Noah, and Amer do not simply represent difference; they perform it, construct it, and complicate it in ways that challenge mainstream cultural logic. Their comedy offers a discursive space where power can be mocked, reimagined, and, at times, undone. However, this space is also fragile, dependent on audience literacy, platform politics, and the comedians' positionality within global circuits of capital and recognition. In other words, satire is not a cure but a cultural tactic. It is limited, strategic, and always in tension with the very systems it seeks to critique.

Several limitations shaped the scope and direction of this research. First, the focus on Netflix specials, while methodologically coherent, narrows the field to platform-approved content, possibly excluding more radical or experimental performances found elsewhere. Second, audience reception was not studied, which would have added a valuable layer to understanding how meaning circulates across different demographics. Third, as a female, Gen Z scholar with a background in international relations and media studies, and as someone with a dual nationality and lived experience of migration, I remain aware of the interpretive biases that shape any qualitative work. I have attempted to mitigate this through reflexivity in conducting the analysis and discussing my findings in light of previous research, although subjectivity is never entirely absent

Future research might take several directions. A comparative study across other platforms, such as YouTube or Instagram reels, could reveal how digital affordances shape comedic resistance differently. Longitudinal work might track how these comedians evolve in their politics and

performance over time. Audience studies, particularly of diasporic viewers, could provide insight into how comedy is taken up, misread, or repurposed. Finally, extending the analysis to include female and queer comedians from similar positionalities would offer a more intersectional understanding of humour as resistance.

In summary, this thesis has demonstrated that laughter can perform political work. Minhaj, Noah, and Amer stand on stages shaped by history, race, empire, and migration, and from these stages, they speak, joke, mimic, and resist. They do not offer easy answers, but they raise vital questions about who belongs, who gets to speak, and how power is performed and undone in the space between joke and truth. Their comedy reminds us that sometimes, what begins as laughter can end as understanding, and that is no small thing.

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Appendix A: Stand-up thumbnails

Hasan Minhaj	Trevor Noah	Mo Amer
 Homecoming King (2017)	 *Afraid of the Dark* (2017)	 *The Vagabond* (2018)
 The King's Jester (2022)	 *Son of Patricia* (2018)	 *Mohammed in Texas* (2021)
 Off With His Head (2024)	 *I Wish You Would* (2022)	
	 Where Was I (2023)	

Appendix B: Coding Tree

Textual	Discursive	Social
Code-Switching	Audience Address	Collective Experiences
Juxtaposition	Audience Alignment	Comparison of Parenting
Metaphor & Symbolism	Dialogic Engagement	Critique of Power Structures
Prosodic Play	Self-Positioning	Cross-cultural Comparison
Repetition, Parallelism,	Intertextual References	Cultural Hybridity / Diasporic
Anaphora	Laughter as Resistance	Identity Politics
Textual: Satirical Framing	Discursive: Mimicry	Desire for Whiteness
Textual: Mimicry	Discursive: Satirical Framing	Frustration with Bureaucracy
	Meta-Commentary	Generational Identity Conflict
	Self Mockery	Homeplace Criticism
		Immigrant Name
		Immigration Challenges
		Intersectionality
		Microaggressions / Threatening Language
		Model Minority/Meritocracy
		Police Aggression
		Post COVID-19
		Refugee Stories
		Reinforcement of Stereotypes
		Resistance Through Vulnerability
		Solidarity and Collectivity
		Subversion of Stereotypes
		Success Stories
		Trapped by Societal Expectations