

# Comedians and their personae: a look at contemporary streamed stand-up comedy specials

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the positioning of comedians in streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs). In an analysis of ten 2023 Netflix SSCSs, this research explores the multimodal meaning making in introductory sequences as well as the humorous and serious strategies employed in the SSCSs to create comedians' on-stage personas and to position them vis-à-vis societal and private themes. The study aims to uncover the principles of stance-taking and identity construction within the introductory shots and sequences, as well as the transtextual relationships that connect these specials both to each other and to wider public discourses. By contextualising these findings within theoretical frameworks around humour, identity construction, stance-taking, and transtextuality, the study provides insights into the evolving genre of SSCS and the complex interactions between comedians' performances and their socio-cultural environments.*

*Keywords: identity construction, stance, stand-up comedy, streamed stand-up comedy special, transtextuality.*

## 1. Introduction

Streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) are a genre of comedic text that serve as a good example of contextualised and performed humour currently present in the mainstream. While they are tied to the comedians who perform them as well as to stand-up as a genre of performance, SSCSs are more than mediated stand-up comedy, filmed in front of a theatre audience and streamed to asynchronous streaming audiences in front of a screen. They are multimodal and multidimensional artefacts, performed and edited, and subject to genre conventions that are a blend between stand-up norms and patterns introduced by the telecinematic production and distribution. Making use of textual and contextual affordances, the producers of SSCSs position the comedians' on-stage personae, their show, and ultimately the identity of the artefact and its participants in interesting ways that are tied also to the public discourses that are assumed to be shared as common ground between comedians and (some of)

their audiences. The analysis of such moments of self-presentation accordingly promises insights both into comedic practices within a genre that has not yet received much scholarly attention (but see examples in Section 2.1), and into the relationships such performances establish with sociocultural topics.

The aim of this study is to explore how comedians in SSCSs are positioned relative to their audiences, to the common ground they assume with their audiences, to their on-stage and off-stage identities, and generally to extant public discourses. In particular, I ask the following research questions:

- (1) How do streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) multimodally position performing comedians in the introductory shots and sequences of the stream?
- (2) What stance-taking and identity construction principles are employed in the creation of the comedian's persona?
- (3) What transtextual relationships characterise and connect recent comedy specials?

These research questions are addressed based on a sample of ten 2023 SSCSs from Netflix, with the aim of providing insights into the current landscape of SSCSs, in which self-reflection and refraction have been identified as key aspects (Bennett, 2023). While comedians like Mae Martin or John Mulaney create performances that appear to be conventional, their on-stage and on-screen personae are both novel and creative performers – and also vulnerable, fragile human beings and autobiographical storytellers.

In what follows, I will first contextualise the study theoretically, by summarising my approach to humour and identity construction (Section 2.1), stance-taking (Section 2.2), and transtextuality (Section 2.3). The data and method of the study will be described in Section 3, before providing the results in Section 4. There, multimodal positioning will be discussed based on the introductory sequences of the 2023 sample of Netflix SSCSs (Section 4.1), before stance-taking (Section 4.2) will be explored based on the larger textual structures present in the sample. The conclusion (Section 5) finally sheds light on the transtextual characteristics of the entire sample and Netflix comedy specials more broadly.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Humour and identity construction**

Humour in this study is understood as a cognitive phenomenon of processing difference and the resolution of that difference within a playful context and – more importantly – as the textual phenomenon of employing stimuli intended to create such cognitive effects. Generally, I thus follow an incongruity and resolution model of humour akin to the one introduced by Suls (1972, see also Messerli, 2021), and most of the humorous instances that were observed in the empirical analysis informing this study can easily be described in terms of knowledge structures or scripts that are juxtaposed in a fashion that is surprising, but also explainable. The playframe (Bateson, 1972/1955) in which these incongruities occur is institutionally and paratextually (Genette, 1997) established already before streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) are started, with SSCSs being labelled as comedy on streaming platforms, described with a blurb that identifies their comedic nature and offered in lists and groups next to other examples of comedy. This does not mean, however, that SSCSs would be comedic throughout, and Section 2.2 will highlight that stances are taken both by means of serious and playful, humorous discourse.

The flipside of employing incongruity to create humour is that humour, once recognised, indicates incongruity.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, instances of humour in SSCSs also become instruments of positioning the identities of their authors and principals, for instance in terms of similarity and difference: When Dave Chappelle towards the end of his SSCS *The Dreamer* makes a joke about black LGBTQIA+ artist Lil NAS X's childhood dream of being gay, he implicates that he expects it to be common ground between himself and at least a part of his audience that such a childhood dream – opposed in the joke to childhood dreams of being a fireman or president – is incongruous. This is not an explicit anti-gay stance, but the motivational choice of including this joke contributes to the construction of a heterosexual male identity of the comedian's persona and to a heteronormative understanding and positioning of both the theatre and the streaming audiences of *The Dreamer*. Humour thus also categorises ideas and objects as incongruous and congruous, and it is an integral part of comedians' identity construction.

In general, discursive identity construction highlights the work individuals do in interaction to consciously or unconsciously position themselves and others by means of different processes. This approach to identity seems fruitful also for the understanding of the participants in SSCSs. The most salient identity in this case is that of the performing comedian themselves – I will use the term persona construction in this case, which I regard as a particularly planned and intentional identity construction process. The seminal approach by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) will serve as a useful heuristic here to understand identities in SSCSs as emergent in interaction and as subject to the principles of emergence, relationality, indexicality, relationality and partialness proposed in this framework. These principles broadly highlight the multiplicity and fragmentariness of identity as a discursive achievement rather than a stable precondition, and they also foreground the processes and relations that constitute identity. In particular, my focus here is on relationality in terms of processes of adequation and distinction, while also including authenticity and authority as useful categories of relationality mentioned by Bucholtz and Hall (2005).

For stand-up comedy in general, Daube (2012) has highlighted the symbiotic relationship between audience and comedian, who oscillates between positioning themselves as antagonist and protagonist and thus creates a persona collaboratively with the audience. Other research has highlighted the identity aspects audiences assume and construe based on performance and physical appearance of the comedian on stage. Double (2014), for instance, distinguishes different distances between autobiographical aspects of comedian identity and the personas they put on stage, while also addressing how differences between expectations based on physical appearance and linguistic performance can become a resource for comedy. Brodie (2014, pp. 64–89) dedicates a chapter to the social identity of comedians and similarly points out that comedians' physical appearance is perceived before the stand-up routine even starts. Interestingly, Brodie also distinguishes between different stages in a comedian's career and an accumulation of resources that contribute to the comedian's identity construction on stage – from the discursive actions on stage alone to the reputation they have built up over time. In Cooper (2019b), focus groups put centre-stage gender as an identity category and display clear awareness of intersectional aspects of identity. They also discuss the relationship between authority, authenticity and targets of the joke, noticing that embodied identity enables comedians to include certain themes and butts of joke in their comedy. In a similar vein, Cooper (2019a) shows the contribution stand-up comedy – in this case Amy Schumer's – can make to public discourses and debates by positioning themselves with or against dominant values. Fox (2018), in researching the effect of northernness in England, adds a different type of intersectionality that addresses the role of the combined variables of geographical region, social class, and gender in stand-up.

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<sup>1</sup> In the same way that due to the fact that fires routinely lead to smoke, smoke comes to indicate fire.

Based on these insights into stand-up and a general discursive approach to identity, I assume for the case of SSCSs that comedians' personae can be created by means of relational strategies during the performance itself as well as by orienting towards relevant extant discourses. Using the same example as earlier in this Section, Dave Chappelle arguably chooses Lil NAS X as an example in the first place based on similarity – both Chappelle and NAS X being black American show-business figures – but then creates a distinction between himself and NAS X (Example 1).

Example 1. Dave Chappelle (DC), *The Dreamer*, 47:35–49:01

- 1 DC: When I see a fellow dreamer I give them my utmost respect, even if I don't understand  
2 what their dream is.=I know a dreamer, when I see one. and I've met MA:NY powerful  
3 dreamers in my life.=none more POWERFUL (.) than a man (.) who calls himself (.) Lil  
4 Nas X.  
6 DC: I met this n\*\*\*\* at a party,=I had no idea who he was.  
7 ...  
8 DC: But when THAT n\*\*\*\* walked in, he was dressed like C-3PO=he was SHIning.  
9 ...  
10 DC: I didn't know who he was. for some reason, out of all of them dreamers, he walked right  
11 up to me. (*parodic walking to the front of the stage*) and he said, (*deep voice*) I tried to  
12 get you in my video. (*back to his normal voice*) I didn't know what the fuck he was  
13 talking about.=I said what?=I said what?  
14  
15 DC: What video? and he was just looking at me like (*makes a face*). (*deep voice*) you know  
16 what video (*normal voice*), and walked away. (*imitates Lil NAS X walking towards*  
17 *further back on the stage*)  
18 DC: And I watched him walk away.=I said MAN=I said (.) This n\*\*\*\* is having a very  
19 powerful dream?

Example 1 shows a range of explicit and implicit identity construction strategies. Firstly, Lil NAS X is aligned with the categories *famous people* and *dreamers*. Then he is also positioned relative to DC himself, which is done mostly meta-discursively by performing a reported interaction between the two. A hierarchy is established with NAS X knowing who DC is while DC repeats that he did not know who NAS X is. DC further compares NAS X's outfit to the look of the fictional robot C-3PO from the Star Wars universe, he contrasts his own walk to that of NAS X, which he performs as a type of flamboyant parody of a model walking on a catwalk, and he changes his voice to establish a contrast. In doing so, DC not only creates the character Lil NAS X on stage and constructs an identity of the music star, but he also positions himself with regard to NAS X, highlighting with every move who he, Dave Chappelle, is in contrast to LIL NAS X.

## 2.2. Stance-taking

The contrast between Dave Chappelle's onstage persona and his performance of Lil NAS X, and strategies of distinction and adequation more generally, can also be conceptualised in terms of stance-taking (Du Bois, 2007). Stance, much like identity construction, takes place in a particular context and with orientation towards previous practices, or indeed stances: "Stance is an activity built for two (or more)" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 171). When Dave Chappelle takes a stance towards Lil NAS X – he does so in response to various other acts of stance-taking. This includes the performed appreciative evaluations by other dreamers at the party in the scene of Example 1 above, but more prominently also the controversy that surrounds Chappelle at this point in his career because of transphobic comments he made during several of his performances. As Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle nicely visualises, evaluation is a multidimensional action that

establishes several relationships, each of them being complex themselves. The primary relationship between the stance-taker and the object of stance is an act of evaluating the object, but also of positioning the stance-taker by means of that act. The bidirectional act of positioning then aligns with or distinguishes itself from previous stances taken towards the same object. And objects of stance themselves of course exist in the context of other objects which have been evaluated by the same and other subjects. Finally, categorisation and assessments of similarity and difference are themselves context- and subject-dependent. For instance, Dave Chappelle not only evaluates Lil NAS X as a gay icon in the context of other people having evaluated him as a gay icon, he also already chooses the readily available categorisation of NAS X as gay as his primary focus, rather than, say, his rise as a black performer within the predominantly white culture of US American country music.

### **2.3. Transtextuality**

Categorisation as a choice highlighted in Section 2.2 also points to the complex relationships between texts that streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) make use of. Genette's (1997) understanding of transtextuality is a useful way of theorising these relationships as well as the genesis and development of each individual SSCS as a text (see e.g. Messerli & Locher, 2024). This comprehensive framework does not only include intertextuality, understood as the relationship a text establishes to other texts (Kristeva, 1969), but also paratextuality, which makes reference to those ancillary texts that also influence a text's reception. For instance, Mae Martin's SSCS *SAP* is described on Netflix as follows: "From a mythical moose encounter to the gender spectrum in "Beauty and the Beast," Mae Martin reflects on a world off its axis in this comedy special." This description serves as a paratext of the SSCS: it shapes genre expectations, and it starts constructing an identity for the SSCS and its performing comedian. As another type of transtextual relationship, Genette adds metatextuality, referring to texts about the text, which is another dimension of the blurb just mentioned, but also includes, e.g., fans' reviews of *SAP*. The text's architextuality describes its tacit relationship to other similar texts – in this case other SSCSs. Finally, hypertextuality points to transformations of texts and to the relationship between the transformed text – e.g., a parody or pastiche – and the source text which has been transformed.

The SSCSs I focus on here are all complex in terms of their transtextuality. They establish many intertextual references to other fictional texts as well as non-fictional accounts, e.g. of the comedian's life off-stage. They include multimodal paratexts, such as presenter's announcements and elaborate credit sequences. They give rise to praise and criticism – metatexts that may become paratexts of future SSCSs. They follow architextual patterns established in the genre and establish new norms that may inform the shape of future specials. And while none of them are purely to be seen as hypertexts, they typically contain hypertextual elements such as the parody of Lil NAS X's walk Dave Chappelle performs.

## **3. Data and method**

To select the data for this study, I started by picking Netflix, the most well-known host of streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) as a sample platform and chose recent productions as a focus for an exploratory study of how SSCSs multimodally position themselves, performing comedians and other participants. Out of the 32 Netflix SSCSs that were released in 2023, I selected 10 specials as a sample (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The sampling process to arrive at these ten SSCSs can be described as a type of stratified random sampling. It involved picking individual specials randomly until there was a roughly balanced distribution between

Table 1. Sample of streamed stand-up comedy specials used in this study

All SSCSs were released on Netflix in 2023.

Comedian	Title	Release date
Chris Rock	<i>Selective Outrage</i>	4 March 23
Mae Martin	<i>SAP</i>	28 March 23
Leanne Morgan	<i>I'm Every Woman</i>	11 April 23
John Mulaney	<i>Baby J.</i>	25 April 23
Wanda Sykes	<i>I'm an Entertainer</i>	23 May 23
Amy Schumer	<i>Emergency Contact</i>	13 June 23
Beth Stelling	<i>If You Didn't Want Me Then</i>	3 October 23
Trevor Noah	<i>Where Was I</i>	19 December 23
Ricky Gervais	<i>Armageddon</i>	25 December 23
Dave Chappelle	<i>The Dreamer</i>	31 December 23

For each of these ten SSCSs, I examined the opening sequence until the comedian starts speaking by breaking down the broadcast into individual shots and analysing what each shot contributes to the multimodal positioning of the program and the comedian.

In a second step, I used the same ten SSCSs as a sandbox to explore exemplary cases of stance-taking through humour as well as through serious parts of the performance. The resulting examples, which will be presented in Section 4.2., thus need to be regarded as a non-representative explorative sample of the stance-taking strategies employed in recent Netflix SSCSs. Finally, I exploratively examine persona construction in the larger context of each of the SSCSs and look at the different textual characteristics and relationships through the lens of transtextuality.

In terms of methodology, the analyses presented here are informed by multimodal discourse analysis, comprising a selective close-reading of examples and their contextualisation within larger discourses surrounding each of the performances. When transcripts or summaries are used in the following sections, they should always be understood as access points to rather than as an accurate reproduction of the multimodal data that is available on Netflix at the time of writing.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Multimodal self-presentation

Each of the ten streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs) in the sample starts with the Netflix logo and chime and then moves on to an introductory sequence specific to the SSCS, a multimodal, telecinematic piece of production that would not have been visible to theatre audiences present during the recording of the performance. The only exception to this is John Mulaney's *Baby J.*, which starts *in medias res*. In this case the audience sees a black screen first, while already hearing Mulaney talk, then a large organ which turns out to be the back of the stage of the venue where the SSCS was recorded, fades in, and the camera already shows us the performing comedian, on stage in front of the theatre audience. Here, a short credit sequence will only follow ten minutes into the stream.

In the other nine SSCSs within the sample, the comedian's performance does not start immediately, but is preceded by a sequence of between 11 (Wanda Sykes) and 42 (Chris Rock) shots. Each of these nine examples contains generic patterns – most notably the act of the comedian walking on stage, which is explicitly represented in eight cases, while Dave Chappelle

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comedians that identify as male or female. The final sample contains five SSCS by comedians that at the type of writing use the pronouns *he/him*, four that use *she/her* and one that uses *they/them*.

is seen backstage before the show, but then is shown on stage without the streaming audience observing his walking there. In most cases, however, there is extensive footage of the theatre and the waiting audience, typically seen before the comedian so that the asynchronous audience in front of a screen is aligned with the synchronous audiences waiting for the performance when it is recorded. Prototypically, audience applause is audible before the start of the performance, and the instrument by which the comedian's voice reaches us, the microphone, is a central part of the introductory sequence in almost all cases, be it that the performer moves around the microphone stand (e.g., Mae Martin), or that they prominently carry the microphone onto the stage (as does Leanne Morgan). What these elements of the introductory sequence do is to position the comedian as a performer of comedy. They communicate that this is stand-up, they show the comedian interacting with the audience, they include positive evaluation of the comedian by the theatre audience by means of applause, they reinforce the expectations of streaming audiences that they will see and hear stand-up comedy. This aspect of identity of the comedian as a performer and entertainer, and as a positively evaluated figure, is sometimes reinforced by other means. Notably this includes the excitement in the voice of the presenter who explicitly elicits the audience's applause (a presenter is audible in 5 of 10 SSCSs). Another semiotic means by which performance is foregrounded are still or moving images, or spoken quotes from previous performances (Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock).

While this positioning of the comedian as performer contains many elements directly inherited from stand-up as a non-streamed performance, a second commonality more specific to SSCSs stands out. In many cases, the opening sequences contain implicit or explicit references to the performer as a human being subject to experiences much like those their audiences might be familiar with. For instance, Beth Stelling's *If You Didn't Want Me Then* starts with a series of 25 still photos of herself as a child. This quick visual autobiography is topical because – as the audience will learn – her SSCS makes frequent reference to her experiences growing up, but it is also an early way of aligning the performer on stage with a very human back story that many in her audience will be able to relate to. Leanne Morgan's *I'm Every Woman* also contains a quick nod to family ties, when the announcer says "Ladies and gentlemen, my mom, Leanne Morgan." In other cases, less explicit, more poetic and thoughtful tones are chosen for such acts of positioning beyond comedy. Dave Chappelle's *The Dreamer* and Chris Rock's *Selective Outrage* (the two know each other well and Dave Chappelle contains an intertextual reference to *Selective Outrage*) both choose black and white film images to position the comedian as someone who has been pondering recent events. Dave Chappelle is shown in a simple industrial setting, walking in slow-motion, dimly lit, whereas Chris Rock is seen preparing for his show, a love symbol on his necklace, artistic shallow depth of field film images showing him walking past his own successes. Both of them are shown with serious facial expressions, accompanied by slow, pensive music. Mae Martin's SSCS contains a little film scene, a sketch of Martin meeting a man roasting a marshmallow on a fire. Martin hands him a snow globe, they throw both their phones onto the fire, and Martin asks the man to announce the special, which he does. The forest theme of the sketch is then carried over to the stage, with trees on the stage and a log instead of the typical barstool on the stage. There are autobiographical links here too, but for the most part, the initial sketch seems to be used to position the performance itself as an intimate space in which Martin can tell their story – and accordingly one of the first acts in the performance is an invitation for everyone in the theatre audience to shout out their names.

## 4.2. Stance

The opening sequences broadly summarised in Section 4.1 only contain few explicit evaluations. Even when elaborate telecinematic openings are present, they are poetic and vaguely associative rather than foregrounding a specific stance already. In the same vein, the titles of all ten specials in the sample are non-specific (see Table 1). The only exception is perhaps *Selective Outrage* which weakly hints at the criticism of woke discourses that Chris Rock includes in the early parts of his performance.

Example 2. Chris Rock (CR), *Selective Outrage*, 02:37–03:07

1	CR:	I'mma TRY.: to DO. a show tonight, without offending nobody=okay? I'mma try my
2		bes:t. you know why?='cause you- you never know who might get triggered.
3	CR:	that's right. you say the wrong THING. and motherfuckers get scared. you gotta watch
4		OUT. you know- you know what people say. They always say, uh, wo:rds. hurt. That's
5		what they SAY. you gotta watch what you say. 'cause wo:rds hurt. you know, ANYbody
6		that says, wo:rds hurt has never been punched in the face.

Example 2 takes place right after Chris Rock has thanked the audience for their applause. The most obvious intertextual reference of this opening is the autobiographical event that was broadly reported on in mainstream news as well as on social media: Presenting the award for Best Documentary Feature at the 2022 Academy Awards, Chris Rock made a joke about Jada Pinkett-Smith being bald, at which point her husband Will Smith walked onto the stage and punched Chris Rock. While this specific event is explicitly mentioned by Chris Rock here, he uses it as a more general access point to what he perceives to be a culture where what he (and by extension everyone) says can unpredictably offend anyone – “you never know who might get triggered.” He later refers to such dangers as *woke traps* and specifically repeats the title of his show *selective outrage*, stating that he has no problem with wokeness, but with what he positions as arbitrariness of when it does or does not lead to criticism.

In terms of relationality, Chris Rock implicitly uses an authentication and authorisation strategy to foreground wokeness and cancel culture as topics: He is in a privileged position as a performer to not only have his own opinion, but also well-documented evidence that because of his words – and specifically words tied to a comedic performance – he offended someone and was physically attacked because of it. As someone who experienced the consequences first-hand, he appears as someone with authentic authority over the subject, and he makes use of this opportunity by essentially creating his SSCS around it. The strength of this relationship between a criticism against aspects of wokeness and the punch at the 2022 Academy Awards is also visible in Dave Chappelle's *The Dreamer*. During a stand-up comedy performance, Chappelle himself was attacked by an armed man about three months after Chris Rock was punched. It is interesting to note, however, that in *The Dreamer*, Chappelle does not simply refer to the attack he experienced himself, but specifically prefaces it with extensive references to the more well-known incident between his friend Chris Rock and Will Smith.

When it comes to how this stance towards wokeness is performed, Chris Rock, oscillates between humorous and serious elements to position himself. He includes jokes about the idea that words hurt; falling into a woke trap; listening to Michael Jackson, but boycotting R. Kelly;<sup>3</sup> diversity and safe spaces; and the hypocrisy he associates with wokeness. Most of these jokes only employ weak incongruities and instead rely strongly on the audience agreeing with the stance Chris Rock aligns with. Accordingly, the audible studio audience support in this part of the show does not only include laughter, but also applause and supportive cheers.

<sup>3</sup> The comparison rests on the indictments against Michael Jackson and the conviction of R. Kelly in sexual child abuse cases.

Similar observations can again be made about Dave Chappelle. Before the release of *The Dreamer*, Chappelle was in the news repeatedly because of his anti-transgender stance. Orienting both to this aspect of common ground between himself and his audiences, and authorising his performance through the success that was also made reference to in the opening sequence of his SSCS, he positions himself as a heroic figure, a boxer who walks on stage in slow-motion and will not buckle down. He is old but still fast, when he gets the better of his attacker in his account of the events. And in this vein, he starts his performance with a long elaborate story of the beginning of his career, the venue in Washington where the special is recorded, his fandom of Jim Carrey. This early segment constitutes a version of a shaggy-dog story that has audiences wondering why it is included in a stand-up comedy performance, until the punch line finally reveals that there is a weak link to Chappelle’s stance towards transgender people: The method actor Jim Carrey staying in character when portraying comedian Andy Kaufman and the fan Dave Chappelle having to address him as *Andy* rather than *Jim Carrey* is mapped to Dave Chappelle having to accept transgender people as members of the gender they identify as.

What these examples illustrate is that the comedians in the sample take stance firstly by framing ideas and objects as incongruous, secondly by shifting into serious bits of discourse and taking a stance bona fide, and thirdly by creating ambivalent stretches of discourse, which formally still follow the build-up and punch lines of stand-up jokes, but make it evident that the rationale and motivation for including these segments of talk in the special is the effectiveness of the bit not at eliciting humour, but at communicating the views and observations of the comedian.

The variety of stance-taking strategies and the contextualisation of stance-taking moments within larger discourses do not deny the importance of the objects of stance-taking themselves. By choosing particular themes as object of stance, SSCSs strategically choose what they deem significant objects with or against which they want to position themselves. In sum, the sample – roughly a third of the Netflix SSCSs released in 2023 – can also give us pointers as to what observations comedians employ in the creation of their comedy – or indeed, for the communication of what observations they want to use their comedy as a vehicle. An overview of the main identification categories that were identified in the sample is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes in the 2023 Netflix sample of streamed stand-up comedy specials

	every-day life	relationships	gender	celebrity	Covid	growing up	own age	personal growth	comedy	mental health	parenthood	America	race	attention	past traumas	reproductive health	social media	woke-ness	addiction	economic inequality	
Chris Rock	x	x		x			x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	
Mae Martin	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x				x		
Leanne Morgan	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			x					x					
John Mulaney	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x				x	x				x		
Wanda Sykes	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x			x		x		x	
Amy Schumer	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x				x	x		x		
Beth Stelling	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x						x					
Trevor Noah	x		x			x			x			x	x				x				
Ricky Gervais	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x		x				x	x			
Dave Chappelle	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x			x			
Sample	10	9	8	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	2

The examples chosen so far have already foregrounded gender and wokeness as a topic, and Table 2 shows that it is important in 8 out of 10 SSRS, which makes it the most significant sociocultural category in the sample. In Dave Chappelle's and Ricky Gervais' SSCSs, gender is used as an object of stance for negative evaluation and distinction. Regarding gender as socially constructed is aligned with disability and openly ridiculed by Chappelle, while Gervais in a sequence of jokes employs the transphobic trope of claiming he identifies as a chimp. Both of them use contemporary conceptualisations of gender as incongruous elements and punch lines for their jokes. Chris Rock does not explicitly comment on gender, but – as I discussed earlier – uses wokeness as a discourse to position himself against. At the other end of the spectrum, the SSCSs of Wanda Sykes and Mae Martin use gender fluidity and LGBTQAI+ as objects of stance that are positively evaluated and serve as important identity categories. Sykes publicly came out as gay in her mid-40s, Martin is the only non-binary comedian in the sample. Martin positions gender as a topic they are obliged to talk about and makes explicit mention of comedians including Chappelle and Gervais. Throughout *SAP*, Martin positions themselves in terms of typical human experiences, talking about growing up with their parents, their rebellious youth, living through the pandemic, their dating live. In this context, gender appears as an identity category that is brought to *SAP* from the outside, a piece of public discourse forced upon a show otherwise consisting of private, intimate moments. Sykes' *I'm an Entertainer* on the other hand oscillates between her private life with her wife and two kids, and broader US American societal themes she believes she shares with her audience, and she – as a gay black woman – can talk about with authority. She aligns with Democrats, with choice, with women's toilets being open to all (not just cis) women, and raises topics like the political right, white supremacy, and the January 6 insurrection, but also whiteness and masculinity to construct her persona by means of distinction. Trevor Noah's *Where Was I* only briefly touches upon gender when he talks about gender and toilets as a non-issue for either side, and implicitly uses traditional gender roles. While gender roles are also present in Amy Schumer's *Emergency Contact* and Beth Stelling's *If You Didn't Want Me Then*, in a classic binary gender understanding from a woman's perspective, and in Leanne Morgan's *I'm Every Woman*, which evokes a world of nuclear families, it is not a direct identity category in the SSCSs, and even less so in John Mulaney's *Baby J*, which is the most clearly themed special, focusing on Mulaney's drug addiction, intervention and rehab.

Table 2 shows that further important societal categories include *Covid*, *America*, used as a code when SSCSs specifically addressed the status of American society, *race*, *social media* and *wokeness*. A clear divide can be seen in the importance of the topic of race, which is not a significant theme for any of the white comedians (n=5) in the sample, while all black comedians (n=5) repeatedly refer to living as a white person (distinction) or as a black person (alignment) in America. Similarly, all comedians identifying as female orient towards reproductive health in some parts of the SSCS, whereas none of the male and non-binary comedians do.

What the overview in Table 2 further shows, however, is that the most important orientation points for acts of persona construction are aspects that can be characterised as personal. All ten SSCSs make frequent use of everyday situations to position themselves as human beings leading more or less normal human lives, and other more specific themes like relationships, life as a celebrity, experiences when growing up and growing older are also present in the majority of specials. Furthermore, the comedians also specifically identify as having had issues with mental health or at least experiencing personal growth and improved mental well-being in recent years. Other topics like parenthood and addiction are tied to whether the comedians have made relevant experiences in their lives off-stage.

## 5. Conclusion: streamed stand-up comedy as a transtextual network

This study has provided an overview of topics employed for identity construction and stance-taking and has put the focus on the multimodal positioning taking place in the opening sequences of ten streamed stand-up comedy specials (SSCSs). In addressing research questions 1 (How do SSCSs multimodally position performing comedians?) and 2 (What stance-taking and identity construction principles are employed in the creation of the comedian's persona?), it has painted a picture of opposed stance-taking towards gender, selective significance of sociocultural categories for comedians dependent on their ethnicity and gender, but also of the fact that SSCSs are loci for personal stories. The comedians not only show that their comedy is based on observations of mundane everyday life, but more specifically of their own everyday life, which includes experiences as a human being, as a person in relationships with other people, as an adult growing up and growing old, as a person working in comedy, as a parent. While this explorative treatment of identity construction moments does not make it possible to quantify tendencies, there is nonetheless some tentative evidence in the categorisation presented in this study that societal categories will typically lead to explicit acts of stance-taking, especially when large sociopolitical questions such as abortion are addressed. Identity categories belonging to the meta-category of private life, on the other hand, often give rise to more descriptive and implicit forms of alignment, which cannot as easily be categorised as positive or negative, or even as alignment or distinction – as it was done in exemplary fashion for the category of gender. Instead, these areas of private life trigger storytelling that will almost inevitably be similar to some of the experiences audiences have made, while being different in other regards.

Seen together as a transtextual network, and thus addressing research question 3 (What transtextual relationships characterise and connect recent SSCSs?), the sample presents itself as a collection of architextually similar performances, sharing formal and thematic elements, such as the walk on stage or the reliance on representing everyday events on-stage and on-screen. The paratexts, which – fittingly – were only discussed here marginally, include simple texts such as titles, participants and genre description, but also elaborate telecinematic sequences, of which the sketch at the beginning of Mae Martin's *SAP* is the most prominent example. While metatextuality takes place mostly outside of the data that was examined for this study, traces of it appear when references are made to interviews with the comedians or to criticism and praise in the press and on social media. Hypertextuality is most significant in small fragments of the performances, such as Dave Chappelle's parody of Lil NAS X, but also in further examples in the corpus that could not be discussed in detail in this article, including Wanda Sykes' parody of her French wife, or Trevor Noah's parodies of German, French, Jamaican and American speakers of English. Finally, the texts also create an abundance of intertextual connections. These include links between the very SSCSs that were discussed here, as when Chappelle's *The Dreamer* mentions Rock's *Selective Outrage*, or when Mae Martin refers to the specials by Chappelle and Gervais. Further intertextual connections are established to other fictional texts and non-fictional events – e.g., Jim Carrey's performance in *Man on the Moon*, Seth Meyer's presence at John Mulaney's intervention, Chris Rock's, Amy Schumer's and Ricky Gervais' hosting of major film award ceremonies – and they make their appearance in these SSCSs as texts within the text. In addition, several of the specials also create intertextual references by referring back to the main text of the special from within the paratext of the end-credit scene. Trevor Noah exits the stage to meet Neil Diamond in a limo, having just ended his performance with a reference to the singer's song *Sweet Caroline*, and Beth Stelling's *If You Didn't Want Me Then* ends on photos of the raccoon family that she mentioned repeatedly when talking about her childhood experiences visiting her father.

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