

## What are the British Actually Laughing At?

### **An attempt to understand British comedy**

In my essay I will be exploring the reasons as to why British comedy is characterized the way it is. This will be done by taking into account the ways in which the British and American comedy industries contrast. I will evaluate the opposing commercial devices employed, the cultural differences, and the few similarities that these industries share. The British techniques, such as “sarcasm and irony”<sup>1</sup> are vastly different to those used by the Americans who offer a more slapstick approach. This has resulted in both industries producing films and television programs that actually share little in common with each other, despite their popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. The British tend to approach situations with a mindset that comes across as significantly crude, cold and dismissive when juxtaposed with the classic American sunny disposition. I will explore this by comparing the UK and US versions of *The Office*. The general British national denial of emotions has moulded the route that comedy has taken, pushing comedy to become a way to stifle sentiment and a crutch for the population to lean on when feeling vulnerable. Yet interestingly, amongst both British and American audiences, an expectation appears concerning body image and weight, raising the question “are comedians funnier when they are fat?”<sup>2</sup> This has created a stereotype that links to the root of the need for comedy. The fact that both countries share this harsh stereotype lends something to the fact that all humans crave the desire to take pity upon or diminish the confidence of another through laughter, in order to feel better about oneself.

I will start by addressing the varied techniques that are employed by British and American actor-comedians. When watching a British comedy series and comparing it to one of American origin, many differences can be noted; these predominantly concern the manner in which jokes are told, the approach to certain (mostly sensitive) subject matters and the way in which reality progresses and is presented. I need only cite the American remake of the British comedy, *The Office* to see these differences. When watching and comparing, it becomes evident that “unlike Americans, Brits don’t feel the

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<sup>1</sup> Simon (n.d.). *A beginner’s guide to British humor*. [online] EF GO Blog. Available at: <https://www.ef.com/wwen/blog/language/beginners-guide-to-understanding-british-humor/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gora, S. (2011). *Are comedians funnier when they’re fat?* [online] Salon. Available at: [https://www.salon.com/2011/09/23/jonah\\_hill\\_slims\\_down/](https://www.salon.com/2011/09/23/jonah_hill_slims_down/).

need to make their show's stars more viewer-friendly.”<sup>3</sup> A great deal more character development takes place throughout the American show, “In the American version of *The Office*, people can (and do) change for the better whereas in the UK, the characters remain static.”<sup>4</sup> Dawn and Pam are both lowly secretaries unsatisfied with their jobs as receptionists, however, in the UK version, “Dawn is much less assertive and remains bound to her life as a receptionist throughout the entire length of the show.”<sup>5</sup> Pam, the American equivalent, develops over the series “from an under-appreciated, insecure office worker to a self-confident, successful woman.”<sup>6</sup> This is a transition that would not be taken well by the British audience who have an affinity with the more realistic, dreary life of an office-worker and are satisfied with finding humour in the every-day. The UK Office provides this for the British by “capturing the excruciating truth about human blind spots.”<sup>7</sup> David Lier shared his opinion that “there’s no accounting for which vision of existence is more accurate, or has more artistic merit - life is boring, great, and awful at times. But the British office was mean where the American office is nice.”<sup>8</sup> Brits do not feel compelled to have “fluid characters and wacky, over-the-top humor to off-set the cringe-inducing drudgery of working in an office”<sup>9</sup> they instead provided “richly drawn human characters who, after watching the show became impossible not to see in others around you.”<sup>10</sup>

One key cause of these vast distinctions between the British and American versions of *The Office*, is the fact that the respective audiences watch the show for very different reasons. It has been said that “the Brits watched *The Office* so they could laugh at themselves, but Americans watched *The Office* so they could laugh at the

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<sup>3</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>4</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>5</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>6</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>7</sup> Staff Writers (2018). *Which is better: The Office UK or The Office US?* [online] The Spinoff. Available at: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/tv/13-08-2018/which-is-better-the-office-uk-or-the-office-us/>.

<sup>8</sup> Thier, D. (2011). *None*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/04/the-office-why-the-american-remake-beats-the-british-original/237958/>.

<sup>9</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>10</sup> Staff Writers (2018). *Which is better: The Office UK or The Office US?* [online] The Spinoff. Available at: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/tv/13-08-2018/which-is-better-the-office-uk-or-the-office-us/>.

characters.”<sup>11</sup>This is a clear example of the fact that British people take comfort in realism. Being able to recognise a reflection of ourselves in a comedy TV show helps us to feel less alone and less abnormal, or with the case of the UK Office, allows us to see our “mundane, pointless existence in the modern world”<sup>12</sup>. The majority of American comedy incorporates many references to American culture which is likely presented in a positive light, “Americans are considered wildly optimistic in comparison”<sup>13</sup> to the British. Jokes concerning serious subjects are sugar-coated and glossed over “in case it causes damage”<sup>14</sup>, this is generally not a concern when broadcasting to a British audience. The pilot for both the American and the UK show follows a storyline containing a prank. The UK version sees David Brent’s face photoshopped onto a pornographic image, to a British audience this appears relatively tame. However, when adapting this episode for the American audience, the prank became a stapler coated in jelly. As a Brit, it is hard to see how this prank is merely anything but childish, yet this illustrates the American dislike towards any form of vulgar jest and the need to eradicate jokes with an inappropriate connotation. This can be summed up by George Bush’s famous comment that expressed his desire for American families to be “more like the Walton’s and less like the Simpsons.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas in the UK we tend to take onscreen dysfunctional families (such as The Boswells from *Bread* and the self-titled *Royle Family*) to our hearts and treat them like national treasures.

British comedy often utilises subtext to develop one key joke or storyline. This point can be illustrated by the likes of Alan Partridge; in his feature concerning handwashing on BBC’s *This Time*. Partridge who is attempting to revive his television career can be heard relaying phrases with inappropriate connotations such as “very creamy hands” when viewing a video of a woman washing her hands with soap. This feature consists of multiple layers, it makes a mockery of early evening magazine shows, whilst

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<sup>11</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>12</sup> Thier, D. (2011). *None*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/04/the-office-why-the-american-remake-beats-the-british-original/237958/>.

<sup>13</sup> Daw, D. (2019). *The Office UK Vs. US: 10 Biggest Differences* | *Screen Rant*. [online] ScreenRant. Available at: <https://screenrant.com/office-uk-vs-us-differences/>.

<sup>14</sup> Pegg, S. (2007). Simon Pegg: American and British senses of humour have more in common than we think. *The Guardian*. [online] 10 Feb. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/10/comedy.television>.

<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, M. (2018). “Kinder, gentler” and other George HW Bush quotes. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/01/george-hw-bush-quotations.html>.

simultaneously illustrating how sad the character Alan Partridge truly is. It cleverly highlights Partridge's flaws in both the workplace and his personal life; demonstrating the difficulty he has when conversing with a woman and his lack of professionalism. American comedian Reginald D. Hunter relocated to Britain for this exact reason, in his words "the British really reward cleverness"<sup>16</sup>, he stated the people of his hometown "don't have a whole lot of subtext to them."<sup>17</sup> An example being in the pilot of *Brooklyn 99*, when Amy Santiago makes the joke "I apologise for my partner, his parents didn't give him enough attention." An English sitcom such as Alan Partridge would typically have this topic form the core and basis of the character and allow it to dictate their actions - in America it is simply utilised as a punch line. This is an example of how little information the audience has concerning the character's backstories and 'deeper' life experiences which makes it "hard for the show to feel anchored in reality"<sup>18</sup>. The lead character Jake Peralta is widely recognised for his quickfire jokes and tangents, many of these introduce meaningful topics and briskly move on past them. This type of comedy is "simple and accessible"<sup>19</sup> but also extremely "repetitive."<sup>20</sup> Due to the fact that every character is an archetype, they do not have a sufficient amount of depth or nuance to them.

British comedy is generally delivered in a deadpan style with a great deal of appreciation for nuance, it is "dry and incredibly subtle"<sup>21</sup>. This dry style of humour has not been seen to translate well in the US and British comedians often see their work classified as vulgar and crude by Americans. When presenting the Golden Globes Ricky Gervais found himself "accused of being a shock comic, and cruel, and cynical."<sup>22</sup> Often

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, J.L. (2015). Reginald D Hunter: 'The British really reward cleverness.' *The Telegraph*. [online] 8 Aug. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comedy/comedians/reginald-d-hunter-british-reward-cleverness-edinburgh/>.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, J.L. (2015). Reginald D Hunter: 'The British really reward cleverness.' *The Telegraph*. [online] 8 Aug. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comedy/comedians/reginald-d-hunter-british-reward-cleverness-edinburgh/>.

<sup>18</sup> Lyons, M. (2014). *Brooklyn Nine-Nine's Three Big Issues (and How to Fix Them)*. [online] Vulture. Available at: <https://www.vulture.com/2014/02/brooklyn-nine-nines-three-big-issues.html>.7.

<sup>19</sup> Simpson, M. (2019). *Who are the people still watching Brooklyn 99 and finding it funny?* [online] The Tab. Available at: <https://thetab.com/uk/2019/03/25/who-are-the-people-still-watching-brooklyn-99-and-finding-it-funny-93947>.

<sup>20</sup> Simpson, M. (2019). *Who are the people still watching Brooklyn 99 and finding it funny?* [online] The Tab. Available at: <https://thetab.com/uk/2019/03/25/who-are-the-people-still-watching-brooklyn-99-and-finding-it-funny-93947>.

<sup>21</sup> Lutman, M. (2018). *Spotahome's Guide to British Humour*. [online] The Spotahome Blog. Available at: <https://www.spotahome.com/blog/spotahomes-guide-to-british-humour/>.

<sup>22</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online]

when an American sits down to watch a British comedy TV show, they find themselves surprised by the lack of a “superficial,”<sup>23</sup> colourful, exciting storyline with no “bright colours, white teeth and good hair.”<sup>24</sup> This is due to the fact that British comedy is not always intended to be consumed as outright funny and “if you sit down expecting to laugh all the time, you might just be disappointed.”<sup>25</sup> Language teacher Luke Thompson suggests that “by removing the emphasis on comedy, you should be able to focus instead on simply understanding”<sup>26</sup> the show as “you might find it funnier or more moving as a result.”<sup>27</sup> Often humour is required to be found in the reflection and the hindsight. We see British comedy shows such as *Miranda* and *The Inbetweeners* filled with “interesting people, very witty bits of dialogue, unexpected moments, awkward social situations with hilarious consequences,”<sup>28</sup> whether it be Miranda losing her dress in a busy London street or Will McKenzie soiling himself in an exam. When watching these shows, the audience find themselves on the edge of their seats, squinting their eyes and desperately trying to brace themselves for the next horrifically humiliating incident that they know is coming. It is only after the event is over that we are able to cringe, breathe, relax and finally, laugh - as a release of tension from the intolerable situation. Often these on-screen cringe-worthy accidents are not so far from a mortifying, yet realistic situation; the comedy comes from “the frustration, the embarrassment, the flaws”<sup>29</sup> and making a mockery out of our own embarrassing

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Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, L. (2018). 507. *Learning English with UK Comedy TV Shows*. [online] Luke’s ENGLISH Podcast. Available at: <https://teacherluke.co.uk/2018/01/21/british-comedy-tv-shows-to-learn-english-some-british-comedy-tv-show-recommendations/>.

mistakes. Interestingly, an adaptation of *The Inbetweeners* was created for American screens, unsurprisingly the format of comedy proved incongruent with American lifestyles and the show was met with poor reception.

The difference in comedic delivery also causes Americans to be more easily entertained by tamer jokes and Brits to laugh harder at jokes that are brash and more shocking. In reference to the British, Simon Pegg states; Americans are “more demonstrative than we are, Americans are not embarrassed by their emotions.”<sup>30</sup> It is typically made very clear that the audience is expected to laugh when an American cracks a joke, this is often done by ending a sentence with ‘just kidding’ or an acknowledgement towards the joke itself. Whereas, due to the dry, sarcastic manner in which a British joke is likely delivered, the audience often feel that laughing, or public displays of emotion, are unacceptable. This does not mean that we “like them any less, we just aren’t inclined to give that much of ourselves away.”<sup>31</sup> This forces the British people to laugh at jokes much less frequently, and only when something is either extremely funny or extremely uncomfortable.

From the evidence above it is clear there is a great difference between British and American comedy, the question remains, why does British comedy take this shape? In Britain, humour is often seen used as a tool to bury emotions and as a barrier that deflects hurtful comments by changing them into and playing them off as jokes, Americans do not always “immediately register the need to bury emotions under humour”<sup>32</sup>. In correlation to the British, Pegg also stated that “Generally speaking, sentimentality isn’t easy for us. It makes us nervous and uncomfortable. We become edgy and dismissive of these brazen displays of emotion.”<sup>33</sup> Humour appears to provide an outlet for the British to demoralise and dehumanise each other through consistent mockery and a major lack of sensitivity surrounding controversial issues. The British

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<sup>30</sup> Pegg, S. (2007). Simon Pegg: American and British senses of humour have more in common than we think. *The Guardian*. [online] 10 Feb. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/10/comedy.television>.

<sup>31</sup> Pegg, S. (2007). Simon Pegg: American and British senses of humour have more in common than we think. *The Guardian*. [online] 10 Feb. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/10/comedy.television>.

<sup>32</sup> Pegg, S. (2007). Simon Pegg: American and British senses of humour have more in common than we think. *The Guardian*. [online] 10 Feb. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/10/comedy.television>.

<sup>33</sup> Pegg, S. (2007). Simon Pegg: American and British senses of humour have more in common than we think. *The Guardian*. [online] 10 Feb. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/10/comedy.television>.

utilise irony “liberally as prepositions in every day speech.”<sup>34</sup> A day-to-day conversation with a friend consists of copious amounts of insults, sarcasm and mockery, it is very rare for us to string together a sentence that holds “sincerity.”<sup>35</sup> Contrary to how this is generally received by other cultures as “nasty”<sup>36</sup> and offensive, Brits typically employ insults to illustrate our respect for a person; as said by Ricky Gervais, “It’s almost a sign of affection if we like you, and ego bursting if we don’t.”<sup>37</sup> Journalist David Cox noted that the majority of comedians are “plagued by self-doubt”<sup>38</sup> showing why sarcasm has become vastly popular throughout British culture and has developed into a way of displaying affection without having to feel vulnerable. This trait is not reflected in American culture, in fact regularly “Americans say, ‘have a nice day’, whether they mean it or not”<sup>39</sup> which the majority of the British population will view as “insincere”<sup>40</sup>. Gervais addresses this British fear of emotion stating that “Brits are terrified”<sup>41</sup> to reciprocate the level of cheerfulness that Americans so easily churn out. An element of British upbringing teaches people to view life through a pessimistic lens, “We don’t want to celebrate anything too soon. Failure and disappointment lurk around every corner”<sup>42</sup>. Gervais acknowledges that an American upbringing is generally filled with optimism and an abundance of support for each other, “they are brought up to believe they can be the next President of the United States. Brits are told ‘It won’t happen for you’”.<sup>43</sup> This shows why it is more satisfying for an American to witness an onscreen romanticised

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<sup>34</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>35</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>36</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>37</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>38</sup> Cox, D. (2014). *The psychology of comedy: where humour and psychosis overlap*. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/20/psychology-of-comedy-humour-psychosis-overlap>.

<sup>39</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>40</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>41</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>42</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

<sup>43</sup> Gervais, R. (2011). *Ricky Gervais: The Difference Between American and British Humour*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>.

and exaggerated story. Megan Garber, journalist for the Atlantic, states that Americans have a “bias toward optimism” and “the deep desire for happy endings, which is also to say for stories that give the comforting illusion of closure.”<sup>44</sup> The comedy creates an ideal fantasy world that doesn’t seem too far out of reach thanks to their optimistic view of life.<sup>45</sup> A British person watching this style of comedy would understandably find themselves consuming it in a very different fashion as a result of their upbringing. The comedic element for the Brits comes from laughing at the unrealistic manner in which American characters consistently end up content and satisfied. This is the beginning of an investigation into why the British and American versions of *The Office* have such coherent and specific differences.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes self-deprecation as “modesty about or criticism of oneself”<sup>46</sup>. A prominent theme that runs through British comedy is this term, self-deprecation. Comedians such as Miranda Hart and Jack Whitehall are prime practitioners of this technique, yet each employ the trait in different ways. Miranda Hart’s semi-autobiographical sitcom *Miranda* shows 6ft1 Miranda as a disappointment in many aspects of life; social, romantic, academic, and the reasons for her misfortune more often than not relate to her weight and size. Mark Twain once said that “the secret source of humour itself is not joy, but sorrow.”<sup>47</sup> Often being mistaken for a ‘sir’, Miranda is a clear illustration of Twain’s statement. She consistently puts herself down, criticises and makes a mockery out of her own mistakes, appearance and personality traits in order to facilitate laughter. This same process appears in Jack Whitehall’s *Bad Education*, yet the self-deprecation comes into play in a slightly different manner. Here, Whitehall’s writing paints a wide variety of British stereotype characters, “the SS deputy, the flamboyant gay pupil, the fat boy that everyone picks on but turns out to be a hero in the end, the hard-working Chinese girl, the working-class bullies and the class flirt,”<sup>48</sup> all of which are pushed to the extreme and lumped together in a classroom scenario. Every

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<sup>44</sup> Garber, M. (2018). *The Problem With Happy Endings*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/the-problem-with-happy-endings/565388/>.

<sup>45</sup> Notable exceptions to this would be *Curb your Enthusiasm* or *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, which share more comedic traits with British comedy than they do with most American output.

<sup>46</sup> Lexico Dictionaries | English. (n.d.). *Self-Deprecation* | *Definition of Self-Deprecation by Lexico*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/self-deprecation> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

<sup>47</sup> Khazan, O. (2014). *None*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/the-dark-psychology-of-being-a-good-comedian/284104/>.

<sup>48</sup> Crace, J. (2013). *Bad Education* – TV review. *The Guardian*. [online] 4 Sep. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/sep/04/bad-education-jack-whitehall>.



viewer of this show is able to see a reflection of themselves in this compilation of archetypes and therefore feel less atypical.

Why is it that the British feel the need to put themselves down for comic value? Is it for self-validation, to feel better about oneself, to boost self-esteem? Psychologist Daniela S. Hugelshofer suggested that “humour acts as a buffer against depression and hopelessness.”<sup>49</sup> The self-deprecating style of comedy is all about pre-empting what you believe will be criticised about you. In fear of people coming out with a hurtful comment, it is only natural to want to criticise yourself first. Self-deprecating or “self-enhancing humour allows people to overcome unpleasant situations by allowing them to find the humour and silver lining in any circumstance.”<sup>50</sup> This form of comedy can have its advantages in correlation with mental health, however, it is also used “as a method of attention-seeking when we’re feeling down”<sup>51</sup> and is proven to be “indicative of suppressed anger.”<sup>52</sup> Often, comedians are not necessarily the most attractive or the most ‘graceful’ in appearance, “both Larry David and Ricky Gervais have both said that they didn't really become funny until their thirties, by which time David had lost his hair and Gervais had grown fat.”<sup>53</sup> As a way to highlight and take ownership of their flaws, we see a pattern of insecure people turning to a career in comedy. In an interview for the Mirror, Matt Lucas provides a primary example of how comedy comes from a place of insecurity and the need for self-empowerment. Lucas admitted he was incredibly insecure about his weight and image, having lost his hair from alopecia at the age of 6, he shared “I think my way of dealing with it through the years was to disguise myself. It felt like a safe thing to do. Oddly, when I’m in character, I tend to deliberately make myself look even worse.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Khazan, O. (2014). *None*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/the-dark-psychology-of-being-a-good-comedian/284104/>.

<sup>50</sup> Barr, S. (2018). *Self-deprecating humour linked to greater psychological wellbeing, study finds*. [online] The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/self-deprecating-humour-greater-psychological-wellbeing-link-study-university-of-granada-spain-a8207976.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Chandler, A. (2017). *Self-deprecation is damaging and unhealthy – let’s break the habit*. [online] Metro. Available at: <https://metro.co.uk/2017/01/28/self-deprecation-is-damaging-and-unhealthy-lets-break-the-habit-6402441/>.

<sup>52</sup> Barr, S. (2018). *Self-deprecating humour linked to greater psychological wellbeing, study finds*. [online] The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/self-deprecating-humour-greater-psychological-wellbeing-link-study-university-of-granada-spain-a8207976.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Deacon - Telegraph

<sup>54</sup> Moodie, C. (2015). *Matt Lucas: I dress up because I’m uncomfortable with my appearance*. [online]

It is interesting to draw parallels between the typical image of a comedian in both Britain and the United States. As said before, many comedians have a similar look in the sense that they are seen to be “physically unattractive.”<sup>55</sup> A great number of comedians, female especially, are larger than average or overweight. Examples being Miranda Hart, Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson. Each of these comedians come from different sides of the globe, the UK, the USA, and Australia, yet they all have one thing in common, their respective audiences all view them as funny. Journalist Michael Deacon addresses the reasons as to why “the best comedians are physically unattractive.”<sup>56</sup> Deacon primarily believes it amounts to “authenticity”<sup>57</sup>. Most comedy concerns “rejection”<sup>58</sup> and humiliation, “If you look like Brad Pitt, the audience simply won’t believe you know what failure feels like.”<sup>59</sup> Whilst it is important for an audience to laugh at a comedian, it is also imperative they have the ability “to identify with them... it’s off-putting for someone to be beautiful and hilarious... it makes you feel inferior and resentful.”<sup>60</sup> American film critic Glenn Kenny considered the fact that a common trait of comedians is being overweight and said that “excess is considered funny... It’s a token of being larger than life.”<sup>61</sup> A comedy role is often the louder, bigger and more exuberant character in a show, typically less able to blend into the background. This

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Mirror. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/matt-lucas-think-im-fat-5245620>.

<sup>55</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Deacon, M. (2013). Michael Deacon: Why the best comedians are physically unattractive. *The Telegraph*. [online] 29 Nov. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10480353/Michael-Deacon-Why-the-best-comedians-are-physically-unattractive.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Gora, S. (2011). *Are comedians funnier when they’re fat?* [online] Salon. Available at: [https://www.salon.com/2011/09/23/jonah\\_hill\\_slims\\_down/](https://www.salon.com/2011/09/23/jonah_hill_slims_down/).

comes alongside a certain stigma that personality alone is not enough to be funny, many comedians feel that their personality is also reflected in their size. As apparent in the show *Miranda*, there is an idea that being larger in appearance must compliment a larger than life personality. There is a great possibility that this stereotype and assumption surrounding comedians creates a typecasting bracket that it is incredibly hard for comedy-actresses to break out of. We very rarely see people such as Miranda Hart or Rebel Wilson playing serious roles in highly regarded Hollywood films; their characters are nearly always the joke of the film or series. Melissa McCarthy does stand as an exception to this having played a few serious roles; such as Maggie in *St Vincent* and Lee Israel in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* However, it is worth noting that such roles were landed subsequent to significant weight loss. This leads me to wonder whether if one of these 'larger' comedians were to be placed in a more profound emotional role, would they be taken seriously? Or would they be unable to shake off the limiting label of 'comedian'? Certainly, if this scenario was turned around and a straight actor/actress was to play a comedy role, this would be widely accepted by viewers. We need only cite actors Scarlett Johansson in *Scoop* and Robert de Niro in *Meet the Fockers*. This stereotypical body image linked to comedy, appears to be one of the only elements of humour that both British and Americans share, despite the fact that it is one of the most toxic and cruel.

From studying this topic, I have found it exciting that every time I research I discover how little I really know. It is such a rich subject and I am really only scratching the surface. I don't feel as though one can sufficiently answer the question of why British comedy takes the form it does today, however, it has urged me to continue my studies outside of this essay to explore whether there is a healthier way to create comedy.

This study has left me asking myself where do I fit in? Being larger than the majority, it naturally leaves people like myself wondering if because of the way we look, is comedy the only area of performance that we can pursue and will be able to succeed in? Does one have to look funny in order to be funny? When viewing British comedy as a whole it is interesting to explore its intention. Does it aim to fill its viewers with happiness, or provide a harsh reflection of people's lives? Are the jokes made by British comedians funny, or cruel? Empowering, or self-deprecating? British comedy is rich and nuanced, it speaks a great deal about the world that we live in, however, this does not mean that it is healthy.

If the foundation of British comedy is built upon comfortability surrounding the underdog,

life's losers, bringing others down in order to boost self-esteem, we are left with British humour being utterly selfish and the American industry is not much better. The presentation of fantastical, idyllic worlds also leaves its viewers with a detrimentally unhealthy perspective of their own lives.

Self-deprecation and the connection that is now consistently drawn between size and humour, could be an incredibly dangerous message to be sending out through TV shows and Hollywood films. Both the American and British film/TV industries may be paving the way for the younger generation to easily slot themselves into these devastating stereotypes. My study has left me wondering if there is a need to create comedy that involves neither self-deprecation nor the construction of an alternate romanticised life. Is it possible to create a comedy with as much profundity as what comes out of Britain, without it coming from a place of self-defence or a need to protect oneself?

Whilst I cannot yet answer that question, this analysis has enabled me to gain a small insight into an expansive topic which I am now eager to explore. Therefore, my curiosity prevails, despite the fact that my original query has changed into wondering if there is a way we can produce a more nourishing genre of comedy, I will continue to further my knowledge outside of this essay.

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