

# Mental Health and Stand-up Comedy: ‘Unhappy’ Stand-up Comedy as a Reflection of Liquid Modernity

Ann Christina Pereira<sup>1</sup>, Sarika Tyagi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

Correspondence: Sarika Tyagi, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore, Tamil Nadu, 632014, India.

Received: October 12, 2022

Accepted: November 16, 2022

Online Published: November 16, 2022

doi:10.11114/smc.v10i2.5785

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v10i2.5785>

## Abstract

Stand-up comedy reflects the dominant mood of a period with its philosophies, fears and prejudices. Today, an increasing number of stand-up comedians have started discussing their personal experiences regarding mental health issues, most commonly depression and anxiety. The aim of this type of comedy is seldom to elicit laughter. This paper aims to understand the climate that has led to the popularity of this type of comedy. The paper argues that ‘unhappy’ stand-up is a reflection of liquid modernity by studying the stand-up comedy of Daniel Fernandes, Neville Shah and Taylor Tomlinson. Zygmunt Bauman refers to liquid modernity as a society where nothing is permanent and boundaries are not fixed. The paper traces three main features of liquid modernity: anxiety due to “reflexivity of the self”; the evaluation of the exchange value of people, relationships and things, thus reducing human beings as commodities; and the disappearance of the boundaries between the private sphere and the public sphere. This study finds that ‘unhappy’ stand-up is a way for individuals disillusioned with their predicament in liquid modernity to channel their inner struggles and in the process cope with the process.

**Keywords:** stand-up, liquid modernity, comedy, humor, mental health

## 1. Introduction

One can tell a lot about a society from the comedy that is produced there. Although the same can be said about all cultural forms, comedy enjoys an edge over the others because problematic concepts can be said in the context of comedy and can in many cases dodge the consequences of their actions (Gilbert, 2004). Ian Brodie describes stand-up comedy as a genre of ‘intimacy’ with ‘entertainment’ as its primary function (Brodie, 2008). However, recent shows reveal that stand-up comedy is increasingly being used for healing from and raising awareness on mental health (Brodie, 2008). These shows have both comic and tragic elements. We refer to this type of comedy as ‘unhappy’ stand-up comedy. These shows have the explicitly stated function of helping them heal, raising awareness about social or mental health issues and helping others who might be in the same situation. In Daniel Fernandes’ *Shadows* (2017), he addresses his struggle with anxiety and depression. Neville Shah’s irreverent humor in *Going Downhill* (2020) is also a notable example of a stand-up routine that is centred on his struggle with depression and pathological lying. Similarly, Taylor Tomlinson’s *Look at You* (2022) is a show where she spoke about living with bipolar disorder. These comedians appear to be aware of their mental health status and do not shy away from speaking out about it in public, sometimes even without the use of humor. However, it is not clear what feature of the contemporary age encourages ‘unhappy’ stand-up among an audience accustomed only to non-serious stand-up. We use Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity to interpret this variety of comedy, and in the process gain insights into both ‘unhappy’ stand-up and liquid modernity.

When the primary function of entertainment in traditional stand-up comedy gives way to other functions like healing and raising awareness, it becomes necessary to understand why this happens. It is not easy to discover whether the incidence of mental illnesses have increased over the years. However, in recent years, there have been efforts to remove the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. Therefore, it is essential to study stand-up comedy that tries to normalize debates surrounding mental health. In addition to studying the psychological aspects of stand-up comedy/comedians, it is beneficial to study the cultural and economic aspects of contemporary society too. Studying contemporary society with its unique challenges will throw greater light on the nature of various types of relationships between people and the

aspects of society that cause distress to people. Once these are identified, individuals can take conscious steps to overcome these problems.

The myth about artists, stand-up comics or persons of genius being sad or depressed individuals is widespread. This is unsurprising considering the emotional stress involved in the profession. Although the relationship between comedic genius and mental illness may sometimes be exaggerated, comedians do work under conditions of extreme pressure. Nick Butler and Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell (2018) point out that stand-up comedians perform “emotional labour” where they cannot reveal their true feelings all the time and appear composed for the benefit of others (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Thus, as a result of their passion, they do not show their feelings to people above them in the hierarchy, like managers, producers or promoters of the shows. Instead, they try to adopt an appropriate personality (cheerful, bold or confident as the situation demands) to win the favour of their employers. Popular press and some studies claim that stand-up comedians are more likely to be depressed, have “psychotic traits” that account for their creativity and are at a greater risk for mental illness than others (Janus, 1975; Ando et. al., 2014, p. 344; Dessau, 2012).

However, several other studies are skeptical about this proposition. For instance, Sheila Lintott addresses the mental health concerns in the comedy industry, but refuses to reduce it as another expression of the myth of the troubled comedian. Lintott examines the works of Janus (1975); Greengross, Martin and Miller (2012) and Ando, Claridge and Clark (2014), compares them with her own interviews of amateur stand-up comics and discovers that mental illnesses not only do not contribute to the creativity of the comedians, but actually hamper the creative process (Lintott, 2020, pp. 211-212). Similarly, Edward Naessens notes that stand-up comedians generally use a “comic stage persona” that is quite distinct from their offstage personalities (Naessens, 2020, p. 226). Naessens does not believe that comedy may provide catharsis, except as an “unintended side benefit”, and that what is said on stage need not always be true (Naessens, 2020, p. 240). However, the cathartic nature of these performances cannot be dismissed altogether. An understanding of the comedian is not the only factor responsible for a specific type of comedy. Instead, we carried out our research with the conviction that above all else, comedy is a reflection of the time that produces it. Therefore, this paper elaborates on the characteristics of contemporary times and how these may be directly or indirectly responsible for ‘unhappy’ stand-up comedy.

Using the examples of Daniel Fernandes’s *Shadows*, Neville Shah’s *Going Downhill* and Taylor Tomlinson’s *Look at You*, this paper argues that ‘unhappy’ stand-up comedy reflects the worries posed by a liquid modern society. The three shows were chosen for study because all three shows deal exclusively with the theme of mental health and are available online. The shows of Maria Bamford and Bo Burnham were excluded from this study as they rely primarily on stylistic features than on verbal content. Other comedians like Neal Brennan and Cristela Alonzo also speak about their mental illnesses, but mental illness is not the focus of their shows, merely a source of humor. Live shows based on the same theme were also excluded from the study due to restrictions imposed by the venue on video or audio recording. Using these criteria, we limited our study to the three shows: *Shadows*, *Going Downhill* and *Look at You*. The shows that we selected are available in YouTube, Amazon Prime Video and Netflix respectively. Fernandes, Shah and Tomlinson are comedians who speak about living with a mental illness, in an attempt to heal themselves and others like them. This study shows that although they are from different cultural backgrounds, their shows reveal similarities in content. This paper attempts to understand liquid modernity and analyze the extent to which liquid modernity is responsible for the creation of ‘unhappy’ stand-up. This will be done by identifying the key features of liquid modernity and recognizing each of these features in the shows selected for study.

## 2. Methodology

For this study, a thematic analysis of the shows *Shadows*, *Going Downhill* and *Look at You* has been attempted using Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity. Several studies examine the personality traits of artists and the representation of mental health in literature and media using theories on psychology or communication (Atanasova et. al, 2019). However, these theories are insufficient to explain why mental illnesses are becoming a popular theme in contemporary stand-up comedy. Therefore, theories that describe contemporary times, like the theories of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Marc Augé and Zygmunt Bauman were considered for analysis. An inductive approach was followed to analyze the shows selected for study. The shows revealed increasing tendencies of anxiety among individuals, an excessive value being attributed to material things, and uncharacteristic revelations of the comedians’ private lives on a public platform. These are the primary characteristics of Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity. Therefore, the theory of liquid modernity is used to study the shows to gain a greater insight into both ‘unhappy’ stand-up and liquid modernity. This study identifies the three key features of liquid modernity—*anxiety, consumerism and the blurring of the boundary between the public and the private*—in the shows of Fernandes, Shah and Tomlinson. The theory of liquid modernity is increasingly being employed in the analysis of social and cultural phenomena. For instance, Jordi Xifra and David McKie (2011) analyze the concept of race using Bauman theory of liquid society. Similarly, Andreas Widholm (2015) uses the concept of liquidity to study journalism. The study of stand-up comedy can also benefit from the theory of liquid modernity.

## 2.1 Liquid Modernity

This paper considers ‘unhappy’ stand-up as a product of the contemporary times. There is little consensus on what constitutes our times, but we believe it is closest to the notion of liquid modernity conceptualized by Zygmunt Bauman. But before one understands liquid modernity, it is essential to consider it in relation to other terms that are used to describe the social, economic and cultural qualities of the present. The term ‘information society’ or ‘information age’ is used to describe life in contemporary times. This period is characterized by an excessive dependence on interconnected networks of information and communication. In such a society, convenience is privileged above all else (Kuden & Braund-Allen, 2017). Supermodernity, second modernity and liquid modernity are other terms that have been used to describe the situation of contemporary society. The common element in all of these terms is ‘modernity’. In the words of David Harvey (1991), modernity is characterized by “fragmentation, ephemerality, and chaotic change” (Harvey, 1991, p. 11). He then defines postmodernity as a “total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic” that was typical of modernity (Harvey, 1991, p. 44). Although some believe that postmodernity came after modernity, the use of the term to describe an age that came after modernity is debated, especially by Giddens, Augé, Beck and Bauman. They view modernity as continuing even to the contemporary times, albeit in a different form.

Anthony Giddens notes in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) that there are three main reasons for the dynamism of the modern age: “the separation of space and time”, “the disembedding of social institutions” and “reflexivity” (Giddens, 1991, pp. 16-17, 20). Giddens described the changed condition of modernity as late modernity as characterized by the “disembedding” of man from tradition and envisioning the self as a “reflexive project” (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). This idea is reinforced in the works of Marc Augé, who argued that contemporary times are characterized by excesses of time, space and individuality and calls it supermodernity (Augé, 1995). Ulrich Beck (1992) spoke about how society has transitioned from an agricultural society to an industrial society during modernity. However, there has been a second modernity when we have transitioned from an industrial society to a risk society where one is increasingly aware of the risks posed by modernity (Beck, 1992). One of Beck’s most influential ideas is that of ‘individualization’. According to this idea, people cannot take their identities for granted from their communities anymore, but have to put in their own efforts to claim their identities (Beck & Gernsheim, 2002).

Although Giddens, Augé and Beck have described the condition of individuals in contemporary society, it is Bauman who unites all the theories into a coherent structure. Bauman’s theory provides a comprehensive picture of contemporary society as he builds on their theories. He describes the current age as a liquid modern age, a continuing stage of modernity. He uses the metaphor of liquefaction to explain the dominant ethos of our times. Modernity, he said, also focused on the liquefaction of solids, but also replaced them with new solids (Bauman, 2000). In modernity, the existing order was replaced by another order that was as rigid as the first (Bauman, 2000). Liquid modernity, on the other hand, emphasizes the fluidity and unpredictability of contemporary society where nothing stays solid for long. This sets apart liquid modernity from early modernity. Liquid modernity, in simpler words, is just a stage of modernity where boundaries keep shifting and nothing is permanent. If Bauman’s works are studied, one can arrive at three major features of liquid modernity—*anxiety that occurs as a result of individualisation, rapidly increasing appearances of the private realm into the public sphere, and the all-encompassing consumerism in the lives of people.* These features of liquid modernity figure prominently in ‘unhappy’ stand-up.

### 2.1.1 Anxiety

Bauman’s observations on anxiety in liquid modernity have their roots in the writings of Giddens. Giddens conceived of modernity as a period of “reflexivity of the self” (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). Bauman reinforces Giddens’ belief that human beings are ‘reflexive’ in nature (Bauman, 2000). The anxiety involved in liquid modernity is a result of the need to evolve constantly and consistently to deal with the uncertainty of the changing times. There is a great risk of becoming irrelevant. Individuals in liquid modernity are forced to improve on their previous selves by learning newer skills, mastering newer technologies and acquiring newer products just to stay up-to-date (Bauman, 2005). There is no final place where an individual can reach to be able to finally relax or let go of the constant updating of the self that is required. This is because neither success nor failure is ultimate in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). This leads to the individual embarking on a series of projects aimed at the betterment of the self. However, this is done by each individual separately and there is no scope for the people to become united (Bauman, 2000).

The anxiety in liquid modernity is sometimes a result of the separation of the individual from society (Bauman, 2000). In liquid modernity, an individual is no longer defined by the society that they are part of, but is encouraged to find their individuality and choose the necessary resources and actions to construct their identities. This involves an individual going over each choice that is offered to them a number of times and choosing the most appropriate option according to the changing systems of knowledge. The choices available to an individual are infinite, but they are solely responsible for their choices (Bauman, 2000).

### 2.1.2 Consumerism

Consumerism differs from consumption in that while the latter is unavoidable, the former is not (Bauman, 2007). When an individual faces anxiety, they try to derive happiness from the market. Bauman speaks about the consumerist way of life in *Liquid Life*: “Any life pursuit, and most significantly the pursuit of dignity, self-esteem and happiness, requires the mediation of the market; and the world in which such pursuits are inscribed is made up of commodities—objects judged, appreciated or rejected according to the satisfaction they bring to the world’s customers” (Bauman, 2005, p. 107). However, the market does not satisfy the individual as the incomplete satisfaction of desires is essential for the constant stream of demand, which in turn ensures the smooth functioning of the market (Bauman, 2007).

The market also helps an individual to “make and unmake” their identities (Bauman, 2000, p. 83). So the individual continues to chase items in the market to define them. However, having more money to spend on goods does not guarantee freedom from anxiety or unhappiness. On the contrary, it is likely to cause difficulties in one’s mental health and interpersonal relationships (Bauman, 2007). An individual in liquid modernity also has to make themselves a commodity in such a market by accumulating the skills desired by the market and compete with other such ‘commodities’ (Bauman, 2007). This too causes a great deal of pressure in individuals. But it is near to impossible to unsubscribe from consumer society as it not only encourages consumption, but also punishes the lack of it (Bauman, 2007). The ones who cannot consume are flawed consumers who are separated from the rest of the community both physically (in the form of shelters or jails) and ideologically (by portraying them as different or morally depraved) (Bauman, 2005; Bauman, 2007). It also leads to waste as goods that are outdated are rapidly discarded to make room for new goods (Bauman, 2007).

### 2.1.3 The Public and the Private

Another feature of liquid modernity is the private sphere being increasingly featured in the public sphere, while reinforcing its “privateness” (Bauman, 2000, p. 59). The public sphere in liquid modernity is generally filled with the “private lives of public figures” (Bauman, 2000, p. 37). Bauman called this the ‘confessional society’. Celebrities are expected to confess their intimate affairs in the public sphere (Bauman, 2000). Bauman speaks about the popularity of chat shows to illustrate this argument. Chat shows appeal to people who deal with similar situations as the viewers/audience. They allow the viewers to see how people coped with similar challenges (Bauman, 2000). Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that ‘unhappy’ stand-up has a market among lovers of comedy. Bauman believes that we are living in a ‘confessional society’ where not just celebrities, but also teenagers and adults engage in confessions in the social media, “effacing the boundary which once separated the private from the public, for making it a public virtue and obligation to publicly expose the private, and for wiping away from the public communication anything that resists being reduced to private confidences, together with those who refuse to confide them” (Bauman, 2007, p. 3).

The problems that an individual faces in liquid modernity can be summed up in three points: one, the constant changes in life and technology lead to anxiety that the individual alone is responsible for all of their choices; two, the promise of happiness leads individuals to buy goods that they do not even need; and three, the private sphere encroaches on the public sphere, thereby pushing out the issues that actually belong in the public domain. All of these problems are reflected in ‘unhappy’ stand-up and the comedians attempt to offer support to others who suffer from the same problems.

## 3. Elements of Liquid Modernity in the Shows of Fernandes, Shah and Tomlinson

Although Fernandes and Shah are male Indian comedians and Tomlinson is a female American comedian, their works show a remarkable similarity in the way in which elements of liquid modernity are portrayed. The three features of liquid modernity—anxiety, consumerism and the blurring of the public and the private spheres—are the three core ideas that we work with. They are not separate features that are distinct from each other, but an interwoven network of ideas. Each of these features will be studied with respect to the selected shows in the following sections.

### 3.1 Anxiety

The presence of the theme of anxiety is perhaps the most prominent feature of ‘unhappy’ stand-up. All ‘unhappy’ stand-up comedians talk about the symptoms of their condition regardless of whether they may be perceived as funny or not. The anxiety is a result of the separation of an individual from their community, or “reflexivity of the self”, or a combination of both. The attempt to talk about such issues can be seen as having two functions: educating the audience and erasing the stigma associated with the condition. Educating the audience takes several forms, like allowing the audience to view the world from the perspective of the suffering individual, and by describing the biological and chemical processes that alter a person’s state of mind.

The anxiety in ‘unhappy’ stand-up is portrayed as a result of the separation of the individual from their community. The shows of both Daniel Fernandes and Neville Shah demonstrate the separation of the individual from society. Fernandes feels alienated from society that comprises his relatives and friends because they have a different attitude towards life.

He calls this the nine-point plan for success—“Go to school, go to college, get a job, get married, have kids, buy an apartment on an EMI, spend thirty years of your life paying off that EMI, retire, die”. The nine-point plan for success in India does not entice Fernandes. Instead, he devises his own set of four points: “I wanted a career that was creative, a career where I could travel all over the world, a career where I could take leave whenever I want for as long as I want, and most importantly, a career where I didn’t have to wake up before 11 AM” (Fernandes, 2017). This earns him the ridicule of his relatives, especially an aunt who tells his mother to put him up for adoption.

If Fernandes’ alienation from his community was due to his differences with them regarding his choice of career, Neville Shah was alienated from his community as his mother married outside the Parsi community. Although Shah was brought up by a single mother, he was an outsider to the community due to the pronounced differences in his physical features. In *What Are You Laughing At?* (2017), Shah mentions the painful experience of having to honour the wish of his mother to have her rites performed in the Zoroastrian way. A person at the *Doongerwadi*, where the last rites of Parsis are done, asks Shah to prove that his mother was Parsi. He later relents, but goes on to tell Shah, “When you die, no, *you* cannot come here” (Shah, 2017, 10:20-10:50). Although the comedians do not consciously link their anxiety to the physical or emotional separation from their community, they offer narratives that speak about their alienation from the community they are part of.

Anxiety manifests itself in various forms, but they are usually a result of ‘reflexivity of the self’. This is best exemplified in Fernandes’ show where he says he was convinced that he had an illness that doctors could not diagnose and that he was going to die soon. He spent a good part of his time searching for illnesses in WebMD and asking the local hospital staff to run tests which always gave the negative result: “I would keep going back again and again until the hospital staff were finally convinced that their equipment was faulty. They were like, ‘He has something. We just don’t know how to find it’” (Fernandes, 2017, 8:05-8:35). The fear of death haunted Fernandes until he finally consulted a mental health physician. It must be noted that while reflexivity is responsible for anxiety, it is reflexivity in the form of therapy that helps them overcome it.

The shows encourage the audience to make use of therapy and medicines if there is a need. Tomlinson explains this in detail in routine where she talked about her experience with medicines for her condition. She likens medicines to ‘arm floaties’ that are used in swimming:

And if you just take your arm floaties, you can go wherever the hell you want. And... I know some of you are, like, “But Taylor, what if people judge me for taking arm floaties?” Well, those people don’t care if you live or die, so maybe who cares? . . . That being said, you have to take your arm floaties because it’s not cool to know you can’t swim, go to the public pool anyway, and jump into the deep end, making it everyone else’s problem. And you thrash around going, “I’m good.” They’re like, “You’re literally drowning.” And then someone nice and handsome jumps in to help you. And you’re, like, “See? I’m fine. I can totally swim.” And they’re, like, “No, you’re holding him underwater. You turned Kevin into an arm floaty and that’s not a fair relationship for Kevin.” Then someone floats by you on their back and you’re, like, “What was that?” And they’re, like, “Oh, that’s someone whose parents supported them in the pool until they could be trusted not to die.” (Tomlinson, 2022, 11:10-12:28)

But even therapy, that is supposed to help persons with mental illnesses, is portrayed as a luxury by all three comedians. Therapy is both embraced and condemned in ‘unhappy’ stand-up. The therapist offers solutions to problems in exchange for money. A reason for the unpopularity of therapy may be that it is still not easily accessible to all, presumably because of its high cost. Fernandes says, “I remember the first time I called up a clinic to book an appointment and they told me how much it would cost. I was like, ‘I feel better already’ [pretends to hang up on an imaginary phone, shocked]” (Fernandes, 2017, 10:01-10:10). Shah also makes a remark about how he was diagnosed only “two years and two lakhs later” (Shah 43:01). Tomlinson talks about asking her therapist how she can be ‘fixed’, and the therapist responds that she has to keep visiting her every week. When Tomlinson asks her if she will ever get better, the therapist screams, “I don’t know. Bring your credit card!” (Tomlinson, 2022, 20:37-20:50)

An important function of ‘unhappy’ comedy is the function of raising awareness about the conditions of their existence. It appears that comedians speak about their mental illnesses because they did not have any awareness about mental health when they experienced their symptoms until their diagnosis. Fernandes says: “The thing is that I didn’t know much about mental illness. Like, I knew it existed but I was very ignorant about it. Like, people would say stuff to me, like, ‘Oh, he’s depressed’ and I’ll be like, ‘Why? Is his Wi-Fi not working?’” (Fernandes, 2017, 4:30-4:47). For this reason, all ‘unhappy’ stand-up comedians try to educate the audience about the lesser known facts of their conditions, like the significance of serotonin or experiences with the suicide hotline. For example, Fernandes gave a vivid picture of how a deficiency of serotonin affects the brain: “I shut down emotionally, worry about things that are not likely to happen and I’m tortured and paralyzed by my own thoughts. It’s like you know how to swim, yet you’re drowning, but you don’t die” (Fernandes 6:26-7:14)

Neville Shah talks about how men struggle with depression because society expects them not to show vulnerability. He says that even when men are depressed, they try to shrug it off as they believe that their feelings are not 'masculine'. He points out the necessity of serotonin in men (Shah, 2020). Similarly, Taylor Tomlinson makes a playful reference to serotonin in her show *Look at You* after making a joke: "If you're not laughing, congrats on your serotonin. And if you're, like, 'What's serotonin?' Don't worry. You have enough" (Tomlinson, 2022, 10:12-10:28).

Thoughts about death or suicide are also common in these shows. Fernandes plans his own funeral, which he says he plans to conduct in a comedy club. Tomlinson and Shah speak about their experiences calling the suicide hotline. Both comedians observe that suicide hotlines are generally unsympathetic. Tomlinson says:

Did you guys know that sometimes when you call a suicide hotline and the call drops, they do not call you back? Yeah, you think that'd be the time for \*69 [used for redialling the last incoming number] but sometimes they just ring a bell in the cubicle, like, "Lost another one, that's lunch!". . . For all I know, that's how they train those volunteers. Like, "Hey, some nights, we get too many calls. Fridays are big for us, in those situations, you're just gonna have to use your best judgment, alright? Like I usually wait for like a privileged white girl name, like a Chelsea, a Kelsey, a Taylor. Those are the salmon I throw back and hope they swim upstream on their own." (Tomlinson, 2022, 47:18-48:16)

Shah summed up the attitude of the suicide helplines in one statement, that "it is really suicide 'help' line" because the number is always busy when he calls it (Shah, 2020, 47:58).

### 3.2 Consumerism

The consumerism that is omnipresent in liquid modernity seduces but never satisfies. In a world characterised by anxiety and dissatisfaction, consumer goods are advertised as being the solution to the problems faced by people. However, any satisfaction that an individual might experience is only momentary. Different comedians have different ways of talking about consumerism. While Daniel Fernandes speaks about how consumerism causes anxiety, Shah and Tomlinson speak about how they derive happiness from material things.

Consumerism is portrayed as a cause of anxiety in the works of Fernandes. This is best exemplified in Fernandes' show when he talks about a panic attack that he experienced while getting ready for a party. He could not make up his mind regarding the shirt he was going to wear for the party, trying on sixteen shirts and later deciding not to go for the party as he was convinced that none of the shirts looked good on him. This directly reflects Bauman's sentiment in *Consuming Life*:

I would suggest that the idea of 'melancholy' stands in the last account for the generic affliction of the consumer . . . a disturbance resulting from the fatal encounter between the obligation and compulsion to choose/the addiction to choosing, and the inability to choose. (Bauman, 2007, p. 42)

Later in the show, Fernandes ridicules how certain values are traditionally associated with certain products, like diamonds:

For years, capitalism has successfully convinced us that jewellery is evidence of love. Think about this...first, DeBeers started with a fantastic tagline, right? 'A diamond is forever'. But I'm like, 'But relationships are not'. . . I don't know if you know this, but now they've come up with a formula to prove your love. If you really love your woman, you will buy her a diamond engagement ring worth three times your monthly salary. Did you know this? Yeah! When I heard this, I was like, 'Are you nuts? I'm not spending 30 lakhs on a ring'. (Fernandes, 2017, 8:08)

Unlike buying things for his parents to make them happy, the idea of buying diamonds according to a formula to prove love does not excite Fernandes. He calls out how capitalism tries to seep into relationships as proof of love.

The potential for consumerism to cause anxiety is also illustrated by the nine-point plan for success. An important part of the nine-point plan is the buying of an apartment. Fernandes talks about young homeowners who work very hard to pay the monthly instalment on the house for many years, but proud of what they have. He says that they try to convince him of buying an apartment on debt, assuring him that it's a good investment:

I don't know if you've noticed this, but owning an apartment in this country is considered to be some major achievement, yeah? Young India is obsessed with owning apartments. Like, I've never seen grown people get so excited about brick, cement and paint. . . By the time you end up owning the apartment, like, you're really old, you have arthritis, your wife has left you, your kids don't want to live with you anymore. . . And then you're just sitting there, doing nothing with your life. That just sounds so empty. (Fernandes, 2017, 47:44-50:03)

Although Fernandes makes the choice to not subscribe to a consumer society, his friends and relatives constantly keep reminding him of his lack of an apartment. This illustrates how consumerism further alienates an individual from his community.

Fernandes replaces the nine-point plan which determines the value of an individual with his own plan. But by doing this, he sets a different standard to ‘commodify’ himself. He achieves the plan (to have a creative career that would let him travel all over the world, where he could take breaks whenever he wanted and that does not require him to get up early in the morning). However, he realises that even though he followed his dreams, he had still not achieved the happiness that he thought would come with it. Being a successful performer is having a high ‘value’ in the entertainment market. He says, “Dreams could turn into nightmares real fast if you don’t get validation for the choices you’ve made” (Fernandes, 2017, 1:01:51-1:02:09). Validation lets the performer know his ‘value’ in the entertainment market.

Unlike Fernandes, Shah speaks light-heartedly about how goods satisfy their anxieties. He talks about how things substitute human relationships when he declares that cigarettes are better than people: “Cigarette doesn’t let you down. Cigarette doesn’t play chess. Cigarette doesn’t keep you on hold” (Shah, 2020, 50:32-50:40). Tomlinson has a similar relationship with food as she describes herself as an “emotional eater” (Tomlinson, 2022, 21:09). Although she does not mention food as substituting human relationships in the show, she playfully suggests that she does not like people coming between her and her food. For instance, she talks about how she detests having people around her when she eats nachos (Tomlinson, 2022). As the youngest of the three comedians, Tomlinson has internalised the rules of liquid modernity. She playfully imagines how suicide hotlines can be improved by using a corporate structure to govern it. She pictures a suicide hotline that would set up a loyalty programme for frequent callers. She imagines calling to a suicide hotline to be greeted by a lady who thanks her for her “diamond medallion status” and asks her, “You’re now third in line. Would you like to use an upgrade and kick someone else out?” (Tomlinson, 2022, 49:33-49:58).

The statements of Shah and Tomlinson do not confirm Bauman’s statement that the market does not satisfy. On the contrary, the market appears to create an addiction that individuals seem incapable of resisting. However, it points to the fact that the identities of individuals are closely intertwined with things they consume. Although Bauman does not appear to have a favourable opinion about the widespread and mindless consumerism in society, Tomlinson and Shah indicate that it need not always be a sign of depravity.

### 3.3 *The Public and the Private*

‘Unhappy’ stand-up allows the audience a peep into the private lives of celebrity stand-up comics and this allows the audience to empathize with the ‘victim’ that lies behind the façade of comedy. Both Fernandes and Shah speak about their experiences with depression and anxiety. Tomlinson experiences extreme mood swings as she lives with bipolar disorder. There are two aspects of their private sphere that they bring to the public sphere: their personal lives and their illnesses. However, they do not try to reinforce the belief that mental-illnesses should not be kept a secret. On the other hand, they try to move mental illnesses from the private sphere and establish them firmly in the public sphere.

Fernandes tells his audience in the first few minutes of the show what to expect: “So this show is very personal. It’s about the last eight years of my life in a way that you could possibly relate to” (Fernandes, 2017, 3:30-3:58). He goes on to talk about his breakup, quitting a dead-end job, becoming successful and living with anxiety and depression. Shah speaks about his divorce, the death of his mother and his life with depression. Tomlinson speaks about having bipolar disorder and her strained relationship with her father.

When mental illnesses and taboo issues that were previously in the private sphere become part of public discourse, they normalize the issues and remove the stigma associated with them. Foucault has pointed out the phenomenon of societies around the world isolating people they classify as ‘abnormal’ (Foucault, 1961). The fear of ridicule and exclusion prevents them from seeking help even when it is needed. ‘Unhappy’ stand-up comedians describe their experiences with psychologists and psychiatrists and use their popularity as entertainers to change the dominant narratives on mental illness.

Taylor Tomlinson plays with this idea in *Look at You*, where she talks about receiving her first diagnosis as having bipolar disorder: “Because when you first find out something like that, you’re, like, ‘Oh man, am I gonna tell anybody? Should I tell anybody? And if I do tell people, am I hot and/or talented enough to be an inspiration?’” (Tomlinson, 2022, 6:48-7:13). On the other hand, Fernandes and Shah talk about how common it is to have a mental illness and yet very uncommon to seek help for the same. Shah offers a simple explanation as to the necessity of therapy in *Going Downhill*: “Okay, you should just go [to therapy]. It’s like a cold for your brain. Like, you know? Just go. I mean, if you had a cold, you’d go to a doctor. Otherwise you’d die of pneumonia” (Shah, 2020, 38:12-38:30).

Contrary to Bauman’s pessimistic view that bringing the private to the public sphere will push out the public issues that need to be addressed, ‘unhappy’ stand-up brings an important issue to the centre-stage and strips away the stigma associated with mental illnesses. In doing so, they normalize therapy and medicines for treating mental illnesses. When ‘unhappy’ stand-up is considered as a whole, one can observe that the performers reveal details from their private lives, earn money and heal from the performance (while also helping others like them). This can be illustrated with just one poignant quote from Daniel Fernandes:

Some days are really, really good. And then some days are really, really bad. But the one thing that gets me through all of it is getting up on stage and telling you guys jokes. Which is why, if you think about it, stand-up is actually therapy for me. Because I'm standing across a room full of strangers, telling them my deepest, darkest secrets...except they are paying *me* a lot of money. (Fernandes, 2017, 1:14:08-1:14:33)

#### 4. Conclusion

Although 'unhappy' stand-up cannot be attributed to liquid modernity alone, it has undoubtedly had an effect on comedy. 'Unhappy' stand-up has all the markings liquid modernity. It speaks about anxiety, draws attention to the consumerist tendencies of people and blurs the boundary between the public and the private. The comedians feel alienated from the societies they are part of and this causes anxiety and depression, which are heightened by "reflexivity of the self". Consumer goods promise an antidote to the anxieties of the individual, but they sometimes end up becoming the cause of anxiety. However, the three comedians demonstrate that although liquid modern societies are characterised by a relentless pursuit of happiness and the subsequent boredom or dissatisfaction, there are two sides to every argument. On the one hand, goods can cause anxiety, but on the other, they soothe; "reflexivity of the self" both causes *and* cures anxiety. These comedies educate the audience, remove the stigma associated with mental illnesses and heal the performer. The shows prove that 'unhappy' stand-up is a way for performers to empower themselves, both socially and economically.

This paper elaborates on a new trend in stand-up comedy that has not been studied as a whole. We have focused only on Indian and American stand-up comedy. This may have provided us only a partial view of the whole spectrum of 'unhappy' stand-up that might exist in other countries or continents. Only further studies in the area can confirm whether liquid modernity can be used to explain all types of 'unhappy' stand-up. Our inability to include live shows for study also reduced a significant amount of evidence to confirm our argument.

Regardless, there is sufficient evidence in the selected shows to prove that liquid modernity causes distress in individuals. However, the comedians have shown the audience that there is still scope for optimism. This study shifts the focus of 'unhappiness' in stand-up from the comedian to contemporary times. This realisation not only aids the comedian in the process of acceptance of the situation, but also provides an outlet for them to channel their worries. 'Unhappy' stand-up shows have the stated function of healing the comedians. In a world where more and more debates are being held about de-stigmatising mental health, these shows play an important role in the process. Liquid modern societies cause anxiety in individuals and these shows (or any other means of creative expression) play an important role in equipping individuals to face their anxieties and deal with them. Since this is relatively a new variety of entertainment, it offers great possibilities for future research, especially in the field of reception theory to understand how this variety of comedy helps the audience. We have no doubt that this variety of comedy will become more popular in the coming years and offer us new insights into mental health and the possibilities of comedy performances.

#### References

- Ando, V., Claridge G., & Clark, K. (2014). Psychotic traits in comedians. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 204, 301-345. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.134569>
- Atanasova, D., Koteyko, N., Brown, B., & Crawford, P. (2019). Mental health and the media: From illness to well-being. *Sociology Compass*, 13(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12678>
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage Publications.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brodie, I. (2008). Stand-up comedy as a genre of intimacy. *Ethnologies*, 30(2), 153-180. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019950ar>
- Butler, N., & Stoyanova-Russell, D. (2018). No funny business: Precarious work and emotional labour in stand-up comedy. *Human Relations*, 71(12), 1666-1686. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718758880>
- Dessau, B. (2012). *Beyond a joke: Inside the dark minds of stand-up comedians*. London: Arrow Books.
- Fernandes, D. (2017). *Shadows* [Video]. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IkTLiU5Q0k>



- Foucault, M. (1961). *History of madness* (2006 edition). London: Routledge
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (2008 edition). Cambridge: Polity.
- Gilbert, J. R. (2004). *Performing marginality: Humor, gender and cultural critique*. Detroit: Wayne State UP.
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Janus, S. S. (1975). The great comedians: Personality and other factors. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 35, 169-174.
- Kuden, J. L., & Braund-Allen, J. E. (2017). Introduction to information literacy in the life sciences, *Agriculture to Zoology* (pp-1-15). <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100664-1.00001-6>
- Lintott, S. (2020). Stand-up comedy and mental health: Critiquing the troubled stand-up stereotype. In P. Oppliger & E. Shouse (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Stand-up* (pp. 197-222). Boston: Palgrave.
- Naessens, E. D. (2020). Bursting the sad clown myth: From cliché to comic stage persona. In P. Oppliger & E. Shouse (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Stand-up* (pp. 223-246). Boston: Palgrave.
- Shah, N. (2017). What are you laughing at? [Video]. Amazon Prime Video, <https://www.amazon.com/Neville-Shah-What-Are-Laughing/dp/B07169VNNY>
- Shah, N. (2020). *Going downhill* [Video]. Amazon Prime Video, [https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.84b63437-b1a3-8ae7-71ca-5303de5dcdbd6?autoplay=0&ref\\_=atv\\_cf\\_strg\\_wb](https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.84b63437-b1a3-8ae7-71ca-5303de5dcdbd6?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb)
- Tomlinson, T. (2022). *Look at you* [Video]. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81471774>
- Widholm, A. (2015). Tracing online news in motion: Time and duration in the study of liquid journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 4(1), 24-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1096611>
- Xifra, J., & McKie, D. (2011). Desolidifying culture: Bauman, liquid theory, and race concerns in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 3(4), 397-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2011.605975>

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.