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CHASING THE DREAM—DEFYING THE ODDS: EXPLORING THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN COMEDY

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DEDICATION

In memory of my Grandma & Grandpa,
and to hilarious humans everywhere.

Thanks for the laughs.

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CONTENT ADVISORY

This thesis includes material containing expletives, sexual references, rude humour, and details of disturbing events. This material is included in order to illustrate the experiences and perspectives of the respondents in their own words. Reader discretion is advised.

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ABSTRACT

Although in today's world of work "the repertoire of potential professional identities [individuals] can envision for themselves seems limitless" (Obodaru, 2017: 523), our understanding of professional identity development is limited when it comes to those who attempt to defy the odds in who they become in their careers. This thesis aims to understand the professional identity development process for individuals with odds-defying aspirations—hoped-for professional identities that, by their own estimation, seem unlikely to come about. Using in-depth interviews with aspiring professional comedians who also 'happen to be women' (Kirkman, 2016: 220), I develop a grounded theoretical model showing how odds-defying aspirers recalibrate their ideas regarding what is possible in the world of work, regarding what it means to succeed in achieving their aspirations, and regarding what is at stake in their decision to give up or go on in pursuing their odds-defying aspirations. These changes to their aspirational assumptions are brought about through the process of enacting their desired professional identities and receiving and managing identity feedback—efforts that require them to carefully navigate the competing identity threats of trying and failing or else of failing to try, as well as the steep risks and costs inherent in attempting to achieve their odds-defying aspirations. These developmental efforts gradually enable individuals to alter their regulatory focus and to build up their motivational resolve—moving away from focusing on preventing the loss of their nascent professional identity to focusing on promoting its growth and overcoming motivational precarity with motivational resilience. The findings highlight how this professional identity development process is recursive and circular, often requiring odds-defying aspirers to repeat these efforts throughout their careers. This research contributes to the literatures surrounding identity threat and identity play in professional identity development and provides practical insights into the lived experiences of odds-defying aspirers.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Faith is the power that enables
the unlikely to accomplish the impossible.

— Russell Nelson (2021)

In November of 2020, Emily Harrington ascended the 3,000-foot edifice of Yosemite National Park's infamous El Capitan, making her the first woman to free-climb the route in under 24 hours. Following the historic climb, she reflected, "I never believed I could actually free climb El Cap in a day… It didn't seem like a realistic objective for me… But I chose it exactly for that reason. Impossible dreams challenge us to rise above who we are now to see if we can become better versions of ourselves" (Harrington, 2020: 1; Fazio, 2020). Harrington's statement echoes the experiences of other odds-defying aspirers from around the world, who work to achieve their own impossible dreams in the course of their lives and careers. Take exemplars like Marla Runyan, three-time national champion runner and the first legally blind athlete to compete in the Olympic Games. Or Hellen Keller, who became a prolific author, activist, and lecturer despite suffering the loss of both sight and hearing during her early childhood. Or Loretta Mary Aiken, who rose to fame as 'Moms Mabley'—one of the first stand-up comedians in the United States and a pioneer of situational comedy.

These individuals' achievements reverberate in the aspirations of individuals today, many of whom are hoping for their own impossible career dreams to become a reality. Individuals with odds-defying aspirations—seemingly unrealistic career dreams that they nevertheless hope to achieve—may be found in a wide variety of occupational fields, roles, and professional contexts and may come from as many different personal and professional backgrounds. Based on individuals' subjective understanding of the career dreams to which they aspire, of the unique and evolving circumstances in which they conduct their lives and careers, and of themselves, they may see various professional options as more or less possible

for their future at work. This signals a starting point in terms of individuals' understanding—what Ibarra calls our "basic but implicit assumptions about what is desirable and possible in our lives and in the world" (Ibarra, 2003: 83; Schein, 1992)—where an aspiration that is seen as desirable is simultaneously understood to be unlikely to be achieved formally in the world of work. In other words, individuals may believe that achieving their own career aspirations is impossible, yet still hope for these outcomes in spite of the ostensible odds.

As Obodaru points out, many individuals indeed now enjoy professional possibilities far beyond what was once imaginable: "Never before have people been so free to determine who they want to be, and the repertoire of potential professional identities they can envision for themselves seems limitless" (2017: 523; see also Baumeister, 1997; Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Schwartz, 2004; Twenge, 2006). Unmoored from the traditional, hierarchical, and organisationally embedded career trajectories of days gone by, individuals today may be more likely to form career aspirations that seem to be out of their reach (Hall, 2004; Shardlow & Madsen, 2016). Comedian Katherine Ryan, expressing tongue-in-cheek confidence about the future of work, poked fun at this trend toward greater possibilities for work by stating, "There are jobs now that didn't used to be jobs. Like a life coach used to just be some aristocratic lady who was bored. And you can be a parkour specialist now. That did not exist before. No-one from my high school ever said, 'I want to grow up to work in a cat cafe.' We didn't have those jobs" (Polito, 2018). Yet while the world today offers greater freedom to choose who to become at work than ever before, it likewise heightens the expectation that one's work allows for the expression of one's complete self (Obodaru, 2012, 2017; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Baumeister, 1997; Elliott & Lemert, 2009; Schwartz, 2004; Twenge, 2006). Cultural pressures to 'pursue your dreams', 'shoot for the stars', and 'be that one in a million' are visible across popular storytelling that valorises heroically overcoming the odds, as well as in the career planning and self-improvement texts of the

popular press (e.g., Oberbrunner, 2014; O'Donoghue, Sheehan, & Barry, 2012; Sinclair, Jeberg, & Coffer, 2018). Thus, individuals may increasingly be inclined to pursue careers that reflect their innermost values and identities, even when they may not seem particularly likely to come about in reality—that is, even when their aspirations defy the odds. Understanding the experiences of a contemporary workforce, an important priority for management research (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Campion, Caza, & Moss, 2020; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Petriglieri, Petriglieri & Wood, 2018; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), thus invites further consideration of how individuals navigate and motivate progress toward achieving their odds-defying aspirations.

Yet we know surprisingly little about how individuals' careers play out when they chase their improbable professional dreams and how individuals "hope against hope" when their professional aims seem unattainable (Nurmohamed, 2020). In fact, a growing body of work highlights pervasive gaps in the literature surrounding individuals' professional lives, particularly for those 'going off script' or transitioning to work roles that seem to depart from the well-worn career trajectories of more predictable paths with comparably reliable and favourable outcomes (e.g., Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This leaves substantial room for generating insights into how individuals garner support for their long-shots and pipedreams, as compared to safe bets and more normative career paths. Further, studies that directly consider the dynamics of identity growth, and in particular how individuals actually attempt to move their hoped-for professional identities into the realm of reality, remain limited (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Likewise, researchers have highlighted the need for additional inquiry that focuses on illuminating the positive side of individuals' career-centred adaptation, to reveal how individuals may ultimately thrive, overcome, and grow in their working lives, even in conditions of adversity—where the odds may be stacked against them, often in multiple, intersecting ways (e.g., Caza & Milton, 2011; Maitlis, 2009;

McCluney, 2017; Nurmohamed, 2014; Roberts, Mayo, Ely, & Thomas, 2018). In addition, recent work highlights the need to explore the enduring impact of individuals' professional aspirations—both those that they fulfill and those that they forgo—to understand how individuals' career prospects, which may come and go along the way, may continue to influence their work and identities (Obodaru, 2012, 2017; Shardlow & Madsen, 2016). These research gaps point to many significant, interesting, and unresolved questions in regard to the career experiences of those who pursue odds-defying aspirations.

This thesis explores the professional identity development of odds-defying aspirers in the entertainment industry—specifically in the field of comedy entertainment—who also 'happen to be women' (Kirkman, 2016: 220). The selection of comedy entertainment as a research setting was driven by many multifaceted, overlapping factors that may make attaining a career in this field seem difficult, if not impossible, for incoming aspirers. As Reilly explains, "Initiating and developing a career within most cultural production industries tends to be an unpredictable and messy process" (2017: 147; See also Jones, 1996; Menger, 2014; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). In practical terms, this was an arena where it was conceivable that many early career aspirers might see their career dreams as just that, dreams. Questions of how to stay motivated to persist and progress may be especially pronounced for individuals pursuing careers as comedians, due to the public-facing and gig-based nature of comedic work, which attracts open feedback and criticism from audiences, and which requires relentless opportunity-seeking in order to secure the next gig and retain work as a comedian (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). The focus on women in particular was driven by features of this field that may make gender a salient category in terms of individuals' perceptions regarding their chances of success, due to a variety of factors including the historically heavily male-dominated makeup of the field and patterns of hostility toward women in comedy (Finney, 1994; Kotthoff, 2006; Lavery, 2011; Rodgers, 2020). Research

surrounding comedians as a population of interest shares a rich history across many disciplines, in part due to the unique working conditions that make pursuing a comedy career such a uniquely precarious professional path (Springer, 2012).

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Individuals' experiences pursuing their odds-defying aspirations can be understood as a process of professional identity development. Individuals' ideas of who they are and who they can become at work and their efforts to 'play at' and 'work at' enacting their desired identities are the focus of an increasingly prominent area of research surrounding professional identity development (e.g., Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015; 2020; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019; Pratt, Rockman, & Kaufmann, 2006). Identity approaches are popular among management scholars as they attempt to understand how individuals understand and navigate their working lives (e.g., Burke & Stets, 2009; Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Ashforth, 2001). Utilising an identity lens in this study is appropriate for several reasons: first, individuals' career aspirations are deeply connected to identity-driven motives and concerns (D'Argembeau, Lardi, & Van der Linden, 2012). For example, individuals' ideas of who they may one day become (e.g., possible selves, future work selves) are an important guide for their career behaviours (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Likewise, identity motives (e.g., for self-esteem, efficacy, belonging, distinctiveness, meaning, and continuity) help guide career selection and professional identity development (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008). Second, identity research helpfully illuminates how individuals navigate circumstances where their own sense of who they are is challenged by or at odds with external voices or demands (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987), an area that may have particular relevance for those who try to defy the odds in terms of who they become in their careers (e.g., Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; McCluney, 2017). Identity theories address how individuals' multiple identities (e.g.,

personal, role, social, past, present, future) co-exist and sometimes conflict in the broader self-concept (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Gecas, 1982). Identity research also helpfully cuts across levels to address how socio-political, historical, and organisational contexts influence individuals' self-perceptions (Oyserman & Markus, 1998)—shedding light on how structural influences impact individual-level career experiences. Finally, identity-based approaches link individuals' ideas of who they hope to become at work to their career-oriented motivation and behaviour (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012), and the study of professional identity development invites a negotiated, processual, and richly contextualised perspective of individuals' career journeys, illuminating the psychological, socially interactive, and material struggles involved in individuals' attempts at becoming who they want to be at work (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Taken together, adopting an identity theoretic approach is beneficial to an in-depth investigation of how individuals navigate professional identity development and motivate themselves to achieve their odds-defying aspirations.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guides this thesis is: How does the professional identity development process unfold for odds-defying aspirers? In essence, this thesis seeks to understand the lived experience of those who dare to defy the odds in their professional aspirations and to unearth the practical strategies that enable these individuals to begin and continue on this journey, despite the seemingly unrealistic nature of their career aspirations. Given the broad scope of this question, three more detailed lines of inquiry help to shape the research direction.

First, how do individuals come to hold odds-defying aspirations—and to what effect? Before we can investigate how odds-defying aspirers engage in professional identity

development, it is important to understand their perceptions regarding what is possible for their working lives, and what leads them to believe that their own aspirations are unrealistic. Further, it is important to uncover the impact of such perceptions on individuals' career-oriented motivation. In other words, the first research priority is to uncover how individuals arrive at their "implicit assumptions about what is… possible" for their careers and professional identities, and to detail how these assumptions impact them (Ibarra, 2003: 83).

Second, how do odds-defying aspirers enact their hoped-for professional identities? Enactment is a key process by which individuals engage in professional identity development (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Ibarra, 2003). This question focuses our attention on the specific forms of enactment that individuals adopt as they attempt to achieve their professional identities. Individuals' identity enactment may evolve in conjunction with their identification with various professional identity options, and helpfully reflect the threats, risks, and opportunities that individuals perceive in terms of who they are, and who they might become in the future at work (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Obodaru, 2017; Vough & Caza, 2017). This question thus encourages a deeper exploration of the significance of odds-defying aspirers' enactment strategies for their professional identity development.

Third, how do odds-defying aspirers motivate themselves in the face of career obstacles? A dominant finding in the literature is that those who believe they are unlikely to succeed are less likely to even try to achieve their goals. Further, those who face negative feedback from others are typically thought to internalise these messages. In other words, giving up might be appealing when failure seems like the inevitable outcome of one's uphill aspirational efforts. In the face of their own uncertainties, hesitations, and hang-ups, how do odds-defying aspirers get up the courage to try? And when they face rejection, disappointment, and discouragement, how do they convince themselves to keep going?

Methodological Approach & Outcomes

In order to address these questions, this thesis employs a qualitative study of odds-defying aspirers and a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Studies of professional identity development lend themselves to qualitative methodologies that appreciate context and emphasise process. Using in-depth interviews and first-person narrative accounts enables a detailed, richly contextualised view of individuals' subjective understanding both of themselves and of the world of work, in line with an interpretivist research paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Grounded theory methodology offers guiding principles and a process for developing a theory to explain how odds-defying aspirers undergo professional identity development (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach is appropriate for generating new theory surrounding individuals' interpretations of the world of work, and their place within it (Dey, 1999; Suddaby, 2006). Further, the assumptions of this approach are compatible with those of the key concepts it employs—including identity play, identity threat, and professional identity.

The practice of theoretical sampling—a core tenet of grounded theory—guided the process of data collection (Morse, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As Strauss and Corbin lay out, "Theoretical sampling is cumulative… sampling becomes more specific with time because the analyst is directed by the evolving theory" (1998: 203). Thus, general considerations and practical issues such as selecting whom to study, choosing what types of data to collect, and seeking research access and support, predominate early on. Later, these decisions evolve according to the emerging theory, as further sampling is geared toward "developing, densifying, and saturating" the theoretical concepts that arise early on (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 203).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with women working in or aspiring to work in comedy entertainment, the thesis develops a theoretical model, explaining how the

professional identity development process unfolds for odds-defying aspirers. The theoretical model highlights links between the conceptual categories that emerged during data analysis—revealing connections between the concepts in the theory.

The analysis reveals that odds-defying aspirers experience a set of competing pulls—propelling them to promote growth toward achieving their aspirations, while at the same time preventing their loss. These two pulls reflect opposing types of identity threat—the threat of failing to try, and the threat of trying and failing—each of which threatens to extinguish their growing professional identity. This mixture produces motivational precarity—leaving aspirers unable to either meaningfully move forward or entirely let go of this aspiration. As odds-defying aspirers carefully enact their hoped-for professional identities, and effortfully manage the feedback they receive from others, they recalibrate the paradoxical pulls and become more resilient in their motivation to keep going and to keep growing, come what may. This happens as they alter their own ideas of what it means to succeed, of what is possible in the course of their lives, and of what is at stake in their aspirational journey.

Research Significance

This work contributes to our understanding of professional identity development in several ways. First, this research adds to our understanding of how individuals encounter and address identity threats in the process of professional identity development. It highlights how identity threats may arise not only from individuals' identity-inconsistent actions, but also from their inaction, as they hesitate and vacillate in pursuing a desired professional identity. Theoretically, this expands our conceptualisation of identity threat to include threats arising from an individual's failure to act—a new source of identity threat. Furthermore, while past research emphasises how individuals may respond to identity threats after the fact by protecting or restructuring threatened identities, or by reappraising previously identity-threatening experiences as opportunities for growth and development (Petriglieri, 2011), the

experience of odds-defying aspirers suggests that individuals may also learn to pre-emptively neutralise potential sources of identity threat. By generating new ways of interpreting future feedback, individuals prepare to conceptualise any ending to their story as positive, and to see others' invalidating feedback as necessary and helpful, rather than debilitating and harmful.

Next, this research adds to our understanding of odds-defying aspirations—defining this construct and further detailing how individuals persist toward achieving their hoped-for professional identity options when they face overwhelming odds. Typically, past research has emphasised how individuals' sense of who they are and who they will one day become relies on others' validation: being granted an identity by others sustains it, while being denied an identity by others harms it (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This thesis turns the tables to show how individuals may circumvent the need for validation from certain groups, either by changing their social context or by dismissing others' negative feedback. Thus, individuals may internalise an identity in spite of others' invalidating feedback, and in this way add new motivation to fuel their ongoing progress toward achieving their dreams. This adds an important wrinkle to extant theories of professional identity development by highlighting how the social process of identity claiming and granting may to some extent be avoided, or its outcomes altered, as individuals work to become who they want to be at work.

Finally, this thesis contributes to our understanding of identity play during professional identity development. Identity play provides individuals with plasticity, or flexibility, in terms of how they appear, behave, and view the world—allowing them to reinvent and experiment with different ways of appearing, behaving, and seeing (Stanko, Dahm, Lahneman, & Richter, 2020). The findings of this thesis suggest that play also allows individuals to flexibly define the purpose of their identity enactment, both to themselves and to observers, providing them with flexibility to relabel their enactment activities in terms of current or future identity objectives. Further, past research primarily suggests a progressive

relationship between identity play and identity work, where playful experimentation and exploration give way to objective-driven growth and feedback-seeking in the course of professional identity development (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Fachin & Davel, 2015). This research adds to our understanding of how individuals move from "playing at" to "working at" becoming who they want to be at work by showing how this may also be a recursive process that reflects individuals' evolving circumstances (Shepherd & Williams, 2018). Finally, this research shows how identity play may enable individuals to begin to shift their regulatory focus and beliefs regarding what is possible in order to achieve their odds-defying aspirations in real life, rather than leaving them in a state of wistfully dreaming or fantasising about their hoped-for but seemingly impossible aspirations (Obodaru, 2017).

Organisation of Thesis

The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter II introduces the reader to key concepts surrounding individuals' identities and career aspirations, theoretically framing the thesis in terms of professional identity development. This chapter further differentiates the concept of an odds-defying aspiration from other related constructs in the literature and highlights key theoretical gaps that this thesis aims to fill. Chapter III introduces the research methodology and highlights the appropriateness of the research sample for understanding the unfolding process of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development. Chapters IV and V present the findings—the results of an in-depth, interview-based, grounded theoretical study of the professional identity development of odds-defying aspirers. These chapters detail the process of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development, culminating in a theoretical model that represents this process graphically (See Figure 2). Chapter VI provides a discussion of the theoretical implications of the research for our understanding of

professional identity development and offers concluding thoughts on practical implications and limitations, as well as directions for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Chapter Roadmap

The chapter begins with a review of several interrelated strands of identity theory, situating the present study in the interpretivist tradition of organisational scholarship on professional identity development (Alvesson et al., 2008). The review continues by differentiating odds-defying aspirations from related constructs in the literature, situating the research relative to other goal, performance, and career-aspiration oriented theories, particularly the literature on possible selves and on so-called 'underdogs' and 'favourites' in the competition for sought-after work-roles. The review concludes with insights from across professional identity development theories, highlighting gaps in our knowledge surrounding how the professional identity development process unfolds for odds-defying aspirers.

Identity

Identities are the meanings that individuals attach to themselves—they are the ideas, labels, schemas, and representations that people hold about themselves—the stories that people tell themselves about themselves (Gecas, 1982; Markus, 1977; McAdams, 1993; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Individuals have multiple identities, which guide affect, information processing, and behaviour (Higgins, 1996; Markus 1977, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Individuals' identities are part of the "constellation of thoughts, feelings, and motives that constitutes people's experience of themselves" (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006: 1673; Leary & Tangney, 2011; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Markus & Kunda, 1986).

Identity research in the study of work and organisations has been categorised according to three dominant orientations: the functionalist, critical, and interpretivist (Alvesson et al., 2008). Functionalist perspectives centre on organisational outcomes—for instance, exploring how individuals' identification with organisations, occupations, and workgroups facilitates organisational effectiveness (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Critical perspectives emphasise individuals' attempts to carve out personally meaningful identities in the midst of powerful, repressive structures that seek to impose preferred or ideal identities—including work organisations (e.g., Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Interpretivist perspectives centre on the process whereby individuals construct their identities and on understanding their subjective interpretations and lived experience (e.g., Watson, 2008). Interpretivism invites us to consider individuals' efforts to create and transform the meanings associated with themselves (e.g., through identity work and play) and has become increasingly popular among management scholars in recent years (Caza et al., 2018b). This study is geared toward understanding odds-defying aspirers' ongoing professional identity development and given the processual, phenomenological, and subjective slant of this query, aligns most closely with the interpretivist orientation.

A key tenet of the interpretivist paradigm is that individuals have multiple identities. These identities range from the personal, including individuals' distinctive characteristics and traits (e.g., intelligent), to the social, including the roles they hold in relationship to others (e.g., doctor/patient) and the groups to which they belong (e.g., medical association member) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gecas, 1982; Tajfel, 1978). Individuals' multiple identities are relevant for their career experiences and outcomes (Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). For instance, individuals may grapple with the relationship between their nonwork and work-related identities, from multiple role identities that span work, home, and leisure to visible and

nonvisible demographic identities (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005; Clair, Humberd, Caruso, & Roberts, 2012; Ladge & Little 2019; Creed et al., 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Rothbard, Phillips & Dumas, 2005; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). Individuals may also juggle between their multiple work-related identities, from the multiple identities associated with a particular work-role (e.g., team, occupation, profession, organisation, and so on) to the multiple identities associated with different work-roles, including those they concurrently enact (as in the case of plural careerists) to those that they enact over the course of their careers (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018a; Hennekam, 2017; Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; Obodaru, 2012, 2017). Navigating the tensions that may arise due to these multiple identities is an important part of individuals' careers (Dutton et al., 2010).

Individuals' multiple identities reflect not only who they currently are, but also who they have been in the past (past identities), who they might have been if something in the past had gone differently (forgone identities), and who they may become in the future (future identities). I follow Obodaru (2017) in asserting that these temporally removed identities generate not only self-comparison (e.g., How does who I used to be compare to who I now am? How does who I might have been compare to who I now am? How does who I want to be in the future compare to who I now am?), but also self-description (e.g., Who I used to be is part of who I am; Who I might have been is part of who I am; Who I may become is part of who I am). In other words, past, alternative, and future identities provide individuals with both 1) a reference point from which they may evaluate who they currently are and guide their identity construction efforts, as well as 2) a more complete understanding of who they are (Obodaru, 2017; Higgins, 1987). For example, a future-doctor may use this identity to guide and motivate her efforts to apply to medical school but may also benefit from self-defining and self-describing in this way—for example, in feeling a sense of self-worth or in

feeling a sense of distinctiveness among her peers, prior to ever actualising this professional identity formally in a work role or employing organisation. Thus, individuals may enact their identities both through real activities, as well as through imagined and vicarious experiences (Obodaru, 2017).

Professional Identity

Of particular concern to this thesis are individuals' professional identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Obodaru, 2017; Schein, 1978). Professional identity is defined to include the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that define a person in terms of a specific work role (Schein, 1978; Vough, Cardador, Bednar, Dane, & Pratt, 2013). Individuals' professional identities have become a dominant subject in organisational research, as "there are far fewer identity givens, more identity options, more tolerance of identity diversity, and more frequent identity changes over the life course" in today's world of work (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000: 14; see also Gergen, 1991). While a professional identity relates to an individual's self-definition in terms of a specific work-role (e.g., doctor, juggler, astronaut), several closely related constructs in the literature merit attention and differentiation. First, individuals' *work-related identities* are connected to their membership and participation in work-related activities (e.g., jobs, projects) and social groups (e.g., organisations, occupations, professions, teams), and individuals have multiple work-related identities (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Dutton et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2006). For instance, an engineer's work-related identities may include their personal identity as a creative or technically minded individual, their professional identity as an engineer, their identity as a member of an employing organisation, or their identity as part of a specific team. Second, *career identity* refers to an individual's sense of who they are across their "diverse and diffuse career experiences and aspirations" (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004: 19). Rather than relating to a singular work role, career identity takes a

longer view than professional identity in looking across an individual's multiple work roles and professional identities throughout the career course. It describes who one is or would like to be in one's career and is conceptualised as inherently longitudinal in that it meaningfully assimilates past experiences while giving direction to the future (Meijers, 1998; Plunkett, 2001). Thus, unlike work-related identities, which may or may not be related to a work-role, and unlike career identity, which looks across an individual's comprehensive set of professional and work-related identities, professional identities are intrinsically tied to roles in the world of work.

Recently, Obodaru has clarified that individuals' professional identities may relate to work roles beyond those that they currently or formally enact at work (Obodaru, 2017). In this way, Obodaru helpfully extends this conversation to define professional identities as not only the identities that individuals enact formally through their current work roles, but also the identities that they forgo throughout the course of their working lives. In other words, people may experience professional identities as self-defining, despite not enacting them via formal work roles in the present. By engaging in real enactment through job and leisure crafting, imagined enactment, and vicarious enactment through observing and imagining close others, individuals hold onto professional identities, despite choice or constraint taking them in a different direction in their formal work roles. In this way, professional identities that are not currently enacted in work roles can still be seen as self-descriptive. Building on Obodaru's expanded conceptualisation, and the attendant notion that "people can…define themselves through occupations and jobs they do not actually hold," (2017: 20) an individual's professional identity can be understood as the "set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which a person defines herself of himself" in a past, present, future, or forgone work role (2017: 11; Schein, 1978; Vough et al., 2013). Thus, a

professional identity may relate to a work role that one previously held, currently holds, may someday hold, or might have held.

Professional Identity Development

Professional identity development plays out through the evolution of "an identity or self-definition over time"—whether that professional identity is enacted through the individual's current work role or relates to another (e.g., past, future, forgone) work role that she or he experiences as self-defining (Dutton et al., 2010: 271; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Professional identity development can be seen as individuals engage in identity work and play to explore, construct, authenticate, and validate their hoped-for professional identities, as they move through stages of progression in their careers, and as they advance toward professional identities that fulfill their identity motives (e.g., for self-esteem, belonging) (Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Individuals' professional identity development takes place over time, through both their internal cognitions and their lived interactions with others, as they develop toward actualising various professional identity options, associated with work roles they may or may not ever enact formally in their work roles (Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019). Professional identity development involves narrative efforts to garner support for one's intended path, which is a somewhat more complex and challenging proposition when that path involves going off script from socially prescribed or expected trajectories (Ashford et al., 2018; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Identity Motivations. Individuals are motivated to progress in becoming more desirable versions of themselves in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2010; Rogers, Corley, & Ashforth, 2017; Strauss et al., 2012). Motives for self-enhancement, expansion, and improvement are closely related to the growth that people wish to see in themselves as they

narrate upward trajectories in their working lives and professional identities (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). While professional identities give individuals a sense of who they are, they also may fulfill (or frustrate) individuals' identity motives—the motivational pressures they experience toward certain ways of defining themselves (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). For example, individuals are motivated to see themselves favourably (self-enhancement) and to see themselves as both similar to (belonging) and unique from others (distinctiveness) (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Identity motives help to guide professional identity development by motivating people to pursue certain identities while avoiding others (Vignoles et al., 2008). The theory of identity motives suggests that people strive for certain self-views, which may in turn motivate them to behave in identity-directed ways (Vignoles et al., 2006). For example, an individual's motive for self-enhancement and belonging may guide them to pursue professional identities that are seen as positive and socially valued, that represent upward progression and growth, or that entail inclusion in desirable social circles (e.g., becoming a CEO). These same motives also make individuals wish to avoid incurring negative identities, which represent failure, moving backward (e.g., becoming unemployed), or being excluded and alone.

Identity Claiming. Following in the interpretivist paradigm, individuals' professional identity development can be understood as both an intrapsychic and socially interactive process of iterative and ongoing identity construction involving both cognition and enacted identity claiming and granting (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Caza et al., 2018b). As individuals attempt to both internally authenticate and externally validate their hoped-for professional identities—working to feel true to themselves and to receive others' validation in their work roles—they establish and refine their understanding of who they are at work (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Individuals make identity claims that indicate how they see themselves and how they want others to see them, and their audiences respond to

accept, reject, or renegotiate these claims (Caza et al., 2018a, 2018b; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra, 1999). This process often involves narrative accounts, whereby individuals attempt to secure needed validation for their desired identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 1993). Thus, individuals' self-reflective thinking as well as their social interactions inform how they define themselves: individuals' identities are discursively and narratively constructed and negotiated, as they observe how others respond to their identity claims and use these observations to refine their privately held self-understandings (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Swann, 1987). The negotiated and relational nature of professional identity development has often been theorised, but relatively little work has explored this process empirically (Caza et al., 2018b; see also Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009; Petrigilieri & Obodaru, 2019).

Identity Threat. While professional identity development carries the promise of bringing individuals closer to realising their desired professional identities, it also bears associated claiming risks and identity threats, including those that may arise from failing to achieve these aims (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Indeed, as William James suggests, while individuals may wish to see themselves as "potentially all things, and as potentially successful at everything"—aspiring and falling short can undermine self-esteem (Oyserman & James, 2011: 118; James, 1890). Thus, individuals perhaps unconsciously weigh their desire to progress against the possible risks of failing to sufficiently progress toward their aspirations. Carroll, Shepperd, and Arkin (2009) build on these insights, suggesting that individuals weigh the comparative likelihood that pursuing a hoped-for professional identity will result in either achieving it, or instead result in becoming an alternative, undesired self (e.g., If I try to become an actress, am I more likely to become an actress, or to end up in a dead-end job?). In other words, individuals assess whether their attempt to become who they want to be at work is more likely to lead them to success in achieving their odds-defying

aspiration or to failure and an undesired future. Given these concerns, individuals may weigh their desire to progress toward their odds-defying aspiration against the possible instrumental, image, and interpersonal repercussions that attempting to achieve it may bring about.

The concept of identity threat helps to explain how odds-defying aspirers navigate the process of professional identity development, and how they appraise and address experiences that may threaten the meaning, value, or their achievement and enactment of their hoped-for professional identities. Identity threats are defined as experiences appraised as potentially harmful to the meanings, value, or enactment of an identity (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). During the course of professional identity development, identity threats can originate from individuals' identity conflicts (Kreiner et al., 2006; Rothbard, 2001), from individuals' carrying out identity-threatening actions (Anteby, 2008), from interactions in the social world (Fine, 1996; Van Maanen, 1997), or from the material world (Maitlis, 2009; Shepherd & Williams, 2018)—for instance through disruptive and random events, interpersonal interactions, ingroup and outgroup dynamics, societal beliefs and prejudices, conflicts between individuals' multiple identities, or inconsistencies between their actions and identities. For instance, a career-ending injury may threaten an individual's professional identity as a musician (Maitlis, 2009) or menial work tasks may threaten an individual's professional identity as a doctor (Pratt et al., 2006). Scholarship sitting at the cross-roads of individuals' careers and identity threat has tended to cluster in addressing how individuals grapple with discrete event-based or episodic identity threats, for instance those associated with macro work-role transitions (e.g., retirement, professionalisation, liminality), as well as how they manage long-term, chronic identity threats that occur throughout their careers (e.g., demanding occupations, dirty work), as they try to navigate toward progressively or adaptively greater heights in terms of professional identity development (Dutton et al., 2010;

see for example, Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Pratt et al., 2006, Sargent, Bataille, Vough, & Lee, 2011).

Identity Work and Play. Two distinctive forms of effort have been established in terms of how individuals define and work toward their aspired professional identities: identity work and identity play. Identity work "refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165) and more broadly includes individuals' efforts to build, sustain, and change their self-definitions (Snow & Anderson, 1987). These efforts are generally understood to involve individuals' attempts to manage and agentically mould their self-conceptions (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Watson, 2008). Identity work research tends to emphasise the circumstances (e.g., work-role transitions, role-demands, identity threats) that challenge individuals' latent identity needs (e.g., for self-esteem and self-consistency) and thereby elicit individuals' identity work tactics (e.g., patching) (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Breakwell, 1986; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008).

Identity play, on the other hand, refers to "the crafting and provisional trial of immature (i.e. as yet unelaborated) possible selves" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 13). Individuals engage in identity play for the purpose of inventing and reinventing themselves—trying on and exploring new identities with the goal of enjoyment and authenticity, at the threshold of fantasy and reality. Identity play affords individuals with the ability to appear, behave, and view the world in a variety of ways, and to play with possible, improbable, and impossible selves (Stanko et al., 2020). While identity work is a process of seeking out internal authentication and social validation for one's identities, identity play is an exploration, a type of identity rehearsal, involving detours, deviations, and the creation of variation (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

These forms of effort are theorised to occur in the reverse order as individuals engage in identity development. That is, in order to reach a desired professional identity, individuals must first playfully define it as a possibility, and then iteratively work toward achieving it through interactive and intrapsychic efforts such as self-storytelling. Much like exploratory search shifts over the course of a team project (Knight, 2015), individuals shift from identity play to identity work as they move from exploring and experimenting with multiple possibilities to developing a chosen possibility into reality (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Fachin & Davel, 2015). This does not mean that individuals who engage in identity work to achieve one identity may not be simultaneously engaged in identity play around another identity in a cyclical and iterative process of becoming. Rather, it suggests that an identity will likely be played at before it is worked at. Identity play is associated with divergent exploration and delayed commitment, allowing individuals to freely experiment with nascent identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020). While empirical work on identity play is relatively limited, Murphy and Kreiner emphasise how the "iterative and improvisational spirit" of identity play may be at work as individuals define the boundaries of emerging occupations and establish their own identity legitimacy (2020: 884). Fachin and Davel explore how filmmaker Denys Arcand engages in identity play and identity work during his transition from documentary to box-office directing (2015). Through identity play, Arcand creates discursive resources and ambiguity, which create favourable conditions for constructing his sense of self in the future. In this way, identity play and identity work are understood as symbiotic and interconnected processes, following "a sequential logic… moving from identity play to identity work" (Fachin & Davel, 2015: 379). Stanko and colleagues similarly find that as individuals play with possible selves in virtual reality, such identity play may precipitate actual shifts in their real-world behaviours and identities (2020).

Odds-Defying Aspirations and Related Constructs

As suggested by the previous discussion of how individuals' professional identities may be related to work-roles they do not currently enact, individuals may indeed have hoped-for professional identities that they perceive are unlikely to be achieved formally in the world of work (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987). Unlikely professional identities may provide a mental escape for individuals, even if these identities seem fanciful or fictitious (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Costas & Grey, 2014; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992; Obodaru, 2017; Oettingen, 1996; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen, Pak & Schnetter, 2001). Several threads of research support the notion that individuals may hold onto seemingly impossible-to-achieve professional identities. Carroll and colleagues (2009) conducted an experiment where they showed that once a possible identity was formed, students were reticent to give it up and only did so when it was presented as undesirable, not just when it was presented as unlikely to be achieved. In other words, students kept identifying with a desirable future professional identity (i.e., in a high-paying consulting position as a business psychologist), even when it appeared to be unlikely to be actualised. Importantly, Obodaru (2012, 2017) points out that individuals may continue to identify with their forgone professional identities, despite ostensibly perceiving that their chances of actualising these identity options formally in their work roles have decreased after a career fork-in-the-road (see also Berg et al., 2010). Costas and Grey likewise suggest that individuals may hold identities that represent a discontinuous break with their present working lives; these "imaginary future selves are about dreams and fantasies that are in contradistinction to the present and future (professional) self" (2014: 925). Thus, individuals may identify with professional identities that seem unlikely to come about formally in the world of work.

Based on these insights, I define *odds-defying aspirations* as individuals' hoped-for professional identities, which they perceive to be unlikely to be actualised in their formal work-roles. Professional identity options differ in terms of the likelihood that individuals

ascribe to achieving them—from those that are seen as inevitable, to those that are seen as impossible (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For instance, a young business student may believe that they will never become a hedge fund manager, but instead will end up in a corporate accountant role. The key is that the individual perceives, at some point, that it is unlikely for them to achieve a particular professional identity to which they aspire. The odds-defying aspiration construct thus mutually draws upon the notion of *aspiration* put forward by Costas and Grey where it "denotes the idea of an improved, better, higher or ideal future self as compared to that of the present" in reference to a specific professional identity and its associated work-role (2014: 915), as well as the notion of *defying the odds*, which refers to the perceived low likelihood of actualising a particular future in lived reality. The concept of odds-defying aspirations thus takes the perspective of the subject as the starting point and refers to instances where an individual perceives that a particular professional identity option is both desirable and unlikely to become a reality in the world of work. This definition is reflective of what Ibarra calls our "basic but implicit assumptions about what is desirable and possible in our lives and in the world" (Ibarra, 2003: 83; Schein, 1992)—where a professional identity that is seen as desirable is simultaneously understood to be unlikely to be achieved formally. Importantly, this concept does not dictate the duration, recency, or primacy of such a perception, but leaves space for following the trajectory of an individual's evolving thoughts and feelings surrounding both the desirability and probability of formally achieving a particular professional identity in the world of work. Instead, this concept centres on the individuals' subjective self-understanding—at some stage along their journey—that a particular professional identity is at once both desirable and unlikely to be achieved. Although not all odds-defying aspirations will be as overtly impossible to achieve as Harrington's aforementioned feat of free-climbing El Capitan, individuals' perceptions that their own hoped-for professional identities may never work out are indicative that they hold

odds-defying aspirations. In essence, odds-defying aspirations form at the nexus of individuals' aspirations for who they hope to become at work and their beliefs regarding what is probable for themselves within the world of work.

Studies regarding individuals' professional identities and careers have frequently attempted to define which career aspirations are unrealistic, and for whom. In Snow and Anderson's seminal piece on identity work, they characterise homeless individuals' stories about who they will become in the future at work as "fictive storytelling" and clarify that this is based on both conversation and observation of individuals, where "credulity is strained… because of the vast gap between current and projected realities" (1987: 1359). In this way, they assert that certain professional identities are objectively odds-defying or unlikely to come about for those speakers they interviewed. Along similar lines, but in quantitatively oriented research, Shardlow and Madsen suggest that a career aspiration's likelihood of being achieved is relative and can be measured as the difference between an individual's aspirations and "realistic, or expected, career expectations for that individual"—for instance, based on their educational attainment, gender, IQ, and parents' occupational prestige (2016: 3). Along similar lines, the achievement level to which individuals aspire, alongside the prestige of their chosen occupation, has been shown to factor into how likely it is that they will ultimately succeed in achieving their professional identity aspirations (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016). Stanko and colleagues highlight how individuals' playful explorations of identity may include possible, improbable, and impossible selves—again highlighting the objective impossibility of individuals achieving certain identities (2020).

The notion of odds-defying aspirations put forward here subverts the more common approach of invoking a scholarly gaze or adopting objective measures of individuals' likelihood of success in achieving certain professional identity options and instead focuses on the individuals' subjective understanding of their own chances of succeeding in becoming

who they want to be at work in connection with a specific, desired work-role. As Yost, Strube, and Bailey (1992) suggest, whether the dream of achieving a hoped-for professional identity will ultimately "come true" is not an inherent property of that future professional identity, but something that happens to it, wherein it is made true by events (see also James, 1910/1963). In other words, whether a hoped-for professional identity will come to pass in the world of work "is not inherent in a proposed self; it *happens* to a proposed self." (Yost et al., 1992: 112). Aspiring to a future beyond the bounds of what may be seen as possible for oneself (or perhaps for anyone) is an important and as-yet understudied phenomenon.

The odds-defying aspirations construct differs from other internally oriented concepts in the literature by clarifying that perceptions of possibility are distinct from identification. Likewise, odds-defying aspirations are closely related to, but distinct from, several other identity-related, goal-oriented, and career-centric phenomena. (See Table 2.1).

Underdog Expectations. Underdogs are individuals deemed by observers to be less likely to succeed than their counterparts (i.e., favourites) in competitions (e.g., Ceci & Kain, 1982; Fleitas, 1971; Kim et al., 2008; Laponce, 1966; McAllister & Studlar, 1991; Nurmohamed 2014; 2020; Paharia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011; Palfrey, 2009; Simon, 1954; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007). In this sense, underdogs encounter comparatively low expectations from others, who believe that they are less likely to succeed than those they are up against (e.g., in a political election, athletic contest). Underdog expectations are instances where individuals perceive that others view them as less likely to succeed than those against whom they compete—and underdog performance refers to individuals' efforts to overcome and "prove wrong" the naysayers by outperforming favoured competitors (Nurmohamed 2014; 2020). The underdog literature is focused on work arenas where individuals are pitted against each other, while the notion of odds-defying aspirations does not require this competitive or contest-centric type of encounter. Further, underdog

expectations are rooted in observers' evaluations of an individual's chances for success, whereas odds-defying aspirations are rooted in an individual's own perceptions regarding their chances of achieving a hoped-for professional identity.

Possible Selves. An important precursor to the notion of odds-defying aspirations set forward here is that of possible selves. Possible selves include conceptions of who we might, would like to, and are afraid of becoming—and can be future-oriented or based in the past or present (Markus, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986; see also Erickson, 2007; Yost et al., 1992). Research on possible selves is frequently related to the work domain and to questions of how people envision themselves in the future at work (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015). The possible selves literature has predominantly focused on those identities that individuals perceive they may actualise, and thus largely neglects to consider instances where an individual sees an identity option as unlikely to come about. Although scholars have recognised that individuals' ideas surrounding possibility may change, the dominant frame has been that these shifts represent adding or losing possible selves (e.g., Oyserman & James, 2011). In this sense, possibility has been construed as an on/off switch for an identity, where possibility and identification go hand in hand. The odds-defying aspirations construct instead suggests that individuals' perceptions regarding the possibility of achieving certain professional identity options exist independently of their identification with these identity options. That is, individuals may define themselves in terms of professional identity options that are ostensibly unlikely to be achieved formally in the world of work.

Future Work Selves. Strauss and colleagues defined future work selves as individuals' future oriented self-representations that reflect their work-related hopes and aspirations (2012). Similar to future work selves, individuals' odds-defying aspirations reflect hoped-for identities at work. But odds-defying aspirations are focused on professional identities, which are associated with the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and

experiences that define a person in a particular work role. An individual's future work self is not necessarily associated with a particular work role and thus might include non-role specific work-related self-definitions—for instance, those associated with working for a particular organisation or team (e.g., someday I will work for Google) or in a particular way (e.g., I want to be a compassionate boss) (Rogers et al., 2017). Thus, a future work self, as a broader umbrella construct, may or may not include an odds-defying aspiration related to a hoped-for but seemingly unachievable professional identity.

Imaginary Future Selves. Costas and Grey convey how individuals use imaginary future selves—"a future imagined not in the terms prescribed by disciplinary power but breaking radically with those terms, typically in the form of dreams of escape from the corporate world in favour of a freer and more creative existence"—to resist the constant need for identity work and to depart from prescribed ways of envisaging the future, both of which are brought about by disciplinary power (2014: 911). They clarify how organisations exercise aspirational control, setting individuals in a constant future-oriented state of becoming (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). While imaginary future selves serve as a contrast to organisationally prescribed futures, odds-defying aspirations need not necessarily contrast with a specific alternative for the future. Further, individuals' imaginary future selves are often related not only to work or specific occupational roles, but also to leisure, family life, and so on (Grey, 1994; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as individuals' beliefs regarding their ability to perform a specific task, including the level at which they believe they can perform (i.e., magnitude), the probability they associate with achieving at that level (i.e., strength), and their efficacy beliefs across related situations (e.g., generality) (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Gist & Gist, 2013). Odds-defying aspirations may be understood as closely related to individuals' self-efficacy in terms of the complex, multi-faceted, and long-term aim of

achieving a hoped-for professional identity. But while self-efficacy relates to individuals' beliefs regarding their ability to successfully perform pre-specified tasks, odds-defying aspirations may relate to ambiguous, unknown, and as-yet-undiscovered tasks which may be required in the course of a lengthy, unknown path toward professional identity development.

Fictive Storytelling. The notion of fictive storytelling comes from research surrounding identity work, and pertains to individuals' efforts to craft, revise, or maintain their identity by embellishing their past and present and weaving fanciful fabrications of the future (Snow & Anderson, 1987). As compared to odds-defying aspirations, where individuals deem their own aspirations to be unlikely to be achieved, fictive storytelling may involve both convincing others, and convincing oneself, that a more desirable past, present, or future could be a reality. More to the point, fictive storytelling is concerned with enjoying in the present the benefits of a fictional version of the self, helping to ameliorate identity threats associated with current realities (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Odds-Defying Aspirations and Professional Identity Development

Odds-defying aspirations may introduce new complexities and challenges to the process of professional identity development, and the literature points to many potential avenues for future research exploring and explicating this process. In particular, theoretical examinations have pointed to future avenues for research regarding those whose hoped-for professional identities defy the odds, while empirical work remains limited.

Identity Claiming & Odds-Defying Aspirations—A Risky Business. Aspiring to hold an odds-defying professional identity may seem radical or unrealistic to others, and the path to achieving this identity may seem unclear compared to more socially scripted or expected paths. In such cases, Ibarra and Barbulescu suggest that individuals will have a greater need to justify their direction both to others and to themselves (2010: 139). DeRue and Ashford point out how claiming professional identities can involve risks to individuals' relationships,

image, and other goals, and individuals may anticipate claiming risks as they choose whether to claim desired identities in social interaction (2010). For instance, claiming a leader identity may risk interpersonal awkwardness if others do not grant this identity, and individuals may worry about how their claims will be perceived by others (e.g., as arrogant, pushy, or presumptuous) (DeRue & Ashford, 2010: 639). Odds-defying aspirers' career pursuits may take them through unclear and challenging paths to success and away from more predictable or socially expected trajectories, creating additional obstacles in terms of earning others' approval and endorsement for their chosen path (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010: 139). Exposing an aspiration of this kind in the wrong way, at the wrong time, or to the wrong audiences, could make it vulnerable to social invalidation. Thus, proactively managing and minimising anticipated identity claiming risks may be especially important for those with odds-defying aspirations, as they undertake relatively uncharted or competitive paths to achieving their career aspirations. However, little attention has been devoted to how individuals claim professional identities that entail under-institutionalised transitions and career progression (e.g., pursuing a freelance career, starting a new company) or that may appear to be discontinuous (e.g., accepting a more junior position to pursue a calling, moving into a lower prestige occupation)—the very kinds of identities that may be targets for those newly embarking on a path to pursue their odds-defying aspirations (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ashford et al., 2018; Campion et al., 2020).

Identity Threat & Odds-Defying Aspirations—An Underexamined Context. How individuals manage identity threat is also less understood in the context of careers that "go off script"—deviating from traditional or expected trajectories, as in the case of odds-defying aspirers (Ashford et al., 2018; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In particular, it is unclear how individuals may manage threats to the value, meaning, or enactment of a professional identity that is still in a nascent or future state. Predominantly,

explorations of identity threat responses focus on how individuals deal with threats to current, formally enacted work-role identities (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Creed et al., 2010; Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Fine, 1996; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Kreiner et al., 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Koerner, 2014; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014; Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Pratt et al., 2006; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Petriglieri highlights how individuals engage in identity-protection or identity-restructuring responses in order to manage identity threats—derogating sources of threat, concealing threatened identities, educating others about the value or positive-distinctiveness of the identity, decreasing the importance of the threatened identity, changing the meaning of the identity, or abandoning the identity altogether (2011). How these responses may apply in the context of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development remains to be understood.

Motivation & Odds-Defying Aspirations—A Theoretical Mystery. Given that odds-defying aspirers anticipate that their professional identity development efforts may not result in achieving hoped-for outcomes, their identity motives may be at cross-purposes—propelling them to go for their career goals, while also pushing them to avoid the seemingly inevitable failure that may arise from trying to achieve them. Many questions remain surrounding how individuals motivate their professional identity development as they work to achieve their odds-defying aspirations. Wishful thinking, fantasising, or daydreaming about the future—where an individual's hope or aspiration is seen as an "impossible dream"—tends to be associated with inaction and unsuccessful performance in attaining desired outcomes (Oettingen, 1996; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen et al., 2001). In other words, when individuals' positive or desired futures seem unlikely to be achieved, this tends to limit effort and exertion toward achievement (Pizzolato, 2007). Scholars suggest that individuals'

positive imaginings allow them to mentally escape, and enjoy their desired futures in the present, making it easy to continually defer attempting to make them a reality (e.g., Costas & Grey, 2014; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992). Obodaru extends this line of thinking, suggesting that individuals engage in imagined enactment of these selves in order to make their forgone professional identities feel real and self-descriptive, even when choice or constraint has taken their career in a different direction (2017). In short, fantasising or imagining becoming one's desired, but unlikely, future work self may have a dampening effect on one's efforts to actually achieve this desired future. Likewise, careers research suggests that when individuals believe they are unlikely to succeed, or that others see them as unlikely to succeed, their motivation, effort, and performance tends to slacken, as they avoid putting themselves forward for opportunities that would enable their progression (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Cejka & Eagly, 1999). The idea that individuals' beliefs regarding their chances of success are associated with their motivation and achievement is consistent with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2002; Walkey, McClure, Meyer & Weir, 2013), self-regulation theories (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010), the Galatea effect in self-fulfilling prophecy (Chapman & McCauley, 1993; Eden & Ravid, 1982; Eden, 2014), and other related goal-oriented phenomena (Bandura, 2001; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Pizzolato, 2007; Strauss et al., 2012). Further, receiving negative feedback and encountering low expectations from others—for example, in relation to a particular goal or work-related task—has been linked to detrimental effects on motivation and performance (Brophy, 1983; Eden, 2003; Eden & Kinnar, 1991; McNatt, 2000; Merton, 1948; Steele, 1997). Thus, from a theoretical perspective, it remains something of a mystery how individuals actually move from fantasising about to achieving their career dreams in lived reality, overcoming their own perceptions and others' feedback that their aspirations may be unrealistic. I join with other

scholars in beginning to explore how “imagination, dreams, and fantasies can propel change” in individuals’ career progression as individuals work to overcome the odds (Fachin & Davel, 2015: 386; Nurmohamed, 2014, 2020).

Identity Play & Odds-Defying Aspirations—An Underexplored Process. The concept of identity play put forward by Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) invites a deeper consideration of how individuals play at the threshold between work-related dreams or fantasies and lived reality, and how they create bridges from the world of play back to reality. For individuals with odds-defying aspirations—where paths for progression may be less clear or where work-role transitions may seem more radical—identity play is theorised to be particularly critical for professional identity development (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Past research suggests that individuals may work to achieve seemingly impossible future professional identities by crafting narratives and provisionally enacting their desired identities, often through identity play (Fachin & Davel, 2015; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Shepherd & Williams, 2018; Stanko et al., 2020). In these contexts, identity play is theorised to involve divergent exploration and delayed commitment, helpfully allowing individuals to seek out a wide variety of options for identity and providing nascent identities with sufficient time to develop—conditions that foster identity growth (Ibarra, 1999, 2003). The insight of these studies is that individuals’ engagement in provisional, experimental, playful, vicarious, and imagined identity enactment may actually help to shift their views regarding what is possible for their careers. Insofar as their possibility beliefs might evolve, an individual might move from fantasising about to actualising a desired professional identity. For instance, Stanko and colleagues find that identity play gives individuals the flexibility to appear, behave, and view the world in a variety of ways, and to play with possible, improbable, and impossible selves—in this case, in virtual worlds (2020). They further find that playing with possible selves often leads

individuals to actualise their desired identities in real life (2020). Fachin and Davel similarly find that identity play helps individuals create resources that can be drawn upon in identity work, allowing them to move from dreaming about impossible futures to accumulating resources to attempt to validate them in lived reality (2015). Still, whether identity play of necessity precedes identity work, as well as the conditions under which either approach is adopted in individuals' professional identity development, remains underexplored. Shepherd and Williams theorise that identity play may help individuals to bounce back following identity loss, and that oscillating between identity play and identity validation may enable individuals to progress toward a new positive work identity (2018). Empirical work remains limited, as does our understanding of how people discover and define "the identity that they aim to validate" and "transition from play to work" in the course of professional identity development (Fachin & Davel, 2015: 387).

Chapter Summary

Professional identity development is the process whereby individuals work to become who they want to be at work in relation to a specific work role. Odds-defying aspirations are individuals' hoped-for professional identities, which they perceive are unlikely to be achieved formally in the world of work. Important questions remain regarding individuals' professional identity development in instances where they work to achieve their odds-defying aspirations. Returning to the research questions guiding this study, the literature review suggests that the professional identity development process for odds-defying aspirers will likely necessitate navigating substantial claiming risks and identity threats and engaging in both identity work and play. How individuals form, enact, and motivate progress toward achieving their odds-defying aspirations remains to be seen, although related research suggests that the imaginative exploits of identity play may provide generative foundations for odds-defying aspirers' future identity development.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH CONTEXT

Chapter Roadmap

Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm that underpins this work, this chapter highlights the appropriateness of a qualitative research design for building our understanding of how the professional identity development process unfolds for odds-defying aspirers. A description of the research method follows, with reference to the suitability of grounded theory as an overarching methodological approach for answering the research questions. Following these initial sections, the chapter continues on by detailing how the research unfolded in the field, in harmony with the research design. I highlight key features of the research context, which informed my selection of comedy entertainment, and women who aspire to careers as comedians in particular, as an appropriate setting for the research. Next, I describe the sample and recruitment strategy as well as the process of data collection. I present details of my own background and multiple identities, situating myself in relation to the research. Finally, I describe the data analysis procedures, which enabled the development of a grounded theoretical model of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development. The chapter closes with evaluative criteria for the study, in line with the guiding principles of a grounded theoretical methodology.

Research Paradigm & Epistemological Approach

Competing paradigms help to guide and shape qualitative research designs, in line with their ontological, epistemological, and methodological orientations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The answers to the questions of "What can we know?" and "How can we know?" are foundational to scientific inquiry and guide researchers not only in terms of the questions they ask, but also in how they justify their answers (Bowleg, 2017; Willig, 2013).

This thesis aligns with an interpretivist paradigm, which rejects the notion of an objective, singular, verifiable external reality that can be ascertained by an observer (Ponterro, 2005; Willig, 2013). Interpretivism and constructivism are closely related approaches, which I equate for the purposes of the thesis. According to Guba and Lincoln's typology, a constructivist paradigm aligns with a more relativist rather than realist ontology —meaning that reality is assumed to be multiple and locally constructed—for instance, in the minds of individuals in interaction with others and the material world (1994; see also Hansen, 2004). Further, interpretivism reflects a subjectivist rather than objectivist epistemology. In this way, interpretivism reflects Kant's writings, which express the idea that perception is rooted not only in the evidence of the senses, but in the apparatus and process that organises impressions in the mind (Hamilton, 1994; Kant, 1781/1966). Thus, you can never "partition out an objective reality" from those who are "experiencing, processing, and labelling" their experience of it (Ponterro, 2005: 129; Sciarra, 1999). Felin, Koenderink, and Krueger's (2016) recent articulation of reality as constructed in the mind of the observer, through their perceptual interface, according to their perceptual intentions, helps to illustrate how this paradigm contrasts to more positivistic approaches grounded in objectivism and realism.

Qualitative Research Design

The qualitative researcher seeks to understand and explore issues where quantitative measures and statistical analyses are both inappropriate and inadequate (Cassell, 2013; Leavy, 2014). For instance, qualitative research may be focused on understanding the "meanings and interpretations that individuals or groups ascribe to a given concept or situation… to access the subjective experience of organisational life and behavior" (Cassell, 2013: 1) or may be oriented toward developing theories when only "partial or inadequate theories exist… or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem" (Creswell, 2007: 40). Qualitative research often explores the sensitive, personal, or private

aspects of individuals' lives—including the emotions, stories, interactions, thoughts, and attachments that constitute much of individuals' lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Interpretivist approaches and studies of identity and identity development lend themselves to qualitative research designs that appreciate context and subjectivity (Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018b). The nature of the research questions at the heart of this thesis surround individuals' subjective understandings of themselves in relation to specific work-roles and their potential for formally enacting those roles in the future, and thus are most suited to a qualitative research methodology.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Qualitative research designs differ in relation to the level or unit of analysis under investigation (e.g., individual, team, organisation, community, event, activity), in terms of the problems they are most suited to addressing (e.g., understanding phenomena, developing theory) and in terms of their overarching framework for data collection and analysis (e.g., case study, phenomenology, action research, content analysis, grounded theory, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis) (Cassell, 2013; Creswell, 2007). Key decisions for the researcher include choosing what types of data to collect (e.g., interview, observational, archival), what mode(s) of data collection to pursue (e.g., in-person, electronic, video), as well as how to structure encounters with participants during the course of data collection (e.g., structured vs. unstructured interviews, participant vs. non-participant observations) (Given, 2008). These decisions are made in line with the research question, in connection with the epistemological approach and research paradigm guiding the study.

As Suddaby points out, grounded theorizing in management research is most suited to questions that explore "how individuals interpret reality" and "the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience" (2006: 634). Grounded theory is, therefore, an appropriate method for understanding the process of professional identity

development among odds-defying aspirers—and indeed, this method has been adopted across many related studies in the field (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Ladge et al., 2012; Obodaru, 2017; Pratt et al., 2006; Rogers et al., 2017). While phenomenological and narrative approaches likewise provide rich insights into individuals' lived experiences and interpretive meaning structures, grounded theory methodologies are particularly well-suited to building theory and so align most closely with the objectives and research questions guiding this thesis.

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) seminal text on grounded theory as a method of qualitative inquiry has spurred on generations of researchers and provided the seeds for substantial developments in terms of its core tenets and application (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In line with these developments, grounded theory has been implemented with both positivist and constructivist research approaches—reflecting the detached empiricism and the field-oriented pragmatism of its founders' differing research backgrounds (Charmaz, 2006). This thesis aligns with a constructivist approach to grounded theory, in line with the interpretivist research paradigm of this work.

Foundational aspects of grounded theory methodologies include theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and data analysis procedures including multiple rounds of coding and the writing of analytic memos in conjunction with ongoing data collection. Theoretical sampling is a guide to the selection and inclusion of research participants and data, stipulating that new data should be added on the basis of theoretical and conceptual relevance. The goal is to find "excellent" study participants who have experienced or observed the phenomena under investigation and who are willing and able to share their reflections—in contrast to other sampling procedures that prioritise representation of populations or random, unbiased inclusion of participants (Morse, 2007; see also Spradley, 1979/2016). Sampling ceases when theoretical saturation is achieved—the point at which no new conceptual insights are generated by additional data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constant comparison and

the simultaneous collection and analysis of data are likewise key tenets of grounded theory, and involve iteratively comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with categories, categories with categories, and so on, using insights from this process to guide and inform further data collection efforts (Given, 2008). Finally, data analysis procedures in grounded theory include multiple coding stages, punctuated by the writing of analytic memos. The first of these is open coding, which involves developing initial concepts, followed by axial coding which involves examining patterns and relationships between these concepts and grouping open codes together categorically (Goulding, 2002). These initial coding stages are followed by theoretical coding, which synthesizes the analysis and reconnects it to others' perspectives and existing theory to develop an integrated theoretical framework (Holton, 2007; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory reflects a distinct approach to the implementation of these procedures, including a greater emphasis on researcher reflexivity and the validity of multiple interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Research Context

As Morse points out, qualitative inquiry relies on researchers seeking out "the best examples of whatever it is that they are studying. We seek the optimal, rather than the average experience. By using the worst—or best—cases, the characteristics of the phenomenon or experience we are studying become most obvious" (2007: 234). Thus, in line with the goal of theory development, I looked for a research context that would provide a clear view of the process of theoretical interest (Yin, 2009). Aspiring comedians are well-positioned for building our understanding of odds-defying aspirations and professional identity development, and selecting this context allowed for the recruitment of "excellent" informants who demonstrated a willingness and ability to speak reflexively about their experiences and observations of this process (Spradley, 1979).

Several features of the context informed the selection of aspiring comedians who are women as an appropriate group from which to draw insights regarding how individuals work to achieve their odds-defying aspirations. The field of comedy sits within the broader world of entertainment, an industry that is often at the center of public attention and which attracts newcomers with the elusive enticements of celebrity, wealth, and creative fulfillment. Competition for scarce and temporary roles, as well as the caprice of audience's tastes and interest, mean that individuals will likely need to reinvent themselves and overcome substantial rejection and disappointment throughout their careers in order to continue to advance and progress (Flew & Cunningham, 2010; Kalleberg, 2009; Morgan & Nelligan, 2015). Comedic entertainment is also unique in terms of its heavy reliance on live performance and often on solo performance, making individuals' creative content as well as their career behaviors and intentions subject to feedback and thus potentially riskier to undertake (Barreca, 2013; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Reilly, 2017). Personal and professional transience and instability are common due to the project-based and short-term nature of much comedic work, and under-institutionalised paths to progression may further complicate the prospect of achieving one's aspirations (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Additionally, women working to become comedy professionals are entering a historical and discursive space where women are a minority group, where fiercely debated perspectives surrounding gender and comedic work are ongoing across the public square as well as within the field, and where marginalization, discrimination, and harassment are endemic and overt (Grey, 1994, Rodgers, 2020).

The sections that follow provide additional detail concerning the world of comedy entertainment, and Table 3.1 summarizes key features of the research context. Providing this contextual backdrop serves two key purposes: first, to further explain the selection of comedians, and particularly aspiring comedians who are women, as an appropriate group

from which to draw insights regarding how individuals work to achieve their odds-defying aspirations, and second, to situate the findings of the study in context, within the institutions, structures, and systems that dominate the world of comedy entertainment. For those women who aspire to join its ranks, these contextual factors may be an important and central part of the lived experience of becoming a comedian.

Entertainment Industry Background & Context. Comedians are part of the broad tapestry of content creators that work in the entertainment industry, and key elements of the history and ongoing evolution of the field of entertainment are indicative of the context of the respondents in this study. As Morgan and Nelligan point out, there are "complex challenges associated with making a living and building a career in fields where work is often in short supply, project based, allocated by word-of-mouth informal networks, and where workers feel under constant threat from changes in technology and fashion" (2015: 66). Further, as Reilly highlights, the creative pursuits of

> "content creators such as writers, film directors, stand-up comedians, or singer-songwriters… involve qualities and competencies that are ambiguous or difficult to signal… In addition, these fields feature comparatively more erratic employment, shorter career lengths, and 'winner-take-all' dynamics" (2017: 148).

Thus, this may be a setting where odds-defying aspirations are relatively common among incoming talent as they face a circuitous and challenging career path that does anything but guarantee success.

The first important element in understanding this research setting is the widespread use of project-based freelance work or gigs (Smith & McKinlay, 2009). Entertainment involves a highly competitive talent marketplace where the "freedom of being creative" may be an attractive feature of the sector (Taylor & Littleton, 2012: 138) but also raises unique challenges for its workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Reid, Petocz, & Bennett, 2016). Competition for creative roles in entertainment is high, and labour markets can be volatile (Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Ibert & Schmidt, 2014; Menger, 1999; 2006). In common with many workers

in creative fields, those in the entertainment industry face substantial precarity in terms of their employment, income, and careers (Mills & Ralph, 2015; Raunig, Ray, & Wuggenig, 2011). This pattern of work has been described as "bulimic" (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 17)—with intense bouts of all-consuming work giving way to slow periods repeatedly over the course of creative workers' careers—leading to massive swings in emotional energy and social connection (see also Rowlands & Handy, 2012). As Mills and Ralphs write, "For workers this undermines any notion of professional stability… More significantly, it also results in the sector being made up of disparate, competing companies and organisations that have little chance (and little incentive) to work collaboratively" (2015: 104). In many ways, the individuals at the heart of the entertainment industry's content creation are often at the periphery of its institutions, with ambivalent organizational membership, short-term employment, and a line-up of competition waiting to take their place.

Second is the network-based allocation of labor, meaning that opportunities for employment and career growth tend to flow through interpersonal relationships (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Menger, 1999). Networks are a defining feature of freelance creative work and careers (Potts, Cunningham, Hartley, & Ormerod, 2008; Shorthose & Strange, 2004, Wittel, 2001). This creates an environment where social exclusion and discrimination are well-established patterns (Bielby & Bielby, 1996; DiMaggio & Garip, 2012; Lin, 1999; Lincoln & Allen, 2004; Lutter, 2015) and where economic inequalities and patterns of exploitation are exacerbated as workers extend "goodwill gestures" such as working long hours for low or no pay (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018: 1669; see also Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Lee, 2016; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Terranova, 2000; Ursell, 2000). Creative workers use interpersonal relationships and networks to try to piece together an upward career trajectory, despite the major ups and downs, periods of unemployment, and characteristic unpredictability of careers in

entertainment (Blair, 2001, 2003; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006; Flew & Cunningham, 2010; Kalleberg, 2009; Umney & Kretsos, 2014). In other words, personal connections "stand in for official routes for securing work" (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018: 1668; see also Blair, 2003; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005).

Third is the rise of digital technologies, and the rapidly shifting landscape for content creation and distribution in today's marketplace (Deloitte, 2020). While live entertainment enjoys a longstanding place in human history, recorded and broadcast entertainment is a relatively young field, and recent technological developments have brought an unprecedented shift in entertainment and media consumption through the rise of social media, on-demand, streaming, and over-the-top services in a "technology landscape changed beyond recognition" (Bakhshi, Hargreaves, & Mateos-Garcia, 2013: 12). While this shifting landscape may mean that there are new pathways and destinations for commercial viability in entertainment work (Booth, 2015, Davidson & Poor, 2014; Hills, 2015, Smith, 2015), undermining the "domination of the largest media corporations" (Galuska & Brzozowska, 2016: 744; see also Scott, 2014), it may also be exacerbating issues of value capture between creators of content and entertainment distributors, thereby threatening creative businesses and disrupting paths to career progression and advancement (Davidson & Poor, 2014; Hunter, 2016). Indeed, "This is undermining the economic viability of many cultural and creative operators. While a tiny minority of star creators make a decent living, the majority struggle with short-term and multi-employer contracts and poor returns on their intellectual property" (EY, 2014: 24). Thus, the rise of digital distribution technologies may increase the numbers of early careerists who feel that carving out a comedy career is an unsustainable prospect.

Fourth and finally is the widespread and systemic underrepresentation of women both in the sector's behind-the-scenes work roles and across its creative outputs. For over two decades, The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, led by Dr. Martha

Lauzen, has shown how women consistently comprise a minority of film directors, writers, and producers. In 2019, of the top 250 grossing films, 85% had no women directors, and 73% had no women writers (Lauzen, 2020). Further, the careers of performers in entertainment have been shown to be impacted by gender bias (Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Williams, Lacasa, & Latora, 2019). In 2011, only 11% of top films had female protagonists—a figure that continues to rise, but in an industry that still predominantly places men in these roles (Lauzen, 2020). There is a growing body of work exploring women's experiences working in entertainment and the broader cultural and creative industries, which highlights the challenging career conditions and systemic obstacles that they may face as the complex, volatile, and biased history of creative work in entertainment throws up career tripwires and may even produce a retraditionalisation of gender roles (Adkins, 1999, 2000; Banks & Milestone, 2011; Creedon 1989; Gill 2002, 2009; Mills & Ralph, 2015; Morgan & Nelligan, 2015; Perrons 2003; Ursell 2000). For women aspiring to careers in entertainment, this systemic disproportionality in gender representation may give rise to feelings that a future in this field is unlikely to be achieved.

Comedy Careers Background & Context. Comedic entertainment, and the work involved in creating it, presents its creators with many challenges. In their study of comedians' careers, Butler and Stoyanova Russell attest that, "Freelance creative work is a labour of love where opportunities for self-expression are combined with exploitative working conditions" (2018: 1666; see also Kim, Campbell, Shepherd, & Kay, 2020). The growing field of comedy studies has increasingly highlighted the unique position and role of comedy in history, society, and public discourse, as well as the distinctive circumstances and experiences that unfold in comedians' working lives (Double, 2005; Oppliger & Shouse, 2020, Quirk, 2018; Reilly, 2016, 2017, 2018). "Generating laughter takes work—work that is at once alienating and affirming, and almost always precarious" (Rodgers, 2020: ii).

Comedians in the sample for this thesis include those involved in live and recorded comedy, from stand-ups, to improvisers, to writers, to ensemble and solo performers. As is typical among gig careerists involved in project-based labour, individuals in the study wore multiple hats—like one respondent who was writing for a radio show while performing with an improv group, or another who was developing a sitcom for television while performing stand-up in major festivals. Thus, insights from across a variety of formats (e.g., television, radio, film, web) provide important context in describing the nature of individuals' careers in comedy entertainment (see Double, 2005; Fischer, 2013; Fox & Steinberg, 2017; Gray & Marx, 2013; Marx, 2011, 2012; Springer, 2012; VanCour, 2019).

Comedy has long been considered a socially transgressive form of creative expression, "relegated to the inferior cultural position of entertainment rather than art" (Friedman, 2014: 27). In British culture in particular, comedy is often framed as the lowbrow counterpart to high art—vulgar, physical, and obscene, rather than composed and enlightened (Stott, 2004). The subversive nature of comedy, and its power in undermining or reifying social structures and relationships, is its own substantive area of research—reflecting the unique social positions claimed by those involved in comedy content creation, who "claim positions of epistemic authority and affective and discursive power" (Rodgers, 2020: ii). Further, the public-facing and often self-expressive nature of comedic work makes it unique, even among other types of creative and cultural production. There is often an explicit or implicit connection between the content of individuals' creative work in comedy and their own lived experiences. Unlike other content creators, comedians are often both the writers and the performers of their own material (Greengross, Martin, & Miller, 2012). Therefore, the connection between an individual's identity and their work may be particularly tight, as in other work involving creative self-expression (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). The

decision to become a comedian thus involves a willingness to depart from the normative, to occupy a distinctive role in the world of work, and in the world at large.

Further, the unpredictable nature of comedy careers present unique challenges to aspirers. Similar to other content creators working in creative industries, progress within comedy does not tend to follow an organizationally embedded or highly institutionalized trajectory (Reilly, 2017). Rather, individuals' careers in comedy are self-directed, messy, unpredictable, and facilitated through a disorderly web of gigs, relationships, and fluctuations in audience taste, technologies, and trends (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Caves, 2000; Menger, 2014). Indeed, comedy careers are characteristically unstable (Mills & Ralph, 2015). In addition, opportunities for others to dismiss and invalidate aspirers' comedic ambitions abound, as audiences, critics, and industry gatekeepers are chronic commentators on comedians' material, stage presence, potential, talent, likability, commercial viability, and so on. Comedians face the intense emotional rollercoasters and high demands for self-promotion that a gig-based career often entails (Ashford et al., 2018; Greengross & Miller, 2009; Greengross et al., 2012), and these conditions may lead to frequent or intense instances of identity threat as individuals face the risks associated with claiming a desired professional identity in social interaction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Further, steps to advance and win industry attention can be frustratingly opaque and ill-defined. In common with other cultural production industries, gatekeeping practices may select for talent "somewhat arbitrarily… creating a 'winner' of enormous economic value who is no different from the other candidates in any obvious way, aside from her having been deemed valuable by the right people at the right time" (Mears, 2011: 13). Indeed, the "winner-take-all" field dynamics of comedy often mean that "content producers must endeavour to mitigate downward shifts in their careers, which are usually inevitable" (Reilly, 2017: 148). The complexity and competition inherent in the comedy industry mean that "Cultural producers struggle

internally for power and recognition. Each is trying to 'take all' implicitly at the expense of other contenders in a winner-take-all hierarchy" (Mears, 2011: 9). Thus, individuals aspiring to careers in comedy may be inclined to form odds-defying aspirations on the basis of the slim chances of any one individual becoming a successful, profitable comedian.

Beyond the unique working conditions and ostensible challenges of pursuing a career in comedy entertainment, the sample for this study is also situated in the context of longstanding societal discourses surrounding gender and humour, alongside an industry history that has tended to marginalize and discriminate against women working in this space. Understanding the world of the respondents in the study requires some introduction to where the world of comedy has come from and where it appears to be going as it pertains to gender and gender-based roles and social norms.

According to industry databases, women account for between 8% and 15% of stand-up comedians in the UK (Chortle UK, 2016; The Comedy Store, 2017). As aspiring comedians who are women attempt to imagine a destination and trajectory for whom they hope to become and to keep track of their own progress and success along that trajectory, they do so without the same network, mentorship, and information benefits that are available to their male counterparts (Lutter, 2015; Bielby & Bielby, 1996; Hughes, 2016). Women pursuing comedy careers often face the argument that women are not funny, and that humour and femininity are intrinsically incompatible (Kalviknes Bore, 2010; Rodgers, 2020). As academic Lisa Moore observes, "the female comedy performer's career path is unlikely to be very easy, since she, by the very nature of her act, invalidates cultural norms of respectability and traditional femininity" (2017: 1). As Rebecca Krefting points out in her analysis of the dual-discourses surrounding gender, comedy, and the shifting landscape of media and entertainment—female comedians today are caught in a double bind:

> "The belief that women are unfunny or not *as* funny as their male counterparts continues to hold sway in our society. For women comics, this belief informs hiring

> decisions, online traffic, income, and more. Another popular discourse maintains that the internet levels the playing field in the comedy industry, meaning anyone can succeed if they have good material. Invoking all the trappings of the myth of meritocracy… utopic fantasies of virtual parity obscure the real ways in which gender biases continue to play out in these so-called democratic spaces" (2017: 231).

In stand-up line-ups or panel shows, booking only one woman on the bill is still a relatively common practice (Black, 2016; Lowe, 2020). As Kanter points out, individuals who find themselves in the minority at work are often subject to tokenism—meaning they are the only person in a given work context who belongs to a certain social category or who possesses a certain characteristic, and therein experience a pressure to represent all others of that social category or characteristic (1977). As one commentator observed, being the sole woman in a show can have "a kind of 'spotlight effect' where the elected woman may feel responsible for representing all women—and are then potentially scrutinised as 'the woman' in a male dominated show… stories of women loathing those gigs are plentiful." (Moore, 2017: 1). Thus, a sense of being in the margins or in the minority of role-holders may contribute to aspirers' sense that achieving their aspirations will require overcoming the odds. Aspiring comedians who are women also encounter longstanding debates over nomenclature, and particularly the use of the modifier "female" before the word comedian. As Jen Kirkman points out in her book reflecting on her career in comedy, "I say, 'stand-up who also happened to be a woman' because I don't believe in saying 'female comedian.' A comedian is a comedian is a comedian. Female is not a type of comedy. You can say that someone is a one-liner comic, a storyteller, a prop comic." She continues, "It's implied that male is what a comic really is, and a female comic is a lesser version. It also implies that females only talk about 'one thing'—being female" (Kirkman, 2016: 220). Laura Lexx described this conundrum in a stand-up comedy routine featured on *The Daily Mash*. She explains,

> "I hate being called a female comedian… And I get why it's confusing, why would you hate that so much? Even my husband didn't get it…He said, 'Why do you hate being called a female comedian? What is the problem? You are a comedian, and you

> are female, and you're very proud of both of those things. What's the issue with this?' So, I spent a couple of months referring to him as my 'first husband'" (2019).

Thus, implicit messages that comedians are prototypically male and that a "female comedian" is a "lesser version" of the real thing may alienate early career aspirers and make it seem less likely that their aspirational efforts will end in success.

Summary. As I will highlight in the findings portion of the thesis, the multifaceted dimensions upon which individuals saw their own aspirations as unlikely to come about were informed by the structural and historic conditions of the field of comedy, as well as by the circumstances of their individual lives. Thus, the lived experiences of those I interviewed reflected the unique combination of challenges and features of working toward a career in comedy entertainment, which informed their formation of odds-defying aspirations.

Sample & Recruitment

This research focuses on the careers of those who develop and deliver comedic material intended for performance. Whether scripted or unscripted, whether live or pre-recorded, and whether their work is done in a writers' room, on a stage, in front of a camera, at a laptop, or in a recording studio, those in the sample are or hope to be in the business of making people laugh. I sought out interviewees working in a variety of comedy formats and styles, from one-liner stand-ups to long-form improvisers to topical news show writers—all of whom wore multiple hats as comedy content creators. The comedians in this study are working, or trying to one day work, in the entertainment industry. This definition does not include those who exclusively produce comedic material intended for distribution through industries like publishing (e.g., books, comic strips). It also excludes those who work in the entertainment industry without engaging in written and/or performance-based creative work (e.g., agents, promoters). A day in the life of each of these individuals may look very

different based upon the type of comedy they are creating, as well as where they are in their unique trajectory—from the dingy upstairs of a pub to the sound stage of a major studio.

A summary of the sample of research respondents is provided in Table 3.2. Collectively, they have worked on over 100 television and radio shows and appeared in over 25 major comedy festivals, as well as in performance venues and broadcasts around the world in stand-up specials, sketch shows, chat shows, films, topicals, improv shows, podcasts, panel shows, sitcoms, and so on. Their work has been featured across a variety of channels, networks, and streaming platforms including BBC TV, Sky TV, ITV, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Next Up Comedy, YouTube, Apple Podcasts, BBC Radio, and Spotify. At the time of writing, 72% of the sample have a profile on the British Comedy Guide, 50% have a profile on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), 10% have a dedicated personal Wikipedia page and an additional 32% are mentioned elsewhere on the site, for instance as a writer, contestant, or cast member on a television or radio programme, and 40% retain professional representation through one or more agents and/or managers. Pseudonyms are used throughout the research to refer to the members of the interviewed sample and identifying details have been removed or altered to protect respondent anonymity.

In line with the precepts of a grounded theory methodology, theoretical sampling guided the inclusion of additional data throughout the unfolding process of simultaneous data collection and analysis (Morse, 2007). I intentionally sought out interviewees at different stages in their careers, from those expressing early interest in comedy to those with years of experience as full-time professional comedians, to create a more coherent, long-term picture of how individuals go about trying to achieve their odds-defying aspirations. In total, my interview sample includes 18 full-time professional comedians, 11 semi-professional comedians, and 21 self-described amateurs or newcomers. Full-time professionals report earning all of their income from comedy entertainment in a career that consists of project-

based creative work (e.g., writing, performing). Semi-professionals report earning substantial or at least consistent income from comedic work, typically supplemented by income from sources that are unrelated to comedy (e.g., a day job, part-time work). Newcomers earn limited or inconsistent income from comedy, and usually report holding full-time day jobs in addition to doing comedy during their out-of-work hours, while others rely on freelance gig work or family financial support in conjunction with full-time study and unpaid comedy gigs.

The sample also reflects a wide variety of professional and personal backgrounds. The sample includes individuals who pursued comedy right out of their educational years, others who pivoted into comedy after working in other roles in performance or entertainment, and still others who pursued comedy after a major mid-life career transition. As is often the case in gig careers, the experience of having a concurrent work-role or "day job" was very common among the sample. Previous work-roles and current day jobs of the sample include working in government, IT, science, journalism, education, finance, law, medicine, sales, marketing, culture and heritage, customer service, fitness, higher education, and social enterprises. The demographic makeup of the sample was also diverse. The interviewees were aged between 18 to 60 years old, with an average age of 33. Individuals in the sample reported having lived and worked in over 35 nations around the world, most predominantly in the United Kingdom. 20% of those interviewed were from ethnic minorities and the sample's nationalities represent 4 continents and 11 countries. 1 interviewee was non-binary, and 6 self-reported a historically marginalised sexual orientation. 48% of the sample were in long-term partnerships (e.g., married) and 24% reported major caregiving responsibilities (e.g., for children, aging parents).

Respondents were primarily recruited through snowball sampling, an approach that is appropriate for accessing hard-to-reach populations (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Initial recruiting to begin the sampling process was based on publicly available information

regarding individuals' involvement in writing and performing comedy. Given that comedians are public figures, information regarding appropriate means for initiating contact (e.g., via an agent, manager, or website) was often readily available, along with information regarding travel and tour dates, which helped to identify those in close geographic proximity to the University of Oxford. My background in entertainment also helped me to navigate the social networks of entertainment. (Prior to embarking on an academic career, I worked for a number of years in the entertainment industry). Given that it can be difficult to gain research access within entertainment, particularly given the "social insularity" of comedians, I found this background helpful for building relationships and gaining access (Reilly, 2017: 149; Ortner 2010). Given my position as a student at the University of Oxford, I also leveraged the considerable reach and reputation of the school to facilitate access to hard-to-reach individuals. In this way, my institutional affiliation helped to garner interest in the research and a willingness to contribute on the part of respondents.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved tapping into three interrelated data sources, each reflective of the world of comedians—interviews, archival documents, and participant observations—in an effort both to sensitise to the context of the respondents and to create a richly detailed view of the multifaceted career aspirations, experiences, and perspectives of each member of the sample. The different data sources coalesce in a complementary way, providing rich insights into the world of comedy and individuals' career experiences in this sphere. While the archival data provided information about the industry's language and meaning systems, as well as norms related to advancement and career progression, the participant observations gave first-hand access to the unspoken and entrenched ways of behaving and engaging in entertainment spaces, and the interviews further revealed individuals' subjective understanding of their identity and work.

Six months prior to commencing interviews with comedy career hopefuls and professionals, I started an in-depth field sensitisation procedure involving collecting archival documents, interviewing industry leaders, and observing industry events. I continued these efforts throughout interview data collection to ensure ongoing sensitisation to the context of the participants. In total, I collected over 350 archival documents from entertainers, leaders, organisations, and commentators working in or adjacent to the world of comedy. I conducted unstructured interviews with 10 industry leaders to better understand industry conditions, current events, and the climate for women in comedy. These interviews helped me to understand the language and world of the respondents and typically lasted from one to two hours, generating a further 400 double-spaced pages of text. I further sensitised to the field by observing comedians, audiences, and industry leaders across 80 hours of participant observations at 23 live industry events (77 total comedians observed; 60 women) and across 17 pre-recorded programmes (45 total comedians observed; 30 women) over 14 months. Table 3.3 summarizes the interview and participant observations undertaken across both the field sensitisation and in-depth interviewing processes involved in data collection.

The data for the study includes 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with comedians and aspiring comedians. The interviews lasted an average of 80 minutes and generated over 2500 double-spaced pages of text. Interviews were conducted from May 2018 to May 2020, with intermittent breaks to assess progress, engage in data analysis, and recruit new respondents based on emergent theoretical concepts. Theoretical saturation guided the conclusion of the data gathering; around 40 interviews, new insights from interviews had slowed. I conducted 10 additional interviews and concluded data collection. The interviews included questions surrounding individuals' career aspirations, motivation, and professional identity (See Appendix for semi-structured interview protocol). I gathered an additional set of roughly 700 digital traces, including webpages, social media profiles, and marketing

materials, promoting the work of the members of the interviewed sample, to build a clearer picture of each interviewee's experience level, career stage, and comedic outputs. Respondent pseudonyms, career indicators, and demographic details are provided in Table 3.2.

Researcher Reflexivity

Charmaz (2006) highlights how grounded theory is *constructed* through researchers' involvement and interactions in the world, iteratively with participants' own interpretive constructions of reality. This stands as a contrast to implementations of grounded theory that construe data and theory as *discovered* by researchers, acknowledging to a lesser degree the constructed nature not only of social reality, but of theorising itself. In line with this approach, researcher reflexivity is essential, involving "turning back on one's own experience" recursively throughout the research process to make explicit the relevant background and positionality of the researcher in relation to the participants (Steier, 1991: 2; see also Mruck & Mey, 2007). Thus, in line with the tenets of constructivist grounded theory, I next present details of my relationship to the field and participants, situating myself in relation to the work. This marks an explicit recognition of how my own background, identities, and dispositions may be at work in shaping the research and in particular how the interviews may reflect the interplay of my own identities with those of my interviewees.

Humour and comedy entertainment are an important part of my life from the perspective of my research, from my previous work in entertainment, and on a more personal level. Before embarking on this study, I enjoyed reading the autobiographies of several comedians and appreciated the work of many comedy writers and performers, across a variety of formats. In this sense, I felt a personal attachment to the study. I am hopeful that the comedy entertainment industry will continue to provide poignant, thought-provoking, and hilarious content to viewers, myself included, and I am of the opinion that diverse and representative creative teams are an important part of accomplishing that objective. In part,

this work attempts to understand the landscape for, and thereby amplify the voices and work of, women in comedy entertainment.

As mentioned above, I worked in the entertainment industry for several years before joining academia: as a vocal coach for performers on a sketch comedy television series, as an acting coach, as a musical theatre director, and as a teaching assistant for university-level acting courses. In these roles, I interacted with many individuals working toward establishing their own careers in entertainment. Beyond the advantages that this background proffered in terms of knowing how to go about the process of sample recruitment, it also meant that I was partially an insider to the world of entertainment. This meant that I could relate, on a more personal level, to individuals' reflections about the unique challenges of working in the industry. I believe this professional background allowed me to build trust with respondents during our interviews and to convey empathy for the well-known challenges that are faced by aspirers in this field, particularly by women in entertainment.

On that note, I am female and in my early thirties, like the majority of those whom I interviewed. Although it is my belief that shared demographic attributes are only one of many ways that individuals may perceive similarity and build trust, my same-gender and age position with the majority of respondents may have facilitated access to interviewees, as well as stories and reflections that would have been less likely to be shared with another interviewer. In some cases, the interviews began or ultimately evolved into more informal conversations as I found common ground with respondents and got to know them.

Given my nationality as a citizen of the United States of America, I was an outsider to the United Kingdom and to the world of comedy entertainment within that social context. My voice signalled this non-native position as soon as I began to speak with interviewees. This outsider-ness may have benefited the interviews, as my North American dialect (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary) signalled a naivete in terms of British culture and customs.

Interviewees were often happy to explain unknown terms and concepts to me and to explicitly describe their concerns regarding stigmas, social structures, and the opportunities and challenges facing them in their careers, given their unique blend of circumstances and characteristics. For instance, several respondents shared how their own accent might be associated with a middle-class or working-class image and how they grappled with this part of their image in the course of putting themselves forward as a writer and/or performer.

Finally, an unexpected aspect of the fieldwork was the discovery that I would need to use my own social media accounts for networking with respondents in order to gain research access. Connecting with others via social media allowed me to signal an insider status in the world of UK comedy and to foster relationships as the snowball sampling unfolded. Comedians' use of social media may be complicated by the publicity of their work and the potential for harassment and toxic fandom that may arise in these digital spaces. For prospective interviewees, knowing that I had been deemed safe by their existing friends and colleagues in comedy or admitted to trusted groups of industry insiders often enhanced their willingness to learn more about the study and to ultimately participate. As I gained this digital access, it enhanced my ability to learn about and observe the research context, but it also left me with a sense that my personal online activities had been taken over by professional pursuits—for instance, when I scrolled through a personal social media feed and found that it was dominated by comedians' posts (Rothbard, Ramarajan, Ollier-Malaterre, & Lee, 2020). As I built my network of comedy contacts, I grappled with this blurring of personal and professional—a reflection of the changing digital landscape for researchers (Reich, 2015). This was a particularly challenging aspect of the research process and led me to discontinue my use of certain social media sites following the completion of data collection.

Beyond informing my research interests and enabling research access, my positionality as a researcher was also bound up in the data analysis and interpretation process

that unfolded over the course of the study. As someone engaged in my own process of professional identity development as a doctoral student, I found parallels across the experiences of my research respondents, my doctoral student colleagues, my academic predecessors, and myself. The waxing and waning of my own identification with professorial pursuits, and the inevitable motivational and affective ups and downs of doctoral study, have at times been an odd and introspective companion in analysing the data and interpreting the findings surrounding comedians who are likewise engaged in a process of becoming who they want to be at work. Thus, my interpretations of the data are certainly informed by my own current position as an aspirer and by my own efforts to achieve a new professional identity.

Data Analysis

I used an inductive approach to data analysis, based on the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). My implementation of this approach included several key elements and multiple rounds of coding. During this process I engaged in constant comparison, wrote memos, and maintained theoretical sensitivity, ending data collection when theoretical saturation had been achieved. I further utilized open, axial, and theoretical coding stages, reflecting the need for both substantive and theoretical analysis in the course of producing theory grounded in data.

Constant Comparison. First, I employed the constant comparative method of data analysis. Thornberg and Charmaz (2014: 159) helpfully describe the many types of comparison that may be adopted in the process of data analysis, including comparing data surrounding different social situations, actions, or interactions, comparing data surrounding the same action or phenomenon across different situations and contexts, comparing individuals and groups to each other, comparing individuals to themselves at different points in time, comparing data with codes, codes with codes, data with categories, codes with

categories, categories with categories, and so on (see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison directs the analyst's attention to exceptions, or cases that deviate from patterns in the data, thereby enabling the iterative building up and tearing down of the emergent theoretical framework (Flick, 2006). By drawing out comparative insights among the data in the sample, "The constant comparative method raises the probability of achieving a complex theory which corresponds closely to the data" (Glaser, 1965: 444; Harding, 2006). Constant comparison relates not only to analysis within a specific data set, but also to the work of drawing conceptual parallels and 'far out comparisons' between the current study and earlier work, even in other fields and disciplines (Rodriguez, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Writing Memos. Throughout the analysis, I iterated between reading data sources and writing memos, drawing connections between multiple data sources to iteratively build up and tear down impressions and ideas. The process of memoing helps to organise the researcher's impressions and insights and to capture the emerging theory (Lempert, 2007). Memos may include portions of the data and ideas for their interpretation, including emergent codes and concepts, properties and dimensions, and relationships between concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos are the seedlings for theory. By "putting things down on paper" they enable the researcher to "explore and scrutinize"—making their "thoughts, reflections, and ideas manageable"—and stimulating the process of theorizing (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014: 163). As Charmaz points out, memos are treated as preliminary and adjustable, open to the ongoing process of learning and exploration that is critical to grounded theorising (2006). Rather than formalising conclusions, memos may be fragmented and filled with questions, early ideas, and intuitions. Indeed, they are to be written freely, without constraint or concern for standard conventions of grammar and writing, as a sort of holding vessel for the researcher's ideas to simply "get them out" (Glaser, 1978: 85). I began writing memos during

the sensitisation process leading up to the semi-structured interviews and continued this practice throughout the course of the data collection and analysis. I shared these memos in raw and synthesized form with colleagues on many occasions, sense-checking my interpretations, refining my questions, building up insights to guide theoretical sampling, and clarifying ideas to spark further theorising (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). An excerpt from an analytic memo follows, to highlight the casual, exploratory nature of this research practice in the process of developing a grounded theory. This memo was written in October 2019, while I was simultaneously engaged in ongoing data collection and analysis.

> "*Pretending this is the only part of your life:* there seems to be a social pressure to distance oneself from the day job, family, etc. that might be a distraction from comedy. To pretend like it is the only thing, in order for people further along to take you seriously, because there is such a high dropout rate. There becomes a pressure to focus in on the comedy part of your life around others, to the exclusion of other things. This also means if you're good at anything else, or want to do anything else, you almost have to hide it."

Capturing my thoughts in this way prompted additional focus in subsequent interviews on how individuals engaged in non-comedic activities and discussed them with others in the world of comedy. This memo incited additional theorising around forms of identity enactment and helped to incubate the notions of *divesting* and *overstating* that appear in the theoretical framework.

Data Coding Stages. Creswell highlights how a basic criterion for evaluating grounded theory is to look for whether the researcher followed a coding process that begins with the data and works outward toward a larger theoretical model (2007: 217). Scholars have suggested various stages of coding that may be adopted as part of this overarching process of moving from data to theory. Importantly, coding in grounded theory must include both substantive and theoretical analysis—focused on the data itself and relationships within it and extending out to relationships between the emerging theory and existing theory

(Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This allows for the crystallising of an interpretive account of the data that generates theory—where "what we see depends upon our angle of repose"—reflecting one of an infinite variety of angles from which we might approach the world (Richardson, 2000: 934).

I engaged in multiple rounds of coding using NVivo software as a holding environment and tool for the data analysis. First, I engaged in 'open' or 'initial' coding—reading transcriptions of the interviews line-by-line and assigning codes to portions of the text, developing preliminary ideas of concepts relevant to the research questions (Goulding, 2002). Coding with gerunds is especially valuable for constructivist grounded theorising, as it helps focus the analysis in active, processual terms (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Thus, my initial codes focused on the actions and reactions of respondents in the course of their odds-defying aspirational careers, with an emphasis on gerunds (e.g., auditioning, imagining the future, feeling, deciding, commiserating, avoiding, competing, being in the moment, connecting, ignoring, moderating, proving, taking risks). Additionally, open coding emphasised the language of the respondents to further ground the theory and add credibility to the findings. For example, with labels like "coming out", "remembering it takes time", and "wondering—is it worth it?"

Following from the open coding process, I used axial coding to begin to group concepts together. This involved exploring relationships between the initial concepts, and iteratively defining categories and subcategories, both through the writing of analytic memos and through the constant comparison of emergent concepts. In line with Corbin and Strauss's clarification, axial coding did not unfold as a second stage of analysis subsequent to open coding, but rather co-occurred with open coding, as connections and categories took shape (2008). In other words, the distinction between open or initial and axial coding is primarily explanatory in nature. Indeed, "open coding and axial coding go hand in hand… though we

break data apart… we also have to put it back together again… as analysts work with data, their minds automatically make connections because, after all, the connections come from the data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 198). Thus, as open codes coalesced around broader categories and as intersecting ideas developed, axial coding helped to capture the relationships and patterns in the initial codes. Figure 1 provides an illustration of how the analysis progressed from raw data to open (first order) and axial (second order) codes.

Finally, I engaged in theoretical coding, building a bridge from the substantive coding stages (i.e., open, axial) toward the development of a theoretical framework. This involved iterating between the data and the literature—bringing together the world of the study with the world of existing theory—in order to refine, integrate, and clarify theoretical insights. In part, this process was geared toward identifying categories that "reflected the data but were abstracted from the particular context" (Garrett, 2017: 13; see also Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The theoretical coding stage also involved developing an overarching model of the findings, moving iteratively between the data and the theoretical framework, and creating visual representations of the relationships between theoretical concepts and categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, as I began to identify instances of identity enactment, I coded for how individuals enacted their identities with a wide variety open codes (e.g., downplaying, observing, hedging). As I noticed similarities among these codes, I iteratively grouped them together and began combining them where appropriate. From a lengthy list of approaches to identity enactment, I arrived at a set of 10 strategies, and broke these down into two categories according to their orientation toward the risks of attempting an odds-defying aspiration—with 5 growth-promoting and 5 loss-preventing identity enactment strategies. I was intrigued by the stories that individuals shared of enacting their identity in a loss-preventing way at one point in time (for instance, by disguising themselves on stage to avoid recognition by the

audience) and then doing just the opposite later on (for instance, by making themselves recognizable to the audience). I wondered what precipitated this shift in approach, and how to understand these contradictory approaches as part of the same process of professional identity development. Across multiple versions of the model, I depicted the relationship between these approaches in a variety of ways—from an hourglass flipping over, to a balance of weights competing for dominance—and explored the underlying aspirational assumptions and recalibration efforts that precipitated this shift. All told, I iteratively refined the full theoretical model over a period of 18 months. Thus, my coding process broadly followed Creswell's three central steps of qualitative data analysis: reducing the data into coded segments, combining codes to form categories, and displaying theoretical relationships through data visualisations (2007).

Evaluation

Scholars have proposed a variety of measures for examining the quality of qualitative research outputs (for an in-depth review, see Creswell 2007). As Flick highlights, the question of how to assess qualitative research remains unsolved (2002). As Corbin expounds "everyone agrees evaluation is necessary but there is little consensus about what that evaluation should consist of" (2008: 297). Indeed, a variety of evaluation criteria have been proposed, from establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); to confirming ethical and substantive validation (Angen, 2000); to showing authenticity, criticality, integrity, explicitness, vividness, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity (Whitmore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). These procedures contrast with quantitative verification procedures yet have often been positioned in parallel to concepts such as validity or rigour (Creswell, 2007).

Importantly, as Corbin highlights, evaluations of grounded theory should address not only the scientific, but also the creative aspects of conducting qualitative research (2008).

Thus, alongside establishing the credibility of research findings, originality, resonance, and usefulness may also be important to consider (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). A rendering of Glaser and Strauss's credibility and applicability guidelines is helpful here: "The 'proof is in the pudding' so to speak. If it 'fits' and it is 'useful'… rigor must have been built into the research process, or the findings would not hold up to scrutiny, would not fit similar situations, and would be invalidated in practice" (Corbin, 2008: 300). Further, evaluations of grounded theory need to be aligned with the epistemological assumptions guiding the work (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). While positivist theories stress explanation, prediction, and causal relationships, interpretive theories give precedence to abstract understanding and emphasise interpretation (Charmaz, 2006).

Thus, in line with the constructivist grounded theory methodology guiding this work, a variety of measures were adopted to ensure that the research outputs provide "plausible interpretations" that develop our understanding (Wolcott, 2009: 70, 1994). These measures include prolonged engagement in the field, theoretical sampling, multiple rounds of data coding, analytic memoing, and the use of participants' own language in the codes. Recall that constructivist grounded theorising emphasises that multiple interpretations of the data are valid, as well as multiple theories of a given phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). Indeed, "it is always possible for the same qualitative data set to yield varying interpretations" (Bowleg, 2017: 680; Willig, 2013) and "every theory is partial and incomplete" (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014: 21). Thus, this researcher seeks "crystallisation" to provide a "deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic" while embracing the idea that "we know there is always more to know" (Richardson, 2000: 934).

Chapter Summary

Following a grounded theory methodology, I seek to answer the research question—how does the professional identity development process unfold for odds-defying aspirers?

The comedy entertainment industry's unique challenges and the landscape for women in comedy in particular make this an excellent context for building theory. In line with the tenets of grounded theory, data collection and analysis for this study involved theoretical sampling, constant comparison, writing analytic memos, and multiple rounds of coding—moving from data to theory. The aim of this methodological approach is to generate theory that helps to build an interpretive understanding of the research question at hand, in line with the interpretivist research paradigm guiding this work.

CHAPTER IV: 'STATISTICALLY, I AIN'T GOING TO GET IT'

Chapter Roadmap

This chapter introduces the findings of the thesis, outlining the building blocks of the theoretical model presented. In line with the principles of grounded theory, it highlights key conceptual categories, then theorises relationships between them, to form a cohesive theory of the process of professional identity development among odds-defying aspirers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In every instance, illustrative quotes are provided in both the text and data tables (Creswell, 2007)—evidencing that the overarching process of grounded theorising, which grounds theory in the data, was applied throughout the research. Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 present data for this chapter.

Odds-Defying Aspirations

For those I interviewed, becoming a professional comedian initially seemed like a desirable, but improbable, career aspiration. That is, respondents perceived that achieving this career "dream" would necessarily involve overcoming the odds, which were stacked against them, often in multiple ways. Yet while becoming a professional comedian seemed improbable, it was also highly desirable. In other words, aspiring to become a full-time professional writer and/or performer in the world of comedy was understood to be an odds-defying aspiration—a long shot, pipe dream, high-hope, or unrealistic aspiration. For many respondents, the idea of achieving such a rare or hard-to-achieve future was part of what made it desirable in the first place. Daisy Harding recounted feeling that her ambitions were, "kind of pie in the sky and I didn't at all believe that I could make them happen. Then obviously there is a little part of me that said, 'But it would be nice though.'" This combination of thinking that an aspiration is unlikely to become a reality, while also wishing for it to come about, is at the heart of an odds-defying aspiration. As Mary Clarkson

reflected, “I liked the idea of it, but I never thought it would be a thing that would actually happen.” The label of odds-defying thus indicates individuals’ recognition of a set of odds in social reality—a backdrop against which their aspirations seem unlikely to come about in the world of work, given any number of personal or structural factors. This recognition did not preclude individuals from believing that they could succeed, in spite of the odds, and indeed from actually achieving the milestones, accomplishing the objectives, and reaching the heights to which they aspired. Rather, it set the stage for their professional identity development—with the perspective that becoming a comedian was a desirable but seemingly impossible career dream.

Respondents reported three overarching reasons for perceiving that their hoped-for professional identity as a comedian would be unlikely to come about in lived reality: 1) the rarity and competitiveness of the role to which they aspired, 2) the inaccessibility or complexity of the path to securing that work role, and 3) an upbringing or multiple identities that made them feel atypical as compared to role incumbents. (See Table 4.1).

First, respondents often noted the low likelihood of anyone succeeding in becoming a full-time professional comedian, due to the competitive nature of the field of entertainment and the relative *rarity* of anyone attaining this work-role. In other words, certain occupations, work-roles, and work-related achievements are understood to be uncommon and unlikely to be achieved, and the majority of respondents felt that their desire to become a professional comedian fell into this category of being generically improbable. Agnes Finch put it simply: “Statistically, I ain’t going to get it.” Katie Al-Jamil similarly reported, “You don’t grow up in school with people being like ‘I'm going to be a doctor or a nurse’ and ‘I'm going to be a comedian.’” As this quote suggests, the relative scarcity and uniqueness of comedic work roles was often contrasted to the availability and normalcy of other work roles, particularly in full-time, nine-to-five, organisationally embedded labour. Imogen Baker contrasted her

comedy aspirations to potentially following her parents' career paths, which to her seemed more "realistic" and "a lot more sensible." Calinda Jeffries told me that, initially, she did not think she would be able to "make a living from it," and did not "see it as a reality." Amy Arlington likewise described her aspirations as a "long shot career prospect" and further stated, "Whenever you dream about something that's in entertainment for your job, you're like 'I can do that!' but no one does that." The feeling that "no one" makes it in entertainment reflects the competitiveness of the industry, the rarity of professional roles in comedy, and the low likelihood of achieving a successful career as a comedian.

Respondents also stated how the entertainment industry's lack of clearly defined steps and trajectories for career progression made achieving their comedic aspirations seem improbable, because of the *inaccessibility* of this path. Winnie Miller told me about her experience deciding to pursue a career in comedy and how it compared to the more traditional careers of her parents and university peers, who were studying or working in finance, publishing, law, and medicine. She stated, "I think I guess I'd always been slightly scared of it as an idea, thinking it's not really something you can rely on." The lack of clearly defined "steppingstones" in this career path, and the fact that "you really have to be at a certain level for this to be a viable career and not just something that you enjoy doing on the side," compounded her sense that this might be an unrealistic ambition. Amy Arlington echoed the sentiment that the comparative lack of clearly defined steps to progress made becoming a professional in the world of comedy seem unlikely: "In consulting you get an internship, then a return offer, then you become an associate, and then you're working, and that's your career for your whole life. Whereas if you are going to work in entertainment, who knows? You're going to have to bounce around and figure it out." Nicola Trent likewise shared how she worried about not knowing how to navigate toward key opportunities and away from difficulties: "I don't really know where to look to find the good gigs, because I

know there are some that are just terrible and some that I'll just never do well at, and I don't really want to do those." Aspiring comedian Hilda Avis summed it up simply: "I'm not under any illusions about how easy it is to have a career in comedy." Knowing that the terrain for progress in comedy was not only unpredictable and challenging, but also difficult to map, made future success in this journey seem anything but guaranteed.

Finally, many respondents described that their aspirations were unlikely to come about due to their *atypicality* as a candidate, compared to other comedians—citing a lack of relevant role models from within their own communities or from among the ranks of role incumbents. For many respondents, the perception that becoming a successful comedian was unlikely was due, in part, to the incompatibility of their background and upbringing with their goal of becoming a professional comedian. As Viola Bell put it, "No one like me, from my town, can do that kind of thing." Feeling that their background had conditioned them to pursue more traditional, stable sources of employment, or that their upbringing had not been geared toward preparing them to pursue this type of profession, indicated to individuals that they were unlikely to achieve their aspirations. As Brooklyn Havemeyer explained, "I'm not from a family that does that. I'm not from that background, so it sort of always felt a bit pie-in-the-sky." This meant that they perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage relative to others from communities with more vibrant arts and entertainment offerings or from families with a background in freelance and creative work. Individuals' feelings of atypicality as a candidate were also premised on their multiple identities and the stereotypes, opportunities, and challenges associated with them, as well as the prototypes associated with their desired professional role as a comedian. Many of those in the sample shared their perception that because they did not fit the prototypical image or life circumstances of a comedian—a straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied, unencumbered (i.e., non-caregiver), urban-dwelling male—their odds of success were lower. As Kris Rader reflected, "For me it just

doesn't feel plausible." Going on, she added, "There aren't a lot of people with my unique set of circumstances I suppose. Whereas if you are a twenty-something white, straight, able-bodied man, there are lots of people with a similar set of circumstances." Recognising that the industry assumed this combined "set of circumstances" meant that the individual would experience a relative disadvantage in advancing, and that their efforts were even more likely to end in failure. A very common feature of respondents' experience was recognising that attempting to become a comedian was an act of defying historical and cultural norms: both those norms reflected by the entertainment industry and those conveyed by gender-role socialisation. This normative backdrop contributed to individuals' sense that reaching their ambitions would be odds-defying. As Breanna Barker reflected, "Women didn't do stand-up in the 90s… there just wasn't the representation, or the role models. It was like you're either Victoria Wood—that's not me—or a posh Cambridge Footlight, and it just seemed unachievable." Thus, an absence of role models with whom individuals felt a sense of identification also contributed to their perception that their aspiration was "unachievable." In essence, atypicality reflected a perception that 'people like me don't do this'.

The Paradoxical Pulls

Growing out of their odds-defying aspirations, respondents in the study experienced a paradoxical combination of wanting to make their "dream come true" while also wanting to protect this dream from being quashed by lived reality. In other words, they wanted to promote growth toward achieving their desired professional identity in the world of work *(i.e., the pull to promote identity growth)* and to prevent the loss of this nascent professional identity *(i.e., the pull to prevent identity loss)*. The struggle to navigate this paradox—to advance in their careers without extinguishing their dream by "going for it" too hastily or without adequate preparation—is a central feature of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development. Each side of this motivational paradox is compounded by the identity

threats associated with either potential course of action—either trying and failing or else failing to try—as well as the underlying claiming environment for the individual, including the unique risks and rewards (i.e., instrumental, interpersonal, and image) and tolerance for those risks that their personal circumstances precipitate (See Table 4.1).

Paradoxical Identity Threats. Trying to achieve their odds-defying aspirations presented respondents with the threat of failing in the attempt. The *identity threat of trying and failing* added to the pull to prevent the loss of this hoped-for future identity. As one respondent, Gemma Evanston, put it, "It's one of those things where you think, 'Well, that's kind of my dream.' But if I do my dream, and then I'm terrible at it, then I have no dream." She clarified, "Definitely there was this thought, 'But what if I do it and I fail at it?' Then it's not something I've got in the future to look forward to or aspire to. Then it's kind of gone." In a sense, Gemma feared that by pursuing her comedy aspirations, her nascent professional comedian identity and her hope to actualise it someday would be extinguished. The threat of failing, and thereby harming self-esteem, was also a concern. As Hannah Benson pointed out, "I think it's quite a good idea for me to give up if it really doesn't go well for like a number of years; I don't want to totally crush my self-esteem." Comedians were also concerned about "pathetically holding onto a dream." Brittany Sanders commented, "There's something that says keep at it, and there's something else that's like go and have a happy life doing something else." Thus, a desire to avoid incurring an undesirable future identity also kept individuals away from openly pursuing and enacting their comedy aspirations. Wishing to avoid the threat of others' invalidating feedback meant that individuals were more inclined to withhold efforts to grow, in favour of preventing the loss of their burgeoning identity as a comedian. Failing to achieve their odds-defying aspiration would have the dual effect of limiting their enactment of this identity formally in the workplace but would also make it difficult to return to the happy state of fantasising about becoming a comedian. Thus, the fear

of trying and failing, and thereby harming their comedian identity, oriented individuals toward preventing this loss.

Yet individuals were also faced with the *identity threat of failing to try*, by never going for it and in so doing losing out on the opportunity to enact their odds-defying aspiration formally in the world of work. After working for a number of years as a producer, and then as the primary caregiver for her children, Breanna Barker knew that deep down, she "really just wanted to be a performer making people laugh." She reflected:

> "I thought, this voice isn't going to go away. It felt like an indigestion of the soul. And I wanted to just go do a comedy course, and I was like, 'I will do a burp, I will have got it out of my system and then I'll go back to life as a teacher and a mum and the school run and la-la-la and it will be fine.' And I stepped out on the stage at the end of the course and went 'Oh, I'm home.' And I remember coming home and saying to my husband, 'Don't make me choose. Don't make me choose family or this because I've chosen family for too long and I will die sad if I don't pursue this.' And so I have basically pursued it fairly relentlessly since."

The fear of missing out on this possible future, and the pain of forgoing such a desirable professional identity, loomed large for many respondents. Leticia Ruiz spoke of how temporarily leaving comedy for another career ultimately pushed her back into comedy: "I had such panic attacks when I thought about saying 'I used to be a stand-up.' I was like, 'No, I can't say that. I can't.' I'm not, 'I used to be a stand-up.' I *am* a stand-up, so I had to go back to it." She continued, "I just couldn't settle into the identity of having once been a stand-up, it just didn't sit well with me. I needed to be able to say I am one… I think a comedian, it's a very strong identity. It's not something that you do, it's something that you are." The "panic" over losing this part of her identity illustrates the identity threat that individuals encountered as they contemplated forgoing a future in comedy, by pursuing something else or not fully devoting themselves to becoming a professional comedian. Throughout their journeys, many comedians reported feeling that if they did not put in sufficient investments of time, effort, and commitment, their dream of becoming a comedian would be dashed, not because they had tried and failed, but because they had never tried. The threat of failing to try

is that individuals' odds-defying career aspirations will forever exist in the state of "someday" ambitions and, because of the temporal requirements to achieve them (something of an expiration date on possibility) and the slow march of time, become forgone by the omission of an attempt. Rather than hesitate, the threat of failing to try propelled individuals toward taking a chance on pursuing their odds-defying aspirations, rather than live with the possibility of never knowing what might have been, if only they had tried.

The identity threat of trying and failing combined with the identity threat of failing to try presented individuals with the paradox that they might forgo their hoped-for identity as a professional comedian, whether they tried to achieve it or not, by failing to receive needed validation and enactment opportunities. In this way, incurring invalidation (in the case of trying and failing) and not receiving needed validation (in the case of failing to try) each posed a distinct potential threat to odds-defying aspirers' ability to maintain their nascent professional identity. This added to the paradoxical pulls, prompting a state of motivational precarity, described later in the chapter.

Claiming Risks & Rewards. Aspiring comedians also reported experiencing a combination of claiming risks and rewards that pulled them in either direction—both toward and away from actualising their odds-defying aspirations. This claiming environment was not fixed, but rather reflected individuals' evolving circumstances and priorities—a personalised and dynamic concoction of instrumental, interpersonal, and image claiming risks and potential rewards that was subject to change both across time and across social worlds. Claiming risks and rewards for odds-defying aspirers reflect the three-part typology laid out by DeRue and Ashford in their work on leader identity construction (i.e., instrumental, interpersonal, image) (2010: 638). In this piece, they explain how the process of identity claiming and granting may pose risks to individuals who claim a leader identity, while also

promising rewards. Respondents in this study reported grappling with the potential risks and rewards that accompanied the prospect of pursuing their odds-defying aspirations.

Potential instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks and costs added to the pull to prevent identity loss. One instrumental risk of trying to become a comedian was missing out on other professional opportunities. Sam Carter observed, “I’ve definitely seen people miss opportunities.” Sadie Curtis described this fear, “You feel like, ‘Am I wasting my time with it?’ And the more time I spend pursuing comedy, the more you let go of other opportunities… if you spend three years trying to make it in comedy then you’ve let go of potential other jobs you could have had.” The cost-intensive nature of launching a comedy career was also a major instrumental risk for many individuals in the sample. As Viola Bell explained, “You can’t just do Edinburgh for the rest of your life… it’s very costly.” Her reflection highlights the pressure to give up on chasing a hoped-for future, rather than attempt to achieve it, due to the instrumental risks associated with investing heavily into a career that may never pan out and that may never provide stability. Belinda Emerson, who quit her job to pursue a career in comedy, shared that, “The day I left, lots of people said, ‘Are you mental?’ You’re leaving like a hundred plus K job a year to go and do nothing, to go and tell jokes, it’s just crazy.” The instrumental risks associated with giving up other sources of income, in favour of pursuing a comedy career, also held individuals back. Daisy Harding described a current struggle over whether to cut back in other areas in order to reach her goals in comedy. The need for financial stability and structure pushed her toward preventing loss, rather than promoting growth. “I’m in a relationship and we both have slightly precarious and contractual freelance work… and I don’t have a model that I'm following in terms of like dragging it on your own and I do find it difficult to motivate myself and I do find it frightening.” The fear of instrumental risks thus made individuals more likely to defer “going for it” to become a comedian.

Comedians also frequently reported concerns over how others would respond to their aspirations, and how their relationships might suffer if they shared their desire to become a comedian. For some, concerns about maintaining existing relationships—particularly with friends and family—were critical. Maisy Kingston, a current university student, worried how her friends who were entering more lucrative professions would respond to her career path in comedy. “I think partly that’s why I’m so hesitant to really commit to it. Because I thought, they are going to lose respect for me if they are all like, ‘Let’s go for cocktails’ and I’m like, ‘Let’s stay in because I don’t have any money.’” A further interpersonal claiming risk was in terms of individuals’ romantic prospects. Referring to a popular television programme where single men and women date, Madison Abernathy pointed out “All the girls are looking for a good sense of humour; boys that can make them laugh. And all the boys are looking for girls who will laugh at their jokes. I hate that.” She clarified, “It’s just a shame because there’s a sort of weird assumption underlying that it doesn’t really matter if women are funny, because everything else is more important: how you look, and whether you’re nice or find other people funny, which is just quite irritating.” Medina Nassir commented along similar lines:

> “Even though things have moved on now and women just generally are more educated and less dependent on men, culturally there is still this thing about how you should behave as a woman, whether that’s spoken or not spoken, it’s a kind of unsaid thing—be ladylike. If you’re going to get a husband or if you’re going to marry well, then you have to behave a certain way… and being a female stand-up comedian goes against all of that.”

Thus, individuals’ pull to prevent identity loss was bolstered by interpersonal claiming risks —including the risk of alienating current friends and family and losing out on prospects for future relationships—associated with openly laying claim to a desired identity as a professional comedian.

Individuals also expressed concerns over the image implications of claiming their comedic aspirations, due to the implied confidence or even arrogance of putting themselves forward and “taking up space” in this way. Sadie Curtis shared: “There is an inherent fear I

have of people being like, 'Why is she doing this? She shouldn't be doing this.'" Hannah Benson, whose first foray into comedy took place when she was still a student, reported, "I did an open mic… and they tagged me in a photo on Facebook. Everyone at my school saw it and I was just totally mortified because I thought it was like showing-off and I didn't want to be seen as the girl that showed-off and thought she was good enough to do stand-up comedy." She went on, "I think I was really trapped in that for a long time… You're putting yourself on stage and therefore almost announcing to the world that you feel like you deserve to be there… it obviously means that you think that you should, or you have something to say." Ivy Booker similarly told me about the discomfort of sharing her comedic aspirations with others, due to gender norms.

> "When you say you do comedy, you automatically take up more space—take up more space in the conversation, take up more space as a character. I think that's quite an unusual or uncomfortable feeling for a lot of people and in particular a lot of women. And then there's the pressure of, 'Well, so are women funny?' God forbid you say you're a comedian at any wedding where there's an old, white man over fifty-five."

Carly Knight spoke of how gendered socialisation fed into image concerns over sharing her desire to become a comedian. "It's socially engrained in society for women to not take up space and to be apologetic for expressing your opinions. I think it made me very anxious about it. I thought it was not necessarily something that was a sort of female thing to do." Thus, concerns over being perceived as a "show-off" or as unfeminine fed into the desire to not openly pursue one's comedy aspirations, but instead hide them from others. Amy Arlington, a university student, spoke about overcoming feeling "embarrassed" about aspiring to a career in entertainment, "because it's perceived as such a long-shot thing." Worrying that others would see them as foolish, naïve, or ridiculous made individuals less inclined to openly claim their odds-defying aspirations and instead pulled them to prevent their loss by keeping them safely away from lived reality. For many, the visibility of failure was another key image concern. Imogen Baker shared, "If you fail, then everyone knows

about it. It's public." She continued on, "Your whole family will be like, 'Well you've tried to be funny and it didn't work.' Or if it's on TV, then it's like the whole world, which is really, really scary… is it worth that? Is it worth just doing silly things in front of people, to make a fool of yourself if it goes wrong?"

On the other hand, the looming promise of instrumental, interpersonal, and image rewards added to the pull to promote identity growth. Many individuals reported how instrumental rewards such as creative freedom, autonomy, and the promise of intrinsically motivated and meaningful work had compelled them to pursue becoming a professional comedian. "You're the boss," said Brittany Sanders. Elizabeth Martin likewise confessed, "I quite like the control of comedy. Like, you get to write your own stuff and perform your own stuff." She explained that she wanted to "feel creative forever." Belinda Emerson recounted her journey into comedy, and how unfulfilled values in her work as well as a powerful reminder of her own mortality propelled her to quit her job and become a comedian:

> "I saw a guy have a heart attack at the train station near me when I was getting on the train to go to work, and I went, 'That's going to be me.' I was doing the business job to make my dad proud of me and make my mum proud of me, and I got to the top of my profession, and went, 'I'm not doing this for me'… I was able to then just say, do you know what, fuck it, I don't need this… I just thought, I don't know, why not try?"

As Bethany Valentine contemplated a future as a professional comedian, as compared to other possible career paths, she shared: "When everyone in my course were talking about the dull things they wanted to do, I was like, 'Thank God these aren't relevant to me!' Like at a career fair, 'Would you like to go into marketing?' And I'm like, 'Thank goodness I have show business!'" Many respondents were motivated to become comedians by the desire to escape from boring or non-intrinsically motivating work. Calinda Jeffries' examples of working in a government agency where she "didn't know what she was doing" and "absolutely hated it" is illustrative. She recounted, "Someone said to me, you have to look after yourself because no one else will, and I thought that kind of applies to everything

career-wise. Nobody else is going to do it for me, nobody's going to step in." Gina Lancaster reflected, "Sure. You're going to be like, 'Maybe I should quit and be more sensible' but you know what the alternative is and that's what keeps you going." Thus, knowing "what the alternative is" and recognising that their values are unfulfilled in these alternative paths added to respondents' pull to promote growth toward achieving their comedy aspirations. Kerry Iverson talked about deciding to commit to comedy as her career of choice, "It got to a point where I felt, I know what I love doing. I seem to be decent at it… but I am spending the majority of my days making money for someone else. Like, what is it for? I just felt like I was spending my life promoting other people, which gives me nothing." Thus, the desire for work that is more aligned with an individual's values and interests was a potent instrumental reward that pulled individuals toward actualising their odds-defying aspirations.

Respondents also shared how the potential interpersonal and image rewards of becoming a comedian—such as power, status, or prestige—had propelled them forward on this journey. And as Mary Clarkson candidly told me, "It's all very self-centred. I want people to like me, I need people to like me, I want people to listen to me. It's all very selfish reasons I think." Others likewise reported how they wanted to become a comedian to create a sense of uniqueness and prestige among their peers. As Hayley Vickers put it, "it makes me stand out." Others reflected on the influence they hoped to obtain through a career in comedy. As Kris Rader told me, "You have total freedom to say exactly what you want… as a stand-up you have a huge amount of power because you have the microphone." Agnes Finch agreed that she wanted not only to entertain, "but to educate as well. I think I liked the idea of comedy being a political act." Along these lines, in speaking of her ambitions, Clara Allen joked, "My plan is world domination. Via comedy." Individuals also reported reputational benefits and image rewards that prompted them to pursue their comedy aspirations. Bethany Valentine talked about the potential image rewards of becoming a comedian and how this

helped to fuel her career journey: “It’s like David Bowie saying I always had this strange need to be something more than human… Bigger than Hitler, better than Christ. That’s what you want to be.” She further generalised, “Some people are nice people, and they’re like, ‘I’m doing it to change the world and make people smile.’ Some people are big on like, ‘I’m just giving back to the community’. But realistically, everyone is just doing it to have strangers laugh at them. It is just, ‘I want you to laugh at me and let me roll around in your praise.’”

Thus, individuals with odds-defying aspirations faced a paradoxical set of claiming risks and rewards, pushing them to attempt to become a comedian and not to attempt to become a comedian. This added another layer to the paradoxical pulls, inciting an ongoing internal struggle over whether to pursue comedy as a career. In essence, the paradoxical pulls reflect odds-defying aspirers’ subjective experience of being pulled in opposite directions—toward becoming a professional comedian and away from making the attempt.

Motivational Precarity

The initial combination of wanting to become a comedian while believing this was impossible to achieve and facing the other factors contributing to the paradoxical pulls left odds-defying aspirers in a state of motivational precarity—caught in a back-and-forth, often able to neither move forward purposefully nor to let go completely. Many aspiring comedians continually questioned whether they should keep going or divert their energy and attention to securing potentially more stable sources of future income. In this state, individuals were prone to hesitate, vacillate, and doubt themselves. They were also extremely vulnerable to others’ feedback, reporting extreme swings in their emotions and beliefs regarding their potential when faced with new evidence either for or against this future professional identity. Motivational precarity appeared most frequently in individuals’ careers before a first foray into comedy, after devastating invalidating feedback, or following major changes in life and

work circumstances that made the risks of claiming feel more severe, thereby exacerbating the pull to prevent the loss of their comedian identity. (See Table 4.2).

Hesitation. Motivational precarity was first apparent in individuals' inaction and hesitation toward attempting to become a comedian. Respondents often reflected on how at the start of their aspirational journey they struggled to get up the courage to try doing comedy for the first time. This inaction was often puzzling to them as they looked back and wondered why they had waited so long to start. As Kristen Loughlin looked back on her journey, she saw the downsides of her initial hesitancy. "To newcomers, I would say, don't do what I did. Take it seriously. If this is what you want to do as a job, then make it work for you because I spent so long pissing about with it, I just feel like I may have wasted a few opportunities." Viola Bell likewise recounted her struggle to commit in the earlier years of her career:

> "There's something about leaving university, sort of plodding through life a little bit, crazy, wayward, trying to do things, not really do things. It's too hard and you're a bit scared of really committing to one thing that you really want... I think the fear happens to commit to something you really want, so you just end up getting drunk or going out with friends or finding joy in little things, little relationships, smaller things than actually what you want to do, I mean inside and all that… I'd thought about it, but never really acted on it."

Viola's early career struggle to "commit to something" she really wanted and to "[act] on it" was shared by many respondents, who reported having an interest in pursuing comedy for many years before finally "having a go." Eileen Polson reported, "It had sort of sat in my mind a little bit for quite a while… I don't know why it took a while. It felt like a bucket listing at the time." And Carly Knight told me, "I was waiting so long for someone to tell me that I should be a stand-up comedian, that I realised that I couldn't wait around and I just sort of had to tell myself. It was like I was waiting for someone's permission." These reflections point to the hesitation and delayed commitment that individuals commonly reported early on in the process of pursuing their odds-defying aspirations.

Career Indecision. Motivational precarity is also characterised by career indecision—with individuals continually grappling with questions of whether to persist in comedy as a career. Gina Lancaster shared how she often felt undecided about the future:

> "There's like a little bug and when you get the bug, you're constantly waffling between, 'Should I quit? Or should I keep going?'… As a freelancer I feel I'm constantly looking at my bank account and just going maybe it is time to throw in the towel and become an accountant. From the time I decided I wanted to be a creative person, that sort of became the thing. There's always this idea hanging in the back of my head that I should stop and do something more sensible, and the thing that I love is that other voice that's just like, 'Naaah.' And that's the antithesis of it, you know? That little thing that just goes, 'But you're doing it.'"

At the time of our interview, Madison Abernathy was on the brink of graduating from her degree programme and entering a second research degree. Her comedic activities were through her university, in a sketch group, as well as in the open-mic stand-up circuit. I asked about her long-range career plans, and she told me. "I'd want what I'm doing in research to be a part of comedy, and then I'd totally draw from comedy into research. Definitely. But in what guise, who knows? Whether it's being a stand-up or writing or doing academia that's about comedy, I really don't know." Later in the interview, she reflected,

> "I really don't know. I can't really see beyond the next three years, but I definitely want to keep writing and take shows places and perform. And then after that I don't really know what I'll be doing. I'd love to keep doing it for as long as I can. It's a real sort of passion. But I don't know whether it will ever be sort of the source of any income or whether it will just be something I did because I love doing it."

Madison's duality—being fully dedicated to performing and writing over the next several years and being unsure of whether she would continue comedy beyond her university years—reflects her indecision in terms of her professional identity as a comedian. Sadie Curtis similarly reflected, "Should I keep doing this or should I just like try and get a job in like copywriting for a company or whatever?" Bethany Valentine similarly reported, "It kind of goes in peaks and troughs of whether I want to do this forever and ever." In the course of our time together, she described how she was considering a wide variety of professional roles and occupations and how her ambitions for a comedy career waxed and waned.

> "Often, I feel really positive about it, but like it's never going to happen. Or I feel like I'm really bad and it won't happen. And those kind of come and go… It's like, 'Ya, I'd really like to do that.' Or just kind of a bit apathetic about it. I either am actively thinking about it, or am just kind of passively like, 'Ya, maybe.' It's never really a positive to negative, it's mostly a positive to zero.

Bethany's reflection that she is either "actively" or "passively" considering a comedy career highlights how her career indecision reflects not a deep ambivalence toward the desirability of a comedy career, but indecisiveness as to whether to actually pursue this odds-defying professional path in a committed, persistent way.

Notably, individuals experiencing motivational precarity faced indecision at many different points along their journeys. For instance, many faced internal conflicts when they tried to get up the courage to try to do comedy in the first place (e.g., enrolling in a stand-up course, auditioning for an improv group), when they considered labelling their involvement in comedy as work rather than play (e.g., telling others this is a hoped-for career, not just a hobby), when they grappled with making major investments of time and money into this possibility (e.g., spending thousands of dollars to perform at the Fringe), or when they considered relinquishing other sources of income (e.g., quitting a day job). Each of these considerations represented investing and committing further to achieving their odds-defying aspirations. Going for it meant opening themselves up to the possibility of rejection and disappointment, but not going for it meant never knowing what would have happened if they had taken the chance, and these decision points often left individuals in the grips of major indecision and turbulent emotional ups and downs as they seriously considered how to proceed in their lives and careers.

Self-Doubt. Many interviewees shared how they had grappled with self-doubt as they began to enact this nascent professional identity and struggled to determine their potential viability as a professional comedian. They wondered whether they really had "what it takes" to become a comedian and often doubted their own skills and abilities. Katie Al-Jamil shared

with me, “As long as you’re doing this…you’re going to have ups and downs, but you just keep advancing kind of on the diagonal. Every comedian has those moments of ‘What am I doing? Why can’t I think of new material? I’ve lost my touch.’” As Sadie Curtis told me, “Anything I do is a turn-up for the books. Like wow, she did that, rather than yes, she deserved that. But I feel like maybe that is more about fighting the odds in my brain.” Daria Oglethorpe shared how a series of poorly received performances knocked her confidence and engendered self-doubt.

> “It was literally four performances in a row. You have to pick yourself up anyway to get back on the stage… and I just thought, ‘I can't do this again, I don’t want to get out there, I don't want to do it again.’ Four is not an insignificant number, you know. Why does this keep happening? Am I not capable of actually doing this?”

Felicity Robinson shared how she had taken a break from comedy for several years, after an auspicious start. “I sort of lost confidence with it a little bit. I don’t know why that was, and I stopped for a couple of years. I did the odd gig, but I don’t know what it was. I think it is that typical mentality of, ‘Oh I don’t know if I can do this’ and it’s sort of the confidence that I lacked.” Viola Bell, in reflecting back on her first few years in comedy, shared, “I was a bit unsure if I was any good, and also if I could really do it, and also—what was I doing?” This type of self-doubt was typical for those experiencing motivational precarity.

Feedback-Vulnerability. Individuals experiencing motivational precarity also described major swings in their emotions and comedic activities as a result of others’ feedback. In these circumstances, individuals felt susceptible to the feedback they received and unable to manage it effectively—good or bad. Ivy Booker shared, “I’ve always been not a perfectionist but somebody who doesn’t deal well with getting things wrong; I could internalise that quite a lot.” And as Katie Al-Jamil reflected,

> “I think that’s the magic thing with comedy, is that you just feel so affirmed. You feel so affirmed, which I didn’t realise until later it’s not great, it’s not great to just believe the audience all the time. Because for how much I was like, ‘Oh my god, I’m amazing, I’m the best at this,’ I do the same thing when I bomb. So when I bomb it’s, ‘Oh man, I’m not good at this.’”

Katie went on to explain how the solo and self-expressive nature of her comedic work as a stand-up made invalidating feedback especially potent and alarming. “It’s hard because you’re the only person up there. It’s this vulnerable thing of like, here’s what I believe in and here’s what I feel strongly about. And to have people be like, ‘Well we don’t like that,’ is hard.” Katie further reflected, “People really freak out about public speaking and then especially the vulnerability of stand-up and creating your own stuff and then putting it out there and being like, ‘Do you like it?’” Reflecting on how she still struggled to manage and disconnect from the feedback she received, Sadie Curtis told me, “You need as much praise as you can get, because my brain latches onto whatever negative someone will say much more than any of the positives. People could say five nice things and one bad thing, and that bad thing stays in there forever.”

Daria Oglethorpe shared how after several performances went badly, she could not bring herself to perform again.

> “No one cracked a smile. And that was really hard. I cried actually after a while, it got me down really bad, really, really bad… That has taken some real getting over. A friend asked me to gig with him and I said no, because I couldn’t bring myself to do it… I was like, I can’t. I don’t want to do it yet because it did make me lose faith.”

Daria’s inability to return to the stage was shared by many respondents who, during periods of motivational precarity, wavered in their resolve. This was especially pronounced as several respondents took a step back from doing comedy altogether, quitting for months or even years at a time, in response to invalidating feedback. In many cases, their involvement in comedy diminished to the point where they would have to start over and rebuild past career progress, if they returned to it at all. In fact, 12% of those I interviewed reported exiting comedy at some point in their careers, and many others spoke of witnessing colleagues exit either temporarily or permanently in response to invalidating feedback. Nicola Trent shared how she had taken breaks in doing comedy, as negative feedback disrupted her momentum.

> "For me, the biggest challenge has actually kind of been a bit of motivation. Strangely, because I know I really want to do it and I know I really enjoy it… Definitely early on if something didn't go well, that kind of knocked my confidence a bit. I found it hard at the beginning to pick myself back up again, so I'd stop. I have stopped and started a lot."

Sarah Jenkins described how her comedy career had been "a bit of a rollercoaster" due to the ups and downs of others' feedback. Ivy Booker similarly reflected how she was working to become more consistent in her writing and performance, in order to combat the emotional rollercoaster of feedback-vulnerability: "Consistency for me is a big thing, because then it's less of an emotional or mental-health rollercoaster. Because then, you don't come on after bombing and think, 'What am I saying here?' You just look back at it and think, 'Well, that's a set that usually works.' To be able to do it without having any sort of breakdown, that's going to be good." Ivy's prospective vision of emotional stability in the face of feedback stands in stark contrast to her worries about having a "breakdown" after a gig goes poorly and her further reflection that, "At the start… it's confidence. It's trying not to cry on stage."

Thus, motivational precarity was clear in individuals' vulnerability to external feedback and in their experiences of grappling with self-doubts, indecision, and hesitation throughout the career course. Individuals' journeys sometimes took them through long periods of motivational precarity, where they felt unable to handle others' feedback, where they delayed and hesitated in taking steps toward becoming a professional comedian, or where they took significant breaks from doing comedy altogether.

Aspirational Identity Enactment

Individuals began to enact their odds-defying aspirations through aspirational identity enactment. This enactment took on different forms, in line with the evolving balance of the paradoxical pulls, as individuals focused on either preventing the loss of their identity as a comedian or on promoting their growth toward achieving this professional identity in lived reality. This finding concurs with the literature on regulatory focus, which suggests that

individuals pursue their goals differently when they are focused on achieving their goals in order to either attain desired end states (e.g., becoming a successful professional comedian) or to avoid undesired ones (e.g., not becoming a failed comedian)—termed promotion focus and prevention focus, respectively (Higgins, 1998). That is, there is a marked shift in how individuals undertake the development process of becoming a professional comedian when they feel the need to promote its growth as compared to when they feel compelled to protect and prevent the loss of this budding professional identity. Loss-prevention involved individuals building up resources and avoiding risks in their identity enactment and tended to be hobby-centric and secretive, while growth-promotion focused on investing resources and taking risks and was comparatively career-centric and public. Individuals engaged in *loss-preventing identity enactment* shielded themselves from risks, often by sitting on the side-lines and limiting their investments into comedy, while those engaged in *growth-promoting identity enactment* went all-in, making sacrifices, taking risks, and prioritising comedy as their career of choice. To illustrate this back-and-forth, sometimes seemingly contradictory approach to professional identity development, the sections that follow present loss-preventing and growth-promoting identity enactment tactics in pairs to show how individuals' efforts are reversed as they iteratively and recursively engage in preventing the loss of, and promoting the growth of, their odds-defying aspirations. (See Table 4.3).

Avoiding vs. Approaching Instrumental Claiming Risks. Individuals' aspirational identity enactment first involved managing instrumental claiming risks—that is, the time, money, effort, and other opportunities that might be lost as a result of trying to become a comedian. Essentially, by limiting their effort and expenses up front, individuals tried to protect themselves from investing prematurely into an ill-fated endeavour. Thus, during loss-preventing enactment, individuals avoided instrumental risks as much as possible. During growth-promoting enactment, individuals began investing more seriously and consistently.

For many individuals, an important early form of loss-preventing identity enactment was *fantasising*. As Daisy Harding described, "I would think these huge daydream kind of success stories out, huge, high expectations, but never actually commit to myself achieving them." For her, this "really elaborate imagining" about her future in comedy provided a way to "think about it as a career" before making the leap to enacting it in real life. Brooklyn Havemeyer reflected about how she would "fantasise" about being a famous writer. Winnie Miller reported, "I always used to think 'Oh I want to do this, this is so much fun.' I'd sort of just like imagine myself talking on—I'd watch the Graham Norton Show, for instance, and I'd think, 'Oh I could be in a chat show.'" Individuals often described being "obsessed" with watching comedy, as it provided a means of fantasising about their aspirations and coming to see them as a real possibility through vicarious or imagined enactment (Obodaru, 2017). Calinda Jeffries, a full-time professional comedian at the time of our interview, described watching "loads of comedy on TV." She reflected, "I'd watch them and think that must just be the best job in the world, to be able to be performing...with your best mates and just having a really fun time deliberately just trying to make people laugh. I was like, I want to do that." In other words, individuals began to enact and develop toward becoming a comedian by imagining themselves at the finish line of this career journey: successful, famous, and happy.

Participants described how they moved into growth-promoting identity enactment by *emulating* their role models and other comedy incumbents, rather than simply fantasising about being a comedian. Emulating others' approach built upon their earlier imaginings and involved effortful action, rather than idle fantasising. Respondents described how they had "idealised" other comedians, only to later follow in their footsteps. Bethany Valentine shared the story of joining an improv troupe whom she had previously seen, "I'd actually seen them in Edinburgh; many years before university I'd kind of stalked them a bit. And so, fun dream

come true to get to be in their troupe, because it was like, 'I saw you when I was thirteen' in a bit of a stalker-y way." Bethany went into university with the idea of forming writing and performance partnerships, like her comedy icons before her had done. "I knew that Rik Mayall and Ade Edmonson met each other at University. And I thought, 'Maybe I'll meet my Edmonson at University'. Because obviously in my head I'm Rik Mayall. So I thought, 'At University, dreams come true! You meet like-minded people and you can collaborate on stuff'… Like, the opportunities are there." Calinda Jeffries told me, "On Facebook I'd see other people say, I'm doing five gigs a week and I thought, 'Oh wow, this is what I should be doing.' So, another year into doing comedy, I realised you're meant to do it a lot if you wanted to get anywhere with it. So then I started trying." Addie Winters, a leader at an organisation that provides comedy courses, talked about encouraging students to mirror the efforts of "people who have accomplished the thing" that they want to accomplish professionally in comedy. "You want to be just like them? This is how to actually be just like them. Those people you emulate did the work, so let's do it also." Amy Arlington reported, "I think that is why I auditioned for improv in college, because I'd read in *Bossy Pants* that Tina Fey got her comedy start really doing improv at Second City and I thought, 'Oh, maybe I should do improv.'" By following in the footsteps of an exemplar, individuals attempted to advance in achieving their odds-defying aspirations—moving from the inaction of fantasising to the action of emulating.

Participants often described attempts at *suppressing*, or "pushing down" their desire to become a comedian, by limiting their effort and investment—a key form of loss-preventing identity enactment. Despite a lifelong interest in comedy, Breanna Barker says she "switched it off because it seemed too difficult" and so she "just pushed it down, pushed it down, pushed it down." After spending a decade pursuing an alternative career as a writer, Brittany Sanders told me she thought, "Really what I'd always wanted to do was the stand-up. That

was really what I wanted. I tried it a couple of times and it was so scary and so terrifying. And I just kind of shut it down and went this other direction… and sort of like, woke up ten years later, being like, 'I guess I'm a writer, but that stand-up thing is still in there.'" When I asked Kerry Iverson about how she held onto her desire to become a comedian, she replied, "I think my problem has been more, not being able to let it go. Just the opposite problem… I have this crippling, crippling passion that kind of informs everything that I do and that is always, always on my mind. So it has always been more of a case of, how do I let it go?" Trying to "let it go" was Kerry's way of suppressing. Suppressing also took the form of trying to progress, but without putting forth a significant amount of effort, time, or attention. In this way, if a particular claiming episode went poorly, individuals could simply say that they had not really tried and did not really care. Mary Clarkson recounted, "I wasn't going to enter a particular competition… and I got drunk, and just found this roughish recording of any old crap on the phone and submitted that. I think I'd forgotten that I'd entered it and then got the email saying you're through, and I was like 'Oh wow!'" By impulsively chasing their aspirations, while not putting very much advanced effort into potentially invalidating encounters (e.g., competitions), individuals could be pleasantly surprised when things went well and save face and their own hurt feelings when they did not. Rather than preparing ahead of time, they did as little as possible. Calinda Jeffries recalled going to a comedy club without preparing anything in writing, "I just thought I'll go there and wing it, so I hadn't written five minutes of comedy, I thought I'll just show up and I'll just try and be funny off the top of my head." Belinda Emerson similarly told me, "I entered a competition on a whim one night while surfing the internet for different things, and then they said 'Right, well your round is here,' and I was like, 'Great, I haven't got any material for you.' So I wrote some material quickly and did that." She went on to reveal, "I actually got to the final, which meant I got to perform… in front of four and a half thousand people." Suppressing through a lack of

preparation sent an ambivalent signal regarding an individual's level of commitment and interest, thereby allowing them to make big forward leaps, while reducing the risks of making these claims. Suppressing was also visible in individuals' unreliability and relatively low level of commitment to gigs. Kristen Loughlin reported, "I didn't really take it that seriously to begin with… Sometimes if I didn't feel like gigging, I just wouldn't. I'd just cancel my gig on the day and not really care. Now that it's my job, I can't believe I did that. I guess I was a bit flippant to begin with." Suppressing sometimes took the form of setting a deadline—creating a temporal cut-off point to make satisfactory progress or to receive needed validation, or else to quit comedy altogether. Bethany Valentine told me, "I've always said, 'By 24 I'll have had my debut Edinburgh show, where I'll do an hour'… Past 24, either I decide that I've had my big hurrah, the end. Or I come back. Or it turns out it could be the kind of thing where I go every year and have another show." Bethany's use of a fixed age as a decision point at which she would either devote herself more fully to comedy or give it up demonstrates an effort to suppress rather than invest in this path fully. Others were more ambiguous about when they would stop investing into their potential future in comedy. Hannah Benson reported that if she went through a "number of years" of comedy not going well, it would be wise to give it up. She further reflected, "If comedy totally doesn't work, I could do something else." Agnes Finch similarly told me how she had considered performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival as a cut-off point. "I went to Edinburgh… I knew that was my thing that I wanted to do. And I said right, I'm going to go there and if it goes tits-up, I will never ever go on a stage again, that's it. And if it goes well, then I'm back on the horse." By pre-assigning exit points, individuals set a limit on how much they would invest in becoming a comedian before cutting their losses and giving up.

As compared to suppressing their interest in comedy, individuals engaged in growth-promoting identity enactment forced themselves into *investing* in this future, particularly by

committing to do gigs and to take opportunities outside of their comfort zone. Arden Hughes reported, “It’s forcing yourself to do things. You book in to do gigs and then you’ve got no choice, have you? So no matter how much you don’t feel like doing it because your fear is kicking in, you’ve kind of got no choice. You’re committed to it.” In a sense, individuals worked to ensure that they would follow through instead of losing their nerve and backing out. Madison Abernathy, who started out in sketch comedy had expanded more recently into stand-up, told me, “I don’t think I would have done stand-up if I hadn’t done the course. It forced me to do it.” She continued, “When you’re starting out, the thought of getting up and dying on stage—I just couldn’t have done it when I actually think about it… And in the course, they just made you get up and tell stories and like try out new jokes and stuff, it’s a safer platform for mistakes.” By investing in their comedic aspirations, individuals provided themselves with opportunities to build their skills and abilities in comedy, despite experiencing severe emotional reservations and feelings of nervousness, fear, and doubt. Further, individuals invested by strategically preparing for claiming interactions, as compared to earlier instances of putting in little effort ahead of time to save face. This often meant giving themselves additional lead time prior to entering competitions or applying for positions of interest. By delaying instead of rushing in, individuals tried to optimise their chances of receiving validating feedback when the time came for others to weigh in on their potential to be a viable professional comedian. Clara Allen told me, “I didn’t invite any reviewers to my forty-minute show, I just invited lots of agents to try and say, ‘I don’t need a review of my practice show, I just want someone to help me when I do my real one.’” She went on, “It’s meant to be your warm-up and your practice for what you are going to do next time and if you invite reviewers, then you invite them to your next show. If you have got a crossover of material, they will criticise you for that, even though at that stage you are still fairly new.” In this way, Clara anticipated and strategically prepared so that when the time

came, reviewers would give her more validating feedback. Amelia Aitchison told me of an encounter with a friend who delayed attending her comedy performances. She reported, “He was like, ‘I just didn’t want to watch you and then you be really shit, because you’re my oldest friend…I didn't know if you’d be any good at it and I just didn’t want to ruin our friendship if you were really bad and I had to sit through it.’” On reflection, she agreed, “I was like, ‘Oh actually that’s quite a fair point, you’ve thought well about that.’ So I was like, ‘Oh yes, I don’t want that either, so you should wait for a bit.’” Rather than rushing in, individuals who engaged in growth-promoting identity enactment waited and prolonged periods of developmental activity in advance of important feedback encounters. For instance, many of those I interviewed shared with me that newcomer competitions are often filled with comedians who have been active in comedy for many years. My observations of industry events confirmed this insight. Thus, individuals might hide their years of experience or undersell their past involvement in comedy in order to appear to be more skilled or competent relative to peers. As compared to their earlier attempts to limit how much they invested in becoming a comedian, respondents reported pouring in huge amounts of time, money, and effort into their comedy career, often with reckless abandon. This involved trying to demonstrate to others, as well as to themselves, an almost endless reserve of interest and commitment to doing comedy professionally. Kristen Loughlin told me, “I was trying to grab an open spot where I could and driving up and down the bloody country just to do five minutes. Yes, it was a lot of driving around for no money, but you are earning your stripes really, aren’t you?” Winnie Miller told me, “I’m trying to just get a lot of experience… and doing Edinburgh Fringe, which will be a great test of resilience… I think I just now need to throw myself into it as much as I can and audition for as much as I can.” Investing meant that individuals began to “throw” themselves into achieving their ambitions in comedy, not

holding back but instead amassing sunk costs and risking it all for the chance to secure their hoped-for future.

Individuals also reported efforts to prioritise more "sensible" or traditional career paths and possible selves—referred to here as *hedging*. Calinda Jeffries shared how she had gone to University, despite harbouring hopes of pursuing a career in performance: "I went to uni in order to put my plan B first… I wanted to pursue it, but I never really had the umph to do it." Amy Arlington drew out a picture of her career path, with hedging forming a major component of her journey thus far: "What I've drawn here is for a large portion of my life, [comedy] being an incredibly appealing option… but feeling like, don't do that! Explore all the other ones first." For many comedians, attempts at hedging lasted for years. For Clara Allen, whose early career involved technical roles in entertainment, hedging began to inhibit her progress, as her technical work put her into social interactions with comedy industry gatekeepers. By not exclusively pursuing her desire to become a comedian, she risked being overlooked for future opportunities.

> "If I keep identifying myself as a member of the crew and never as someone who could be in the show, they are never going to think of me that way. Every time I'm in the crew and I'm just getting coffee for all the other comedians who are on the show, I'm telling the producers and the executive producers and directors, the kind of people you want to know you're funny, I'm telling them that I'm a member of the crew and not a potential future person to put in things."

Thus, hedging was a double-edged sword, allowing individuals to pursue more stable career paths, but likewise indicating a lack of interest in or devotion to becoming a comedian. In this sense, the same tactic that initially allowed them to progress might threaten their continued professional identity development down the line.

Individuals reported *divesting* other options for their careers. Divesting allowed individuals to deepen their focus on comedy. When I asked Kerry Iverson about her career trajectory, she told me she had always wanted to do comedy but had been hedging by advancing her career in management. "I always told myself that comedy is what I would do,

but I didn't how know to do it. And I think I've always had two strands going on, which meant that up until quite recently I haven't quite been able to really focus on it." By no longer focusing on the other "strand," Kerry was able to devote more time and energy to developing as a comedian. Hannah Benson told me how divesting added pressure to ensure that she would not give up prematurely on her ambitions in comedy entertainment. "It's one of those self-perpetuating dreams, because I've told myself so many times that it's the only option for me, I've kind of made it the only option for me. I've never really let myself think of doing anything else." By not allowing herself to explore alternative career options, Hannah effectively "made" comedy the "only option." Clara Allen talked about how she divested by limiting her technical work in entertainment. "I've done lots of work being the crew on comedy stuff instead of being in it, and a lot of the time I'm working on a show where there's people in it who are ahead of me comedically, but not a huge amount ahead of me… So I've tried to do less of that recently." She highlighted how she began limiting her involvement in technical roles when she had gotten far enough into writing and performing as a comedian that she "could conceivably be someone you would look to, to write for you or to do a bit part in something." She told me that divesting in this way was an important part of signalling to others in the industry that she was committed to and capable of working as a comedian professionally: "If I keep turning up and I'm on set just doing other stuff that's not funny, you're not going to start thinking that I am funny." By framing a future in comedy as their only real option, individuals pushed themselves to keep progressing, rather than back down. As Gina Lancaster summarised it, "I tried to quit. I've tried and I couldn't, so now I've got to do this." In other words, by trimming away their commitment to alternative career trajectories, individuals worked to progress toward becoming a comedian. While individuals' efforts at hedging often provided them with an "out," and with a means of earning income while building their commercial viability as a performer, ongoing investments in "plan B"

also began to impinge on their ability to keep growing. Divesting helped to reverse this by enabling a greater focus on “plan A.”

Avoiding vs. Approaching Interpersonal & Image Claiming Risks. Individuals also worked to mitigate the image and interpersonal risks associated with claiming a comedian future identity—at first avoiding, and then approaching these risks. During loss-preventing identity enactment, individuals tried to minimize these risks by describing their comedic activities and intentions as mere hobby, by making themselves unrecognizable to audience members, and by withholding information about their involvement in comedy from others from their social circles. During growth-promoting identity work, individuals altered their approach by framing comedy as a serious undertaking and their sole professional interest and by making themselves more easily recognisable, thereby disclosing their comedic activities to others in order to secure needed validation.

The comedians in the study frequently reported initially *downplaying* the meaning and importance of their efforts in comedy. Eileen Polson reflected, “It wasn’t, ‘I’m going to go and become a comedian’, it was ‘I'm going to try having a go at stand-up comedy.’” This downplaying extended beyond individuals’ cognition into their interactions with others. Ivy Booker reflected on how she initially downplayed her desire to become a comedian, “Before I’d always tell people ‘Oh it’s just a hobby, it’s something I enjoy.’ I would play it down quite a lot.” She further observed, “A lot of women do the same… They have to explain it away a little bit more.” Despite expressing and experiencing significant interest in becoming a comedian professionally, individuals defined their early efforts as “hobby,” “fun,” “silly,” “just having a laugh,” “just seeing if I could do it,” and “just for fun.” By defining their efforts as playful and provisional, they might avoid receiving critical feedback. As Mary Clarkson put it, “I always say ‘You don’t start playing golf to win the Open, do you?’ Like it was, it was just ‘Oh this is a thing that I’ve always wanted to do, I will have a go, I’ll meet

some new people, it'll always just be a hobby.'" In downplaying their efforts as playful, enjoyment-oriented, and not work-related, individuals protected themselves from potential scrutiny. The fact that this downplaying was not always fully reflective of individual's priorities and might even shroud the intent of their developmental activities toward becoming a comedian, was expressed by Daria Oglethorpe. Daria had been involved in comedy for several years at University but was uncomfortable telling others that she thought of herself as a comedian. "I would just say that I'm a history of art graduate probably, which is probably not that accurate seeing as I definitely spent just as much time doing comedy as I did doing my degree." Being reticent to claim the title of comedian or even aspiring or future comedian was a frequent, recurrent, and contextually driven concern for many of the interviewees.

Individuals later moved toward *overstating* their commitment to becoming a comedian, rather than downplaying their interest or ambitions. This involved emphasising that they intended to make comedy their sole professional pursuit, and that doing comedy was a serious, long-term, career-focused undertaking for them. In some cases, it also involved withholding information regarding their other income-generating activities or indicating waning commitment or limited identification with these other roles to appear even more committed to comedy. Arielle Francis told me that she and others avoided sharing information about her day job with gatekeepers and other comedians, "You want to give the impression that you're doing well enough in comedy that you don't need a second job." Rosalind Harris reported, "I keep telling people that I want to give up the day job." And Sam Carter told me, "A lot of people have full-time jobs, they just don't talk about it… So you have this thing where stand-up comedians pretend that there is nothing else going on in their lives apart from comedy." Overstating also involved individuals signalling that comedy was their highest priority and labelling their intentions as work centric rather than playful. Ivy Booker reflected on taking her own efforts in comedy more seriously, defining them as

career-oriented rather than as a hobby or leisure pursuit. This was especially recognisable in how she spoke with others: “Being able to tell people, ‘I want to do this properly,’ that was a big thing. I want to do it well, I want to progress, and maybe one day this could be my full-time job.” Elizabeth Martin, who had been doing comedy for almost a decade, and who had amassed credits on numerous radio programmes, television shows, and live comedy festivals, said,

> “Sometimes you still don’t feel like a comedian. I think it depends on who you hang out with. Sometimes you hang out with people and you are like, ‘Ya, I’m the comedian here’. Or sometimes you are like, ‘Oh God, I’m no one’… But I always say I am one, just because I think it’s good not to do yourself down.”

Claiming the title of comedian, even when it felt premature or undeserved, was one manifestation of overstating. Eileen Polson described how she saw herself as studiously engaged in learning her craft. She elaborated: “I’ve spent the first three years treating it like an apprenticeship, I’ve been training, so I’ve been just gigging a lot, doing two, three, four a week and getting, just learning my craft.” She went on to compare claiming the title of comedian to claiming the title of photographer—explaining that she was initially reticent to claim this title.

> “A Danish comic had said, you can’t call yourself a comedian until you’ve been paid for a gig. And I liked that because I struggled with calling myself a comedian. So the first time I got paid for a gig I went, ‘I’m a comedian now’ and that was really nice… So I sort of internalised that as, well, I get paid for it sometimes so I can call myself this. I’m not a professional, but I think I can legitimately call myself a semi-pro… I think a lot of people call themselves comedians when they’ve done five gigs. It’s like saying, I think I’m a photographer because I’ve got a phone. Whereas I do see myself as somebody who is taking the learning of this quite seriously.”

Labelling one’s efforts as work-oriented and purposeful—a serious undertaking—and admitting that one is emotionally invested in the outcomes of this undertaking exposes individuals to potential blowback from others but helps move them forward in terms of actualising their odds-defying career aspirations.

Another relatively common tactic in individuals' loss-preventing identity enactment was *concealing*—or not disclosing comedic activities to others. This was particularly prominent during individuals' first forays into comedy as it allowed them to keep their activities a secret from others, thus shielding their comedic aspirations from potential derision or premature evaluation. Hannah Benson told me that when she started doing stand-up, she "just didn't want anyone to know." Winnie Miller said she had "always been quite private" about her creative ambitions, as she explained, "because it meant a lot." Ivy Booker spoke about hiding her comedic activities from others until she was ready—"No one knew I was doing it and I didn't have to tell anyone until I was ready." Grace Ferrino articulated it this way, "I try not to share it with too many people." Despite appearing on television, she further revealed,

> "My mum doesn't know. I haven't told her yet. I don't know why; I just haven't told her anything. People that she knows have seen me do it, so I would rather tell her before they do. But she is not going to say anything. There's nothing to say. She would just say good luck, but I don't think she'd be excited about it."

Thus, concealment involves selectively sharing your odds-defying aspirations with others deemed safe and supportive—those that do not pose as high a threat to your continued progress. In some cases, individuals concealed to the extent that they did not tell anyone. Viola Bell shared, "I thought I need to just do this for me, so I went to Edinburgh that August with a show that I'd sort of cobbled together myself. I didn't tell anyone, I just did it on my own." She went on to explain how this concealment enabled her to learn in a safe way: "I learned what was funny about me from doing that whole Edinburgh run and not telling anyone, just keeping it sort of hush-hush." Mary Clarkson reported trying out comedy for the first time only when she was "far away enough from everyone. If I was in my hometown and I'd gone, there was a chance that people I know would have been there." When Kerry Iverson was in graduate school, she kept her interests in comedy hidden from her course mates because she feared that they, "wouldn't think it was a very serious thing." She explained, "I

wasn't doing enough about it to make it seem as serious as it was. They would have just said, 'Well what are you doing about it?'" Hoping to avoid these types of interactions fuelled individuals' ongoing attempts at concealing, protecting their identities from potential harm. Comedians also worked to conceal themselves on stage, to ensure that others would not recognise them. Felicity Robinson said, "It was like I put up a barrier between me and the audience. Even though I was doing alright, it felt like, 'Oh no, if I'm me, these people will actually hate me.'" She reflected that at the time, she was more someone else on stage than herself. Karla Simon likewise reported putting very little of herself into her material in her early days as a comedian, "When I was first doing gigs, I was doing a very good impersonation of a comedian. I looked and sounded like a very generic comic. I was talking about subjects that seemed like they were the sorts of things that one ought to do comedy about." Mary Clarkson recounted her earliest attempts at comedy, and the elaborate lengths she went to in order to disguise herself.

> "I remember putting my contact lenses in and curling my hair, because I was like, if I die on my arse, nobody will know what I truly look like. I'd curl my hair and just wear different clothes, just because I didn't want people knowing. I don't know why, it's a bit crazy isn't it? I was just a bit embarrassed. Like, what if it went badly?"

Viola Bell similarly stated that early on, she "was always sort of hiding behind a character." Individuals engaged in concealing not only to hide their comedian activities from others in their personal lives, but also to hide themselves on stage and in their material, creating a partial barrier between themselves and their audiences during these first forays into comedy. Ivy Booker reflected, "I think the ability to go and do something I've wanted to do for a long time but to strangers that you're not going to see again, and then you can just think about it on your own, it was very, very important… it's probably one of the reasons it took so long to do it properly." Thus, finding ways to remain unrecognised by audience members was another way of secretively enacting one's aspirations of being a professional comedian someday.

The nomenclature of *coming out* was often used by respondents to describe their later efforts to reveal, rather than conceal, their ambitions of becoming a full-time professional comedian. Hayley Vickers reflected, “I really don’t think it would be possible to devote the amount of time to a career in comedy that you have to, and the amount of energy that you have to, while hiding it. You can’t stay in the closet with this kind of thing.” This sentiment and the experience of coming out was reflected in the stories of many interview respondents. Winnie Miller shared an emotional story of telling her parents about her aspirations to become a comedy performer. She reflected on allowing herself to “take it more seriously” and how this led to sharing it with them, “It was only really this year that I kind of faced up to it and I told my parents… and it was really scary because I’d never really said that out loud before… And I suddenly decided around Christmas that maybe I could give it a try and see what happens.” Grace Ferrino initially concealed her work in comedy from members of her extended family. This became unsustainable when she made an appearance on a television program, “I had to tell [most of them] because I know they watch it, so I had to tell them.” Belinda Emerson talked about the double-edged sword of revealing that you are a comedian but reaffirmed the necessity of openly laying claim to this title in order to progress:

> “If you are doing secret gigs and you’ve told one friend, you are not a comedian. You need to mentally commit yourself to say, ‘I’m a comedian.’ And there are situations where telling a group of people you’re a stand-up comedian gets you a huge amount of kudos, but it can also be a complete pain in the arse because they go, ‘Tell me a joke then!’, and you go, ‘That’s not how comedy works.’”

Ivy Booker talked about how she began “to be a little bit more open” about doing comedy. “I started bringing people from my sort of normal sphere into like the performing comedy sphere… and there were naturally questions.” In essence, coming out involved no longer hiding one’s comedic activities, and ending periods of secrecy or separation between spheres of activity and social life. Interviewees reported imbuing more of themselves into their work in terms of style and content, bringing their style of dress and grooming on stage into line

with their own taste and personality, and for some, removing the safety net of playing a character on stage. Felicity Robertson reported about how disguising herself on stage gave way to revealing more of her identity in her work as a comedian. “If you come and see me now, you are seeing a version of me that is 80% me and 20% something else. I’m more confident. More honest… Back when I started it was probably the exact reverse of what it is now.” This excerpt illustrates how Felicity’s initial concealment of herself in her work reversed as she continued to progress toward reaching her goal of becoming a comedian. Karla Simon similarly reported,

> “There was a sort of gradual shift, where I went from Karla Simon trying to be a comedian, to Karla Simon standing on stage and saying the things that she wants to say. There was definitely a sense of finding my voice, but my voice was always there, it was just that you come off stage… and go, ‘Hold on a minute, why I would go on stage and do some daft jokes about football or whatever, when actually what I really want to talk about is this?’”

This shift was important for developing a unique voice and enjoying the work of comedy as a means of self-expression, but it also meant being recognisable to one’s audience and fellow performers. Mary Clarkson, who wore a disguise when she took part in a comedy course, told me how she “bumped into” a fellow student years later. She recounted, “He didn’t recognise me because I was wearing a disguise the last time I saw him.” Rather than go unrecognised, she reintroduced herself and they began collaborating on a pilot episode of a sitcom. Phoebe Robinson wrote about this change in approach, “I began overhauling my work wardrobe to mirror what I wore in real life… If I was going for greatness, I couldn’t keep hiding—from my true style or my best material” (Robinson, 2017). Thus, coming out signalled a merging of worlds for comedians—integrating comedy into their life, and their life into their comedy.

Recursiveness of Aspirational Identity Enactment

Although the foregoing dyads point to a progressive relationship between loss-preventing and growth-promoting aspirational identity enactment, where individuals move from avoiding to approaching the risks of securing their odds-defying aspirations, this was

not always a straightforward, one-time progression in practice. Those engaged in growth-promoting enactment sometimes returned back to loss-preventing enactment, especially following substantial shifts in the underlying factors affecting the paradoxical pulls as new pressures appeared that prompted them to again focus their efforts on preventing the loss of their odds-defying aspirations. For instance, as individuals entered new social circles, tried out new types of comedy writing and performance, or experienced changes in the circumstances of their lives, these new factors sometimes overwhelmed their forward momentum—forcing them back into a loss-preventing mode. These experiences were described as a reset or a starting back at square one, and individuals reported needing to re-engage in loss-preventing identity enactment as they gradually built up their nerve to move forward and take the needed risks to claim their hoped-for professional identity once again.

Other respondents went through comparatively short periods of loss-preventing identity enactment, and not every respondent engaged in every form of loss-preventing enactment at all. For instance, some individuals' circumstances meant that their claiming risks felt low or at least tolerable. Thus, they might immediately proceed to growth-promoting enactment strategies in the domains (i.e., instrumental, interpersonal, image) where they had lower levels of risk. Thus, individuals' aspirational identity enactment strategies reflected the evolving content of the paradoxical pulls, and the specific claiming environment of the individual. (See Table 4.3).

New Claiming Risks. Individuals in the study often described how they had gained a sense of momentum and come to see themselves as a comedian, only to have these efforts undone as they moved into new spheres of comedy, for instance as they entered higher levels of advancement. Entering a new sphere of comedy performance often meant making new investments of time, energy, and resources and facing new audiences, peers, and gatekeepers —and thus facing new instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks in terms of claiming a

comedian professional identity. For instance, when I asked Hannah Benson how she referred to herself in terms of her comedic activities and intentions (e.g., saying 'I'm a comedian' vs. 'I do comedy' or 'I want to become a comedian') she told me,

> "I feel like it's happened and then been undone twice. At the end of my school people knew I did stand-up. People would be like, 'Oh this is Hannah, she's a comedian.' I think a lot of it is that you can tell the distinction from how people introduce you to other people and definitely at the end of my university, I totally was a comedian because everyone who knew me at university was like, 'She's a comedian.' And I met people through comedy and they knew that I was an established person, and now I'm totally back to square one because I'm in London and nobody cares who I am and nobody cares that I did loads of shows miles and miles away, it just doesn't matter. And so now I don't feel like I could say that anymore."

Yolanda Mary Jackson shared a similar experience in the transition from doing unpaid to paid spots in stand-up comedy. "In Britain there's an open mic circuit and then there's the professional circuit. On the open mic circuit, I got to the stage when I was a really good open spot. So I'd go on and smash it, but then I'm performing with people who had just started… I'm a big fish in a small pond." She continued, "When you start playing better clubs, bigger clubs, you start playing with professional comics, and then you realise you're not as good as you think you are… And then you start working with really great comics and you are like, 'Ah' and then you have to up your game." The task of shifting the paradoxical pulls, and the effort involved in doing so, repeats as individuals attempt to enter new spheres of comedy—whether in higher levels of prestige, in new geographic areas, or with new collaborators. Clara Allen explained this experience using the metaphor of learning a new skill,

> "Like trying to learn how to ride a bike or a skateboard, where you learn it and you learn one or two tricks and you're like, 'I'm so brilliant!' and then you show them to people who are a bit better and think, 'Oh, I'm terrible at this.' And then you try and learn what they can do and then you're like, 'I'm the best at this!' and then you go and show somebody else and they're like, 'Yes, you're still not any good.' It's just various degrees of being like, 'I'm finally really good at this'—like being a big fish in a small pond, and then going to the next pond and being a miniscule fish for ages."

Individuals' approach to identity development thus evolved as they entered the "next pond" which brought along new risks and new opportunities. Coinciding with these moves into

more competitive, challenging, or new arenas, individuals' approach to aspirational identity enactment often became focused on preventing identity losses, even after they had begun engaging in more growth-oriented aspirational identity enactment. For instance, Hannah Benson shared how in her new circumstances, now graduated from university and living in London, she worried about new interpersonal and image risks and so became "coy" about her comedic activities and intentions, reflecting loss-preventing identity enactment. She explained,

> "I think there can be so much arrogance that can come across if there is no context. When I said I was a comedian at university it was very contextualised because everybody knew who I was or I felt like that, but now I feel like nobody really cares. And so you can be like, 'Well I do a bit of stand-up comedy on the side,' but I kind of feel like I have to be very coy about it.'

Hannah continued on by saying that she would need to secure new validation from industry peers and gatekeepers in London in order to return to feeling comfortable enacting her nascent comedian professional identity in a growth-promoting way, for instance by openly publicising her intent to pursue comedy as a full-time profession. Mary Clarkson's story of entering the same competition on three separate occasions helps to illustrate this trajectory, where individuals move from loss-preventing to growth-promoting identity enactment, only to lose ground and return to loss-preventing. First, she relayed how she had gotten drunk and entered the comedy competition, an instance of suppression, reflecting a loss-preventing identity enactment approach. She had invested little into preparing and essentially applied on a whim. After being accepted and doing well at the competition, the next year she engaged in growth-promoting identity enactment by investing in this opportunity in a more systematic way. She told me, "I really thought about it and I was like this is the thing that I've been sending to promoters and my best jokes, I put it up, and I didn't get through." After investing in this way and receiving invalidating feedback, in the next year of the competition she

reverted back to suppressing, putting in little effort and, as she described it, “Getting drunk and entering out of spite again.”

Heightened Tolerance for Claiming Risks. On the other hand, individuals’ tolerance for the instrumental, interpersonal, and image claiming risks associated with trying to reach their odds-defying aspirations, spurred them on to grow toward achieving them. In practice, this allowed them to either wholly circumvent or quickly move past loss-preventing identity enactment strategies. Amy Arlington spoke of a mentor who shared, “Listen, we all go through the ‘Let me take a quote unquote real job first’, but if entertainment is what you love, then you’re going to quit after two years and just be two years behind everybody else. So just try it.” Amy Arlington shared how she intended to take the advice of her mentor to avoid falling behind because her tolerance for instrumental claiming risks was high. “This year I have felt like, what are you going to lose? I’m 21. If I’m going to be doing a job that’s maybe a little unstable, but it’s going to be exciting and it can be happy though there may be horrible trials, isn’t that what your twenties are for?” As this quote suggests, a sense of having the benefit of time and fewer obligations that make stability a higher priority or personal responsibility (e.g., sole caregiving responsibilities, major expenses, home ownership) invites people to promote growth toward their odds-aspirations, rather than holding back. When individuals were less vulnerable to particular risks, or less concerned about incurring them, they were also less likely to be deterred. Elizabeth Martin reflected, “I could do stuff that not everyone could probably afford to do when they were starting out. Like, just afford to. Because I was so young, I didn’t have a job, so I could afford to spend time and money going to random places and doing random things.” Thus, the benefits of financial security and temporal flexibility ameliorated the need for loss-preventing enactment for some aspirers. Referring to her attempt to become a comedian, Belinda Emerson reflected, “I had nothing to lose. I still don’t have anything to lose, so I can’t disappoint myself, I have no one to

disappoint, so anything that I do achieve is a win." Viola Bell commented on how life experience had made her less worried about the interpersonal and image risks of claiming who she wanted to be: "You judge yourself a lot when you're younger and think, 'Should I do this?' because people will think, people will say. But you learn that everyone is so busy with their own stuff that no one actually cares what you do. You need to make decisions for you, forget the rest of the world." Thus, based on individuals' evolving tolerance to the claiming risks they face, the paradoxical pulls might swing more in favour of growth, thereby allowing them to engage in growth-promoting identity enactment.

Chapter Summary

Individuals form odds-defying aspirations on the combined basis of hoping to become a certain future version of themselves at work and feeling that accomplishing this goal is improbable, if not impossible. Thus, odds-defying aspirations are founded upon individuals' perception of both the desirability and improbability of a future career dream "coming true" in their professional journey. This gives rise to motivational precarity as individuals are caught in a cycle of hesitation, indecision, self-doubt, and vulnerability to external feedback. Odds-defying aspirers further experience paradoxical pulls to promote the growth of their nascent professional identity and to prevent its loss. These pulls inform individuals' approaches to aspirational identity enactment, which iterate recursively between growth-promoting and loss-preventing. Loss-preventing identity enactment strategies focus on avoiding instrumental, interpersonal, and image claiming risks by keeping individuals' career dreams safely out of public view and by limiting investments of resources. Growth-promoting identity enactment, on the other hand, approaches instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks as individuals incur costs, take risks, and put themselves into the spotlight as a comedy hopeful.

CHAPTER V: ‘CARRY ON AND PROVE THEM WRONG’

Chapter Roadmap

As individuals with odds-defying aspirations engage in aspirational identity enactment, they are exposed to identity feedback from others—informally in their social worlds, through interactions with their audiences, and within the industry among their peers and with incumbents and gatekeepers. These sources of feedback provide new information that may validate or invalidate their odds-defying aspirations. Odds-defying aspirers respond to this feedback through feedback management strategies—selective retaining feedback and reappraising it in non-threatening terms. These feedback management strategies, alongside the accumulated experience of enacting their identity as a comedian, enable individuals to recalibrate their aspirational assumptions surrounding what is desirable and possible for their lives in the world of work. Recalibration thus shifts the balance of the paradoxical pulls in favour of growth. Feedback management and the process of recalibration that it precipitates further allow individuals to build toward motivational resilience, thereby overcoming the initial motivational precarity that accompanies their odds-defying aspirations. Data for this chapter appears in Tables 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4.

Identity Feedback

As individuals in the study began to express and enact their aspirational professional identity as a comedian, they encountered feedback from others and from the material world that validated or invalidated this nascent professional identity. This finding aligns with past research on identity claiming and granting, where individuals’ career behaviours and identity enactment are understood to be instances of identity claiming, and where others’ responses to these claims are understood to either grant or deny an individual’s claim to a desired identity

(e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Individuals in the sample described a number of encounters and occasions that told them that others saw them as a future professional comedian, or indeed as having already achieved this designation. This feedback expressed validation of individuals' hopes of becoming a comedian in the form of direct feedback (e.g., laughter, statements of support, job offers), as well as in the form of more implicit or unspoken social cues. Individuals also described a number of encounters and occasions that told them that others did not see them as current or future comedians. This feedback was invalidating to their aspirations and signalled that others were unlikely to support or encourage them in their attempt to become a professional comedian. The key forms of validating and invalidating feedback that odds-defying aspirers reported include: 1) informal social feedback through interactions with family, friends, associates, and even strangers, 2) audience feedback through interactions with comedy consumers, and 3) industry feedback through interactions with gatekeepers, peers, and incumbents (See Table 5.1).

Informal Social Feedback—Encouragement vs. Discouragement. Individuals found validation for their aspirational professional identity as a comedian through others' support and positive encouragement. Madison Abernathy spoke of the encouragement she received, as she told of "people who are probably more encouraging and believe in me more than I do and think that I should do it, which is really nice." In many cases, encouragement actually took on a tone of prescription. Bethany Valentine, another respondent at a relatively early stage of her career, reported, "Whenever I say things like, 'I'll probably do teacher training' or 'I'll go and work in a gallery,' my significant other always says, 'Oh, no. You're going to be a comedian.' So he ends up being the one fostering this sense of—if you can, you should; you ought to do that." She continued, "My friends who have all seen me do comedy say

things like, ‘Well of course you should do that!’ ‘That completely makes sense.’ And, ‘Of course you will!’ And they are very nice in the whole, like, ‘When you’re famous, do this!’ Which is very sweet of them.” These messages of encouragement were validating toward Bethany’s comedy aspirations and fostered her ongoing efforts to continue working to achieve them. Validating support likewise pushed Calinda Jeffries to go on believing in her dream and to become a professional comedian full-time. “When I moved to London and a few separate people said, ‘You should become a comedian,’ it was really exciting. It was like in *Friends* where they say, ‘Monica, you should be a chef’ and she is just like ‘Okay!’ I was just like, ‘Oh, alright then.’” She recounted how a validating encounter with her sister provided further encouragement to go for it.

> “Me and my sisters went to the Edinburgh Festival as punters, just to go and watch stuff… And my sister said to me, ‘My challenge to you is to be performing here next year.’ And then I didn’t perform the following year and we did just laugh at it like, ‘As if that would ever happen’… But just her saying that, challenging me to be there. It kind of made me go, ‘Yes, some people are rooting for me to follow this, and in support of most of all me.’”

Encouragement was particularly powerful when it came from others whom the individual trusted and who had industry-relevant experience, such as Sarah Jenkins’ experience with her brother. “My brother has always championed it and said, ‘Yes, you should do this. You are funny and your writing is great’… He used to write himself and he’s hugely into comedy and sort of a comedy nerd.” Before she had openly made an attempt to become a comedian professionally, Brittany Sanders told me,

> “When I met my husband, one the first times we sat down for coffee, he was like ‘Well you’re a stand-up’… It was like he saw into my soul. He was just like, ‘You’re just meant to do this thing. You are meant to get up on stage’ … Whatever it is that you have sort of in you and you want someone to see it, he did that.”

She confided that the courage to pursue comedy professionally came from the encouragement of someone she “was really close to” and who knew her “really well going here, here, here.”

Another form of encouragement that inspired individuals to continue toward becoming a comedian was others' expressions of understanding—sensing that others "get it". Respondents were spurred on by those who expressed an understanding for the desire to follow a non-traditional path or to chase a dream career. Amelia Aitchison, an actress turned comedian, reflected "My friends on the whole, well they were the ones that kind of made me do the comedy in the first place. Now I've made so many friends doing comedy and a lot of my acting friends have done a bit of comedy, and everyone totally gets it." Winnie Miller reflected on how others' understanding likewise propelled her on.

> "I actually got the warmest reactions from those who are sort of more on the humanities side and who've done acting and similar things before. I think everyone sees the appeal when you do it, but not actually that many people at university level think, 'I want to do this' because a lot of them just think it's a strange world. And it probably is."

This type of interaction reminded individuals that attempting an odds-defying future was desirable and that they were not alone in wanting a career that deviated from more predictable or traditional paths. Likewise, having others express excitement or interest in one's work as a comedian was an encouraging form of validation. As Breanna Barker told me, "My kids like it… They are proud, and they tell their friends 'My mum's a comedian.' And their friends are like, 'Oh my god, your parents have the coolest jobs!' So that's really nice." Interacting with others currently pursuing or aspiring to an artistic profession seemed especially motivational. Speaking about her long-term romantic partnership with a fellow comedian, Katie Al-Jamil told me, "It's really nice to have someone who gets it. And gets the scheduling, especially where we are now in our careers, it's like comedy comes first. So, if we have a dinner date and one of us gets an opportunity, we're going to reschedule dinner, no problem." Thus, receiving encouragement from others in the form of more overt support and even subtle expressions of understanding was a validating form of feedback.

By contrast, when feedback came that was discouraging, individuals found this invalidating to their nascent professional identity as a comedian. Karla Simon, who left a career in accounting to become a comedian, reported, "Some of my friends came to very early gigs and thought, 'Oh, doesn't really know what she's doing' and 'Is she going to be alright?' People were like, 'Oh, God, maybe she hasn't—in inverted commas—got it.'" Sensing others' discouragement was often a matter of picking up on implicit cues, rather than explicit verbal dissuasion. Sarah Jenkins told me, "I've had a couple of reactions when I say I'm working towards this as a career. People sort of tilt their head and are kind of like, 'Oh, well, good for you.' It's kind of like they're saying, 'That's not going to be successful but, you know, good on you for having a dream.'" This kind of discouragement also manifested itself as others pressured individuals to evidence success relatively quickly in their comedy careers or to give up trying. Katie Al-Jamil's experience is characteristic:

> "I was like a year and a half into comedy, and I had an uncle that was like, 'So you'll try this out for another couple of years and if it doesn't pan-out, you'll switch into something else?' You wouldn't say that to anyone else. You wouldn't say that to a first-year medical student. 'So if you're not doing open heart surgery in a couple of years, you'll figure something else out?' Comedy is just like any other career. No one is the CEO of the company two years in, not even ten years in. This takes time, just like anything else."

Madison likewise described how some people found it "quite worrying" that she was trying to become a comedian. Hilda Avis found others' concern over her career direction discouraging as well: "People ask you a lot like, 'But what do you want to end up doing?'" Kris Rader similarly reported, "That's quite often the first thing that people ask, and I think it's a dead-end in some respects. When you ask somebody if they want to make a creative thing their profession, what you are doing is saying if you don't make it your profession, then what's the point?" Clara Allen reflected on the pressure to demonstrate ongoing progress in order to defend her choice to pursue comedy as a career,

> "My parents are very supportive of me doing comedy but also I feel like I have to continue to prove that I'm making progress and making it, making enough money and

> making worthwhile progress in it. If there was a long stretch where I didn't do that, they would never try to stop me. But the idea that they don't think I'm doing well at this would probably make me think twice about carrying on."

Calinda Jeffries explained how her parents' encouragement to pursue something else felt like a tactful way of discouraging her early ambitions in entertainment. "I think they're quite realistic… I can see why they'd have thought she's in a dream world, this is never going to happen. They never said that to me, but they just said, 'You know, it might be good to pursue something more stable." Grace Ferrino similarly reported, "I've had friends say to me, 'You need to have a back-up; it's so rare for people to make it' or you know, 'you need to be realistic; you need to get a job that's going to pay your bills, you need to stop dreaming.'"

Individuals also reported that others' bafflement at their career choice signalled discouraging invalidation of their odds-defying aspiration of becoming a professional comedian. The experience of others "not getting it" seemed especially strong for those from families where others had not been involved in the arts or pursued artistic careers. Feeling like others were disinterested or dismissive toward one's chosen occupation was an invalidating experience and contributed to a sense that this desirable future might not be very socially desirable at all. Hannah Benson told me, "When I was a child living with my dad, the creative arts weren't taken seriously at all." Madison Abernathy faced this type of discouragement from family friends when she expressed her aspiration. "I told one of my family friends that I wanted to be a comedian and she said 'Of *all* of the things I thought you'd end up doing, I *never* thought you'd go in to comedy.' It was like 'Oh great, that's very backhanded!'" She went on, "I think people find it a bit amusing or a bit bemusing… I think a lot of people think 'God, why on earth would you do that? That sounds horrible.'" Hilda Avis told me how the shocked reactions of her childhood peers was a source of invalidation.

> "I don't even think they realise how rude it is to be like, 'But you're not funny' or like, 'But you're not interested in comedy,' and like, 'How can a woman be doing that?' It's always a person that's kind of incredulous, rather than anything more targeted like trolling online, it's just more of a shocked reaction."

Sarah Jenkins said, “For my family it’s just like a fun hobby I do… I think there are probably lots of pockets of friends who are not really close friends who may still see it just as a hobby, and it is not. But sometimes they will get a surprised reaction if I’m like ‘No, this is what I want to do.’” Clara Allen’s experience with taxi drivers was relatively typical of the social bafflement that individuals sometimes encountered, even from strangers:

> “It’s just especially taxi drivers. They are pretty bad for being like, ‘Oh! You’re a comedian? Really? Are you sure? One of the women ones? Wow!’ But yes, basically I think it’s just potentially upon first meeting, if you don’t actually know anything about me, maybe I don’t come across as a comedian. And then they’ll be like, ‘Oh, you’re a comedian? Are you sure you’re a comedian? Because you seem like you should be a secretary or something like that.’”

This type of interaction was an unfriendly reminder that doing comedy—let alone doing comedy as a woman—seemed to be an open invitation for others to express puzzlement over one’s chosen career direction. Feeling like others simply did not understand their ambitions and being reminded that their chosen career path ran counter to social expectations was itself an exhausting form of invalidation for many respondents. Thus, during informal social interactions, others’ explicit or implicit discouragement toward individuals’ hopes of becoming a comedian were invalidating for odds-defying aspirers.

Audience Feedback—‘Killing’ & Being Praised vs. ‘Dying’ & Being Criticised.

Individuals’ interactions with audiences were also a potent source of feedback regarding their odds-defying aspiration to become a professional comedian. Audience laughter, praise, and fandom was especially validating. Lucy Montgomery shared how ‘killing it’ onstage was the best defence against sources of invalidation: “Just kill it, just be really good when you perform, because that’s what it comes down to at the end of the day. No one can really say shit if it’s like, ‘Well, I’ve just smashed it.’” Katie Al-Jamil told me about her experience in a comedy course and how sensing that she was an audience favourite was a validating experience. “What I recognised in the class was that everyone was doing really well, really well. And then I went up and I did amazing. I crushed. I did a great job… it was a five-

minute set and it was just constant laughter." Clara Allen likewise reflected how her hopes of becoming a comedian had been validated by her audience's reactions early in her career.

> "I thought I wanted to do it, but definitely once you've first done a bit of it, after you are like, 'Oh my god, I'm a god' and, 'Oh I can definitely do this as a career.' That four-minute bit that I just did that got some laughter, that is a sure sign for it being my future career… The first few times I tried stand-up, it went quite well, which was lucky. Once I'd done that I was like, 'I must be a gifted genius, I should carry on.'"

Receiving kind messages and praise from audience members after performances was also validating of individuals' odds-defying aspirations. Daisy Harding recalled, "One thing that definitely kept me going was recognising that the work was having an impact, hearing back from audience members, private messages, tweets etc., people talking to me after the show. That was the real fuel and I guess in a way it's kind of an addiction."

By contrast, quiet or hostile audiences and unwelcome critiques from audience members were invalidating. Kris Rader shared, "There are times when you're in a pub in the middle of Suffolk and some beery old man kind of sidles up to you and pats you on the hand or says, 'Oh well done, have you thought about telling this joke instead?' It's not pleasant; it's not a nice environment to be in." Katie Al-Jamil highlighted, "When I started, I would tell jokes based in my female experience, and a lot of times they wouldn't work. And I would wonder, is this because I'm not funny and these jokes aren't funny, or is this because I'm telling these jokes to a room full of twenty-one-year-old boys?" She further reflected, "you have to just do that night after night, and it beats you down after a while. If I didn't have such a positive first experience, I honestly don't know if I would have continued, because I would have been like, 'Well I guess I'm not funny.' Arden Hughes told me how stand-up comedy could be especially "brutal" in terms of audience's invalidating feedback. "If you're standing there and the audience don't think it's funny and you're dying, there's really nowhere to hide." Interestingly, audience invalidation was a challenge sometimes even before a comedian began to perform. Comedy producer Margaret Jacobs reflected, "What happens to

an audience when a female performer comes on stage is there's a slight chemical reaction in the room that can make it more difficult I think for the female performer… and they have to overcome a lot of that." Katie Al-Jamil likewise shared, "Sometimes you'll get a room full of men in the audience who look angry at you because you've walked on stage. At gigs where I have been the only woman on the bill, it doesn't bother me unless the crowd visibly changes when the woman, i.e. me walks on." Facing audience members' hostility was an invalidating signal—a sign that no matter your material or abilities, your identity as a comedian might never be accepted by audiences, often on the basis of gender alone.

Industry Feedback—Progressing & Inclusion vs. Lagging & Exclusion. Beyond audience feedback, feedback from the industry was also important in individuals' first forays into comedy—helping them to understand their potential for this future professional identity. Milestones indicating progress and inclusion from members of industry social circles told individuals that others regarded them as a comedian, or as a potential future comedian, thus validating their emerging professional identity. For example, Clara Allen told me about the validating effect of receiving invitations to perform: "Nicer clubs and bigger clubs, where you're gigging with other comedians (because at this stage I have enough experience to do well there) you get there and you're like all these people think I'm a comedian, which is nice." Clara further reflected on being recognised on a list of the best jokes of a popular comedy festival. "At that point I thought, 'They only pick ten to fifteen people… that's quite a good sign'. I can be like, 'No, I am definitely a comedian'… I can tell people I'm a comedian and then provide them with this evidence of things I have done well." Being given more prestigious opportunities, being paid, winning awards, and being recognized by the media provided individuals with a sense that their aims of becoming a professional comedian were valid and so added to their drive to continue working toward achieving this hoped-for future. Elizabeth Martin pointed out, "You have to get reviewed by Chortle to get a profile,

and I got one because I did a competition. That felt quite official because you could Google me, and I would come up and it would say I was a comedian." She continued, "If you see your name in the newspaper or something, you go 'Ya! Ya, this is it!'" Bethany Valentine likewise reported the validating effect of receiving attention from industry publications and comedy industry insiders, "Reviews are like, 'Look! I'm a proper person with a review'… And just respect from other performers."

Individuals also found validation in industry feedback when they observed that their own progress was outpacing that of their peers or that of typical industry patterns. For example, securing sought-after opportunities, winning competitions, and advancing into more prestigious gigs more quickly than others were positive, validating signals that they were receiving industry attention. Calinda Jeffries reported,

> "In the first couple of years because of competitions that I got in and because I did start to really try hard to do as many gigs as possible and make some good contacts, I got better gigs. And people that I was gigging with would be like, 'Oh you're doing this gig?' Everybody is aware of where everybody is at. And so I did feel like I was maybe getting better gigs earlier and I think people were noticing it."

Bethany Valentine similarly shared how being positively rated compared to her peers was a validating experience. "My sketch group had a terrible review and I got a little mention at the end. I think they called me competent. And I had to pretend to be sad. But secretly I was like, 'Oh yeah!'" Thus, progressing more quickly or receiving higher praise or greater rewards relative to peers was validating to individuals' comedy career aspirations.

Bethany further reflected, "I've managed to meet lots of comedians who are doing very well for themselves… Having their respect, and friendship, and guidance, has been like, 'Ah yes, well, I'm not cut off. I'm no longer in the village. I'm in the city where I know people, and I can go to London and do this thing.'" Building relationships with other comedians, particularly role models and mentors, added motivation to keep pursuing a career as a comedian. Clara Allen told me, "Writing with other comics makes you feel like quite a

comedian… or like helping them edit stuff." Collaborations were thus another validating form of inclusion. Isabelle Andaya spoke about feeling "lucky" to have a supportive community in comedy, "It's the support network more than anything. It's like, 'Oh man, I had a really hard time at this gig' and people will lift you up… just having all these people from every walk of life just be like, 'You're going to be okay' 'It's okay' 'It's going to be fine.'" Receiving invitations to join exclusive industry communication channels (e.g., via WhatsApp or Facebook), to be part of established comedy groups, or to connect with more well-established comedians on social media was especially validating. Winnie Miller told me how being part of a university sketch comedy ensemble provided validation: "Being part of it is a nice little boost of affirmation, that I was sort of 'in' with all these funny people." Bethany Valentine shared her experience of connecting with a now-famous alumni member of her comedy performing troupe, "It was like, 'Oh my god, I can't believe she's on my Facebook.'" Madison Abernathy told me, "I was trying so hard to write material and get into the sketch troupe at my university. And then when I was in, I knew everyone around me was so talented, that I was going to be OK… that was when I first felt like yes, I am part of a good comedy collective." Sarah Jenkins also shared how inclusion by industry insiders was validating: "There are people in the world of comedy who are further along in their careers and extremely successful and brilliant… They have treated me as a peer when I don't consider myself to be a peer… those things have been very positive and reaffirming."

By contrast, individuals spoke of the invalidating effect of falling behind benchmarks for career progression, or feeling excluded, rejected, and undervalued, by members of the entertainment industry. Calinda Jeffries was excited to be signed on with a top agency. Unfortunately, she found that her agent did not hold her work in high regard and did not connect her with appropriate and growth-oriented opportunities. "It was like being in an abusive relationship… He was so negative all the time about everything I did. He would just

say like, ‘Oh you are not ready to do these clubs’ and it was clubs that I was already doing.” She further reflected, “When I was with my agent, I got zero castings. Since I have been on my own, I have had five.” Many comedians reported feeling invalidated when others within the industry discounted their abilities and potential—for example, by providing unsolicited or condescending advice, by denying them relevant opportunities, or by expecting them to work for free. Zelda Sampson came into comedy after nearly two decades in an acting career. She reported finding herself at the receiving end of unsolicited advice from male comedians. “They’ve gone, ‘Oh, I really enjoyed your show, I had a couple of notes,’ and I was like, ‘I don’t need your notes.’” During fieldwork, I frequently witnessed this type of invalidating interaction following comedic performances. For instance, following a preview show of a stand-up comedy hour in advance of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, I observed the organiser of the event discussing the ordering of the material with the comedian who had just performed. Apparently, this preview had been an experiment in altering the order of the jokes. The organiser encouraged the comedian to keep the new ordering, based on the quixotic advice to put your best material first in the show to force yourself to keep improving the rest—which had led to this experimental reordering in the first place. The comedian repeatedly explained that she felt this was a failed experiment and that she did not intend to keep the new ordering in the future, because past iterations had been received far more favourably. She became visibly irritated as the organiser kept pushing, leading her to repeatedly reassure him that while she understood his suggestion, and the rationale behind the clichéd industry advice that had prompted this experiment in the first place, she still had no intention of keeping the new ordering.

When individuals’ career progress seemed to be falling behind that of their peers, for instance when others received awards or opportunities earlier into their comedy career, this was also a worrying sign—an indication that they were falling behind or regressing. In Jen

Kirkman's book, *I Know What I'm Doing and Other Lies I Tell Myself*, she reports, "I saw many of my peers and even men who started comedy after I did get their own TV shows or start selling out comedy shows on the road while I still struggled to get noticed" (2016: 220). Daisy Harding commented on the frustration felt by many women of being "so overqualified" while not being given the same opportunities or respect as their male contemporaries. Grace Ferrino told me of a similar frustration, "There's people that have started after me and they perform at this club and I can't get on there for love nor money. I don't even get a response." Bethany Valentine was concerned with falling behind other women's progress in professional comedy, "I get very competitive with other girls who are my age that seem to be doing more shows in London, or already have bigger names, or have more Twitter followers or whatever. I'm like, 'Damn you!'" Feeling like others had a head start or prior claim to wanting to become a comedian also indicated to individuals that they were lagging behind. Imogen Baker noted,

> "The boys who I do the sketch comedy with have all wanted to be stand-up comedians since they were really young. It's the dream, they're obsessed, and they all have this like encyclopaedic knowledge of comedy. It's almost like a history book; they know everything about the comedy greats and what their favourite shows are and how they made their careers… and information on how jokes are formed and like the analytics of why things are funny… Which I find really boring… When I'm writing something, I don't want to be like, 'Do you think analytically the word is funnier at the end of the sentence or at the start of the sentence?' It's like, 'Well we could just try it out because comedy is subjective and in the moment.' So sometimes I feel out of place, purely because it feels like they're thinking, 'Oh she doesn't really know what she's talking about because she doesn't know everything about comedy.'"

Her further observation that she "wasn't taken as seriously" in terms of her ambitions of becoming a comedian highlights how these interactions became a source of invalidation.

In addition, exclusion from social circles within the industry flagged up concerns for individuals as it invalidated their aspirational identity. For instance, Leticia Ruiz commented,

> "Comedians are friends with each other and there are strong friendship groups that hang-out all the time and go to brunch and play football together and live in houses together… I've never been part of that. I don't think I'm ever going to be part of that. And it hurts sometimes. It really hurt when I found out that there were a

> number of female comedian WhatsApp groups. Because a friend of mine said, 'Oh, I had to leave the female comedians' WhatsApp group,' and I was like, 'I didn't even know there was one.' That's where you feel like the whole world is against you."

Being ignored by other comedians backstage in the green room was another invalidating form of industry feedback. Elizabeth Martin reported the challenge of encountering the highly competitive, heavily male-dominated, and sometimes exclusivist social world of comedy, particularly backstage. "If you're a girl especially, people don't really talk to you much or aren't very nice to you. Not horrible. But they kind of ignore you… And sometimes they might assume you're someone else's girlfriend." She continued, "And then if you go on and do really well, then suddenly they'll be very nice to you." Grace Ferrino commented, "I don't know if I belong actually. I feel like there are people within the circuit that don't want people like me around. I feel like the circuit is for everyone, but certain people can make it so it's not for everybody. These competitions can do that, these promoters can do that." Viola Bell told me, "You're constantly getting knocked back because you're not from the right family, because you don't know people in the industry, because you don't have a chain of inheritance, and all your stuff is from a small town." Feeling like an outsider and being excluded tended to invalidate individuals' comedian future identity and sometimes made it seem preferable to desist in attempting to achieve their comedy career aspirations altogether.

Feedback Management

Odds-defying aspirers attempt to amplify the effects of validating feedback, while limiting or even reversing the effects of invalidating feedback through a variety of feedback management tactics, broadly centred around how individuals manage their retention of and appraisals of the feedback they receive. Selective retention involves selectively believing and remembering identity feedback and selectively associating with others, while threat-reducing reappraisal involves framing invalidation as impersonal, universal, and developmental. In other words, in response to validating feedback, individuals attempt to magnify the positive

impact of this feedback on their motivation—harnessing it for their good—as well as to increase the likelihood of receiving more of it in the future. And in response to invalidating feedback, they attempt to minimise or even reverse its impact—discarding or repurposing it—and limiting opportunities for receiving additional invalidation in the future. These feedback management efforts are mutually reinforcing and help individuals to build up motivational resolve. (See Table 5.2).

Selective Retention. Individuals engaged in a number of feedback management tactics centred on selectively retaining their belief in, memory of, and ongoing exposure to others' identity feedback.

First, individuals engaged in *selective believing* to emphasise the trustworthiness and credentials of those who provided validating feedback, while at the same time derogating and discrediting those who provided invalidating feedback. In this way, they attempted to internalise validating feedback and to disavow invalidating feedback. Clara Allen told me,

> "Doing well in comedy competitions or getting signed is basically someone else external saying they think you have a chance to do well. Which is nicer – well not nicer, but it's more reassuring than any of your friends being like, 'You are definitely funny' or like your parents being, 'We believe in you,' which is very nice… But someone like an agent signing you means they think they can make money by working for you, which means they have a certain faith in the amount of your potential earnings. So that's a nice way to be like 'Oh no, they do believe that truly I can make this a profession if they think they can make any money out of it.'"

By pointing out the profit-oriented motivations of agents, Clara builds up her sense that their validating feedback is reliable. Brittany Sanders recalled,

> "There was this one gig I did, and I still remember it so vividly… there were like six people there and Nick Kroll was one of them. I remember him like leaning forward, and there was just something in his facial expression that went wait a second, this chick is really funny. And then thinking, 'That guy was Nick Kroll.' I still hold that."

By pointing out the trustworthiness, honesty, knowledge, expertise, or celebrity of the validator, individuals amplified the meaning and impact of validating feedback. Sarah Jenkins described how her brother expressed interest and provided constructive feedback at

various times throughout her career. “When the podcast came out, he said ‘Oh this is fantastic’, which meant a lot from my brother because he’s not somebody who would say anything is good if he didn’t think it was.” By emphasising the validity of sources of validating feedback, individuals attempted to internalise and rely upon these supportive messages.

On the other side, individuals attempted to undermine others’ invalidation by denying their credibility—derogating their reliability as a source of feedback. For instance, respondents might cite observer’s limited knowledge of the task at hand, or flaws in their character, integrity, or objectivity. By diminishing the relevance and trustworthiness of others’ feedback, individuals could avoid internalising invalidation and even use it to build reactance to motivate their ongoing career building efforts. Sadie Curtis denied the credibility of competitions and of industry gatekeepers who take charge of these events. Reflecting on one producer’s feedback she said, “She didn’t think I would make it because I don’t care enough.” She went on to describe how,

> “A lot of those people who are gatekeepers shouldn’t be there. I think there’s a reason why they choose to self-appoint themselves as being people who are saying who can be comedians and who can’t… and they can be quite sexist and quite old school in their beliefs and tell people horrible feedback, especially women, like nasty feedback… like you look a mess, you can’t perform like that. And focusing on things that are antiquated now in comedy. People don’t care about that anymore.”

Sadie’s assertion that gatekeepers’ judgments are out of touch with modernity and reflect ingrained biases discredits and undermines their invalidating feedback as irrelevant. Kris Rader was approached by an audience member who “man-explained” her own joke back to her. “So, he went, ‘That was funny because this, that, and the other thing, so you could have made it funnier by doing this.’ And I was thinking, ‘What? You’re talking out of your hat essentially. Who are you to come up and tell me what material to do?’” She further described being “cornered” and given unsolicited advice by men who had just started comedy in their retirement years. “They’ve gone from being an expert in one profession to a newbie in this

one… when you're told how you could improve your set, you try to say in a really nice way, 'You've just started. You might be an old, white man, but you've just started. So, see you in a couple of years.'" Bethany Valentine shared a similar experience, and how she discredited the individual providing invalidating feedback.

> "I did an open mic, and without asking me one of the blokes was like, 'When you were on stage' and he went through all the bits in my set… And I was like, 'Who are you? You're a man in a basement!' Come on! It's acceptable for me to be in the basement, because I'm young and fresh and naïve, but you're a 30-year-old man. You should really be doing something else. Women in the industry, who are often overqualified to give advice are like, why would my advice matter? So I'll keep it to myself. Whereas men who are hugely underqualified say, 'Well I thought this would be funny.' And you're like, 'Well I didn't ask you, Ted!'"

Bethany's reflection that her invalidator was unqualified to provide guidance and had not been invited to do so discredited his feedback. Another example from Bethany Valentine shows how she likewise discredited invalidating reviews. "I had two reviewers and they didn't particularly like me. They thought I had some good sketches and some bad sketches… And I felt very sad that they didn't get it. It wasn't that I thought, like 'that's a valid criticism'. I thought, 'well they missed the point.'" Individuals also denied the credibility of the invalidation associated with being passed over for opportunities. Karla Simon told me, "There are loads of places that basically almost never put women on the bill. And if they do, they put on small, pretty, smiley women who play the ukulele and do songs about falling in love with the wrong person." She continued,

> "If you're happy to put on a woman who comes across like maybe she'll sleep with you, but not the kind of woman who's going to go on stage and talk about politics, then there's a level of misogyny there. Just because some women can limbo dance under your misogyny cut off point, it doesn't mean that it's not misogyny."

Grace Ferrino similarly highlighted the biases of those who did not respond to her calls to be booked at a particular club. She observed, "There are some clubs where their line-up is just white. And if there's an ethnic person in the line-up, they'd be doing very well; they'd have been on TV or supported someone really famous or have got a lot of accolades to their name.

But yet the white person has got shit." Pointing out the inequities, sexism, and racism associated with the allocation of industry opportunities made it clear that invalidating feedback in this form was not a reliable indicator of one's progress or potential. Along these lines, Gemma Evanston shared how a television network had passed on her show and pointed out how the biases of the commissioners were more at fault than the marketability of her work.

> "We got an email saying… we are worried that your subject matter will alienate a male audience. I was angrier than I have possibly ever been in my life. If you are going to tell me I'm not ready or I'm not funny or there's someone else doing it better or you just don't have the money, that's all fine. Those are all factors I can deal with and work on… But if you are really going to tell me that my material is too womany... I've got nowhere to go with that… I don't think people are sitting in a meeting room at another comedy network going, 'Oh, but is this going to alienate a female audience?'… the idea that alienating a subset of the audience, even if that was true, the idea that that is a problem."

After this rejection, and then subsequently selling out a month-long run at the Edinburgh Fringe festival, she explained,

> "To me that was evidence that there is an audience here, there is a market here. I keep being told by men that it's not big enough or that my subject matter is niche. And I'm like, it's not fucking niche. We are selling out. We sold out the entire run of our Edinburgh show. There were male comedians who were more famous than us who have had TV shows who aren't doing that. So don't tell me I'm niche… Not everyone has to find everything funny, but I think a good comedy commissioner is able to look at something and go, 'Well maybe this isn't exactly for me. Maybe it's not what I would watch, but that doesn't matter, it's not all about me. There are other people in the world who aren't fifty-year-old white men'… You're saying it's niche and you're saying well, what about the advertisers and stuff? And I'm like well, we're getting paid thousands of pounds by companies and stores and all these brands, because the brands have realised that through us, they're reaching a specific audience."

In the first instance, by critiquing the invalidation she received as unhelpful, and in the second instance, by highlighting how this invalidation was reflective of poor commissioning practices, Gemma derogated those who had rejected her work for television production. This allowed her to disbelieve their invalidating feedback while believing in others' validation.

Individuals also engaged in s*elective remembering* by memorialising validating feedback while attempting to forget or disregard invalidating identity feedback. This involved

taking steps at the time of receiving validating feedback to ensure that they would be able to remember and draw upon it later during times of hardship, struggle, or doubt. Isabelle Andaya recalled, “One of the first gigs I did, in that show every night the crowd voted to see who wins a tiny trophy. And on my first night I won a tiny trophy and I still have that tiny trophy, and sometimes I just look at it… It’s kind of comforting.” She went on about how memorialising this past validation helped her when she faced invalidation later on. “Sometimes it’s that whole thing of learning not everybody is going to like you and you’re going to have to live with it, and I think ‘Yes, but for a brief moment these people liked me, so that is pretty cool.’” Calinda Jeffries put it this way:

> “What you do when it’s going well is almost like a hibernating squirrel. You get all the nuts of positivity, and so that maybe when there’s bad times, you just remember when ridiculously good things happened. And so you’ve got those from the harvest time and so you can keep them and kind of use them to just remember, ‘No, I’m meant to be doing this’ and yes, ‘It will be fine and it’s good.’”

Calinda’s harvesting analogy illustrates how individuals memorialised validating feedback in order to build resilience to endure future challenges. Bethany Valentine similarly reported,

> “Essentially all of my opinions about myself come from other people. I am very much like, ‘I’m a husk, fill me with your praise’. So that the next time I’ll go out on stage, I’ll remember that they really liked it, or the next time someone recognises me in the street, or the next time someone says something nice about me. Those are the things that heal. Time heals everything. But as does random praise.”

Maisy Kingston told me after winning a competition, she used the award money to purchase a piece of clothing. “When I wear that I feel more confident. I remember being told, if you ever win money, spend it on something tangible. Don’t spend it on a night out, because then you can always keep that object… and now that’s definitely something I do for confidence. I’d go out [on stage] with that on.”

When they faced invalidating feedback, individuals reported trying to disregard it—ignoring it in the moment and attempting to forget it later on. When Grace Ferrino was excluded by others backstage, she disregarded this signal of invalidation. “I just ignore it, I’m

just like, if that's the way you want to be, that's fine, I am not going to talk to you either." Rosalind Harris told me, "A lot of people say that a bad gig is like etched on their memory forever. But I kind of wilfully wipe them from my mind. There's just no point in thinking about it." Efforts to erase or forget sources of invalidation thus aided individuals in their professional pursuits. On reflection, Hilda Avis reported wishing that she had learned to disregard others' unwelcome and invalidating advice earlier in her career "I was just totally allowing them to tell me what to do and to patronise me… I think I would tell myself to just ignore the arrogant people, the people that think they can tell you stuff." Sadie Curtis spoke about how she actively tried to forget invalidating experiences, and to instead focus on "good things" that supported her comedy aspirations: "I tried to teach myself to visualise the good things that have happened and help them outweigh the bad."

Based on earlier instances of feedback, individuals in the study exerted efforts to limit opportunities for future invalidation, while increasing opportunities for validation by managing their social interactions, networks, and relationships through *selective associating*. Individuals described working to increase or maintain relational closeness with those who have provided validation, while limiting interactions with those who had provided invalidating feedback. By selectively associating with others, individuals attempt to increase their chances of receiving validating feedback and to reduce their chances of being exposed to invalidation. As Gina Lancaster expressed it, "Sometimes whether you want to quit or keep going can hinge on like one gig or one instance, but you have those friends around you who will be like, 'What are you talking about? You can't quit now! You're in too deep, man.'" Many respondents reported forming long-term romantic relationships with others who understood and supported their comedy aspirations, and that doing so provided future opportunities for validation at critical moments. As Katie Al-Jamil reflected,

> "You get in your head about stuff and it's really helpful to have your partner to be able to talk you through stuff and actually know what it's like. Because I've got

> plenty of supportive friends but it's really hard for me to be like, 'I didn't get this' or 'I went into this audition today and I blew it' or 'I bombed at this show.' The best thing that they can say is, 'Oh man, that must really suck.' Whereas my boyfriend can be like, 'I was there, here is what I saw.'"

By surrounding themselves with others who provided much-needed validation, individuals enhanced the likelihood that when they faced obstacles and challenges, others would be there to buoy them up and help them to press on.

Individuals also worked to limit others' opportunities to convey invalidating feedback. In some cases, this meant avoiding performance venues where audiences were known to be especially hostile or unwelcoming. Clara Allen shared how concerns about backlash online kept her from posting material that might help to promote her work: "I just don't want to wade through comments being like, 'you're shit'… If you look under any video of a female comedian on Live at The Apollo, the number of comments about whether or not women are funny is massive." In other cases, this took the form of avoiding contact or limiting time spent with others whom they expected to dismiss their ambitions out of hand—those who had often previously been a source of invalidating feedback. In cases where such contact might inevitably occur (e.g., with family members, roommates), individuals tried to avoid discussing their ambitions in comedy. Grace Ferrino reported, "It's horrible when you are sharing your dreams with someone and they're rolling their eyes, because they're like, 'She's insane. Who does she think she is?' So-called friends do that, so I don't tell them anymore." Grace came to hide her ambitions increasingly, and kept others at "arm's length", giving them "little tests" to see if they were "OK to share with." Agnes Finch was unable to attend a festival, which made her feel that she might be lagging behind her peers. To combat this source of invalidation, she used social media filtering tools to disassociate from successful peers. "I kind of just filtered my news feeds so if anyone goes, 'Oh Edinburgh's so hard,' I've gone, 'Yes.' And if anyone went, 'Edinburgh's great,' I'll get rid of them." By limiting her exposure to potentially invalidating messages, Agnes attempted to manage

feedback in a way that helped her to remain resilient. Zelda Sampson, who was on the receiving end of devaluing unsolicited advice, recalled "You need to make sure you surround yourself with the people who will lift you and don't listen to the yakety-yak of people who will bring you down." She continued, "I take my notes from the people that I take my notes from." By excluding naysayers from this inner circle of influence, Zelda deflected their invalidating feedback. Hilda Avis reported how others from her hometown had expressed bafflement at her aspirations in comedy. She went on to say, "It's never something that I initiate the conversation with when I'm at home… I have kind of compartmentalised how I behave or present myself in my hometown compared to at university." She further explained, "At university I'm very happy to be known as someone who's involved in comedy but when I'm at home I'm a bit quieter about that side of things." Not discussing her substantial involvement in comedy with others "at home" was a way to avoid further invalidating feedback. "I don't feel like I have to always be like trying to impress people or convince them that I'm doing all of this comedy at university, therefore I'm super funny. It's like okay, well I shouldn't have to be trying extra hard." She continued:

> "When I did my show at the Fringe, one of my friends came, one of the ones that was part of the group that were like, 'But you're not funny!' And he came to watch the show and he was like, 'That's one of the funniest things I've ever seen. I didn't know you could do that' and, 'Did you write all of that yourself?' And I was like 'Yes, I did.' And I said to him, 'I guess at home it's not a way I feel I can express myself, so I just don't so much.'"

Because she had encountered invalidating feedback from others in her hometown, Hilda tried to avoid associating with these individuals and to avoid discussing her aspirations in comedy with them where possible.

Threat-Reducing Reappraisal. Many comedians described actively working to convince themselves that others' invalidation was, in fact, more benign than it had initially appeared. For instance, many respondents told me how they had worked to convince themselves that others' dislike for their comedy did not mean that they disliked them as a

person. By *framing invalidation as impersonal*, they attempted to reduce the affective impact of others' rejection, thereby detaching their need for self-esteem or acceptance from their comedic writing and performance. Felicity Robinson reflected,

> "I used to suffer from such terrible nerves. I mean now I still get nerves before every gig, but when I first started out, I would be thinking about the gig all night, even if it was just doing five or ten minutes or whatever, constantly on my mind. I would be so nervous it was like I was going to be sick; I was so frightened… When you do get criticised in comedy, it's like, you're actually criticising me. You don't like me, that's what you don't like. And you've got to get past that."

Felicity's nerves surrounding performance and her efforts to "get past" interpreting others' feedback as a personal criticism reflected an overarching effort to manage feedback in order to more resiliently carry on. By unhinging their desire to be liked from others' responses to their comedy, aspiring comedians attempted to reduce their sensitivity to others' critiques. Sadie Curtis told me, "I am a bit more able now to separate who I am on stage and what material I'm saying. If they don't like you doing stand-up, that's not to do with the fact that they don't like you, it's just what you're saying. At the start, that is really, really hard to separate." Across these quotes, it becomes clear that individuals' comedic material and identity are often tightly linked at the start of their career. The threat of rejection on stage is felt as more than a rejection of their writing or performance; it is taken as a rejection of who they are. As they try to disconnect the desire to be liked, included, and accepted by others from their comedic activities and build up experience enacting and managing feedback regarding their nascent professional identity as a comedian, they build up their ability to be more resilient in the face of invalidating feedback.

Another way that aspiring comedians attempted to manage the feedback they received was by *framing invalidation as universal,* particularly among those pursuing a career in comedy. As Hannah Benson expressed it "If it's just rubbish, then you did a rubbish gig. And it's fine, because everyone does." After struggling to attract top reviewers to an important gig, Sarah Jenkins shared how she had spoken to "other people that also really struggled to

get a review" and realised that this was a "universal thing." She explained how her perspective had shifted as she focused on how her predecessors has struggled: "There is always a story behind the success which is one of hard work and graft and often being ignored for years." By explaining that facing obstacles and being ignored were universal experiences on the way to success, Sarah could frame her own invalidating experiences as less threatening and as more indicative that she was on a difficult journey, just like everyone else working their way to top of the field. Individuals in the sample framed invalidation as universal by indicating that everyone in comedy experienced rejection, failure, and setbacks from time to time.

By pointing out how "bombing" was a universal part of the process of honing new material, individuals in the study also began *framing invalidation as developmental*. Gina Lancaster expressed this view by stating that, "However high you get, however well you're doing, you need a place to share your new stuff and a place to bomb, you're always going to need that." Similarly, Ivy Booker told me, "I am at the point now where I have a set that I know nine out of ten times works, but it's a ten-minute set. So when I do a twenty-minute show, it goes back down again, maybe like five out of those ten would be solid." Rather than being upset by this uptick in invalidation, individuals who framed invalidation as developmental saw this negative feedback as a necessity, as part of the work of refining creative performance materials—an admittedly unpleasant but inescapable aspect of the job. When future instances of rejection or failure came along, they could see them as simply a part of the process and a reflection on the developing state of their creative materials, rather than a reflection on their potential as a performer.

Recalibration

Through individuals' aspirational identity enactment, encounters with identity feedback, and feedback management efforts, they gain role enactment experience and

exposure to the world of comedy. This in turn enables them to begin to see themselves, their aspirations, and their potential to progress and achieve those aspirations in a new way. This recalibration essentially turns individuals back to their "basic but implicit assumptions about what is desirable and possible" to rewrite their perceptions regarding the future of who they may become (Ibarra, 2003: 83). This happens through three primary means, each aimed at recalibrating a different underlying component of the paradoxical pulls: redefining aims, rewiring possibility, and reactance rewards. Redefining aims involves individuals defining their aspirations in more inclusive terms, so that nearly any outcome can be interpreted as a success. Rewiring possibility involves individuals coming to see their odds-defying aspirations as more possible than initially perceived, on the basis of new information and experience gleaned through identity enactment and validating feedback. Reactance rewards are individuals' ideas of how achieving their odds-defying aspirations may be even more essential and beneficial than they had originally imagined, because of the upsides of defying others' expectations. Thus, recalibration helps to shift the balance of the paradoxical pulls in favour of promoting identity growth by pre-emptively neutralising the threat of trying and failing, by reducing perceived claiming risks, and by augmenting potential claiming rewards. (See Table 5.3).

Redefining Aims. First, individuals recalibrated by redefining their aspirational aims, and indeed the meaning of success, in more proximal and inclusive terms. This helped them to pre-emptively neutralise the anticipated identity threat of trying and failing, by carving out new ways to conceive of themselves as a success—in case their initial definitions, milestones, and markers did not come to pass. These re-definitions often moved individuals away from focusing on the future, to focusing on the present, in their vision of success. In this way, individuals focused on the intrinsic, present benefits of doing comedy, as well as markers of success beyond their current or future comedic activities and career progress.

Individuals often spoke about how they had initially seen success as something they were working toward—something in the future, attached to specific milestones, metrics, or measures—but that they had come to see it as something in the present as well. Through the *diversification* of their aims they began to recognise the good things about whatever career progress they had already achieved, and to conceptualise success as achievable in a variety of ways, often based on the career progress they had already attained. For instance, newcomers often spoke about how they felt successful just continuing to do comedic activities at all—and how even if their career took them in an entirely different direction, they could feel successful no matter what. Bethany Valentine shared,

> "The jobs I'd like to do all fall into this thing of talking to people and making them listen to you. Being a teacher is essentially being a comedian, but straighter…working in an auction house is always appealing to me because I like the idea of being a presenter on a TV show. When I imagine myself, if I was just working in a gallery, doing catalogue or whatever, I always imagine like, 'But by night, I do comedy!' So if I am not doing one of the exciting, show-y off-y jobs, I always imagine that I have an exciting, show-y off-y evening."

Drawing connections between their comedic interests and other possible career paths in this way prepared newcomers to story their career journey as a success and to express their comedic interests in other domains, regardless of whether formal opportunities for employment in comedy entertainment were forthcoming. Semi-professionals spoke about how they had come to see their comedic career as a success—disclosing that even if comedy never became their full-time job, it would still be worth pursuing. Elizabeth Martin, a semi-professional who earned part of her income from comedy alongside freelance work, told me: "As much as I would like to be wildly successful, I have thought, 'Would I be happy just doing this at a level where I could make money and feel creative forever?' And I think I probably could… So I could probably do it, or something to do with it, forever I think." Professionals often spoke about how they had come to view success as something they had already achieved by focusing less on the specific outcomes (e.g., shows, venues, awards) they

had initially hoped to achieve and by focusing more on the privilege of earning their living from comedy. Agnes Finch told me how she had changed her aspiration away from securing a specific opportunity on a particular network to being able to make her money doing comedy. “I thought, I’m going to have to change what my aim is. So I then decided—my aim is to make my money from being a stand-up and that would make me happy… I changed it. I went right, I’m going to make my money from comedy which is great, and I’ve done that.” Thus, moving from visions of future grandeur to expressing gratitude for current realities, and finding joy in the realistic, attainable version of their comedic interests, allowed individuals to conceptualise their lived reality as a success in terms of their comedic ambitions—thereby shifting their view of success from ‘somewhere out there’, to something they were already experiencing or could confidently hope to one day experience, even if the future did not bring specific, sought-after professional opportunities in comedy. Sadie Curtis seconded the importance of this type of recalibration by stating,

> “It’s not sensible just having one goal in mind because if you do, then when it doesn’t happen or if it doesn’t happen, you’ll be disappointed. So for me it’s better to have as many plates spinning as I can, so that if one falls, it’s okay because I’ve got tons of opportunities coming my way that might be good. I feel like that’s the healthiest way to see it because if you just think of comedy as, ‘Okay, I’m going to do stand-up and then I’m going to get my own special, then I’m going to make a series, then I’m going to do a sitcom’—it just won’t happen that way. There are only like two people that’s happened for in the world; that’s not how it happens. I feel lucky to even be in this industry and work in it and have the opportunities that I do have. It feels greedy to be like, ‘Here’s my one thing I want to do.’ I’m grateful for anything that comes through, regardless of where it’s from. I think that has helped with my perspective toward it, rather than just being like, ‘If I don’t get a sitcom I’m giving up.’ It is better to be like, ‘No, there are other angles.’ That’s probably a more sensible way of seeing it.”

Thus, by focusing on how much they had already accomplished, and by defining success as inclusive of a wider variety of possible future opportunities and avenues for expressing their creative and comedic ambitions, then no matter what the future held, individuals could see their journey in comedy as a success story. This re-definition of success enhanced individuals’ ability to keep going, in spite of the odds.

Individuals also redefined their aims in terms of *mastery* of their craft—gaining a sense of success through their consistency and competence. In other words, by seeing success in the very act of doing a good job at the work of comedy and focusing on this aim, individuals could work toward this version of success, regardless of the opportunities they were extended in the future at work. Carly Knight, a semi-professional comedian, shared:

> "For me, success is leaving a stage and knowing that I've done a good job. It would be nice if I could live off money from comedy and be booked for TV stuff—that would be amazing, but I am pragmatic. I think those are the sort of goals that are nice to have, but they shouldn't be what drives you. So for me, those kinds of things are like small, little ambitions but not the measure of success in comedy. I think it's literally down to doing a gig that the audience enjoys. Just being the best comedian that you can… making the booker happy that they booked you."

Viola Bell shared this sentiment, "After every gig there's an element of success… Any good comedian knows if it was shit. Good comedians know if it was good. You know when it's a bad audience, you know when it's a good audience, and you know when you haven't done your job by managing to turn the audience around." She went on, "I think comedy gives you an instant success: you think you're funny, and it happens. There is nothing like making a whole room of people laugh with something you've written, something you're doing. Nothing."

Individuals also recalibrated their aims through *personalisation*. In some instances, this meant narrowing their focus on identifying and honing a target audience for their work, which would more specifically reflect their authentic interests and allow for artistic integrity. Viola Bell described how, as she gained a sense of who she was as a comedian, she recognised that not everyone would like her comedy—and that was okay. In fact, letting go of the desire to be liked by everyone, and instead focusing on building a personalised following specific to her comedic voice, was an important part of her professionalisation.

> "You're constantly judged… always putting yourself out there… and you think, well I don't really need that anymore, I kind of know who I am and know what I do, I've got a fan base, I just don't need these other ones… I think you do gigs at the beginning

> because you need to make an audience, you need to find an audience, you need to find people who like you and who don't like you."

Embracing, rather than being hurt by the fact that some audiences would not enjoy their comedic writing or performance, meant that comedians became more comfortable selectively alienating some audience members, in order to retain others and build a more loyal, devoted following that was better aligned with their authentic comedic voice and style. That is, in appealing to only selected audiences, they may actually fuel greater growth and ultimate success than by seeking universal acceptance, praise, and encouragement. As Katie Al-Jamil put it, "Famous comedians have a base… You get a base by creating a voice that other people relate to. I wouldn't measure a good comedian by everybody loves them or everybody likes them… if everybody likes you, then nobody loves you." Katie's reflection that being liked by everyone might actually stand in the way of being loved by a core group of followers highlights the trade-off that comedians begin to willingly make as they redefine their aims. Thus, outright rejection by certain audiences could start to be seen as a necessary and even potentially beneficial aspect of their professional identity development. Recognising that everyone may not love their work, and that this was not a career-ending proposition, helped individuals to hope for a dedicated fan base composed of those for whom their comedy was best suited. By telling themselves that gaining devoted fans often coincided with acquiring detractors as well, respondents redefined their aims toward finding their own, personalised niche in comedy, even if that meant being disliked by certain audience members, as part of the process building up a distinct and devoted fan base. Personalisation, in other cases—particularly among those who were already earning their living from comedy—involved hoping for more opportunities for authentic self-expression, including the expression of multiple facets of their personality and interests. Arielle Francis told me,

> "When people say what do you want your career to look like, I say someone like Stephen Fry, but that's mainly because he's allowed to do interesting things and serious things and stupid things and silly things, and no one says that's off-brand. I

> don't think there are a lot of female comedians who have that opportunity to be cross-disciplinary and to be just sort of interesting. So that's kind of the pinnacle of my ambition is that—not the kind of level of fame or wealth that he has, but the freedom to do a lot of different things and have people go, 'Oh yes, that makes sense'… I think a lot of the world nowadays is geared towards people being quite one-note and on-brand. Whereas I quite like the idea of having lots of different facets to a personality."

Thus, personalisation meant finding ways to express the "different facets" of one's personality through comedy.

Individuals also redefined success through the *integration* of factors beyond their work into their career goals, to orient their aims toward developing a holistic work-life that fulfilled their multiple, competing values. Calinda Jeffries shared how the camaraderie of her early career had given way to competitiveness amongst her peers and how she used relationships with friends and family to temper this intense focus on comedic success, thereby reminding herself that "there is more to life than… your career":

> "A lot of gigs are like a social gathering and the people who do them sometimes have no ambition to go any further… but then as you get to the other side, it gets more competitive. And you sometimes work with people where you are like, 'Oh! They're not a very nice person.' And it can feel a bit like you are on your own, and it's a dog-eat-dog world… it's so important to keep my friendships outside of comedy alive and also see my family as much as I can, because it really brings me back down to like there's more to life than what gigs you're getting and where you are in your career."

Brooklyn Havemeyer shared how her view of success had changed as she learned more about the costs and downsides of success for her role models. "People who were being pushed around by studios or worked to the bone… I would have thought, even though it's a stressful job, I was like, 'Oh that must have been amazing' and then you find out the cost of it." She went on about how her role models had "suffered"— "you start to see the flipside of it all… and how badly wrong that can all go when you're that successful." She concluded, "I wouldn't want to have success at the expense of those things or having a happy home life or that sort of thing." In this way, Brooklyn reoriented her developmental efforts toward a different meaning of success than she had originally held. As Celeste Arietta said it,

> "There's dreams of course. I mean I would love to be in a movie, I would love to do some TV stuff, I would love to do more radio stuff. But sometimes I feel that when we look at that and just chase that, we might miss life… Comedy can't be your whole life. Otherwise you will be nothing but depressed; you have to also have a life. So a person you love, a home that you love, friends. And maybe I focus a bit too much on that, but that's important to me too."

By reminding themselves that there is more to life than comedy, and conceptualising career success in terms of values fulfillment both within and beyond the domain of work, individuals could frame a wider variety of futures as a success. By highlighting how factors outside of their formal work-roles and projects were important markers of overall success, odds-defying aspirers worked to pre-emptively neutralise the threat of trying and failing, thereby pushing the paradoxical pulls toward growth.

Rewiring Possibility Beliefs. As odds-defying aspirers engaged in aspirational identity enactment and feedback management their perceptions began to shift. These joint efforts enabled them to begin to build an evidence base that their odds-defying aspirations could be seen as attainable, rather than impossible. They began to believe that they were among those who might actually succeed in creating a viable comedy career. They began to see their aspirations as normal and shared by others, thereby feeling less alone in their career pursuits. They began to see the path ahead in clearer terms—moving from seeing the path as hazy to having a more concrete vision of how to move forward. And they began to see their heroes and role models as more approachable and human, rather than distant and super-human. In these ways, individuals came to see a career in comedy as less of a long shot and more of a real possibility for their future.

Individuals first described how they had come to see a professional future in comedy as more possible that they had originally imagined as they began *accumulating evidence* that they could become a viable comedian in the future. Based on validating feedback and progressive opportunities, individuals began to grow an evidence-base for their own potential

—turning comedy not necessarily into an easy path, but a possible one. In reflecting on her journey into doing comedy full-time, Sadie Curtis shared,

> "When someone offers you something, then you're like, 'Okay, maybe this is good' and it starts off small. You'll get a little writing thing on something small, and then someone else will offer you something and someone will tell you you're good, and then those things add up. And then after a while you're like, 'No, I can'—there's enough here that I'm not kidding myself… because I have got a whole CV of stuff I've written and now it's just like, 'You can't tell me that's not a good joke.' But… there is definitely a voice in me that's like, 'You're a joke,' or at least that people are thinking, 'Who does she think she is?' Back on to the reason why I still keep going—it is the positives, making the positives outweigh the bad."

Thus, Sadie's efforts to selectively remember others' feedback helped her to shift her view of her own potential, and thereby "keep going." Mary Clarkson described how being approached by an agent who talked about comedy "as a job" and being "offered bits and doing professional nights rather than open mic nights… and getting offered better stuff" helped to shift her view of her potential to have comedy as her career. "That made me sort of start thinking like, 'Oh, it could be.'" Thus, as Mary accumulated multiple indicators that comedy could be her full-time career, she began to see herself as a viable future comedian.

Individuals described how being in contact with others who saw comedy as a viable, possible career for themselves also helped them to feel less alone in their aspirations. Rather than an outlandish or ridiculous hope, being around other like-minded dreamers helped in *normalising* their odds-defying aspirations. Seeing these others' commitment to comedy as a career helped to create a perceptual shift, whereby individuals started to see their own career aspirations as more attainable. This shift made pursuing comedy feel less unrealistic, thus attenuating the pull to prevent identity loss and enhancing the pull to promote identity growth. Winnie Miller found that seeing others pursuing careers in the performing arts boosted her own motivation to go for it:

> "It has surprised me actually how many people do think of it as something sustainable and sensible, and I find that very encouraging… that is probably where the main encouragement comes from. As long as we all keep making connections and talking to each other about it, I think it seems a little more viable across the board."

Winnie's reflection demonstrates how her early efforts to enact comedy as a hobby helped her to see how it might become a profession, thus propelling her onward in her journey. Sadie Curtis likewise reported, "People who take it seriously help make you feel like you can do it. If you are on your own, it is easy to just think, I'm kidding myself, I need to stop." She continued, "I did two lessons and met people after that and it was cool to see other people who were also on the outskirts trying to make it in the industry and not just seeing it as a joke or just seeing it as like a hobby. It was people who were genuinely like no, I really want to do this." Thus, Sadie's relationships with other comedians helped her to see comedy as a real, possible career. Madison Abernathy likewise recalled how her first foray into comedy exposed her to others who were pursuing comedy as a career and how this fuelled her motivation to pursue it more seriously as well. "I was like, 'I want to do this, this is a dream' but I guess I never really thought about actually pursuing it." She went on, "Being around people who were thinking about it as a serious option actually made me a lot more committed to it… A lot of people coming out of the stand-up course started gigging loads and that's really nice to see, people actually really going for it." She explained, "When you're in that group you're like, 'Oh yes, everyone does this' and you forget… Just being absorbed in and then you are like, 'Oh I'm just part of this now, I'll just do it,' and then you don't really see it as a lone pursuit." Although pursuing comedy initially seemed like an impossible dream for her career, associating with others who were also going into a career in comedy was "like going from an area of low concentration, being absorbed into an area of high concentration." Hayley Vickers described how seeing others' commitment to working toward becoming professional improv comedians had helped to believe that this was possible for her as well. "I started doing improv and I was like 'Oh this is great,' and I met sort of older improvisers who'd made a career out of it and were having their own shows for a full run at the Fringe. And I was like yes, yes, I could do that." Seeing that others were pursuing comedy as a career

moved the needle of individuals' improbability perceptions—helping them to see a career in comedy as a challenging, but increasingly possible future. Rather than seeing themselves as the "only one" on this journey, they could look to other aspirers who believed in this potentiality and start to see their own aspirations as normal, instead of outlandish.

Respondents in the study also described how their identity enactment enabled *detailing*, as they learned more about various options for roles and revenue sources available to comedians and built their understanding of the path to becoming a comedian. In essence, as they learned about ways in which they might advance their comedy careers, they began to connect the dots from where they were, to where they hoped to be—to trace a path to actually achieving their odds-defying aspirations. Getting this close-up view of the career trajectory, and insider knowledge in terms of how others make a living from comedic entertainment, precipitated further shifts in individuals' perceptions about their probability of succeeding in achieving their odds-defying aspirations. Identity enactment thus allowed individuals to encounter new, practicable ideas about how to build their careers, thus making the impossible seem more possible. As Katie Al-Jamil put it, "The more that I am learning about the craft and where you can take it, the more I am like 'Oh yes, this can be a career'." Hayley Vickers told me, "My understanding of comedy… as a viable financial option has developed at breakneck speed basically over the last year." She then went on to describe how she felt like she was building up her understanding of the steps to becoming a "viable comedy performer." Along these lines, she recalled how learning about a friend's comedy journey—including the specifics of his career behaviours, trajectory, and timeline—helped her to see comedy as a possible career for herself.

> "My friend was working full-time as a comic. He was working pretty much every day travelling up and down the country, losing sleep and stuff. But the possibility that it could happen, and it could happen in five to ten years of working really, really hard at something and then earning your money from doing what you love—I think that blew my mind as something that really brought it home to me… I think that's probably when I thought that it was possible."

Clara Allen explained, "Once you've watched enough comedy, even though obviously all of that's way above the level you'll be at, you can see the trajectory better—like, I've just got to do these gigs here and then write this kind of thing. You can sort of see the end goal. That's quite helpful." She went on to explain:

> "There are a lot of other people who want you to do well, who are other female comedians normally and it's very supportive in that way. A lot of very good friends of mine are also comics. It's quite helpful when they are slightly ahead of you or slightly behind you and you can give them advice, or they can give you tips on good gigs or people to invite to things… It also means that even whilst you're sort of progressing, you've got a kind of clear idea of what you want to aim for next because one of your friends has just done this gig that's a bit better or this opportunity."

Lucy Montgomery likewise shared how friendships with comedians had helped her to become privy to the details of others' careers, which made comedy seem more viable as a career option. "I think a lot of [what kept me doing it] was starting to see that it was a comfortable career… I saw a few of my peers, just like friends who were actually doing quite well and…actually making a career from comedy and I was like, 'Oh this is really cool.'" Learning concrete details about the comedy career path through identity enactment thus fuels perceptual shifts that motivate individuals' ongoing progress in their aspirational careers.

Individuals also described how their identity enactment had enabled close encounters with comedians and industry insiders, which helped in *humanising* the entertainment industry and their personal heroes and role models—making those in this field seem more like "normal people." This, in turn, helped to make comedy feel like a possible career, as opposed to a fantasy, which in turned spurred on individuals to act on their desires to reach their odds-defying career aspirations. This type of perceptual shift was often enabled by in-person interactions with industry insiders. Daisy Harding shared an emotional experience about attending a live performance by one of her role models, Maria Bamford:

> "I saw people like Josie Long, Bridget Christie, who I found really inspiring, and kind of fell in love with on stage… I went to go and see Maria Bamford and it was a really fun and quite emotional gig to be at because I knew like twenty female comedians in there… and you could tell the room was just full of these people being

> like, ‘I have wanted to see you for so long.’ And not even so much like, ‘I’ve booked this ticket in advance,’ or ‘I can’t wait to see Maria Bamford.’ I was getting quite emotional because it was more like, ‘I wanted to see you as a possibility.’”

When Brooklyn Havemeyer began sharing her comedy aspirations, her sister helped to provide back-stage access to a performance through a friend who worked in entertainment. “We went backstage, and I was like, ‘Oh, she works here. Oh, they’re all normal people’ … I was looking at famous people going, ‘That must be amazing’ but not sort of looking at someone in my immediate vicinity and thinking, ‘Oh, they’re doing it.’” She continued on, “I remember that being quite a key moment—just seeing that it was a job and knowing it was very normal. Just up the road from us. You kind of go, ‘Oh, I see.’” Being able to access this space and recognising that those working in entertainment were “normal people” caused Brooklyn’s perceptions of her own potential to become a comedian to shift. In other words, coming to see the humanness of those working in entertainment helped Brooklyn to see a comedy career as more possible for herself. Reflecting back on an experience meeting a professional comedian, Gemma Evanston told me, “She was very warm and funny obviously, but at the same time she wasn’t like a rock star, do you know what I mean? She was a normal person, a very funny person who I like immensely, but I’d sort of thought of comedians as these sorts of superheroes with these magic powers.” She further reflected, “And there she was, and she was just really nice and encouraging and normal. I remember thinking, ‘Oh, maybe normal people like me who are this old and this gender can do this.’” Gemma’s original view of comedians as “superheroes” with “magic powers” illuminates how the superhumanisation of those who hold particular work-roles may be undone as individuals have one-to-one and up-close encounters with these individuals (Waytz, Hoffman, & Trawalter, 2015). This humanising process enables rewiring, making the impossible seem more possible, which may in turn help to propel individuals forward toward working to achieve their odds-defying aspirational aims as they recalibrate the paradoxical pulls.

Reactance Rewards. As individuals progressed, they also learned to develop reactance in response to invalidation. This heightened their sense of the potential rewards of becoming a comedian—leveraging invalidation into an even greater pull to promote growth, and thereby recalibrating the paradoxical pulls. Reactance took on many forms. Individuals were reactively motivated to out-perform rivals, to defy sources of normative influence and control, and to assert their distinctiveness, competence, and decision-making autonomy. They were also reactively motivated to become a voice for underrepresented groups and to create space for fellow aspirers through trailblazing, building a sense that their own motivational journey could be an important exercise in altruism. These efforts gave individuals powerful motivation to continue working to achieve their career goals—despite others' invalidating feedback and other challenges along their career journey—and to continue aspiring in spite of the odds. In this way, reactance helped respondents to build a heightened sense of the potential rewards of claiming their odds-defying aspiration, thereby elevating and ennobling this pursuit.

Elizabeth Martin recalled an interaction with a more experienced act who helped her to develop a sense of *rivalry* reactance to keep pursuing her dreams of becoming a comedian: "She said to me, if you ever feel like, 'Aw, this is tough, I don't want to do it anymore,' just think of all the mediocre male comedians who are doing better than you, and that will really push you to work harder because they got where they are through nothing." She further reflected, "That was really funny and just true as well. I think like any industry, you do have to work harder if you are a woman. So that kind of stuff makes me think, 'Ya I've got to do this.'" In this way, Elizabeth co-opted the meaning of the invalidating feedback of lagging behind male peers to fuel additional motivation to pursue her odds-defying career aspirations. Imogen Baker shared how invalidating experiences with peers in a university-level sketch comedy troupe had given rise to competitive rivalry reactance. "It feels like they think, 'Oh

she doesn't really know what she's talking about because she doesn't know everything about comedy.' There is a sort of weird ownership to it… there's definitely a sense of maybe they're more deserving of professional success." She continued,

> "I get the idea of completely dedicating yourself to the work but from my understanding of it, every person who has become successful in comedy, it has been because they shined because of their talent in some way or another or luck or they have connections… There is definitely an element of talent and luck there. It did make me feel like I wasn't taken as seriously in terms of becoming a comedian after graduation, but maybe I'll prove them wrong."

Thus, not having her comedic aspirations taken seriously, and then undermining the credibility of this invalidation by arguing that her peers' assessment of her potential was misaligned with reality, helped unearth a motivation to "prove them wrong" by continuing to work to achieve her odds-defying career aspiration. Yolanda Mary Jefferson shared how she had asked to play a gig, and the promoter decided not to include her on the bill. "At the time I was livid… He might have had a point, but of course at the time I was like completely indignant. How dare he?!… I'm brilliant." She explained that rather than be deterred by this negative feedback, she responded by organising a gig of her own. "He didn't want me at his gig, so I set up my own gig… I don't know why, some kind of protest in my head… I was so annoyed that he'd turned me down." In this way, rather than allowing this invalidation to derail her progress, she used her "livid," "indignant," and "annoyed," emotional reactions to "protest"—and, by organising her own night, effectively became a rival to this promoter. Kerry Iverson summed up this sentiment nicely by saying, "Be so good at what you do that they can't ignore you." The promise of rivalrous vindication thus became a new reward of its own for individuals' identity claiming—helping to spur individuals on as it strengthened their pull to promote identity growth.

Defiance reactance involved individuals' transforming discouragement into a more rebellious or beat-the-odds attitude that fuelled ongoing action to achieve their odds-defying aspiration. Madison Abernathy reported: "It's definitely a gender thing as well. I don't think

that would have happened to me if I'd been a boy—I don't think I would have ever been encouraged to be less funny as a boy. So maybe it is a little bit of a defiant thing." Being discouraged from comedic activities as an adolescent and further reflecting on how this discouragement was based on gender allowed Madison to tap into a rebellious motivation to continue pursuing her odds-defying career aspirations—creating a new reward for becoming a comedian by establishing her decision-making autonomy. Hannah Benson described how her family's culture and norms as well as the invalidation of her comedic aspirations through her family members' discouragement, spurred her on to progress even more. She reported, "I was quite ambitious because I wanted to revolt. My family are very like, 'You have to do law and medicine to be an accepted person in this family' kind of thing." She aimed to get into a top university, and to pursue comedy while she was there:

> "I thought that that would be like the ultimate kind of, 'fuck you,' to do something that was totally not what you wanted me to do, but at a place where I was clearly quite good at it. I wanted to do something so whacky and naughty at a place that was known for producing comedians. So that became my total goal… I just wanted to sort of mock, parody that kind of thing with my life. It was totally a rebellious thing."

Hannah's rebellious attitude reflects defiance reactance. Calinda Jeffries likewise strengthened her motivation to enact her desired future identity in response to others' discouragement. "One of my best friends said to me early on, 'Yes, but it's very unlikely that you'll ever be able to make a living from it.' And when she said that I was a bit like 'Oh!' Like, not that I'd ever thought I would be able to, but when somebody says you probably won't be able to, I was suddenly like, 'What?!'… I think it might have like spurred me on a bit more to go 'Well I can.' Maybe I can... She didn't mean it in a bad way, but I don't think anybody expected that I would pursue it to this degree where I am doing it for a living." Likewise, Hayley Vickers found that her mother's advice to stop pursuing comedy ultimately propelled her on to pursue this career more actively, as she undermined the credibility of this invalidating counsel and chose to disregard it. Hayley went on to describe how she was "kind

of drifting," how comedy "was the only thing that [she] really cared about enough to not want to drop," and that there was "nothing" she "wanted to do anywhere near as much as that." Thus, her mother's discouraging advice led to Hayley's appropriating this invalidation, which fostered her desire to achieve her dreams.

Another newfound reward for becoming a comedian was found in the prospect of *voicing*, serving the interests of currently underrepresented audiences**.** Eileen Polson reported her experience observing another comedian during what she described as an "aggressively laddish and misogynistic" night of stand-up: "She came up and did five minutes… and it was just insanely different from everything else. And I just thought… I don't understand how you could take the risk of walking onto that stage and doing that, that was extraordinary to sort of lay yourself bare like that." Eileen messaged her the next day and asked:

> "How do you approach that? How do you handle that when it is a very, very straight white male, laddish evening? You can talk about straight white males, but more than that it is about horrible men. How do you go on after that? That made me think, 'I don't want to do this.' But, how do you do it? And she said, 'That means you must do it.' She said 'You must do it and it means that you go out and you be yourself, and there will always be people like you in the audience wanting something different and being delighted by something different.' And that was really big."

Sacrificing one's own comfort and safety by continuing to work toward a career in comedy on behalf of underrepresented groups, whose interests and experiences may not otherwise be reflected in comedy entertainment, was an important form of reactance reward for many respondents. The idea of leveraging one's own outsider status in mainstream comedy to serve and give voice to currently underserved consumers, was a powerful way for individuals to motivate ongoing action to achieve their odds-defying aspirations, despite the invalidating exclusion and rejection they frequently faced. Individuals often shared egalitarian visions for what comedy entertainment could become, and how it might better serve a wider set of audiences, if its workforce were to become more representative. Madison Abernathy told me, "Something is massively appealing about comedy because it is a traditionally masculine area

and there is so much more that it could be if it had more women in it. I think it would just be so much more interesting to see more women in it." Kris Rader similarly wove a vision of the future of comedy:

> "A lot of comedy works on surprise. So you are given a completely different perspective of something that is totally part of your normal everyday experience and it makes you laugh because you think, 'Oh yes, I never thought of it that way.' People who come from marginalised communities have that in spades…. What I'm saying is, there is so much potential for comedy to open up those kinds of stories and those experiences… For every ten people you have who come in and tell the same old hackneyed sort of stuff, you get one or two people who come and tell you something that just opens up your experience in a completely new way and makes you laugh. I hope that we are on a tipping point—reaching a point where we understand that people will pay money to go and see people with different experiences."

By connecting her own career path with the unfolding of a more representative and inclusive field of comedy entertainment—one that welcomes difference and sees unique stories as valuable and viable—Kris helped to bolster her own motivation to keep going. Grace Ferrino shared,

> "I have an important voice and what I say is needed and it's important. So that keeps me going… because I get to raise awareness of my issues—not my issues, but issues I face as a minority ethnic woman, as a visible minority ethnic woman. I can do that and doing that through comedy is probably the best way. Some of the things I talk about are quite dark… If I was just there at Hyde Park Speakers' Corner going 'Ahah, ahah, ahah!' they'd be like, 'Oh this is too heavy.' Whereas if you do it in comedy, they get a sting but they laugh afterwards—it's like when you are at the doctor's and they give you an injection and then they give you a sticker or lollipop as a child."

Grace's view that her own career could be put to use raising awareness and representing minority women, as she shared her own lived experience in her comedy writing and performance, helped motivate her to continue on despite the many obstacles she faced. Thus, she cast herself as a representative of others, framing her own career as a useful platform to share the unique challenges and viewpoints of minority ethnic women. Madison Abernathy further reflected, "Every now and then in comedy when you're writing silly jokes, which is ninety percent of my material, you think 'why am I doing this?'… but stand-up actually can be really impactful." She summed it up by saying, "Comedy and laughter is very powerful

and often very political because a lot of the time people don't think they're taking it seriously but do." Acknowledging the power and platform of comedy as a tool for social activism, and the role they could play in amplifying underrepresented voices, helped fuel many comedians' journeys as they built up this motivation as a reaction against their own invalidating experiences of being excluded, overlooked, or rejected.

Individuals also found motivation in the notion that their own career journey might involve *trailblazing* by opening the way for other aspirers in the future, particularly those who might not have equal access, opportunities, and resources. As they faced invalidating feedback along the way, the hope of trailblazing for others became a potent new reward for achieving their career dreams. For instance, Katie Al-Jamil reflected, "Comedy has changed my life for the better… and there need to be people creating opportunities and pushing the status quo aside to make room for people to do this who wouldn't necessarily be able to do this." Thus, Katie ennobled her own comedy career as an altruistic means of extending opportunities to others: "I would love to… continue making this craft available to people who want to try it and maybe want to pursue it." Madison Abernathy similarly shared how she felt a sense of duty to make space in comedy for other women: "You're not going to see more women in comedy unless you go into it and encourage other women to get into it. So I feel a duty. I'd like to be one of those people who people can be like, 'Oh, I could do that!' you know?" Reflecting on her own favourite female-led comedy, she said, "I think a lot of young women are like, 'That's me'… that's just really important to see. I wish I had more comedies like that growing up, definitely, and seeing women in roles where they are the funny people. Being able to write something like that would be amazing." The idea of being observed by others, and thereby helping them to believe that they too might succeed in a comedy career, was also present in Hilda Avis's statement that:

> "Sometimes you just have so many intersecting identities that you feel like, I just cannot be bothered…You're not just dealing with one thing that makes you stand out,

> it's sometimes three or four things at once….and it's just like, 'Meh, I don't want to fight this battle today.' I recognise that in myself and so I can see easily why people would feel that way. But I guess I am now in a mindset of well, you have to be in it to win it and representation matters. So I want people to see me doing something like writing a show and be like, 'Okay, that's something that I can do now, it's not just something that's done by a certain group of people'. So yes, for me it's being in spaces and making sure that people can see that you're there."

Hilda connects her own comedic activities in comedy with the desire to show others that they can do it as well. Believing that their own efforts to overcome the odds might inspire, encourage, and create space for the next generation of rising aspirers helped individuals to motivate their ongoing action to reach their comedy career aspirations. Hayley Vickers shared, "There are cases where I don't feel like I belong, where I don't feel like I fit in. And of course I belong. I am determined to not let differences make me feel like I shouldn't be there… like doing stand-up comedy nights, where you are the only female act." She further reflected,

> "I have done that a lot, and it is tedious, and it is frustrating. I used to be intimidated by it, but now I am just angry. Because I could list twenty funny women off the top of my head… the responsibility of organising a gig includes ensuring you have diverse perspectives… and promoting those people even if you don't fit into those groups."

Trailblazing that was geared toward helping fellow comedians was also important for Felicity Robinson, who reported, "If I am going to have a support act or something, I will choose a woman. If you want to champion someone, I'd rather champion a woman, because it is harder for us in a lot of ways… There is still a long way to go." As individuals in the sample came to believe that they could use their own aspirational journey to create space and opportunities for other marginalized aspiring comedians, this helped to create a sense of reactance based on the promise of changing the industry and trailblazing a path for others like them to succeed. In other words, if they could help future aspirers to succeed through their own uphill battle in achieving a comedy career, it would be worth it. Thus, in the face of overwhelming odds, seeing how their own career might benefit and support other up-and-comers helped motivate them to keep going.

Motivational Resilience

Through individuals' efforts at feedback management and the accumulated experience of enacting their comedian identity, they became more adept at navigating and motivating their career progress without being derailed by failure, rejection, and periods of slow progress and achievement. Recalibration helped to fuel this transition as individuals worked toward becoming more resilient in their motivational resolve. As compared to the motivational precarity that so characterised the early career experiences of odds-defying aspirers, individuals' newfound resilience allowed them to be more persistent, self-confident, and resistant to others' feedback. Resilience enabled them to overcome the self-doubt and vulnerability to feedback that had often plagued their early days, as they steeled themselves against whatever obstacles appeared along their path. In this state, individuals were committed to continuing their career in comedy, come what may. (See Table 5.4).

Patient Persistence. As compared to their initial hesitation regarding pursuing a career in comedy, individuals who had built up resilience demonstrated persistence across career ups and downs. Perseverance in the face of challenges and patience through periods of slow progress indicated that, although they may have initially had their doubts, they would continue on as a comedian, even if it turned out to be slow-going and difficult along the way. Their resilience was thus characterised by consistent, growth-promoting identity enactment efforts. Felicity Robinson reported,

> "I'll be honest with you, when you do get constant knockbacks, which I did have at the very beginning, like constant, constant, constant, and you can't get in, you can't break into the work that you want, you can't break into the gigs that you want—I don't know how I bothered carrying on. But there is just something that is like, 'No, I want to do that. So I'm going to put this in place and I'm going to try my best. And all these doors that are closed to me, I'm going to find out how to get into.' And you have just got to. It's just perseverance."

Felicity's reflection that she met "constant knockbacks" and closed doors with a resolve to overcome them demonstrates how motivational resolve includes persistence, even in the face

of seemingly insurmountable challenges. Lucy Montgomery shared her view that success in comedy was "more about perseverance than talent" and further reflected, "it's a hard thing to carry on doing… you have to just keep going." And as Viola Bell explained, "You have to learn how to endure." Calinda Jeffries told me that, although she had initially hesitated quite a bit, she turned a corner and became persistent as she learned to embrace her own agency: "I think just probably getting older and not being a child anymore and realising that if I wanted to do it, then you have to do it, rather than just wishing that you could do it." Thus, patient persistence reflected an enduring commitment to pursuing a comedy career.

Adaptability. Individuals with motivational resilience also demonstrated adaptability. They took responsibility for overcoming barriers and navigating obstacles in their path to career progression, demonstrating a commitment to carry on and a willingness to adapt to changing personal circumstances and industry conditions in order to succeed. As Kristin Loughlin told me, "You are always evolving, and if you are not, then there's something wrong." She went on to describe how she was adapting to the implications of her own aging as well as to changing norms surrounding creative expression in the wider industry.

> "Over the last couple of years, I have had to really redress what sort of things I talk about and how I do it, because I am of an age now where some of the things that I used to talk about on stage and the way I used to behave is absolutely not appropriate … it's a really interesting period in comedy too because comedy is where you are supposed to be able to say anything and get away with it if you say it in a certain way. But now people are so easily offended by everything, you constantly have to question what you are doing. Sometimes it does go too far, but sometimes I think it's good to question because it makes you a better performer, it makes you a better writer."

Kristin's willingness to flexibly adapt to her circumstances in order to keep progressing is clear in her efforts to address her own changing positionality as a performer and to adapt to the changing landscape of the industry and cultural context of her creative work in order to become a "better performer" and "better writer."

Self-Confidence. Individuals' motivational resilience reflected a measure of self-confidence and sometimes even self-delusion as they steadfastly endured mixed responses to

their aspirations. Viola Bell expressed the need for self-confidence by saying, "You have to learn to believe in yourself." Calinda Jeffries explained how, for her, "Wanting to perform never went away, and then somewhere the confidence came." As Carly Knight put it, "I suppose you have to be deluded to an extent. Just to not have crippling anxiety and to actually push yourself." She continued,

> "I think you've got to be a certain amount of deluded to be able to perform. You've got to have a certain amount of that delusion to carry on. Because I suppose if you didn't, you'd say, 'Right, I've tried comedy. I've done ten gigs and I was only okay at all of them. Time to quit.'"

Carly's reflection that the courage to carry on hinges to some extent on building up self-confidence bordering on self-delusion, rather than accepting evidence that one's comedic work is "only okay," shows how individuals may overcome self-doubt as they enter a state of motivational resolve. A similar sentiment was shared by Yolanda Mary Jackson, who told me, "I think all open spots, me included, you have a rather deluded sense of how good you are, which you probably need in order to carry on; otherwise you'd give up." As compared to the self-doubt that prevailed during motivational precarity, individuals with motivational resilience demonstrated higher self-confidence and belief in their own abilities in comedy.

Feedback-Resistance. Resilience also involved resistance to others' feedback. Individuals gained a sense of detachment from feedback—for instance, by building up what was often referred to as "thick skin" and by learning to "not take it personally" when they faced negative feedback and reviews. Hilda Avis reported disregarding her classmates who expressed bafflement at her ambitions in comedy. She described thinking, "You don't find me funny because you're just not open to that… they often have quite a laddy humour. But that kind of goes over my head now because I guess that's just a cultural thing and they're just in a limited little bubble." Her statement that their invalidating remarks are attributable to culture and closed-mindedness, and that they now go over her head, highlights how her feedback-resistance had developed through efforts at selective believing. In part, many

individuals gained the ability to withstand and resist others' feedback due to accumulated experience. For instance, Hannah Benson recounted, "The more I performed, the more I just didn't care… I go into autopilot now and I just think, 'Stay calm, remember what you're going to say'… I've bombed a couple of times and it hasn't mattered." Likewise, recognising that every comedian "bombs" sometimes helped individuals to be content with a portfolio of feedback that was, on balance, validating—rather than worrying so much if one interaction episode went awry. When we spoke, Brittany Sanders was resolute in her commitment to pursue comedy as her career, and impervious to invalidating feedback. "Tonight I could get up and bomb and it would feel like, 'Oh, well.' You know, seven times out of ten it's like, 'There we go, that's the thing.'" Rather than taking feedback as a reflection on themselves, individuals questioned the wisdom of assessing their own talent and potential through others' feedback and so began to keep feedback at arms' length. As Katie Al-Jamil reported, "I have seen myself get so much more comfortable in front of a quiet audience." She reflected how over the course of her career, she had learned to keep a distance from both positive and negative signals from audiences. "What I have started to recognise in my own career is like don't internalise either one of those. When you do a good job you say, 'Alright, good job, keep it up,' and when you do a bad job you say, 'Alright, not your best time, keep it up.'" Katie's statement shows how feedback resistance reflects a sense of distance and disconnection from others' validation and invalidation. In this state, individuals' professional identities as comedians grow independent of the need for constant validation and less susceptible to both validation and invalidation.

Summary. Although the majority of newcomers in the sample were still grappling with motivational precarity, most professionals had achieved motivational resilience. That is, those who had endured to the point of earning all, or most, of their income from comedy had learned to weather the storms of a comedy career with a greater degree of patient persistence,

adaptability, self-confidence, and resistance to others' feedback. This turn in motivational resolve reflected a more secure determination to persist and represented a more stable sense of professional identification. Thus, achieving motivational resilience signalled a sort of end point—a point at which individuals had developed their odds-defying professional identity to the point that they could rest from the ongoing turbulence of the paradoxical pulls and the conflicted forms of identity enactment that these pulls precipitated. In other words, in this state, individuals felt a sense of arrival—albeit a provisional and mutable one—where becoming a comedian was something they had already done.

Bitterness

Not every respondent achieved motivational resilience in the course of their professional identity development. Those who found identity enactment too risky or unrewarding, who did not receive enough validating feedback from others, or who lacked needed skills in feedback management and recalibration often became bitter. For instance, when individuals felt that career progress was not immediate enough or that the risks they had taken had not been adequately rewarded, they expressed feelings of anger and agitation. As they weighed options for the future, some respondents looked back with bitterness toward the investments they had already made into pursuing a comedy career. Others looked forward to the future without hope and with a deep sense of resentment—begrudging those for whom success in comedy had seemed to come more easily and ruminating on the devastating loss of their own hopes for what might have been and the heights to which they might have climbed.

In a sense, for individuals who persevered in comedy long enough to overcome their initial misgivings, but who did not effectively engage in feedback management and recalibration, the result of attempting to achieve their odds-defying aspirations was a growing sense of bitterness. In other words, if individuals' growth-promoting identity enactment left them feeling unsuccessful, the steep risks and costs of this enactment—in the absence of

sufficient validating feedback and effective feedback management tactics—left individuals unable to recalibrate and therefore subject to the vulnerability, pain, and loss of exposing and investing in achieving their odds-defying aspirations. Essentially, without the intervening impact of feedback management and recalibration, individuals' motivational precarity devolved into bitterness as they engaged in identity enactment and faced identity feedback. The key markers of bitterness among odds-defying aspirers include defensiveness, despondency, and jealousy. (See Table 5.4).

Interestingly, individuals who exhibited bitterness did not always express an intent to exit professional comedy, and indeed many still intended to carry on despite the many challenges of this career path. This determination was perhaps a carryover from developing some degree of resilience in the course of professional identity development, but in this case reflected a toxic relationship between an individual and his or her odds-defying aspiration—attempting to reach it was a source of pain and anger, but they could not or would not let it go. This counterintuitive finding makes sense if we consider individuals' engagement in growth-promoting identity enactment. For example, if individuals divest themselves of other professional identity options to ensure that they do not quit pursuing their odds-defying aspirations when the going gets tough, then they may persist even if they become miserable and embittered in the process. Bitterness was a more common past or present experience among odds-defying aspirers in semi-professional or professional career stages, while newcomers were less likely to have become bitter during the comparably short tenure of their careers. Further, bitterness was not always a final destination—like motivational resilience, it represented a provisional endpoint on individuals' journeys of becoming. As individuals continued growth-promoting identity enactment, some built up their feedback management and recalibration skills to the point that they developed motivational resilience and overcame

their bitterness. This was often a painful and emotional process, involving turning away from poignant and deeply held anger and disappointment to find newfound hope for the future.

Despondency. The first key element of bitterness was despondency, or intense emotional expressions of despair, anger, and hopelessness. Those who had taken great risks often felt burned by the industry that they had given so much to be a part of and expressed feelings of frustration and exhaustion. Many felt that the demands of the industry and the high costs of rising through its ranks were incompatible with their own life circumstances. Agnes Finch, who had become despondent toward her comedy career, shared how she had struggled with disappointment: "I thought if I forever have the aspiration that I am going to have my own Channel Four show, I'm going to be forever disappointed and upset and miserable. And I thought, 'Do I want to spend my life being disappointed, upset, and miserable?' I find it quite emotional talking about this actually." Although Agnes ultimately overcame this period of bitterness, the raw emotionality of her former despondency was evident as she held back tears. Becoming "disappointed, upset, and miserable" was reflective of the deep emotional pain that individuals sometimes experienced in the course of pursuing their odds-defying aspirations. In some cases, emotional despondency came about in conjunction with major risk-taking endeavours or costly investments. For instance, Sam Carter spoke of the steep costs of taking a show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and how several of her colleagues had left comedy because the requisite expenditure of time, money, and energy had left them bankrupt and bitter. "They got so focused on trying to produce a show for Edinburgh that they essentially bankrupted themselves. It made an awful lot of them very bitter. I'm not sure how many of them actually do it anymore." Neil Strauss, a *New York Times* reporter who went undercover as a comedian, observed, "If you ever talked to comedians off-stage, you'll see the scars trying to make it has left on them: they are bitter and humourless. If you can't see those scars, then chances are they're still doing a routine for

you" (1999: 1). Indeed, my experiences interviewing comedians revealed that this path had often been punctuated by intense emotional challenges. Daisy Harding told me about a time when she "didn't get any work and became quite depressed… I really fell in on myself in terms of mental health, feeling quite worthless." She went on to share how pursuing a career in the performing arts had left herself and many of her peers "pretty moribund."

Defensiveness. Bitterness was also reflected in individuals' defensiveness toward industry invalidation. This focus co-opted their energy away from navigating toward future opportunities or adapting to changing industry conditions and instead kept them defensively obsessing over past failings to displace blame. Individuals argued that the industry had overlooked them, not because of a lack of effort or skill, but because of inherent flaws in the system. Defensiveness reflected individuals' frustration with the seeming randomness of comedy career progression and the unpredictability of outcomes versus effort. They felt a disconnect between the work they put in and the results they got out, and they turned toward blaming institutions for what they felt were undue burdens, obstacles, or delays along their path. Leticia Ruiz shared how she felt that the landscape of comedy had shifted around her—changing the rules of the game and leaving her behind.

> "I don't know what I'm allowed to do anymore. So that's the frustrating thing. Comedy was always the haven of the outcasts… the things you shouldn't say in a boardroom suddenly were hilarious on stage… with YouTube and bringing it to the masses, what happened was the in-crowd went, 'What's this game you're playing? We want to play.' And they have taken over. And now it's an in-crowd game and I'm on the outside of my own business."

The shifting landscape of the comedy business thus became a scapegoat for Leticia's frustrations as she defensively expressed feeling that it was not her fault that she was struggling to progress. Defensiveness involved assigning blame to the system for career setbacks. Brooklyn Havemeyer shared her internal struggle to overcome bitterness and how part of that was learning to accept the unmeritocratic nature of the industry, although her initial impulse was to blame it. "There is a lot of rejection. Pitching for things and not getting

them…having to show your work to people and get notes. Just the whole thing of it. You are constantly kind of ripping layers off and going, 'Oh, is that alright?' You either melt under that or you go, 'Right. Okay.'" She further stated, "A gig is a total meritocracy. The audience will laugh at what they find funny… but the industry is not a meritocracy. Like anything, there are lots of other things going on. You can't keep going, 'That's not fair!'" Individuals experiencing bitterness were often preoccupied with how the industry should be or with how the industry used to be—and were unable to reconcile themselves to existing industry conditions in order to effectively navigate those conditions.

Jealousy. As specified by the earlier findings on identity feedback and feedback management, individuals often looked to the industry and especially to their peers to assess their own potential as future comedians. Progressing quickly relative to peers was a validating signal, while lagging behind others' progress tended to invalidate individuals' odds-defying aspirations. Thus, social comparisons were an important part of individuals' identity feedback, and managing such social comparisons (for instance, by disassociating from comparatively successful peers) was an important part of the feedback management process. Jealousy arose among odds-defying aspirers who failed to filter out these invalidating messages and relationships—or in other words, who failed to disbelieve, forget, or ignore signals that others were surpassing them in terms of career progress. Bethany Valentine described how she had grappled with feelings of jealousy. "I remember being like, 'But I'm the one who does comedy. What is this?' I used to find it very irking when I saw another woman on the circuit. And if they were better than me, it would be even more… It was like, 'Other women are getting in my way of being special.'" Jealousy and interpersonal resentment were also visible in individuals' competitive and even hostile attitudes toward others in the industry, where individuals saw other comedians' successes as a hindrance to them. As Letitia Ruiz shared,

> "As comedians, we don't work off role models so much as competitive models. What is that person doing? Why is that person ahead of me? I should be doing what that person's doing. How did that person get there? What did they do? Comedians are always looking at everybody else and going how did they get there and why are they there? Why aren't I there?... that is part of being a comic. I don't know any comic that doesn't look at another comic and feel jealousy."

The jealousy between comedians was sometimes felt by those in the sample as they noticed others growing bitter and resentful toward them. For example, Felicity Robinson shared how others who had offered her advice early in her career became jealous of her later success, "What you'll notice is the people that have done that will then be very bitter towards you when you start to do well… When I started out, I did quite well quite quickly in competitions, and there was quite a lot of bitterness towards me." Thus, respondents' experiences of feeling jealousy toward others, or of feeling resentment directed toward them, evidence the bitterness that may come about in the course of odds-defying aspirers' careers.

Chapter Summary

As individuals began to enact their professional identities as comedians, they faced validating and invalidating feedback from others in their social circles, from audiences of their comedic material, and from industry peers, leaders, and institutions. They engaged in feedback management—selectively retaining and reframing this feedback in threat-reducing ways. Their identity enactment, exposure to identity feedback, and feedback management efforts enabled recalibration, and thereby helped to shift the paradoxical pulls toward identity growth. Individuals' recalibration allowed them to pre-emptively neutralise the anticipated identity threat of trying and failing as they redefined their aims in broader terms, making any ending conceivably a success. Recalibration also helped individuals to rewire their perceptions regarding the achievability of their aspirations and build up a sense of heightened rewards for achieving their odds-defying aspirations through reactance. Steeling their resolve and valorising their efforts in this way enabled ongoing growth and progress, in spite of the

odds. As individuals recalibrated their sense of what they were aiming for, what was possible, and what rewards awaited them in their aspirational career journey, they shifted the balance of the paradoxical pulls and built up their resolve keep going. In this way, individuals become more persistent in their determination to continue in comedy, more confident in their own abilities, and more resistant to others' identity feedback—or in other words, more resilient. If they failed to effectively engage in feedback management and recalibration, on the other hand, they began to develop a sense of bitterness.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Chapter Roadmap

This chapter opens by returning to the initial research questions and presenting the theoretical model, drawing on the insights of the two foregoing findings chapters and the relevant literature to demonstrate how odds-defying aspirers' professional development unfolds. The sections that follow present key theoretical contributions of this research to theories of professional identity development, specifically around identity threat and identity play. Each section outlines how the present study adds to the existing literature and highlights where future research may be of benefit in refining existing theory. Practical implications of the study are presented next, with reference both to those responsible for managing talent and to those individuals navigating their own careers and working lives. Finally, limitations of the study are presented, followed by concluding remarks.

Theoretical Model

In grounded theorising, theoretical models help to graphically represent how categories interrelate—translating a data structure into a map of relationships (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The theoretical model presented in Figure 2 connects the categories outlined in the findings chapters. The model portrays how odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development is a recursive, circular process rather than a linear one. As individuals with odds-defying aspirations enact their nascent professional identities, they do so in line with the ongoing tug-of-war of the paradoxical pulls. Changes to the paradoxical pulls can re-start the process and inch or propel it forward as individuals navigate the often-multifaceted challenges that make their aspirations seem almost impossible-to-achieve in the first place. The process of shifting the paradoxical pulls, overwhelming the pull to prevent identity loss with the pull to promote identity growth, is brought about through individuals'

recalibration—which helps them to see their end goal, the possibility of achieving it, and the potential rewards of doing so in new ways that shift their aspirational assumptions and move them toward growth-promoting identity enactment. Recalibration is enabled by individuals' accumulated identity enactment experience, their encounters receiving identity feedback, and the feedback management efforts in which they engage. These identity development efforts also help individuals to build up their resilience—overcoming precarity and steeling their resolve to keep working toward achieving their odds-defying aspirations—or else leaving them subject to feelings of bitterness.

The theoretical model not only provides an overarching picture of how the professional identity development process unfolds for odds-defying aspirers, but also provides insights into each of the research sub-questions guiding the inquiry. First, it answers the question of how individuals come to hold odds-defying aspirations, and to what effect, by specifying how odds-defying aspirations give way to a set of competing, paradoxical pulls and generate motivational precarity. Second, it answers the question of how odds-defying aspirers enact their hoped-for professional identities through both loss-preventing and growth-promoting identity enactment in connection with the evolving balance of the paradoxical pulls. Third, it demonstrates how odds-defying aspirers motivate themselves in the face of career obstacles through feedback management and recalibration tactics that build up their motivational resilience. It also highlights how a failure to effectively engage these tactics leaves room for bitterness to take hold. The sections that follow detail these elements of the theoretical model in response to the initial research questions.

How Do Individuals Come to Hold Odds-Defying Aspirations & to What Effect?

Odds-defying aspirations arise on the basis of individuals' aspirational assumptions regarding who they are and who they can become in the world of work. The theoretical model suggests that odds-defying aspirations give rise to a set of competing paradoxical pulls. These pulls

comprise the opposing identity threats of failing to try and of trying and failing, as well as the opposing claiming risks and rewards that may come about through attempting to secure a hoped-for professional identity in the world of work. Odds-defying aspirations and the paradoxical pulls they precipitate generate a state of motivational precarity where individuals encounter conflicted emotions and motivations in regard to pursuing their hoped-for professional identities. Essentially, odds-defying aspirations lead to individuals being pulled in opposite directions, both toward and away from attempting to actualise their odds-defying aspirations in the world of work. The "Aspirational Assumptions" box at the left of the theoretical model and its interconnection with precarity in the "Motivational Resolve" box depict this relationship.

How Do Odds-Defying Aspirers Enact their Hoped-For Professional Identities?

The second research question, concerning enactment, is answered in the "Identity Enactment" box in the theoretical model, which connects back to individuals' "Aspirational Assumptions" and suggests that identity enactment reflects the evolving tug-of-war between the paradoxical pulls that accompany an odds-defying aspiration. Individuals' identity enactment strategies either avoid (i.e., loss-preventing identity enactment) or approach (i.e., growth-promoting identity enactment) the instrumental, interpersonal, and image risks that they face in professional identity development—reflecting either a prevention or promotion focus (Higgins, 1998). These enactment approaches bear important similarities to the identity play versus identity work efforts that have been described elsewhere in the literature (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020). Further, individuals' "Recalibration" efforts may help to shift their "Aspirational Assumptions"—enabling them to move toward growth-promoting identity enactment in the course of their professional identity development. This portion of the theoretical model builds on Shepherd and Williams' speculative notion that "individuals can shape or influence their self-regulatory state" in order to promote their identity development

(2018: 44). The overarching idea is that a prevention-focus must give way to a promotion-focus to enable positive and enduring identity growth. The findings of this thesis add to this theorising in the context of odds-defying aspirations and professional identity development. Indeed, odds-defying aspirers' aspirational identity enactment built from prevention-focused to promotion-focused as they effortfully managed the paradoxical pulls, recursively throughout their careers.

The model also highlights how identity enactment sets in motion other important aspects of professional identity development—eliciting "Identity Feedback" from others, which in turn provokes "Feedback Management," and helps to enable "Recalibration." Identity enactment exposes individuals to new ideas and information regarding themselves, the field of comedy, and the role of a professional comedian. It also gives them insights into others' perceptions of their likelihood of succeeding in comedy.

How Do Odds-Defying Aspirers Motivate Themselves in the Face of Career Obstacles? The third research question is addressed in the latter half of the model, in the "Recalibration" and "Feedback Management" boxes—which reflect multiple pathways that individuals use to stay motivated their own insecurities and others' invalidating feedback. If individuals effectively engage in these strategies, they develop resilience; if they do not, they are more likely to become bitter in the process of professional identity development.

The theoretical models suggests that individuals motivate themselves to keep moving forward by 1) altering their aims to match their lived realities more closely (the "Redefining Aims" box) more closely, 2) altering their own ideas of what is possible (the "Rewiring Possibility" box), and 3) developing a desire for rewards that come from reacting against invalidation (the "Reactance Rewards" box). In essence, the findings suggest that individuals develop motivational resilience by altering the content of their aspirational assumptions

surrounding what is desirable and possible in their lives in the world of work through recalibration.

Furthermore, the findings on feedback management highlight how individuals stay motivated by harnessing the positive impact of validation and by decreasing the negative impact of invalidation. Odds-defying aspirers work both to minimise the occurrence and sting of invalidation as well as to maximise the occurrence and uplift of validation through "Feedback Management." Further, they learn to reappraise invalidating episodes in threat-reducing ways, both retrospectively and prospectively altering their outlook on the threatening nature of instances of identity invalidation. Thus, the theoretical model suggests that individuals also stay motivated by managing their ongoing exposure to and interpretation of others' identity feedback.

While individuals' odds-defying aspirations and the paradoxical pulls give rise to a state of motivational precarity, characterised by hesitation, indecision, self-doubt, and feedback-vulnerability, many individuals in the study became resilient, reflecting a newfound strength of identification with their odds-defying professional identity and an increased capacity to practically manage the ups and downs of an odds-defying career. This change was brought about as they engaged in effective feedback management and recalibration.

How Does the Process of Professional Identity Development Unfold for Odds-Defying Aspirers? The theoretical model paints a picture of the overarching process of professional identity development for odds-defying aspirers. Importantly, the theoretical model demonstrates how individuals work to address the identity threats and claiming risks that they face in pursuing their odds-defying aspirations through their engagement in identity enactment, feedback management, and recalibration. These approaches help to pre-emptively neutralise identity threats and to avoid incurring claiming risks and costs prematurely, and to

address the threats, risks, and costs that do arise in the course of professional identity development.

As the findings point out, accumulated experience was important in odds-defying aspirers' efforts to build resilience. Motivational resilience often came as the result of years of practice at enacting a hoped-for identity, receiving and managing feedback from others, and recalibrating. Thus, those in the study who had achieved professional status frequently reflected back on how they had gained these skills—what Sadie Curtis described as "tools to deal with" others' invalidation. Comedians often sought out and shared these tools with each other—sharing new ways to see and interpret invalidating feedback to attenuate its impact on their motivation and behaviour. Those who had left comedy for months or years at a time in response to devastating invalidation often commented on how after returning they realised that they had not previously developed the ability to manage others' feedback effectively. Gaining new skills in feedback management and recalibration was thus a critical part of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development, gleaned through hard-won experience and collaborative learning among odds-defying aspirers across stages of professional identity development. As individuals enacted their identities over time, they gained a sense of distance from isolated feedback encounters—seeing them as part of a larger story of who they were becoming at work, rather than a definitive or potentially devastating judgement on their future.

The theoretical model also importantly points to the dark side of attempting to defy the odds and the bitterness that can come about in the absence of effective feedback management and recalibration. The heightened identity threats and claiming risks of attempting an odds-defying aspiration can exact a terrible toll on odds-defying aspirers as they experience periods of intense bitterness. The findings of this study help set a foundation

for further explorations surrounding the outcomes—for better or worse—of individuals' attempts to overcome the odds.

Summary. Odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development unfolds as a process of overcoming the paradoxical pulls and the motivational precarity that arise from their odds-defying aspirations. The evolving content of individuals' aspirational assumptions prompts individuals to enact their hoped-for professional identities in either prevention-focused or promotion-focused ways. Individuals' identity enactment efforts, alongside their feedback management and recalibration strategies, help them to move from loss-preventing to growth-promoting identity enactment strategies and to build resilience and avoid bitterness. The sections that follow address how the theory of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development set forward in this thesis expands and refines our notions of identity threat and identity play in professional identity development.

Identity Threat in Odds-Defying Aspirers' Professional Identity Development

Importantly, this piece adds several new insights into how individuals respond to identity threat during the process of professional identity development. First, it expands our understanding of the sources of identity threat by illuminating how individuals' failure to act may threaten a nascent professional identity. Second, it clarifies that individuals' professional identity development includes efforts to address not only the identity threats that they experience in the present, but also the identity threats that they may or may not face in the future. In this way, they pre-emptively build resources to interpret and appraise potentially identity-threatening career experiences in non-threatening ways. And third, it suggests that individuals' efforts to redefine success may be an important means of managing identity threat as they navigate their odds-defying career journeys. This finding connects to the broader literature on success metrics in individuals' careers, highlighting how the flexibility

of these definitions in the new world of work may enable odds-defying aspirers' ongoing progress toward achieving their hoped-for professional identities (Ashford et al., 2018).

Identity Threats from Within. The findings show how odds-defying aspirers engage in both loss-preventing and growth-promoting identity enactment, feedback management, and recalibration to pre-emptively avoid and neutralise possible future instances of identity threat. In large part, these ideas align with past research around individuals' efforts to protect and restructure their identities in response to appraised identity threats. Individuals' loss-preventing identity enactment strategies that seek to avoid claiming risks (i.e., fantasising, suppressing, hedging, downplaying, concealing) concur with past research that suggests that individuals may choose to hide or minimise identities in specific contexts where those identities are appraised to be threatened to reduce the likelihood of identity threats occurring (Roberts, 2005; Tajfel, 1978). Further, odds-defying aspirers' feedback management efforts, including selectively believing others' invalidating feedback, are similar to the well-documented derogating response, whereby individuals discredit the validity of the source of a particular threat in order to reduce the severity of harm to their identity as they "condemn the condemners" (Petriglieri, 2011; see also Sykes & Matza, 1957). Thus, the findings of this study provide additional empirical evidence that individuals work both to reduce the severity and likelihood of identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011). In particular, the findings highlight how managing the visibility of their identity claims and their trust in the credibility of others' feedback may be important means by which odds-defying aspirers attempt to bring their hoped-for professional identities into lived reality.

Yet, beyond the attempts that individuals make to avoid others' invalidation of their nascent professional identity, individuals with odds-defying aspirations also face the identity threat of failing to try. Rather than coming about through receiving negative or invalidating feedback, this type of identity threat comes through *not* seeking or receiving needed

validation. Thus, growth-promoting enactment strategies that approach claiming risks (i.e., emulating, investing, divesting, overstating, coming out) expand on existing research to show how individuals may choose to disclose or emphasise identities in contexts when not doing so would threaten them—allowing their hoped-for professional identities to become forgone professional identities if they do not share or emphasise them enough to receive needed validation from others. This suggests a new type of identity threat in professional identity development that has not yet been explored in the literature, which focuses more on whether individuals can muster the courage and corral the resources to claim their hoped-for professional identities and not on how others validate or invalidate their hoped-for identity.

This finding further nuances our theoretical assumptions regarding where identity threats originate. Identity threats have often been understood as externally located—something outside of individuals that comes along and poses a challenge to the meaning, value, or enactment of their identities—such as when personal interactions deny a claim to a cherished identity or when structures and events limit the expression of an identity (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Fine, 1996; Obodaru, 2012, 2017; Petriglieri, 2011). Yet the findings here suggest that identity threats may also originate from within individuals' own behaviours, cognitions, and emotions—where a failure to act, think, or feel their way into an identity may threaten its future meaning, value, or enactment (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016: 128). In this sense, individuals may threaten their own identities by failing to sustain them through needed identity enactment (real, imagined, or vicarious) or sufficient feedback-seeking. Of course, many theorists have pointed out how individuals may be their own source of identity threat insofar as their multiple identities conflict within the broader self-concept (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Rothbard, 2001), or in instances where they conduct their work in a way that contradicts the meanings they associate with their professional identity (Anteby, 2008; Pratt et al., 2006). As Petriglieri point outs, "What is valuable… is considering the sources of these

experiences, because these help to predict how a person will respond to threat." (2011: 646). The experience of odds-defying aspirers suggests a new source of identity threat originating within individuals themselves, specific to a failure to act or to enacting a sought-after identity in a way that limits its own future actualisation, growth, or full expression. For example, an individual's own attempts to protect or restructure a threatened identity may become identity threatening over the course of professional identity development. Take concealment, the well-documented tactic where individuals seek to avoid identity-threatening feedback by hiding an identity in contexts where they fear it will be invalidated. For odds-defying aspirers, concealment may create initial opportunities to explore and enact their nascent professional identity as a comedian prior to sharing it widely with others. Yet concealment may limit their opportunities to seek out and receive needed validation as they progress in their professional identity development. Likewise, hedging and suppressing, which limit individuals' investments into achieving their odds-defying aspirations, may initially help individuals to safely explore and play at their provisional professional identities. But without sufficient investments of time, energy, and resources (i.e., divesting and investing) to support the achievement of these identities in the world of work, individuals may be unable to sustain their odds-defying aspirations—allowing them to become forgone in the very process of trying to preserve them. Thus, the very efforts that may initially help individuals to limit the severity or likelihood of identity threats may become the stumbling blocks to their achieving their hoped-for professional identities formally in their work-roles.

Identity Threat & Reappraisal. Past research on identity threat in professional identity development highlights how individuals grapple with sources of identity threat and work to protect or restructure their identities in order to minimise the severity of harm or likelihood of such threats occurring. A large volume of this work has focused on episodic threats—for instance, the identity threats faced by individuals during times of liminality and

transition (e.g., Conroy & O'Leary Kelly, 2014; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006; Caza et al., 2018b). Likewise, researchers have shed light on chronic identity threats faced by individuals, for example when multiple identities or identity motives conflict in individuals' professional identity development (Caza et al., 2018a; Elsbach, 2003; Kreiner, et al., 2006; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). As noted in the literature review, the temporal focus is largely on the present and on how individuals handle threats to work-role identities that they currently, formally enact in the world of work.

Building on this work, recent research has also begun to consider how individuals may adaptively re-appraise past events, retrospectively addressing identity threats in order to move forward and grow. Petriglieri points to this possibility by highlighting how individuals may learn to reappraise identity threats as an opportunity for identity growth or gain (2011: 656), so that past identity-threatening episodes may be reinterpreted as positive or beneficial (see also Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Maitlis likewise shows how individuals facing career-ending injuries may reinterpret these initially identity-threatening experiences as the start of a new chapter in their professional lives, which enables progress and growth in new and unexpected ways (2009). Vough and Caza similarly explore how individuals work to build resilient career identities after being denied a promotion (2017). In every case, the event initially appraised to be identity threatening is rooted in the past, and reappraisal is a process of reinterpreting the threatening quality of this past experience. Indeed, the findings of this work concur with these findings: odds-defying aspirers' feedback management efforts include attempts to recast past instances of invalidation in a less threatening light through threat-reducing reappraisal.

Where the present investigation adds to this theory is in highlighting how individuals may also pre-emptively respond to identity threats to support positive appraisals of their own, others, and the material world's identity-threatening forces, so that future events may be

interpreted in non-threatening terms. Individuals' recalibration—and specifically, the redefining aims and reactance rewards themes—highlight how individuals realign their interpretive structures to nullify and defuse the potency of future identity threats. Take personalisation, where individuals redefine their aims away from seeking universal appeal to seeking appeal on the basis of authentic self-expression. In future interactions with audiences and gatekeepers, invalidation can be seen as non-threatening, reflecting differences in taste, style, or preferences, rather than reflecting an individual's viability as a future comedian. Further, threat-reducing reappraisal may likewise serve to limit future appraisals of feedback as identity-threatening. By learning to see past instances of invalidating feedback as impersonal, as a universal part of the experience of becoming a successful comedian, and as an unavoidable part of the process of developing creative work, individuals may prepare to see future invalidating encounters in a comparatively positive light.

Thus, while reappraisal has previously been conceptualised as a solely retrospective process—with individuals initially appraising an experience to be identity-threatening and subsequently reappraising it—the findings of this thesis suggest that individuals' efforts to manage their appraisals of identity-threatening events may also be geared toward the future, to events that have yet to transpire. Thus, individuals may address sources of future identity threat through pre-emptive appraisal—building an arsenal of meaning structures so that when potentially identity-threatening situations arise, they may be appraised as non-threatening. Whether the origin of these imagined future identity threats is individuals' own behaviour (e.g., choosing a different career), others' feedback (e.g., being criticised or devalued), or the material world (e.g., not receiving work opportunities), odds-defying aspirers' work to create an interpretive stance where any future eventuality can be perceived in non-identity-threatening terms. In this way, recalibration and reappraisal help to ameliorate not the severity or likelihood of future harm from identity threat, but the chances that stimuli will

even be perceived as identity threatening in the first place. Episodes of feedback that might have previously threatened an individual's identity are no longer identity-threatening as individuals demonstrate a greater degree of feedback-resistance, reflecting a newfound security in their professional identity as a comedian.

Future research would beneficially consider the role of temporality in individuals' appraisals and responses to identity threat during professional identity development. The findings of this thesis present strong evidence that individuals' professional identity development efforts may be geared toward preventing harm from future identity threats, as well as those in the past and present. This leads to the insight that while our current conceptualisation of identity threat focuses almost exclusively on real, lived, and current experiences appraised to be identity-threatening, individuals' career paths may involve the management of not only real and present but also imaginary and future identity threats associated with individuals' prospective career hopes. Scholars might usefully consider how temporal direction (e.g., past vs. future), temporal distance (e.g., one day ago vs. two decades ago), and temporal realism (e.g., lived timeline vs. alternative or counterfactual trajectories) may inform individuals' management of identity threat, particularly in terms of appraisal. For instance, future research might explore how individuals work to appraise or reappraise past, present, and future identity threats as opportunities for growth throughout their careers. Furthermore, considering the trajectory of individuals' preconceived notions of the identity threats that they may face in the course of their careers, as compared to the identity threats they ultimately experience in lived reality, would be valuable. Scholars might ask: when individuals come across potentially identity-threatening experiences which they have previously imagined occurring, what is their experience? How do they respond? And how does this compare to their experience when unanticipated identity threats arise?

Identity Threat & Meaning Change. Another well-documented response to identity threats is identity restructuring, where individuals seek to change the importance or meaning of a threatened identity or exit it altogether (Petriglieri, 2011; see also Ashforth, 2001; Burke, 2006; Crocker & Major, 1989; Deaux, 1991; Ebaugh, 1988). Meaning change involves altering the meanings associated with a threatened identity, and this identity-threat response is described as "only relevant when an identity threat indicates that the association between an identity and its current meanings is unsustainable in the future" (Petriglieri, 2011648). Thus, when individuals' actions at work contradict the meanings that they associate with their work-role, meaning change may help to bring these back into alignment—as in the case of surgical medical residents engaging in scut work and subsequently changing the meaning of being a surgeon to being the most complete doctors in the hospital (Pratt et al., 2006).

The finding that odds-defying aspirers' recalibration includes redefining their aims in a variety of ways highlights new dimensions and applications of the concept of meaning change. First, the redefining aims theme indicates that individuals may change not only the meaning of holding an identity, but also their understanding of the process of securing that identity—altering their own views of what counts in terms of achieving it. For instance, the mastery theme highlights how odds-defying aspirers may redefine their aims by focusing on their own mastery of the craft of comedic writing and performance. In this way, they may shift the meaning of becoming a comedian away from external sources of feedback or particular work-related opportunities toward their own internal compass of proficiency and skill sets. Individuals' threat-reducing reappraisals also point to a type of meaning change, where the meaning of being a comedian may come to include invalidating feedback experiences (i.e., framing invalidation as universal and developmental). Thus, rather than *threatening to* their professional identity as a comedian, encountering negative feedback from others can instead be framed as *constitutive of* enacting and actualising this identity. Both

findings thus highlight how meaning change may be geared toward an individual's understanding of the meaning of *becoming* a comedian—again, expanding our understanding of this tactic as it pertains to those engaged in professional identity development.

Redefining Success Metrics in the New World of Work. Odds-defying aspirers' efforts at redefining their aims also shed light on the flexibility of personalised measures of career success in the new world of work and on the utility that this flexibility may offer to those who pursue odds-defying careers. Ashford, Caza, and Reid (2018) point out that those in the new world of work may measure and define long-term career success in markedly different ways than has been typical in the past. Gig workers who take up short-term contracts cannot assess their progress based on their place in an organisational hierarchy, and age-graded social comparisons are less meaningful along more personalised, under-institutionalised, and idiosyncratic career trajectories. The findings of this thesis show how odds-defying aspirers—in this case, comedians who are part of the independent, gig-based workforce—may redefine the meaning of career success in order to pre-emptively neutralise imagined, future identity-threatening experiences—which may or may not come about in reality. This phenomenon opens new lines of inquiry around whether today's unmoored and unscripted career paths may be creating greater opportunities for the creation and preservation of individuals' identities, and for the proactive management of identity threat, through individuals' flexibility in measuring and conceptualising career success. On the other hand, given the absence of more formal milestones, feedback mechanisms, and signals of progress in contemporary careers, this may point to these careers creating a greater demand for adapting and proactively addressing past, present, and future identity threats. In this way, this research provides early insights into and further motivation to explore how individuals navigate career trajectories that "go off script"—defying or departing from more expected

paths in the pursuit of their seemingly unachievable dreams (Ashford et al., 2018; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Future scholarship might explore how odds-defying aspirers' metrics of career success evolve across the career course either through specific professional transitions or in light of specific structural or systemic conditions. For instance, a longitudinal study of odds-defying aspirers' definitions of success may help to clarify the inflection points at which these definitions are clarified or expanded and what prompts individuals to adopt certain measures. Further, studies of the limits and bounds of flexible definitions of success may be warranted to better understand how individuals use this resource in their careers, as they attempt to withstand identity threats and embrace identity opportunities (Bataille & Vough, 2020).

Altering the Social Context of Identity Claiming. This research also adds to our understanding of identity claiming and granting and how individuals may fuel professional identity development in the face of others' invalidating feedback. The dominant understanding of identity construction set forward in the literature is that individuals seek social validation for their identities and that receiving such validation is essential for individuals' identification with a specific target identity. When others grant these identities, individuals can internalise them, and when others do not grant them, individuals must discard them or else alter or refine them in a way that achieves social validation (Shepherd & Williams, 2018: 39; see also Conroy & O-Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra, 1999). The findings of this thesis thus suggest new means by which individuals may secure needed social validation, and further points to the idea that individuals may continue to identify with a hoped-for professional identity in spite of its social invalidation.

The selective associating tactic used by odds-defying aspirers in their feedback management indicates that rather than altering or refining the content of the identity they are

claiming, individuals may internalise an identity by shifting the social context in which they claim it. Past work has often conceptualised individuals' social context for claiming as fixed or unalterable—as if an individual's identity claiming audiences were a static feature of social life (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This assumption may be a holdover from research in traditional organisational contexts and the field's historic focus on how individuals' identities are negotiated in this context, where it may be difficult to redirect identity claims to wholly new sets of interaction partners. Yet in the new world of work, the increased mobility and flexibility of contemporary careers and gig-based work may allow for the possibility that individuals will simply seek new interaction partners who will validate their identity, rather than working to win over reluctant grantors (Ashford et al., 2018). In other words, if others do not validate an individual's hoped-for professional identity, they may seek out new social contexts until they find a group of people who will. Thus, the threat of invalidation may be avoided by redirecting identity claims to new social interaction partners.

Connecting Constructs Across Literatures—Identity Threats & Underdogs. Past research often assumes that individuals internalise others' feedback in regard to who they are and who they will one day become at work—where identity construction hinges, to some extent, on being granted a hoped-for professional identity by observers (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Theories of identity claiming and granting often presume that individuals are subject to others' feedback—where validation is necessary for individuals to internalise an identity and where invalidation is associated with either additional refining of the desired identity or else its abandonment. What these theories overlook is the possibility that identification may run counter to the social feedback that individuals receive in identity claiming and granting encounters or, in other words, that individuals will not always accept the identity feedback they receive. The findings of this thesis clarify how odds-defying aspirers accomplish this—through selective retention and recalibration.

Past studies surrounding underdog performance show how individuals may avoid internalising others' negative feedback when those providing the feedback lack credibility, leading to a desire to prove themselves right and to prove these others wrong (Nurmohamed, 2014; 2020). In this way, individuals who face low expectations regarding their chances of success may rise above them to persist and perform. Theoretically, the findings of this work parallel these findings from the literature on underdog performance: encountering others' invalidating feedback does not necessarily mean that individuals will internalise this feedback. In other words, the findings of this work suggest that there is space for individuals to reject others' denials of their identity claims, reacting against them rather than accepting them. In this way, individuals who face negative or invalidating feedback from others regarding their ability to achieve their identity goals may avoid internalising this feedback and instead react against it and thereby stay motivated to progress. Odds-defying aspirers incite reactance rewards—including rivalry, defiance, voicing, and trailblazing—as they discredit and distance themselves from those who negate their potential and thereby invalidate their hoped-for professional identities. In other words, if individuals can convince themselves that their naysayers lack credibility, they can avoid internalising these others' negative feedback. This finding provides a new link in the literature, connecting theories of identity threat responses to theories of underdog expectations. Specifically, the identity protection responses documented by Petriglieri (2011), which include derogating sources of identity threat, may be linked to Nurmohamed's theory regarding underdog expectations. That is, while Nurmohamed suggests that individuals may avoid internalising others' low expectations when those others lack credibility, selective retention—which includes selectively believing others' feedback—illuminates how individuals may effortfully manage their own beliefs regarding others' credibility in order to generate reactance in response to others' invalidating messages toward them.

The findings of this thesis also highlight new types of reactance rewards, which can help individuals to overcome naysayers in their professional identity development. The findings highlight how individuals are reactively motivated by rivalry, defiance, and the prospect of voicing and trailblazing. In this way, this paper expands our understanding of reactance to include a variety of rewards that may come about by resisting others' invalidating feedback and persisting in professional identity development. Although this thesis highlights four new types of reactance rewards (i.e., rivalry, defiance, voicing, and trailblazing), it also points to the need to explore other types of reactance that may fuel individuals' ongoing professional identity development (e.g., vengeance, vindication), as well as the underlying processes that shape psychological reactance (e.g., social comparison).

Additional research is needed to understand the conditions that allow for the unleashing of reactance—and indeed, to understand the full range of reactance rewards that may be at play in professional identity development for various groups and individuals. For example, future research might consider whether reactance is experienced at the group level across cohorts of aspirers. The present research revealed several instances where experienced comedians coached newcomers on how to generate reactance in response to invalidating feedback. This type of mentoring for reactance warrants further investigation. Likewise, scholars might consider under what conditions the types of reactance found here (e.g., rivalry, defiance, voicing, and trailblazing) apply—for instance, depending on the nature of the industry or of the work being conducted, depending on the marginal or minority status of aspirers' demographic characteristics in a particular field, and so on.

Identity Play in Odds-Defying Aspirers' Professional Identity Development

As individuals navigate the paradoxical pulls to prevent losing and to promote growing toward achieving their odds-defying aspirations, the findings highlight how they engage in identity enactment. The identity enactment of odds-defying aspirers reflects

elements of identity play and identity work—that is, loss-preventing identity enactment occurs in places, for purposes, and by processes often associated with the playful exploration of professional identity options, while growth-promoting enactment involves identity work as individuals seek needed validation to support their ongoing progress (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020). This thesis contributes to our understanding of identity play and identity work in several ways. First, it demonstrates that whether an individual is 'working at' or 'playing at' a role may be somewhat artificial and surface-level—an act of labelling, rather than an adoption of a fundamentally different set of purposes. Second, the thesis highlights that identity play may be an important tool, not only at the start of individuals' explorations into new professional identity options, but also repeatedly throughout individuals' careers as they enter new domains and face new obstacles to progressing. In other words, rather than simply providing an avenue for discovering and developing an idea of who to become at work, identity play may provide a way for individuals to sustain their professional identities when others' feedback and material reality threatens to snuff them out. Finally, the findings help to specify how identity play may help individuals to reconsider their core ideas regarding "what is desirable and possible in [their] lives and in the world" (Ibarra, 2003: 83), providing both new theoretical and practical insights into how odds-defying aspirers may approach professional identity development and progress toward achieving their aspirations.

Plasticity of Purpose. Past research has theorised that identity play allows individuals to generate variation in their ideas of who they may become (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), and affords them with plasticity in terms of their appearance, behaviour, and perspective (Stanko et al., 2020: 8). The findings of this research further suggest that identity play may afford individuals with plasticity of purpose—that is, the ability to flexibly re-story the intent of their identity enactment efforts as more or less directed toward real-life achievement versus

enjoyment and exploration. Thus, although Ibarra and Petriglieri's initial conceptualisation of identity play theorises that play contrasts to work in its places, processes, and purposes (2010: 12; see also Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020), this study highlights how the places and processes we often associate with play—outside of work, during time off, or during in leisure activities—may afford individuals with the flexibility to reinvent their purposes and even discover new purposes along the way.

Play-based labels may be adopted as part of downplaying in order to prevent premature evaluation and criticism of individuals' desired professional identities. In loss-preventing identity enactment, "hobby" and "play" become important framing devices for individuals' aspirational activities and intentions. Thus, creating the illusion of playfulness may be an important means by which individuals prevent the loss of their future identities while engaging in professional identity development—reflecting a plasticity of purpose that may enable individuals to flexibly story their intentions in terms of their careers, both to themselves and to others, as an affordance of identity play (Stanko et al., 2020). In this way, identity play, in some cases, may only be playful on the surface level—that is, "playing at" becoming one's desired professional self may be a useful way of labelling one's developmental efforts in order to avoid the critiques and accountability that others may demand for hoped-for professional identities. Liminal playgrounds in the form of exploratory comedy courses and open mic-nights may afford individuals with freedom, not only from the constraints of time and space, but also from the need to pre-specify their ambitions and intentions (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020). This study thus turns attention to how ostensibly playful identity development efforts may also shroud strong desires to achieve a pre-specified professional identity.

Future research might consider under what conditions individuals' explorations of identity possibilities are inwardly versus outwardly playful. Conjuring an image of play for

one's identity-directed developmental efforts may allow for ongoing growth without incurring the same image risks. Indeed, identity play is theorised to help delay evaluation and to protect individuals from feedback (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Early conceptualisations of identity play do not address the externally espoused versus internally experienced playfulness of individuals' professional identity development efforts. Yet odds-defying aspirers' co-opting of play-centred labels, language, and locations shows how—in real life—these boundaries may be blurred and narratively reconstructed to suit current purposes as individuals progress, make choices, and face constraints. In other words, what was once work may become play, and what was once play may become work, in the story of a career journey as individuals narrate the direction and trajectory of their careers and lives. Developing an understanding of the conditions under which individuals adopt inwardly versus outwardly playful identity development efforts, and the implications of these efforts on individuals and their employing organisations or industries, deserves further empirical and theoretical consideration and integration into insights surrounding professional identity development.

Interestingly, a comedy educator interviewed as part of the field sensitisation process shared with me how her employing organisation had debated the merits of splitting instruction by students' comedic career intentions—whether for professional progression, or for personal pleasure. Yet, she and her colleagues repeatedly found that those who entered their courses ostensibly for pleasure often turned toward pursuing comedy professionally, while those entering with openly espoused dreams of chasing a comedy career often became more interested in pursuing comedy as a hobby. Thus, in the same classroom, at the same level, individuals might enter and leave a comedy course with different orientations in terms of whether they are 'playing at' or 'working at' becoming a comedian. And indeed, the same individual's purpose may evolve over time as they discover new things about the role they are enacting. Under what circumstances and by what means identity work becomes play and

identity play becomes work, when it comes to professional identity development across formal and informal role contexts, thus invites further investigation. This mirrors the distinction made by Ibarra and Petrilgieri regarding a process versus outcome focus—that those working toward an identity use enactment as means to an end, while those playing at an identity see enactment as an end unto itself (2010: 13). How identity playgrounds may enable individuals to alter their focus and to re-label their purposes suggests that play affords individuals with flexibility in terms of defining, for themselves and for others, the intentions of their identity enactment activities (Stanko et al., 2020).

Identity Play Recursion. Past research suggests that identity play precedes identity work; individuals "play at" becoming certain versions of themselves before they "work at" them (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Fachin & Davel, 2015). Current conceptualisations focus on the preliminary, provisional nature of identity play in the development of professional identities.

The present research highlights how ostensibly playful efforts may be involved in professional identity development across the career course, and not just as a precursor to role entry. Building on the theory of positive identity construction in the wake of identity loss articulated by Shepherd and Williams, this thesis finds that individuals' "identity refinement and validation can be facilitated by periodically re-engaging in identity play" (2018: 39). The findings highlight how loss-preventing aspirational identity enactment may occur recursively throughout individuals' careers, rather than simply as an exploratory or variation-seeking exercise before individuals have developed a clear idea of who they want to become. In this way, identity play may function as a refuge from the demands of a harsh, lived reality throughout individuals' journeys toward becoming who they hope to become at work. The ongoing tug of war between the paradoxical pulls suggests that individuals may return to identity play after periods of identity work and indeed that such a recurring and flexible

pattern of developmental effort may be essential to preserving an aspiration through the turbulence of real-world professional identity development, for instance when new claiming risks arise and constrain individuals' progress. Thus, the findings of this thesis provide early empirical evidence that learning to "oscillate" between identity play and work may indeed be beneficial to aspirers (Shepherd & Williams, 2018: 41)

Future research is needed to understand how and when individuals engage in identity play, on how they transition between identity play and work, on how identity play occurs during various career junctures (e.g., professionalisation, mid-career moves, retirement), and on specific prompts for movement between these modes of developmental effort. Indeed, as Fachin and Davel point out, our understanding of how people "transition from play to work" in their professional identity development remains limited (2015: 387). Building on the previous section, future research might also consider when individuals engage in deep vs. surface-level identity play and how the labelling of career intentions in individuals' careers narratives evolves as they progress in their career paths.

Identity Play and Rewiring Possibility. This research also provides insights into how individuals may overcome and alter their own ideas of what is possible, thereby providing further motivation to achieve seemingly unlikely identity options in their formal work roles and assignments. Aspirational identity enactment may enable individuals to rewire their sense of what is possible for themselves in the future at work, thereby making professional identities that were once perceived to be unachievable seem more likely to come about. This occurs as individuals accumulate evidence of their viability, normalise their aspirations by meeting others on a similar path, gain a more detailed understanding of their chosen career path, and humanise their heroes and role models. Indeed, the view of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development put forward in this thesis expands our understanding of the mechanisms underlying Ibarra's statement regarding how individuals become who they want

to be at work: “It is a messy trial-and error process of learning by doing in which experience in the here and now (not in the distant past) helps to evolve our ideas about what is plausible —and desirable” (2003: 163)

Along this vein, this research also shows how loss-preventing identity enactment, which may be ostensibly playful or hobby-centric in nature, may ultimately help to motivate ongoing action to achieve an odds-defying aspiration. Past research on individuals’ forgone professional identities, for instance, has demonstrated how individuals may continue to enact these identities through imagined and vicarious enactment, job crafting, and leisure crafting (Obodaru, 2017). These enactment strategies broadly align with the loss-preventing identity enactment uncovered in the findings of this work (e.g., fantasising, hedging, downplaying). Obodaru introduced the notion of forgone professional identities to highlight how individuals retain and enact identities they have forgone in the course of their careers, either by choice or constraint, in their formal work roles. This research builds on these insights to show how a professional identity that was once seen as forgone—as an impossibility for the future, forgone by choice or constraint—may come to be seen as possible again as individuals move recursively toward their odds-defying aspirations through their identity enactment efforts. How identity play might enable this type of rewiring and lead to changes in career-oriented motivation and behaviour was previously underspecified. In this way, this study adds to our understanding of how “imagination, dreams, and fantasies can propel change” as individuals move through their careers (Fachin & Davel, 2015: 386).

Future research building on this area might consider how accumulating evidence, normalising, detailing, and humanising may be facilitated through interventions and outreach, and what factors may mitigate or augment the impact of individuals’ professional identity development efforts on their subsequent rewiring possibility. For example, future research on the process of normalisation might explore whether identification with peer aspirers is a

prerequisite for normalisation and the attendant shifts in individuals' perceptions of what is possible for themselves professionally. Similarly, understanding the variety of ways in which detailing a career path leads to rewiring possibility, and which are most efficacious, would be beneficial for practitioners working to attract and develop talent in their industries and organisations. Future research might also investigate the circumstances under which exposure to one's heroes and role models leads to humanisation and recalibration or whether this exposure ever backfires. The superhumanisation of celebrities and professionals in various work domains has received scant attention in the literature. Scholars might consider in greater detail the superhumanisation of professionals in the entertainment industry, to what extent aspirants from various backgrounds engage in superhumanising celebrities and star performers, and under what circumstances these processes generalise to other professions, industries, organisations, and individuals. Furthermore, studies on the humanisation and dehumanisation (both superhumanisation and suprahumanisation) of workers across a range of industries, professions, and occupations deserves further investigation, both in terms of impacts on aspirers and on current role-holders, as well as on their employing organisations.

Practical Implications

Practical implications of the study include new insights for those individuals and organisations interested in talent development, particularly for those who aspire to elite or highly competitive work-roles and for underrepresented groups in specific industries. At the heart, this research offers practical insights into the lived experience of odds-defying aspirers, and the seemingly contradictory approaches and efforts that they may extend toward career advancement, in light of the ostensible impossibility of their career dreams. For organisations, individuals, and groups working toward creating more effective professional development programmes and more inclusive talent pipelines, the experiences of odds-defying aspirers outlined in this study indicate several key learnings.

Individuals' ideas about what constitutes success and what it takes to get there, as well as their preconceived notions of the viability of various work roles and arrangements, feed into their understanding of who they can become at work (Ibarra, 2003). Thus, while odds-defying aspirations are not constrained to a specific set of occupations or work-roles, it is reasonable to expect that they may be more common in some professional arenas—for instance, among those aspiring to comparably rare occupational roles (e.g., astronauts, racing drivers) or to relatively high attainment levels (e.g., C-suite, tenured professorships). Likewise, roles in industries with winner-take-all dynamics may be prone to eliciting odds-defying aspirations among hopefuls and newcomers, given the subjective nature of their work and oversaturated markets for talent (e.g., creative industries, athletics). Thus, this research may hold insights for those involved in attracting, recruiting, and developing potential candidates to hold these types of relatively rare or elite work-roles and leadership positions. Accordingly, the first major practical contribution of the present research is that it provides much needed empirical data on the lived experiences of odds-defying aspirers as they attempt to advance into competitive, selective, and elite work-roles. This research also holds insights for those involved in attracting, recruiting, and developing potential candidates to hold these types of relatively rare or elite work-roles and leadership positions. For example, the finding that individuals face paradoxical pulls associated with underlying identity threats and claiming risks suggests how developmental processes might expose individuals to competing difficulties as they attempt to advance. Preparing individuals to face these paradoxical pulls might be an important part of professional training and socialisation for individuals who hope to secure these types of roles. Thus, educational and professional development programmes geared toward preparing individuals for these types of roles may benefit from learning more about the experiences of odds-defying aspirers as they undergo professional identity development. For individuals aiming to reach heights beyond what they see as likely to be

achieved or working in hyper-competitive industries, with talent-saturated labour markets, under-institutionalised paths to career progression, and winner-take-all dynamics, these findings may also provide a set of frameworks for understanding their own lived experiences.

Further, although individuals who aspire to professional identity options for which they are not in the majority need not necessarily believe that their aspirations defy the odds, it follows that individuals at the margins or in the minority in a particular field may come to feel that their chances of success are low. Thus, the findings may hold further relevance for underrepresented or marginalised groups in a particular work role or context (e.g., based on race, gender, ability/disability, etc.), where overcoming barriers and multi-generational biases may necessitate individuals' defying historic patterns of exclusion in order to achieve their aspirational aims (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Further, for those who face substantial obstacles to progression based on their socio-economic or personal background, these findings may hold practical applications. The finding that individuals engage in loss-preventing identity enactment might elicit different designs for programs intended to attract and develop these candidates. Similarly, groups devoted to increasing the representativeness of those occupying boardrooms, public offices, the C-suite, and so on, may benefit from exploring how their programs and publications might specifically enable different types of rewiring possibility beliefs. For those individuals and organisations interested in attracting, retaining, and developing those at the margins of a certain talent pool, this study may help to illuminate the lived experience and challenges of odds-defying aspirers, as well as point to opportunities for better supporting and facilitating their professional identity development. On a related note, this research holds practical relevance for organisations and policy-making bodies tasked with promoting and creating greater social mobility for disadvantaged groups, as it sheds light on how individuals find the motivation to progress toward career aspirations that, on the surface, may seem unachievable.

The findings also point to practical implications for those navigating employment in precarious, gig-based, and freelance work, with aspirations that defy the odds. For individuals navigating their own road-less-travelled in their careers, the findings suggest that motivating and navigating this process necessitates building feedback management and recalibration skills that help to build up motivational resilience. Further, the findings suggest that rather than being a one-and-done experience, motivating ongoing professional development may involve iteratively moving between preventing identity loss and promoting identity growth over the career course, to enable individuals to overcome motivational precarity and avoid becoming embittered by the process of attempting to defy the odds.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations which should be taken into consideration in the interpretation and application of the theoretical model put forward in the findings. These limitations also suggest additional directions for future research, where new scholarship and different approaches to inquiry might helpfully clarify and refine the findings presented here.

First, the interview sample for this study was comprised of individuals who were actively considering a future in comedy. This means that individuals who quit along the path to achieving their comedic aspirations were not represented in the study. Thus, the experience of exiting or losing a nascent odds-defying aspiration may not be fully captured by this analysis. Odds-defying aspirers' motivational precarity, and the feedback-vulnerability that led some individuals in the interviewed sample to quit doing comedy for months or even years at a time, may provide some insight—but this still does not fully capture the experiences of ex-comedians. Further, the findings on bitterness may provide initial insights into the many challenging experiences of a comedy career that may prompt aspirers to leave, but again, a follow-up study might consider in more detail the experiences of those who leave and the process of professional identity exit among odds-defying aspirers (Ebaugh,1988).

Next, the respondents were relatively diverse in terms of age, race, and other demographic attributes. Although these dimensions of difference may provide important insights into individuals' odds-defying professional identity development, this study did not utilise these dimensions to the full extent possible in theorising. Additional research might beneficially explore how these and other individual differences may lead to variation in individuals' identity enactment, both in terms of the sources and types of validation and invalidation that individuals receive and in their approaches to feedback management. Further, how various individual differences may inform individuals' initial formation of odds-defying aspirations and constrain or enable their later recalibrations warrants further investigation. For example, future studies might consider how individuals' multiple identities limit or enhance recalibration in terms of rewiring possibility beliefs and harnessing reactance rewards.

Next, I utilised individuals' first-person narrative accounts of their lives and careers, drawing on both retrospective and prospective accounts of their paths in comedy. Developing nuanced process data about individuals' career trajectories through interviews presents several important challenges—particularly when individuals are reflecting back on a decades-long process and of necessity highlighting only fragments of that process. Although an interview-based approach is appropriate for generating new theory in process models (Van de Ven, 2007), longitudinal research exploring individuals' odds-defying aspirations and professional identity development would be better suited to detailing and discovering how this process unfolds over time. There may be important nuances in the aspirational identity enactment, feedback management, and recalibration efforts that individuals undertake over time. For instance, certain approaches may be more prevalent among early careerists versus those switching careers mid-stream.

In my efforts to find a group of respondents with odds-defying aspirations, I looked to a professional arena with multiple, intersecting, and overlapping barriers for aspiring individuals. This approach raises the possibility that, despite concerted attempts to clarify which efforts and processes are central to the story of odds-defying aspirers in particular (as opposed to gig careerists, marginal or minority group members, etc.), some elements of the findings may reflect not only the odds-defying nature of the sample's career aspirations, but also additional categories of similarity among the members of the sample. Although this approach allowed for a degree of uniformity in the sample, given that my sample was predominantly British and female and was entirely composed of members and would-be members of the comedy entertainment industry, it is possible that the findings may be premised on additional social categories of my sample in particular. Further research will be needed in order to explore the full theoretical applicability and generalisability of the phenomena described in the findings. For instance, future studies might consider whether individuals in other industries, with greater and lesser degrees of institutionalised career progression, competitiveness, winner-take-all dynamics, and public-facing work, encounter similar obstacles and undertake their odds-defying professional identity development by the same means, or whether these structural conditions lead to differences in individuals' approaches to this process.

Further, this study explored the experiences of female odds-defying aspirers within a heavily male-dominated industry. Future research might explore the experiences of odds-defying aspirers in fields where they are in the majority in terms of gender or other relevant demographic characteristics. For example, a study exploring to what extent the more collectively oriented reactance rewards that are documented in the findings (i.e., voicing and trailblazing) depend on the experience of being at the margins or in the minority of a particular industry would be of benefit. Future research might also consider how the findings

carry over in cases where male odds-defying aspirers seeking to enter female-dominated professions and occupations to assess how gender-roles within society might impact the unfolding of odds-defying aspirers' professional identity development efforts.

Though the findings of this thesis are based upon the experiences of odds-defying aspirers, they may have implications for those engaged in professional identity development for other identities that defy social expectations for the content of their future at work. That is, the findings may be most applicable to other instances where individuals aspire to professional identities or accomplishments that go beyond the bounds of what is generally seen as desirable and realistic for them within a given social context. Thus, an important boundary condition for my theorising is that there be some degree of agreement between individuals and relevant others in their social environment in regard to what is realistic and attainable in the world of work—or in other words, that their "emotional relationships with institutions… benchmarks for success, and… preconceived notions about viable work arrangements" be reflective of the social world in which they attempt to achieve their aspirations (Ibarra, 2003: 83). For instance, an individual who feels that their aspirations defy the odds, but who perceives that others would not see it this way, might face different obstacles and engage different tactics than those put forward in the findings—perhaps more akin to a struggle with feelings of impostorism rather than a journey to defy the odds.

A second boundary condition concerns the foundations of impossibility upon which odds-defying aspirations are built and individuals' intentions to actualise them that these various foundations presume. Stanko and colleagues highlight that individuals may engage in identity play for possible, improbable, and impossible selves (2020). They define improbable selves as those that are unlikely to become part of the actual self and impossible selves as those that will never become actual and clarify that with improbable and impossible selves, as compared to possible selves, individuals' intentions in identity play are to generate empathy

and to take on another's perspective or to make themselves unrecognizable and thereby challenge others' assumptions. For instance, individuals might engage in identity play as someone of a different gender, ability status, age, hair colour, species, or even as an inanimate object. In these instances, identity play provides a context for exploring and enacting identities without an intent to achieve them—and in some instances, with the opposing hope that they will never come about in lived reality. Thus, an intent to actualise a hoped-for identity, paired with low likelihood perceptions, is a critical boundary condition for this thesis's theorising. In other words, low likelihood perceptions alone are insufficient to precipitate engagement in odds-defying professional identity development.

Another boundary condition focuses on enactment via current, formalised work roles versus other forms of identity enactment. I focused on a group of people who were aspiring to enact their comedian professional identity formally in the world of work. Others, for instance those who forgo a hoped-for professional identity after a career fork-in-the-road, might continue to enact these identities through job-crafting, leisure-crafting, vicarious enactment, or imagined enactment. In these cases, enactment is geared toward fulfilling the values that are connected to the forgone work-role—not to actualising this professional identity in the workplace. Thus, an intent to actualise a professional identity through one's primary work-role is central to the theory set forward here. Future research should examine whether and how workers with forgone professional identities may come to pursue these identity options through their formal work roles after choice or constraint takes them in another direction.

Finally, the theoretical model developed in this paper is a process model at the individual level of analysis, which Obodaru points out is "surprisingly rare in management journals" (2017: 23; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). Future empirical work might beneficially adopt an alternative approach to data collection, analysis, and theorizing. For instance, a future study might explore how cohorts of odds-defying aspirers

work together throughout their careers to motivate and navigate their professional identity development—for instance, in external labour markets or temporary organisations (Bechky, 2006; Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Reilly, 2017). Likewise, research exploring how various work-roles are socially constructed as odds-defying for all aspirers or for certain groups of aspirers, and the implications of these social constructions for individuals' professional identity development, would be valuable.

Conclusion

Building on prior research exploring professional identity development, this research adds to our understanding of how the professional identity development process unfolds for odds-defying aspirers. Through an analysis of the professional identity development experiences of 50 women in comedy, I find that odds-defying aspirers face chronic paradoxical pulls—to prevent losing and to promote growing toward achieving their desired professional identities in the world of work. As they effortfully shift the balance of these paradoxical pulls, they enable their ongoing professional identity development and develop resilience to persist along this path. Notwithstanding the limitations, this research illuminates the unfolding process of professional identity development for odds-defying aspirers and provides a basis upon which future studies may build.

TABLES

Table 2.1 Odds-Defying Aspirations and Related Constructs from the Literature

Theoretical Construct	Description	Focus	Field(s) & Key Cites
Odds-Defying Aspirations	Individuals' hoped-for professional identities, deemed unlikely to be achieved formally at work	Work-role specific	—
Underdog Expectations	Others' low expectations for an individual's chances of success relative to competitors	Competition	**Social Psychology, Economics, Political Science, Marketing** - Nurmohamed, 2020 - Simon, 1954 - Dixit, 1987
Possible Selves	Individuals' probable, desirable (hoped-for), & undesirable (feared) past, present, & future selves	Multiple domains (e.g., work, leisure, wealth, wellbeing)	**Social Psychology** - Markus & Nurius, 1986 - Yost, Strube, & Bailey, 1992 - Oyserman & James, 2011
Future Work Selves	Individuals' self-representations of personally significant work-related aspirations	Domain of work	**Management** - Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2011 - Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015
Imaginary Future Selves	Individuals' positive fantasies that represent a radical break from disciplinary power	Power, resistance, and subjectivity	**Critical Management Studies** - Costas & Grey, 2014 - Roberts, 2005
Self-Efficacy	Individuals' beliefs regarding their ability to perform specific tasks	Pre-specified task performance	**Psychology, Management** - Bandura 1977, 1982, 1986 - Gist & Mitchell, 1992 - Maddux & Goselin, 2011
Fictive Storytelling	Individuals' self-storytelling involving fanciful embellishments of past, present, & future	Identity work in social interaction	**Sociology** - Snow & Anderson, 1987 - Callero, 2003

Table 3.1: The World of Comedy—Background

Context	Key Features
Entertainment Industry	• Highly competitive, project-based, independent work • Network-based opportunities & advancement • Proliferation of new distribution channels & streaming • Women's underrepresentation on & off screen/stage
Comedy Careers	• Socially transgressive, public facing, self-expressive work • Unpredictable career paths & winner-take-all dynamics • Women's tokenism & marginalisation

Table 3.2: Respondent Summary

Industry Leaders (10)	Professionals (18)	Semi-Professionals (11)	Newcomers (21)
Addie Winters	Anna Jeong	Agnes Finch	Amy Arlington
Cora Rhodes	Arielle Francis	Amelia Aitchison	Bethany Valentine
Ella Himenez	Brooklyn Havemeyer	Arden Hughes	Breanna Barker
Felix Andrews	Calinda Jeffries	Belinda Emerson	Carly Knight
Hazel Trudeau	Celeste Arietta	Brittany Sanders	Daria Oglethorpe
Margaret Jacobs	Clara Allen	Elizabeth Martin	Eileen Polson
Max Samuelson	Daisy Harding	Gina Lancaster	Grace Ferrino
Pat Adamson	Felicity Robinson	Kerry Iverson	Hannah Benson
Sheryl Kennedy	Gemma Evanston	Mary Clarkson	Hayley Vickers
Sia Muñoz	Karla Simon	Rosalind Harris	Hilda Avis
	Katie Al-Jamil	Sarah Jenkins	Imogen Baker
	Kristen Loughlin		Isabelle Andaya
	Medina Nassir		Ivy Booker
	Leticia Ruiz		Kris Rader
	Sadie Curtis		Lucy Montgomery
	Viola Bell		Madison Abernathy
	Yolanda Mary Jefferson		Maisy Kingston
	Zelda Sampson		Nicola Trent
			Polly Jamison
			Sam Carter
			Winnie Miller

Stand Up Comedy	Sketch Comedy	Improv Comedy
80% of respondents	63% of respondents	38% of respondents

Live Shows/Tours	Radio/Podcasts	Television/Film
100% of respondents	67% of respondents	45% of respondents

Major Performance Outlets* (e.g., Networks, Channels, Festivals)

A-cast	Channel 4 Network	Leicester Comedy Fest.	SkyTV
Amazon Prime Video	Comedy Central	Melbourne Intl Fest.	Spotify
Apple Podcasts	Comic Relief	NBC	The Apollo
AudioBoom	Edinburgh Fringe	Netflix	The Comedy Store
BBC Radio	ITV	Next Up Comedy	The Laugh Factory
BBC Television	Just for Laughs Montreal	Second City	UKTV

Demographic Summary

*Respondent Nationality***	*Respondent Age*	*Respondent Gender*
78% UK/Europe	Average Age = 33	95% Women
15% North America	Min. Age = 18	3% Men
10% Asia/Oceania	Max. Age = 60	2% Other

* Not an exhaustive list. To preserve anonymity, the outlets listed were reported by at least two respondents.
** Numbers add up to more than 100% to account for dual citizenships.

Table 3.3: Summary of Fieldwork

Interviews	**In-Person**	**Remote**	**Total**
Newcomers	9	12	21
Semi-Professionals	6	5	11
Professionals	6	12	18
Industry Leaders	7	3	10
Total	**28**	**32**	**60**

Industry Observations	**Live**	**Recorded**	**Total**
Solo Performance (e.g., stand-up)	6	9	15
Ensemble Performance (e.g., sketch, improv)	3	8	11
Mixed Bill Performance (e.g., awards & competitions)	7	0	7
Networking Events & Venues	7	0	7
Total	**23**	**17**	**40**

Table 4.1: Representative Quotes—Aspirational Assumptions

Second-order themes	First-order themes	Representative first-order data
Odds-Defying Aspirations	*Rarity of role*	I think any comedian can tell you they grew up watching SNL and they were like 'I want to be on SNL,' but that's ten people, right, that's not realistic for most people. —Katie Al-Jamil I think the first year I probably only gigged about six times. And I loved it, but I didn't really know that you could do it as a job. And so I thought you were either mega famous and successful and on TV or you just did it as a fun thing like I did… So I just thought it was a little bit more than a hobby and I found it exciting, but I didn't know that it could lead to a career particularly. —Calinda Jeffries
	Inaccessibility of path	Maybe that's the problem. I don't understand how jobs work within the arts industry because it's very project-based and quite fleeting and I don't really know. I don't know what my days are going to look like, and I don't have a five-year plan. —Madison Abernathy I'd always kind of had it at the back of my mind as sort of, 'oh it would be amazing, but it could never happen'… it's a tricky thing to get into. —Winnie Miller And so I still think in terms of setting yourself goals and being ambitious, is the level of self-doubt and lack of structure that this kind of career inherently comes along with. —Daisy Harding You know about TV comics and you know about people that you admire, and you have no idea how they got there. Especially if your academics have always been very much about academia and not… talking about how you actually build a practical career as a performer. So it's a bit of a weird sideways leap to then go in almost completely blind and just be like, 'Hi guys! I'm very good at this, but I don't know how to be good at this in a good way, like in an effective way, efficient way." —Hayley Vickers One of the main hurdles has been figuring out what is out there. Because I didn't really know how it worked… The comedians I was obsessed with, their route was very direct. They all went straight from University into a particular scene that existed, and it was very well timed. It happened quite early for them, really immediately. Which, in my younger age, I understood that was how it happened, with no real concept of how it actually worked. —Kerry Iverson
	Atypicality of candidate	My parents were strict, they were really conservative, they wanted me to be a doctor and marry a doctor, have

		some little doctors. There is no way that somebody like me would ever have become a comedian, from my background, from my upbringing, it just wasn't something that Asian women did. —Medina Nassir Within the family… there are bits and bobs of creative life. But my dad works in sales, my mum is super shy. They were very encouraging, and they would always take me to the theatre and always encourage me. But still, if you don't really know anyone. No one around me was doing it, if you know what I mean. —Brooklyn Havemeyer Up until about seven years ago, the people that you saw on TV, whether it was like on Mock The Week, panel shows or like Live At The Apollo, it was always just straight white men or maybe… like Alan Car and Graham Norton, but again ultimate gay man… And even when I started doing stand-up I thought, 'Oh well, there mustn't be that many female comedians about since I never see them on TV'… It's hard to envisage yourself doing something if there's not someone that looks like you doing it. —Carly Knight I was back home recently, and I saw two of my siblings ... None of my siblings have a passion or interest, just they don't have it. They have nothing that they really want to do... And that's fine for them. —Kerry Iverson No one's going to give a woman in her forties with a baby 'best newcomer' or 'best comedian'… they can't do anything with me. —Agnes Finch I didn't see female comedians… When I was at university, I hadn't seen any women do comedy, certainly not stand-up comedy… I remember before going on stage thinking, 'Who am I going to write like?' I'd maybe seen Stuart Leigh, Dylan Moran, neither of which I was anything like. I remember thinking, 'What am I going to do?' —Ivy Booker I've always sort of been interested in it, but I think growing up, the idea that you could do it as a girl as a job or even as a hobby unless you were exceptional at it, you had a gift, it just wasn't a thing in my sort of sphere. —Ivy Booker So because of my parents or my environment, although my academic background was really good, my self-esteem was very low and I really didn't have any idea that I could make my dream come true… to be honest I didn't imagine I would become a comedian. —Anna Jeong
Pull to Promote Identity Growth	*Identity threat of failing to try*	I have never wanted to let it go, if that makes sense. So while I've been doing this parallel thing... I could have probably committed to something else, but then that would have meant giving up on the dream, which I couldn't quite do, so I never quite committed. —Kerry Iverson

	I felt like, if you are fairly good at what you're doing, then maybe it's cowardly to not continue with it. Maybe I'm being silly and not pursuing what I'm actually good at because it's comedy, which is a scary thing to do. —Imogen Baker Without improv, I don't think I would have the channels to be myself. —Polly Jamison If I wasn't doing comedy, I wouldn't be Grace. I couldn't not do it. It's a part of me, it's how I live, it's what makes me alive. —Grace Ferrino I probably guess it's better to see it as something that keeps going rather than like a bus that kind of stops and starts again. Yes, just always pushing, rather than thinking this didn't go right and maybe I should give up. I think I'd feel like I hadn't really achieved much if I just sort of gave in to failure. —Winnie Miller
Claiming rewards: instrumental	My need is more about being creatively satisfied and having a voice and talking for myself, probably because that was suppressed when I was growing up, so like I think that's what's been left. There's a lingering need to express myself. —Sadie Curtis I do comedy because it challenges me, and I want to be challenged. I am obviously challenged at work when I've got to write reports, but it's very boring and I'm just not interested, whereas I'm always interested in me… That's why I do comedy. —Viola Bell I realised I have to really do something otherwise I'll be going back to these office jobs… I think the default would have been going and doing jobs that I didn't want to do. —Calinda Jeffries And a lot of my graduate friends are now going into work in art galleries or in consultancy firms, and all of that sounds interesting but just totally wrong for what I want to do. They might be earning a lot of money, but I just don't care, because I feel quite adamant about what I want to do. —Hannah Benson
Claiming rewards: interpersonal	Comedy allows me to smile and to laugh and to make other people happy. That's what I like, helping others, making others happy… And it allows me to reach loads of different people. When you hear them laugh, then you know you're doing something good, and you feel good as well. —Grace Ferrino Personally the really successful comedian is the person who can empower people from their negative experience. Sometimes they have negative experience, but they can empower people and they can give lessons from that experience. So I do want to be like that… there are a lot of people who are just struggling with low self-esteem, so I wanted to deliver a message to empower them too… So maybe doing this stand-up

		comedy will give people some ways to escape from the struggling or some options, some possibilities. I'm doing this for everybody, yes, including myself, healing myself and healing the people. —Anna Jeong I was totally inspired by her and she was a woman in her forties talking about her kids, standing alone on the stage getting all the attention and I just loved it. And it just inspired me. I wanted to write for her initially, but then my husband said well they write for themselves, so now what? And about six months later I texted her and said I want to have a go. —Eileen Polson Regardless of whatever else is going on in the rest of your life, you step on stage and you are somebody completely different and you can make everybody's night better, and I really like that part. —Hayley Vickers
	Claiming rewards: image	I found I really enjoyed this. I have a voice for the first time in my life, I'm saying what I want to say, people are laughing and it's going well. And I felt like I had some control, I had some power, I had a voice and I just carried on. —Medina Nassir Amy Winehouse was like, 'Oh I don't want to be famous; I could never handle being famous'. Like, I want to be famous. And not in that kind of six-year-old girl way. I actually want that. —Bethany Valentine It makes me stand out from the different social groups that I'm in—I like that about it. —Hayley Vickers
Pull to Prevent Identity Loss	*Identity threat of trying and failing*	If comedy totally doesn't work, I could do something else, but for now I would be so devastated if I was forced to give it up or just couldn't do it anymore. —Hannah Benson There's a lot of personal investment in putting yourself on the line like that and if that's worth it, do you know what I mean? If it's worth it to put your whole personality on the line as opposed to just getting a job and living your life. —Imogen Baker
	Claiming risks & costs: instrumental	I had to give up science and I loved science growing up so much… I watched that Brad Pit film recently, *Ad Astra* and I remembered how much I wanted to be an astronaut as a child… or something to do with physics… Now thinking back I was like, 'Oh man, yes, that could have been a thing. But here you are.' And I don't have any regrets thus far, but I guess it's sacrificing your other dreams because I think you can only fit so many hats on your head. —Isabelle Andaya You put all your eggs in one basket and then it's difficult to recover from that if it doesn't happen… The more time you spend doing it, the more your prospects become slimmer in other parts of the world. —Sadie Curtis

	There's absolutely no guarantee of financial security for a very long time. Even people who have sell-out shows are still completely financially unstable. —Imogen Baker I don't know whether I need to stop doing that work in order to commit fully to comedy… I would therefore take away all my kind of support systems financially and I'm not sure I could handle it. I think I would come to panic… coming from a background of always having a regular income. —Daisy Harding Yes, time and money, such a drain because I'd have to travel… so it would be like six quid or something to even get there and then a pint would be like a fiver, and then do this gig, but obviously like the night would be free… sometimes I wonder, why am I doing this? —Madison Abernathy
Claiming risks & costs: interpersonal	There is a reason that public speaking is one of the main phobias of people and it's because (and this is a very hack evolutionary biology theory) it's because if you speak publicly in front of a small tribe of people and you get it wrong, that's a life-or-death proposition. —Arielle Francis Anyone in their right mind wouldn't still be doing it, because it's so mad. You don't know when anything's coming your way. You don't know when you're going to be given the next job or anything like that. And your relationships crumble because you don't have time to see anyone and stuff like that, and it's probably inherently bad, bad for you doing this because it's not the same as having a normal life where you can have hobbies and a life and do things on the weekends and stuff like that… there's so much you have to weigh-up. Is it worth pissing-off so many people or… dropping out of things and losing a lot of friends and becoming sort of one track in what you do? —Sadie Curtis It's probably one of the reasons it took so long to do it properly. Because if you're at university, you're going to see your university friends, if you're from a village there's nowhere to do it. —Ivy Booker Friendships. Last term I was doing some shows and I didn't really get to see my friends very much, which is tough but I think any sort of hobby that you have would be the same… It's really, it's tricky actually when friends don't get how important it is to you and housemates who never came to any of my shows. And that was sort of fine, I never came to their football matches or whatever, but it means a lot… It's a bit of a test of friendships. but if you are never around and then you're like oh come and see me on stage, they're like why? —Madison Abernathy At the beginning of your career you sort of are like sure, I'll drive six hours for fifty pounds, to do a ten-minute spot in a pub in the middle of nowhere. And that is very, very, good for you as a comedian, but it is also not fun. It also is one of the other things that plays against women in the industry. If you have the family

	or you want a family, then those kinds of concerns, you know, can I spend the next four years driving up and down the country, never being home, making very little money? —that is a big question, in a way that it isn't for men in their late twenties, early thirties. For women in their late twenties, early thirties, I think it becomes more of a concern. —Arielle Francis It's taken a lot of sacrifices, I think. Even relationships. I ended a relationship because the person I was with, two relationships actually. When I first started out, I was with a guy who really didn't like me doing stand-up. Yes, he really did not like it, and he was very threatened by it and I'd never experienced that before and I was like, 'Actually I think I like comedy more than him, so I'm going to stick with this'. So we broke up and then I was in a relationship for a long time and the person I was with, even though he was a comedian, he wasn't as sort of driven as I was, which again is fine, he was happy doing what he was doing. And I was like, 'I'd love to move to London, I'd like to try and give it a go,' and he just didn't want to move, so that was part of the reason we split up. —Felicity Robinson
Claiming risks & costs: image	It's like revealing a big chunk of yourself. And once you say it, that's all people hear… That's what they hear, that's how they frame you, suddenly there's a different pressure in a conversation. —Ivy Booker I don't know, I think it's that I get worried that I'll come across as arrogant. I don't know, yes, I don't want to be arrogant. —Nicola Trent It depends on the extremity of how many people you're exposing yourself to and how willing you are to make a complete and utter fool of yourself and expect that you look like an idiot and no one laughs, that's a bit scary… The idea of people thinking that you think you're funny and that you're actually not… the idea of people thinking that you're big-headed about your own talent and people thinking, 'Well they're not that talented,' I think it's my worst fear ever. I would never want to come across in that way… the idea of exposing yourself and it's flopping, and people are saying, 'Oh what's she doing? That's absolutely not worth my time,' that's just terrifying, just absolutely terrifying. —Imogen Baker

Table 4.2: Representative Quotes—Motivational Resolve (Part 1)

Second-order themes	First-order themes	Representative first-order data
Precarity	*Hesitation*	I always knew that I wanted to do comedy, I just didn't know when. I always just had it in the back of my head, on my bucket list, and I thought that I'd do it when I was a bit older. —Amelia Aitchison I don't know if I can pick an individual incident where I was like, 'This is it, this is what I'm going to do,' but I think I was quite into the idea for quite a long time. —Clara Allen A women's comedy group came to my town and did a course. And I was like I'm going to do that, I'm going to do that, I'm going to do that. If I had a pound for all the things I'm going to do, you know, I'd have so much money. But I didn't do it. —Breanna Barker So I was quite hesitant last year to audition for things, partly because I felt like I wasn't proved or accomplished enough… Looking back I really should have auditioned. There was no kind of real reason why I didn't. I think it just, it feels like sort of an inside and outside, whereas realistically that's not really the case. Like a lot of people are starting off in comedy, a lot of people have done a bit. —Maisy Kingston There was part of me that was like, 'Man, do you want to do this?' Like—why are you beating around the bush? You obviously want to do this. —Gina Lancaster
	Career Indecision	You're just standing in front of maybe four strangers, maybe ten or maybe just comics, you know, in some club in some part of England on a Wednesday night and you've got to get up for work the next morning and there's plenty of moments in comedy to just have your internal voice go, 'What are you doing? What are you doing?' —Ivy Booker There's lots of things, obviously, that make you feel negative. Because it is such a—when you're in the arts, it's just a constant like, "Ooh, maybe this is a terrible idea." —Elizabeth Martin If I get a long-term performing job, as in a run at a theatre, for example, or a tour… that would mean that I had to quit my job. I wouldn't let my job stop me, the comedy would take precedence over that and if I had to leave, then I have to leave. But then I would probably be looking for something else immediately after…I'm still in two minds about it… it's obviously great to have a salary but it's tiring doing both things, but the stress of not having any money would be so much worse… But yes, definitely, a few days after you don't do very

	well you do, yes, I certainly think, 'Thank god that no one's relying on me to do this.' I rarely think, 'Oh I'm just going to quit,' although I have had those moments where I'm like I could just give it up and life would be so much easier if I just gave it up. I had one of those moments last year at the Edinburgh Fringe… I wasn't happy with my show for several different reasons… I don't think it was a terrible performance, I think I just about got through it and still made people laugh and it was fine. But then as soon as all the audience left, I just burst into tears and was like, I really want to give this up, because it was just really emotionally draining… you're never completely happy with what you're doing, especially when you're doing a show by yourself and sometimes it goes brilliantly and other times not. You sort of think—oh there is no stability, there's no emotional stability, so it would be easier if I gave it up and just was a normal person. —Rosalind Harris I am trying to weigh-up, I probably am the happiest I've ever been, so it is that debate of, do you sacrifice your own security for a very random life… Yes, it means you have to weigh-up, is it worth it? —Sadie Curtis Every now and again, I'm like yes, I'm definitely going to do this! And every now and again, I'm like, 'meh'… So it kind of does come and go. At the moment I'm in a bit of a 'meh' period… Ya, it's almost like, diabetic. Like I'm at the moment, low energy. And then when you like top up, higher energy. So that kind of up and down… A diabetic journey into comedy. —Bethany Valentine I find having a job really tiring. So when I'm not really tired-out from work, I'll be like, 'Yes, it's something I really, really want to do!' and I'll book in loads of gigs, and then it will get to the end of the day and I've had a really busy or stressful day at work, I'll just be like I just don't have the energy to… I feel like just sometimes life gets in the way. —Nicola Trent
Self-Doubt	As you do more and more gigs, I think you go up a kind of ski lift. To reach the very top would be to make it as a professional comedian. Yes, so that's the journey. But now I think I'm like a quarter of the way there and I keep on going back down and coming back up, back down, coming back up. I guess because I don't sometimes believe it myself, so yes, that's the issue. —Grace Ferrino Really it is just down to sudden bursts of self-doubt from competitions. Competitions make me feel that way. So, I did a couple of competitions… which is really nice, because at the end of it, I come out with lots of contacts, and people who say really positive things about me, and yet I still feel really sad about it. That's the only time that I have these peaks of self-doubt. —Bethany Valentine There's anxiety around 'Oh gosh, is this just a fluke? And will I be able to write things, funny things ever again?' And happiness that I've gotten recognition, but some trepidation that—there's that feeling of like, 'Oh god, I'm a fraud.' —Gina Lancaster

	There are these people and they'll go up and they'll get one laugh, if that… And then they come off and they are like, 'Yes, I smashed that!' And you're thinking, 'Oh, I don't know if you did.' And then you're like, 'Gosh, am I that person?' Am I ever coming off being like, 'I smashed that!' and I didn't? And I think everyone is a bit worried—is everyone thinking that I'm a terrible comedian and they're wondering why I'm still doing this?... please tell me I'm not deluded. —Carly Knight
Feedback-Vulnerability	When I had my first bad review, I gave up for about four months. I would have been in my early thirties and I can remember being really knocked by it, and it was quite confusing as well and instead of kind of going, 'Oh what a stupid bitch', I kind of went, 'Oh my god, maybe I am shit.' —Agnes Finch I really need to feel like I have made people's time worthwhile if I go on stage and I think I hold that to quite a high standard. So I did that gig and it made me think, I'm wasting people's time and I'm not blowing peoples' minds with what I'm saying so what's the point? And I kind of went away... I stopped doing it for a while… I took a break because I did that gig where I died, and it was horrible… And when you are just starting out, there is a pressure because you want to impress people, especially when you're new because they are watching you and they're going to make a snap decision about whether you're good or not within the first five minutes, as everyone does. It's kind of horrific if you die that early on. You're not ready and you don't have the tools to deal with that yet. —Sadie Curtis I remember the first review I got, said I had funny sketches, but they were slightly hectic. And that just played in my head for days and days and days. —Bethany Valentine I do ruminate, or I used to… I did used to ruminate about it long ago, like 'Oh god, what if, what if, what if' —Elizabeth Martin You have periods of not working and it's like the door is constantly getting shut in, or you get through the door but nothing really happens, that's part of the life... But you just think I can do anything, I work hard, why is it not happening? And I guess what is hard is really committing to that want. —Viola Bell I quit because I was discouraged at my lack of progress on one hand… and then I had a really bad experience, I got yelled at for going over time at a competition gig and I felt really distressed… I'd gotten shouted at by somebody who said, 'You would have made it through this competition if you hadn't run over time! What's wrong with you?' And I was like OK, I'm a new comedian. You know you're not supposed to go over time, you know all of this stuff, but you kind of make mistakes, and my psyche was kind of fragile at that time. I knew I had something, but I also just took feedback really hard. —Gina Lancaster

Table 4.3: Representative Quotes—Aspirational Identity Enactment

Second-order themes	First-order themes	**Representative first-order data**
Loss-Preventing Identity Enactment	*Fantasising*	I always really liked comedy growing up, I watched a lot of sort of sketch shows… which I always really enjoyed. It wasn't ever something that I thought I would end up doing. It was never like a dream to start doing comedy when I was younger, I just enjoyed it, and I love Mean Girls, the film—a fantastic film. —Nicola Trent
	Suppressing	Like my family and best friends knew I was interested in it, but I was also trying to convince myself I didn't want to do it, because it's... Yes, a little bit because it's a horrific life. So I was, yes, I was a bit like oh maybe I don't want to do it, maybe I just want to, I don't know, do something else. It was partly I thought uni might bash it out of me, but I came out being like no, I still want to do it. —Brooklyn Havemeyer But I mean I keep doing it because I'm hoping that at some point it will pay off and that I won't have to do all of this at once, but I guess it's a kind of hope that someday it'll pay off… I am hoping after a few years, if I get to thirty and it's still not paid off, I think I'll be like okay, I've done that. But that's still in the future, so I've got lots of time, so it could work. —Nicola Trent
	Hedging	Obviously, you need money to survive, so I don't really have an option to quit my job. So yes, I am finding, particularly in the last few weeks, kind of a balance, having to do a job and having to survive and also wanting to do my passion. —Nicola Trent
	Downplaying	I literally do comedy for fun… I mean obviously it's great to have the attention and laughs and stuff like that, but mostly I do it because it's really fun to do with my friends on stage, we get to be completely stupid and it's like being a kid. —Imogen Baker I don't really ever talk about it to people that I want to make a career out of it, it's always just, 'Oh I'm doing this thing.' —Nicola Trent
	Concealing	I did it in secret for a long time and I didn't tell anybody. My parents didn't know, my brothers and sisters didn't know, my friends didn't know, I just went out and did it. Because I was really scared that one day I'd wake up and people would just not be laughing anymore or I'd been found out or oh I'm not really as funny as I thought I was, what do I think I'm doing, you know? I know the end result, the end result is I'm going to have to get married and have kids. This is just not going to work out, no matter how it is in the meantime. So I just always thought that this is going to end soon, I am going to have to go back to teaching, so I never told

		anybody for years, for about five or six years. While I was starting, while I was doing the small gigs. —Medina Nassir Before I would definitely not have told them, but now I'm like, 'Oh isn't this great news? I'm writing and doing this show,' and it's like, 'Oh yes, enjoy that'… I've felt a lot more like comfortable with my choices since that conversation. I wouldn't you have told them before, because I felt like everyone saw it as a hobby, they all think that I was jeopardising my possible future because I was limiting my job prospects for the sake of a hobby. —Maisy Kingston I've never done stand-up, nor do I sort of have a desire to because I feel safer, I love acting and I sort of feel a bit safer in a character. Because it's like, you know, if you say something stupid, it's like I didn't say that, it was the character that said that. —Daria Oglethorpe I knew I wasn't very good. Well when I started out, I knew I wasn't good, that's part of the reason that I did it, so I didn't want people to come and watch me. I knew I could get good, and I knew I had an ability to get there but yes, I didn't want to bring people. —Arielle Francis I think the ability to go and do something I wanted to do for a long time but to strangers that you're not going to see again, and then you can just think about it on your own, it was very, very important… in comedy I think it you can take a long time to figure out who you are as a comic, I'm still doing it but I've definitely got a better idea now… And you're also very susceptible to other's opinions… So yes, I think the city was very important because there was that lack of judgment. —Ivy Booker
Growth-Promoting Identity Enactment	*Emulating*	And so I started like reading more about Tina Fey and I got her autobiography for my birthday once because I liked her so much, and she talked a lot about improv in it. So when I got to uni I was like, 'Oh okay, well if I like this person, she does it, I'll try it out,' and I really loved it, and I just had a lot of fun doing it and it was a good way to meet people. —Nicola Trent My friend was doing stand-up… and I would go to watch her at these stand-up nights and open mic comedy is just a real mixed bag. And she would do well, she would have some funny turns and there was stuff that really didn't work, and watching her do that, I was like holy shit, you're so brave. I would just keep going to her gigs though… And I would go and ask her all these questions. She was like—the only way to know if you really want to do it or if it's the right thing, is to jump on stage and do it, and you should do it. —Gina Lancaster
	Investing	I remember having to get a Mega Bus back from London to Manchester, and I got back into Manchester at six in the morning, and I just went home, got changed and went straight to work and did a day's work. And then

	the next night you're gigging again but like in Manchester. You've got to have a real level of wanting to do it and it can seem a stupid thing to do. —Felicity Robinson It all came down to confidence and I just didn't have it. So I sort of researched and I was like, 'Well what would make me feel comfortable? I know nothing about stand-up, I'm absolutely terrified, what would help me?' And I wasn't even sure I liked it. But then I thought, 'Just do some research,' and there was this place running a course. —Gina Lancaster I gigged it before I went, so I did two previews, which is the funniest thing now, because I'm doing like ten previews of this show that I'm making currently. I went very naïve. —Daisy Harding
Divesting	I was choosing whether to retrain as a social worker and that was going to take up a lot of time… And I was looking at everything on my plate, you know, family, relationships, comedy, training, working, and I was like well one of them has to go… I had already reasoned it out in my head that it wasn't reasonable or rational to hold on to my current job and a comedy career. It's like instead of saving money, that's living off scratch cards, but it's much more exciting. And we sat down, and I said to my partner, 'I'm not going to do counselling anymore because I want to do comedy.' —Ivy Booker
Overstating	I think you get this in theatre, you get it in music, anything that is a creative thing that is extremely competitive and also potentially very lucrative. You are supposed to be completely committed to it, like it is the be all and end all, you will do this for free, you will do this in place of doing anything else. —Pat Adamson It's funny because the way comedians talk about this, when they started, it's all sort of up in the air. —Gina Lancaster
Coming Out	I think psychologically if you start to tell people that you are a comedian and you make that commitment to your friends and your closest group, that is when you mentally have to take it seriously, and only once you do that are you properly a comedian. —Belinda Emerson Telling people you do comedy is like coming out. It's a big part of your identity... I relate it to a real sort of coming out… it's only recently that I tell people that I do it, if they ask what I do, because now it's such a large part of my life, it feels dishonest not to mention it. It's like saying, 'What do you do for a job?' and you are like, 'Well you know, a bit of this, a bit of that, occasionally leave the house' and maybe you are a fire-fighter. And people would be like, 'Oh you've got to tell us you are a fire-fighter. It is a big part of your life.'

		—Ivy Booker I was used to being on a stage, but I wasn't used to being on a stage as myself. I knew how to stand on a stage and hold a microphone… but I just didn't know how to talk to them as myself. So I actually started doing comedy as a character, for me it was more natural to be in a character than to be myself. And then after a few gigs, someone was like, 'Why are you wearing this wig and this costume? I don't think you need it.' And I was like, 'Oh no, it's my character.' And they were like, 'Yes, but your character is you, so I don't know why you're wearing it.' And I was like, 'Oh.' And then I was booked on this gig and I realised I didn't know anyone, and so I just psyched myself up and I was like—no one knows you, you could be the best comedian in here, you don't know, so just go on without your costume. So I did it without my costume and it felt much better. So then I was just like, 'Oh right, actually this is how I want to perform.'—Amelia Aitchison I started getting on TV and then I had to, so I started telling people. —Medina Nassir And then at home you're doing it and it could become part of your identity. —Ivy Booker
Prompts for Recursion Between Identity Enactment Types	*New claiming risks*	When I first came here it was like I was starting from zero, so it was like being a brand-new comedian again, right. It doesn't matter the accolades you have from somewhere else, when you come here you were starting fresh, and we'll get to the nitty-gritty of it, being a girl and starting here, you have less credibility.—Celeste Arietta Like I'll start and I'll be like really enjoying it, I'll do a run and it'll go really well and then if something happened in my life I'd be like, 'Okay, I'll just take a break to figure that out.' And then it's getting back into it all over again… Yes, I think mainly just stopping and starting has been a thing. I did a few gigs at the beginning of this year and then I broke-up with my ex, so I was just like alright, I'll take a few months off to deal with that. And then starting again was kind of rough, like tough, I found it very difficult. —Nicola Trent
	Heightened tolerance for claiming risks	The funny thing is, after a bad review I took more risks because I thought well there is nothing as bad as a bad review, people seen how embarrassing. —Agnes Finch I had a baby and after that I was really happy. I actually really enjoyed being a mum and I had a lot of support, so I had a really lovely time with my baby. And I thought well I'm really happy, but I would like to do something else for me and it kind of doesn't matter if I fail at it because I'm very happy at home, do you know what I mean? I've got my baby to go back to, so it kind of doesn't matter if it goes wrong. —Gemma Evanston

Table 5.1: Representative Quotes—Identity Feedback

Second-order themes	First-order themes	Representative first-order data
Identity Validation	*Informal Social Feedback—Encouragement*	I only did my first ever stand-up because they wanted to do an all-women stand-up night and someone was like, 'Oh you're quite funny, do you want to try it?' And I said, 'Yes, okay,' and I really enjoyed it. But I probably would never have signed-up to do it unless someone had asked me. So yes, definitely it was a lot of people not pushing me into it but yes, being around people that were doing it. —Nicola Trent My show got some really good reviews, which is what you kind of require to be able to go and tour the show across the country. And that validation of those people encouraging me to tour the show, at that point I don't think I would have done it if those people from the outside hadn't picked me up and encouraged me… Because the self-care aspect of doing comedy is often the thing really you don't provide for… And so it can become incredibly difficult to sustain. I think people drop out because you just feel like I'm totally alone and I'm giving so much to my audiences and getting really great responses, but then I go back to a lonely hotel room, and the contrast is so extreme. —Daisy Harding If I didn't have that thing around me sort of encouraging me and saying, 'Oh you're good at this, you're good at writing, oh your funny, you should do this'—if I didn't have that, I don't know what I'd do actually. That's a really interesting thing, if I didn't have that sort of support around me or the encouragement when I was growing up, I don't think I would have, maybe I would never have thought. —Rachel Fairburn My closest friends who always sort of understand, even if they're not interested and they don't particularly like it, they'll be supportive and understand. —Madison Abernathy I met a guy in the lift as I was leaving [my job]… and he said, 'Oh hi, we haven't met.' And he said, 'Are you on your way out?' And I went, 'Yes, I'm leaving.' And he went 'Okay, what are you going to do?' I'd never met this guy before and I went, 'I'm going off to be a stand-up comedian.' And he turned around and I thought he was going to say something detrimental, and I was going to regret, you know what I mean? You've put yourself out there and you're waiting for him to go, 'What are you, sad, mental, what's wrong?' And he said, 'Oh right, I've only ever known one other person do that… and his name was Jimmy Carr.' And that was my parting conversation with this stranger that I'd never met, holding balloons and candles and flowers, getting in a lift. So I just thought, I don't know, why not try? —Belinda Emerson
	Audience Feedback—'Killing' & Being Praised	Doing a set—the best I'll ever feel, probably just ever, is coming off from a good show… Especially if you do a set and it goes well, you come off the stage and you're like, 'Oh I can do this! I have just done it. I can definitely do this.' So that's probably the only bit, and the same for writing material. Nothing makes you feel

	like you can do it than actually doing it. —Madison Abernathy My performance just got a good response. And I was like, 'Oh, there's a place for me. There's a market.' —Grace Ferrino Even stuff like, people re-tweeting your stuff on Twitter, it's like, 'Yes, I made a funny thing'. So social media praise. —Bethany Valentine Even when I'm having a day where I go, 'Oh you're not that funny, you're not that cool,' just total self-doubt kind of gets in there, I can go and do a gig that night and go—'A room of forty people can't be wrong. You must be funny, otherwise they wouldn't be laughing.' Because it's something that you can't bullshit. A roomful of people will laugh, or they won't laugh, you can't coerce them into laughing, you can't pay them to laugh, you can't do any of that. They'll laugh if they want to, it's a very natural spasmodic reaction. So if you don't get it right and they don't laugh, you know, that's what will tell you you're not funny. —Belinda Emerson My mum brought me up watching French and Saunders who are like my comedy icons… And we actually got a review for a show that we did a couple of months ago where literally by chance the reviewer compared me and my friend to French and Saunders, and I literally started crying. I was like oh my god. That was when like kind of the first time where I was like OK, like maybe I should think about this as a thing because that's the best thing I could have ever heard… I never really considered it as a career thing because I was just having a good time, I was just doing the student show, no one was paying us, it wasn't professional or anything like that. But then the show went really well, I really enjoyed it, and I think it was just really nice and validating. Like, subconsciously I think I'd always been kind of working towards being compared to those kinds of people because they are my idols. So I think just that was like a piece of validation that was like OK, if you want to pursue this, then you can. More like a kind of kick up the butt. Like a driving force. —Imogen Baker Stuff like people coming up afterwards and saying I really enjoyed your stuff, things like that always makes me feel like I've done a good job. —Carly Knight
Industry Feedback—Progressing & Inclusion	When I moved to London, that felt like it was more real... people know more who you are. Which you shouldn't have to feel like that, but the wider industry kind of knows you a bit better and stuff. I mean, I didn't really feel like a comedian still, but it felt quite nice. —Elizabeth Martin This is going to sound really egotistical but my performance CV for somebody who's my age is quite impressive. —Hayley Vickers

It was really funny because my aim was to stop doing open spots and become a professional comic, because you're a semi-pro for a while where you're getting some paid spots and some open. And I remember somebody said to me it's like you're knocking on a door and you suddenly fall through it. And I remember once looking at my gig list and I had no more open spots; everything was paid. but it wasn't like—do you know what I mean? I just looked and, 'Oh! actually I've done it.' —Yolanda Mary Jefferson

I always found that faintly embarrassing when people started calling themselves a comedian because they have done a course or they are doing open mics, I just find it a bit oh, hah. So it was quite a long time and I think it was probably not until I was getting paid, and so after the open mic circuit and I was doing shows for money. And then also when I got a part in the TV show, I was like yes, OK, and I was working with other proper comedians and I was like yes, this counts. —Gemma Evanston

Just getting recognition on a sort of a higher level… whether people wanting to meet with you and commission your work… being booked for TV appearances or radio appearances or winning awards, the sort of things that verify that you are funny. I think a lot of comedians—everyone is a bit scared that they might be deluded, and so anything that like verifies that they are not so deluded is quite important. —Carly Knight

I have been able to meet maybe like three or four really good comedy people that I really trust and have been really supportive and nice, and I think that has literally been the thing that's pushed me through. Because otherwise I definitely wouldn't do it, unless I had someone being like, 'You're really good.' —Sadie Curtis

Being at industry events where there are people you know well… and at events where other people are maybe slightly ahead of you in comedy but where you feel included in whatever the event is or the conversations are, that's quite nice and you're like, 'Oh, no, I am one of this group.' —Clara Allen

It's really nice when people are nice, and you feel like they're supporting you. And yeah, it just feels like a nice community kind of thing. —Elizabeth Martin

So from the start, my first ever gig, I suppose it would just be like, I didn't know that it was a thing that you could do. And then it was like, 'Oh, it's going very well' 'Oh, I'm definitely going to be a Ricky Gervais immediately.' Sign with an agent, 'Oh my god! Even more!' is what I thought. —Calinda Jeffries

By gig thirty-two I'd made it to the semi-finals of a competition and there's something about that that makes you kind of go, 'Oh I am good! I do sort of know what I'm doing.' —Gina Lancaster
I didn't know how to start, but I just wanted to do it. And I said, 'what do I do'? And she said here's how you apply, here's how you, like sell yourself, here's how you do all this stuff. And I don't think I could have done it without her. She was really supportive and still is. —Elizabeth Martin

Identity Invalidation	*Informal Social Feedback—Discouragement*	When I was a child, if I was outspoken, my parents would just try and shut me up because they felt it was not an attractive thing for a woman to be doing. Now it will not get you a husband if you are so outspoken, opinionated, brash; they don't want that. That's how I was brought up… It's not something that was ever, ever encouraged with me. And I know that that is specific to my culture but it's kind of like our royal family in a way. Kate Middleton was suitable to be in the royal family because she didn't have any opinions…Very demure, very quiet, tows the line. The minute somebody like Megan Markel comes in who is absolutely outspoken, says she's a feminist, talks about women's rights, really wants to campaign and make a change, all of a sudden this is not acceptable, and this is not how we want a woman to be. —Medina Nassir I just sort of said to my boyfriend, 'I think I might go for it,' and he said, 'Well I think you need to focus on your relationships, focus on your work a bit more.' I was like, it is not really your place to tell me to do my degree better, I can manage my own time… he didn't think it was a particularly realistic career and was very much like, 'Go to a grad scheme.' And I don't know if that's social conservatism or if it was specifically him being insecure, but it did very much come out as complete lack of support. —Maisy Kingston People are usually quite surprised. Like I had to report something to the police a few months ago…and they were just chatting to me, sort of, 'So what do you want to go in to?' and I was like, 'Oh hopefully comedy,' and they were just shocked… Yes, I think people sort of tend to take it with a bit of a pinch of salt and be like, 'Oh that's a nice aspiration to have' without much belief. —Maisy Kingston It's usually men that I've grow up with or boys from school who will be like, 'But you're not funny,' which is always the classic reaction… 'How can you be funny? You're a woman.' I guess it's just a weird reaction of like having to put you down…—Hilda Avis My parents were in denial and they were like well, you know, it's just a hobby, isn't it? I'd go out with guys… and they'd say, you know, this comedy, I mean it's just a hobby, isn't it? I mean you're not really going to pursue this? Also when we get married, you know, you're going to give this up, aren't you? So it was never ever taken seriously, it wasn't, I was never going to be a comedian. These were the constant blocks, like this is just not going to happen. —Medina Nassir I think my mum was frustrated… she didn't understand why making money wasn't my priority. I think she thought that I would get a job earning money fresh out of uni and then just be happy, and just be comfortable knowing that I've got money and I'm secure… comedy is quite private and writing is quite a private thing you do in your own time, so she never really saw any of the good gigs and the things that outweighed her trepidation that it's wasting my time. So she never really got it, and wasn't really that supportive… I think she's quite money centric, so I think she finds it frustrating that I'm not the same way. So yes, that was quite a

	big battle to fight. —Sadie Curtis
Audience Feedback—'Dying' & Being Criticised	When I first started, I remember someone saying that Sarah Millican had spoken to them and said, 'Oh there's always the audible groan when a woman comes on'—like, when she'd come on stage sometimes. And I'd hear it sometimes at a club—the sudden change in atmosphere in the audience and this was like five or six years ago, you know, folded arms, the kind of like, 'Go on then', you know, let's just get this over with and then get another man, you know, get a man on to do it properly… Yes, when a white guy comes on stage, people are just like alright, and then he tells you about himself, whereas I think if you were a woman or you're a minority or you're disabled or something, you come on stage and you have to address these things before you then get to express yourself. —Hazel Trudeau It makes you lose faith in it really. Getting bad reviews… last year we got all five-star reviews… And then this year we got threes and fours, and it does knock your confidence a lot because it's like oh well that's somebody's professional, you know, in inverted commas, opinion. —Daria Oglethorpe
Industry Feedback—Lagging & Exclusion	This is a brutal industry… And I think because people only see the big positive things, especially on social media when it's just everyone's highlight, it's hard to tell people like, you just get the shit beat out of you in this industry. Mostly it's rejection and mostly it's like falling on your face, and then when you do get that one thing, that's what all that hard work has been for. —Katie Al-Jamil And every now and then I did have the panic of, 'I'm not keeping up' or I'd see people that started with me and they'd be professional or would be doing a show at Edinburgh. And I think it's natural for us to compare ourselves and it's more so now… with social media, you know, Instagram, You Tube, just being able to share your videos and build some platform like that, it's now easier to compare people and their progress… I think falling behind is a big part of how people feel in the circuit… Yes, I guess the way that I'd describe it is doing it because you want to be somewhere else, you want to be further along, it means that you're not enjoying the moment and if you're not enjoying the moment, comedy can be quite brutal. —Ivy Booker I think women in the circuit fight harder to get the gigs…To start to try and be a female comedian, you have to really know what you're trying to do, and really know that the stuff will work… to be acceptable as a female comedian you have to be so good…You just have to absolutely nail it before people are like, 'Aren't they good?' Whereas if a bloke does one great joke, it's, 'That was amazing!' Ya. Stop praising the boys. Forever. Is my mantra. —Bethany Valentine We were supposed to write sketches and bring them back. The males wouldn't show up and they honestly

most of the time wouldn't have anything written…the women were showing up and we'd have like three or four different scripts and almost everybody was part of them…. What ended up happening is that the director made sure that the show was an equal representation of the men's material and women's material, and some of the men's material frankly was just not the same quality we had put together because we had put a lot of work in to it. It was very discouraging… and all the women felt that way. Backstage whenever the men's sketches would go on, the really low-quality ones that got put into the show in place of our hard work, together we would sort of be rolling our eyes and being annoyed with the situation. —Sia Muñoz

There is definitely an element of exclusion and it definitely feels like…if you weren't new and shiny, they weren't very interested… You get that a lot. People that think they are too good or people think they are better than you or some people think they're too important to talk to you. Some people don't want to talk to you. They might have a friend there and they are just like, I'm talking to that person, that's who I know. —Sam Carter

I'm quite aware that a lot of people already doing comedy are already friends. So sometimes when you go to a gig and loads of people know each other, it can feel a bit like, I'm excluded, I don't really know how to start chatting to them when they're already really close. I don't like that to so much, but then again, I think if I was in that circle, I would think that too. It's just because I'm outside, looking into it at the moment. —Nicola Trent

I think it was to do with me. Things were obviously happening and people were like, 'You're doing amazing, it's great, you're really successful' But I felt like, 'No, nothing's happening.' But I don't know whether that's because I put onto my shoulders, 'I want to be the best' and 'Why aren't I there yet?' —Viola Bell

Then it was like, 'Oh, actually it's going a bit slower than I thought.' Then maybe dah, dah, dah… I mean I nearly did like an 'Oh no!' —Calinda Jeffries

You have to have like real thick skin to be able to deal with people saying like, 'You look a mess' or what men say to you after gigs. Just men, especially male comedians coming up to you after gigs and being like, 'Oh I didn't know you did comedy' or just like saying things that are clearly slights against you. The worst one is when people come up to you and go, 'Well how do think that went?' after you do a gig, and it's like, 'Why are you asking me?' —Sadie Curtis

Table 5.2: Representative Quotes—Feedback Management

Second-order themes	First-order themes	Representative first-order data
Selective Retention	*Selective Believing*	There's a review that I got after this comedy competition from a huge comedy critic that just blew me away, and I was like you have real concrete evidence from somebody who watches comedy all the time. That for me was huge. —Gina Lancaster I did a comedy award competition and didn't make it through. And I felt like, 'Oh no! I'm never going to make it!' But then after doing lots of crying… I looked and it, and I was like, 'But actually, I'm so much more qualified than they are on the circuit. I've already got this in the bag.' So I thought I can just carry on doing it, even though I feel a bit like rubbish right now. —Bethany Valentine I wish I could tell younger comedians to not listen to older comedians… there are people that are two years older than you, that are *only* two years older than you, yet they are like total heroes to you and there's nothing that they can do wrong in your eyes. There are a couple of comedians who… I really, really admired… And now I just think, 'They were such losers—why did I even care?'… mingled with comedy and with admiring them and thinking that they were really creative or much more talented than me, now I've realised they were just more confident and just a bit older and I was just totalling allowing them to tell me what to do and to patronise me. —Hilda Avis Yes, men will go, 'Oh yes, you said that, and then did you think about finishing it off in this way?' Or 'You could have said that' and I'm like, 'Who the hell do you think you are?'… That's a relatively common experience, not every gig but quite a lot of gigs. I mean it's a bit more of a fine line with the other acts because sometimes you get other acts who come up with a real genuine spirit of collaboration and want to say, I really love that bit, what about expanding it in this direction or whatever. And it's a bit easier to take from somebody who's been gigging for five years than it is from a member of the audience. But also, there's something about the feeling of the comment I suppose. So you do get other acts who will say something to you and you just feel patronised rather than supported and encouraged. I don't think it's a unique experience, but I don't know if it is something that a man my age would experience. —Kris Rader I had a really good gig just before Christmas… Everyone was really merry, and it just went really well, and I was like, 'Oh wow, this is great.'… "I actually played the same gig, doing the same set later and it was the opposite. The New Year had gone by, everyone was still hung-over, no one was drinking and that was a bit of a slump. But it was nice because I'd done the Christmas one and I wasn't upset. I thought, 'Well, if you'd been here on the 23rd of December!' —Madison Abernathy

Selective Remembering	There's this voice in you that's like, 'You're shit' the whole time. 'You shouldn't do this, you're shit.' But I've been reading about trying to visualise success and it's like, 'No, I'm not shit and these are the reasons why.' I try and visualise all the credits I've got and all the good things that have happened and I try and see them. I had a friend try and teach me that. Before, I was really nervous about gigging. He was like, 'You've got all these things, think about them and ground yourself in that. It's a thing that a lot of people don't have; just try and make them part of your psyche before you go out'… that has definitely pushed me through trying to do comedy. —Sadie Curtis It was like the best gig I've ever done and I got a lot of really, really good feedback from it and people were saying it was really good. And even now when I mention it, they are like, 'Oh yes, that was a really, really good gig'… And I think it's that. Just the gig I keep in my mind and I'm like, 'Okay, if I can be that good, then I can do that again in the future, I can replicate it' and that has been driving me. I think if I hadn't had that, I wouldn't have been so sure that I could do well at some point, so yes, I think that was quite an important one… If I ever do badly and I'm worried like, 'Am I actually even good at this? Why am I doing this?' then I'll remember like how good it felt to do a really good gig and that will keep me going. That is encouraging to me. And yes, it was nice to have people all laugh and come up to me afterwards and tell me it was good. Yes, that was good. I got into the semi-final of a competition… which felt really good and it felt nice to be validated, it felt like that. Yes, so those two instances. —Nicola Trent I have a list of all my gigs. Yes, I keep a spreadsheet… I realised that I would need something that would sort of keep me going, but it is very difficult to quantify progress in certain ways. You reach a point maybe where you get reviews and…you get some praise from an audience member or you get this and that, but you need some drive to keep you going. So I made this spreadsheet of all my gigs, so then I can write notes and say what's good and what's bad and really be specific about what is working and what's not… I've had to really pull myself, like almost pull my face to the evidence and say, 'You've done the work, you've done this, recognise that you're good, that saying that you're good is not you being egotistical. You've done the work to make it happen, good job.' —Gina Lancaster There is nobody up there to help you if you fail, and so you have to develop that kind of thick skin where somebody says ah do you know your set was rubbish, you have to turn around and be like no, I'm funny, bye. —Hayley Vickers Ignore the arrogant people, the people that think they can tell you stuff. You will learn. If something is obvious to learn about a gig or about performing or writing, you will learn it with enough experience and you don't need someone who's two years older than you to tell you exactly how the world works, because they won't have it right. —Hilda Avis

	Selective Associating	That's why I try to curate the people that I really know and trust and that motivate you to also doing it, because you can see them struggling and you're like, 'No, it's not just me that's doing this.' —Sadie Curtis They might be giving you criticism for the right reasons and they might be giving you good criticism for the wrong reasons, and you have to be really careful about who you allow into that inner circle of having influence over you. —Zelda Sampson I quit comedy after about a year or so because I didn't necessarily have a community, or I didn't think it did. And only now do I know who my allies are, who do I go to talk to after something terrible happens or who's my support system within comedy, who are my allies. I know who those people are now. But when I was starting out, gosh, I didn't and it takes, yes, I didn't really have much clarity. —Gina Lancaster
Threat-Reducing Reappraisal	*Framing Invalidation as Impersonal*	There are so many other things involved in getting stuff on telly. You know, it isn't just like the funniest thing and it's subjective anyway. Whereas at a gig if it's funny, people will laugh—the biggest laugh of the night will be when the room is at its most united. You can't really get away from it, it just is what it is. Whereas that meritocracy doesn't translate to the industry TV-wise, because it's famously complicated, trend-obsessed, nepotistic, there are so many things going on, so many gates between. Whether or not you look right or whether or not you're considered the right type of thing, there are so many other layers involved. So yes, I think it kind of makes you resilient a bit more, a bit more philosophical probably. —Brooklyn Havemeyer When I first started, I was like, 'Oh man, they're not laughing at me, they hate me, I'm not funny, I'm not good at this.' Then it was like no, that's ridiculous. It's this negative thought pattern, and it really is just practice and getting up and doing it over and over… a quiet audience doesn't mean they hate you. A quiet audience could mean it's Wednesday at midnight and everyone in here woke up at seven o'clock this morning and they're just not laughing out loud. Or a quiet audience could mean hey, you know what, maybe they don't love that joke, but that doesn't mean you are bad at this or that you're a bad person. —Katie Al-Jamil When you go to stand-up, you basically have to develop a shell because you're just up on stage, it's just you. If anyone criticises your act, they can't be criticising anyone else. —Hayley Vickers And because it's so deeply personal, you know, you're standing on stage by yourself, usually with nothing else, you know, you've got to be quite careful with it and the expectations you've got in yourself. —Ivy Booker With some competitions and stuff like that, they put through people that they think will be famous, because they want to be successful themselves. So it's not necessarily putting through the funniest or the cleverest or anything like that, you're putting them through, you know, you're putting through the one you think is going

		to be most successful. So it's not necessarily the best one, it's the most marketable. The most marketable, the person that fits in the group. —Grace Ferrino It's just people…people who are in commissioning roles will pay for the kind of comedy that they find funny and all of that can ride on whether you're good at socialising at three o'clock in the morning or not. It can be whether you have a good PR agent, it can be whether there's buzz, it can be any number of things that have nothing to do with how funny you are or how talented you are or how much potential you have, or even whether there is an audience for your work. —Arielle Francis
	Framing Invalidation as Universal	It's still a dicey thing to do. It's an entertainment career. This is what it is, right? The entertainment industry is hard… and that is a universal unbiased struggle. It is just hard, hard work. You really want to like get that first-rate job out the get-go and it is tough to do. —Addie Winters I held Joan's story in my heart when I saw many of my peers and even men who started comedy after I did get their own TV shows or start selling out comedy shows on the road while I still struggled to get noticed. Joan was funny, wildly originally, indefatigable, and she couldn't get noticed for over a decade? Maybe, just maybe, Joan's story was my story too. —Jen Kirkman (Kirkman, 2016: 220)
	Framing Invalidation as Developmental	It is one of those things that you could only get good at by being bad at. —Arielle Francis I think you only learn from mistakes. —Brooklyn Havemeyer

Table 5.3: Representative Quotes—Recalibration

Second-order themes		Representative first-order data
Redefining Aims	*Diversification*	As long as I can spend my time writing, and touring, and performing, and doing the comedy I'm doing for some money. The money isn't why I do it, obviously. That would be foolish… But as long as I'm doing that, then I'm doing what I want to do. —Kerry Iverson For me, the definition of success would be able to have the lifestyle that I have now, I mean it may be a bit bigger place at some point and maybe, you know, a different car for us or something, but if I could maintain this, if I could keep making money doing some sort of live thing, whether it be radio or just if I could keep physically doing live shows, I would happily do that. If I could just maintain my life at a, you know, modest or whatever and not be in debt and strictly do that, to me that would be a success… So to me, I guess practically, there's the practical dream and then there's the fantasy dream. So practical dream, if I can maintain this at the work level I have now, I would be very happy. If that was what my life got to be, great. —Celeste Arietta Even if I knew now that I would always have to supplement an income I got from comedy, from working. Even if I didn't earn my income all from comedy and I knew now that I never ever would and it would just always be as it is now, would I still do it? Yes, I would. That makes it easier to keep doing it I think. —Sarah Jenkins I would like to be a bit further along than I am now. But if it came to it and it wasn't my wildest dreams, I think I'd be fine. —Elizabeth Martin I do struggle with feeling that I haven't been successful and I'm not going to be successful in terms of the broader industry and that kind of wider view—but then again, you know, I've done a month at Edinburgh which a lot of people haven't done. —Kris Rader
	Mastery	At a very granular level, I feel like a success where I've done a gig and people have laughed and also sometimes come up to me afterwards and said oh yes, I hadn't thought about that before or, you know, I really liked that or that was different or whatever. In a very immediate way that is when I feel successful as a comedian. Then I think I can quite easily fall in to the trap of feeling that success in a much broader kind of way as a comedian is about you're getting paid gigs, you're regularly gigging, you've got an agent, you're doing an hour at Edinburgh and not twenty minutes... but because they just seem so completely—there is a

	bolt line between my experience and that, in the sense that I would have to totally change my lifestyle to get over. It is quite easy to feel very excluded from that success I suppose. But yes, so I think it is possible for me to feel successful on my own terms in the moment. —Kris Rader It's not so much about whether you're funny or not. It is whether you can be funny consistently in different rooms because every different room is a different problem, every different night is a different audience, so you have to be able to think your way around those spaces and moderate your energy. A lot of comedy is crowd control or sort of feeling the crowd and going with their mood or changing their mood. So comedians are fascinating, they walk in backstage and say what are they like and they will be able to describe the vibe geographically. There is a hidden side over there, these guys aren't laughing, these guys are with their wives, you know, that, you can just feel it. You can't really see the audience, they're in blackness, but you can feel it and it's very distinct and it's something that every comedian understands and has learnt, any decent comedian. —Arielle Francis The whole reason I am fascinated by comedy and keep coming back to it, it's because I want to be a shit-hot joke writer… at the heart of it we all want to be seen as good at what we do and a comedian is good at what they do if they write shit-hot jokes or their persona is just funny, but that's something to be worked on… my passion for all of this, my interest in all of this, is at the heart of it being like, 'How do I get really fucking good at this?' And I love that and that is a joy because when it works, man, there is no feeling like it. —Gina Lancaster
Personalisation	Being true to what you think is good and being proud of the work you're putting on. Not because it's doing well, but because it's something that you like, and think is funny and appeals to the people who are going to like that. I think playing to *your* audience instead of just *the* audience, so creating content for people who will appreciate it for what it is as opposed to trying to make something that isn't quite for you but would be more popular. That sort of artistic integrity in a way, but not in an exclusionary sense, not to make content that only like seven people who are in-the-know will get. But just to have faith in the stuff that you're doing and it's different to what other people are doing and they're more successful, that's okay because that probably will be the case. Yes, but like being able to find peace in that and see that as success. —Madison Abernathy And also when people say, 'What if somebody hates your show?'—that's okay. It's not for everybody. Not everybody is going to like every piece of art they see. It doesn't invalidate my show, nor does it invalidate that person's opinion—it's fine. They'll see another show next time, they won't come to my show. It's cost them the price of a ticket to find out that they don't like my show. —Zelda Sampson

		And so just being more authentic to yourself and really trying to just build up your own voice and your own opinions and realising that not everyone's going to like that. When I'm talking about abortion, I'm going to lose some people, not everyone's going to love that. —Katie Al-Jamil
	Integration	And not to lose sight of what is important in life, which is being happy. So I'm always just like 'am I happy right now?' and if the answer is yes, then you know, that's enough in a way. And I used to be a little—like I know comedians who are very, like 'It's all or nothing, and I've got to get to the top'. But they're always very anxious and focused on the wrong stuff... I'd rather be not as successful but saner than that. —Elizabeth Martin Your childhood pinups tend to be the shiny ones, and that changes when you get older and realise…they were basically having to do what they were told. And they are people who have spoken in their later life about feeling quite powerless or not wanting to do certain things. And you think, 'Oh. It's glam and it's funny but they weren't massively happy,' so that kind of thing maybe shifts… I've gained new heroes from people I've met who are not famous but are just consistently doing really interesting stuff and making it work. So even if they're not making a huge amount of money, they're doing what they want and they're having a nice time and they're not twats. That's the other thing, is seeing what it can do to people. Now my heroes are more on a personal level, in terms of they've stayed absolutely lovely and they're generous and they send the lift back down and try to help people. —Brooklyn Havemeyer This goes to my personal attitude towards assessing life… with regards to what's sustainable and what's healthy. —Daisy Harding I often look at comedians who do get on [Live at the Apollo] and the drive they have and I think god, if I had one eighteenth of the drive that that psychopath has to achieve that in the timeframe that they've set, who knows, I could be Prime Minister of the country, but I like to enjoy life. —Celeste Arietta
Rewiring Possibility	*Accumulating evidence*	You can't just say you believe you're a comedian, you've got to show the evidence. Which to be fair, prior to that I thought I could be a comedian but if you've never sort of had anyone apart from you and then people being polite to you at gigs, telling you you're good, it feels like you don't really have proof. Doing well and things like that is the kind of evidence that you can put in an email if you're trying to get booked at a club and then they will actually pay attention to that, because… that means that someone else has vetted you and thinks you were good enough to be there… it's evidence from other people who don't need to say that you're good, that you are good. —Clara Allen

	When people started believing in me, I was like, they might be right. People that I cared about, people whose opinion mattered to me, would say things like, 'Grace, you've got a chance' 'I think you could make it' and stuff like that. And then other people, people that I've never seen before at the shows, coming in and going, 'You're going to be on TV,' and they wanted to take pictures of me. And they're like, 'Can we take a picture? You're going to be famous'… when they started believing in me, then I started believing in myself. I was like this could happen; these people believe in me, they think I'm good enough, maybe I am. —Grace Ferrino
Normalising	I was surrounded by quite a lot of boys who really wanted to like be stand-up comedians and they were like, 'Oh well if you're good at it, why are you not doing it?' I said oh, I didn't even think that I could be. It wasn't even a thought that I could actually do something with this. Like it was just me messing about having fun, but they were like, 'Oh no, we're all doing this because we want to like have a career', and I was like, 'Oh yes, I can do that also, I can do that.' So yes… I started doing a bit more stuff then. —Nicola Trent I don't think I would have been able to imagine it as the reality that I do, if it hadn't been for the group of people that I work with. I mean, most importantly we're very good friends, so there's a support network and we can trust each other. That's not to say there aren't frustrations. That happens. But as a group, I think we've taken something that we enjoy and made something out of it. —Kerry Iverson I just saw other people doing it on stage, and I thought I could do that. So I think it must have been when I was more using social media and I was more watching things, dreaming things. It sort of crept in through the side… watching other women doing comedy, and then seeing some women doing comedy really well. And I do remember the first lass I saw smash it… I was crying with laughter, at an open mic night in some basement in London… and that brought into focus all the other female entertainers and comedians that had been there in my sort of peripheral vision… And you know, you don't have to be a sort of twenty-year-old boy in a shirt from New York to be a comedian. So maybe it wasn't that I hadn't seen it, but the fact I hadn't recognised it as female comedy, and it just brought back things. Yes, I think once I realised it was possible, then I could see other influences and joy and look for female comedy. Certainly, I do go around with my blinkers on quite a bit. —Ivy Booker
Detailing	The first time I did a gig that wasn't a university gig… that was when I felt like, 'Okay, this is proper work.' Like, actually, it's not a completely closed door. And I think I thought 'it should be harder than it is'. I'd assumed that the standard is much higher for you to be able to get in. But actually you can be quite practical, you can do some quite nice gigs. So that was, that was when I first kind of thought, 'Hey, actually, this is a possibility.' Rather than being a dream, or 'if I try hard for six years, and write a good stand-up set…'—actually it was, if you are inherently just quite nice, and likeable, and friendly, you can just say things… and just have a nice time. Actually, you don't have to be a genius. So yes, the first time I did a professional gig, I

		thought, ‘This is a thing I could do.’ —Bethany Valentine Being able to see someone that was like my hero, it was hugely motivating and getting to see that lifestyle and stuff like that was really cool, because I’d never really got a vision of that before and it was like really cool to have a window in to like—this is what your life could be like if you work really hard at this and if you play your cards right or whatever… seeing how it all works and stuff… it was just cool to see that and to witness a world that I wouldn’t have dreamed that I’d have been allowed in at any point. So that was pretty life-affirming, just to go out there and have that experience. —Sadie Curtis I would not have known where to start in comedy. I wouldn’t have known; I wouldn’t have had the confidence to do it… I had no clue about it. So I went to do a twelve-week course, and it was really good fun. At the end of it we did a showcase gig to friends and family, but I was like, ‘Oh maybe this could be my job.’ So I did my first gig before the end of the course and I was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And then I really enjoyed it and I started gigging and did a load of competitions and I did quite well in all of them. —Rachel Fairburn
	Humanising	I read Tina Fey’s book, Bossy Pants, the year it came out. I had already been a big Tina Fey fan, 30 Rock was my favourite TV show of all time… And the book went into how she became a comedy writer, and I was like, ‘Oh, it’s not just like she was born Tina Fey.’ She was born really funny, but she also grew as a person. She was this normal nerdy theatre kid, like I saw myself, and then found this thing that she was really good at… You need innate talent, but you also can learn… I think when I realised that it was better than being like, just go be a comedian, go do comedy. —Amy Arlington
Reactance rewards	*Rivalry*	I think a lot of people in the industry were not very supportive at the beginning because they didn’t think I’d last. My attitude was…carry on and prove the bastards wrong. Because that’s the only way you can get them and annoy them, is just to carry on regardless. —Yolanda Mary Jefferson All the knockbacks we’ve had and people saying terrible things like that, obviously, my comedy partner and I are quite similar in that we’re the kind of people who that just makes us want it more. That makes us want to be able to go fuck you—you were wrong, and we are good. We’re proving we’re good and you missed out. So it’s been a motivator, you know. —Gemma Evanston A compère introduced me to the stage as a local stripper… Especially being quite early on, I didn’t have the required confidence or material to be able to do him down at that point... Now it is a really important bit of my set. It’s a real ‘Agnes wins against the baddie’ kind of thing… But that kind of stuff can bring you down. Well it used to. I used to think, ‘Oh god, I don’t know if I can compete’—but it kind of drives you on as well,

	doesn't it? —Agnes Finch I definitely do feel like a bit more of an amateur, but it could be kind of cool if I prove them wrong. —Imogen Baker
Defiance	After I graduated, I sat down with my mum and she was like… 'improv takes up too much of your time,' like, 'comedy takes up so much of your time, if you're not going to do it for a career, you need to stop it.' And I was like no, fuck you… at that stage it did formulate in my head… I really realised that I had to make an active choice and make huge steps towards pushing myself towards doing it as a career. —Hayley Vickers
Voicing	I think comedy is uniquely accessible to people with different stories because literally all you need is a microphone… So a lot of my comedy focuses on my experiences of being a mother and a single parent and the kind of structural disadvantages around that… However the career structure is uniquely closed to those things because it is still about who is commercial, who's going to pull in a hundred and fifty people in a night and sell drinks at the bar. I think it's really critical that we are reaching that point where people are starting to think about comedy slightly differently because it means that hopefully some of those other stories and some of those other narratives and some of those untold experience, people will begin to see them as more commercial. —Kris Rader
Trailblazing	I think women have got to a point, female comics have got to a point where they're like, 'Do you know what? I'm sick of this shit now.' We need to stick together, and we are going to help each other out. —Felicity Robinson

Table 5.4: Representative Quotes—Motivational Resolve (Part 2)

Resilience	*Patient Persistence*	I have a video game mentality. I have that with a lot of my stuff, so I have to complete, I have to get to the next level, right, I have to be the boss and I have to win the game… I am like that with comedy. I have to get to the next level. —Gemma Evanston I have got tunnel vision. I'm very sort of relaxed about things. I'm very patient... I'm very much like, it's a long process, it is a marathon, not a sprint… I think because I've got that attitude, it's meant that I'm quite resilient. —Carly Knight Sometimes people that run these nights and that run these clubs and competitions and stuff like that, they have an idea of comedy. Rather than letting the comedy flourish itself, you know, have all the different people on and see, see, give people a chance, they want their idea of comedy to flourish on that stage and if you ain't in that idea, then you ain't getting on there and that is that. And also these people often know lots of other people on the circuit, other promoters, so they can mess things up for you and stuff like that. But I don't let that scare me. I'm like, 'I know my route, I know my path, you're not going to stop me. I don't give a shit if you own half the clubs in London, I'm not going to stop going. You do you, and I'll do me, and that's it. I ain't going to stop because of you. I've been through far worse. —Grace Ferrino I knew it was going to be hard work, and lots of failure and things like that… And I also knew it would take a long time, so I just kept doing it. —Elizabeth Martin I think it's a marathon not a sprint, isn't it? Just because you're doing well now and winning everything, it doesn't mean that you'll keep at it. So I'm not too bothered about it if I'm not getting stuff. I'm like okay, well I'll do it when I'm ready. But yes, I think I'd rather move slowly. As a friend says it, 'Move quickly by going slowly' and make sure that you're doing really well at what you're doing at the minute and that'll move you forward quicker. —Mary Clarkson
	Adaptability	If you're getting worse, if you're stagnating, you've just got to work harder. —Carly Knight
	Self-Confidence	I can do it. This is going to sound like properly like mental, but I have felt a bit like no doubt that I can do it… I just thought, I need to get over there. —Calinda Jeffries
	Feedback-Resistance	When you've done so many gigs, you stop caring as much. A bad gig doesn't get to you like it

		would when you first started. It's like, 'Oh, I'll get over it.'… So I like the fact that I don't care as much about the audience reactions. —Lucy Montgomery My bottom line with reviews is they are one person's opinion, and I don't really give a shit, good or bad. It is nice to have a good review. A bad review, it's annoying because it might affect your audience numbers, but I really don't care about those opinions… you just have to find a way to deal with it. I had a really hilarious moment with a reviewer in Australia a few years ago. So the show I was doing that time, I won some award, I think it was Best Performer, and after the award ceremony this woman came up to me and she said congratulations and I said thank you so much. And she said, 'Oh, I reviewed your show, so I am really glad you won the award.' I said, 'Oh thank you. Thanks for coming to the show, did you enjoy it?' And she said, 'Did you not read the review?' … and I said no, because the review is not for me, surely, it is for the audience to decide whether they want to see the show or not, that's what you write the review for, it's not meant for me. And her face just sort of, and then it occurred to me. I went oh my god, I've just somehow un-validated you, because you wanted the power… and I said well thank you for giving me a good review, I'm glad you enjoyed the show and obviously people came and saw the show because of the good review, so thank you very much. But I think I did kind of puncture quite unintentionally, that was not my intention at all. So then there was also a part of me that was like you shouldn't be punctured by that, you are writing your review for the audience, surely, you are not writing it for me. I am the performer, once I've done it, it's gone. —Zelda Sampson If you put something out there, particularly the riskier it is, the more dangerous it feels and if it works, it works so well, and if it doesn't work, you die. There is something pleasurable about that as well because you get to die without actually dying. You get this feeling of absolute shame and despair, and then you are fine, and nothing happens, and that in itself is either a very addictive feeling or a big red flag and you could very quickly—I know people who have quit comedy after dying badly. —Arielle Francis It is being vulnerable and going out and just taking whatever gets literally thrown at you sometimes. And then I suppose also just the resilience… I think it has made me more philosophical… You kind of have to just go 'Okay, that is the industry'… I think it kind of makes you resilient a bit more, a bit more philosophical probably. —Brooklyn Havemeyer It's a really unwelcoming thing, so you kind of have to have a thick skin and be okay with having people not like you. —Celeste Arietta.
Bitterness	*Despondency*	I see a lot of comedians that are miserable and they chase and they chase and all they want is fame

	and fortune, all they want is Live At the Apollo and if they never get that, then they've failed and then are like ooh. There's only so many people who get that. —Celeste Arietta A lot of people I know that have started comedy around the same time as me and then they quit, I think they quit because they wanted things to happen a lot sooner than they were happening… people can be very fragile and let themselves be bitter. —Carly Knight Sometimes it can make you miserable. —Lucy Montgomery
Defensiveness	I had more success when women were less popular in comedy than I have now because I am the wrong kind of woman. Whereas before it was a meritocracy, if you are funny, you are funny. —Leticia Ruiz Doing comedy shouldn't be down to you being better at admin, it should be down to you being good at comedy and obviously you have to be a certain level of good to get gigs booked and stuff like that. But I think like opportunities with things like BBC Three and stuff like that who do online stuff, I think it's nicer if it's just clear how you get that, and then you can try and get it and if you do, it's because you wrote something funny enough and if you don't it's just, you know, that's unfortunate, they've got loads of applications. But if it's just that the only people getting it are the ones who know the secret person to email, that feels a bit unfair. —Clara Allen
Jealousy	The other thing that comics have got to be weary of, which is why I don't really follow many comics online, is not getting bitter. You get a lot of bitter comics. —Yolanda Mary Jefferson So many of them will keep it a secret but they have got famous parents and that is why they can do it… there is a lot of that happening in the industry, and I feel like they should declare it… There are people that I know who have got famous parents or whatever, that didn't really gig much at all but because they have the money to hang out with the higher-up comedians going to gigs and stuff, it just means that they get ingratiated into the industry a lot quicker than other people do who are more on the outskirts. So it is really weird watching that happen. There are a lot of people with famous parents with a lot of money coming in and being able to get super successful super fast, not necessarily because they are funny or on their own merit, but because they know who to work with, they've already got the contacts… When I started out, I wouldn't have a clue where to start and having those kinds of things really does give you a huge leg up in the industry that lots of people don't have. There is a huge disparity and it's happened a lot like with people that I've met. —Sadie Curtis

FIGURES

Figure 1: Coding Example—Moving from Raw Data to Second-Order Codes

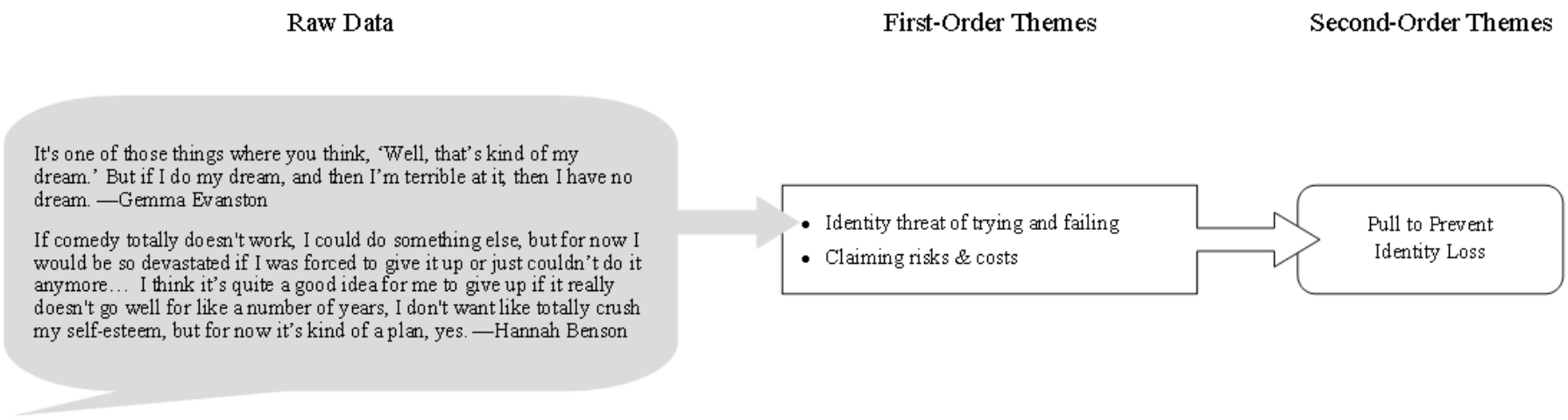
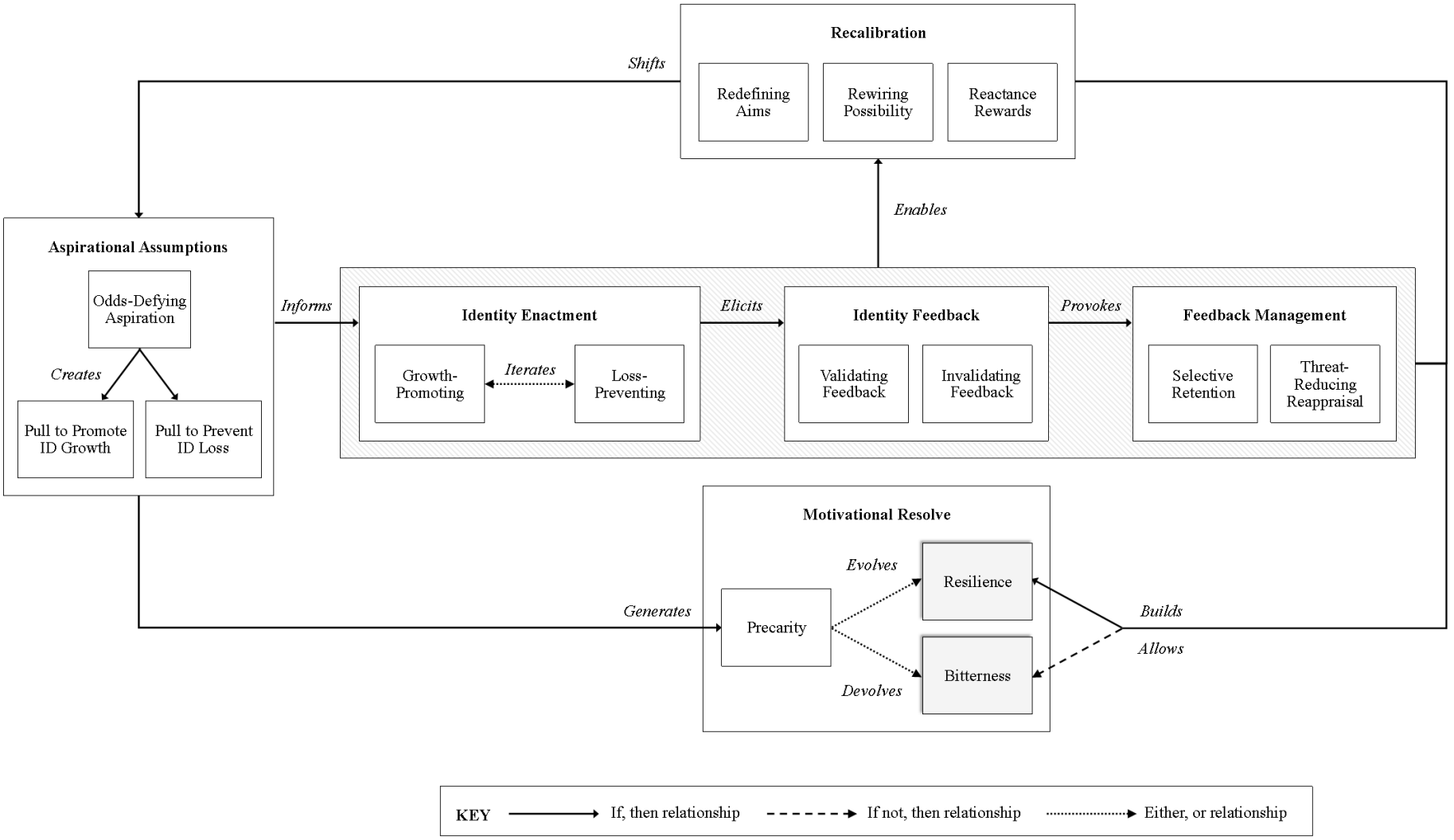


Figure 2: Theoretical Model of Odds-Defying Aspirers' Professional Identity Development


Recalibration
Redefining Aims
Rewiring Possibility
Reactance Rewards
Shifts
Enables
Aspirational Assumptions
Odds-Defying Aspiration
Creates
Pull to Promote ID Growth
Pull to Prevent ID Loss
Informs
Identity Enactment
Growth-Promoting
Iterates
Loss-Preventing
Elicits
Identity Feedback
Validating Feedback
Invalidating Feedback
Provokes
Feedback Management
Selective Retention
Threat-Reducing Reappraisal
Motivational Resolve
Generates
Precarity
Evolves
Resilience
Devolves
Bitterness
Builds
Allows
KEY
If, then relationship
If not, then relationship
Either, or relationship

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Guide to Interview Questions

Questions labelled by respondent groups, as follows: A = Aspiring Comedians | B = Early Career Comedians | C = Established Comedians | D = Ex Comedians | E = Everyone

Introduction Questions

First, I just want to **get to know you** a little bit.

1. (E) Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background – just to give me an overall picture of who you are

   Probes:
   - Where are you from?
   - What's your educational and work background? In what fields or areas have you worked and/or studied? What roles have you held along the way?
   - Have you gone through any major career transitions up to this point?
   - Tell me about what you currently do. Where do you work?

2. (E) Tell me about your work in comedy – just so I've got an initial idea of how you fit in the world of comedy, and where you are on your professional journey

   Probes:
   - Tell me a little bit about your work – what genres, topics, and styles interest you?
   - What different roles have you had in comedy?
   - How long have your worked with your current show/tour?

Central Questions

Next, I'd like to talk about your experience **aspiring to become** a comedian.

3. (E) When did you first consider becoming a comedian?

   Probes:
   - What was it that attracted you to a career in comedy?
   - How important was (is) it to you to become a comedian?
   - Was there a particular event, moment, or person that triggered or crystallized this aspiration? If you can, try to describe the details of this experience.

4. (E) What sort of picture did you (do you) have of what you would be like in the future as a comedian?

   Probes:
   - Has that picture changed or stayed the same over time? How so?
   - Were (are) there individuals in particular that you wanted (want) to be like, as a comedian - where you said (say), I want that to be me someday? Who? Why?

5. (E) Besides comedy, what other career paths did you (are you) consider (considering)?

   Probes:
   - What were (are) your thoughts in terms of deciding which career direction you would (will) take? What drove (will drive) your decision?
   - Were there others who thought you should take another path, outside of comedy?
   - Others I've spoken to have described coming from a family, or a group where they felt like there was a sort of 'default setting' for their future career. Did you ever feel like there was a sort of 'default setting' for your future? What was it?
   - If you weren't doing comedy now, what might you be doing instead?

6. (E) What did you do (are you doing) to start to prepare for a career in comedy?

   Probes:
   - What did you do (are you doing) to try to develop your skills or networks? Were there (are there) particular classes or events you participated (participate) in?
   - What did you (do you) watch or read? Who did you spend time with?

7. (E) How did (do) others respond to your wanting to become a comedian?

   Probes:
   - Was anyone especially supportive of your aspiration? How did they express this? How did this affect you?
   - Was anyone especially unsupportive of opposed to your aspiration? How did they express this? How did this affect you? How did you respond?
   - Who did you tell about your aspiration? Who did you NOT tell? Why?
   - How did those outside of the world of comedy (e.g., co-workers, family) react?
   - How did people inside the world of comedy (e.g., talent bookers, peers) react?
   - How did it feel to talk about this aspiration for the first time?
   - Was there anyone whose response was especially influential?

8. (E) Throughout this journey – so starting early on and tracing until today – how certain were you that you could make it as a comedian? Would you mind drawing it out?

   Probes:
   - Along the way, what has made you more certain that you could become a comedian?
   - Along the way, what has made you less certain?
   - Have you ever doubted whether you could become a professional comedian?
   - Have you ever doubted whether you would make it?
   - We've talked about your dream of becoming a comedian, how clear and strong was that dream across time?

9. (E) What, if anything, did (do) you do to try to build up that certainty? What helped (helps) you to maintain your sense of – 'hey, I can do this'?

   - Did (do) you have any particular mentors or advocates that kept (keep) you going in your hopes of becoming a comedian?
   - What else helped you to keep feeling like you could do it? Things in the environment? Individuals? Relationships?
   - Throughout your journey – what have you done (did you do) to try to hold onto that aspiration – that dream of becoming a comedian?
   - Is there anything you've done to try to overcome those influences that made you less certain?

Next, I'd like to talk about your experience **actually becoming** a comedian. So making that transition in.

10. (B, C, D) What was your path into comedy? What were the important milestones along the way?

    Probes:
    - When did you first start in comedy? What was your first gig? What was your first paid gig?
    - Tell me about a memorable high or low in your path to becoming a comedian.
    - Was there a time when you went from thinking – someday I'll be a comedian, to, now I am a comedian? What happened?

11. (B, C, D) How would you describe your experience becoming a comedian? How easy or difficult was it for you?

    Probes:
    - Were there aspects of getting into the career that were particularly easy/difficult?
    - What do you think would have made it easier to become a comedian?

- If you could describe your path into comedy using a metaphor, what would it be?
- How do you feel your experience becoming a comedian compares to others?
- How, if at all, has pursuing this career impacted your health and/or safety?

12. (B, C, D) Do you feel that becoming a comedian has changed you at all?

    Probes:
    - In what ways? How do you feel about those changes?
    - What impact has this journey had on you?
    - How central is comedy to your sense of who you are? Would you still feel like you if you weren't in comedy?
    - Have you had to make any personal sacrifices to get into or stay in this career?

Next, I'd like to talk about **working in comedy,** and being a comedian.

13. (E)What does it mean, to you, to be successful as a comedian?

    Probes:
    - In what ways do you feel successful or unsuccessful in your career?
    - What does it mean to you to make it as a comedian?
    - At the present moment, do you feel like you've made it? How would you know you'd made it as a comedian?

14. (A, B, C) Do you currently consider comedy to be your full-time job? Is this a goal for you?

    Probes:
    - How long did you (do you anticipate) keep (keeping) a 'day job' before making the leap into doing comedy full time?
    - What proportion of your income comes from comedy? What other sources of income or financial support do you have?
    - Are you currently, or have you previously worked in any other fields concurrently with doing comedy? Do you anticipate doing so in the future?

15. (B, C, D) Do you feel like you 'belong' in the world comedy? Why or why not?

    Probes:
    - Have there been times when this has been different? When has this changed?
    - How would you describe the comedy community?
    - How do you feel about your relationships in comedy?
    - Tell me about your interactions with others in the industry (e.g., talent bookers, agents). What was it like interacting with them as a newcomer? And later on?

16. (B, C, D) How has your material changed or remained the same over the course of your career? And why?

Probes:

- Are there certain subject areas you've avoided in your material? When? Why?
- What are the considerations you make in choosing what subjects or styles of comedy to avoid/include?
- How have you changed as a comedian over time?

17. (E) What sorts of things are on your mind at the present moment, in terms of your work?

    Probes:

    - Are there any particularly important career milestones in your near future or past?
    - What opportunities or threats are you thinking about right now?
    - Do you find your work personally meaningful and engaging? How so?

Closing Questions

18. (E) Tell me about how you see your future. Where do you see yourself in the next year? Five to ten years? (A) Twenty years?

    Probes:

    - What do you see as the next step forward for you? What seems exciting or promising?
    - Do you see yourself being a comedian for the foreseeable future? Why or why not?
    - Are there new roles either within or outside of the entertainment industry that you hope to get into? How clear is your idea of how to get there?
    - How sure are you about the future?

19. (E) Are there any additional questions that you feel we should have asked or ideas that we should have explored as part of this research project?

    Probes:

    - What makes these questions or ideas critical or central, in your eyes?

Snowball Sampling Probe

20. (E) Can you think of anyone else who works in comedy / who used to work in comedy / who is hoping to work in comedy / and also 'happens to be a woman', who might be interested in talking to me about their experiences?

APPENDIX 2: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

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How Women Sustain Future Work Identities in Comedy

Ethics Approval Reference: SSH_SBS_C1A_18_009

1. ***What is the purpose of this study?***

We are conducting a study on the career aspirations of comedians (e.g., sketch, improv, stand-up) who are women. The purpose of the study is to build an understanding of the lived, real-world experience of individuals who aspire to become a professional in the world of comedy, and to understand better what individuals do to be resilient as they start onto and continue on this career path.

The study is geared toward understanding the effort involved in sustaining one's vision of becoming a comedian. In other words, we're hoping to uncover how someone who wants to make it into the world of comedy keeps that aspiration alive over time.

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

As an insider in the world of comedy, your insights and perspectives on the industry, organizations, and challenges that aspiring and current comedians encounter will be valuable to the study. We want to hear your perspectives on this field, and on how newcomers enter this field.

Inclusion requirements: You must over the age of 18 in order to participate in this research study. Please inform the researcher if you do not meet this criteria, or if you have any other questions regarding participation.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

No. You can ask questions about the study before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw yourself from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty, by advising the researchers of this decision. If you choose to withdraw, any data/information you have previously provided will be removed from the study. Participants may also withdraw their data from the study any time after the interview is complete and prior to the publication of the thesis (anticipated in 2021).

4. ***What will happen to me if I take part in the study?***

If you are happy to take part in the study, you will be asked to attend a single visit at the University of Oxford, Said Business School, or at an alternative location to be agreed upon by the participant and researcher, or via video conferencing. Upon arrival, we will talk you through the study procedures and give you a chance to ask any questions. If you are still happy to take part, then you will then be asked to sign a consent form.

If you consent to participate, you will be interviewed. The interviewer will ask you a series of questions about yourself and your professional background, and about your experiences and knowledge of the field of comedy. The interview is expected to last between 30-90 minutes.

With your permission, the interview will be video and/or audio-recorded. The recording will be used to create a transcription of the interview, to ensure accuracy of reporting and to assist in the data analysis process. Recordings will not be used in published material.

5. *Are there any potential risks in taking part?*

Although we consider these risks to be low, you should be aware that the following risks are involved in taking part:

- Loss of time (approximately 2 hours)
- Emotional discomfort during or after the interview

In order to mitigate any potential risks:

- The interview will be conducted in a location with nearby access to food, water, and toilet facilities, as mutually agreed upon by the participant and the researcher.
- You may take a break at any time during the interview, or choose to skip over a question.
- Upon request, you may see the interview questionnaire prior to consenting to participate.
- Upon request, you will be provided with a list of counselling resources for emotional support.
- The researchers will maintain strict respondent confidentiality.

6. *Are there any benefits in taking part?*

The benefit of participating in this study will be the opportunity to reflect on your career field. Your interview is intended to be a positive experience that allows you to share your expertise, and both think back and look forward to the future in your field. Later on, you will also be provided with feedback from the study, to give you an idea of the outcomes of the interviews and the wider research project. There will be no payment for taking part in this study.

7. *What happens to the data provided?*

The research data will be stored confidentially using whole-disc encryption. Your responses will be anonymised or will not be anonymised, according to your request on the consent form. We will ask participants for their permission to use direct quotes. Personal / sensitive data will be stored confidentially using whole-disc encryption and password-protected files. Only the research team and transcribers will have access to research data and to any personal/sensitive data.

All research data and records will be stored for a minimum retention period of 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research. Responsible members of the University of Oxford and funders may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the study to ensure we are complying with guidelines, or as otherwise required by law.

8. *Will the research be published?*

The University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research.

If you agree to participate in this study, the research will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

The research may also be published in academic and practitioner publications, including journals, books, and so on, at the sole discretion of the researcher.

9. *Who is organising and funding the research?*

The research is conducted by Gabrielle Cunningham, a doctoral candidate in Management Research at the University of Oxford, and is jointly funded by Green Templeton College and Saïd Business School. This doctoral research is supervised by Dr. Sally Maitlis, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Leadership and Dr. Sue Dopson, Rhodes Trust Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

10. *Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: SSH_SBS_C1A_18_009).

11. *Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?*

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the relevant researcher Gabrielle Cunningham, Tel: +44 (0)1865 288800, Email: comedy@sbs.ox.ac.uk, or her supervisors Dr. Sally Maitlis, Tel: +44 (0)1865 288915, Email: sally.maitlis@sbs.ox.ac.uk, or Dr. Sue Dopson, Tel: +44 (0)1865 288911, Email: sue.dopson@sbs.ox.ac.uk, who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:
Professor Colin Mayer (Chair), **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk
Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

12. *Further Information and Contact Details*

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

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