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## Situational Comedies and The Changing Narrative

### **Part 1: General Analysis**

#### **History and Social Impact**

A sitcom, situational comedy, is a genre of comedy on television or a streaming service centered on a fixed amount of characters who carry over from episode to episode. The impact of this particular genre mainly contributes to the reflection of the current standards of society.

Although not all sitcoms show every aspect of society, these shows allow their audience to relate to the characters as if they are people that they know personally. Humor is the main reason why people tune into sitcoms. The audience wants to see life's difficulties in an enjoyable way, which may be a contrast to their own realities in the physical world.

The sitcom genre actually started on the radio before it rose to fame on television. Situational comedies began appearing on American television around the 1950s. Sitcoms soon became a staple genre of American TV because it was different from other shows at the time. This is because the character stayed the same, as well as the setting of each episode. The debut of shows like "I Love Lucy" (CBS, 1951–57), was the start of a revolution in American television. The show was setting up new standards. This show was shot on film instead of live broadcasting.

Another difference was the location being somewhere other than Hollywood. It followed a style of a consistent series rather than that of a variety show. However, not everything about sitcoms has a positive effect, still to this day, there is a shortage of diversity in the writer's room. In the following statement, author Felicia D. Henderson conveys the message that the writer's room, no matter the show, is mostly dominated by men. Making the environment very intimidating for a woman to speak up in. "On one of the most wholesome family sitcoms, I encountered daily ribbing by the all-male writing staff for not laughing at every joke about male genitalia."(Henderson 146). Clearly, the lack of diversity amongst writers has created tension even in unexpected circumstances. Men are still the dominating force generally in the film industry, which can hinder progression in storytelling. For example, *Seinfeld*, the famous American sitcom television series, had three men and one woman as the main characters, making the show more relatable to a male audience. Overall, situational comedies have a long history from the early 1950s to present-day, making people from all over die of laughter.

At least once in your life, you have heard of the television sitcom phenomenon, *Friends*. If you have not heard of this show, people might assume that you live under a rock. However, you might know of these other popular sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *That '70s Show*, where the characters are almost like your best friends because you know their deepest secrets. The audience develops a strong bond with them. The emotions that fans have for the cast translate to the actors that play these characters in real life, which paves the way for the actors to get more work. The more work these actors get, the more recognized they become. Some notable actors that rose to fame because of their roles in sitcoms are Jennifer Aniston from *Friends*, Ashton Kutcher from *That '70s Show*, and Steve Carell from *The Office*. Jennifer Aniston played fashion enthusiast,

Rachel Green, in Friends but has many other achievements under her belt. Also, she appeared in many successful commercials and music videos. In total, Jennifer Aniston has appeared in one hundred and twelve films and Tv shows combined. These films and shows include popular titles like Marley & Me, Horrible Bosses, Dumplin', and Murder Mystery. Ashton Kutcher played the dumb pretty boy, Michael Kelso, in That '70s Show that solidify his career as an actor. He has starred in many successful box office films and even produced the hit show Punk'd on MTV. Outside of acting and film, Ashton Kutcher has invested in several high technology startups. Kutcher is also co-founder of the venture capital firm A-Grade Investments. Lastly, Steve Carell played a quirky and idiotic regional manager, Michael Scott, in The Office. Before the success of The Office, Steve Carell had an impressive resume, including the titles Bruce Almighty, Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy, and The 40-Year-Old Virgin. He has been nominated and given several awards for his performances and writing. Steve Carell continues to produce and act in many other classics. There are numerous actors that have come from situational comedies that influenced the world for better, whether it be with the films they acted in or other aspects of life.

### **Discourse Community**

Many diverse groups of people watch situational comedies, but especially teenagers and adolescents. This may not come as a surprise because teens are "always" using their devices to stream, watch, talk, text, and anything you can possibly think of. Adolescents are a target demographic for many streaming services because of this very reason. New sitcoms and other tv shows are being produced for this age group with themes that they can relate to. One of the most thriving streaming services, Netflix, has recently added several exclusive films, and television

series focused on teenagers. Emily Steel, a writer for The New York Times, communicates the message that Netflix is producing new films for their younger audience to gain attention and revenue from these viewers. "Netflix is trying to fill a void that exists broadly, Erik Barmack, Netflix's vice president for global independent content, said in an interview last week. Mr. Barmack said that while a number of traditional and digital outlets offered programming that appealed to younger children and young adults, scripted entertainment focused on teenagers was scarce. 'In the on-demand world, there isn't a place where there is lots of great scripted shows and movies that are providing to that audience,' he said. 'That is both an opportunity and a challenge.'"(Steel). Simply, teenagers are the up and coming audience for situational comedies because they are the future generations of subscribers. Adolescents are a substantial demographic for television in general because of their immense presence. For example, the newest sitcom Big Mouth has themes that feed to the younger audience like, puberty, sexuality, and friendship. Teenagers are going to continue to be a prime audience that sitcoms cater to because they make up most of the viewers, which means more money for the company.

Being a teenager myself, I would say it is a complicated discourse community to be apart at first. The reason for this is because there are goals a teenager has that can be hard to achieve. One main goal is to be popular or known by many because this would mean that you gained social desirability. Having validation from your peers gives you higher esteem and most likely makes others like you too. The way teenagers communicate has a significant effect on your likeability. Adolescents can almost always be seen on their phones. They communicate by texting on various apps like Snapchat and posting about their life on apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The most commonly used method of conversation is through social

media. Social media allows teens to show the best parts of themselves to their friends, which makes them appear more attractive. This is also how teenagers communicate with the outside world because, in some apps, you can block people from seeing things you post. This lets teens control what content the outside world can or cannot see. Language is another significant component in a teenager's life; because of this, it varies between different types of teens. However, some common words shared between these groups would be "lit, canceled, GOAT, OMG, and YOLO." To join this discourse community, all you really need is to be going through puberty, and the rest will follow.

### **Rules and Message**

When it comes to situational comedies, they are formatted differently from other types of shows. For a sitcom to be "right," there are a few rules or expectations that are to be followed. Firstly, sitcoms are centered around the same characters for each episode that are mostly in the same settings. The show is usually a thirty-minute program because of the standard twenty-four to forty-eight hour time span in the storyline. This is implemented because the audience implicitly understands the compression of time because they're probably smart and knowledgeable about television. A perfect example of these rules would be the situational comedy, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. This show has thirty-minute episodes and everything else. Besides having the requirements of a sitcom, it also has been successful because of the nature of the show. This show has plots that often revolve around Larry David's, an American comedian, writer, actor, director, and television producer, many faux past and his problems with certain social conventions and expectations, as well as his annoyance with other people's behavior. The thing that intrigues people would be the dark humor and that life's difficulties can be viewed

funnily and enjoyably. Other shows that send the same message to their audience are shows like *Veep*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia*. Situational comedies vary with their message and theme every show. Still, they all follow the rules in place for sitcoms because, without them, they cannot be a situational comedy.

## **Part 2: Focused Analysis**

If you are interested or want to discover more about sitcoms, it would be wise to research the most popular ones. This will give you insight into the elements of a sitcom that make it more or less successful with the viewers. *Friends* will forever be one of the most prosperous sitcoms in history. The reason was the connection its cast had with the audience. The audience from the past and now can agree that *Friends* had the message of humor in all aspects of life, whether its work life, home life, love life, or social life. This appeals to a lot of viewers because it is intended for mostly everyone. Still, the primary demographic for *Friends* are middle working-class people between the ages of 18-36. This is because the show is primarily about young adults experiencing adult problems. But, the show sold the message that growing up and doing "normal adult things" can still be a fun experience. In all comedies, there are all types of topics brought up and joked about. However, Situational comedies have a habit of crossing the lines to get a joke across. Nancy Rhodes and Morgan E. Ellithorpe, authors in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, communicate the message that sitcoms can promote false realities with humor. "In addition, humor can reinforce negative stereotypes (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). The mechanism through which stereotypes affect behavior is hypothesized to be the activation of social norms. In particular, humor communicates an injunctive norm that it is acceptable to make light of and trivialize the stereotype topic."(Rhodes & Ellithorpe 361). Plainly, sitcoms can unintendedly use

humor to push stereotypes that negatively affect others. Dark humor is very much associated with sitcoms because it follows daily life, and the negative parts are where the funniest joke comes from.

Sitcoms are very important to me because, in my opinion, I feel they are the funniest shows. This genre of television is the most relatable because it has everything to do with life and allows the audience to reflect on themselves. Viewers can compare experiences and see their unfortunate events as positive because, in the show, the characters get over it and keep pushing after being able to laugh about it. Sitcoms are to the point and can come off as goofy, but sometimes people need that to escape from their reality to see life positively. The elements that make sitcoms a positive in their audience's experience are jokes and humor. A lot of people have a stressful life, and they need time to rest and to laugh on their devices or television while watching their favorite sitcom.

## Works Cited

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