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Research Paper

*“The One About Gender Stereotyping and Lack of Diversity”*: Gender and Diversity Portrayals in Sitcoms in the 1990s and 2000s

In the golden age of sitcoms, a lineup emerged that echoed through living rooms around the world. *Friends, Seinfeld, The Simpsons, The Office, Sex in the City*: these iconic shows were not just television, they were a cultural phenomena, creating laughter for millions and etching unforgettable moments into the collective heart of entertainment history. But, behind the scenes of these beloved sitcoms, a more critical lens illustrates the flawed portrayal of women. Additionally, diversity in the representation of women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities during this time period remained limited in many sitcoms. Episodes during this time featured stereotypical gender roles, usually portraying female characters' storylines centered on romantic relationships and household responsibilities. Additionally, women were portrayed as being only interested in marriage and family, sexualized, and weaker than men. One might expect that media producers, writers, and directors would play a role in addressing these issues, yet as employees of profit seeking media conglomerates, they found themselves contributing to the creation of onscreen content that perpetuates such stereotypes as it is more money making. In the '90s and early 2000s, the portrayal of characters on sitcoms was flawed due to a lack of diversity, the perpetuation of stereotypical, sexist roles, and short sighted media corporations contributing significantly to the production of onscreen content. These dynamics contrasted with the rise of women’s rights and diversity initiatives, creating a strong contrast between the show’s fictional characters and the emerging reality of women and nonconforming cultures. The poor portrayal of characters exerted a negative influence on society by reinforcing regressive norms and limiting the representation of women in various roles.

The dawn of the 1990s originated numerous developments which changed how people viewed women and feminism. Among such developments is Third Wave Feminism. A prominent outcome of Third Wave Feminism was literature which brought a new light to feminism and its intersectionality with one's identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a lawyer and theorist, used the word “intersectionality” to explain the overlap between race, class, gender, etc., and their influence on an individual’s perception and treatment by others. This idea expanded to “intersectional feminism” which encapsulated the numerous ways in which women were oppressed (Alexander). This included ideas of women’s roles extending beyond the traditional norms of raising children and maintaining a household and broadened feminism across diverse, racial, and cultural identities. Third Wave Feminism used the concept of “intersectional feminism” to build a movement far more reaching than those of First and Second Wave Feminism. The flawed portrayal of women in popular sitcoms displayed many sentiments that Third Wave feminism sought to address. To be specific, a lack of diverse feminist viewpoints and a dismissive tone on important issues such as violence against women and reproductive rights illustrates the rising conflict between Third Wave Feminism and popular entertainment(Alexander).

*Friends* and *Seinfeld* are just two of the popular sitcoms of the 1990s. These two shows, along with other popular sitcoms, premiered every Thursday night as part of NBC's lineup. Such sitcoms can be referred to as “situational comedies” which focus on “everyday life humor.” The 1990s sitcom also introduced strong language and more explicit scenes than what had previously appeared on “network television.” Television networks faced backlash over this issue as parents, teachers, and religious groups claimed that such scenes were not appropriate for family television (Allen and Thompson). Shows like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* have significant sexist content. However, they represent an improvement over sitcoms from earlier years. In the 1950s, TV shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *All in the Family, and Gilligan's Island,* had extremely problematic portrayals of women that conform to traditional gender roles and stereotypes. While sitcoms in the 1990s did show progress in presenting women as more empowered, they still portrayed a deeply flawed and inaccurate representation of women. Scenes promoting sexist stereotypes or hypersexualizing women are undoubtedly among those deemed inappropriate for family television. Additionally, the ongoing Third Wave Feminist movement opposed the stereotypical portrayal of women onscreen and demanded a more accurate portrayal of female characters.

Sexism in the 1990s era sitcoms manifests in portraying women as only interested in marriage and family, objectification of women, and characterizing them as weaker than men. One study using Artificial Intelligence to find sexism in media discovered overt sexism in most of the sitcoms that were popular in the '90s and 2000s. For example, in *Friends,* this study, as seen in Appendix A, found that 2.357% of its dialogue was considered sexist (Singh, et al. 183). This means that in a typical 30-minute episode, there would be at least one sexist scene. Considering that *Friends* ranks in the lower part of the top ten for sexist content, this represents a significant sexist element. *Friends* is a sitcom set in New York City in the 1990s. The story follows six mid-twenty-year-old friends as they struggle with jobs, relationships, and family.

In *Friends,* this sexist content manifests with a sexist view of marriage and family. Often the female characters are preoccupied with marriage and family rather than careers and independence. In the episode “The One With All The Wedding Dresses” there is a scene with Monica and Phoebe, two of the main characters in *Friends*, having fun trying on a wedding dress ​​and pretending they are brides. They become very upset as they realize that they are not getting married (“The One With All the Wedding Dresses” 15:38). This episode illustrates the stereotype that women can only be fulfilled and find happiness through marriage and having children. The scene also emphasizes the societal pressure and expectations placed on women to conform to traditional norms of success and happiness, often revolving around marriage and motherhood. Another manner women are minimized is by being considered weaker compared to men. In the *Friends* episode*“*The One with the Football”the friend group decides to play a game of touch football. In this game, Rachel, another main character, is called a “useless girl”, Monica is made fun of for being “like a boy” as she is competitive, and Phoebe flashes her breasts to distract the boys and get a touchdown (“The One with the Football 18:02)”. This episode undermines women's abilities and contributes to the notion that women are inherently less competent or skilled. Additionally, the episode shows that Phoebe can only contribute to the game by sexualizing herself.

Another example of overt sexism is shown in *Seinfeld's* episode “The Implant*”*. *Seinfeld* is another sitcom set in New York City in the 1990s. Taking place almost entirely in Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment, the show is a story of Jerry, his ex-girlfriend Elaine, and his best friend Kramer. In this episode, Jerry meets a woman at his gym and feels compelled to find out if she has breast implants. Rather than ask the woman, Jerry asks Elaine to spy on her in the gym and to determine whether her breasts are real or fake (“The Implant” 2:14). This scene demonstrates the objectification of women by focusing on her physical appearance. Jerry’s objectification of this woman also exemplifies a lack of respect for personal boundaries and the dehumanization of women. While attempting to be funny, the episode highlights the insidious nature of sexist behavior. By reducing the woman to her physical features, Jerry underscores the prevalence of sexism in everyday situations. While the audience may dismiss such behavior as harmless, it contributes to the perpetuation of sexist attitudes. A 2017 Harvard Kennedy School study that is part of the Women and Public Policy program demonstrated that “sexist humor” fosters a social context of tolerance of sexism among men. Additionally, the study showed that in the context of sexist humor, men feel freer to express their antagonism against women through subtle sexist acts as well as sexual violence (Romero-Sánchez, et al. 951).

Additionally, the 1990s and 2000s sitcoms lack diversity by unfairly portraying body type, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. A standard criticism of the series *Friends* features an all-white, straight cast; there was no representation of any lead characters of color or members of the LGBTQ community (DeAngelis 7-8). *Friends* also shows a lack of diversity in body type, for example, in the portrayal of one of the female leads, Monica Geller. Monica is often the subject of body shaming jokes by her friends, especially through flashbacks to her teenage years when she was heavier ("The One with All the Thanksgivings" 7:40). References to “Fat Monica”, “Your fat sister”, and “the Fat Monica Dance” illustrate how Monica’s past weight was central to her character ("The One with All the Thanksgivings" 11:49). These jokes reinforce harmful body image stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards. Ironically, as an adult, the other friends accept Monica precisely because she has become thin and pretty. Flashbacks ridicule her younger self, who exemplifies a more normal beauty standard.

Another example of a sitcom lacking diversity is from an episode titled “Diversity Day” in *The Office*. *The Office* is a sitcom taking place in the fictional Dunder Mifflin office building. The show focuses on the work routine and inter-office relationships of the Dunder Mifflin employees. In this scene, the office staff is undergoing mandatory diversity training, where Michael, the manager, hands out cards with different ethnicities on them. The employees are to then take a card and put it on their forehead and then try to guess their pretend ethnicity by how their co-workers interact with them. When Kelly Kapoor, one of the employees, walks into the room, not even wearing a card, Michael goes hardcore into a thick Indian accent and talks about convenience stores. He gets slapped across the face for it (“Diversity Day” 18:59). Even though this scene presents as a joke in the sitcom, it offers an example of how shows will leverage stereotypes and lack of cultural awareness for laughs. By making fun of Kelly Kapoor’s culture, *The Office* mocks the consequences of such actions and highlights the need for an increased understanding of how the media portrays race and other aspects of inclusion and diversity.

*Friends* did attempt to include diverse characters in a few of their storylines. For example, the Friends episode “The One With The Lesbian Wedding,” featured Ross’s lesbian ex-wife and her partner (“The One With The Lesbian Wedding” 0:44). This episode illustrates an acceptance toward the LGBTQ+ community and same-sex relationships. Likewise, the Seinfeld episode “The Beard” features a gay character who is Elaine’s date for the evening (“The Beard” 1:21). In both cases, the shows focus on homosexual characters and their issues. While the introduction of a person of the LQBTQ+ community does show diversity in the sitcoms, the primary effect is to not take people’s sexuality seriously. In the case of *Friends*, Ross’s lesbian ex-wife becomes a joke on Ross since the other friends accuse Ross of causing his wife’s change in sexuality. In *Seinfeld,* Elaine develops an attraction for her gay date, and tries to get him to “switch teams.” While the inclusion of diverse sexual orientations is a benefit for the shows, the end result is an attempt at humor where people’s sexuality is not taken seriously.

Sitcoms like *Friends* and *The Office* are products of an industry that generates this type of mainstream content. White male-dominated management, risk avoidance, and profit-driven strategies drove the industry's approach to content creation (Shah). At the end of the 1990s, there were only nine corporations (mainly US) that dominated the media world: AOL-Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, News Corporation, TCI, General Electric (owner of NBC), Sony (owner of Columbia and TriStar Pictures and major recording interests), and Seagram (owner of Universal film and music interests) (Shah). This was the continuation of a trend of consolidation of media into fewer and fewer companies. These large media conglomerates were risk-averse and lacked diversity in management and production crews. Focusing on profitable entertainment, the companies would reinforce stereotypical gender roles and avoid shows that were out of the norm. While these big media corporations might argue that they were responding to market demands and consumer preferences, they were effectively creating negative stereotypes. Similarly, a sampling of the top 250 films in 1998 resulted in 91% with no women directors, 82% with no women writers, 52% with no women executive Producers, 32% with no women producers, 74% with no women editors, and 94% with no women cinematographers (Lauzen, 3). These statistics illustrate the male dominance in the industry. A study by the University of Southern California's Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA) states that the industry was a “straight, white, boys' club” (Hoag). In the most egregious example of this white male dominance of the motion picture and television industry, the Academy Awards, considered the most prestigious award in the entertainment industry has nominated less than two percent of women of color out of the 13,252 nominees since 1929 (Smith). This extremely low percentage highlights the persistent challenges faced by women of color in the industry and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

The representation of women in sitcoms during the 1990s and early 2000s was tainted by a lack of diversity, conventional sexist roles, and the effects of regressive media corporations. Because of the representation of women in stereotypical roles, this media reinforced regressive attitudes and had a detrimental effect on society. The sitcoms *Friends* and *Seinfeld* were the most popular shows of their time; however, they exemplified a lack of diversity and sexist viewpoints. With casts that were completely white, and leveraging sexual tropes for comedic effect, these sitcoms were products of a profit-driven and risk-avoidant corporate culture. Additionally, these sitcoms were typical of their era, and they only showcased specific beauty standards. When alternate body types were introduced it was the target of a joke and treated negatively. With the consolidation of major media companies at the time, there was little counterpressure against these conglomerates driving the stereotypical and market-tested sexist viewpoint. This resulted in television and film content that lacked diversity and leveraged stereotypes. By today's standards, TV sitcoms such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld,* and *The Office* are woefully inadequate in the treatment of the challenging aspects of gender, sexual orientation, and women’s rights.

The sitcoms of the 1990s and early 2000s were a staple of Network television and cable television that are being replaced with new technologies such as streaming and social media. These new formats have driven an evolution in how content is created and shared with the general population. As technology progresses, the portrayal of women and diverse cultures is also evolving. The fragmented media of today represents a significant opportunity for telling accurate stories of women and minorities compared to the past. With the crowd sourcing of YouTube short videos, multiple streaming platforms, TikTok, Instagram, and others, content creators can no longer afford to be unfair in their treatment of women, minorities, and diverse characters. Rather than a single gatekeeper installed as a senior manager in a large corporate entity, today’s truth surfaces through the collection of followers and connections on disparate media platforms. The corporate conglomerate of the 1990s no longer can force a sexist or discriminatory narrative. Today’s variety of media and media sources requires the embracing of differences with equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Appendix A



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