

The Use of External Characters to Portray Inappropriate Sexual Behavior in Workplace Comedies

Leigh Welch, Oklahoma State University

Television has become one of the most common past times in the United States with almost 80% of citizens watching on any given day (Krantz-Kent 2018). From 2013 to 2017, individuals 15 years and older spent an average of approximately 2 ½ hours watching television each day (Krantz-Kent 2018). Given television's popularity, extensive reach, and unique platform, television is also an important area for sociological analysis. The influence television has on society contributes to multiple aspects of our lives from norm production to stereotype reinforcement (Montemurro 2003). This includes how we perceive the behavior of others as well as how we perceive we ourselves should behave. In the context of the American workplace, studies have shown that the trivialization of sexual harassment on television may have an effect on how individuals behave at their jobs and how they perceive sexist behavior (Ford & Ferguson 2004). The present study builds on this research and asks, "how is sexually inappropriate behavior portrayed in workplace comedies?" More specifically, we examine how outside or external characters that viewers have little attachment are weaponized in media to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace, and what this may tell us about the writers, the messages viewers receive, and the shows in general?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comedy and the Audience

There is no such thing as "universally funny" when discussing comedy (Friedman, Mills, & Phillips 2011). When attempting to analyze fictitious media, it is important to address audience interpretation and reaction. Existing literature on disposition theory of humor and disparaging humor allows us some insight on audience reactions to comedy. There are numerous factors that have been shown to influence what various audiences find and do not find humorous including variables like class, age, gender, nationality, and even factors as immeasurable as individual personal experiences (Friedman

2011; Mills 2010). Furthermore, authorial intent, despite often being discussed, is not a good way to predict audience perception. For example, attempts at satire often go misinterpreted by audiences who instead believe the shows to simply be praising offensive behavior, thus reinforcing stereotypes (Weaver 2010; Husband 1988). Thus, there is no precise calculation that can be made by comics or writers that will result in every audience finding what jokes they make funny.

However, this is not to say that there are no commonalities among all audiences as there are factors that scholars have identified as being present when viewers take in comedic media. One consistently found was that audiences must approach comedy while in a particular headspace in order to enjoy it (Bryant & Zillmann 2013; Olson 1968; Ford 2000). This headspace must be noncritical and light-hearted because the assumption is that comedy is not serious and is meant in good fun—“it’s just a joke” (Ford 2000; Bryant & Zillmann 2013; Johnson 1990). This also implies the assumption that if audiences are consenting and consciously choosing to watch comedic media, they are either already in or placing themselves in this noncritical mindset.

The various theories of humor can be separated into three humor mechanisms: cognitive, affective, and social/interpersonal mechanisms (Cho 1995). First, cognitive approaches place importance on the incongruity and surprising elements of humor where the audience may be motivated to stay engaged and be humored by the resolution of incongruous or unexpected event (Cho 1995; Davis 1979). In contrast, affective mechanisms focus on physiological arousal and tension as the influencers of perceived humor (Cho 1995). These theories suggest that as audiences strive to resolve perceived tension when viewing media which then affects the humor perceived by the audience. It also theorizes that this humor allows viewers to “escape from strict regulation of affective expressions by social norms” (Cho 1995: 193) and serves as a form of emotional release. This again reinforces the necessity of a noncritical mindset when viewing comedy. Lastly, the social/interpersonal approach to humor, such as disparagement humor and disposition theory, tries to explain humor in context with the social and interpersonal norms that surround it (Cho 1995). All of these theories can be executed in a variety of

ways, such as the use of word play, sexual themes, visual absurdity, sarcasm, nonsensical jokes, and retaliative jokes (Cho 1995). When discussing workplace comedies, each of these different mechanisms and executions are useful to consider when evaluating the role of inappropriate sexual behavior in comedies as they may incorporate all of these in some form in an effort to elicit certain reactions from audiences. Further, the cultural aspect of humor is important in our evaluation as laughter can be interpreted as understanding. By laughing, we say, “I understand and get the joke, so I’m laughing,” and this makes the target of a joke even more so important (Francis 1988). Asking “who are we laughing at?” becomes crucial in understanding the message that is being sent by the joke tellers.

Additionally, humor can play a role in affecting social behavior. Studies examining the use of disparaging humor and disposition theory have shown that a noncritical mindset makes it more likely for sexist jokes to result in an increase in tolerance of sexist behavior (Ford 2000). This result was found specifically when viewers already held prejudiced beliefs about the targeted group, but disparaging humor does have the possibility of creating negative views about the targeted group. In the case of Ford’s study, they found that viewers that were already high in “hostile sexism” became more tolerant of sexist behavior after viewing sexist humor than when they were exposed to neutral or serious sexist comments (2000). “Prejudiced norm theory” has been used to explain this phenomenon by stating that for individuals high in prejudiced beliefs, exposure to disparaging humor about groups they have prejudice towards creates a norm of tolerance for discriminatory behavior by expanding the bounds of acceptable conduct (Ford & Ferguson 2004). In other words, confirmation bias helps these individuals normalize discriminatory behavior as they now feel justified for their beliefs and actions. These viewers perceive this behavior as normal when exposed to disparaging humor, and they use this information to inform how they self-regulate and use it as a guide for social judgement (Ford & Ferguson 2004). This becomes important for the subject of this paper as we can see some of the potential harms to come from making light of certain problematic situations and from utilizing disparaging humor toward particular groups. In the case of inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace, this is important to consider when evaluating

scenes from workplace comedies as they may help normalize problematic behavior in the workplace which can then transcend from fictional to real harm.

Workplace comedies

In light of there being no universal audience, it seems even more clear that the key to creating a successful television show is finding the *right* audience. The serial form has been a popular way to gain a targeted audience by creating characters that an audience will feel attached to as they form emotional ties to the characters and become invested in their fictional lives through character development and narrative complexity (Hammond 2005). Sitcoms have transitioned over time to include various settings, but in their origin, sitcoms predominantly took place within a household and/or familial environment (Taylor 1989). The settings may have changed, but the spirit they wish to engender largely remains the same. To increase audience attachment, sitcoms often try to replicate domestic spheres by creating an environment and characters that audiences are able to relate to; however, throughout time, this relatability has extended into other genres of television and shifted environments, now including the “work” sphere of life. The creation of “realness” is done through the use of not only characters appearances, but also through their chemistry and ability to feel “familial” (Taylor 1989). Workplace comedies can be seen as an extension of this through the relationships built among coworkers where they are no longer just people doing a job but a work “family” with rich emotional ties to one another (Taylor 1989). By doing this and utilizing the serial form of the show, audiences become invested in the characters themselves from week to week when watching.

By offering the same levels of intimacy, emotionality, and tension as a family sitcom while allowing for greater interaction with the outside world, workplace comedies allow for a space where audience members can feel invited by an often diverse set of characters with varying personality traits, and it allows for greater opportunity of outside characters to come and go (Taylor 1989). However, this may become more complicated with the increase of sexual behavior being portrayed on television—much of which takes place in the workplace (Lampman et al. 2002). As programs incorporate more and more

sexual behaviors into their scripts, it is important to analyze their portrayal when it takes place in a workplace comedy as it could potentially shape beliefs and expectations for the real-life workplace (Montemurro 2003). The use of comedy can shape how we envision social norms and practices by showing us what is and is not acceptable behavior (Berlant and Ngai 2017). In the case of inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace, comedy can be used to show the “correct” and “incorrect” way to react in situations which may be more complicated when we take into account the empathetic attachment viewers have to the main characters in a show. This makes it important for us to take a closer look at “outside” characters in workplace comedies to see how they are portrayed in contrast to the primary characters in the show.

In-Groups/Out-groups

Social identity theory offers a useful mechanism for us to evaluate the role of “outside” characters in workplace comedies. These include newly introduced or uncommon recurring characters that do not work in the workplace and/or are not a part of the core cast for the show. Social identity theory is rooted in the idea that identity at least in part is determined by self-categorization (Stets & Burke 2000; Turner et al. 1987). Individuals tend to self-categorize themselves in relation to other social categories in society as a way of defining where they belong (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). These social groups contain individuals that consider themselves of the same social category and may share similar attitudes, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and/or values (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). By determining that they belong within a particular or multiple social groups, they are able to distinguish where it is perceived they *do not* belong through the process of accentuation (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988).

Accentuation occurs for both the group that the individual is a part of and the different groups they do not belong to (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). By accentuating the similarities between themselves and other members of their social category and by accentuating the differences between themselves and individuals from other groups, the formation of a perceived in-group for the

former and out-groups for the latter occurs (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). It is also worth highlighting that these social categories cannot exist without each other's existence as they depend on group comparison (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). For example, a person would not feel the need to categorize themselves by nationality if every person were the same nationality, but it is because there are various nationalities that bring different lived experiences and norms that individuals may feel a sense of identity with their particular nationality. Additionally, these are often, but not always, hierarchal in nature (Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg & Abrams 1988). We tend to feel that our groups are the more valid, prestigious, powerful, and/or important groups which means that we tend to feel that our in-groups are better than the perceived out-groups. This often results in the use of social stereotyping of perceived out-groups, greater commitment to individuals identified in-groups, and heightened attraction to an individual's in-group (Hogg & Hardie 1992; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 1997; Stets & Burke 2000; Haslam et al. 1996).

In the case of media, this becomes an interesting dynamic as viewers may have a particular identity activated prior to or through watching media that then influences their perceptions of characters in a show or movie. Television poses a unique site for exploration of these dynamics as the characters developed for a television show play a key role in audience retention, so in the production process, executives prioritize the development of likeable and interesting characters in order for the show to be successful (Hoffner & Cantor 1991; Gitlin 1983; Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). Viewers tend to form connections with characters that extend beyond simply the situations and portrayals in the show, and they tend to begin feeling a personal connection and relationship with beloved characters that mirror emotions they may feel toward friends and family (Hoffner & Buchanan 2005; Giles 2002; Hoffner & Cantor 1991). This is a known possibility among television executives, and television has adapted to try to foster this response by utilizing the serial form of television in order to compete for audience retention (Hammond 2005; Smith 2005). The serial form is a method of structuring shows and storylines that add complexity and depth to main characters (Hammond 2005). The use of moving storylines that create an

ebb-and-flow dynamic among main characters relationships also adds depth to characters which allows viewers to form an empathic attachment to them (Smith 2005). Characters become more realistic, so viewers become more invested in the events that take place in their life. This attachment helps foster a more loyal audience.

This makes the use of external characters more useful for furthering the plot and complexity of characters (Smith 2005). By establishing a powerful connection to the main characters, guest characters can be used to seed conflict and feed tension in ways that carry more weight (Smith 2005). Guest characters may leave at any point in time with little care from the audience, but the conflict these characters bring allow the main characters to have something to do or a problem to solve that engages the audience and strengthens their connection (Smith 2005). A guest star can be very one-note and lacking in complexity as the audience does not have much attachment to them, so they can be used as plot devices. These characters are not necessarily meant to be around to deal with the ramifications of their actions, but rather, they are meant to force the main characters to deal with the conflict they sow (Smith 2005). Audiences liking the external character is often not the purpose of their involvement, so it is not a crucial factor, and in fact, guest characters are often meant to be disliked, so the audience has someone to root against (Smith 2005).

The in-group attachment and out-group exclusion is amplified by viewers apparent desire to identify with liked characters or characters that hold admirable attributes in media (Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). Wishful identification has been found among individuals who are the same gender as characters they view on television, and this was especially the case when those characters were also successful and admired (Hoffman & Buchanan 2005). However, the attributes of characters that were most desired by viewers differed depending on their gender where women viewers would have stronger wishful identification with female characters who were perceived to be successful, intelligent, admired, and attractive, and men viewers had stronger wishful identification with male characters who were perceived to be successful, intelligent, and, most concerningly, violent (Hoffman & Buchanan 2005). This raises

concerns in the context of the present study and previous studies where there has been analysis of the portrayal of inappropriate sexual behavior and/or sexual harassment. When guest stars engage in problematic behavior, we must wonder what impact this will have on viewers.

Objectification and Sexual Harassment

Objectification. Objectification entails treating a person as if they are an object (Nussbaum 1995). MacKinnon (1987) was one of the first to discuss the concept of objectification when addressing the potential harms that pornography may cause women in society. However, since the term was originally coined, many scholars have elaborated on the concept in interesting and intricate ways. Martha Nussbaum (1995) builds on past research of objectification by adding a more nuanced lens and discussing the various ways that objectification may occur for women as well as men (MacKinnon 1987; Sunstein 1992). While MacKinnon explains that objectification “cuts women off from full self-expression and determination—from, in effect, their humanity,” Nussbaum builds on this by elaborating on the seven characteristics that objectification entails (Nussbaum 1995: 250). There are seven characteristics of treating something as an object, and some of them, when applied to human beings, are always morally problematic (Nussbaum 1995). These include characteristics such as instrumentality which entails treating an object as a tool to be used, denial of autonomy which is when an object is treated as incapable of self-determination, and fungibility which entails treating an object as interchangeable as well other characteristics (Nussbaum 1995). As later will be explained, our sample exhibits several of these characteristics—specifically, denial of autonomy, fungibility, ownership, and denial of subjectivity—in the occurrences we have coded.

As explained in literature, the purpose of objectification is to use someone as a thing or deny them personhood for one’s own purposes (MacKinnon 1987; Nussbaum 1995). The motivation for this is theorized to be attributed to the perceived power one might gain by using a person as an object or as a means to an end (Gruenfeld et al. 2008; Nussbaum 1999). When the objectifier, typically from a more powerful social group, perceives the target to be useful for the objectifier’s goals, they would treat the

target as an object to use for their own purposes (Gruenfeld et al. 2008). This psychological oppression of targeted groups by more powerful groups serves to increase the objectifier's social power (Nussbaum 1999; Fanon 1967; Gruenfeld et al. 2008). In the context of external characters in television shows, these characters may have less "power" toward the at home audience, but they still wield their power against other fictional characters.

One of the consequences of objectification is proposed to be self-objectification: the internalization of an observer's perspective that results in the objectified to treat themselves as objects as well (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Moradi & Huang 2008; Quinn et. al. 2006). After experiencing objectification, one begins to engage in self-objectification as a response as they have been made hyperaware of how others perceive their bodies, and this often leads to experiencing body shame, anxiety, reduced flow experiences—feeling like one is living uncontrolled by others, —and decreased internal body awareness (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Csikszentmihalyi 1982; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Moradi & Huang 2008). These consequences of self-objectification often result in detrimental effects on one's life such as disordered eating and depression (Moradi & Huang 2008). In the case of media, this becomes more complicated as we are not typically shown the aftermath of these processes. Given the light-hearted nature of comedy, workplace comedies do not seem to prioritize depicting accurate portrayal of events where objectification or self-objectification take place.

Sexual Harassment. Through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), sexual harassment in the workplace has been prohibited and deemed an actionable offense (Basu 2003). While sexual harassment has had several differing definitions since the 1970's, some academic conceptualizations of sexual harassment define it as a workplace event that "is appraised by the recipient as stressful" (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald 1997: 403). The EEOC (2021) defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature," repeated occurrences that are "so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision,"

and it may occur between the victim and supervisor, co-worker, or even clients/customers. Given the nature of sexual harassment law and worker's understandings of it, documented cases may not give a full view of the severity and prevalence of sexual harassment in American workplaces (Basu 2003).

Since its conceptualization, sexual harassment has been a popular area of analysis across many disciplines (Coster, Estes, & Mueller 1999). Analyses of the portrayal of sexual harassment in television have displayed how media can impact viewer's perceptions of what is and is not appropriate workplace behavior. Given that television is such a large contributor to American culture and has been seen to influence viewer's perceptions of various gender norms, the evaluation of televised portrayals of sexual harassment serves as a gauge for the norm production taking place in the United States (Dow 1996; Fouts & Burggraf 2000; Fung & Ma 2000; Montemurro 2003). Situational comedies offer a lens for what is and is not considered humorous behavior, and the trivialization of sexual harassment has the potential to impact a person's perception on what an actionable offense they experience may be and how they ought to react when they are in a sexually harassing situation or hostile work environment (Montemurro 2003; MacKinnon 1989). For example, a person may be more likely to blame themselves for being too thin-skinned and not being able to "take a joke" or "compliment." This is tied to objectification in the sense that when sexual harassment takes place, victims are no longer being viewed as workers, but rather, as objects or bodies (Acker 1990; Montemurro 2003).

It has been found that the number of sexual encounters and their explicitness on television has greatly increased over the years, and this includes instances that take place in a work environment (Lampman et al. 2002). In Grauerholz and King's (1997) study of sexual harassment portrayals in prime-time television, approximately 70% of sexual harassment occurrences took place in situational comedies. Through this trivialization, portrayals lacked serious consequences and were depicted as humorous. Sexual harassment was often invisible to viewers in the sense that it is rarely labeled as sexual harassment, but instead a humorous plot device. This was similar to the findings of Taylor, Alexopoulos, and Ghaznavi's (2016) study on workplace sexual interactions depicted on prime-time television during

2014 where they found that these interactions were fairly common, but they were portrayed in a way that did not communicate harassing behavior as they were typically ignored or positively received. While the present study is not limited to legal definitions of sexual harassment specifically, these studies still show us important ways that inappropriate sexual behavior on television is portrayed and the impact that this could have on audiences.

METHODS

In the compiling of our sample in the spring of 2020, we utilized the website “The Futon Critic”¹ as a starting point to ensure a wide representation of workplace comedies. After this, we also searched other online lists of shows aired from 2000—2020 and conducted an internet search for “workplace comedies” to ensure a comprehensive, well-rounded list. When evaluating television shows, certain criteria were applied to see which would fit into the category of “workplace comedy.”

First, we eliminated shows that were animated or contained fantasy elements (zombies, magic, etc.). This ensured that the situations being displayed could actually take place in the modern workplace, instead of being hyperbolized or fantasized. Then, we eliminated shows meant for child audiences—including shows whose main character was a minor. If a show is geared towards a younger audience, some topics might not be touched on as they would in a show meant for all audiences. We also cut shows that were based in a time period that was not the present (2000-2020s). Along with this, we eliminated shows that were not set in the United States. Both the time period and place can affect what subject matter is explored in a show. The culture of the time and place may be different than that from modern-day America, and our focus is to explore American media’s portrayal of sexual harassment in a workplace.

We further limited our sample based on run-time, what years shows were active, and how many seasons they had. We purposefully selected shows with a 30-minute run-time (20-25 minutes if the show did not contain commercials). If an episode runs for less than the time specified, it might not be able to

¹ <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/>

develop a plotline or explore issues like a typical episode could, and if the show was longer than our sample's average run-time, it may explore topics at a deeper depth than other shows were capable of due to time constraints thus skewing the sample. We also cut shows that did not run for a full year or only had one season. These shows face the same dilemma that short episodes do; they may not have been able to explore plotlines and various topics or develop character personalities like a longer-running show was able to. Further, this served as a gauge for shows' popularity and their ability to reach wide audiences. If a show was renewed for a second season, they were likely popular enough and viewed enough for studios to renew their contract. Additionally, we cut shows that utilized "spoof" humor and excessive improvisation. This felt necessary as they felt too different from our general sample. In "spoof" shows the writers were not writing from a typical sitcom perspective and are instead writing from a perspective that is meant to mimic other shows. The genre they are meant to mimic is not within the scope of our criteria. Lastly, shows that were largely improvised were cut as they did not allow us to analyze motivations of the writers or directors. When a show was mostly improvised, we were not able to infer themes about the portrayals of sexual harassment in the workplace from a television production standpoint.

From the TV shows that fit these criteria, a random number generator was used to select one episode from each show aired from 2000 to 2020. With the sample size of 52 episodes from 52 different shows two – three researchers each week would take primary responsibility of coding one or two episodes and at least view the episodes that were being coded by others. Each episode was viewed by at least one other person other than the primary coder in order to enhance intercoder reliability. We would then discuss these episodes at our meetings and relay our coding process for the other members of our team by going through our data collected in a shared excel sheet. To enhance understanding and reliability, we included a detailed description each occurrence in our data sheet. We collected our data by examining each instance with sexual behavior specifically in regard to whether or not it ought to be categorized as sexual harassment or assault, the setting the behavior takes place, the tone of the scene, who the intended audience was in the scene, who the offender was and what their motivations were, who may be considered a victim and what their reactions were, who, if any, bystanders were present and how they

reacted, and noting any relevant relationships between characters—romantic, platonic, familial, or professional—and any important power dynamics between them.

Additional steps were taken as we attempted to take when coding our data environment to help us maintain objectivity and understanding of the perspective of the show. For example, we often had to remind each other and ourselves to try to take the situation out of the fictional world and into a real-world setting and imagine how it would be perceived if it were a real occurrence. Additionally, we were concerned with accurately portraying the response of the victim, so ensuring that we were not projecting our reactions onto our perceived response of the victim was very important. Lastly, we attempted to make note of the show's use of comedy (i.e., satirical, cringe comedy, dark humor, etc.), so our review of the instances would reflect the motivations of the writing and production.

The next step was to cut shows that did not focus on the workplace. This was somewhat difficult, seeing as how many shows also involve a look at the main character's family life. We distinguished 'workplace comedies' and 'comedies that see the character go to work' by reading descriptions of the shows and determining the main setting from that. If the shows description said that it mainly took place where the character worked, then it was classified as a workplace comedy. If the description primarily focused on the main character's family life or their relationships with their friends, it was cut from our sample. Additionally, as we only sampled shows aired from 2000 to 2020, if a show had begun prior to the year 2000, we removed all prior episodes from our random selection process.

The present study focuses on the use of external, or "outside," characters for offenses of sexually inappropriate behavior. Thus, our analyses focused on scenes where the "offender" was an external character. We operationalized external characters as characters that were newly introduced in the episode and/or were minimally reoccurring. We also excluded any offending characters that worked in the same workplace as the main cast/premise of the show as we did not code enough episodes of each series to determine whether or not they became more integral or dynamic characters. This may be seen as a limitation of the current study, and future work may entail more in-depth analysis sampling more episodes

from fewer various workplace comedies. This process led to a deeper analysis of 23 workplace comedies and 29 observed occurrences of inappropriate sexual behavior.

Next, categories were created based on our preliminary inductive analysis of the occurrences and characters that remained in our sample. In this process, we reread the detailed descriptions of each scene as well as the summarizations of the offenders, victims, bystanders, tone of each scene, and the notable relationships present. From there, we discussed the perceived motivations for offender's actions and found commonalities that informed the categories as will be outlined in our findings. Since a character's motivations may fluctuate throughout the episode, we decided to treat each coded scene as a unique event. These categories included the groups "the clueless," "the jerk," "the objectifier," "the creep," and "the seductress."

FINDINGS

This sample had a wide variation of characters that had many unique characteristics, but also many similarities. We tried to evaluate the best way of categorizing the commonalities we were seeing between characters who engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior toward others, and we concluded that it seemed the most similarities we were detecting were in their behavior and not their positionality or identity². More specifically, we found that they were rooted in the intent or goals of their behavior—Why are they doing what they're doing? This led us to developing three primary categories—the "Clueless," the "Jerk," and the "Objectifier" as well as two subcategories: the "Creep" and the "Seductress."

"Clueless" perpetrators did not seem to have a specific motivation. They simply did not realize that they were offending or acting inappropriately. "Jerks" were motivated by their desire to bring harm to another character. They were intentional in their actions to worsen the lives of others and were the equivalent of a stereotypical bully. "Objectifiers," were attempting to use the victim for their own purposes—typically, in the form of sexual gratification—by objectifying others and reducing their

² Among each of our categories, men seemed to be the most prevalent demographic with no specific level of attractiveness, age, race, or amount of power held, but no category was secluded to just men as women were often present in our sample.

victim's personhood to their appearance with no regard for the complexities of their victim's mind or identity. This was our largest and most various category which led to the creation of two subcategories of the "Objectifiers." First, we saw a trend that was at first difficult to describe as it originated as a visceral reaction to certain characters, after further dissection, we realized that the subcategory "Creep" was necessary. "Creeps" are perpetrators that shared the same intent of the "Objectifiers"—sexual gratification—but took their attraction to a new level by adding a level of persistence and attempt to *convince* characters to do what they wanted. Lastly, we saw a trend of young, attractive women being used as plot devices in a particular way that objectified their bodies, but they themselves were the ones acting in inappropriate ways that oversexualized their bodies. These characters were categorized as "Seductresses."

The Clueless

As previously stated, "Clueless" perpetrators typically did not have a particular intent for their actions. While the other categories depict the goals perpetrators had for their behavior, "Clueless" characters either had no intent for their actions, and their acts were said or done on a whim, or their intent was good hearted and innocent, but the outcome was inappropriate and made others uncomfortable. While this category holds the least number of occurrences in our sample, it provides the opportunity for rich discussion about the nuances of how writers' motivations impact the characters and behaviors we are shown on screen. These characters were typically unaware that their behavior was inappropriate even when it may appear obvious to the audience. This category consists of characters that were oversharing sexual information ranging from details about sexual encounters to trying to show others their pubic hair.

This sometimes appeared in occurrences where the "Clueless" character was trying to be friendly like in the case of Dutch in *Breaking In*. This show centering around the staff of a security company and their sneaky, all-knowing boss, Oz. The company tests security systems by breaking into trusted security systems in order to evaluate system weaknesses, and this often gets them in sticky situations. In this episode ("Tis Better to Have Loved and Flossed" 2011), Dutch was visiting his girlfriend, Melanie, at her

office to help her coworker. Melanie's coworker, Josh, had accidentally burned off his eyebrows, so Dutch was helping by drawing new eyebrows on Josh in the office. When explaining that drawing eyebrows was easy compared to the other manscaping he does, Dutch told Melanie's coworkers that he "trims the hedges" every night. He proceeded to attempt to show one of them, Cash, his pubic hair saying, "You should really look at this." Cash was obviously disinterested and quickly walked away telling Dutch, "Hey man, I'm out" as someone else was trying to get Cash's attention. Dutch then called after him, "You sure?" before the scene changed. In this instance, Dutch represents the category of "Clueless" as he seems to genuinely want to share his manscaping handiwork because he is proud and thinks it is impressive, but not because he is trying to seduce Cash or make him uncomfortable. Additionally, as he shares this information with others, his intentions appear goodhearted as if he could have just as easily been sharing with them the size of his biceps he was proud of because he had been working out. He seems to be trying to display a skill and not his genitals.

Additionally, there was a woman present in this category as well—Mrs. Mansfield. In *Ground Floor*, we follow the work of bankers and their boss, Mr. Mansfield. In this episode, Mrs. Mansfield is planning her and Mr. Mansfield's daughter's wedding, and she recruits the help of her husband's employees to do it ("Wicked Wedding" 2015). At one point, Mr. Mansfield and his employees are standing with Mrs. Mansfield at the office talking about their daughter's upcoming wedding. Mrs. Mansfield lightheartedly interjected with, "I can't believe it's been 25 years since you said, 'Don't worry, honey, you can't get pregnant in a hot tub.'" After, the two coworkers present glanced at each other and stared ahead appearing uneasy and unsure how to react or respond. While Mrs. Mansfield seemed completely unaware that she shared too much information, Mr. Mansfield tried to recover by nervously chuckling and telling the others that his wife is an "open book" and then telling his wife, "Let's uh, close the book, darling." While Mrs. Mansfield remained unaware that her behavior was inappropriate, it does not change that she put employees and even her husband in a position that breached a professional relationship and made them uncomfortable. This isn't to say that she is a bad character or that we should

not like her, but it does display one of the roles that outside, irregular characters play in workplace comedies.

In other instances, the “Clueless” character was actually attempting to be helpful by providing an abundance of information that ultimately had an adverse effect and made other characters uncomfortable. However, while the intent of the fictional character is to be helpful, it is beneficial for us to additionally look at the intent of the *writers* in order to understand the true role these outside characters are meant to play in the sense of the show’s success and comedic value.

A clear example of this occurring can be found in the show *Silicon Valley* with Pete the lawyer. *Silicon Valley* follows the misadventures of an upcoming technology company—Pied Piper. These garage-based tech geniuses jump through hoops to ensure their product reaches the market. In this episode, the Pied Piper team is facing a lawsuit from their former employer, Gavin (“Binding Arbitration” 2015). To aid them in their legal proceedings, the team is trying to find an affordable lawyer. One member of the Pied Piper team, Richard, finds a lawyer, Pete Monahan, who is willing to work for free unless they win. They quickly learn after meeting Pete that this is because of his shady, criminal, and sexual past. Pete, in an effort of being completely transparent and professional, explains in a calm, unemotional voice that he was disbarred after being incarcerated for drug use and trafficking female minors into the state to have sex with him. While Pete’s conveying of this information is the ethically correct thing to do, the manner in which Pete delivers the information is what makes his behavior cross a professional boundary. After explaining his past acts, Pete says, “Did I have consensual intercourse with two women under the age of 18? Repeatedly. I admit this.” He seems to offer all this information unprompted like a prepared speech including unnecessary details, and the team seems to be unsure how to react to this information. They display signs of discomfort and awkwardness like avoiding eye contact and shifting in their seats. While Pete’s behavior lacks the explicitness that most other perpetrators in this category have, his oversharing still had a similar effect on the other characters in the scene. His method of explaining his crimes undercuts the seriousness of his offenses and serves to trivialize the severity of his

past acts. He belongs in this category because although unintentionally, he was inappropriate in a professional relationship despite his perceived attempt to behave extremely professional.

Additionally, when we consider the writers of Pete's character as well as the other characters in the "Clueless" category, it seems that they all had a similar motive—to add humor to a situation by making people uncomfortable. While in other occurrences this looked like inserting absurd caricatures of people behaving in ways that "normal" people would not (Dutch) or well-meaning oblivious characters (Mrs. Mansfield), in *Silicon Valley* the chosen method of inserting humor was by juxtaposing professionalism with accounts of exceptionally unprofessional content. This shows us what qualifies as a trope, character, or scene worthy enough to make it on screen. This leaves us with the larger question, "What are the limits?" When a writer's bottom line is to get more viewers, laughs, and success, where is the limit of what will be shown on television, and does it have a moral/ethical component? In the case of Pete the lawyer and many others in this sample, writers have taken a potentially innocent situation and turned it more problematic in order to achieve their bottom line.

Additionally, in every case for the "Clueless" category, the offender was portrayed as ultimately harmless, as all their offenses were either shrugged off, laughed at, or ignored. Despite making others clearly uncomfortable, the audience is not meant to perceive their behavior as harmful, but rather as oblivious. This makes the perpetrator seem harmless or easily ignored since there is rarely any confrontation for their behavior or the harm they have caused. For the audience to perceive a character as "harmless," it does not require no harm to be done. Instead, perpetrators must seem innocent in the sense that they did not *intend* to cause harm. However, not every case was this simple such as one instance which had slight overlap with the category of the "Jerk" category as the character unconsciously insulted another character.

In the show *Great News*, we watch the antics of the workplace "family" at a cable news network, but Katie, a promising young producer, faces additional obstacles after her mother is added to the team. Between Katie's self-centered boss and her controlling mother, we are placed in the center of the action

(“A Christmas Carol Wendelson” 2017). In this episode, Katie was put in charge of picking up her boss’s adult son, Petey, from the airport. When she approaches Petey at the airport, Katie asks, “You’re Petey?” and he quickly responds, “Yeah, and you’re a seven,” Which sets the tone of Petey’s continuous casual insults for the rest of the episode. Later, Petey learns that his father is too busy to spend time with him, so he must spend time with Katie instead. While he is distraught and complaining, Petey says, “It’s like I’m 11 years old again. I try to spend Christmas with my dad, and he pawns me off on one of his whores.” Petey did not seem to want to offend Katie by indirectly calling her a “whore” but instead was simply not thinking through or caring about the impact of his words. He was still clueless, but in a less innocent way than the other perpetrators that fall into the “Clueless” category.

The impact of the situation is noticeable when we consider Katie’s reaction to the implication of being her boss’s “whore.” She calmly tries to collect herself by taking a deep breath and slowly closing her eyes before trying to be hopeful and encouraging toward Petey. It is reasonable to assume that her reaction was at least in part due to the status of the man who sexually insulted her. If Petey were not her boss’s son, and simply a man she met at a store or maybe even a coworker on even footing with her, she may have spoken up against the offense.

While Petey’s behavior was shocking and insulting, it was reframed throughout the episode as ultimately harmless. His immaturity and poor relationship with his father were played up, and he was painted as a “man-child” which seemed to smooth over or excuse his misbehavior. This, again, highlights the importance of questioning the writer’s intent and the context surrounding the character. While we will later discuss the importance of context in greater detail under the “Jerk” category, it is necessary to address here as well given that Petey, as a character, was portrayed in a certain way. By ensuring that Petey’s personality be perceived as immature instead of menacing, the writers were able to signal to the audience that he is harmless or that he “doesn’t know better.” The discrepancy between Petey’s character and the “Clueless” category and Petey’s character and the “Jerk” category places Petey’s character in a gray area that simultaneously belongs to both and neither category.

The Jerk

Next, there is the “Jerk” category. The most important aspect of characters in the “Jerk” category is their intent to harm other characters. Categorization of “Jerk” characters became more difficult, and the line felt blurrier, when characters would use overtly sexualized language in order to demean or make others uncomfortable on purpose. However, this is why categorizing characters based on their primary intent is useful. By looking at the “Jerk” category, we can see that they hold two key characteristics: their primary role is to worsen the lives of others and they do this intentionally. These characters were typically men, but there was an occurrence including a woman, who held a position of power, purposefully harming and insulting other characters. As for the men in the sample, there was no specific demographic prevalent in the sample, but instead they varied in age, appearance, and their availability of power over others. There is a dynamic range of behaviors displayed in this category from sexually explicit threats to generic bullying. A prime example of this can be found in the show *A.P. Bio*.

In *A.P. Bio*, we are centered around Jack, a former philosophy professor who has reluctantly moved home and began teaching at a local high school in his hometown—Toledo, Ohio. Jack appears to be an arrogant, selfish person, but throughout the series, he shows his heart grow ever so slightly. In this episode, we meet Greg, a newly introduced motivational speaker visiting the school, who is revealed to be the old high school bully of Jack (“Personal Everest” 2019). When Greg runs into Jack in the school bathroom, he reminds him that he used to call Jack “Pimple butt.” While Jack tries to maintain his cool and deescalate the situation, he tells Greg, “You think that’s funny, but you kind of sound like an idiot right now, because I don’t have pimples on my butt. That was a lie you made up in 10th grade.” Which led to Greg acting disgusted and accusing Jack of trying to expose his butt to “prove” that he does not. This made Jack more uncomfortable and upset, and the situation is reminiscent of immature high school bullying.

Greg depicts another characteristic that makes the “Jerk” category unique from the “clueless” in that he is not painted as harmless. Whereas the other categories utilize tone and victims’ responses to portray the offenders as ultimately harmless even if they are unsettling, the “Jerks” are meant to be

villains or characters we dislike and root against because they obviously bring conflict or harm to others. Greg is a bully who causes mental anguish for Jack whose downfall we cheer for.

Additionally, what makes this interaction in *A.P. Bio* interesting is that it is a clear-cut example of a scene that was made unnecessarily sexual. While this occurrence was coded in our sample due to its sexual nature, we could easily imagine a scenario where the exact same message and intent is portrayed without using sexual language. This brings us to the question of “why?” Why was it important to include sexual imagery and accusations to this scene? This is where we must go beyond the intent of the character and question the intent of the writers. It seems too often to be the case that writers find themselves desiring a certain reaction from their audience whether that be disgust, shock, humorous discomfort, or laughter, and they utilize interactions between characters to bring this effect. By using absurd situations and language, they can find a shortcut to eliciting these emotions in viewers. This is even more clear when considering the next example of Jane from *Swedish Dicks*.

The epitome of the “Jerk” is captured and embodied by the only woman recorded in this category—Jane. *Swedish Dicks* is a show about two private investigators—Ingmar and Axel—originally from Sweden whose paths crossed and led to them starting a partnership as unlicensed private investigators. Jane is a rival private investigator and nemesis of Ingmar and Axel. Her character is portrayed as powerful, intimidating, and mean. She is quick-witted with her insults, and they almost always include some form of demeaning sexual language. She epitomizes the “Jerk” category—she is meant to be a villain. The episode analyzed in this sample was centered around Jane blackmailing Axel and Ingmar to get them to do her dirty work and capture a “dangerous” criminal (“Girls Day!” 2018). We later learn the “dangerous” criminal is actually innocent, and Jane wanted to deliver him to men that want him dead, thus adding to her villainess nature.

In this scene, Axel and Ingmar were sitting in an awkward silence, and Axel says he wishes someone would walk through the door. Then, the mood changes as the door opens and the camera pans slowly up from Jane’s high heels to her face revealing it is their nemesis saying, “Mornin’ ladies.” Axel

exasperatedly says, “Why do I ever open my mouth?” to which Jane quickly quips back, “So Ingmar can put his Swedish dick in it?” Saying this, she derogatorily implies that the two men are gay in an effort to insult them and shift the power dynamic in her favor. She goes on to explain to them why she’s there and tells them to bring the perpetrator in to her. She feigns concern saying patronizingly, “You do have cuffs, right? Not the furry kind, the big boy kind?” Again, she uses sexualized language to demean them and make clear that she does not respect them as private investigators or as people. Throughout the interaction, Jane uses insulting language, such as calling them “bitches,” strikes powerful stances, and at one point, steps on Axel’s hand with her high heeled shoe on purpose. We see that the audience is being primed by the writers and producers to dislike Jane. Through the strategic use of her high heels being used to portray power, her confident but degrading demeanor, and the camera work adding a layer of suspense, Jane is not given any redeeming qualities or sense of humanity. We root for Axel and Ingmar, the main characters who the audience is attached to, and see the outside character, Jane, as a foe to be outwitted and beaten. This is in keeping with humor disposition theory, a commonly used technique that engages viewers by making them invested in the heroes’ success and, more importantly, the villain’s demise (Bryant & Zillmann 2013). In each scene where Jane is present, she is used to cause more conflict or harm to Axel and Ingmar.

It also may be notable to consider gender’s role in this scene. It may not have been as impactful if Jane were a man or if she were talking to two women. As a woman, her power over them comes across as also being more emasculating. We can also imagine an interaction where Jane insults the two men by calling them “losers” instead of “bitches” or if she insulted them in some more “PG” manner, but would it have been as clearly demoralizing or shocking?

Like the other examples in this category, Jane is painted in a very negative light. While Greg epitomizes the immature high school bully, Jane was the intimidating nemesis we are led to root against. Although in very different ways, these two characters carry the similarities that are found among all the

characters in this category—they want to cause harm intentionally and the audience is meant to dislike them.

Again, however, these categories are not always neat and tidy as it is unreasonable to believe that anyone, even fictional characters, will always be limited to one motivation for their actions. There may be some gray areas where we could choose to interpret the intent of a character to be rooted in one thing or another which is why we chose to take other factors under consideration when categorizing these characters, such as the context surrounding the coded scene and the perceived personality of the characters we are shown.

We have already discussed one example including Greg from *A.P. Bio*, and how he exhibits behaviors in line with the “Jerk” category; however, at times, his behavior borders the line of the “Objectifier” category. For example, in our sampled episode, there was a scene where Jack attempts to expose Greg as a liar to his class, but he seems to ultimately fail as Greg gives a compelling explanation for his behavior to the class and pretends to appear genuine and goodhearted. However, after this performance, Greg tells Jack that he will be teaching a mandatory teacher workshop, and then sits on Jack’s desk, pushes Jack’s chest, and leans toward him saying, “I cannot wait to get my hands on you...” he then threateningly whispers in Jack’s ear so no students would hear, “My little Pimple Butt.” While this appears and is very predatory, we view Greg’s words and behavior as indicative of his desire to torment Jack mentally as no one will believe Jack that Greg is a bad person. We think this conclusion is also likely due to Jack’s reaction to Greg’s behavior. Rather than being uncomfortable, surprised, or concerned, Jack’s face appears upset, but trying to maintain his composure.

When trying to determine the categorization for this occurrence that seems to represent aspects of both the “Jerk” and “Objectifier” categories, we were asking ourselves if the intent of the character would appear to be the same in a scenario where there was no sexual behavior or language as well as examining the scene in the context of the character as a whole. For the latter, we had to consider the personality and actions of the character and what the writers were trying to portray about them and the scene. For

example, Greg's actions where he seems to threaten Jack do not seem to reach the criteria of objectification as he was not attempting to reduce Jack's identity to his body, treat him as an object, or as a tool to be used. Greg's use of calling Jack "pimple butt" was not meant to reduce Jack to an object, but rather it was meant to demean him and remind Jack that he is powerless. If Jack had been called something other than the derogatory childhood nickname, we may perceive the scene differently. Under our interpretation, Greg was not using Jack as a tool to gain power, but he was lording his perceived existing power over Jack. Despite this reasoning, this is not to say that it is impossible for a "jerk" character to also have instances where they are "Objectifiers." We can obviously envision a character who is portrayed as a villain also engaging in sexual harassment, but, using our best judgement, we do not view Greg as falling under that umbrella. If the sexual language in this scene were replaced by some other form of degradation or insult, we imagine that the writers' vision for the character would still be realized.

The Objectifier

As the last major category formed, the "Objectifier" covers the majority of the occurrences within our sample, but this also means that "Objectifiers" take many forms. The overarching motive of characters in this category is that in their behavior, they are seeking to use a person as a thing for their own purposes (MacKinnon 1987; Nussbaum 1995). In doing this, "objectifiers" increase their own power by using a person as a means to achieve their own goals (Gruenfeld et al. 2008; Nussbaum 1999). There are many offenders that fall under this umbrella that also take it to a new level. When this happens, perpetrators were placed in the subcategory of "Creep." Within the general umbrella form of the "Objectifier," before diving more deeply into the subcategory, there was a wide range of objectifying behavior. We found instances of unwanted kissing, objectifying comments, staring, sexual name-calling, and even the stealing of underwear. It seems we are typically meant to perceive the offenders negatively in some way whether it be that they are gross, uncomfortable, or crude. However, they were all still painted as ultimately harmless as their offenses were rarely confronted and were typically dismissed or ignored even if we weren't meant to condone their behavior. As a result, the audience was not shown the

aftermath of the offense—the victim’s response and harm experienced—and the offense appears trivial and unimpactful.

For example, later in the episode of *Swedish Dicks*, Jane, as she was leaving, insulted Axel and Ingmar by saying, “I still think you guys suck as detectives. And one of you smells like old meat.” Then, she added while looking at them, “But, you know, some people think old meat is a delicacy.” She then winked and laughed before getting in her car to leave. Her final comment left Ingmar and Axel both looking very uncomfortable, and it seems like this was Jane’s goal. This unsettling interaction crosses the line into objectification as Jane made an unnecessarily sexual, albeit odd, comment about the men. She seems to have been attempting to shift the power dynamic in her favor by making the men feel less human and reducing them to their bodies. She was still being a “jerk” in the sense that she was wanting them to feel harmed, but she seems to also be wanting to gain power from the situation and uses them to meet her goal of doing this.

In more clear-cut “Objectifier” examples, perpetrator’s behavior was often painted in an ultimately negative light by being so absurd or atrocious that it seems that the audience is meant to be laughing at the characters for being so offensive. A prime example of this occurring was found in the show *Alpha House* with the character “Paul.” This political satire centers around fictional members in congress who happen to live with each other, and the difficult situations they find themselves in (“The Apparition” 2014). The episode opens with Andy, a main cast member and fictional U.S. senator, lying in bed with his housekeeper, Marta. When Andy wakes up in his moonlit bedroom, he sees the ghost of Senator Paul Mower, his deceased mentor, peaking at Marta under the covers. Paul remarks, “nice piece” to Andy. After Andy says that he thought Paul was dead, Paul says, “Not so dead I don't recognize a nice piece when I see one,” leans forward, and sniffs Marta while she’s sleeping. The two men discuss women and how it is better to cheat on girlfriends with employees. When Paul proclaims that he always preferred au pairs to housekeepers because they're "temporary," Andy replies, "I remember, master. You taught me well." Then, Andy asks Paul if he was "really doing his Chief of Staff" to which Paul responds, "Oh,

yeah. That's what I mean about keeping it in house." Paul then asks Andy if he's thinking of "nailing" his Chief of Staff, Katherine, and Andy explains that he can't because Katherine is a lesbian, and Paul tells him, "Oh, that's even hotter!" The men's conversation is serious in tone and reminiscent of a "Star Wars" Sith lord speaking with their pupil. Later, after Marta wakes up, she asks confused, "Where are my panties?" implying that Paul took them as a ghost.

This scene has multiple moving parts in it. First, their objectifying behavior and language are displayed as stereotypical "locker room talk" and is obscene to the degree that it is made clear to audience members that they should not be accepting of this behavior (Curry 1991). This purposefully private interaction where the two men speak openly about the objectification of women is likely a result of their close bond and recognition of each other's masculinity (Curry 1991). Marta is interchangeable, or fungible, with other exploits as the men describe women in terms of accessibility and attractiveness (Nussbaum 1995). This message would be less clear, and less humorous, if the men's words and actions were more insidious or subtle. The way the men are portrayed makes the intent of the writers' more obvious. However, there is still something to be said about the way these actions were dismissed and otherwise not addressed. Marta is never offered any agency or opportunity to object to the way she is talked about and objectified. This is a clear disregard of her subjectivity—she is treated as if her feelings and experiences are unimportant (Nussbaum 1995). In other words, the effect of Andy and Paul's actions is never shown. Instead of portraying harm, it is painted as an ultimately harmless interaction because it is said while Marta is unconscious and unaware, and Paul is not mentioned or shown again in the episode.

Another instance where the objectification of a person is written off as a light-hearted joke is in the show *Sirens*. This show portraying the everyday work of three Chicago EMTs—Johnny, Henry, and Brian—finds the humor in the wild situations they are called in to. In our sampled episode, the experienced EMTs, Johnny and Henry, are training Brian on his first day as a licensed EMT ("Pilot" 2014). At one point, the three main characters, are sent to a man's house where the unnamed patient had gotten a soda bottle stuck in his anal cavity, and it is implied that the accident occurred in the patient's

attempt for sexual self-gratification. Two of the EMTs, Henry and Johnny, are experienced and, as a joke, send the new EMT, Brian, on a wild goose chase to get something to "suck it out." When the patient becomes nervous, Henry explains to him that the device does not exist, and they are actually going to have to take him to the hospital. As Henry and Johnny leave the room to get a stretcher, the unnamed patient begs them to take care of it now instead of at the hospital yelling after them, "Guys, look, I'll give you two grand if you try to get it out," and referring to Brian, he adds, "Three grand if you have the twink do it."

This patient clearly represents the "Objectifier" category through his objectification of Brian. By reducing Brian to a "twink" which is used to describe the physical qualities of a, typically gay, young man and bribing the other EMTs to have Brian perform the act, the patient is not respecting Brian's personhood. This denial of his autonomy and subjectivity makes it seem as if Brian has lost any respect he would have as a licensed EMT (Nussbaum 1995). The patient's attempt to bribe the EMTs with two thousand dollars seems to be rooted in his own embarrassment of his situation, but his raising the bribe depending on if "the twink" performs the act, makes his offer problematic and borderline fetishizing as this seems to be desired for sexual gratification.

Additionally, like *Alpha House*, the patient's statement is used as a one-off joke and the problematic nature of his statement is never addressed. Brian is not offered agency to speak up about what the patient said because he was out of the room and unaware, and Henry and Johnny are out of frame, so their reactions are not seen. This lack of agency for victims seems to be a common trend in the "Objectifier" category as a way for writers to avoid consequences or complications that may extend the length of the joke that is meant to be fairly short and avoid the audience witnessing or questioning the implications of what is said on screen. This avoidance of consequences makes it easier to dismiss the joke as harmless and unimpactful. Also, we seem to be meant to laugh at the patient, but not because what he says is so drastic and clearly degrading, like we saw with Paul in *Alpha House*, but instead, we are meant to laugh at the patient's attraction to Brian which is a fairly homophobic message being sent to viewers.

This especially seems to be the case as Brian's identity as a straight man is often questioned and joked about throughout the episode when other characters imply to Brian that he seems gay or not masculine enough.

Lastly, in contrast to Paul from *Alpha House*, Owen, a young, 10–11-year-old boy in *Stacked*, is painted as a child who does not know any better. In this show, Pamela Anderson plays a ditzy, attractive, young woman named "Skylar" who is consistently ogled at and objectified throughout the episode. The randomly selected episode happened to be the pilot episode where Skylar is introduced to the rest of the main cast after wandering into the bookstore (her soon-to-be employer) ran by the brothers Gavin and Stuart ("Pilot" 2005). Skylar agrees to pretend to be Gavin's girlfriend in order to make Gavin's ex-wife, Charlotte, jealous. This devolves into Skylar being introduced to Gavin's two children—Allegra and Owen. When Owen sees Skylar, he smiles and exclaims, "Woah. Way to go dad!" and tries to give Gavin a high-five. While the laugh track plays, Gavin, embarrassed, slowly puts his son's hand down. Skylar tries to ignore Owen's reaction by kindly greeting him and telling him that his dad talks about him all the time. Instead of responding to Skylar, Owen goes on to stare at Skylar's chest while telling Gavin, "Hey dad, we should take your girlfriend swimming sometime" and smiles. After another laugh track plays, Gavin snaps his fingers in front of Skylar's chest to get Owen's attention and says, "Owen. Owen, please." Skylar looks uncomfortable but tries to ignore it, and she continues trying to sweetly talk to his daughter. After being rudely insulted by Gavin's daughter and Charlotte, Charlotte ushers the children toward the door, but Owen, still staring at Skylar's chest, complains, "But we just got here!" Charlotte angrily tries to get Owen to listen to her but is continuously ignored. Eventually, Charlotte yells at Owen more intensely, and Owen "snaps out of it" and leaves. After the scene transitions, we see Owen staring at Skylar through the bookstore window, and Charlotte wrestles him away saying difficultly, "I said let's go young man!" Each time Owen ignores his mother's attempts to get him to leave, a laugh track is played making light of the behavior Owen is engaging in.

The tone of this scene, and the way Owen is treated by his parents is reminiscent of the “boys will be boys” trope. Owen, although clearly objectifying and making Skylar clearly uncomfortable, is painted as harmless to the point that his own parents do very little to correct or scold his behavior, at least not publicly. While it still seems we are not meant to condone Owen’s behavior, it also appears that we might be meant to excuse it. Owen is an interesting case, in the sense that he is the only child in our sample who was an offender, and it seems that his age was utilized in the show strategically to minimize the magnitude of his behavior. Owen depicts how men grow up to be objectifiers who “can’t help themselves” when near attractive women. This speaks to the way demographics can influence the portrayal of certain characters. If Owen were a teenager or a middle-aged man, this scene would carry a different gravity with it. Additionally, Owen’s behavior exemplified the “Objectifier” category as each of his actions were done with the sole intent of gaining sexual gratification while clearly reducing Skylar to an object to be viewed or used as displayed in Owen’s complete disregard for Skylar as a person when he continuously ignored anything she said and her clear discomfort. It is also important to point out that although Skylar was clearly uncomfortable given her facial expressions and avoidance of eye contact, no one in the scene addressed Skylar’s discomfort or personhood except to insult her by calling her Gavin’s “mid-life crisis.” Skylar was reduced to an object by the writers intentionally in order to have her beauty the butt of everyone’s jokes. This is the clearest example of an objectifier, and even bystanders, denying a victim subjectivity (Nussbaum 1995). Since she was reduced to a body to be viewed, her discomfort was not important or worthy of acknowledgement.

This trivialization of fictional situations like the ones described have potential to cause actual, material harm to real workers. In addition to Ford and Ferguson’s work regarding prejudiced norm theory (2000; 2004), we see this harm extend outside of theoretical and/or controlled analysis. By creating and/or reinforcing normative behavior for how one should respond to sexually charged situations like these in the workplace, workers may internalize the messages shown to them on screen in the sense that what is and is not acceptable behavior becomes blurrier, and victim’s may not be sure how to react when

experiencing an offense. For example, in the 2016 court case *Posteraro v. RBS Citizens, N.A* (159 F. Supp. 3d 277, 2015 DNH 237), the plaintiff claimed that she had experienced frequent unprofessional sexual joking in her workplace. These inappropriate jokes included the phrase “That’s what she said” repeatedly being used uncoincidentally during the height of popularity for the show *The Office* where the main character and fictional boss uses this joke almost like a catchphrase. In response to the plaintiff’s claim, she received several criticisms including that she needed to “lighten up” and learn how to take a joke. This helps display the potential consequences of consuming problematic content in a noncritical mindset (Ford 2000; Bryant & Zillmann 2013; Johnson 1990).

The Creep. The “Creep” shares many of the same qualities of the “Objectifier” such as their primary intent of reducing one’s personhood for their own goals as well as some of the type of behaviors exhibited. As a type of “Objectifier,” “Creeps” were more persistent in their efforts and were often allotted more screen time. While “Creeps” act with the intent of using others, they also take it to a heightened level through their attempts to convince or pressure their victims in their effort to get what they want. However, we noticed that this largely seemed to take place when those who would have initially been coded as “Objectifiers” had more screen time. In other words, it seems as though any “Objectifier” has the potential to rise to the level of “Creep” if they were only shown acting upon their desires or motives.

This subsection did not have many occurrences, but the instances that were recorded are notable as they show a difference in how outside characters may be introduced to cause more substantial conflict or plot material to utilize in the episode in ways that an “Objectifier” does not. While “Objectifiers” were more so used for one-off jokes, “Creeps” typically served as a way of furthering the plot of the episode in a certain direction.

A good representation of this was found in the show *Wanda at Large* when the main character, Wanda, was confronted by a male stranger at a basketball game. Prior to this occurrence, Wanda, portrayed by actress Wanda Sykes, had several workplace spats with her coworker, Bradley. Wanda and

Bradley's work as correspondents for a political talk show fostered an environment where Wanda, a strong democrat, and Bradley, a staunch Republican, frequently butted heads and formed a rivalry. After their feud is established, both workers end up attending a basketball game their boss gave them tickets to, and from there, the dominos began to fall to result in peace between Wanda and Bradley ("Wanda & Bradley" 2003).

At the game, Wanda goes to the concession stand to get refreshments. While Wanda is buttering her popcorn at the concession stand, a man behind her says, "Hey shorty." After Wanda ignores him, he continues saying, "Girl, you know you hear me." Wanda then glares at the man before telling him, "I'm married" and turning back around. After invading more of her personal space, he replies to her, "Me too. Hey, you know, you need to give me your phone number, so we can hook up." At this point, Wanda becomes defensive and upset, and she tells him, "Man, if you don't back up off me..." and he interrupts her saying, "Oh, what, you gonna try to play me like that?" This is where we see the role of the "Creep" being used to further the plot of the episode as Wanda's work "rival," Bradley, overhears the interaction and steps in for Wanda's defense. This bystander intervention was necessary for the show's plot as Bradley needed redemption in Wanda's, and the viewers', eyes. After Bradley's interference as a bystander, his and Wanda's rivalry starts to morph into a friendship, thus advancing the plot of the show. It's also worth noting that in the 52 episodes we analyzed, this was the only occurrences where bystander interference took place. So, why did Bradley, Wanda's coworker, step in when nobody else did? Was this due to the desire to encourage this type of bystander intervention, or was it only done because it was a convenient method to cause the two characters to bond? In this example, the stranger that pursues Wanda may have been only an "Objectifier" if his advances had ended once he was rejected; however, his persistence and harassment of Wanda made his offense more extreme and more "creepy." The stranger's "outsider" status made him easily forgettable yet able to recenter focus on Bradley and Wanda's relationship (Smith 2005).

This can also be seen in the episode selected for *The Norm Show* where Norm Macdonald is propositioned to be a male escort ("Norm vs. The Oldest Profession" 2000). Over the course of this

episode, Norm debates working as an escort in order to help pay his rent, and a large source of jokes are at the expense of Norm's consideration of this and thus also at the expense of sex work in general by painting it as a disgusting and immoral occupation. Norm ultimately decides to take the job, but at his first encounter with a client in her hotel room, he gets cold feet and changes his mind. However, he does not actually vocalize this, and it is portrayed as an awkward and humorous interaction. His client, Mrs. Beaumont, portrayed by the actress Cloris Leachman, is an older woman in her 70's, and is very direct and graphic in what she wants from the evening. After quick pleasantries, she tells Norm, "Take off your pants" followed by a laugh track. Norm tries to encourage her to go downstairs to the embassy party to meet the ambassador to which she replies, "Why don't you *whip* out the ambassador, and we'll both get to know him." Again, followed by a laugh track. Norm nervously laughs and says, "Now Mrs. Beaumont, you're being a little, what's the word, grotesque." This banter goes back and forth with a mixture of Norm, not so subtly, insulting her, and Leachman's character saying things such as, "Come on, I want you to see heaven, and I'm gonna see either the ceiling or the pillows. That'll be your choice," with laugh tracks sprinkled throughout. Mrs. Beaumont is very persistent in her efforts to get Norm into bed as she still believes he is there as an escort to have sex with her, but all her advancements are painted as humorous instead of seductive.

This interaction is notable for several reasons. First, Leachman's character was used as a plot device to prove the "grotesque" nature of Norm's actions as well as provide a situation for Norm's colleague, a "rescued" ex-sex worker named Taylor, to save him from. Second, Mrs. Beaumont's behavior is distinctly more unsettling and inappropriate given her persistency. Taken in isolation, any one of her comments may not be any different from other "Objectifiers," but her continued persistency takes the offenses of her behavior to another level. It is also notable that Mrs. Beaumont's behavior may be perceived differently if she were a young attractive woman. Leachman's age and appearance seemed to be utilized as a punchline. If we were to view this scene with the absence of laugh tracks, the tone of the scene would likely be much different as it would be totally reliant of the audience's interpretation of the transpiring events. Laugh tracks cue to audiences what is and is not funny, and they can portray scenes

that otherwise are not funny as humorous. In the case of the scene, laugh tracks were used after each sexual advance Mrs. Beaumont makes which implies that the idea of her, an older woman, being sexually provocative towards a younger man who is not attracted to her, is inherently funny. Additionally, laugh tracks were used after each insult Norm said to or about her implying that we, the audience, should agree with him.

Lastly, this scene leads us to an important analysis of how gender was used or portrayed in our sample. Mrs. Beaumont is unique in the sense that she is the only woman to be portrayed as a “Creep” or “Objectifier.” Instead of her advances being portrayed as something to resist or be tempted by, she was described by Norm as “grotesque” and “not a regular lady at all.” In contrast to this scene in *The Norm Show*, typically, sexually provocative women were portrayed much differently. In our analysis, we likened their behavior to the term “seductress.”

The Seductress. These women, all young and attractive, made use of their bodies and behavior as ways to tempt others. However, they differed from the other outside characters we categorized in our sample in that they did not really have any shared intent other than using their bodies as tools to achieve whatever they want from that interaction. This is similar to the concept of self-objectification in that they seem to be very aware in how others view their bodies, and they use that knowledge to their advantage by strategically treating themselves as objects to be viewed as well (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Moradi & Huang 2008; Quinn et. al. 2006). However, this media representation of self-objectification is different from the reality of how self-objectification operates since we are, again, denied the opportunity to view the aftermath of these acts. Studies on real-life practicing of self-objectification specifically discusses the common and harmful effects of internalizing the male gaze: body shame, anxiety, disordered eating, and feeling controlled by others (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Csikszentmihalyi 1982; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Moradi & Huang 2008).

In the shows these characters occur in, their attractiveness is typically commented on or implied, and their behavior is rarely ill-received. Their appearance and seductive behavior are portrayed as something that the men they are interacting with desire despite their persistency and provocative nature

being very similar to that of Mrs. Beaumont's. This raises the question of "why?" which appears to be because of their demographic. Cloris Leachman's age and appearance made her a punchline, whereas Meg, Jenna, and Amy's age and appearance made them desirable, as described below. While it did not appear in our sample, we can imagine a very similar dynamic where a woman's weight, attractiveness, age, etc. results in them being treated more similarly to Mrs. Beaumont than Meg, Jenna, or Amy. This trend is important to consider as it represents an interesting way that a woman's gender impacts her portrayal in television in a way that a man's gender does not in this study.

In our first example, the show *Spin City* depicts Meg, the daughter of the mayor, as a forbidden object. *Spin City* centers around the wild antics that are the New York City Hall. Although originally starring Micheal J. Fox, the sampled episode we viewed was after Fox was replaced by Charlie Sheen; however, their jobs remained extremely similar. They were tasked with the difficult job of spin work and turning bad situations into opportunities. In this episode, the mayor's daughter, Meg, is visiting New York, and the mayor had clear instructions for some of his staff—keep their hands off of her ("Rain on My Charades" 2001). Before Meg, portrayed by Alyssa Milano, is introduced, the show opens to a scene where Charlie, on behalf of the mayor, is telling his coworker, Stuart, that the mayor's daughter is off limits. Throughout the interaction, Stuart objectifies Meg by commenting on her attractiveness, and after being told that the mayor said he would have Stuart neutered if he makes any advances on her, Stuart responds with "worth it." This set the stage for how Milano's character was framed throughout the episode. In a later scene, Milano's character is sitting in the office breakroom eating a cup of yogurt when Stuart walks in. Meg greets him, and he says while smiling and staring at her, "I'm not supposed to talk to you." Acting unaffected, Meg responds, "That's too bad," and she looks him in the eye while purposefully seductively licking the yogurt from the spoon. Apparently aroused, Stuart looks uncomfortable. He tells her while turning away, "I'm not even supposed to look at you." Meg purposefully drops her spoon and "innocently" looks at him and says, "Oops." She reaches down sideways while pushing forward her breasts for Stuart to look at. While reaching for her spoon she

maintains eye contact with Stuart. When she sits back up, Stuart frustratedly pulls his glasses off his face and snaps them in half and storms out of the room. Meg chuckles at his expense.

Meg clearly displays the “seductress” like behavior we saw among young, women characters. While attempting to be humorous, Meg tempts Stuart into viewing her sexually, so she can laugh over his discomfort and his struggle to resist his “urges.” This scene depicts an interesting dynamic where Meg is almost baiting Stuart into becoming a harasser. If Stuart were to cross a line and cave to his sexual desire, he would be a harasser in the workplace. This plays into the victim blaming narrative of the victim “asking for it” as Meg is obviously and clearly trying to tempt Stuart sexually. This scene also plays up the false narrative that men “can’t help themselves” when it comes to objectifying attractive women. Stuart’s character epitomizes this idea throughout the episode but very clearly does so in this scene. Stuart was left so “helpless” to Meg’s temptations that he had to resort to breaking his glasses, so he couldn’t see her. Although Stuart was not receptive to her advances, it was for much different reasons than why Norm was unreceptive to Mrs. Beaumont’s advances. Stuart was clearly attracted to and, in a way, appreciative of Meg’s seductive behavior, but he was denying himself rather than denying Meg because he was fearful of getting in trouble by the mayor, his boss. In *The Norm Show*, Norm was rejecting Mrs. Beaumont directly because of his lack of attraction to her specifically.

In *The Loop*, we see a different but somewhat similar situation occurring with Jenna. In this show, there was not so much a particular event that stood out, but rather how the show unfolded and the cumulation of occurrences that made it noteworthy (“Jack Air” 2006). Sam, the main character of the show, is a man in his 20’s trying to improve his career at an advertisement company. One day after work, he gets home and is introduced to one of his roommate’s friends, Jenna. Jenna is a “wild child” and the life of the party. When Sam is reluctant to go out drinking together, Jenna mocks him by calling him a “pussycat” and meowing. The scene transitions to the audience watching Sam having liquor poured into his mouth by Jenna over the bar, and a crowd cheering for him. Sam and Jenna are then shown at a table talking about Jenna’s job which establishes that while Jenna has no affiliation with any one bar, and she

does not have a formal workplace, Jenna is working anytime she promotes the Saco Borosso brand and, later, the “Saco Borosso challenge.” Arguably, anytime she is at a bar, she is working.

Jenna urges Sam to compete in the Saco Borosso challenge which consists of a series of drinking games that you must complete—many of them involving completing challenges naked. She explains, “You compete against me in 10 different challenges. You know, who can eat what when,” and her voice and demeanor become flirty and seductive before continuing saying, “who can stuff what where.” Each time Sam is reluctant and tells her that he cannot participate because he has work the next day, Jenna meows to pressure him into competing.

Throughout their interactions, Jenna is flirty with Sam and the two of them eventually end up kissing and, subsequently, having sex. Jenna’s behavior is probably the most similar to Mrs. Beaumont’s in this sample; however, they were treated drastically differently by the men they were trying to seduce, and this seems completely dependent on whether or not those men found them sexually appealing. Jenna’s pressuring behavior and flirtation ultimately led to her and Sam becoming sexual partners after she pressured Sam to get drunk while Mrs. Beaumont thought that Norm’s presence was predicated on his willingness to have sex with her because she had hired him as a sex worker. This makes Jenna’s behavior in even more of a gray area than Mrs. Beaumont’s. Despite these important differences in the situations, Leachman’s character was painted in a derogatory light while Jenna was painted much more flatteringly.

Lastly, we see an example of this type of portrayal in *Breaking In* with Alyssa Milano’s character Amy. In this episode, Cameron, the main character, is trying to get over his crush on a coworker. He meets a woman, Amy, while at lunch with another coworker, Cash. Cash encourages Cameron to go talk to her, and from then on, Cameron starts dating Amy. We later learn that Amy is actually the separated wife of his boss, Oz, and Amy was only using Cameron to spy on and get information about Oz’s plans to steal something from her house. The plot of the show sets up an interesting power dynamic between Oz, Amy, and Cameron as Cameron was being lied to and used by both Amy and Oz who were only concerned with having more power over the other. Toward the end of the episode, Oz and Amy are found making out on Oz’s desk by Cameron and other coworkers, and Oz reveals that before they walked up, he

and Amy had sex on his desk. At this point, Cameron does not know that Oz is aware of Amy and Cameron dating, so he pretends not to know Amy in fear of losing his job. As Amy is leaving, she looks at Cameron and says, "So I'll see you around...What did you say your name was again?" Annoyed and upset Cameron doesn't make eye contact with her and says, "Just go..." As she leaves, she sensually smells his shoulder without Oz noticing, and exits. It was because of Amy's feigning attraction for Cameron and her manipulating him into wanting to date her that placed him in a subordinate position of power with her and with Oz. Her smelling him as she left was done in a way that appears borderline sexual but seems to actually be more of a power move exerting control.

CONCLUSION

Workplace comedies serve as a unique area of analysis given their wide scope of viewers, the tone set for audiences, and the setting they occur in. When viewers take in comedy they intentionally or unintentionally enter a noncritical mindset which may cause problems if they internalize certain messages without analyzing their validity or ethicalness (Bryant & Zillmann 2013; Olson 1968; Ford 2000). This makes it necessary to evaluate this medium from an intentionally critical mindset as well. When television shows are produced, writers and staff have their own motivations that guide how they approach their work. From advancing the plot of an episode to providing a one-off joke, inappropriate sexual behavior was used by external characters for the purpose of providing humor, plot development, and show success.

These motivations seem to morph the development of media in the sense that certain situations are portrayed in humorous ways that may serve to trivialize the impact these situations may have if applied to the real world. Consistently, our findings displayed the creation of inappropriate sexual behavior done by external characters in order to increase absurdity and/or humor in workplace comedies. However, in order to do this and maintain the humorous, nonserious tone of the show, viewers were denied the ability to view the aftermath of these occurrences. The shown impact on victims was largely limited to discomfort, so viewers could maintain a lighthearted mood. The avoidance of showing any more harm than this in order to provide humor can be seen as a trivialization of inappropriate sexual

behavior in workplaces which may then impact how viewers perceive these types of behavior in their own workplaces. Making inappropriate sexual behavior a joke rather than a concern could create situations where real workers no longer recognize harmful workplace behavior as something to be done away with, but rather, something they need to learn how manage themselves.

In the future, an interesting comparison to make would be to how often these types of portrayals are present when the offender is a core cast member. We know that external characters are often strategically used because viewers feel less attached to them than to core cast characters, so the misdeeds of external characters can be easily dismissed as well as potentially give viewers a character to root against (Smith 2005; Hammond 2005). Extending the current study to include core cast members may allow us to further evaluate the potential messages signaled to viewers.

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