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## **Representation of female identity in humour**

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### **Abstract:**

*The article discusses humour as a form of communication and social interaction, which is not only based on sociocultural similarities, tolerance and solidarity among in-group members but also hostility or aggression towards out-group members. As humour is formed on binary oppositions, the female gender is often used as a popular “target” in humour discourse. It also represents “otherness” regarding the opposite gender and communicates social codes based on physical appearance, behaviour, or specific roles in society. Gender-stereotyping, which is used to categorize and understand the “outside” world better, is one of the most common and simplest approaches in humour discourse. The main aim of our research is to discuss the role of women and the way female identity, as a social construct, is defined and presented in humour discourse through stereotypes. More precisely, this article examines the evolution of women's representation in the situation comedies with regards to their stereotypical portrayals and traditional social roles.*

### **Theoretical background – theories of humour**

Humour is a specific form of communication and social interaction that reflects current events, the mentality of a society, its emotions, attitudes, collective values, or even the perception of the world outside. On the one hand, as a “universal human trait” (Raskin, 1985, p. 2) it is present in all societies, but on the other hand, it is also a culturally and personally specific phenomenon. Humour and its relation to laughter have become the subject matter of different research approaches trying to find the most general and widely applicable definition. Since the function of humour in society and for every individual can be studied from different theoretical perspectives, so far, only partial definitions have been formulated. For example, Martin defines humour from a cognitive perspective as “a type of mental play involving a light-

hearted, nonserious attitude toward ideas and events” (Martin, 2007, p. 1). Based on heterogeneous views on humour research, three fundamental theories of humour – superiority, incongruity, and relief theories – which later became a platform for other theoretical approaches to this phenomenon, have been formulated. Each of the three theories focuses on humour from a different angle and thus supplement each other and form one complex synergy.

One of the major theories studying the conditions of humour formation and perception, the **superiority theory**, traces back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who explains humour through a feeling of superiority while observing other’s weakness or misfortune. Likewise, Aristotle defines comedy as “an imitation of people who are worse than the average, [...] the ridiculous [...] is a species of the ugly” (Aristotle in Morreall, 1987, p. 14). He considers laughter and wit as indicators of scorn and educated insolence, respectively. Imperfection and hostility are central for jokes, moreover, laughing at human mistakes is compared to the deviation of values. It is important to emphasize that early perception of humour was characterized by negative rather than positive tendencies. In ancient Greece, humour was not part of everyday life; it was only tolerated during annual festivals in honour of Dionysus (the god of fertility, wine and drama). Another superiority theorist who considers humour a form of supremacy over others is Hobbes (1982). In the *Leviathan* he introduces “sudden glory” as the passion which makes “those grimaces called laughter”. According to Hobbes laughter is associated with “glorification” of the self, often at the expense of someone else. This implies that forasmuch as laughter at the failures and defects of other people was considered a sign of cowardice and degradation, humour was neither accepted nor tolerated by society at that time.

The **incongruity theory** focuses on the cognitive aspects of humour and laughter. Bergson (1993) introduces “disharmony” as a key concept. Similarly, Gruner (1997) stresses the element of surprise and the presence of an incongruous element as a necessary building block of humour, besides the principle of superiority (the presence of a winner and loser). Likewise, Kant (1975) and Schopenhauer (1998) consider the presence of the paradox as a priority condition for provoking laughter.

The **relief theory** is based on the natural human need that involves uncontrollable releases of excess psychic energy and tension through amusement and laughter. The major representatives are Freud and Spencer. The Freudian approach sees psychoanalysis and humour as congenial; understanding humour as a “defence mechanism”, which helps transform negative emotions into pleasurable sensation and satisfaction (Freud, 2005). Laughter, as a form of catharsis, reduces levels of the body’s stress hormones. In addition, Spencer in his *The*

*Physiology of Laughter* (1860) presents laughter as a specific release of accumulated and suppressed emotions and energies. According to Raskin (1985, p. 38), “the basic principle of all such theories is that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc”.

These mega theories have become the basis for numerous sub-theories aiming at different aspects and mechanisms of humour which are all interconnected. Hence, they create one complex approach to humour studies.

### **Typology of humour**

Humour can be classified as a means of interpersonal communication and interaction, through which culturally specific information is transmitted. As a social phenomenon, it reflects the characteristics and mentality of the culture or even our perception of the outside world. Kuipers (2008) defines five broad categories of the sociological approach to humour:

- Functionalism – focuses on social functions of humour; describes humour as a social phenomenon that supports and maintains social order. As a social valve, it helps release tension in social relations and reinforces hierarchy.
- Conflict theory – describes humour as a means of social conflict; it serves as a form of attack or defence. Its double-edged nature can be seen in the way humour is used. On the one hand, it can be used to exercise power by people in control, but on the other hand, to express resistance by those in less powerful positions. This category includes offensive, hostile and aggressive forms of humour associated with societal controversies about ethnic, religious, gender, or political humour.
- Symbolic interactionism – humour is part of social reality where relationships and meanings are constructed in interactions.
- Phenomenology – perception and social reality construction. Different forms of humour function as an alternative sphere of freedom and resistance in society, and thus giving humour a unique and central function in the social life of people.
- Historical-comparative approach – the role of humour in society is explained through comparisons in time and place. This approach traces and studies humorous universals as well as factors determining systematic variations in joking patterns across cultures.

Based on the content of social interaction, self-evaluative standards and psychological behaviour patterns related to humour, Martin et al. (2003) have developed a typology of humour styles. They categorize them into four main groups:

- 1) Self-enhancing humour is manifested in the perception of unpleasant, absurd situations as funny and amusing. It is the tendency to alleviate the problems, show a positive attitude and resilience.
- 2) Affiliative humour is a friendly and tolerant form of humour whose aim is to amuse other people, strengthen group relationships and create a pleasant atmosphere (telling jokes or funny stories). This type of humour helps people restore their social status.
- 3) Self-defeating humour is a self-disparaging way of presenting one's own mistakes, mocking one's own failures, putting oneself down to create enjoyment, and increasing one's own group status.
- 4) Aggressive humour uses offensive behaviour (e.g. irony or sarcasm), and as a hostile form of humour it ridicules or harms other people. It makes you feel superior to other people.

### **Stereotypes in humour**

It is apparent that societies are constructed by different social groups whose members share similar characteristics, values or opinions; moreover, they interact with each other and psychologically identify. In-group membership supports self-esteem, favouritism, and affinity over out-group members and creates a kind of bias. In the process of self-identification, the perception of the difference between “we and they” often results in the formation of stereotypes about ourselves and others. In general, stereotypes are “sets of beliefs, usually stated as categorical generalizations, that people hold about the members of their own and other groups” (Rinehart, 1963, p. 137). Lippmann (1922) defines a stereotype as an oversimplified picture of the world which helps satisfy the necessity to see and perceive the world as more understandable and manageable than it really is. It stems from the need of human beings to think in terms of categories. Nevertheless, from the neuropsychological point of view, it is a quick cognitive shortcut used to assess other people (out-group as well as in-group members). According to Drabinová (in Gracová, 1999), two different forms of stereotypes can be defined: historical and national. Historical stereotypes create a bridge between the history of mentalities, political history, and history of intercultural contacts, whereas national stereotypes are a system of shared values that help individuals not only categorize and create inner and outer worlds but also reinforce their coherence and support perception of their own community as different, often better/superior, or even ideal. Intergroup stereotyping is a natural and two-way process during which a member of a social group is assigned the identical characteristics of the whole group. Subsequently, prejudice, which is an incorrect attitude adopted by an individual or group

resulting from a critically unassessed judgment, might develop (Hartl & Hartlová, 2000). Some researchers consider stereotype and prejudice to be closely related terms with the same psychological background (Nakonečný, 1999), others consider them as semantically identical. All societies are exposed to stereotypical images and messages, but in cases where these beliefs are negative or incorrect they can lead to harmful consequences for a particular social group or its members with a subsequent impact on an individual's perception of reality.

The traditional understanding of the relationship between individual and society is based on the gender dichotomy – two distinct categories “male vs female”. In addition, Van Zoonen (1994, p. 33) claims: “Since we are born into societies that have labelled a particular difference between human beings as woman vs man, and a related difference as feminine vs masculine, we come to think of ourselves in these terms: as being and feeling a man, or being and feeling a woman. Gender, however defined, becomes a seemingly ‘natural’ or inevitable part of our identity and for that matter often a problematic one”. Evidently, the main differences between men and women result from physical and biological characteristics (male/female) on the one hand, but also from social expectations (masculine/feminine) on the other hand. Since in most contemporary societies, males are those who hold the positions of power (patriarchal societies), their dominant role is also reflected in the process of humour creation. According to Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 141), “a society is considered a masculine one if the gender emotional roles differ clearly: men should be authoritarian, harsh and focused on material success, while women should be modest, gentle and concerned with quality of life”. These gender-related roles which are accepted by members of a society provide a powerful stereotypical frame. Furthermore, they promote gender bias, or even lead to discriminatory behaviour directed against women, even though the idea of achieving full gender equality has become one of the primary objectives of all democratic societies.

Humour is often used as an effective means of social influence, which controls and establishes social order and hierarchy. Feelings of social cohesion, solidarity and self-identification are manifested in relation to other in-group members, while maladaptive humour styles such as hostile/offensive jokes, irony or sarcasm are often used to mock and ridicule out-group members, who are considered less important or even inferior. Apte (1985) affirms that differences between male and female humour arise from social restrictions imposed on women; they enjoy less freedom, their behaviour is more controlled and restricted with expectations of modesty, politeness, etc. Not only women's traditional roles (range of attitudes and behaviours considered acceptable and desirable) performed in society but also their looks and behaviour are popular themes used for developing stereotypes in humour. The way how female characters

are depicted, reflects male dominance, sex discrimination, prejudice, or in some cases misogyny. Representations of women's role, their sexuality, physical and emotional characteristics, actions, or even ordinary problems and activities they perform daily, are often depicted in an ambiguous way. They become targets of ridicule, exaggeration, underestimation, mockery or belittlement.

### **Portrayals of women in situation comedies**

The process of over-generalization and stereotyping of a particular social group seems to be a significant part of ethnic, religious or gender humour (gender as a social label/construct and sex as a biological one) presented in the form of jokes, cartoons or various comedy genres. In particular, the emergence of situation comedies or sitcoms has brought a different but popular way in which gender presentations are formed through stereotypes. Initially broadcast on radio, the sitcom transformed into a type of television programme in the late 1940s. Throughout the decades, it has been one of the most popular and enduring forms of entertainment presented on TV which, "has become a behavioral model, educational tool, informational provider, a source for concern, debate, and criticism" (Roman, 2005, p. 301). The popularity of this genre stems from the fact that it reflects contemporary events and changes in society in a humorous way. Furthermore, according to Mills (2005, p. 9), it becomes "not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself".

Traditional features of sitcoms include a distinct narrative style, shooting technique, manner of acting, duration (25-30 minutes), and scheduling. Additionally, each sitcom episode involves the same characters and setting (with a limited number of locations) and is often described as "closed off" – issues and problems are explained and resolved by the end of the episode. This creates an expectation of a "happy ending" (Mills, 2005, pp. 26-27). Since the narrative structure is circular rather than linear, the characters return to their original status by the end of each episode in preparation for a new situation to occur the following week (Mintz, 1985). This is reinforced by the stereotypical nature of the characters, which helps the audience to "establish expectations, validate preconceived notions, and provide viewers with models of behavior for their own lives" (Meehan, 1983, p. 114).

The first situation comedies, aired on television in the USA during the 1950s, were mainly focused on the positive family values that followed the social ideology of the traditional nuclear family – an important building block of the "healthy society" during the Cold War. After World War II, women were encouraged to give up their careers and return to their

traditional family roles. And thus, the dominant theme promoted in the media was marriage with new ideas of femininity associated with domesticity and idealized home life. Moreover, gender differences were often exaggerated through introduced social roles. In general, men were portrayed as the sole income earner whereas women were marginalized and encouraged to stay at home rather than to go to work. They were often portrayed as archetypal mothers, wives or homemakers in social isolation, dedicated to household tasks and bringing up children, which had traditionally been their natural responsibility. The traditional social role of a young woman was based on social values and pressure to get married, have a lot of children, take care of the family, prepare meals and do all the household chores with a smile on her face. She was responsible for the healthy functioning of the family and providing psychological, emotional as well as moral support. In the early era of television, the common image was, as Eisenmann (2002, p. 133) states, a “white, middle-class, suburban ideal where an at-home mother dutifully managed home and family, fully supporting her husband’s preeminent role”. These ideological presumptions were based on the socially defined patterns of behaviour and “fairy tale” image – “they lived happily ever after”. Strong gender roles were introduced in the first sitcoms (*I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*) in which the representation of women was based on a portrayal of “perfect housewives” – happy, neat, attractive and flawless at all times. During that time, women were expected to be caring mothers, obedient wives and diligent homemakers working hard to make their home more welcoming, safe and warm. Their relationships were limited to family, close friends, or women’s magazines, where they would look for advice on a happy marriage and “perfect family”. According to Mackinnon (2003), in the first family sitcoms, father figures were depicted as the breadwinner of the patriarchal family, who did not take an active role in domestic chores and child-rearing. This idealized image led to views regarding the 1950s as the peak of gender inequality (Eisenmann, 2002) through gender marginalization and a striving for emancipation.

The 1960s and 1970s were known for the women’s liberation movement for equal social and legal rights, led by the second wave of feminism (the first wave saw the ratification of the 19th Amendment in August 1920, which granted women the right to vote). These were decades of great change for women. The revolutionary view on equality and independence was supported by Betty Friedan’s book (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* in which she depicted the frustration of women who were dissatisfied with their lives as devoted wives-mothers. Losing their own identities, women were trying to break out of the household trap as a place where all their own desires and ambitions were neglected only to follow society’s ideal of femininity. In

the same year, a report entitled *American Women*, issued by the President's Commission on the Status of Women, advocated gender equality. Women were granted equal educational and work opportunities, as well as wages with special support for working mothers. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender, race, colour, religion and national origin meant greater empowerment for women. At the beginning of the 1960s, stereotypes presented in situation comedies did not differ that much from the ones in the 1950s. In *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1962), typical gender stereotypes prevailed in the first episodes. Laura was portrayed as a caring and subservient housewife and Rob as the dominant partner and breadwinner, making all the important decisions. Even though the traditional gender roles of the 1950s were still dominant, some slight changes in women's roles were evident, especially in the socioeconomic sphere – more women were seeking and holding jobs (Pilcher, Pole & Williams, 2003) to become economically independent.

Although most female characters on TV were still portrayed as stay-at-home moms during the 1960s and 1970s (Signorielli, 1991), changing values and ideology influenced the traditional representation of women who did not fit into the traditional character pattern. A new type of sitcom with ridiculous cartoon-like characters or unusual plots full of fantasies became part of prime time. Female characters used magic to escape reality, which was based on their roles as housewives (*The Addams family*, *Bewitched*, *I dream of Jeannie*). Changes brought by the Women's Liberation Movement affected the image of women, who were trying to become more independent in TV shows. The shift from a full-time homemaker-oriented sitcom model to a strong female character or feminist sitcom model, in many cases single and working, thus financially independent, is a typical feature of 1970s sitcoms (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*). Many controversial political and social issues such as religion, racism, divorce or even abortion dominated many television shows (*Maude*). Moreover, themes based on personal as well as work relationships and difficulties faced by working women were offered to audiences (*Alice*).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, there had been significant change in the traditional representation of women. The feminist approach altered into a form of narcissism – women were objectified and more focused on their physical appearance. Zuckerman and Dubowitz identified a change in female role models in the popular TV series *Charlie's Angels*, which helped break down traditional female portrayals – “from one narrow and unrealistic ideal (the beautiful contented housewife) to another (the beautiful, smart, and athletic private detective)” (Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005, p. 61). Although in many sitcoms, the traditional family was restored (*Full House*, *Family Matters*), many of them focused their attention on the portrayal of single mothers/women (*The Golden Girls*, *Kate & Allie*, *Murphy Brown*). Women were



“more likely to work outside the home and more likely to hold a professional position” (Douglas, 2003, p. 99), whereas men were more frequently involved in child-rearing and domestic life (Day & Mackey, 1986). This can be clearly seen in *The Bill Cosby Show*, which not only broke down ethnic stereotypes but also introduced positive male and female role models. The “rights and responsibilities in the family had become less gender specific” (Douglas, 2003, p. 99). A man was portrayed as a caring, sensitive and supportive husband-father and a wife as an independent and successful woman who can balance both her family and career easily. The gender gap was eliminated and so the relationships between the husband and wife became more equal; men were more willing to participate in childcare and housework (Farley, 1990).

Another popular image reflecting women’s greater social and economic independence presented in TV shows was that of a strong and emancipated woman often referred to as a dominant and imperfect wife/woman as the main character (*Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*). Similarly, pseudo-families with strong relationships among friends or colleagues became a popular sitcom type (*Cheers*). Although it reflected the social trend of ignoring traditional ideology based on having a family, it introduced a new perspective of a carefree and exciting life of being happily single and independent. Having time for self-care, enjoying the freedom to learn, work or relax without any commitments shaped the way women started to perceive their real desire. In addition, the absence of a mother character became a new phenomenon in the non-traditional depiction of a family (*Full House*, *My Two Dads*, *The Nanny*).

In the 1990s and 2000s, society became more tolerant and showed respect for changes in perception of gender. Women’s roles shifted from the 1950s traditional conception of a housewife to the unconventional female character of the 1990s and 2000s. In popular domestic sitcoms, the picture of the idealized traditional family was overlaid by the idea of the pseudo-family and dysfunctional working-class family (*The Simpsons*, *Married...with Children*, *Unhappily Ever After*) in which fathers changed from powerful providers to buffoons whose stupidity was a frequent target of jokes (Scharrer, 2001). Moreover, “with emphasis on disenfranchised families, extended families, single-parents and gay relationships, the idea of “family” took on a broader and deeper meaning” (Sedita, 2006, p. 11). Family-like communities, often multi-ethnic or mixed-gender, facing everyday problems, introduced a new hierarchy of social values – friendship preferences rather than biological relations and ties (*Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Golden Girls*, *Ally McBeal*).

In general, the messages conveyed by female characters supported the idea of feminism and femininity through behaviour, sexuality and looks. The concept of women’s empowerment

was mainly associated with “feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are” (Shugart, Waggoner & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195). In those decades, it was not surprising to see women on TV being portrayed as attractive role models, even as unattainable goddesses, who used their beauty as the key to life success and happiness. They were also shown as sexually accessible and seductive women expressing alluring behaviours to attract men (the common blonde stereotype). Furthermore, female sitcom characters were often introduced to audiences as young, single, independent and free from family/workplace demands and pressures (Elasmar, Hasegawa & Brain, 1999). At the same time, sexually explicit content became part of many TV shows. It focused on the female character’s expression of sexuality through controversial behaviours, promiscuity or aggressiveness, or LGBT characters presented in sitcoms aiming at the representation of women’s sexuality in a new light and as something natural (*Ellen, Friends, Will & Grace, Two and a Half Men*). However, many themes still included the representation of the submissive female, unrealistic career choices, obsession with personal appearance, dieting, and eating disorders (Van Damme, 2010). Croteau (2012) argues that the accumulation of media images sets the standards of beauty and proposes what is normal and common, for instance, that women should be preoccupied with their looks or are incomplete without a man. As a response and opposition to stereotypical images of women, often portrayed as passive, weak and faithful, or alternatively as domineering, demanding, slutty and emasculating, the third wave of feminism redefined women/girls as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Gender representations are anchored in binary oppositions, which “arise from the dichotomous definition of gender as either masculine and active or feminine and passive” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 93). The abovementioned stereotypes create a mosaic of the expected images, opinions and evaluations; moreover, they facilitate communication and decoding humour discourse correctly. In this article, we have tried to analyse the evolution of women’s portrayals in sitcoms through several decades. The results of our qualitative data analysis illustrate a considerable change in gender roles from traditional in the 1950s to more unconventional in the 1990s and 2000s. To sum up, female characters, who are often portrayed in sitcoms as amusing, smart and attractive, perform two different roles: on the one hand, a woman who is subject to male dominance, on the other hand, a woman who is physically and intellectually superior to her husband (Walsh et al., 2008). Gender inequality is reflected in a stereotype related to the position of women in a patriarchal society. They are often portrayed as inferior, obedient and

submissive to men (Kray et al., 2001). Women who fit this stereotype are considered passive, quiet and weak individuals who need someone to make decisions for them. In most domestic sitcoms, women are stereotyped as caregivers, warm-hearted wives, and mothers. Their main responsibility is to raise children and do all the housework (Vogel et al., 2003). Another role that is often portrayed by women in a stereotypical way is the image of wives as commanding matriarchs who rule their families and make important decisions. They either have jobs to show their independence or thanks to their dominant personality become head of the household (Senzani, 2010). Comparing the sexes, women are often portrayed as sensitive, hysterical or hyperemotional (Heesacker et al., 1999). Their inappropriate emotional responses involve jealous reactions, laughing, crying, aversive emotions, or any other responses that may be disruptive or exaggerated. Their impulsive behaviour, emotional immaturity and lack of intelligence are often closely linked to their looks as attractive and blonde-haired women. Objectification of women is a popular stereotype in many sitcoms. This act of treating individuals classifies women as the object of sexual desire, the target of seduction (focusing on their body and sex) regardless of their characteristics, capabilities or competences. They are demoted from having a position in life to being powerless (Goodall, 2012). In terms of femininity as a central concept, it is apparent that women's identity is affected negatively, while it reflects dominant social values and stereotypical societal views.

Humour is often used as an effective means of social influence, which reinforces social cohesion. Furthermore, it serves as a tolerated means of social criticism or mockery. Since the categorization of the world is also based on biological and mental differences between males and females, the perception of their identities and different social roles through stereotypes is reflected in different TV shows. "In these ways, sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself." (Mintz, 1985, p. 9)

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