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HOW A SITCOM BECOMES SUCCESSFUL

By

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University Honors  
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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## Abstract

Sitcoms become successful due to elements in the show that can be related to audiences. I define success in terms of popularity. In addition, writers and producers have to consider the audience and the events of the time period. My methodology consists of textual analysis. I will be focusing on two specific sitcoms: *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. *Friends*, which premiered in 1994, echoed the 1990's economy and rising popularity of the coffee house culture. *The Big Bang Theory*, which premiered in 2007, reflected the renewed interest in science at that time and the struggle of human contact due to the increase use in social media. These two shows succeeded because they spoke to the audiences of that generation and embodied the cultural shifts of the period. Furthermore, the shows illustrate the culture through their unique characters and events. Martin Gitlin articulates in his book, *The Greatest Sitcoms of All Time*, about a character's development to attract and grasp in audiences. He states that each character is unique in personality and the relationships within the show entice audiences because they wish to see the characters' social lives. My hope is that this research will benefit me as an aspiring actor to gain knowledge of the process of producing a successful sitcom. In addition, I hope that people outside of the field will take interest in learning the reasons why they may be attracted to certain sitcom shows.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

A sitcom, or situational comedy, is defined as a type of comedy based on the situations or circumstances in which the characters are involved. Each episode centers on a different situation with the same main characters. Writers, producers, directors, and the production team all work to develop a show that resonates well with audiences. The goal is to appeal to audiences of that generation, usually the 18-28 demographic. In my research, I focused on two sitcoms: *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. I explored what makes them popular, and discovered that the concept of sitcoms has to come from events to which the audience can relate. Sitcoms are based on situations, so the situation has to reflect what is familiar to the audience. Sitcoms become successful by being consistent with the time period as well as developing characters with whom the audience can relate and connect. I decided to study sitcoms because I wanted to understand the process of what makes a sitcom successful. I also want people outside of the field to find interest in the development of sitcoms and why they appeal to many individuals.

## **Methodology**

I utilized textual analysis in my research on how a sitcom becomes successful. Textual analysis consists of analyzing texts through historical documents and narratives. It entails seeing people's perspectives of the world. I researched the 1990's economy and coffee house culture to prove their effect on *Friends* and looked at the 2000's scientific interests and social communication to see how they are related and reflected on *The Big Bang Theory*. Then, I analyzed the character types that the show produces. I examined these elements to understand how a sitcom communicates and appeals to its audiences.

## ***Friends—the 1990's***

### *The Economy of the 90's*

The first episode of *Friends* premiered on September 22, 1994. The economy during this time period was recovering from the recession of the early 90's. The unemployment rate was low, an average of 275,000 new jobs generated, exports rose by 16 percent, and corporate profits increased. Under Bill Clinton, the economy had low inflation, was stable, and no wars occurred.

The characters in *Friends* never struggle to find jobs; instead, all of them maintain some sort of work and seek to find careers that they like. They live in nice apartments in New York City and do not have to worry about not being able to pay rent or being evicted. *Friends* focuses on the characters' relationships and career struggles. For instance, one of the characters, Rachel, comes from a rich family and decides to go off on her own. She wants to discover what she desires to do with her life. She starts off working in a coffee shop, and then moves on to working in high fashion industries such as Ralph Lauren. She does not struggle in finding a place to live, as she moves into her high school friend Monica's apartment, and does not struggle with money for rent. The show reflects the economy at the time. The 1990's economy was stable and the generation worried more about their social lives and what they wished to do for a career than whether they could make ends meet. This period's generations, generation X and Y, tend to seek opportunity more than just taking on any job to survive. Generation X, also known as the "lost" generation, had the lowest voting participation over all of the other generations (Generation X, Y, Z et. al). The audience never hears the characters in *Friends* talk about politics. That is because neither the characters nor the audience

thought about the politics at the time. For Generation Y, the philosophy was that work does not define life; instead, the career allows for a continuation of life. Generation Y's are unlikely to stay in a single job without a promotion (McCrinkle). They focus more on their lifestyle, as Rachel does in *Friends*.

### *The Coffee House Culture*

The characters of *Friends* hang out at a coffee house called Central Perk in New York City. The popularity of the coffee house culture spread in the 90's. Expanding from Europe to America during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the coffee house started out as a place of business. People such as Washington and John Adams would meet to talk about business ventures and trade. In New York, the Tontine Coffee House became home of the New York Stock Exchange. From this progression, the coffee house became a place for people to meet. Furthermore, the early 1900's introduced a new method of producing coffee. Coffee started out as grounds brewed in boiling water and served as the traditional black coffee. In Italy, Luigi Bezzera created a patent machine that pushed steam and water together through a "group" that held coffee grounds in a filter. This first espresso machine, named La Pavoni, travelled to America in 1927 and was installed in New York's Caffè Reggino, "Home of the Original Cappuccino." The piston lever espresso machine came out in 1949. This innovation led to today's automatic machines utilized by Starbucks, a coffee house that expanded the coffee house culture.

As Central Perk is a popular place for *Friends*, Starbucks became the go-to coffee place for people to buy drinks and hang out. Starbucks started out as a roaster, selling high quality beans (but not producing actual coffee) and coffee makers from Hammerplast. The vice president of Hammerplast, Howard Schultz, changed the concept

of Starbucks to what it is known today, a coffee house for people to buy drinks and meet up to talk. Schultz brought this idea from Italy when he visited Milan one day and discovered an Italian coffee bar. He was mesmerized by the smiling baristas interacting with the high activity of customers. He then traveled back to Seattle with this inspiration in mind for Starbucks. The owners of Starbucks laughed at the idea, as Starbucks was only a coffee retailer at the time. Nevertheless, this refusal did not stop Schultz pressing to open a coffee bar. After a year, the owners of Starbucks allowed Schultz to put one espresso machine in a location. That day, they served 400 people, which was above their customer average. However, the owners still refused to open a coffee house. Schultz then decided to leave and start his own company called Il Giornale Coffee Company. It quickly profited and grew. Later on, Starbucks decided to sell its business and Schultz jumped at the opportunity of purchasing it and changed Il Giornale Coffee Company to Starbucks. Starbucks expanded from 100 to 2,000 outlets in the United States in a decade. Starbucks is what it is today because of Schultz and his ambition. Because of Starbucks, the coffee house has become a place for people to gather, talk, and drink coffee—just as Central Perk in *Friends*.

Starbucks did not become popular because of its quality. Blind taste tests have proved that an average American prefers Dunkin Donuts or McDonald's coffee to Starbucks (Dada). People have become addicted to not the coffee but the coffee buying experience. They like the relaxing atmosphere and friendly baristas. In addition, psychologists believe that people go to buy coffee at coffee houses to reward themselves. The experience of buying coffee in a coffee house relaxes them. In *Friends*, after long days of work or having the need to talk to a friend, the group gathers at Central Perk to

hang out with each other. The enjoyable customer experience resulted in the coffee house culture in which *Friends* portrays with Central Perk.

In 2014, New York City opened a limited pop-up shop called Central Perk to celebrate *Friends*' 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The shop included some of the character's outfits on display, signed scripts pasted on the wall, and the big orange couch from the show. On the couch sits James Michael Tyler, who played the barista Gunther in the sitcom. Central Perk is a revolutionary coffee house that gained people's attention. In addition, Central Perk reflected the coffee house culture that people enjoyed.

### *The Characters and Their Relationships*

Martin Gitlin addresses in his book, *The Greatest Sitcoms of All Time*, the success of *Friends*. He says that *Friends* is "one of the most popular sitcoms of its era" (Gitlin 165). The characters in *Friends* portray relationships that could entertain people. The characters' unique personalities and relationships pull in the audiences. The audiences want to see how their messy situations turn out.

The author analyzes the characters and their relationships. Monica and Chandler start out as friends and marry toward the end of the production. At the starting of their new relationship, Monica and Chandler hook up without their friends knowing. One by one, each friend finds out. Monica's brother Ross discovers their secret last. Monica and Chandler's relationship draw in audiences. The audiences wish to know if the friends ever find out. In addition, each character illuminates different personalities; therefore, they will give different reactions to the news. Furthermore, Ross and Rachel go through a similar phase. Their relationship fluctuates throughout the show. They are together in the first season, then they break up, and then come together again. Audiences are curious to

see if they would end up together. The focus is on the relationships and not anything else—nothing on politics and nothing on starvation. Additionally, the episodes portray jealousy of one kind or another, usually of Rachel. Phoebe is the ditzy blonde in the show with her failed attempt at singing her songs, such as “Smelly Cat,” at the coffee house. Joey, the good-looking player, adds the show with his pick-up line, “How you doin’?” These characters’ personalities differentiate the show from the others because each show produces its own unique characters and the relationship that goes along with it. *Friends* portrays these characters as loving and caring for one another as they struggle through finding themselves in their careers and relationships in the 90’s.

### ***The Big Bang Theory—the 2000’s***

#### *A Renewed Interest in Science*

*The Big Bang Theory* tells of four socially awkward scientists working at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California while trying to maintain a social life. Many scientific breakthroughs came about in 2007, the year *The Big Bang Theory* premiered. The top scientific innovations include: transistors becoming smaller, engineers creating transparent material as strong as steel, and the theory of enzymes being able to convert any blood type to O. Part of the concept for this sitcom reflects the 2000’s renewed interest in science and the attempt to make scientific breakthroughs. The characters’ work ranges from engineering to physics at the university.

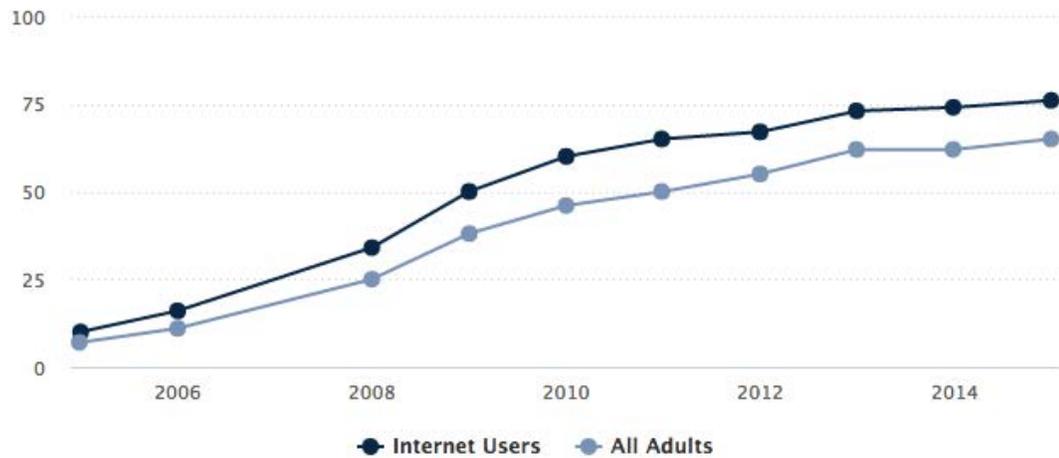
The president during the running of this show, Barack Obama, contributed to the scientific revolution. He pledged to restore “science to its rightful place” in his inaugural speech (Hourihan). He set a high bar of funding to scientific research including physical

science and cancer research. He also promoted clean energy technologies. He encouraged families to go solar in order to bring awareness to climate change and create a more sustainable environmental practice. Due to his initiative, solar jobs grew 12 times faster than the rest of the economy. Continuing, he created the Clean Energy Savings for All Initiative to spread the idea of solar energy. *The Big Bang Theory* is not an educational show but a sitcom that embodies science to its characters. Audiences are drawn to the fact that the comedy exemplifies the time period's events, which was an interest in science.

### *Social Communication*

Of all the characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon proves to be the most unique and humorous character, which results from his hilarious lack of social concepts. Signs of low emotional intelligence (EQ) include frustration from others not understanding the point, confusion to why people act sensitively to a comment or joke, finding others to blame for the issues in working in a team, and annoyance in other people's expectation to acknowledge their feelings (Wilkins). Sheldon inhabits all of those signs. He is unable to understand human emotions and does not speak to people properly or respectfully. Whenever the other characters, including Sheldon's mother, address that he is crazy, Sheldon replies, "I'm not crazy, my mother had me tested." He claims that he is smart and brags about his high IQ and scientific work at the university. His character development of not knowing how to communicate properly to other people results from the time's increase in social media usage. The use of social media grew and expanded throughout the 2000's. A survey documents the upsurge of social networking.

*% of all American adults and internet-using adults who use at least one social networking site*



The chart from the Pew Research Center survey shows the escalation of social networking in the decade of 2005 to 2015. 65 percent of adults use social networking sites (Perrin). This action means less face-to-face communication. The concept for *The Big Bang Theory* puts the characters in a world of technological advances and lack of knowledge in talking face-to-face with one another. Again, the most prominent character is Sheldon. He lacks understanding sarcasm and how to present a relationship that is physical in words and touch with his girlfriend, Amy Farrah Fowler. He dislikes their dates and would prefer to engage in something scientific. He is most comfortable when talking to her on Skype. But when Amy attempts to be physical with him, he hesitates to move forward to that stage of their relationship. The technological advances and applications, such as Facebook, texting, and other ways of communicating on electronics, decrease physical contact and therefore the social skill depreciates as well. The show emphasizes the diminution of face-to-face contact and portrays an exaggeration of the lack of social skills from the increase of social media usage.

*The Big Bang Theory's* main characters consist of four geeky nerds and one beautiful girl, a foil to the guys. John Jurgensen writes in his article, "A Nerdy Comedy's Winning Formula," about how comedies have shifted in characters and strategies throughout the years. With so many comedies shows out there, writers and producers have to figure out a way to differentiate themselves in the shows they write and produce. *The Big Bang Theory* has done just that with its unique characters. The show's formula features two nerdy characters who are brilliant but socially challenged. The characters' social awkwardness contrasts with their beautiful neighbor Penny. Penny works as a waitress at The Cheesecake Factory while pursuing her goal to become an actress. One of the main nerdy characters, Leonard, attempts to court her but fails constantly. This situation again reflects the technological advancement in the 2000's. The increase in social networking decreases the ability to communicate effectively face-to-face. The show presents people who are smart and think they know everything from their high education. However, when it comes to social situations, they fail because they lack the proper communication skills.

## **Conclusion**

Sitcoms become successful by creating characters and events that reflect upon the time period and with audiences. When people talk about their favorite sitcoms, in essence, they talk about what is going in the world at that time. *Friends* reflected the recovering economy and the sensibilities of a particular generation. It also reflected the coffee house culture. *The Big Bang Theory* portrayed the renewed interest in science and the decrease of physical human social contact due to the increase in the social media convention. Sitcoms deserve a place on television because they reflect life on screen.

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