THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF RIDICULE: A CRITICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF GENDER AND HUMOR IN U.S. SITCOMS

Leah E. Waters

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
May 2017

APPROVED:
Koji Fuse, Committee Chair
Megan Morrissey, Committee Member
James Mueller, Committee Member
Dorothy Bland, Director of the Frank W.
Mayborn Graduate Institute of
Journalism and Dean of the Frank W. and
Sue Mayborn School of Journalism
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the Toulouse
Graduate School

The serious investigation of humor’s function in society is an emerging area of research in critical humor studies, a “negative” subsect of the extensive and “positive” research that assumes humor’s goodness. Using Michael Billig’s theory of ridicule as a framework, this study explored how humor operated to discipline characters who broke social norms or allowed characters to rebel against those norms. Layering this with gender performative theory, the study also investigated how different male and female characters used ridicule and were subject to it themselves. After examining ridicule in *The Big Bang Theory, 2 Broke Girls, and The Odd Couple* using a critical rhetorical analysis, the findings revealed that disciplinary ridicule was used more overtly throughout all three programs, while potentially rebellious ridicule emerged in only a few scenes. In addition, men were overwhelmingly the subjects of disciplinary ridicule, although women found themselves as subjects throughout all three programs as well. The discursive ridiculing of non-normative bodies constructed and maintained social norms about gender and sexuality, thereby uninviting these bodies from participating in society.
Copyright 2017

by

Leah E. Waters
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be a pity nearing sacrilege if I didn’t acknowledge the unseen efforts of a few people who guided my thoughts and words throughout this process. Although a few lines on a page is inadequate commendation for their contributions, I hope such mention brings them joy in knowing my life has been forever changed by their own. First and foremost, thank you to my family, including, but certainly not limited to, my husband Jim, my son Charlie, and my in-laws Craig and Betty, who have loved and supported me throughout the late-night writing sessions and weekend absences. I would not have finished this thesis without you all giving me strength and peace of mind. To Dr. Megan Morrissey, thank you for introducing me to the world of rhetoric and all its liberating possibilities. Your passionate discussions and thoughtful feedback have allowed me to view discourse as the most powerful tool at our disposal. And thank you more than anything for your constant feedback on my work, directing each one of my words to its highest potential, instilling in me a greater attention to detail far beyond my prior observations. To Dr. James Mueller, thank you for teaching me the media theories of the world, both past and present, and pressing me to question the reasons and consequences, causes and effects of historical events. More than anything, thank you for modeling a cooperative classroom, safe for exploration of challenging ideas. To Dr. Koji Fuse, thank you for your attentive, painstaking edits on all my disheveled drafts, carefully providing correction when needed and challenging me to question assumptions. Thank you for never, ever letting up on me, even when it required harsh criticism clothed in direct words. Thank you for telling me the truth, empowering my work, and above all, making me laugh. Surprisingly, studying humor is serious, often unfunny business. I’m grateful we found opportunities to laugh, even if it was at our own expense.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES ................................................................. vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ...................................................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .......................................... 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical and Modern Theories: Superiority, Inferiority, Incongruity, and Relief .......................... 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Theories: Critical Humor Studies ........................................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT ......................................... 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating Gender ................................................................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rhetoric of Humor .......................................................... 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS ............................................. 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. METHOD ................................................................. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6. RESULTS ................................................................. 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Big Bang Theory ............................................................ 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: Rhetorical Positionality .................................................. 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule ................. 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity .............. 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Broke Girls ...................................................................... 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: Rhetorical Positionality .................................................. 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule ................ 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity .............. 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Odd Couple ................................................................. 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: Rhetorical positionality ............................................... 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule ................ 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity .............. 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Differences .......................................................... 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Commonalities ...................................................... 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The study of humor as a social phenomenon spans the centuries as curious scholars have investigated its paradoxical, pervasive, and elusive properties. It can be both universal and personal, as well as both unifying and divisive, a tool of control, subversion, and liberation. Despite its relatively long history of academic investigation, the full intricacies of humor’s cause, function, and effect continue to puzzle the most accomplished researchers. One of the countless challenges that researchers face when studying humor is its inability to be contained by any one theory, text, method, or discipline. Goldstein and McGhee (1972) have pushed against defining humor as its meaning may change depending on the researcher’s theoretical orientation. Therefore, this study must cast a wide net of inquiry, pulling together ideas and criticisms from Bergson’s (2005) social corrective theory and Foucault’s (1972, 1980) discourses of power to extend the dialogue within the relatively progressive field of critical humor studies. Prior to the emergence of critical humor studies, researchers were most interested in discovering the enigmatic properties that characterized a humor phenomenon. More specifically, psychologists and sociologists wanted to know what made a joke funny, who laughed at it, and why. However, solely viewing humor through a positive perspective often overlooks its hidden role in reproducing and/or deconstructing social norms. On the other hand, critical humor researchers challenge humor’s assumed goodness and essentialness to positive human behavior and then want to know how humor functions as a social mechanism (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008).

From the critical arena of academic inquiry evolved contemporary theories of humor that acknowledged humor’s persuasive power to both uphold and subvert social norms (Billig, 2005; Weaver, 2011). The rhetorical function of humor in society has recently emerged as a serious site
of scholarly investigation by critical humor researchers (Ford, 2004; Weaver, 2011; Abedinifard, 2016). Much like previous research in critical humor studies, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the humor technique of ridicule is mediated as a rhetorical device to reify or push against social norms. Billig (2005) argues that ridicule specifically works to discipline and/or rebel against social norms, thereby giving rhetorical power to speakers in a given situation. While applying the little-explored theory of ridicule posited by Billig (2005), the following study diverges from most of its predecessors in three ways: (a) The text for analysis involves the humor discourse of popular U.S. sitcoms; (b) the social norms in question are those of gender; and (c) the method used is one of critical rhetorical analysis. Those three methodological departures in turn will open up new venues of investigation on humor in the context of U.S. sitcoms. First, since popular U.S. sitcoms represent a text that attracts the widest possible audience, they present an opportunity to understand how ridicule operates in a mainstream space. Second, investigating gender norms can reveal the ways in which ridicule might function differently among male and female characters. Third, critically analyzing U.S. sitcoms from a rhetorical perspective will allow the present study to investigate patterns about whom and what Hollywood says consumers can and should laugh at.

The specific aims of this study are to investigate the following issues: (a) how male and female characters use ridicule specifically as a rhetorical device to negotiate social power, defined by their discursive positioning among the group; (b) how disciplinary and rebellious types of ridicule emerge in humor situations; and (c) how ridicule is used to reinforce and/or subvert social norms. In order to investigate these intersectional aspects of humor, the study analyzes humor situations preceding laugh tracks in three sitcoms: Big Bang Theory (mix of male and female genders), 2 Broke Girls (two female protagonists), and The Odd Couple (two
male protagonists). Each show was chosen because of the genders of main characters to allow the present study to operationalize the discursive similarities and differences between male and female characters. Through the practice of rhetorical critique, this study attempts to discover how different gendered bodies negotiate rhetorical power through their use of ridicule.

Although scholars have produced a large body of work on humor, successful understanding of the phenomenon is fragmented by a “continuing lack of any systematic and theoretical attack” on the subject (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972, p. xix). Goldstein and McGhee (1972) encourage students of humor to push the current fabric of understanding past their own disciplinary boundaries in order to weave together a more comprehensive, holistic picture of the phenomenon. Despite a growing body of literature in critical humor studies, scholars have yet to produce work investigating the rhetorical implications of ridicule’s function in society. In addition, while humor studies have investigated mainstream U.S. texts like sitcoms in the past, they have not analyzed how these programs serve as products circulating social norms. The following study investigates these aforementioned gaps in existing literature between humor and rhetoric research with the hopes of extending the conversations in critical humor studies. It also attempts to integrate discrete, discipline-specific theories by contributing to conversations intersecting humor, gender, and rhetoric studies with the purpose of providing critical understanding of how humor operates as a socially persuasive phenomenon. The intended outcome of this study is one in which future researchers will have more hermeneutical possibilities for understanding the complex relationship between gender, humor, and its power to shape society.
Although this study of humor is situated within the discipline of critical humor studies, it is important to review the wealth of literature across various fields that investigate the subject. Many other books and articles exist far more comprehensive than this study (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983; Chapman & Foot, 1976; Billig, 2005). However, reviewing the most popular classical and modern paradigms of humor will clarify how contemporary approaches diverged from them, and more importantly, why the critical study of humor requires investigation of contemporary theories. Historically, the word “humor” had been used in the context of ancient and medieval medicine to describe fluids of the body and their effect on a person’s temperament (Traherne, 1675). Plato and Aristotle both thought of humor as an irrational and dangerous temperament that couldn’t always be trusted (Aristotle, 1941). The modern definition of humor only began to emerge as early as the 17th century, taking on a meaning to describe a person’s ability to appreciate the comical and oftentimes ludicrous. The word humor has also been defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2017) as “the capacity to elicit laughter or amusement,” specifically by one’s writing or performance. Despite this study’s social focus, it is imperative to discuss some classical theories first to fully demonstrate how later theories diverged.

Some of the first written discussions of humor focused mainly on its use in classical comedy, dramaturgy, and oratory but failed to explain the phenomenon in terms of its social function, psychological causes and effects, and application beyond the theater (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983, p. 6). Modernist approaches to studying humor separated into more independent bodies of knowledge that tended to stick to the conversations only within their academic
disciplines. Most of the humor theories explained here have emerged from the fields of psychology and sociology, although their application has stretched into other fields such as anthropology, film, communication, and media. Berger (1987) argues that no single theory is comprehensive enough to explain everything without fault: “Yet each theory does have something to contribute to our understanding of this all-pervasive, mysteriously enigmatic phenomenon we know as humor” (p. 6). The current interdisciplinary approach to humor attempts to pull together the seemingly contradictory results of differing fields. Although researchers from various camps may argue some of these theories should be further differentiated so as not to oversimplify the complexities of humor, this study explains the theories based on the interdisciplinary consensus to which most scholars have contributed.

Classical and Modern Theories: Superiority, Inferiority, Incongruity, and Relief

The first and foremost of these, seminal to all later ideas outlined here, is the superiority theory of humor. Aristotle and Plato first discussed this form of wit as having some conversational benefits, but eventually Plato argued humor was nothing more than “educated insolence” (Plato, 1978). English Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes articulated what researchers now categorize as superiority theory: “The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others” (Hobbes, 1812, p. 65). Simply put, we laugh because our own superiority is suddenly made visible through the inferiority of others. Later scholars further applied this theory by claiming laughter’s spontaneous response to one’s own superiority was often, if not always, at the expense of a weaker, more inept “other.” Thus evolved a more modern approach of the disparagement theory. First proposed by Wolff, Smith, and Murray (1934), the theory posits that laughter or one’s “mirth” depends on one’s affiliation with the
disparaged object. Wolff et al. insisted upon a dichotomous classification of unaffiliated and affiliated objects that dictated how one would respond to disparagement of those objects. Their empirical studies of audience reception of gender jokes revealed that more women than men appreciated jokes disparaging men, and more men than women appreciated jokes disparaging women. Since its emergence, disparagement humor has been investigated in terms of its theoretical implications (Berlyne, 1969; Keith-Spiegel, 1972; La Fave, 1972; Zillman & Cantor, 1976) and experimental possibilities (Bryant, Brown, Comisky, & Zillman, 1982; Zillman & Cantor, 1977; Zillman, Hay, & Bryant, 1975). The findings, although not always significant, implied a distinctive way in which humor works: A human’s orientation toward a humor situation is governed by his or her identity and the position of that identity within the humor context. La Fave’s (1972) extension of this idea claimed a joke is “humorous to the extent that it enhances an object of affection and/or disparages an object of repulsion” (p. 198). Since its introduction, scholars have used disparagement theory as a testing ground for exploring humor’s social function (Suls, 1977; Zillmann, 1983; Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Although related to superiority theory, inferiority theory of humor functions a separate mechanism since the person who creates the joke is also the butt of it. Inferiority theory implies that people cannot help but laugh at their own misfortunes, which is distinctive from superiority since the mocking is turned inward (Davies, 2008).

Laughing at the misfortunes of others only accounts for a fraction of explainable instances of humor. Incongruity humor is first defined by Kant in his Critique of Judgement: “Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing,” as quoted in Morreall (1987, p. 47). Although Aristotle alluded to a form of humor like incongruity where the speaker violates certain expectations held by the audience, he didn’t use
the term incongruity. In *The World as Will and Idea*, Shopenhauer explained the phenomenon more explicitly: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity,” as quoted in Morreall, 1987, p. 52. The definition of incongruity theory most modern humor scholars use comes from McGhee (1979):

> The notion of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationships between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous. (pp. 6-7)

This “essentialist” outlook of incongruity theory differs from the psychological and sociological “descriptivist” paradigms of humor, as the former is concerned with the “essence of the humorous phenomena” and the latter with the “modalities of their production and reception” (Attardo, 1994, p. 23). Incongruity theory is also considered a linguistic theory for this reason, relying on the arrangement of words and their meaning to create humor. A famous example illustrating the incongruity of words most clearly is Groucho Marx’s one-liner: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don’t know” (Heerman, 1930). Pursuant to the theory, Marx’s joke invokes humor because of the incongruous mental image of an elephant in his pajamas. Incongruity theory has thus been used in rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor (Waisanen, 2009) and its discussions of its semiotic and rhetorical properties (Weaver, 2011, 2015; Perez, 2013, 2014). Berger (1995, 2010a, 2010b) contributed to those discussions of humor most practically by his identification of 45 humor techniques, which has served as a resource to humor researchers since its emergence into the field. Berger (1995) separated humor techniques into four distinct typologies: language (allusion, irony, sarcasm, satire, puns), logic (absurdity, coincidence, ignorance), identity (parody, imitation, caricature),
and action (slapstick). He believed the semantic structure of these humor techniques, rather than
the content of a joke itself, evoked laughter in a humor situation. His approach is markedly
uncritical, but his typology of rhetorical techniques has been used to name ways in which
characters employ humor.

The other, most widely cited approach of humor is the relief theory introduced by earlier
scholars but most popularized by Spencer’s (1911) psychological and Freud’s (1905/1991)
psychoanalytic ideas. Relief theory assumes humor acts as a release from social tension, the
mind’s reaction to psychological stress or dissonance. For Spencer, laughter is simply a release
of nervous energy (Morreall, 1982). For Freud, laughter indicates a more complex reaction,
which Billig (2005) describes most clearly:

Freud teaches that the social world makes demands on its members and that humour
becomes a way of evading those demands on its members, at least momentarily. Above
all, Freud conveys the message that one should distrust humor: our laughter is not
necessarily an honest reflection of the soul. Yet, curiously Freud’s own analysis contains
its own evasions and omissions. These are taken as further evidence that the disciplinary
functions of humour are both socially important and also matters of evasion. (p. 6)

Despite the widespread popularity of these three classical understandings of humor, scholars
recognize each theory’s collective inability to fully explain each humor situation. However, one
premise is inherently agreed upon in academic conversations: Humor’s complexity requires
situation-based study to fully investigate its essence, uses, effects, and social function. The
following section explores the more modern theories found within the emerging field of critical
humor studies. Although the classical theories aren’t altogether disregarded in critical study, their
epistemological assumptions are questioned in light of postmodern world where discourse, and
thereby humor, are constantly operating as tools of social power.
Contemporary Theories: Critical Humor Studies

The aforementioned classical and modern theories explore humor’s universal properties and consequently tend to oversimplify its powerful social functions (Weaver, 2011, p. 37). Prior to critical humor studies’ entry into academic conversations, scholars hesitated to regard humor as a serious area of study (Davis 1995; Kuipers 2008). Abedinifard (2016) argues the ambivalence about humor research’s merit reveals an important tension that humor “apparently has something notable to do with the construction and maintenance of gender structures, but to go beyond such an observation would require taking humour too seriously” (p. 234). Therefore, a critical humor studies scholar investigates these relationships, not to simply note its existence, but to investigate how the worlds of seriousness and humor are one in the same (Billig, 2005, p. 5).

Regarding humor’s roles in shaping and maintaining societal norms, Henri Bergson’s Laughter (1900/2005) marks a turn in investigating humor’s function as a social corrective and brought with it a critical eye on the previously unquestioned positivism of laughter in psychological study. The esteemed, 20th-century French philosopher proposed three observations of laughter that created the impetus for studying humor’s disciplinary function: a) Laughter is human; b) laughter frees humans momentarily from empathy; and c) laughter is socially shared (Bergson, 2005, pp. 2-3). According to Bergson’s observations, since only humans experience laughter, it must serve a purpose in the social world. When we collectively laugh at a man who trips over his own feet and falls into the bushes, we experience a “temporary anesthesia of the heart” by substituting our concern for mirth (Billig, 2005, p. 43). Bergson (1911) also stressed the necessity of audience in a humor situation: “Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo” (p. 5).
Bergson’s seminal work on humor’s social function allowed for more critical examinations of laughter to emerge. Martineau’s (1972) theory of humor as a social “lubricant” and “abrasive” acknowledged humor’s power to control behavior and meanings within and outside of social groups. More recently, Billig’s (2005) ideas on ridicule’s power to shape the social order influenced humor studies by insisting upon a critical investigation of its functions. Classical theories generally failed to question humor’s goodness: “We belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humor is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human” (Billig, 2005, p. 13). Contemporary approaches have argued for a critical look at the negative implications of humor’s taken-for-granted position in society. Because this study uses Billig’s (2005) critical approach as a basis to investigate ridicule’s function in U.S. sitcoms, expounding his interpretations is necessary to provide a thorough framework for the focus of the study. Much like others before him, Billig (2005, p. 176) noted three paradoxes of humor: (a) its universal and particular properties to both be understood by all and still isolate a single person; (b) its ability to be both social and antisocial, both uniting people with laughter and excluding others with the same token; and (c) its evasive and relatable properties to appear mysterious and resistant to analysis but simultaneously be understandable and analyzable.

Billig’s (2005) most significant theoretical contribution is the idea of unlaughter and its subversive power:

Language is paradoxical to the extent we can deny; we can question because we can answer; we can criticise because we can justify, and so on. Because laughter is rhetorical, it cannot be a single, simple thing that can be considered apart from the rhetoric of communication. So the rhetorical opposite of laughter, which here will be termed ‘unlaughter’, will need examining. (p. 177)

It is with unlaughter, Billig claims, that people have the ability to disrupt the social order. The power of refusing laughter has rhetorical and material consequences in a social situation. It
signifies one’s unwillingness to participate in the disciplining of a social act. In the context of laugh tracks on sitcoms, viewers cannot escape the rhetorical laughter inserted into the program. However, Billig also notes how different kinds of humor can both reinforce and resist social norms. Billig differentiates humor into two categories of ridicule: disciplinary and rebellious humor. He considers that although both are ridicule, disciplinary humor “mocks those who break social rules” and therefore help maintain those social structures, while rebellious humor “mocks the social rules, and in its turn, can be seen to challenge, or rebel against, the rules” (p. 202). However, identifying certain humor as either disciplinary or rebellious is problematic because of humor’s potential for ambiguous and/or polysemic readings. The paradox of humor follows that “the same mechanism that ensures social compliance also expresses pleasure at subversion” (Billig, 2005, p. 234). Billig (2005) also argues for an investigation of not just humor but also of serious social issues in order to understand its context:

The two phenomena—the seriousness of the social world and its comedy—may be integrally connected. The social basis of the connection cannot be demonstrated merely by examining in increasing detail how humor operates in particular social situations. Instead, it is necessary to take a broad view of the so-called serious world and its power over social actors. (pp. 214-215)

In the context of this study, those serious issues are gender, as well as humor’s rhetorical power to discipline our understanding of it. The new and growing literature in critical humor studies is unified through a common point of tension: Humor can reproduce and/or resist hegemonic gender relations (Weaver, 2015). Despite the interest in this area of study, little investigation has been made into the hegemonic processes at work in humor and comedy in U.S. television. Weaver introduces a fourth theory to address humor’s liberatory potential in what he calls equality theory of humor, an emerging area of research focused specifically on the political and critical examination of social inequality and the “role of humour in perpetuating unequal
social relations” (2015, p. 228). The following sections unpack the theoretical framework of
gender performance theory and the practice of critical rhetoric as it relates to humor’s function as
crutch for social inequality.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT
Mediating Gender

The publication of Judith Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* marked a theoretical shift in how people understood, and hence studied, the representation and construction of gendered bodies. Prior to this shifting in meaning, gender was considered a biological construct, predetermined at birth and dependent solely on genetic makeup outside of one’s conscious control. Butler (1990) re-defined gender as “‘performative’… not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint” (p. 95). In Sloop’s (2004) simple definition, “gender is what we *do* rather than what we *are*” (p. 6). Feminist research on gender recognizes the need to understand one’s own political positionality, as well as the deconstruction of gender as a homogeneous category (Chiaro & Baccolini, 2014, p. 1). West and Zimmerman (1987) argue for a more interactional understanding of not just gender but also sex and sex category in which those three identifiers work together to create a gendered person. Expanding the performative idea further, West and Zimmerman (1987) define gender specifically as an “activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriated for one’s sex category” (p. 127). Performing as a person in a gendered body means creating categorical, unnatural, and non-biological differences between men and women and then using those differences to reinforce the “essentialness” of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137). Any theoretical discussion of gender invokes Foucauldian ideas of the complex system of power relations into which gendered bodies are placed. To Foucault, a person is inextricably and discursively constructed within the social structures. No gendered, pre-discursive body is “amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather
that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies” (Foucault, 1977, p. 217). These networks of power into which men and women are dichotomously placed are constantly being disciplined in order to maintain the bi-gender matrix (Amigot & Pujal, 2009, p. 647).

How humor functions as an apparatus of power in order to discipline potentially troubling gendered bodies is a fundamental question in this study. Although the concept has been explored briefly by some scholars (Weaver, 2015; Abedinifard, 2016), the relationship between gender and humor is an underexplored topic and by nature evades clear definitions. As Chiaro and Baccolini (2014) claim, no identifier greater than gender exists:

Gender conditions the most minute details of our lives, possibly more than our age, our social background, and our ethnicity, and, thus, it stands to reason that the way we “do” humor, and perhaps even our sense of humor may also, in some way, be accordingly gendered. (p. 1)

The present study activates the performative lens to unpack how certain gendered bodies use humor as an apparatus of power. For example, a characteristically normative female performs a masculine behavior (or vice versa) and is seen as an object of ridicule indicated by the program’s addition of a laugh track. Her physical characteristics, as well as all the ways in which the program makes her a woman, cannot be the sole variable in determining a character’s gender in a certain humor situation, as her “masculine” performance changes how an audience understands her body and its persuasive power. Butler (1990) describes this performance as making “gender trouble… through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place” (p. 34). In the rhetorical sense, the disparaging of non-hegemonic gendered bodies ultimately renders alternative ideas of gender structure as “ridiculous,” thereby disciplining their performances into a realm of social mockery (Abedinifard, 2016).
Weaver, Mora, and Morgan (2015) acknowledges the largely unexplored relationships between gendered humor and the discourses of gender hegemony and resistance (p. 227). Gramsci’s widely circulated theory of hegemony posits that the ruling class dominates a diverse society by controlling cultural ideology wherein that society gives consent to be governed to maintain the status quo (Bates, 1975). Ortner (1989–1990) describes hegemonies as “culturally dominant and relatively deeply embedded but nonetheless historically emergent, politically constructed, and nontotalistic” (p. 46). Althusser (2014) diverged from Gramsci’s position of absolute historicism, which posited that all knowledge is a historical production, arguing that ideological state apparatuses, of which mass media are one of many, circulate dominant ideology and is therefore a constant site of political tension. Condit’s (1994) re-reading of Gramsci argues for a hegemonic meaning-making society in which many voices contribute to its structure, not just a single dominant view. Noting its constant fluidity, Davis (2004) defines hegemony as “the winning of consent in order to gain and maintain power. Consent, however, is not a fixed goal. It is a moment of power which is always contestable and that has to be constantly re-won” (p. 46).

The construction of hegemony, and more specifically, gender hegemony, arises when “[o]ther kinds of behavior and character are defined as deviant or inferior and attract derision, hostility, and sometimes violence” (Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985, p. 44). Ridicule, among other things, works to uphold these structures of gender hegemony through “self-policing” bodies (Abedinifard, 2016; Connell, 1987, pp. 98–99).

Gendered humor examines, emphasizes, and exaggerates differences in humor between men and women (Abedinifard, 2016; Connell, 2009). Gendered humor also exists in hierarchies that are generally structured around intersectional elements of identity, such as age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and ability. This more complex understanding of gender’s
intersectional relationship with bodily non-normativity (Gerschick, 2005) allows for scholars to understand how ridiculing humor rewards hierarchically dominant bodies over othered, counter-hegemonic performances of potentially troubling gender:

In mainstream gender humour with targets—women, effeminate men, homosexuals, etc.—the disciplinary effect can occur through the derision of certain gender-transgressions. Fear of ridicule that typically results from embarrassing social situations acts as a control strategy that causes conformity to societal norms. (Connell, 2005, pp. 201–202)

Since gendered humor works as an ideological “watchmen” over heteronormative gender norms (Abedinifard, 2016), it is important to investigate the kinds of gendered bodies that humor tends to discipline and why it does so. In Anglo-American mainstream gender humor, those identities most targeted are pariah femininities (e.g., characterized by women challenging hegemonic gender norms, women with non-normative bodies, and lesbians); effeminate masculinities; homosexual masculinities; aged, disabled, and other racialized gendered bodies (Connell, 2009; Abedinifard, 2016). Although ridiculing humor is seen as “an essential abjecting policing tool in the process of construction and maintenance of hegemonic gender norms and identities” (Abedinifard, 2016, p. 244), scholars of humor cannot assume ridicule’s function is inherently policing, as it has been shown to work subversively against hegemonic gender norms as well (Bing, 2004; Bing & Heller, 2003; Crawford, 2003; Kotthoff, 2006). Since humor is a powerful, persuasive tool in both maintaining and disrupting normative ideas (Kotthoff, 2006a, p. 5), further study is needed to explore its function in mediating gendered bodies. This study investigates how gendered bodies mediated in ideological containers negotiate social power through the use of disparagement and self-disparagement humor.
The Rhetoric of Humor

In popular U.S. sitcoms, rhetoric is a persuasive act and humor its weapon of choice. The study of humor and its power to persuade necessitates an ideological investigation called critical rhetoric, a theory and practice championed by communications scholar Ray McKerrow. In this theoretical and practical essay, McKerrow (1989) defines critical rhetoric as an orientation toward studying the material and constitutive relationship between discourse and power with the purpose of influencing social change. McKerrow distinguishes the practice of critical rhetoric from the method of traditional criticism by conceptualizing the former as doxastic, nominalistic, influential, and polysemic and the latter as epistemic, universalistic, causal, and monosemic. A large part of McKerrow’s push for an ideological turn stems from Foucault’s ideas on discourses of power. In short, the practice of critical rhetoric “seeks to unmask or demystify the discourses of power” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). For Foucault, discourse means “a system of representation,” instead of strictly a linguistic concept (Hall, 1997, p. 41). Hall (1992) describes Foucault’s understanding of discourse as:

a group of statements which provide language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect. (p. 291, emphasis original)

Discourse, understood in this way, is not just what we say, but what we do. As Foucault (1972) argues, discourse governs the way we think about ideas and make meaning from them: “Nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (p. 44). Discourse then is just one way in which power operates within an “institutional apparatus and its technologies (techniques)” (Hall, 1972, p. 75).

In the context of this study, discourse is the performance (speech, silence, physical movement) of characters within a gendered body, and the ridiculing humor is an apparatus of power used to
discipline and/or liberate those bodies. However, Foucault’s (1977) understanding of power is not one that should be essentially limited by the discourse used to describe it:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of object and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (p. 194)

Therefore, the practice of critical rhetoric attempts to unpack the discourse and investigate how apparatus techniques are negotiating that power. McKerrow (1989) outlines eight principles governing the practice of critical rhetoric, which will be mentioned briefly here to edify its orientation in relation to this study. First, critical rhetoric shouldn’t be considered a restrictive method, but instead a practice that orients the researcher to maximize discursive possibilities. Second, the materiality of discourse must be acknowledged: “The analysis of social praxis must, if it is to accomplish its transformative goal, deal in concrete terms with those relations which are “real”—which do in fact constrain discourse, and do so in ways that are seldom seen without such analysis” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 103). Therefore, the ways in which people talk about gender limits or liberates the social performances of gender. Third, doxastic knowledge establishes the structure of critical rhetoric:

Rather than focusing on questions of “truth” or “falsity,” a view of rhetoric as doxastic allows the focus to shift toward how the symbols come to possess power—what they ‘do’ in society as contrasted to what they “are.” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 104)

Fourth, critical rhetoric is a nominalist process, whereby the naming of new hermeneutical possibilities is a chief concern. Fifth, McKerrow (1989) argues that “influence is not causality,” meaning that symbolic discourse alone does not condition social norms. Sixth, what is absent from a text holds equal importance to what is present in that text. Seventh, the fragments within texts have polysemic possibilities, which is certainly true of a rhetorical
analysis of humor. Eighth and finally, McKerrow (1989) regarded the act of rhetorical criticism as a performance itself, an individual reading on the discourses of power that pushes against restrictive norms.

McKerrow’s eight principles of critical rhetoric inform this study, as well as other ideas about the power of discourse. McGee (1990) introduces the idea that critics and readers must construct text based on fragments of discourse, which are essentially the bits of language that make up a speaker’s main argument. He argues that once we understand how texts are constructed and by whom, critical scholars of discourse can not only study the dominant ideologies but also challenge how they hold power in the world through language. Therefore, the practice of critical rhetoric attempts to unpack the discourse and investigate how apparatus techniques are negotiating that power.

Not all critics who operate under a more traditional approach to rhetorical study agree with every tenet of McKerrow’s critical rhetoric. Charland (1991) applauds McKerrow’s approach to discussing “power-laden sedimentations of discourse” but also criticizes the scholar for failing to provide the practitioners of critical rhetoric with a horizon or telos against which to accurately measure and compare the relationships of that power and discourse. Charland (1991) proposes thinking about the praxis of critical rhetoric metaphorically like Hippocratic medicine where one studies the discourse, diagnoses its power-laden issues, then recommends a partisan-driven decision to improve its social function. McKerrow (1991) explains that although it may appear critical rhetoric fails to “make a difference” because of its lack of a permanent stance, the scholar of critical rhetoric must make sense of the fragmented discourse in the postmodern world and take a stand contingent upon that person’s life. McKerrow (1991) reiterates that although his first essay isn’t necessarily a playbook for scholars of critical rhetoric with prescribed steps, it
still provides a progressive lens through which scholars can study different power-laden discourses and make their own decisions. Thus evolved a gradual, and not altogether consensual, shifting of how critics of mediated rhetoric practiced and viewed their work.

John M. Sloop is one such critic accomplished in the practice of critical rhetoric with his work that investigates the media’s power to discipline society’s understanding of gender and sexuality. Sloop (2004) defines the actual writing of critical rhetoric “as a political practice, an attempt to alter or shift public knowledge by illustrating how that knowledge has been constructed” (p. 18). Sloop claims that when gender identity is ambiguously troubling, the discursive frames surrounding the individuals inevitably fails to challenge or blur the bi-gendered, heteronormative ideology. The discourse printed in newspapers and popular media “that would seem to be ripe for the problematizing of gender and sexuality becomes a point around which different people re-inscribe their views of gender or sexuality” (Sloop, p. 139). Simply put, the media explained troubling performances of gender as deviant and deceptive, disciplining the ways in which people would understand those who behave out of the social order. Because of our cultural impulse to explain behavior into mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive categories of heterosexual and homosexual, Sloop (2004) claims the bi-gendered matrix remains intact when someone identifies as a person who is heterosexual or homosexual, male or female; it’s when gender and sexuality are ambiguous that the matrix is troubled, therefore prompting narratives to discipline behaviors into culturally explainable categories. Only through the lens of critical rhetoric can political change take place “slowly and through long-term commitments to changes in meaning” (Sloop, 2004, p. 140).

Therefore, a critical rhetorical investigation of humor’s function in society isn’t about whether something is considered “funny” or makes someone laugh. A rhetorical scholar would
then argue that perhaps it is not one’s own sudden realization of superiority that causes laughter but instead the persuasive act of laughter that situates another in a state of inferiority. Since the focus of this study’s analysis is on disparagement humor, the chief concern is investigating how the discourse of gender is disciplined by the use of ridicule and the production of laugh tracks with a program. The persuasive power and material consequence of sitcom laugh tracks on an audience has been a marginal area of study. Investigating the employment of laugh tracks and their rhetorical function is a pivotal element of this study. It is important to note that not just the joke itself holds persuasive power. The physical sound of laughter cannot be ignored as an element of the discourse of power. If disparagement humor functions as a social corrective, then the critical rhetor must ask how the mediated discourse of ridicule disciplines non-hegemonic performances of gender. Therefore, how do the laugh tracks reinforce this disciplinary othering of gendered bodies? Although not many scholars have investigated this question directly, Weaver (2015) remains the most accomplished researcher who studies humor from a rhetorical perspective. His intersectional investigation of rhetoric and humor informs much of this study’s approach and method, which he defines clearly:

> A rhetorical analysis does not require that jokers acknowledge their enjoyment of joking, responsibility for it, or equally, admit intended meaning. It is an approach that seeks to unpack how meaning is generated so that the connections between humor, seriousness and construction of convincing communication can be seen. (Weaver, 2015, p. 328)

Weaver’s (2015) rhetorical analysis of racial disparagement humor investigates how this convincing communication reinforces ideological and discursive social structures:

> A rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor suggests that there are ideologies, discourses, ways of thinking, stereotypes, and prejudiced forms of social structure that can, in some social situations, be reinforced by disparagement humor, joking and laughter. (p. 329)
In the context of this study, these social structures are the gender norms present in the world, illustrated through the characters performances in media products like television sitcoms.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Weaver (2011) argues that when investigating how gendered bodies negotiate discursive power in a humor situation, one must first outline each person’s rhetorical position within the communication triangle: the speaker, text, and audience. In the context of the sitcoms, a person who initiates a humor technique or joke is designated as a speaker. The characters who are present in the scene may or may not be the intended subject of the joke but are still considered a part of the audience. The subject, narrowly defined in this study for the purpose of specifying a particular gendered body, means either an implicit or explicit person who is the target of the humor technique. For example, a normatively attractive woman uses the technique of ridicule toward an emasculated man. The woman is the speaker and the man is the subject. Thoroughly defining the position of each character in a humor situation allows this study to investigate its first research question:

RQ1: How are male and female characters rhetorically positioned within the speaker, text, and subject triangle in a humor situation in which ridicule is used?

Exploring this question will allow for a clearer investigation of potential patterns with the way certain male or female characters position themselves in a humor situation. For example, this study could find an emerging pattern that when men are speakers in a humor situation, they use ridicule reflexively instead of targeting certain gendered bodies as subjects. Exploring the possibility of combinations of male or female as speaker or subject will allow for a more thorough picture of how gendered humor is used in each program.

In his theoretical shifting of ridicule’s function in maintaining the social order, Billig (2005) makes the distinction between two types of ridicule that function in particular ways: (a) disciplinary ridicule, which corrects social rule-breakers; and (b) rebellious ridicule, which
targets the social rules themselves. The former is seen as intrinsically conservative while the latter inherently radical. Billig further defines disciplinary ridicule as a mechanism of power that “stands guard over rules” (p. 207), whereas “groups maintain their unity by mocking transgressions of their customs” (p. 206). Rebellious humor mocks the social rules and the rulers who enforce them by laughing at maxims of conversation: “The notion of rebellious humour conveys an image of momentary freedom from the restraints of social convention” (p. 208). Despite what might appear to be clear distinctions between the two, Billig (2005, p. 203) notes how humor’s potential for ambiguity can prevent a clear classification. So too can the researcher’s own personal and ideological positionality within a humor situation. The focus of this study is on how ridicule functions, which can be either as a disciplinary or rebellious apparatus or perhaps as one whose quality defies categorization. Although this means of classifying the ridicule in the programs is inherently fluid, the study nonetheless investigates how ridicule tends to operate, even if definitive categorization remains impossible, by asking these two research questions:

R2: How do male and female speakers in sitcoms with different configurations of protagonist genders use disciplinary ridicule to negotiate performative gender power?

R3: How do male and female speakers in sitcoms with different configurations of protagonist genders use rebellious ridicule to negotiate performative gender power?

Studying gendered bodies in the sitcoms necessitates defining normative and non-normative representations of gender. Without defining the societal norms, one couldn’t analyze how ridicule is disciplining or rebelling against them. Normative means performances that constitute socially acceptable behavior for a given person’s identity, while non-normative performances are generally ones that behave outside the norms. For the context of this study, Connell’s (1987, 2005) theories and Giddens (2006) and Schippers’s (2007) extension of them
have provided the model to understanding the gender hierarchy of Western societies, which can be found in Table 1 of the appendix. Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). In the context of Connell’s (2005) model, complicit masculinities realize hegemonic connection with masculinity but don’t necessarily embody it, marginalized masculinities are those from non-white ethnic classes, and subordinated masculinities are commonly those not of heterosexual identity. Abedinifard (2016) most aptly describes the function of this hierarchy:

> Within a patriarchal gender order, the model suggests, an idealized form of masculinity gains cultural ascendancy over, and at the expense of, all femininities and other forms of masculinity, which are themselves arranged in certain inter- and intra-relations. While marginalized and subordinated masculinities are normally marked by non-white racial/ethnic backgrounds and non-heterosexual—particularly homosexual—orientations, the resistant/protest/pariah femininities are repelled as they, unlike emphasized femininities, refuse to recognize the cathexis —that is, the desires—of a dominant masculinity. (p. 238)

Although the above model elevates masculinity over femininity, this study also investigates ways in which women assert themselves through humor independently of men. The clear and exclusive classification of gendered bodies in the sitcoms remains a concern since physical characteristics of a person alone cannot define that person as either normative or non-normative. Their performance as gendered bodies include all the multifaceted markers of a person’s identity, such as their haircut, clothes, walk, speech, silence, and expression of personality. Therefore, since this study is concerned with these gendered bodies negotiating power through their rhetorical apparatus of humor, investigation of the person’s entire discursive construction must be considered in the context of each humor situation. A person may perform complicit masculinity in one scene and then marginalized masculinity in another. For that matter, a
character could also appear as a non-normative gendered body but still perform normative masculinity or femininity, or vice versa. Because of this complex and slippery lens of investigating gendered bodies, thorough and descriptive contextualization is required when analyzing each humor situation involving ridicule. Thus, the following research questions attempt to unpack these layers of complexity:

R4: How are normative and non-normative male gendered bodies discursively constructed through the rhetorical device of ridicule in U.S. sitcoms?

R5: How are normative and non-normative female gendered bodies discursively constructed through the rhetorical device of ridicule in U.S. sitcoms?
CHAPTER 5

METHOD

The purpose of critically analyzing humor through a rhetorical lens is to discover what these specific kinds of humor, ridicule in particular, do to control or subvert social order, such as gender norms. The focus of this study is not to investigate the morality of humor on whether its use is good or bad for the people who are givers and receivers of it but on how humor like ridicule functions as a social corrective in sitcoms, disciplining our understanding of non-hegemonic gender performances. Weaver’s (2011, 2015) greatest contribution to critical humor studies is his methodological approach of the rhetorical triangle: examining the speaker, the content or text being communicated, and the audience’s reception of it. Although the rhetorical triangle has been used extensively in critical discourse analysis studies (Richardson, 2006), Weaver (2015) extended the approach to rhetorical analyses, arguing for its potential to unpack tangled meanings and ideologies. For the purpose of this study, the speaker is the humor initiator in a scene, the text is the actual words exchanged in the humor situation, and the audience is not only the other characters in the scene but also any people who have the potential to see it. Therefore, one clarifying addition must be made to Weaver’s approach: consideration of social context as inextricable from the text itself, something Billig (2005) advanced in his study of ridicule. When investigating a text, what is *said* holds as much significance as what is *unsaid*. More importantly, the text itself holds no discursive significance without a historical and social context from which it draws meaning.

Pursuant to Weaver’s (2011, 2015) methodological use of the rhetorical triangle, when disparagement humor situates a person as the butt of a joke, that person’s gendered performance is disciplined in relation to normative ideologies. In the context of this study, all three points are
considered when investigating humor’s function as a rhetorical weapon, most importantly in terms of how the gendered body negotiates power through it. The genders of both the speaker (humor initiator) and audience (humor object) are both disciplined by the text (humor technique), but understanding its interaction is limited by sometimes multiple, ambiguous readings. Humor’s potential for polysemic interpretations requires accurate contextualization on the part of the critic and therefore allows for deeper unpacking of problematic themes (Weaver, 2015). Therefore, a reading of each situation of disparagement humor necessitates a thorough understanding of context in order to investigate how power is negotiated. Consider the following joke as an example:

Son: Dad, what does “gay” mean?
Father: It means “to be happy.”
Son: Are you gay?
Father: No, son. I have a wife. (Memes Meme, 2017)

The humor at work in this joke is a semantic and linguistic one called a *double entendre*. Since the father defines “gay” as “happy,” his answer invokes humor through the incongruous reconciliation of having a wife and not being happy. Contextually then, the humor only works because of the stereotype of the unhappily married couple. The field for critical investigation of this joke is ripe with possibilities, especially in terms of this joke’s rhetorical power to minimalize homosexuality into a linguistic silencing. The critical rhetor dissects the humor situation in this way, unpacking its meaning and construction so alternative readings can be offered. This study attempts such a task by investigating the persuasive, disciplinary power of ridicule in U. S. sitcoms and how it reinforces or resists gendered hegemonic norms.
This study will use critical rhetorical analysis to investigate ridicule’s disciplinary and/or rebellious role in negotiating performances of gender within popular U.S. sitcoms: *The Big Bang Theory* (a program with a mix of male and female characters), *2 Broke Girls* (a program with two female main characters), and *The Odd Couple* (a program with two male main characters). These three programs will serve as the most ideal text because of the perceived gendered power given to the main characters as predominant speakers, therefore accounting for all the possible positionalities in a discursive situation. By choosing shows whose main characters demonstrate a male-dominated, female-dominated, and mixed gendered positionality, this study can isolate the speaker’s gender in relation to that of its subject. In each program, three lenses of analysis will be employed to investigate the humor situation: the kind of ridicule used, the gendered bodies using it, and the rhetorical position of those gendered bodies within the situation. In order to explore these research questions, the study will analyze the complete 2015–2016 seasons of the three programs, examining each humor situation immediately preceding a laugh track that uses ridicule or self-ridicule. Those situations in which humor operated in a ridiculing or self-ridiculing manner will be analyzed based on all the discursive elements contributing to the construction of gendered bodies, their positionality in the rhetorical triangle, and whether ridicule functioned as disciplinary and/or rebellious.

Although a humor subject could be a specific person present in the scene or group of people implied but not visually present in the humor situation, both of them are still considered subjects in this study. In the case in which self-ridicule is used, the speaker and subject then would be the same person, which includes self-deprecating remarks alluding to that person’s own gendered body. Any gendered body present in the scene that is not considered the speaker or subject is marked as a present audience. Their discursive interaction is also considered in the
rhetorical position as rarely do they remain completely silent during a humor situation. Since I must also consider myself as a part of the non-present audience, it is important to specifically address my own positionality as a researcher and an audience member of the text itself. I am not exempt from humor’s rhetorical function simply because I am aware of it. Therefore, I will take a moment to make known my own identity and how that could potentially affect how I read the humor situations. I am a 28-year-old white female with an average build. I have nearly completed all course work requirements to receive a graduate degree. I grew up in a lower to middle-class home where my parents were divorced. I have never questioned the idea that I am a straight woman, although rarely have I felt like an adequate example of ideal femininity. I had a somewhat conservative upbringing in a southern, religious environment. However, as an adult, I tend to view myself as possessing more qualities of liberalism. It is important to acknowledge my positionality to make myself and readers aware of how my worldview may have influenced the study’s analysis. Since I cannot divorce myself from my positionality, I am constrained by my own understanding and assumptions of social norms themselves. When I defined myself as having an “average build,” this is because of my view of a normative female body type in society today. The idea of bodily normativity has most definitely changed through the centuries and will assuredly do so generationally throughout the coming decades. However, in our present age and culture, norms exist and condition our understanding of the world.

Therefore, I must acknowledge the limiting power these norms hold over me and my own interpretation of humor. One of these constraints is the use of a male and female binary to explore gender performativity. By only looking for and analyzing performances of men and women, I risk silencing other performances of gender not bound by the bi-gender, heteronormative matrix. Through my focus on male and female bodies, my critique as a
discursive product in itself will reproduce and reinforce the norm. I am aware of this limitation and its implications in silencing potentially troubling gender performances. However, the methodological lens of examining female and male performances serves as a way of examining existing societal norms, one of which being the bi-gender standard, and how ridicule disciplines or liberates those. Therefore, the study’s bi-gendered structure doesn’t necessarily mean I will not look for and analyze examples of performances that trouble the binary. In fact, I hope to find instances of gender troubling in order to investigate ridicule’s influence on its construction.

The three programs were analyzed for every humor situation immediately preceding a laugh track. Those situations in which humor operated in a ridiculing or self-ridiculing manner were then analyzed based on all the discursive elements contributing to the construction of gendered bodies, their positionality in the rhetorical triangle, and whether ridicule functioned as disciplinary and/or rebellious. The following example helps illustrate how this rhetorical, discursive analysis was used in each situation of ridicule. In a scene with the men of the group eating lunch together at university, Leonard makes the following disparaging remark toward Howard and Rajesh after they spent the night together: “So boys, how was the pajama party? You guys jump on the bed and sing into hairbrushes?” This comment is immediately followed by a laugh track and the shamed faces of Howard and Rajesh. In this context, Leonard is the speaker, Howard and Rajesh are the subjects. Although Leonard’s nerdy appearance is physically characterized in the show as non-normative in comparison to other athletic, classically attractive males, he is performing complicit masculinity by emasculating Howard and Rajesh’s characters. By positioning subjects into the realm of feminine performance, Leonard uses ridicule as a disciplinary mechanism, thereby constructing his own masculinity in contrast to his emasculated subjects. Although this methodological approach appears too systematic and restrictive, the
theoretical lens—the interaction between disciplinary and/or rebellious ridicule, normative and/or non-normative femininities and masculinities, and the rhetorical positionality of speaker and subject—serves as a focused framework through which emerging patterns can surface. Ridiculing humor functioning outside of these given categories is a resulting possibility, which could potentially lead to the problematizing of gendered hierarchy. Therefore, complete contextualization of the entire humor situation is needed to avoid overly simplistic and reductionist classification of complex behaviors.

A brief description of each of the three sitcoms that represent different gender configurations of main characters is offered here. First, *The Big Bang Theory*, ranking No. 2 in 2015–2016 with 19.36 million viewers on CBS, follows the lives of two brilliant but socially inept physicists, Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) and Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki), after they meet blonde and beautiful Penny (Kaley Cuoco), waitress and aspiring actress who moved to their Pasadena apartment building from Nebraska. While smitten Leonard is only too eager to welcome Penny to their friend group, pithy and reluctant Sheldon sees no logical reason why their friend circle must extend. Slowly through many mishaps and misfortunes, the intellectuals and comic-book geeks welcome Penny with her common sense and social subtleties into their gang. Completing the friend group are quirky engineer Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg), socially awkward Raj Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), brilliant and cheerful microbiologist Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz (Melissa Rauch), and Sheldon’s equally awkward girlfriend, Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik). See Table 2 for a full cast list along with character descriptions.

viewers. The program explores the lives of two mid-20s women looking to score enough cash waitressing to start their own cupcake business. Big-busted and loud-mouthed Max Black (Kat Dennings) and suddenly penniless and disgraced socialite Caroline Channing (Beth Behrs) pair up in a Brooklyn diner, with their two different socioeconomic pasts standing in stark contrast to one another. *2 Broke Girls* is one of the few sitcoms on prime-time television featuring only women as the comedic leads, thus making it a relevant place from which this study can draw conclusions about a character’s use of humor based on gender. See Table 3 for a full cast list along with character descriptions.

Third, *The Odd Couple* reinvents the original 1970s television series, co-star, writer, and executive producer Matthew Perry brings to life the character of Oscar Madison, along with his co-star Thomas Lennon as Felix Unger for multi-camera sitcom for CBS. *The Odd Couple* chronicles the friendship between Oscar, divorced bachelor and sports talk show host, after his old college buddy Felix, neurotic and sensitive, is kicked out by his wife who wants to divorce him. The CBS show website describes Oscar as an “endearing slob” and Felix as an “uptight neat freak.” Secondary characters include Oscar’s no-nonsense assistant Dani and his long-time agent and friend Teddy. *The Odd Couple* ranked No. 32 in its first season and attracted 11.28 million viewers in 2015. See Table 4 for a full cast list along with character descriptions.
CHAPTER 6

RESULTS

The following results are divided by program, addressing each research question individually, then comparing and contrasting the themes that emerged from the shows. However, before unpacking the findings and the evidence that supports them, a clarifying statement is critical to understanding how ridicule operated in these programs, and consequently, how ridicule was analyzed. Since the study focused on only humor situations involving ridicule, other humor techniques like slapstick and irony were initially excluded from analysis. However, it soon became apparent that ridicule sometimes operated in implicit and subtle ways. A character may not have explicitly ridiculed another character, but the humor technique used placed that person in a disparaging light. Therefore, those situations were included in analysis. One must also make the clear distinction between a ridiculing remark and a ridiculous character, which by the program’s design is almost always situated disparagingly. The trope of the ridiculous character is present in all three programs, a fact that isn’t always obvious from textual excerpts. Therefore, when an example is given in a finding, it will be clarified specifically how the ridicule emerged in each situation. Despite this distinction, the weapon of ridicule still operated for a singular purpose: to disparage, mock, or cut down a person, group, or idea. Although the ammunition and targets may have varied, the tool’s function remained unchanged.

The Big Bang Theory

RQ1: Rhetorical Positionality

In The Big Bang Theory, where both male and female characters employ ridicule and are subjugated to its power, the study found several common patterns in the humor situations. In response to the first research question addressing the rhetorical positionality of gendered
characters, the study discovered that men were far more likely to be targeted for ridicule than women, no matter the gender of the speaker. Also, male speakers ridiculed other male subjects and even themselves far more often than female characters. In the example below, Leonard is trying to cheer up Sheldon, who was recently dumped by Amy, by making him oatmeal and French toast for breakfast. Sheldon’s response is characteristic of his moody temper and ignorantly insulting remarks.

*Sheldon:* That’s a lot of carbohydrates for a man on the prowl. You know what? You eat it; you’re married. It doesn’t matter what you look like.

(Episode 8: “The Mystery Date Observation”)

In situation above, Sheldon’s ridicule of the newly married Leonard positions himself as the speaker and his friend as the subject. It also targets the stereotyped married men who let appearances slide after saying “I do.” This particular example is also important to illustrate the ridiculous nature of Sheldon’s character indicative of the show itself. Although not overwhelmingly obvious from just this small excerpt, other examples will show more clearly how Sheldon often ignorantly ridicules himself by the design of his eccentric character. The same character design often leaves him as the easiest target for ridicule among his male friends.

The example below illustrates how the group often ridicules Sheldon’s childish and unapologetically coward nature. In scene below, the group is taking a belated bachelor party trip to Mexico when the van gets a flat tire and the men must work together to change it. Howard takes the lead, explaining the mechanics and merits of changing a tire, while Sheldon cowers nearby, reluctant to help for fear of some unknown roadside doom.

*Howard:* Every self-respecting gentleman should know how in case he comes across a damsel in distress by the side of the road.

*Sheldon:* If I see one scorpion, I am getting on someone’s shoulders and I am never coming down. (In obvious paranoid distress.)
Leonard: And there’s your damsel.
(Episode 3: “The Bachelor Party Corrosion”)

It’s important to note here that although Sheldon is the explicit subject of ridicule in the aforementioned scene, the implied subject are men who act afraid, and thus, by comparing them to a woman in distress, disparages them.

As mentioned earlier with Sheldon’s character, the self-ridicule of men observed in the program tended to follow similar patterns that diverged into two distinct performances: men who knowingly laughed at themselves and their shortcomings and men who were ignorant of their ridiculed position. The former were in on the joke with the audience while the latter were left out by their own humorous wordplay. In the following example, Leonard knowingly targets his own height, eyesight, and occupation in a self-deprecating remark, a quip that illustrates how men in the show acknowledge their societal shortcomings. In the scene below, Penny and Leonard are in Las Vegas about to elope and they are trying to pick out a suitable marriage package from a brochure.

Leonard: Oh, they even stream the whole thing live on the Internet.
Penny: Why would we want that? (Looks confused.)

Leonard: Because there’s a lot of gorgeous blondes out there who don’t believe they can land a short, nearsighted scientist. Let’s give them hope.
(Episode 1: “The Matrimonial Momentum”)

The previous situation is one of the clearest scenes where overt ridicule isn’t used but Leonard’s sarcastic remark still ridicules himself and other people like him. Even though the technique itself is sarcasm, the target is still ridiculed by its use. Another example of self-ridicule where the character is oblivious to his own joke illustrates how the humor technique of sexual allusion translates into a ridiculed character. The context of this scene involves Sheldon giving a live-stream broadcast of a show called “Fun with Flags,” which he used to produce with his ex-
girlfriend Amy. In the scene, Sheldon is acting passive-aggressively bitter toward Amy for dumping him. He then stresses how he doesn’t need her to help produce the show or as his girlfriend.

*Sheldon:* But the show must go on. And thankfully, all the things my girlfriend used to do can be taken care of with my right hand. (Holds up camera remote in hand and doesn’t realize the double entendre.)

(Episode 2: “The Separation Oscillation”)

The blind ignorance to his own self-ridicule is an inescapable pattern for Sheldon, one that leaves him as the show’s common target.

Since the program features both male and female main characters, the study also focused on how women were positioned in humor situations. Rarely were female characters the subjects of men’s ridicule. Although a few examples do exist, they were infrequent enough to exclude them from clearly patterned formulas. In one excerpt of a scene below, Raj, Penny, and Leonard are discussing a scientific study that looks at how childhood popularity influences lifelong success.

*Penny:* Does the study tell you what happens to the unpopular kids?

*Leonard:* You tell me; you woke up in bed with one.

(Episode 7: “The Spock Resonance”)

Penny’s set-up of the joke and Leonard’s punch line illustrate how both characters can be ridiculed in the same situation. Not only is Leonard calling himself “unpopular” but also jabbing at his wife for choosing an “unpopular” man as a spouse. Conversely, though, female characters tended to use ridicule most often toward men, sometimes with subtle jabs and other times with overt mockery. In the scene below, Penny makes an off-hand comment about her soon-to-be husband in his tuxedo. The context of the scene involves both Penny and Leonard acting nervous
and uncertain about their impending nuptials. Penny tries for a calming and distracting remark, one that is awarded with canned applause.

_**Penny:**_ Look, it’s going to be a great wedding. Look at you in your little suit. (As if to a child.)

(Episode 1: “The Matrimonial Momentum”)

Penny’s ridicule of Leonard for his small stature is a pattern in the show, one that often disparages Leonard despite his intellectual and professional achievements.

Despite women most often targeting men with their ridicule, most of the ridicule directed toward female characters came from other female characters. An excerpt from the scene below illustrates a pattern of how women use correctives disguised as compliments to subtly ridicule another female character. In this scene Amy announces to the female group that Barry Kripke, a colleague of Sheldon’s, just asked her out on a date. Amy appears pleased but confused by the revelation, while Penny and Bernadette are excited for her.

_**Penny:**_ I told you things would change if you plucked your eyebrows!

(Episode 5: “The Perspiration Implementation”)

Penny’s remark targets Amy’s lack of feminine grooming, a common misdemeanor the females mention often in the program.

Another revealing finding emerged about the rhetorical positionality of ridiculed subjects, indiscriminate of gender. Some characters who were the subjects of ridicule in one scene became the creators of ridicule in another scene. For example, the following two excerpts from the same episode illustrate how Raj can be the butt of the joke one minute and the man with the punch line the next. In the first scene, the male group is talking about their need to find helium for an important experiment, entertaining every possible location that might supply it.

_**Leonard:**_ We’d have to go to every Party City in California.

_**Howard:**_ (to Raj) Sounds like you on Cinco de Mayo.
Raj: Hey, people were still talking about that party on siete de Mayo.
(Episode 6: “The Helium Insufficiency”)

In this example, Howard targets Raj as the subject of ridicule, citing Raj’s eccentric behavior.
This repartee between the male characters is common in the program, and Raj is often the subject of many stereotypically racist jokes. However, later in the episode, Raj targets another male character, Stuart, who is exclusively at the bottom of the group totem pole. In this scene, the whole group, except for Leonard and Sheldon, are sitting in the living room and going through male dating candidates for Amy. After Amy and Sheldon broke up, the group is helping Amy by swiping through a dating app that they have projected onto the television for easier group viewing.

Penny: Alright, where do we stand on cross-eyed Mike?

Raj: You know he won’t be looking at other girls.

Howard: Unless they’re sitting on the end of his nose.

Penny: OK next.

Bernadette: Mmm check out his tiny teeth. He looks like a man-dolphin.

Penny: Wait, if he’s good in bed, she can throw him a fish.

Amy: OK, I’m starting to feel guilty. Aren’t we being a little mean?

Raj: That’s a fair point. We wouldn’t make fun of someone like this to their face.

Penny: (Stuart’s photo pops on the screen.) Look, it’s Stuart!

Raj: (to Stuart) You may want to leave the room.

(Episode 6: “The Helium Insufficiency”)

The previous excerpt demonstrates how both male and female characters target certain men both present and absent from the scene. At the end of the scene, Raj turns that ridicule on Stuart, implying he should leave the room so the group can make fun of him.
RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule

In response to the second and third research questions about how characters used disciplinary and/or rebellious ridicule, the study found that both male and female characters used disciplinary ridicule far more often than rebellious. In addition, men tended to use disciplinary ridicule more than women did, especially when the targets were other men. Analyzing all the targets of disciplinary ridicule revealed certain patterns that emerged about the kinds of male characters most commonly susceptible to disciplinary ridicule, including men who were short, small, single, socially awkward, sensitive, lacking sexual prowess, creepy, normatively unattractive, desperate, nonwhite, visually impaired, lacking physical stamina, and straight men who acted gay. Below are several examples that illustrate how male characters were targeted as those who performed outside social norms and then both male and female characters used ridicule to correct them. In the following example, the male group is driving in a van down to Mexico for Leonard’s belated bachelor party. Howard is behind the wheel with a heavy foot on the gas.

Leonard: (to Howard) Hey, watch your speed. I hear the Mexican police target tourists.

Howard: Not a problem. If anything goes down, we just put Koothrappali in the driver’s seat and slap a sombrero on his head.
(Episode 3: “The Bachelor Party Corrosion”)

As mentioned earlier, Raj is the common target for racial ridicule, and Howard is most often its initiator. The ridicule here only works because the brown complexion and foreign accent of Raj’s Indian descent could possibly be mistaken for Hispanic. His performance as a non-white man automatically leaves him vulnerable to mockery. Conversely, Howard’s whiteness protects him from such ridicule. In the next example, the male group members are trying to help Sheldon find a new girlfriend and are discussing how to lure women in an online format. Sheldon mentions his
many attractive characteristics, like his intellect, intrigue, and undeniable sense of humor. The men exchange dubious glances at the idea that Sheldon has jokes. Sheldon doesn’t like the idea of dating websites, but then suggests a more competitive possibility.

*Howard*: If you don’t want to use dating websites, what do you suggest?

*Sheldon*: Off the top of my head? Uh, prospective women weed themselves out in a battle of wits until only one champion remains. She shows up at my door flush with the thrill of victory and then sits quietly by my side while I watch Daredevil.

*Howard*: You seriously think women would fight for you? (with obvious skepticism)

*Sheldon*: People compete for jobs and trophies—why not me?

*Howard*: He’s right—(toward Raj)—he knows a lot of jokes.

(Episode 8: “The Mystery Date Observation”)

This particular example illustrates several layers of the function and disciplinary power of ridicule. In the scene, Sheldon’s arrogance and eccentricity characterize him as the ridiculed trope. By design, he presents himself as an easy target for his friends’ ridicule. Howard’s quip implies that Sheldon’s masculine attractiveness is laughable, and by excluding the ignorant Sheldon from his ridicule, the program emphasizes that the audience is in on the joke. This discursive separation between the ridiculer and the ridiculed is also a common pattern in the show, illustrating a social disciplining of those who perform outside social norms.

Despite all his eccentricities, Sheldon isn’t the most ridiculed male character on the program. The middle-aged and socially desperate Stuart is positioned as the ridiculed character in every appearance within the group. In the following scene, Sheldon is trying to practice his compassion and extends his apologies to Stuart after behaving coldly toward him. Sheldon’s motives for apologizing to Stuart are actually self-serving as Penny said he must apologize to the people he wronged before his friends allow him to join the group trip to Las Vegas. It’s obvious
that empathy isn’t a natural trait for Sheldon, which is made even more clear with his oblivious
dismissal of Stuart’s exclusion from the group trip.

Sheldon: And I want you to know I mean it. This isn’t me just wanting to go on the trip to
Las Vegas.

Stuart: What trip to Las Vegas?

Sheldon: The one everyone’s taking this evening on the party bus.

Stuart: Of course, I wasn’t invited.

Sheldon: That would be my understanding. (Oblivious to how this makes Stuart feel)
(Episode 13: “The Empathy Optimization”)

Stuart’s knowing acknowledgement of his own exclusion positions him as the ridiculed and
unwanted outcast of the group. Because his character is socially awkward by design, he is
constantly portrayed as the epitome of mockery. Stuart’s ridiculed state is echoed in another
scene where he finally moves out of Howard and Bernadette’s spare bedroom. After packing up
his car and readying to leave, Stuart turns to the couple in an emotional goodbye.

Stuart: This is weird.

Howard: Yeah. A grown man moving into his own apartment. Crazy times. See ya!
(Excited to get rid of him.)
(Episode 12: “The Sales Call Sublimination”)

The ridiculed Stuart is aware of his mocked position but still remains uninvited from the
cool crowd. Stuart’s constant belittlement also comes from both male and female characters as
well. In the next example, Bernadette and Penny discuss the dating app that both Amy and Stuart
are using to meet new people.

Bernadette: It shows you pictures of people nearby, you swipe them around, it looks kind
of like a game.

Penny: Oh, and if you lose the game, you have to go out with Stuart.
(Episode 6: “The Helium Insufficiency”)
Penny’s ridicule of Stuart as an unwanted consolation prize further demonstrates how characters discipline performances like Stuart’s as undesirable. Furthermore, Stuart is not only unwanted by others but his overt self-pity illustrates how he even dislikes himself. In the next example, Penny and the girls are hurriedly decorating for a party while Stuart slowly frosts a cake with obvious melancholy.

*Penny:* Thank you so much for helping us, Stuart.

*Stuart:* Oh, I was just glad to be invited. To be honest, I don’t always feel like I’m part of the group.

*Penny:* OK, sweetie, we’re on the clock here. Can you hate yourself and frost at the same time?  
(Episode 17: “The Celebration Experimentation”)

Stuart’s characterization of self-loathing, coupled with the other characters’ ridicule of him, positions him as the show’s pillar of derision. Of course, Stuart doesn’t have a monopoly as the ridiculed target. Every male character faces ridicule at some point in the program. In the next example, the men discuss the events of their day and Raj mocks Leonard for visiting a therapist.

*Sheldon:* We discovered a medium-sized asteroid together.

*Leonard:* Wow, that’s amazing! I’m in a pretty great mood today myself.

*Sheldon:* OK. Guess we’re gonna talk about you now.

*Leonard:* Well, we are, because Dr. Gallo made me realize that I’m a worthwhile person and that my feelings matter.

*Raj:* I learned that for free from a cat poster, but good for you.  
(Episode 12: “The Sales Call Sublimination”)

Raj’s quick dismissal of Leonard’s expressive feelings and visit to a therapist targets men who share more sensitive sides with other male friends. As mentioned earlier, Raj himself is often targeted for his ethnicity, leaving him as the butt of many disciplinary racial jokes. In the next example, Sheldon is helping Raj in his lab by mining data on a computer.
Raj: There’s about six months’ worth of data on this hard drive. Why don’t you go through it and see if you can spot any patterns or anomalies?

Sheldon: Yep, I’m on it. Hey, look at that! An Indian guy outsourcing a computer job to a white fella.
(Episode 12: “The Sales Call Sublimination”)

The humor situation here relies heavily on stereotype, positioning Raj’s body as a nonwhite man the target for such ridicule. Another interesting layer exists within Raj’s ridiculed position in the show. Not only is he ridiculed overtly for his ethnicity, but Raj’s relationship with Howard is often characterized like that of a married couple. In the following scene, the group is discussing how Leonard kissed another woman before he married Penny and he told Howard but not Raj. Raj is upset that he was left out and turns on Howard, since Raj considers Howard his best friend and didn’t share this information with him.

Howard: Leonard asked me to keep it to myself.

Raj: Let’s leave Leonard out of this for the moment. This is about you and me. (Said with intimacy, like how a married couple would argue.)

Leonard: Wait, wait wait, how is my day-old marriage falling apart becoming about you two?

Raj: (To Leonard) Hang on. (To Howard) What do I need to do to make you trust me?

Howard: (To Leonard) You think it’s hard having one wife. Try having two.
(Episode 2: “The Separation Oscillation”)

Howard’s overt allusion to Raj as his “second wife” is one of the most explicit references to their intimate relationship. Howard is ridiculing Raj specifically for acting like a “wife,” a targeted ridicule that disciplines performances where men act like spouses to other males. In addition, Howard’s discursive aside to Leonard excludes Raj himself from this joke, thereby distancing the ridiculed from the ridiculer again.

Although the show illustrated more examples of men using disciplinary ridicule, female characters still targeted certain people and groups for performing outside social norms. The study
found that women tended to use disciplinary ridicule toward men and women in relatively equal measure in humor situations. The common female targets of ridicule were women who lacked feminine style, clothing taste, and a sexualized appearance, those who valued intellect over appearance, but also “pretty idiots,” women who were promiscuous, as well as those who married non-normative men. Every female main character used and was targeted for ridicule at some point in the program. The following examples are the best illustrations of how disciplinary ridicule involving women worked in the show. In this scene, Penny, Leonard, Amy, and Sheldon take a retreat to a cabin in the woods. The four of them are playing a Never Have I Ever Drinking Game in which a person says something they’ve never done and then the other players must take a drink if they have done that thing.

Penny: OK, let’s see. Never have I ever... (long pause)

Amy: (Aside to Sheldon, though Penny can hear) She’s trying to think of something she’s never done before. This could take a while.

Penny: Very funny. Never have I ever… (struggles to think of example) OK let’s just circle back.

Leonard: OK, I’ll go. Never have I ever been arrested.

Sheldon: So, I drink. (Questioningly as if trying to understand the game.)

Amy: No, it’s only if you’ve done it.

Sheldon: Got it. (takes a drink)

Amy: I can’t believe you’ve been arrested. (In shock)

Sheldon: I can’t believe Penny hasn’t.

(Episode 20: “The Big Bear Precipitation”)

Sheldon’s overt ridicule of Penny’s past history coupled with Amy’s subtler reference targets Penny’s known characterization at promiscuous, reckless, and willing to do about anything for a good time. Penny’s ridiculed position throughout the show targets her somewhat shady past with her lower-class family from Nebraska and her own once meager living as a waitress. In addition,
Penny also faces ridicule as being the only character, male or female, without an advanced degree beyond high school, which is often illustrated more clearly through her stereotypical “dumb blonde” remarks. In the following example, Sheldon targets Penny’s intelligence overtly. Sheldon is using a virtual reality simulator to “interact” with the forest after reading a story that spending time in nature makes a person smarter.

Sheldon: Some of the participants who spent four days in the woods away from technology reported a 50 percent gain in reasoning skills upon their return.

Penny: OK, if that’s true, then why aren’t there more genius squirrels? (Genuinely)

Sheldon: You may need this more than I do. (Hands her simulator)

(Episode 20: “The Big Bear Precipitation”)

Sheldon often mocks Penny for her lack of education and overall unintelligent remarks, which disciplines not only her performance but also women in general who lack formal education. Penny faces ridicule for more than just her lack of education, but also for her aging body. At the beginning of the series, Penny was characterized as the young, gorgeous blonde of the show, albeit still the group idiot. Now in Season 9, Penny’s character appears slightly older, which is emphasized further in the following scene. In the example, Penny and Leonard are waiting a long time for a table at a restaurant on Valentine’s Day. In order to speed things along, Penny tries to flirt with the host of the restaurant, a young man in his early 20s.

Host: With all due respect ma’am, there’s nothing I can do.

Penny: (Chuckles) You don’t have to call me ma’am.

Host: OK. (Skeptically)

Penny: I mean, we’re basically the same age.

Host: (Laughs) OK.

Penny: How old are you?

Host: I’m 21. How old are you?
*Penny:* Just shut up, Glen. (To Leonard) Come on. Let’s get out of here.

*Leonard:* What? Why?

*Penny:* Because I’m young. Let’s go.

(Episode 15: “The Valentino Submergence”)

In that scene, Penny’s performance is disciplined by the host’s ridicule, illustrating how older women who try to act younger are common targets for mockery. Penny also faces ridicule for marrying Leonard, a fact that is reinforced several times in the show. In the following scene, Sheldon is considering asking out a woman who used to date Leonard, but then reconsiders citing that as a deal breaker.

*Sheldon:* Oh you’re right. I could never be with a woman whose self-esteem was so low she’d be with Leonard.

*Penny:* (With exhaustive and patient insistence) I’m with Leonard.

*Sheldon:* Yeah, I know. Forever. (Oblivious to his own insult.)

(Episode 1: “The Matrimonial Momentum”)

Sheldon targets both Leonard, his perceived intellectual inferior, and Penny, his spouse, thereby disciplining performances of women based on their partner choices.

While the study attempted to discover both ridicule that mocked social norms and the ridiculed characters who broke them, very few examples of overt rebellious ridicule emerged, which made it difficult to define clear patterns of its function. Despite the rare occurrences of rebellious ridicule, each example seemed to work in complicated ways and perhaps even to a disciplinary end. In one example, the female characters are sitting on Bernadette’s back porch discussing the news of her pregnancy when she suddenly gets emotional. The humor situation stereotypes the moodiness of pregnant woman, which subtly undermines the effects of Bernadette’s words.

*Bernadette:* But it’s weird. Howie’s the one who’s been talking about having kids for years, and I was all excited to tell him because I thought he’d be thrilled, but then he
started to flip out and now this feels like a bad idea and I’m gonna get fat. (Starts to whine at the end with excessive hysteria)

*Penny:* No, no, come on. Come on, you’re not gonna get fat. You’re gonna be beautiful and glowing and have the cutest little baby bump ever.

*Bernadette:* Easy for you to say, skinny bitch. (Louder and with more belligerence toward Penny) Sorry, hormones. (Quickly turns softer)

*Penny:* Oh, that’s all right. All I heard was “skinny.”

(Episode 16: “The Positive Negative Reaction”)

In the canned laughter after Bernadette breaks down and cries, it is apparent that she isn’t ridiculing herself because she’s afraid to “get fat.” Her characterization as the moody mother-to-be is seen as ridiculous. However, it’s her sudden attack of Penny as the “skinny bitch” that borders on the rebellious. Bernadette points to Penny’s slim figure and targets the societal expectation that women should indeed be skinny. And if the scene ended there, it might have been more rebellious indeed. However, Penny’s ending quip acknowledges her pleasure at still being called skinny, elevating this body shape itself as solidly normalized. This scene itself presents potential for female characters to target social norms about feminine bodies; however, the character who strikes the most targeted attack is minimalized as unreliable because of her “pregnancy hormones.” Thus, this potentially rebellious ridicule fails to fully liberate women from the limiting social norms surrounding body type.

*RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity*

The fourth and fifth research questions were designed to investigate how ridicule discursively constructs male and female bodies as normative and non-normative. Therefore, the study focused on discovering patterns about the kinds of masculine and feminine bodies most often ridiculed. Then using each humor situation, the study analyzed how the disparaging remarks rhetorically created a normative or non-normative character. In order to guide analysis, findings were separated by male and female characters, although this bi-gender matrix did not
necessarily exclude other performances. In *The Big Bang Theory*, since characters used ridicule most often to discipline those who broke social norms, the program illustrated clear examples of both non-normative bodies. Male characters received most of the disciplinary ridicule and, therefore, have more examples illustrating humor’s role in shaping their construction. In the following scene, the entire group is gathering to watch the Game of Thrones premiere, but Sheldon and Leonard get into a fight, prompting Leonard to watch it across the hall with Howard and Amy. Howard is also upset with Raj and Amy is not speaking to her ex-boyfriend Sheldon either. The group’s divisiveness fuels the conversation below.

*Howard:* So what the hell happened?

*Leonard:* Oh, I just ran out of patience with Sheldon’s nonsense.

*Howard:* Tell me about it. I’ve had it with Raj, too.

*Amy:* You know, like women, men have a monthly hormone cycle. Dips in testosterone can cause irritability.

*Howard:* Interesting. Well maybe my male cycle synced up with Raj’s actual period.

*Leonard:* If Sheldon’s testosterone dipped, he’d become a butterfly.

(Episode 21: “The Viewing Party Combustion”)

Howard’s ridicule compares Raj’s “irritability” with that of a woman’s monthly cycle. In its basest form, men who perform femininity in any way are easy targets of ridicule. So Howard’s ridicule constructs Raj’s performance as moody and unreliable, thereby linking it to the feminine body. Leonard’s ridicule of Sheldon characterizes his body as a soft and delicate form that is not necessarily feminine but is certainly not normatively masculine. Ridicule functions in the same way in the following example where Leonard compares Sheldon’s grumblings with those of the female body.

*Leonard:* I’m surprised you wanted to go to a sports bar, Sheldon.
Sheldon: Look at this blister. Like it or not, we’re athletes now. Besides, a bar is where I belong. I’m having female problems. (Referring to problems with dating)

Leonard: If you’re cranky and retaining water, I have a theory.
(Episode 5: “The Perspiration Implementation”)

The explicit mentions of testosterone, cycles, and symptoms of PMS discursively and inextricably ties the female gender to a specific body, essentializing it and the proper behaviors defined for it. Therefore, ridiculing a man for behaving as female characterizes him as non-normative.

In another example, Leonard, Sheldon, and Howard are all waiting in a room to apply for a patent together. Howard and Leonard are dressed in business casual attire, while Sheldon is dressed in a brown suit and red bow-tie, bearing a striking resemblance to Pee-Wee Herman.

Howard: Ok I gotta ask. Why are you wearing a bowtie?

Leonard: I’ve never applied for a patent before. I wanted to make a good impression.

Howard: Oh. Is the impression that your first name is Pee-Wee?
(Episode 18: “The Application Deterioration”)

Howard and Leonard’s attire represents the normalized male form, and before Howard says anything, so does Sheldon to some extent. Sheldon’s dress attire doesn’t represent a non-normalized body on its own. However, it’s Howard’s comparison to a known pedophile that discursively sets apart Sheldon’s body as non-normative. Howard isn’t exempt from ridicule’s power, however. In several instances in the show, his own body is discursively disciplined with ridicule by other male and female characters. In the follow example, Howard’s wife Bernadette is discussing her pregnancy with Amy and Penny, turning a seemingly benign phrase into a ridiculing zinger toward her husband.

Amy: Think about all the fun things you get to do when you have a baby.

Penny: Yeah, you get to buy toys and little clothes.
Bernadette: I kind of already do that for Howie.  
(Episode 16: “The Positive Negative Reaction”)  
The women in the scene above use ridiculing remarks to construct Howard’s body as small and childlike, the effect of which is emasculating and othering. Leonard’s body as a masculine form is also questioned in the program, most often by his wife. In the following scene, Penny and Leonard just got married and Leonard asks to carry his new bride over the threshold at the Vegas hotel. Penny’s short remark is all it takes to demean his body. In the moment after, however, Leonard transfers this ridicule to a body even less masculine, normalizing his own in the process.  

Penny: Can you?  

Leonard: Who do you think carries Sheldon to bed when he falls asleep in front of the TV?  
(Episode 1: “The Matrimonial Momentum”)  
The above example illustrates the way in which Leonard and other characters often depict Sheldon as the epitome of non-normative masculinity, with his thin build and childish behavior. Sheldon, on the other hand, often targets people whose physical bodies are less than normal, lacking in some material way from a normalized form. In the following example, Sheldon is talking about a man with a vision disability and subtly ridicules him for lacking the physical make-up of a normalized person.  

Sheldon: Like when that Sparkletts guy let me look under his eye patch.  

Leonard: Uh, first of all, you made that guy cry.  

Sheldon: And we learned that you don’t need an eyeball to do that.  
(Episode 2: “The Separation Oscillation”)  
Sheldon, through his ridiculing remark, others the man’s disability, targeting the non-normative form as anyone lacking able-bodied perfection.
Bodily normativity is also constructed by ridicule to signal the kinds of men who lack sexual prowess or overt masculine attractiveness. In the following scene, Penny and Bernadette bring Leonard and Howard lunch at the university while they work on a project.

*Penny:* Hey guys.

*Leonard:* Hey, what are you doing here?

*Bernadette:* We heard there were some sexy scientists working hard all weekend.

*Penny:* Yep so we brought you some lunch and we are gonna go look for ’em.

*Leonard:* (looks in lunch bag) Soup, sandwiches and emasculation, just like my mom used to make.

(Episode 19: “The Soldier Excursion Diversion”)

Penny’s ridicule of Leonard and Howard indicate that a “sexy scientist” is an oxymoron of sorts, thereby indicating the men’s bodies as lacking normative desirability. It is through Penny’s comments that Leonard and Howard are constructed and reinforced as non-normative. And in a way, Leonard is complicit in the ridicule with his own acknowledgement of the emasculation. Leonard acknowledges his and Howard’s emasculation again in the same scene, thereby using self-ridicule to confirm their own non-normative bodies. In the following excerpt, Penny and Bernadette volunteer to help with the guys’ project, and Leonard instructs them how.

*Leonard:* After you wrap the body in reflective tape, the ends get Teflon tape so we can get a tight seal.

*Penny:* Like this?

*Leonard:* Yeah, perfect. And it helps to have small, delicate fingers. So don’t be discouraged if you can’t do it as fast as me and Howard.

(Episode 19: “The Soldier Excursion Diversion”)

Leonard’s ridicule of his and Howard’s small fingers emasculates himself, acknowledging his non-normalized form. However, it’s obvious from the joke’s delivery that it’s meant to be self-
deprecating, showing Leonard’s full awareness of how ridicule positions him outside normative masculinity.

Although most disciplinary ridicule was directed toward male characters, female characters were also subject to its power, thereby reinforcing the social norms of an idealized feminine body. In the following example, Amy is getting back out in the dating world and expresses her frustration with Penny and Bernadette about her own body.

*Amy:* Fine, I guess. I’ve been focusing on me. I was thinking about changing my wardrobe.

(Exclamations of excited “yes” from Bernadette and Penny)

*Amy:* But then I decided I don’t want to go changing who I am just because of some man.

(Disappointed looks from Bernadette and Penny)

(Episode 3: “The Bachelor Party Corrosion”)

In this scene, Amy is dressed in her standard attire of long sleeve sweater vests, long skirts in generally dull and unflattering colors. Bernadette and Penny represent the normalized female form, which is bright colored clothing that shows more skin. Therefore, Bernadette and Amy’s ridicule takes the form of disciplining Amy for “covering up” her femininity with bland attire. The disappointed looks shared by Bernadette and Penny but not acknowledged by Amy serve to silence ideas that women should dress for themselves, but should prepare their feminine bodies to attract potential males. Maintaining the female form is a trope repeated again in a later episode where Amy is showing off her new dress for a third date with a new guy to Penny and Bernadette. Amy speaks from off-stage sounding scandalized and nervous about her new look.

*Penny:* Come on Amy. Show us the dress.

*Amy:* Ok, but I’m really stepping outside of my comfort zone here.

(Amy enters with an extremely modest stress and camisole that someone would probably wear to a funeral.)
Penny: I don’t think any of your comfort zones are showing.

Bernadette: Yeah, it’s your third date. Maybe you could go more sexy.

Amy: Well, some people think the sexiest organ is the brain.

Penny: Nobody ever bought me drinks at a bar because my brain just popped out of my shirt.

(Episode 7: “The Spock Resonance”)

Amy’s eccentrically modest appearance only changed slightly from her normal attire by a shift in colors from neutral tone to black and greys. Her outfit reveals very little skin and is characterized as excessively conservative. Penny’s dismissal of Amy’s brain as an attractive characteristic elevates normative femininity as a sexualized body meant to attract men. Through ridicule, Amy’s modesty is characterized as undesirable, and desirability is reinforced as the norm of the feminine body.

The form of normalized female bodies is also disciplined by male characters as well, even if in subtle and indirect ways. In the following scene, Howard is coming to terms with his impending fatherhood, questioning whether he’s capable of being a good dad.

Howard: I shouldn’t be raising a kid. I don’t even eat my own vegetables. (Erratically and nervously pacing)

Leonard: Buddy, I think you might be overreacting.

Howard: And then there’s this nose. (points to his large nose) I mean, what if he looks like me? Or worse (gasps), what if she looks like me?

(Episode 16: “The Positive Negative Reaction”)

Howard keeps no secrets about his Jewish heritage and the evidence of it from the shape of his nose. In this scene, Howard is worried his son might inherit the excessive and undesirable facial feature. Yet, he is even more scandalized at the idea his daughter would inherit such a nose. The question of why a large nose is less acceptable on a female than a male invokes ideas that a person’s gender is tied to a physical body and that person’s essential biological make-up. The
same idea is echoed in the following example when Sheldon is commiserating the folly of
women in comparison to men after his break-up with Amy.

Sheldon: Would you like to hear another reason why men are better than women?
Leonard: Sure, let’s make it an even hundred.
Sheldon: You would never kiss me, and make me say I love you and then break up with me.
Leonard: I wouldn’t.
Sheldon: And you know why? ’Cause you’re a man. The champagne of genders… All you hear women say is “I’ll just have a salad.” “Where’s my lip gloss?” “I think this element should be called radium.” That last one was Madame Curie.
Leonard: I figured that out.
Sheldon: You know what? She was kind of an honorary man. She had a penis made of science.
(Episode 1: “The Matrimonial Momentum”)

This example illustrates how Sheldon’s somewhat unreliable ridicule of women as inferior actually characterizes Sheldon as ridiculous and eccentric. Although the ridicule attempts to liberate the idea of women as intellectually inferior, it still reifies that a person’s gender is inextricable from his or her own body. It also reinforces the idea that certain personality or intellectual traits are inextricably essentialized to certain gendered bodies. In the context of the previous example, Madame Curie could not be a brilliant scientist as a female because her body wouldn’t allow it. However, giving her an “honorary penis” allows her to enter into scientific achievements. The assumption of gender’s essentialized form is a common theme in the program, one that is further highlighted with ridicule’s disciplinary effects.

2 Broke Girls

RQ1: Rhetorical Positionality

Since 2 Broke Girls features only female lead characters, the analysis focused solely on
situations in which Max or Caroline used ridicule or were subjects of ridicule themselves. The study revealed that both female characters ridiculed men more often than other women. Max and Caroline both used self-ridicule as well, though not as often as they directed mockery toward others. The following examples reveal the pattern of ridicule indicative of the show’s design, which highlights gender and sexuality in humor situations with high frequency. The most common targets for Caroline and Max’s ridicule were their boss Han and the diner cook Oleg. In the following example, Han is upset and frazzled that a city tour guide doesn’t bring his customers into the diner. As is the formula in this show, Han or another person will set up a joke ignorant of its potential humor and Max or Caroline will follow it with a ridiculing zinger.

_Han:_ And I hate him because that tour never eats in here. He just keeps pushing his stupid Ye Olde Williamsburg Watering Hole. I don’t want to hear any more about that guy’s hole!

_Max:_ Until ten years from now when you’re still single.
(Episode 1: And the Wrecking Ball)

These short quips focused at men highlights their emasculation. In this scenario, Max targets Han by implying he will become so desperate for love, he will “turn gay” for the tour guide. The emasculation by comparing straight men with gay men is a common tactic used in the show. Female characters also target men like Oleg, who is characterized as creepy and eccentrically undesirable. In the following scene, Oleg tries to discuss his girlfriend Sophie’s need for fertility medicine, and Max turns it into a ridicule of his unattractiveness.

_Oleg:_ Max, can I ask your opinion on something? If Sophie and I want to get pregnant, she needs to be on drugs.

_Max:_ Oh to have sex with you? I get that.
(Episode 7: “And the Coming Out Party”)

Max’s sharp implication targets Oleg’s characteristic repulsiveness. In another scene, Caroline targets Han’s short stature when he calls a staff meeting at the diner.
Han: Everybody sit down.

Caroline: Why? So we can be eye-level?
(Episode 5: “And the Escape Room”)

Han is often the butt of jokes targeting his lack of masculine characteristics, including the ridicule of his lack of sexual prowess. Han’s foreign origins also leave him susceptible to ridicule from the women. In the following scene, Han arranges for his reluctant employees to participate in an escape room activity for a team-building exercise.

Han: It’s a fun way for us all to learn how to work together to solve a problem.

Max: If the group of us could work together to solve a problem, you’d be back in Korea.
(Episode 5: “And the Escape Room”)

Han’s overeager attitude and undesirable character often leave him open to mockery, thereby allowing Max to ridicule his Asian descent. In another scene, Caroline insults Sophie’s aging body while Max targets Han’s lack of experience with women.

Caroline: Is it even possible for Sophie to have a baby? I mean, didn’t that window close around the same time Blockbuster Video did?

Caroline: I say we gotta find him and knock some sense into him.

Han: I’m in.*with excitement*

Max: That’s the first time Han has ever said that to a woman.
(Episode 1: “And the Wrecking Ball”)

Max’s twist of word play disparages Han again, citing his inferior sexual accomplishments.

RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule

After thorough analysis of the ways in which ridicule functioned in 2 Broke Girls, the findings revealed that the female characters used more disciplinary ridicule than rebellious ridicule. The most common male targets for disciplinary ridicule were men who appeared small, short, boring, desperate, closeted homosexuals, overt homosexuals, men lacking sexual experience, and those possessing fetish eccentricities. The most common female targets for
disciplinary ridicule were older women who behaved like they were young, women who dated jobless men, and those who had small breasts or generally undesirable feminine qualities. Another group of ridiculed individuals, indiscriminate of gender, were people of lower class, individuals characterized as homeless, nonwhite, or those trying to rise above their social standing. In one particular case, disciplinary ridicule targeted characters who identified as “gender fluid,” a finding that will be discussed in this section.

In the following repartee between Max, Caroline, and Han, the three discuss the girls’ return to the diner from Hollywood where Caroline was signing the contract for her movie deal.

Han: Look who’s back from Hollywood. If it isn’t ScarJo and J-Lo.

Max: Said the guy from down low.

Han: Can I get an autograph? Oops, my bad. Still just waitresses.

Caroline: Han, don’t be upset just because I’m about to make $250,000 and have a movie made about me.

Max: Han already had a movie made about him: “Paul Blart: Small Cop.”

Han: What’s your movie called? “Straight Outta a Job?”
(Episode 17: “And the Show and Don’t Tell”)

Max’s first quip about the down -ow ridicules Han as homosexual, thereby disciplining normative masculinity to be firmly heterosexual. However, Han returns the mockery by insulting Max and Caroline’s social status as “just waitresses,” reminding them of their lower place on the totem pole. This back-and-forth ridiculing continues to the same effect in the next few lines, maintaining a disciplinary function of correcting characters who perform outside their given norms. This disciplinary pattern continues with both male and female characters, as in the following scene with the often ridiculed Sophie by the quick-witted Caroline and Max.

Sophie: Hey, everybody! Well, it happened.

Max: Ryan Seacrest came out?
Sophie: Oh Max… don’t be silly. I’m pretty sure that happened a couple of years ago.

Sophie: My biggest dream has come true.

Caroline: Kentucky Fried Chicken comes with free hair extensions?
(Episode 1: “And the Wrecking Ball”)

Not only does this ridicule and trivialize the “coming out” of man as homosexual, it also disciplines ideas that men who act “too gay” have the potential to be socially outed. Then Caroline turns the ridicule on Sophie by implying her lower-class shopping habits as the site of mockery. The idea that the once-rich Caroline can mock the lower class is often an area of humor in the show. In the following example, Caroline goes to visit her grandmother and is greeted by her butler at the door, who has not seen her since her father was imprisoned for embezzling millions.

Butler: Well Caroline, have you bounced back from the scandal?

Max: If you count working at a diner, sleeping in a wall, and clothes shopping at CVS, then she’s real bouncy.
(Episode 7: “And the Coming Out Party”)

Max targets the depths of Caroline’s fall from wealth as a site of ridicule, one of the few examples in which the two use disciplinary ridicule toward each other. When the two main characters do use ridicule in that way, it generally functions to discipline ideas of class instead of gender, however.

In one particular example, the show directly illustrates how ridicule disciplines ideas of gender fluidity and how transgendered people are themselves characterized as ridiculous. In the following scene, Caroline is preparing a call-in order for a person named “I,” who promptly appears at the cupcake stand window ready to pick up the order. With over-stylized make-up and eccentric jewelry, coupled with the five-o’clock shadow on the chin, the person is obviously
meant to be a man “dressed up” like a woman, thereby producing a narrative of transgender people as counterfeit and deceptive.

Caroline: I mean, what kind of person would just be named I?

I: (Man dressed like a woman approaches the cupcake stand) This kind. Hello. That’s my order.

Caroline: Yes, they’re just about ready, mis…ter… (Caroline struggles with a gendered pronoun.)

I: I’ll spare you the stress and confusion, dear, because I can tell by the size of your pores, you’re a sweater. (Spoken with higher-pitched class and scorn)

Max: She is. Sometimes she gets so nervous watching “America’s Next Top Model” our couch is slick for days. Spoiler alert: None of them are America’s next top model. (Sounding nervous)

I: To be clear, I am neither he nor she, Mr. nor Mrs., male nor female, and the only part of me that’s transitioning are my heels from day to evening. I am simply I, and I cannot be labeled. I am gender-fluid.

Max: That’s cool. As long as none of it gets on us. (Episode 4: “And the Inside Outside Situation”)

This entire scene characterizes transgender and gender-fluid people as a masquerading falsehood that confuses normativity. Max’s final quip at the end signals the person as a ridiculed character whose performative gender is trivialized and cannot be trusted. The othering of non-heterosexual bodies through disciplinary ridicule becomes a common theme in the program.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of disciplinary ridicule in the program, rebellious ridicule emerged through the female characters’ use of their own promiscuity and sexualization. Several examples will illustrate a clear pattern of how the women used rebellious ridicule, although in some cases, this humor didn’t necessarily liberate the women from the social norms themselves. In the following example, Max’s ex-boyfriend Randy wants to have a serious discussion with her after their break-up. Caroline’s quip targets Max’s lack of social nicety and general sexual modesty, one of her most common characteristics in the show.
**Randy:** Max, let’s get real.

**Caroline:** Max doesn’t like to talk about reality unless it’s reality TV. Like the Cops New Orleans episode she was on.

**Max:** It’s the only time Fox has ever aired a nipple.
(Episode 22: “And the Big Gamble”)

The function of ridicule above contains layers of nuance that require careful contextualization. In the scene, Caroline appears to target Max for her promiscuity, which could be seen as behaving outside social norms. Yet, Max owns this promiscuity as a badge of honor, almost normalizing a woman’s use of her own body for sometimes immodest means. In this context, the ridicule does target Max’s indecent exposure; however, Max ownership of the ridicule does push against ideas that women should be mocked for their bodies. However, it is only within the context of these social norms that Max can take hold of discursive power. Therefore, the rebellious ridicule in the scene is limited in terms of its liberating power. The pattern of rebellious ridicule emerges again with Max’s sexual proclivities, apparent in the following scene where Caroline finds out Max has other friends.

**Caroline:** Well, you know, I thought we were exclusive, for lack of a better word.

**Max:** What, like monogamous? You thought we were in a monogamous friendship? I’m not even monogamous with the people I’m monogamous with. What is the big deal? You had friends before we were friends. Bunch of rich bitches.
(Episode 10: “And the No New Friends”)

Not only is Max mocking the conservative social norm of monogamy, she also mocks women from the upper class that used to be friends with Caroline. Max targets the powerful in society and the rules that govern their relationships, even while mocking her own inability to fit it. To Max in this show, nothing is really off limits to the power of ridicule. This includes the President of the United States himself. The following example serves as one of the few moments where a
character targets a powerful political position, which on the surface appears to push against the social norm of respecting one’s government.

*Caroline:* I just got a $20 tip on a $10 check. I may be the greatest waitress ever, and strangely, that doesn’t make me want to die.

*Max:* You’re finally getting the hang of a job you’ve had for years. Is your last name Obama?
(Episode 4: “And the Inside Outside Situation”)

Max’s quip toward former President Obama appears subversive on the surface. However, it is questionable whether the ridicule actually mocks a norm or a person who breaks it. After thoughtful contextualization, the seemingly rebellious ridicule may lack the mocking teeth of subversion because laughing at one’s government is often seen as harmless, acceptable, and even democratic. Therefore, it would be a stretch to characterize this as overtly rebellious, especially considering the tone of most mocking remarks about politicians, who are common targets of mainstream ridicule.

The last example in which a potentially rebellious ridicule emerged centered around the idea of normalized whiteness. Racial and ethnic difference was a common site of humor for the program. However, this particular humor situation targeted a character for being “too white,” an uncommon point of mockery for sitcoms. In this scene, Max and Caroline visit Earl in a jazz bar filled mostly with people of color. The two female characters do not necessarily look out of place until Max points out Caroline’s attire.

*Max:* You gotta go up there and buy us some time so I can convince Earl to get up there.

*Caroline:* Max, I don’t know if I could do that. *Hesitant at first. In a white cocktail dress, pushes white flower in her hair.* Should I go with “God Bless the Child” or “Lady Sings the Blues”?

*Max:* Quit adding white things to you. You’re already the whitest person here. Just go.
(Episode 9: “And the Sax Problem”)
Caroline’s excessive whiteness in a predominantly black space is marked a site for ridicule. On the surface, this could potentially serve as pushing against the social norms. However, Max’s insistence that Caroline tone down her whiteness implies that it doesn’t belong in such a racially diverse space. Therefore, its appears that an excessively white body entering a diversely colored space is ridiculous and laughable. Despite the few examples of rebellious ridicule, instances of disciplinary ridicule emerged in far greater frequency and with more overt effects.

RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity

In the program, normative and non-normative male bodies are constructed in several discursive ways. Clear examples of normative male bodies were limited to those characters who demonstrated overt heterosexuality, like Max’s boyfriend and potential love interests. Non-normative male bodies were discursively constructed through ridicule as men who lack sexual experience or were generally small and weak in stature. Normative male bodies were also constructed in contrast with the ridiculed homosexual man. In the following example, Caroline and Max meet the manager of the hotel where the two are staying in Los Angeles. The hotel manager’s overt and excessive performance of “gayness” characterizes him as ridiculous.

*Hotel manager:* Well, I heard you were in LA for a movie meeting, and well, keep me in mind.

*Caroline:* Absolutely. For what?

*Hotel manager:* A part. I’m also an actor. I’m very versatile. I can play a gay dad, a gay executive, a gay priest.

*Max:* (Rhetorically) Is there any other kind?

*Hotel manager:* I can also play straight. Just ask my ex-wife Beth. But she really should have suspected. We would get into such knockdowns about the pesto.

(Episode 13: “And the Lost Baggage”)

The hotel manager’s exaggerated flamboyance positions his ridiculous body into the realm of otherness. In addition, the man’s non-normative body is also characterized as a ridiculous “act,”
one that he chooses to perform and can switch off at any moment. Another example that
ridiculed homosexuality involves Max’s mockery of a boy who lacks athletic abilities by
implying he’s gay. A kid comes into the diner trying to sell candy, but Max brushes him off and
ultimately ridicules him for failing to catch a fruit she throws his way.

Kid: It’s not a scam. My friends and I just want a place to play baseball after school so
we’re not hanging on the streets like rap people.

Max: Kid, I started the candy scam. I raised $500 for homeless bowling league. AKA, pot. Catch this, Mr. Baseball. (Max throws an orange at the kid.)

Kid: (Flails arms dramatically) Not the face!

Max: I think I know which team you play on, and it ain’t baseball.
(Episode 12: “And the Story Telling Show”)

In this scene, the non-normalized boy is characterized as weak, relying on the stereotype that gay
men lack normative masculine traits. The kid’s ridiculous reaction and Max’s derision of his
sexuality construct the identity of the non-masculine gay man, thereby reinforcing the
appropriateness of heteronormative masculinity.

The non-normalized male form is also constructed as small, childlike, and generally
underdeveloped, which generally comes at the expense of Han’s character. In the following
scene, Han offers Max and Caroline access to the facilities at his gym after their shower broke.

Han: Girls, if you need a shower, there are wonderful facilities at my new gym.

Max: Well, they obviously have child care.

Han: They even give me 6:15 wake-up call every morning, so I can make it to my ideal
body workout.

Max: I’ll give you a wake-up call right now. Sleep in. With that body, nothing’s gonna
work out.
(Episode 2: “And the Gym And Juice”)

Max’s targeted mockery of Han’s body calls attention to his non-normative shape, which is short
and generally dressed in clothes that don’t fit his body type. Max’s ridicule of Han is the most
common mockery toward men in the show, as illustrated in the next two examples. In the following scene, Han finds Max in the diner without her uniform and Max replies in her ordinary fashion of biting ridicule.

*Han:* Max, it’s almost your shift. Why haven’t you changed into your uniform.

*Max:* It’s almost spring. Why haven’t you changed into a butterfly?

(Episode 8: “And the Basketball Jones”)

Comparing Han’s body to that of a delicate butterfly positions his body into a non-normalized form, that of less a man and more a creature of dainty sensibilities. Despite the emasculation common with Han’s character, he was still ridiculed as a man, but just not a “manly man” who women desire. In following scene in which Han is wearing his normal sweater vest with tight biking shorts and a helmet, Max mocks him for his attire.

*Han:* Oh this is good! I need the exercise. I feel like I’m getting a little chubby!

*Max:* Oh I know. I can see it through those shorts.

(Episode 8: “And the Basketball Jones”)

Max’s ridicule implies that although she notices his male parts through his shorts, she has no interest in seeing, thereby linking non-normative male bodies with undesirability.

While Caroline and Max were often the tools used to construct male non-normativity through their ridicule, they also used humor to discipline the female body as well. Both female leads are characterized with normatively attractive female forms. Caroline’s blonde and thin traditional beauty stands in only slight contrast with Max’s curvy, well-endowed figure. A common theme involves Max ridiculing Caroline for having a small chest, as in the following scene where the two are waiting for Jennifer Lawrence to arrive to talk about Caroline’s movie.

*Caroline:* When Jennifer Lawrence gets here to interview me, just know, I’m also kind of interviewing her. I mean, I know she has my looks, does she have my naiveté?

*Max:* Is that French for “small boobs”?

(Episode 15: “And the Great Escape”)

65
The ridicule in this scene is two-fold as Max targets Caroline’s snobbish word choice and her flat chest, constructing the ideal feminine body as big-breasted. The trope of the dumb and beautiful female is also illustrated throughout the show through Sophie’s character, although Max and Caroline also target two normatively attractive, blonde rich women who walk into the diner in the following example.

*Max:* Hey, look. It’s the Oldsen twins. Did you tell them we worked here?

*Caroline:* My diner uniform fell out of my gym bag and they didn’t believe I was a stewardess on Air Yugoslavia. (Goes to take their order at the table.)

*Woman 1:* Oh we don’t need to order. We don’t eat.

*Caroline:* Well, you’ve come to the right place.

(Caroline returns to the counter by Max)

*Caroline:* I’m back. See? Nothing happened. Those two moms didn’t do anything. I mean, how dangerous can they be? They’re almost 40.

*Max:* 40? That’s almost 50.

(Episode 2: “And the Gym and Juice”)

Although the prior scene relied on the stereotype of rich, entitled housewives, Max and Caroline’s pointed ridicule also targets older women, separating the aging female body into the realm of non-normativity. Although the ridicule of women targets those of bodies deemed unattractive by normative standards, the humor focuses more on disciplining the male form than the female form.

*The Odd Couple*

*RQ1: Rhetorical positionality*

Since *The Odd Couple* features only male lead characters, the analysis focused solely on situations in which Oscar and Felix used ridicule or were subjects of ridicule themselves. The study revealed that male characters were overwhelmingly the target of ridicule, while women
were only ridiculed a handful of occasions. Oscar, the stereotypical divorced, mid-40s ladies’
man, and Felix, the obsessively clean, overly sensitive, but no-less-straight hypochondriac, are
both designed as characters easily ridiculed. Felix is the target of mockery far more often as his
eccentric character traits give other characters many derisive opportunities ripe for ridicule. In
the following scene, Felix plays matchmaker with Oscar’s assistant Dani, asking her questions so
he can set her up with the perfect man.

_Felix:_ Now that I have this information, I shall find you the perfect match. And while I
cannot guarantee success… yes, I can.

_Oscar:_ Felix, you can’t micromanage romance.

_Felix:_ It’s not micromanaging. It’s simply creating a love algorithm to compare data,
weighting certain categories (Oscar pretends to fall asleep and snores) as indicators for
long-term potential.

_Oscar:_ Oh, I’m sorry, I dozed off. Who’s the space president now?
(Season 1, Episode 4: “The Blind Leading the Blind Date”)

Oscar’s ridicule targets Felix for his eccentric and compulsive invasiveness, a trait that Oscar
often mocks when Felix’s schemes go beyond normal. Felix’s excessive displays of his own
intelligence also gives Oscar reasons to mock him. Despite Felix’s often ridiculed position, the
character still exhibits discursive power by turning the ridicule on Oscar for his untidy and
unhygienic living conditions. In the following scene, Felix interrupts Oscar’s date after learning
his wife filed for divorce. Oscar reluctantly ends his date to console a nearly hysterical Felix.

_Felix:_ I’m sorry I ruined your date. I just… I just didn’t know who else to turn to.

_Oscar:_ No, no, it’s OK. I know divorce is brutal. But it gets better buddy, trust me.

_Felix:_ This is better? (Surveying the mountains of clothes, papers in disarray, bottles and
trash scattered across the living room.)
(Season 1, Episode 1: “Pilot”)

In this scene, Felix targets Oscar’s cluttered and messy apartment. Despite the obvious
ridicule pointed at Oscar, the humor also works to characterize Felix’s ridiculous cleanliness.
More importantly, this form of ridicule, while pointed at a superficial fault of Oscar’s, doesn’t necessarily disparage him. In fact, Oscar is rarely the target of disparaging remarks that target his masculinity. Instead, Oscar uses self-ridicule to mock his own hedonistic behavior. In the following scene, Felix expresses remorse for Oscar’s own divorce from his wife a few years ago. Oscar responds in his normal fashion of shameless bachelorism, brushing off the show of emotion with excessive displays of his sexual freedom.

*Felix:* Still, I should have been there to help you with your pain.

*Oscar:* What pain? The day we signed the papers, I threw myself a two-day party. I woke up covered in bubble wrap. A stripper had to pop me out. One bubble at a time.

(Season 1, Episode 1: “Pilot”)

The previous example characterizes Oscar’s overt hetero-masculinity in stark contrast with Felix’s more sensitive expressiveness, ridiculing the latter by reinforcing the former. Felix also blindly ridicules himself often in the show, parading as the epitome of emasculated mockery. In the following scene, Felix, in exaggerated self-denial, explains to Oscar that his wife, Ashley, is going to take him back. Oscar’s sarcastic response echoes a common pattern in the show where the audience and Oscar laugh at Felix’s expense.

*Felix:* Any minute the phone is going to ring and it’s going to be… (phone dings with text message) Ashley. (checks phone) No. Just an allergy alert. But good news: the pollen level has dropped to a 2.3, so the mask… (taps pocket) stays in my pocket.

*Oscar:* Wow, and she left you. (With obvious sarcasm that Felix misses)

(Season 1, Episode 1: “Pilot”)

Felix’s long list of weird quirks is the most common trope, amounting to a majority of the ridicule in the show.

Despite the overwhelming amount of ridicule toward male characters, female characters are sometimes targeted, although the pattern appeared only cursory and superficial. In the following example, Felix invites his and Oscar’s friends to a yoga studio where he is a substitute
teaching a session. Felix’s obsessive and compulsive corrections toward the participants scares all the customers away, except for Oscar’s friend and agent Teddy.

_Felix:_ I really messed this up, Teddy. I just wanted to share something I love with people… and have them do it exactly the way I thought they should.

_Teddy:_ Nothing’s wrong with that first part. But as for the rest, I’ll tell you the same thing I’d say to a woman who wants to cut her hair short: no one wants that.

(Season 1, Episode 10: “Enlightening Strikes”)

Although a female isn’t physically present in the scene, Teddy’s ridicule targets women with short hair, normatively seen as an unfeminine trait. In another scene, Teddy targets the constraints of marriage, citing having a wife as exempting him from bachelor behaviors. Smoking a cigar, drinking beer, and admiring Oscar’s sports shrine that is the wall of TV screens in his living room, Teddy takes out his phone and starts recording the wall.

_Oscar:_ Teddy, are you filming my sports ticker?

_Teddy:_ And your ten TVs. Next time my wife tells me I’m spending money like an idiot, I’m gonna show her this.

_Oscar:_ You know what? You should get a sports wall. You’re my agent. Tell Diane you need one for work.

_Teddy:_ (laughs) Oh, Oscar. You get a wife or wall. No man gets both.

(Season 1, Episode 1: “Pilot”)

Although his wife or no other woman is present in the scene, this indirect mockery nonetheless targets the stereotype of the controlling wife.

Although Oscar often initiates ridicule, he is also the recipient as well, especially when in relation to Felix, characterizing their plutonic relationship as a “married couple.” In the following scene, Oscar and his ex-wife, Gabby, sit down for breakfast after the previous night’s sexual encounter. The two realize getting back together won’t work, but decide to be friends instead.

_Oscar:_ We wrecked our marriage. Let’s not wreck our divorce, too.
Gaby: I’m so impressed by how thoughtful you’re being about this.

Oscar: I think it’s from living with Felix. I overthink everything now.

Gaby: Well he’s good for you. Maybe he’s a better wife for you than I was.
(Season 1, Episode 12: “The Audit Couple”)

Oscar and Felix are often the butt of mistaken identity when people assumed their status as “roommates” was a euphemism for their homosexual partnership. However, in this situation, Gabby knows both men are straight, yet she still ridicules the codependent men for living together so harmoniously. The situation implies that two straight men who live together are subject to ridicule and its disparaged position.

RQ2 and RQ3: Disciplinary and Rebellious Ridicule

In the humor situations in which Oscar and Felix employ ridicule, it functions in a disciplinary way in nearly every single instance. The most common targets of this ridicule are men who are overly expressive and sensitive, divorcees, straight men who “act gay,” as well as men who are obnoxiously particular with style or tidiness. Most of the time, this characterizes all the notable features of Felix, and very rarely includes Oscar. In one of the most overt performances of Felix’s ridiculous antics, both Oscar and Teddy use disciplinary ridicule to mock his outrageous eccentricities. The humor situation is comprised of two different scenes. However, they are given together here for contextual grounding. In the following scene, Oscar and Felix discuss their past history with school mascots.

Felix: You know, I was a mascot myself. The Roosevelt High Screaming Eagle, if you can imagine that.

Oscar: I can. You in a bird suit, stuffed in a locker, waiting for your best friend the janitor to get you out.

Felix: (Appears confused) Did I tell you that story?
(Season 1, Episode 7: “Secret Agent Man”)

Not only does Oscar’s ridicule position Felix as the lonely and bullied schoolkid, it also characterizes Felix as being oblivious to the mockery. The humor at work functions because the audience and Oscar are in on the joke, uninviting Felix to the knowing laugher. Then later in the same episode, Felix’s mockery continues when he brings out his old mascot costume in an extreme attempt to reunite Teddy and Oscar. Felix tricks Teddy and Oscar into meeting after the two have a falling out to try and patch things up.

Teddy: I got your text.

Oscar: I didn’t send you a text.

Felix: (voice offstage and muffled) I did. It was I.

Oscar: (confused) Felix?

Felix: (still offstage, speaking with announcer voice.) 20 years ago, a mascot brought two good friends together. And so it shall be again. (Jumps out in normal shirt, pants, and tie, but with the head of a screeching eagle mascot.)

(Teddy and Oscar both jump back and scream in fright.)

Teddy: What’s that?

Oscar: Oh, my good God!

Felix: It’s my old Screaming Eagle head from high school. I thought it would be weird to wear the whole thing.

Oscar: (said with obvious sarcasm) Yeah, that would’ve been silly.

Felix: (with exaggerated hand gestures and flourish) What is a mascot? (Said with a practiced air of a rehearsed speech)

Oscar: A kid with no friends?

Teddy: A failed gymnast?

Oscar: A virgin?

Felix: That’s right--a hero.

(Season 1, Episode 7: “Secret Agent Man”)
Throughout this entire charade, Felix’s exaggerated performance is characterized as ridiculous and eccentric. Then through Oscar and Teddy’s ridicule, that performance is disciplined as friendless and lacking sexual prospect as a man.

The linking of the ridiculed with emasculation and inability to attract women is a common theme emergent in the program. In the following scene, this theme is echoed when Felix encourages Teddy’s son to pursue chess instead of sports.

Teddy: Hey Felix, you mind if I borrow your chess set for my son?

Felix: Oh, he’s given up on athletics? Good for him. His teenage years will be free from injury.

Oscar: And girlfriends.
(Season 2, Episode 9: “Chess Nuts”)

Oscar’s quick ridicule targets not just Felix but all men who fail to pass the test of masculinity with organized team sports. Despite the overwhelming presence of disciplinary ridicule, a handful of scenes contained humor where Felix mocks Oscar’s macho man lifestyle, which on the surface appears rebellious. In the following scene, Oscar mentions his intentions to pursue a sexual encounter with a woman, for which Felix ridicules him, targeting Oscar’s primitive and simple-minded pursuits.

Oscar: I’m having dinner with Brooke. And afterwards, please make yourself scarce. I’m hoping we end up back here for a little nightcap, if you know what I mean.

Felix: Yes, I always know what you mean, Oscar, because you only ever talk about sex and hamburgers.
(Season 1, Episode 11: “Jealous Island”)

Out of all the uses of ridicule in the program, this scene appears most clearly to push against the idea that manly men just like to eat and have sex. However rebellious, Felix’s pointed mockery still works to characterize himself in stark contrast to this masculine ideal. Despite a potentially
rebellious ridicule emergent in a few humor situations, no clear patterns appeared from their use, nor are the examples particularly liberating for the characters.

**RQ4 and RQ5: Male and Female Bodily Normativity**

Male normativity was constructed in this program through the dichotomy and contrast of Oscar and Felix’s characters, the former being the normal heterosexual male and the latter as a non-normative body who “acts gay” but isn’t. The theme of Felix’s performance as a straight, flamboyant man is characterized as confusing and eccentric, thereby prompting narratives of ridicule to discipline his body into non-normativity. In the following scene, Oscar’s male friends are watching sports on TV and Felix is in the kitchen making healthy snacks for the group.

*Oscar:* Hey, Felix! How’s the food coming?

*Felix:* (Exits the kitchen with an apron and plastic gloves) I’m just plating it. Roy, always a pleasure. Teddy, if you have to smoke that cigar, please turn on the air purifier. (bell dings in kitchen) Oh, gentlemen… start your taste buds. (Exits to kitchen)

*Teddy:* I’m developing a little theory about why his wife wasn’t happy.

*Oscar:* He’s not gay.

*Roy:* Are you sure? He seems a little gay.

*Oscar:* No, he seems incredibly gay, but he’s not.

*Roy:* Ah. That’s a shame. I always wanted to have a gay friend. You know, to just seem more evolved.

*Teddy:* You already have a black friend; what are you trying to prove?
(Season 1, Episode 1: “Pilot”)

In the scene above, Teddy and Oscar equate homosexuality with Felix’s failure as a husband. Then Roy and Oscar imply Felix’s apparent “gayness” is such that it can be measured on a scale, with the standard starting at heterosexual normativity. Finally, when Roy is disappointed that Felix is not gay, he implies that a homosexual man or a heterosexual are both valuable commodities, but a man who masquerades as both is not. In addition, Teddy’s non-normative
race also positions himself as a commodity, one that is mocked by Teddy himself, implying the inclusiveness of others into normativity as a hilarious concept. The disciplining of the confusion of Felix’s character implies that the categorical assumptions of sexuality must be clearly defined. Felix’s performance continues to serve as sites of both frustration and ridicule for Oscar, as is evident in the following scene. In an episode where Felix constantly outperforms Oscar in sports, Felix is gloating and Oscar is resentful.

*Oscar:* It’s bad enough to lose, but to lose to somebody like you…

*Dani:* (Aside and looking tense at the direction of the conversation.) Ooooh…

*Felix:* (Looking slightly hurt.) I’m sorry, did you say “someone like you”?

*Dani:* (Sounding more tense with a higher pitch) Oooohhh….Uh, I think I left my, uh, thing in a place. (Hurriedly makes an exit to avoid the imminent awkward confrontation.)

*Felix:* (With more aggressiveness) When you say someone like me, what do you mean? Do you mean a freelance photographer?

*Oscar:* (Without hesitation) No.

*Felix:* Do you mean a Virgo with a Pisces rising?

*Oscar:* (Without hesitation) No.

*Felix:* Do you mean a wimp?

*Oscar:* (Without hesitation) Your words, not mine.

*Felix:* (Obviously affronted) Ah!

*Oscar:* Oh, come on Felix, admit it. You’re not exactly a guy’s guy.

*Felix:* Why? Because I use coasters? Because I sing the occasional aria in the shower? Because I know the pleats in a kilt go in the back?! (All while liberally applying hand sanitizer to himself)

*Oscar:* I feel like you’re trying my case for me.

(Season 1, Episode 8: “The Unger Games”)

The above scene is one of the clearest examples that brings to the front the idea that Felix’s non-normative body confuses the normative Oscar when he out-performs his friend in sports. Felix’s
responses only work to ridicule his body further. Oscar’s insistence that Felix lacks a “guy’s
guy” performance echoes the ridicule, thereby implying that no matter how good Felix performs
at sports, his body remains non-normative because of his other eccentric and flamboyant
tendencies.

Despite Felix’s characteristic design as non-normative, he still maintains heterosexual
behavior with the introduction of his girlfriend, Emily. In the following scene, Felix enters the
restaurant where Emily works as a waitress and Oscar is eating at a table.

Emily: Aw, there he is. My big, sexy boyfriend. (Kisses Felix)

Oscar: I’ll give you… “boyfriend.”
(Season 2, Episode 1: “All About Eavesdropping”)

Emily’s remark about Felix’s attractiveness gives Oscar another opportunity to ridicule his
friend’s non-normative body. Although Felix has a steady girlfriend who is normatively
attractive, his characterization as sensitive and slightly flamboyant exempts him from normative
masculinity, and consequently, a sex appeal to females. Therefore, Felix’s body and his
performance makes him an easy target, his ridiculed form precluding him from traits awarded to
normal straight men.

Program Differences

Although the three sitcoms were designed in the relatively common manner of all U.S.
comedies on television, The Big Bang Theory, 2 Broke Girls, and The Odd Couple each
maintained distinctive characteristics regarding the kinds of gendered humor used and the make-
up of normative and non-normative bodies. In the Big Bang Theory, humor situations revolved
around intelligent word-play and subtle sexual allusions, with men and women positioned as
both the initiators and targets of ridicule. Male characters tended to use disciplinary ridicule
more, but female characters still participated as well. In 2 Broke Girls, the humor relied heavily
on overt sexual allusion and racial stereotypes, with emasculated men as the common target of ridicule. The two female characters commonly used disciplinary ridicule to target men, although they also illustrated examples of ridicule that bordered on the rebellious. *The Odd Couple* was designed to mock the ridiculed character of Felix more often than any other character. The two male characters targeted disciplinary ridicule toward men most commonly, and rebellious ridicule was almost non-existent. Despite these thematic and character differences, the shows shared more in common than they differed.

**Program Commonalities**

Several threads of thought emerged from each of the three programs. At the time of analysis of each episode, down to the unit of the humor situation, these patterns appeared somewhat isolated to a single incident or character. However, after examining the ways in which ridicule operated among all gendered characters in each show, this study discovered how humor’s disciplinary function transcended across programs. Beyond the text that is seen and heard are the implications of the context from which this ridicule emerges. Certain gendered performances were socially appropriate for their corresponding gendered body. Any performance that strayed beyond the boundary of acceptable behavior became a popular target for ridicule. Across the three programs, the most common targets for disciplinary ridicule were male characters who were performatively unmanly and women who were performatively unfeminine. After a more holistic analysis of these humor situations, the theme emerged that this mocking and ridiculing of these “othered” bodies reinforced the normative performances and separated them from the non-normative. In fact, it was through this ridiculing that the normative and non-normative bodies were discursively constructed, linked together only through the contrast of its opposite. Therefore, it appeared that one could not exist without the other.
In several examples, when characters’ performances confused or troubled this binary, ridicule was used to discipline it into hilarity, almost as if sending a message that says “Look what happens to those who misbehave.” In addition, all three programs tended to target non-normative performances of masculinity more than femininity. The common male targets that appeared in the three programs all challenged heteronormative masculinity, and to some extent, performances of femininity did not trouble these boundaries. However, the fact still remains that each program, while distinctive in plot line, characters, and humor themes, overwhelmingly employed the power of ridicule toward a disciplinary end.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the harmless pursuit of laughter and a good time, watching U.S. sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory*, *2 Broke Girls*, and *The Odd Couple* certainly qualifies as humorous entertainment. In addition to this, the watching of sitcoms also counts as purchasing a commodity, the exchange of currency for services rendered. Media companies create genres of programming to attract the widest possible audiences in hopes of luring eyeballs to the screen, which translates into greater profits for their business. Consumers are more than happy to comply and hand over their money for high-quality entertainment. If the secured spot as the second most-watched show on prime-time television is any evidence, then *The Big Bang Theory* is not only a commercial success, but also one of the United States’ most popular and recognizable platforms illustrating how humor operates. This reason alone drives the curiosity to discover what makes the show so popular. It begs the question from the perspective of a critical media scholar: What or whom are we laughing at? If the cultural product of a sitcom is so widely circulated among millions of Americans, then what are the show’s producers saying is funny that we as a people understand? This line of inquiry is what drove the investigations into *The Big Bang Theory*, as well as *2 Broke Girls* and *The Odd Couple*, two popular sitcoms by their own right.

Studying such an elusive and polysemic communication as humor comes with its share of challenges, the foremost of which is selecting the appropriate theory to understand its function. Billig’s (2005) theory of ridicule served as the focused framework through which certain kinds of humor could be studied to answer the aforementioned questions. Since the questions involved the discovery of humor’s effects, a critical rhetorical analysis allowed for the study to explore patterns of humor’s functions, as well as create a discourse that linked laughier, humor, and
persuasion with the maintenance of societal norms. The findings revealed a rather unsurprising pattern in the kind of targets for ridicule. Gendered bodies that performed outside their appropriate male or female behaviors were disciplined as non-normative through ridicule. What does it do when we discipline these othered bodies through ridicule then? The implications of such ridicule revealed a complex web of possibilities and limitations that were tied together and sometimes dependent on the other’s existence. When characters ridiculed others, they were discursively creating normativity through the following mechanisms: by disciplining categorical excess, and by negotiating a spectrum of otherness.

First, performances of categorical excess were cut down discursively through ridicule. In *The Big Bang Theory*, the male protagonists in the show were often the recipients of disciplinary ridicule when they performed a behavior that was too feminine or not masculine enough. This study revealed that the characters were disciplined only when their performances exceeded a seemingly arbitrary social scale. Leonard is too short. Sheldon is too quirky. Raj is too sensitive. Howard is too Jewish. All of these “excesses” positioned them as easy targets for ridicule, thereby constructing them as non-normative bodies. Then the rhetorical mechanism of ridicule trimmed these excesses away from the model of a normative body. Leonard’s shortness is excessive for a man, but not for a woman. Without the ridicule of his height, we wouldn’t know the acceptable body type of a man. The social norm that normative men should be tall is discursively constructed because of the ridiculing of Leonard’s small stature. Raj’s sensitive comments are ridiculed, prompting narratives of his feminine body and thereby exempting him from masculine normativity. His excessively intimate comments toward Howard are mocked, positioning his performance as too feminine to be that of a man. The discursive disciplining of Raj constructs manly stoicism and emotionless expressions. The same rhetorical mechanism
exists in the other two programs as well. In 2 Broke Girls, Han’s excessively short, Asian, and “chubby” exterior are common targets for Max and Caroline’s ridicule. In The Odd Couple, Felix is too sensitive, tidy, emotional, and neurotic, often leaving him ridiculed in comparison to Oscar’s normative body. Across the three programs, gender normativity is constructed only in relation to the ridiculed, disciplined performances of non-normativity.

Normativity was also constructed in a secondary way, although the ridiculing mechanism operated toward its same disciplinary end. After carefully analyzing the social dynamics of a humor situation and the rhetorical positionality of characters, it became obvious that ridicule didn’t just create an immovable standard of normativity, stable in a finite performance of masculinity and femininity. The nature of ridicule in the programs was such that the speaker and subject did not remain in static positions, fixed permanently in a place of immovable mockery. Furthermore, this kind of flexible positionality allowed different characters to be initiators and receivers of ridicule in different situations. A notable feature of this finding was ridicule’s versatility, its potential to both control and liberate a person depending upon the context. Characters liberated themselves from their own ridicule at the expense of another’s ridiculous position. In fact, characters who were positioned as non-normative in one scene used ridicule to target another character’s shortcomings in a later scene. And in a way, the rhetorical one-upmanship did help construct an ideal of normativity through the show. However, the ridicule also constructed what can only be described as a spectrum of otherness. Those characters who turned the tables on their discursive othering did so by highlighting the otherness of different characters.

For example, the design of Han’s character in 2 Broke Girls is that of a short, Asian man, which is an unchangeable form of his body. However, he is able to position himself as the
ridiculer only by mocking Max and Caroline’s lower class position. The key to this rhetorical othering, though, relies on a character targeting a social norm he or she is not guilty of breaking themselves. Leonard can only mock Sheldon’s eccentricity because he is so normal. Penny can mock Leonard’s smallness because she’s a taller woman. Oscar ridicules Felix because he isn’t sensitive or clean. Felix mocks Oscar’s laziness and untidiness because he himself isn’t. Max and Caroline target older women’s age because they themselves are young. In this way, normativity isn’t constructed as simply an all-or-nothing, rigid set of conditions, but as a continuum that allows performances to shift along depending on their position relative to others. Despite the potential for characters to liberate themselves from their temporary ridiculed position, no character’s performance can escape the spectrum itself.

Normativity and non-normativity do not cease to exist because of a liberating performance. The continuum may stretch and push the boundaries of what it means to be normative or non-normative. However, not even the most discursively troubling performances can break free of categorical positioning. Even when potentially rebellious ridicule was present in the programs, its manifestation was always pushing *against* a norm itself. These performances were limited by the norms themselves. Though social norms can shift, this study illustrated how people and their performances always operate within the spectrum of sameness vs. otherness. The same is true of gender performativity as well. Any troubling performances of gender or sexuality were ridiculed or disciplined into non-normativity. However, Max’s potentially rebellious ridicule of the socially defined norm of feminine modesty challenged ideas about how women can use their bodies as rhetorical weapons. Despite this pushing against the norms, women and men were still inextricably tied to and defined by their physical bodies. Therefore,
gendered performances other than male or female were silenced by omission or disciplined into the ridiculous, like the “gender fluid” character in 2 Broke Girls.

The larger implications of the ridiculing and othering of non-normative performances is a discursive uninviting of certain kinds of people. People become uninvited through ridicule. It is their eviction notice from the cool crowd. Throughout all three programs, characters would ridicule certain people and then wouldn’t welcome them into their social circle because of their othered position. In The Big Bang Theory, Stuart’s constantly ridiculed state kept him uninvited from the group trip to Las Vegas. In 2 Broke Girls, Oleg’s performance of the creepy pervert exempts him from masculine attractiveness. The othering of bodies not only separates them from normativity, it excludes them from all the benefits that normativity provides, like social power, heterosexual attractiveness, a voice to defend themselves.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the abundant mapping of ridicule’s function throughout the three programs, the study was not without its limitations. First, the theoretical framework allowed for a thorough investigation of gender and humor but only a cursory acknowledgment of race, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, and other intersectional identifiers. Human beings do not exist as solely gendered bodies but also has sites where the aforementioned identifiers intersect with gender. A more rigorous investigation of humor and intersectional possibilities could have strengthened the depth of understanding regarding the maintenance of social norms. Intersectionality is only given passing significance in this study, while a more robust understanding of normativity could have benefited from exploring the ways different identifiers emerged in the programs. Secondly, although each program contained a mix of gender-protagonist casts, they all were products from one network: CBS. Writers and producers from a
particular company could have been constrained by the prescriptive limitations of that media organization. This particular study could have benefited from choosing shows from a diverse range of networks.

Although this study deeply explored ridicule’s function in *The Big Bang Theory*, *2 Broke Girls*, and *The Odd Couple*, a critical rhetorical analysis of humor barely scratched the surface of explaining the material consequences such mechanisms have on society and how people view themselves. Ridicule’s role as both the shackles and key in defining social norms is an area of critical humor research historically underexplored but nonetheless a fruitful site for future research. Scholars looking to apply Billig’s (2005) theory of ridicule could consider also looking beyond U.S. sitcoms to other texts, such as more subversive and niche content from satirical news shows like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* or *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Since ridicule worked in a disciplinary way most commonly in the three programs in this study, perhaps focusing on other humor techniques like parody and satire could provide more liberating possibilities. Other text possibilities include those not normally known for their overt humor references. A study could explore how more serious shows like dramas use humor and ridicule in passing, since ridicule doesn’t necessarily have to make an audience laugh to perform its rhetorical role.

Besides just looking at different texts from a rhetorical perspective, the study of ridicule could also benefit from an audience reception analysis in which focus groups are asked to characterize performances based on the ridiculing mechanisms at work. A more ethnographic approach could also produce interesting possibilities, allowing researches to observe how ridicule behaves in interpersonal group settings. Beyond just the expansion of text and approach possibilities, researches could explore the creation of such programs like *The Big Bang Theory*
by conducting a series of in-depth interviews to understand why and how ridicule emerges to begin with. Cultural texts like U.S. sitcoms are not simply created in a vacuum but rely heavily on creating humor from easily recognizable tropes and characterized behaviors. Ridicule in these shows are designed by writers, crafted to maximize the the biggest laugh among the widest possible audience. The humor situations don’t emerge on accident from the individual minds of the writers without social conditioning. It is from the social conditions of norms that the writers themselves construct humor situations, thereby limited in what they can target and liberate. An interesting investigation could explore the sitcom writer’s freedom and restriction to reproduce norms through their humorous products.

Although the study revealed a largely disciplinary function of ridicule within *The Big Bang Theory*, 2 *Broke Girls*, and *The Odd Couple*, the rhetorical mechanism of humor itself shouldn’t be totalized as a discourse strictly limited to reinforcing social norms. In fact, 2 *Broke Girls* remains the closest example of mainstream humor that revealed potentially rebellious ridicule. However, the design of sitcom-structured characters limited the potential for discursive rebellion to occur. In the scripted and formulaic dialogue of television, there was little room to present norm-challenging characters and little time to examine rebellious humor. Perhaps through other texts, by different approaches, and from other kinds of humor, researchers might discover more liberating possibilities. Moving beyond the constraints of the sitcom could allow more troubling gender performances to emerge. Despite this study’s structural limits, the investigation of humor’s capacity to reinforce and/or subvert social norms can only benefit from more rigorous analysis in the field of critical humor studies.
Table 1: Model of Hegemonic Masculinity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hegemonic masculinity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complicit masculinities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasized femininities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalized masculinities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant/protest/pariah femininities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinated masculinities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: *The Big Bang Theory* list of characters with performative descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Character</th>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Character Description</th>
<th>Gender Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Sheldon Cooper</td>
<td>Jim Parsons</td>
<td>Eccentric, highly intelligent, arrogant, neurotic, socially inept, tall, skinny</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Leonard Hofstadter</td>
<td>Johnny Galecki</td>
<td>Endearing, short, intelligent, more socially understanding than Sheldon, now married to Penny</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Penny (no surname)</td>
<td>Kaley Cuoco</td>
<td>Blonde, attractive, unintelligent, street smarts, lower-class upbringing, waitress, now married to Leonard</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Howard Wolowitz</td>
<td>Simon Helberg</td>
<td>Jewish, small, reformed womanizer, married to Bernadette</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Rajesh (Raj) Koothrappali</td>
<td>Kunal Nayyar</td>
<td>Indian, heavy accent, overcome fear of women, sensitive, aloof</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Amy Farrah Fowler</td>
<td>Mayim Bialik</td>
<td>Highly intelligent, excessively modest clothing, socially awkward, Sheldon’s ex-girlfriend</td>
<td>Non-normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Bernadette Rostenkowski</td>
<td>Melissa Rauch</td>
<td>Intelligent, kind but fierce, blonde, married to Howard</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Character</td>
<td>Character Name</td>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>Character Description</td>
<td>Gender Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Max Black</td>
<td>Kat Dennings</td>
<td>Brunette, big-chested, loud-mouthed, waitress, lower-class origins</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Caroline Channing</td>
<td>Beth Behrs</td>
<td>Blonde, flat-chested, heiress-turned-waitress, upper-class origins but now living in lower class</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Sophie Kachinsky</td>
<td>Jennifer Coolidge</td>
<td>Eastern-European reformed call girl, older, unintelligent, dating Oleg</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Oleg (no surname)</td>
<td>Jonathan Kite</td>
<td>Fry cook at diner, creepy, overly sexualized comments, dating Sophie</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Han Lee</td>
<td>Matthew Moy</td>
<td>Owner of the diner, Asian, short, noticeable accent, chubby build</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>Garrett Morris</td>
<td>Black man, sits at diner host table, refers to his own marijuana use often, old hippy vibe</td>
<td>Normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Broke Girls list of characters with performative descriptions
Table 4: *The Odd Couple* list of characters with performative descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Character</th>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Character Description</th>
<th>Gender Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Oscar Madison</td>
<td>Matthew Perry</td>
<td>Divorced, bachelor, 40s, sports show host, slob</td>
<td>Normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>Felix Unger</td>
<td>Thomas Lennon</td>
<td>Uptight, neurotic, neat-freak, overly sensitive, compulsive, intelligent, cultured</td>
<td>Non-normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Dani (no surname)</td>
<td>Yvette Nicole Brown</td>
<td>No-nonsense, Black woman, full-figured</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Teddy (no surname)</td>
<td>Wendell Pierce</td>
<td>Oscar’s friend and agent, black man, married</td>
<td>Normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Roy (no surname)</td>
<td>Dave Foley</td>
<td>Oscar’s friend, makes few appearances</td>
<td>Normatively masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Emily (no surname)</td>
<td>Lindsay Sloane</td>
<td>Pretty brunette, flighty, waitress, aspiring jewelry maker, Felix’s girlfriend</td>
<td>Normatively feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


89


