STEREOTYPING ON THE BIG BANG THEORY: BLONDES VERSUS BRUNETTES

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STEREOTYPING ON *THE BIG BANG THEORY*: BLONDES VERSUS BRUNETTES

A Thesis

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Abstract

of

STEREOTYPING ON THE BIG BANG THEORY: BLONDES VERSUS BRUNETTES

by

Melissa Viscuso

This thesis examined five episodes of the CBS situation comedy, The Big Bang Theory, to examine the portrayal of blonde and brunette stereotypes. Framing analysis was used in conjunction with cultivation theory to analyze conversations of the three female lead characters, Penny, Bernadette, and Amy to see if the blonde and brunette stereotypes were reinforced or changed over time. Findings of this thesis include the changing of the blonde stereotype as well as the changing and reinforcement of the brunette stereotype.

_______________________

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Michele Foss-Snowden, Ph.D.

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Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Stereotypes can be seen across different mediums, such as magazines, film, and television. As stereotypes are presented in the media, the question of what exactly is a stereotype comes to light. Generally speaking, the simplest way to describe a stereotype is a widely held image or idea of a specific person or group (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012). Another common use of categorizing individuals or groups is that of an archetype. In the basic form, an archetype is a typical example of a person or thing that is foundational to social understanding (Prividera & Howard III, 2012).

Although stereotypes and archetypes are similar, they differ in the notion that archetypes are derived from evolving cultural stories and ideologies (Prividera & Howard III, 2012). Stereotypes are portrayed from the cultural stories and ideologies rooted in archetypes (Prividera & Howard III, 2012) which are reinforced by the exposure of multiple stereotyped images via the media (Major & Coleman, 2008). As stereotypes are widely held general beliefs about an individual or group, they are important to study because of their influence on audiences view towards those individuals or groups. This could be because of how the media presents specific individuals or groups.

American television situation comedies (sitcoms) and drama programs often depict different stereotypes. There is the jock stereotype, the cheerleader, the geek, the smart Asian, the homemaker wife and the breadwinner husband (as in I Love Lucy), the dumb but hot blonde, the shy but smart brunette, and so on. The use of words differ
between stereotypes in television and film. The jocks and cheerleaders do not use the same words as the teacher’s pet or the geek; however, instead of focusing on jocks or geeks this thesis will focus on the blonde and brunette stereotypes. Different words and topics of conversation are used within each of these stereotypes. It is necessary to examine this concept as the use of language between stereotypes differs.

The conversational styles of stereotypical blondes and brunettes in television can have different degrees of how visible or not visible they are. The conversational styles can be subtle, like in *Pretty Little Liars* when one of the lead brunette characters concentrates on her schoolwork, trying to get the best grades and using bigger and more complex words that her blonde counterpart does not understand. The stereotypes can also be obvious (like in *Friends* with the character of Phoebe); often, a blonde is depicted as always a little out there and a ditsy airhead who does not always understand the conversations taking place with her fellow characters. One movie that displays differences in conversational style in the blonde and brunette stereotype is *Legally Blonde* (2001). The main character, Elle Woods, is a “dumb blonde” who relates legal events to fashion and her college sorority. Her counterpart, Vivian, is the smart brunette who uses intelligent phrases and does not seem sincere. Audiences see these stereotypes and conversational differences repeated over and over in the media and it is important to look into how these stereotypes are constructed and maintained through dialogue. This study will do just that.

A few television shows and films (e.g., *Friends, the Big Bang Theory, Pretty Little Liars,* and *Legally Blonde*) portray conversational style differences between blonde
and brunette stereotypes. This thesis looks at the conversational style differences between two specific stereotypes (a blonde stereotype versus a brunette stereotype on *The Big Bang Theory*) and examines how these stereotypes are advancing and being redefined to create something new. *The Big Bang Theory* was chosen because of its popularity and its unique depiction of the two stereotypes analyzed in this study.

**Rationale**

This topic for the study is important for many reasons. The first reason is that blonde and brunette stereotypes in general are portrayed in the media with alarming frequency (Young, 2009; Kurylo, 2011). Studying the conversational style differences between the stereotypical characters that are often shown in television and film is important because how characters speak reveals current societal notions about the portrayed stereotypes. According to Young (2009), popular culture in the United States has no difficulty and makes no apology for painting the blonde as “dumb” and the brunette as “intelligent” or “serious” (p. 1). Audiences learn these stereotypes and can use them to interact with real people in the real world (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). As the actors use words to bring these stereotypes to life, it is important to focus on how the actors depict these stereotypes through their speech.

It is also important to examine the conversational style differences between blonde and brunette stereotypes in the media because very little, if any, research has been done on this topic previously. The few previous studies have focused primarily on the blonde stereotype, leaving the brunette stereotype unappreciated. Even with the few studies done on the blonde stereotype, the research is still limited in that area, and even
more limited in the area of brunette stereotypes, and non-existent in the area of comparing conversation styles of the two. Although there is a lot of research done on stereotyping in the media, most of these studies focus on sex/gender stereotyping (Drew & Miller, 1977), racial stereotyping (Kretsedemas, 2010), and sports stereotyping (Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2005); hair color stereotypes as presented in mediated spaces are not a part of the larger stereotype conversation. This lack of research is particularly troubling, considering the ubiquity of the hair color stereotypes, and the power and influence held by the media outlets that transmit the stereotypes to millions of hearts and minds.

*The Big Bang Theory* not only has an all-star cast, including Jim Parsons, Johnny Galecki, and Kaley Cuoco, but (speaking of messages that reach millions of hearts and minds) it is also one of CBS’s top rated shows (CBS.com, 2013). The show had 17.8 million viewers for its Thursday, October 17, 2013 episode (Bibel, 2013), and has continued to grow with 20.35 million viewers for its Thursday, January 9, 2014 episode, beating out its competitors on FOX, NBC, CW and ABC during the same time slot (Bibel, 2014). *The Big Bang Theory* has been nominated for an Emmy 26 times and has five wins, including outstanding lead actor in a comedy series in 2010, 2011, and 2013 for Jim Parsons as Sheldon Cooper (Emmys.com, 2013). The show introduces guest actors including Summer Glau, James Earl Jones, Bob Newhart, and Leonard Nimoy, as well as respected scientists like Steven Hawking and Neil deGrasse Tyson, who have also helped with the show’s ratings (CBS.com, 2013). As *The Big Bang Theory* continues to
grow in popularity, it becomes more influential in creating a contribution to the ways in which certain types of people are perceived.

As I have provided a background and rational for this thesis, the following pages will cover the prior literature in regards to stereotyping and its use in the media. It is important to continue to study stereotypes as they are used by audiences to interact with people in the real world (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). As stereotypes are widely used in media, it is necessary to continue to study them as the media depicts multiple types of stereotypes (Major & Coleman, 2008). I will then cover the methodology of framing analysis that was used to examine the artifact and why this method was used to analyze a television show. Television was used because it creates an environment where stereotypes thrive (Tosi, 2011). The more often individuals see stereotyped images on television, they are more likely to believe them to be real (Gerbner, 1969). The images shape social understanding (Montemurro, 2003) as well as create a way for audience members to know how to treat different types of groups or individuals in the real world (Chung, 2007). After the methodology is reviewed, I then provide transcripts of the data with the information from the transcripts. Finally the areas of future research are introduced with concluding remarks.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers multiple areas. As this thesis examines stereotypes over time, it is necessary to review cultivation theory. This theory will attempt to explain how television viewing changes the way audience members view stereotypes; in this case, whether they believe the blonde and brunette stereotyped images to be real or not. If the stereotypes are portrayed as realistic as possible, it can drive the audience member to believe they are real. In this instance, it drives the audience member to make a connection with the character which leads me to discuss the notion of parasocial interaction. Each section ties together the idea of how stereotypes are used in the media which links back to the effects the stereotypes and characters have on audience members over time. After reviewing the prior literature, we can then understand the areas of study that need to be expanded on to better understand media influence.

The literature review will cover eight areas. The first includes a review of cultivation theory. The second includes the idea of parasocial interaction. The third is a brief summary of the evolution of stereotypes. The fourth includes general stereotypes, specifically sex and race as well as stereotypes in the media. The fifth area includes the use of stereotypes in media. The sixth area includes the use of comedy in media. The seventh section includes stereotypes shown in comedy. The eighth and final area includes previous research on the portrayal of blonde and brunette stereotypes in film.
Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Potter, 1993) attempts to explain the long-term effects of television. Gerbner (1969) proposes that the more time individuals spend watching the television world, the more likely they are to believe what they see as real. Long-term exposure causes individuals to have a distorted view of reality. The effects of these distorted media images and ideas are at the heart of cultivation theory (Northup, 2010). Cultivation occurs when an individual or group is heavily exposed to television’s stereotyped messages (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). According to the theory, the more a person is exposed to blonde and brunette stereotypes, for example, the more likely she or he is to cultivate a stereotypical view of blondes and brunettes in the real world. There are different types of television viewing that make a difference in the audience members’ view of reality: light and heavy (Gerbner, 1969). Both light and heavy television viewing shape viewers’ beliefs and conceptions of reality in different ways (Lee, et al., 2009). The more television you watch, the more likely you are to believe what you see is real; heavy viewers are more impacted than light viewers. However, even for light viewers, the changes that occur in media portrayals over time help alter the public’s perceptions of people or groups and topics (Lee, et al., 2009). From a cultivation perspective, television and film are more likely to teach us social lessons about what the world is like, but they do not necessarily impact the perceptions of a light viewer’s personal reality (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). For heavy television viewers, television and film narratives can be understood as lessons on how to think or act; the repeated exposure to stereotypical
images might increase beliefs that the types of behaviors and attitudes shown are (or should be) characteristics of real world relationships (Chock, 2011). Television and film play a large part in creating and maintaining a specific culture, for both light and heavy viewers (Northup, 2010). Even light viewers come to understand that the culture and social norms presented on the screen are at least representative of some part of the real world (Chock, 2011).

The media influence social and personal judgments (Chock, 2011). Media stories can convey relational themes, stressing the importance of trust and open communication (Chock, 2011); audience members learn to have faith that the media show the truth, and that television narratives can be trusted. Consistently watching television creates a perceived reality. Perceived reality the audience have may be partially based on social knowledge that is drawn from media sources (Chock, 2011). Lee et al. (2009) found heavy television viewers seemed to have the most unrealistic perceptions of reality. This unrealistic perception of reality could be because what the viewed perceives to be real might moderate the cultivation effects, especially because images shown by media that are seen as unrealistic are more easily dismissed (Northup, 2010). Dismissing the images the viewer sees occurs when audiences watch television or films without knowing how to process some of the meanings inside the messages being broadcast to them, which leads the audience to become easily swayed by what they see (Goodall, 2012). The audience members at this point do not question the different information or images viewed, but instead internalize the message and believe it to be real. This can be the case in regards to
heavy viewers, as the more images they see, the more they internalize them and believe them to be accurate representations of reality.

Although the majority of cultivation theory research is focused on local news and stories about crime and violence, studies have shown content in other genres has a cultivating influence on viewers as well (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Exposure to different genres may have an influence on viewers’ perceptions; for example, makeover programs are linked to low self-esteem, perfectionism, and body dissatisfaction in viewers, and shows based on medicine or doctors and hospitals are linked to the cultivation of the stereotype that doctors are courageous (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Stereotypes do not just exist in one type of television genre. In fact, exploring the cultivation of stereotypical meanings in various genres allows for a stronger comment on the power of media in general.

While viewing television shows, mental shortcuts used while processing messages incline heavy viewers to rely more so on those viewed messages when constructing judgments about the world (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Cultivation theory links media content with stereotypes and these repeated images of stereotypes makes them highly automatic in viewers’ minds (Zhang, 2010). This automatic assumption of a stereotypical meaning is particularly evident in terms of gender. Audiences experience repeated images of portrayed gender stereotypes; then, by building relationships, women and men are in effect modeling what they see in the media and putting it into action in their own lives (Goodall, 2012). The more often women, specifically, view gendered stereotypes, the more likely they are to believe the stereotypes are real. If women continue to consume
media that depicts them as passive, for example, then they may be more inclined to believe that being passive is a normal trait for a woman (Goodall, 2012). In the case of heavy television viewers, the more images they see of women portrayed as passive the more likely they are to believe this to be a realistic trait for women.

The more that television programs send stereotypical gendered messages to audiences, the more they could effectively impose superficial and stereotypical values onto society (Goodall, 2012). Thus, the research shows that even light television viewing makes a small but consistent contribution to viewers’ beliefs and perspectives, especially regarding stereotypes, and especially regarding gender-based stereotypes (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Parasocial Interaction

Whether an individual is a light or heavy viewer, television does make an impact on the audience members’ view towards the particular character of the show they are watching. The amount of time spent watching television has been found to have a correlation with parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002). One of the outcomes of viewing television is parasocial interaction with the characters. Parasocial interaction is “bound to the interpersonal processes between person and user that take place during media exposure” (Schramm & Hartman, 2008, p. 386). In short, parasocial interaction is the connection audience members feel with the characters they see on television. According to Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), people tend to have a fundamental need to form connections with other people, and television provides audience members access to a wide range of other human beings. Parasocial interaction has been used to describe
responses of affinity, interest, friendship, identification, similarity, liking, or imitation among audience members towards characters (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Just as we form opinions about people in real life, we also do so about characters on television and movies (Schippa, et al. 2005). In extreme cases, individuals develop such strong interaction responses that they believe the characters are real rather than fictional (Bednarek, 2012).

The more audience members watch certain characters, the more the characters seem real to them. It is important to remember that although the majority of viewers can make the distinction from real and fictional, the viewer believes the character to be real because it gives the viewer a sense of belonging (Schiappa, et al., 2005). The characters become a part of the audience member’s real life. Parasocial interaction develops because characters are established as stylized representations of particular actual social identities (Bednarek, 2012). Over time, viewers become more familiar with characters and actors on a program and often feel as though they know these individuals as well as they know their friends, neighbors, and family members in real life (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). The human brain processes media experiences similar to how it processes direct experiences; so, people naturally react to televised characters as they would towards real people (Schiappa, et al., 2005). As this occurs, viewers tend to build a close relationship with characters in television fiction (Bednarek, 2012). Audience members are interested in the lives of television characters and sometimes engage with them emotionally (Bednarek, 2012). The vast majority of people are capable of making the distinction between fictional and real people; however, when watching television or movies, some
viewers choose to not make the distinction, for many reasons (Schiappa, et al, 2005). One reason could be that the audience wants to feel a part of a reciprocal social interaction, even though the feeling is an illusion (Schramm & Hartman, 2008). This illusion, however, provides the audience member experiencing this parasocial interaction some type of identity or bond on which to cling.

A parasocial bond with a character or multiple characters can encourage the perception that the traits the viewer and character share are something they have in common (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012). Hoffner and Cohen’s 2012 study on the television show Monk and obsessive compulsive disorder found a stronger parasocial relationship was associated with the belief that a series can help audience members’ deal with their own problems, like obsessive compulsive disorder, via parasocial interaction. This idea was also shown in Bednarek’s 2012 study on constructing nerdiness. Bednarek (2012) found that televisual dialogue draws on mainstream nerd stereotypes, which creates shared common ground with the audience members through the use of dialogue and phrases via the characters. This common ground gives the nerdy audience members characters they can see themselves in and relate to, and relates back to Hoffner and Cohen’s (2012) idea that what they see depicted is normal, thus creating an identity. Although identity formation is not necessarily negative, it does put the viewer into a stereotyped category created in the parasocial cycle between actual experience and media representation of actual experience.
Evolution of Stereotypes

As I have discussed the notion of parasocial interaction and how it can put the viewer into a stereotyped category, it is necessary to discuss the evolution of stereotypes and where they began. According to Sanders and Ramasubramanian (2012), “stereotypes are cognitive structures that hold and organize the knowledge, beliefs, and expectations a person has about a group of individuals” (p. 18). The public seems to accept stereotypes shown as social reality (Zhang, 2010). In other words, the media suggest stereotypical content, and the audience accepts this media-constructed content as reality. This social reality is a target for change. Previous research has shown it is incredibly difficult to change the images in our heads that have been created over years of television and media exposure (Major & Coleman, 2008).

The dialogue used in constructing stereotypes is designed with a target audience in mind (Bednarek, 2012). For example, certain words will have great impact on one kind of audience, while another kind of audience will be unaffected. Talbot and Durrheim (2012) found the language used about stereotypes has changed over time due to responding to historical events. For example, from the beginning to the end of the Gulf War, the stereotypes of Americans changed from less progressive to more progressive (Talbot & Durrheim, 2012). Certain words that once had great impact on that one kind of audience mentioned above might no longer carry the same meaning or significance. This audience targeting and change over time is especially obvious in political communication, particularly media coverage of gender issues during elections. Major and Coleman (2008) found that journalists have made some progress in using dialogue that
will reduce stereotypes in their media coverage of political candidates. The 2008 election offered reporters an ideal opportunity to break the bonds of words that invite gender stereotyping, but the media still mostly aligned with the gender stereotypes that have been in place for decades. Gender stereotyping in election coverage may have changed slightly; however, it has changed even more in some other forms of media.

Gender stereotyping in advertising still exists, but the content has changed dramatically (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 2012). Women were originally shown only in the home; however, as the percentage of housewives dropped, so did the number of portrayals of housewives in advertising (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 2012). The stereotypical African American woman in advertisements has also changed; she used to hold only low status occupational roles, but began being featured in higher status roles (Zinkhan, Cox, & Hong, 1986). In television, women started to branch into the news broadcasting scene and have moved from less central to more central roles in television characters (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 2012). Although there have been changes, there are still subtle but persistent negative stereotypes. These stereotypes are easily evoked, even in individuals who claim not to be prejudiced (Major & Cohen, 2008). Almost all stereotypes have changed in content and become more favorable, but they have also increased in uniformity, in the sense that where there was three ways to be stereotyped, now there are ten ways to be stereotyped (Talbot & Durrheim, 2012).

One reason why core stereotypes tend to remain so familiar is because of the social hierarchy status of different social groups (Talbot & Durrheim, 2012). The roles of each group have changed over time, but the change takes place at a very slow rate. One
of the areas the roles has changed for is in regards to sex and racial stereotyping. The root of sex and gender stereotyping has remained consistent, however over time there have been updated versions of the prior stereotypes.

**Stereotyping in General: Sex, Race, and Use in Media**

The literature on blonde and brunette stereotypes may be minimal, but the literature on stereotyping in general continues to grow. Boylorn (2008) notes that recreations of historical stereotypes make room for new updated versions with fewer restrictions. For example, mammy was stereotyped as nurturing and self-sacrificing, but now is shown as bossy and stern (Boylorn, 2008). According to Hersey (2007), stereotyped generalizations rarely allow characters an opportunity to become better rounded. One area that continues to suffer from characters that often rely on stereotyping is sex and gender. According to Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan (2008), traditional gender stereotypes depict that men represent the ideal against which women are judged. Lauzen, et al. (2008) also note that simple social roles shown by characters contribute to audience expectations and beliefs about gender. There is a connection between the audience expectations and media representation of the feminine ideal (Massoni, 2004). In television, women are shown how they should look, dress, and act, and they are told what they should do or not do. Women are typically cast in traditional roles in programs from all genres (Drew & Miller, 1977). Female characters in media are more likely to have identifiable marital roles, whereas male characters are more likely to have identifiable occupational roles (Lauzen, et al. 2008). Women are also not typically found in roles where the character is in power, like professional roles or top-level business roles.
(Lauzen, et al. 2008). Women are most often shown in more passive roles and engaging in house work (Monk-Turner, Kouts, Parris, & Webb, 2007). The process is cyclical: an individual’s basic knowledge of her or his social role can influence the creation and maintenance of gender stereotypes, and the television presentation of those stereotypes contribute to an individual’s basic knowledge of her or his social role (Lauzen, et al. 2008). So, women are stereotyped in reality, and their experiences are confirmed by what they see on television.

Bias against race and gender has combined to create the stereotype of the angry black woman. Racial stereotypes are common in television, but the “angry black woman” stereotype has become increasingly pervasive (Kretsedemas, 2010). The media stereotypes of black women are often embedded in the narrative themes in television; these themes contribute to ongoing racial bigotry as well as color-blind racism. Ji, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) make an interesting note regarding color-blind racism and racial stereotypes. In the world of film and television, minority characters rarely resist or reject the stereotypes that are forced upon them (Ji, et al., 2006). The resulting lack of a presentation of resistance paints a racist illusion of a world without racism; Ji et al. (2006) call this kind of racism color-blind, as it falls in line with the same problematic position of color-blindness regarding race and ethnicity. The notion of color-blind racism shows that characters rarely resist their force stereotypes, which leads back to the “angry black woman” stereotype as that is now becoming more common (Kretsedemas, 2010) and does not appear to be changed anytime soon.
Race-ethnic stereotypes have been triggered by media exposure (Bresnahan & Lee, 2011). Bresnahan and Lee (2011) also note that race-ethnic stereotypes shown can be activated by viewing only a single race-based presentation. According to Billings, Angelini, and Eastman (2005), stereotyping has a significant importance because it can potentially influence the emotions and thinking of viewers, including advertisers and other television programmers. So, in only one presentation (which would qualify as light viewing under cultivation theory standards), an audience member can experience a variety of racial and gender based stereotypes, and those stereotypes can influence that audience member’s emotions and thinking, as well as her/his thoughts about the presence and nature of racism and sexism in reality.

The literature on different stereotypes shown in media also continues to grow. According to Tosi (2011), the representation of cultures in television and film has created a reality in which stereotypes thrive. Johnson (2008) notes that visual media in particular make use of clichés to create easy connections with the viewer. As stated previously, race-ethnic and gender stereotypes are so common that they have become cliché. Often, the race-ethnic and gender stereotypes are hidden within less-specific stereotype categories, like the teen mean-girl or the effeminate homosexual.

According to Banjo (2011), audiences often see obvious racial media stereotyping as offensive; however, audiences continue to enjoy stereotyped messages. Entertainment based on racial stereotypes has become quite popular (Banjo, 2011). This widespread acceptance of these stereotypes is important to discuss because viewers’ racial self-concept can produce uneasy feelings when exposed to racial entertainment (Banjo, 2011).
The images of ethnic minorities on television not only contribute to the formation of race-ethnic stereotypes, but also trigger stereotypes already held by viewers (Bresnahan & Lee, 2011). Banjo (2011) found that individuals who are comfortable with the subject of race were not only more likely to prefer stereotyped entertainment to neutral entertainment, but were also more likely to report White stereotypes as more realistic compared to Black stereotypes. So, even when audiences recognize the presentation of stereotypes and see the content as inherently stereotypical (Boynton, 2008), and even when the stereotypes are overwhelmingly negative (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008), audiences will still consume the stereotypical content.

Negative stereotyped characteristics are also present in regards to sex stereotyping. As previously stated, the media are guilty of presenting and representing the feminine ideal (for example, women are identified in their marital roles, and they are seen in powerless and passive roles, such as roles involving housework, and so on).\(^1\) Gender stereotypes are often shown regarding women, yet there are also areas where male stereotypes are shown. According to Hanke (1998), shows like *Home Improvement* are a prototype for gender relations that acknowledge the need for male improvement, but simultaneously express men’s anxiety about further dissolving the boundaries between men’s and women’s realms. Hanke (1998) provides an example of this anxiety in that the show’s “remasculanization of domestic space is to reassert male knowledge and

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\(^1\) Prime-time television has a history of under representing women in powerful roles on-screen, and the inequality continues behind-the-scenes as well (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008). Future research should examine sex/gender stereotypes in television and film production.
improvement concerning the management of the household and raising children and to undermine whatever historical claims to knowledge or authority in the domestic sphere women have had” (p. 82). The show attempts to break the boundaries of the domestic sphere (where women are to remain in the house while men go outside the home to work). One way the show attempts to debunk gender stereotypes is through the character of Wilson, who provides a second thought of traditional masculinity; however, any gender antagonism in terms of social structure is translated into creating more gender differences outside of the woman homemaker and man breadwinner (Hanke, 1998).

While *Home Improvement* attempted to break the boundaries of gender stereotypes by including variety in professional options, other films and shows push the boundaries of gender stereotypes by combining traditional notions with modern spins on age and social status. Teen films, for example, rely on the same gender stereotyped portrayals as films featuring adult or child casts (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). However, teen films add to the traditional gender stereotypes by creating a sub-stereotype for a particular kind of teen: the “mean girl” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p. 136). An example of the “mean girl” stereotype is found in the teen movie *Mean Girls*, which focuses on the dominant teen girl as the “mean girl” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p. 133). The mean girl has surrounding characters who want to be like her and long to be included in her in-group. The well-established picture of the cloyingly sweet and kind girl presented in the media has been replaced by the mean girl. This mean girl stereotype is not only depicted in films like *Mean Girls* and *Legally Blonde*, but it can also be seen on
the television show *Pretty Little Liars*. As *Pretty Little Liars* is still on the air, it can be used to continue Behm-Morawitz and Mastro’s research on the mean girl stereotype.

As previously discussed, research on stereotypes in the media has focused heavily on issues of race, gender, race and gender, and combinations of gender with attitude and age in the mean girl stereotype. The final area of media stereotyping that has been studied is the portrayal of homosexuals. According to Chung (2007), the media generation warns individuals about social issues like homosexuality not from direct contact with gay people or from their parents, teachers and peers, but from characters and scenes depicted in films, television programs, fashion, and commercial advertisements. Because of these depictions, gay media stereotypes are oversimplified (Chung, 2007). There is one main trait of the stereotyped homosexual. According to Cartei and Reby (2012), the portrayal of male homosexuals in television and film takes on hyper-feminine connotations. Cartei and Reby (2012) found that actors playing homosexual characters tended to take on traits of perceived femininity including their appearance, behavior, and voice pitch. In romantic comedies, homosexual characters tend to take on feminine traits; the forced femininity has created a problem in the portrayal of homosexual couples. Modern romantic comedy lacks different forms of coupling (Moddelmog, 2009). Not only are stereotypes about homosexuals leading individuals to perceive their gender in a certain way, but they are also impacting notions of acceptable behavior in relationships of all kinds. The reach of stereotypes grows wider.

This area of stereotyping also includes the aspect of race and ethnicity. The premise of romantic comedy is that the central characters are crazy for each other, but the
genre appears to have difficulty accommodating people of color unless they intentionally play against stereotypes depicting them as hypersexual and promiscuous (Moddelmog, 2009). Not only do homosexuals have to fight against their feminine stereotype, but they have to fight against a racial stereotype as well. Moddelmog (2009) notes that as romantic comedies traditionally end with marriages or the promise of marriage in the future, gay romantic comedies need to find a different way to end their stories. Although the homosexual stereotype continues to be depicted and complicated by the factor of race, Johnson (2008) argues that these stereotypes have finally resulted in many in society beginning to demand more realistic portrayals of characters that are frequently stereotyped. If more realistic portrayals are shown, then the stereotyped depiction society previously held will be allowed to diminish.

**Use of Stereotypes in Media**

According to Chung (2007), because “stereotyping is a frequently used human way of grouping, labeling or categorizing information, it is cognitively impossible for humans to avoid stereotyping altogether” (p. 100). As we are already programmed to impose stereotypes, the media reinforce the ideas we already have. According to Tomascikova (2010), media deliver amusement, activity and diversity as well as handling facts, issues, and problems that are not always experienced by an individual directly. As millions of people watch television programs daily, the way social issues are presented on television may affect their attitudes and beliefs towards social issues (Montemurro, 2003). The images that affect viewers’ attitudes are projected through different ways. Chung (2007) argues that media images and programs not only market products, ideas,
and worldviews, but also show socially acceptable behavioral navigation. Televised images continue to play a role in shaping societal understanding (Montemurro, 2003). The more stereotyped images audience members see, the more likely they are to believe they are true (Gerbner, 1969). According to Grondin (2012), television provides audiences with social truths through television programming, and public culture (in the form of ideas and information) is informed through a televised-medium format. Dipaolo (2010) adds that Americans can be surprisingly sensitive when experiencing criticism of their culture and international policies in entertainment from overseas. No group wants to be depicted in a negative light, especially across cultures. Because of this desire for self-preservation in their audience, the media try to make changes in their presentations. The media understand that people learn about others through internalized images such as stereotypes (Chung, 2007). Although television shows have claimed to represent all types of people equally, they have done so by selecting candidates who fit pre-existing stereotypes (Chung, 2007). Any progress that has been made has been barely palpable.

In regards to the use of gender stereotypes, the media continue to reinforce the ideas of how men and women should behave. According to Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008), watching televised gender portrayals does have an effect on audience members’ real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Anderson Wagner (2011) provides an example of this argument and shows how women on television were once viewed as feminine or funny but rarely both, but modern portrayals of women can include both humor and attractiveness in the same host. Hersey (2007) provides another example and shows how modern films assert the heroine’s sexuality and career rather
than continuing to subordinate them to male desires. If media continue to show a more positive and evolved image of women, then audience members will have more opportunities to change their understandings of previously stereotyped portrayals.

Modern media show some progress in the use of racial stereotypes as well. According to Tomascikova (2010), audiences have developed an indifferent attitude toward how race is portrayed in television. As racial stereotypes are most commonly used to represent people of color, the reified racial beliefs help maintain the racial hierarchy and White privileges (Ji, et al, 2006). Banjo (2011) found an interesting outcome regarding the display of racial hierarchy. When Black actors performed white stereotypes on stage using degrading characterizations, the performers found they were highly entertaining to their White audience members (Banjo, 2011). Although the racial hierarchy exists, it appears that White audiences choose to ignore them or do not understand they are being ridiculed. Bresnahan and Lee (2011) found evidence that audiences endorsed negative stereotypes about competence and liking based on images of different race/ethnicities. When audience members endorse the negative stereotypes, it gives the media more room to continue to depict said stereotypes. Boylorn (2005) states that one way to make a change is to reframe race and gender representations because the new frame will allow the stereotyped groups to accept the negative and positive representations together rather than isolate them. By adopting this solution, the stereotyped groups have the opportunity to force media to make a change in their use of stereotyping.
Use of Comedy in Media

The human mind is wired in a way that it is easily attracted by humor (Rice, 2009). According to Anderson Wagner (2011), comedic messages are best interpreted when the viewer has a preexisting knowledge of the topic. Although the preference for a preexisting knowledge-base exists, it is still possible for new or uninformed audiences to enjoy television comedy. Mainstream comedy tends to rely on safe humor and make jokes that will appeal to, but at the same time not offend the average viewer (Montemurro, 2003). However, humor or joke-telling can be used as a way for members of an in-group to strengthen bonds while at the same time excluding the out-group, namely those who are the subjects of the joke (Montemurro, 2003). The humor used in comedies causes the receiver to get lost in the television show because the programming offers some sense of relief from boredom, pain, or even the simple state of reality (Rice, 2009). According to Anderson Wagner (2011), humor can be an effective way of criticizing social structures and attempting to bring change. Montemurro (2003) also argues that situation comedies call for the quick resolution of issues and the storylines are presented in a light, superficial manner. In the comedic arena, controversial or uneasy topics are more readily accepted by audiences because they are presented in the form of a joke rather than as more serious (Anderson Wagner, 2011). Yet when controversial topics are presented in the form of a joke, the lines can be blurred between the comedian, the media pundit, and the activist (Grondin, 2012). Thus, the use of comedy in discussions of political and social areas is an important topic to study.
The media use political humor to gain the audience’s attention. According to Grondin (2012), political humor allows its audience to publicly show their emotions and challenge the course of action chosen by the authorities. Political humor can be used in any form, but it is commonly used in infotainment (the generic hybrid of information and entertainment). Satirical and political infotainment television is an important point of the culture wars, a clash between conservative and liberal views, because it plays a political role in mediating their re-enactment (Grondin, 2012). Political infotainment television’s use of comedy distracts the audience away from the real issue and focuses their attention on the comedic aspect. Comedy programs entertain by targeting the flaws of contemporary discourse using humor, parody, and satire (Grondin, 2012). However these shows adopt a popular form of current affairs and news programming: “they are ‘opinion’ news programs” (Grondin, 2012, p. 350). Using comedy in political news programs, or infotainment programs, diffuses the importance of the issue and leads the audience to accept the topic without question (a critical result, as asking questions is the only path to real social change).

According to Tomascikova (2010), British situation comedy offers portrayals of social order and social hierarchy through stereotyped social categories and characters with unrealistic social goals. These programs reveal the dark side of comedy in the media. As stated previously, comedy uses storylines that are light and superficial to discuss serious topics. This idea of comedy being used on television to discuss serious topics, and the idea of comedy being used to discuss social hierarchy in the workplace, could have a lasting effect on people’s lives, especially in regards to sexual harassment. If
situation comedies continue to reinforce images of sexual harassment as something that can be joked about, then it may be viewed as not a serious social problem but as a humorous issue (Montemurro, 2003). Depicting a serious issue as funny leads the viewers to not take it seriously in their own lives. If television programs trivialize sexual harassment in the workplace, it is possible that women’s contributions and roles within the workplace will also be taken lightly (Montemurro, 2003). As relaxing and entertaining as comedy shows are, taking a serious topic like sexual harassment and making jokes about women’s bodies or suggesting that a workplace climate distinguished by the sexual objectification of women is acceptable, situation comedies further the confusion about what actions are and are not appropriate in today’s society (Montemurro, 2003). Using comedy to make serious issues light and funny also leads to other problems in living the gendered differences in society.

Gender differences in comedy are shown on-screen, but they start off-screen. According to Henderson (2011), “a female writer who does not laugh along with off-color jokes about penis size may be labeled incapable of being ‘one of the guys’ and therefore ‘not a good fit’ with a predominantly male staff” (p. 152). Because of this situation, male power is realized through control over the joke-telling form. In the past, this inequality has made women and/or other marginalized groups its targets (Hanke, 1998). It has always been difficult for women to break out in comedy. According to Anderson Wagner (2011), writers and critics have argued that femininity and sense of humor are mutually exclusive and that “women’s ‘natural’ inclination toward emotion and sensitivity has left them incapable of possessing a quality -humor- that many feel is
dependent on ‘masculine’ traits such as intellect and aggressiveness” (p. 35). Although men have dominated comedy in the media, there has been debate about whether women even have a sense of humor (Anderson Wagner, 2011). Women have become successful in comedy and the culture of comedy has shifted. Part of that shift has been in response to a wider culture shift that has developed in gender relations (White, 2010). This culture shift has not only helped women in comedy, but has also had an effect on racial comedy.

Racial comedy has different characteristics from gender comedy. Ethnic humor presented in television in America is about power differentials (Banjo, 2011). Theories about racial comedy suggest that the naturalization of racial differences through stereotyping is more likely to occur in a comedic format because universal conventions discourage viewers’ participation with the racial discourse (Ji, et al, 2006). Again, comedy deflects from serious issues and prioritizes the in-group over the out-group. According to Banjo (2011), when jokes about a particular ethnic group are spoken by people of an economic majority, it tends to have an offensive and even racial undertone to its context. Overall, humor presented in television comedy can help people from racial or ethnic minority groups cope with their oppression (Banjo, 2011). As comedy is often used in media, as a distraction, to lighten the mood, or inform the audience of serious topics, writers hope there will continue to be a positive social message that encourages viewers to embrace tolerance, individuality, and good humor (Dipaolo, 2010).

**Stereotypes in Comedy**

As this thesis uses a comedy show as its artifact with a specific focus on the use of stereotypes, it is necessary to examine the use of stereotypes in comedy. One way
stereotypes are reinforced in television comedy is through laugh tracks. Situation comedies that contain laugh tracks can reinforce negative behavior, such as weight-based harassment, by cueing the audience when to laugh and by directing the viewers as to what content should be taken as comical (Montemurro, 2003). Using laugh tracks influences the audience without them realizing it, which reinforces the stereotypes shown.

As stated previously, past research has examined the use of homosexual relationships within media and romantic comedy and the portrayal of homosexuals in media. Commercial theaters play films portraying long-term relationships among same-sex partners, but these unions are most often presented as completely comic (Moddelmog, 2009). This comedic frame shows audiences that same-sex relationships are not to be taken seriously, which creates further stereotypes on this group.

Another stereotype presented in comedy that is not as common as race or gender is that of a speech impediment: stuttering. According to Johnson (2008), when stuttering is used as a comic element, the stutterer is not a true representation of a person but rather is the physical embodiment of his or her speech impediment. The physical embodiment becomes the character’s identifying trait to others and the character is presented solely in a comedic way. An example of this is the Warner Brothers cartoon character of Porky Pig (Johnson, 2008). One of Porky’s main functions is to be funny when he speaks and to also be an easy auditory target for those who find stuttering comedic (Johnson, 2008). The character traits are also present in the personality of the character. The most common way in which stuttering is used in television and film is to simply portray that a character is weak or nervous (Johnson, 2008). This common portrayal leads the audience to believe
that if someone stutters, then that person is automatically weak and it is a part of her/his personality. Although there are purely negative portrayals of stuttering, Johnson (2008) found the most common positive way that stuttering is showcased is when the storyline is crafted towards teaching the audience how to behave. If the audience is able to learn something, then they have the option to see through the stereotype and not impose it on individuals with this trait.

According to Anderson Wagner (2011), comedy is an ideal area for women to push boundaries and challenge traditional gender roles, as the genre has been used as a means of masking transgression and providing an acceptable wide range of behaviors. The acceptable behaviors typically focus on women staying in the home while men are at work. Playing off masculine stereotypes and on the classification of men as “sexist” is commonly used in comedy (Hanke, 1998). Slapstick comedians often played with traditional concepts of femininity, like the comic of the kitchen turning the center of women’s domestic life into a chaotic whirl of “masculine” slapstick comedy (Anderson Wagner, 2011). Although the common gender stereotypes in comedy exist, another stereotype is that women are not seen as funny.

Women in comedy have tried to break out of the “women are not funny” stereotype. Comedians are presumed to be masculine figures (White, 2010). In terms of comedic stereotypes, women have had to face the stereotype of being deemed “too refined and delicate to be funny” (Anderson Wagner, 2011, p. 35). While male comic television actors ridicule their own lack of self-knowledge, which has led male viewers to learn to laugh at themselves (Hanke, 1998), female comic actors are not held to the same
view. When women incorporate loud comedy into their acts, they run the risk of being labeled as disreputable and unfeminine (Anderson Wagner, 2011). The idea is to keep most women under the feminine housewife umbrella, as it represents the norm for viewers. Fan magazines, published magazines for fans of pop culture, generally acknowledge and even promote women’s humor, but traces of widespread stereotypes about the incompatibility of comedy and femininity are apparent in these discourses (Anderson Wagner, 2011). Women can enjoy humor but have little space to create humor. Women can appreciate comedy, and they can inspire male humorists, but actually creating comedy is considered assertive and too competitive to be traditional ladylike behavior. As men produce humor, women are expected to inspire and appreciate men’s efforts (Anderson Wagner, 2011). As funny as women are, they are still stereotyped in their casted roles, and in their looks. Whether women are shown as monsters or dolls, the evaluation of their worth still focuses on how the women in comedy look (White, 2010). Montemurro (2003) found that the more often negative comments (in situation comedies) were made about a woman’s weight, whether those comments were about her being too heavy or too thin, the more significant the reaction was in terms of laughter. Women are still stereotyped into this specific image, of being too refined and delicate to create humor, that when the actor is not of that image, then the woman becomes humorous. The stereotypes of women in comedy have slowly started to change, but stereotyped homemakers, women not seen as funny, and women as props for male comedy continue to exist in the television landscape.
Racial stereotypes also continue to be used in comedy. As previously mentioned, comedy is seen by many as a safe realm for communication about controversial topics, such as race or politics (Banjo, 2011). According to Ji et al. (2006), racial stereotypes in comedy are highly problematic because they help validate racial differences through humor, which renders them natural and not able to be disputed. People of color are usually portrayed as victims rather than perpetrators of racism. They are not perceived as having power over others, as opposed to a White character who has power, even comedic power, over a minority character (Ji, et al., 2006).

This issue earns additional importance because many shows and films categorized as Black entertainment, especially comedies, reinforce the stereotypes (Banjo, 2011). The same could be true with other racial/ethnic groups. People of color sought power by owning stereotypes, using the stereotypes as a form of power and opportunity to ridicule social dominance, but they also used the appropriation of stereotypical content as an opportunity to scorn social dominance (Banjo, 2011). Society is unsure of the reasons why comedies result in gratification, and the gratification is particularly puzzling for ethnic comedies that typically tend to emphasize racial distinctiveness through stereotyping of in-group and out-group members (Banjo, 2011). Although racial comedy is often used, it may be seen and understood differently by the out-group members from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. According to Banjo (2011), racial comedy in television and film cannot be assumed to be interpreted the same across racial groups. Examples of this difference can be found within the writer’s room on television and film sets. According to Henderson (2011), a Jewish writer had suggested a joke that was
reliant on poking fun at a Jewish character based on his religious identity. When the Jewish writer suggested a joke making fun of his religion, the Black writer assigned to the script brought up that the “joke might make it into a Jewish writers script – but it absolutely would not be in any script with the black writer’s name on the title page because it would make her look anti-Semitic” (Henderson, 2011, p. 147). The use of racial stereotypes in comedy are typically presented as light hearted and humorous; however, as Henderson has shown, the debate over how the stereotypes are used often happens behind the scenes. As individuals do not want to appear as racist when creating or depicting a racial stereotype, especially in comedy, different measures are taken. Henderson (2011) provides another example of the problem of stereotype authorship: “when a series with a predominantly white cast decides to introduce a black character, and there is a black writer on the writing staff, he or she is usually assigned to write that script” (p. 151). This act is taken as one of precaution to insure no one individual or group will be accused of bigotry or racism.

Overall, racial humor uses absurd strategies to exaggerate and exploit differences between groups (Banjo, 2011). These differences translate into stereotypes that are seen as positive and negative. Although factual messages may reinforce stereotypes, humor messages within entertainment contexts have the opportunity to illustrate potential harmony (Banjo, 2011), which is what anyone could ask for in portraying specific images of groups or individuals.

As the prior research shows, there are different ways to stereotype an individual or group. This thesis however, is focused on blonde and brunette stereotypes. It is
important to note that although hair color stereotypes are not on the same level of seriousness as the stereotypes I discussed previously, race, gender, or sexuality, it does not necessarily mean that hair color stereotyping should not be studied. Any stereotype can be ingrained in our minds however it does not mean that it is normal and should be ignored. Although this study does not analyze race, gender, or sexuality stereotypes, they do provide a foundation in studying other stereotypes that have branched from those realms. As I have previously covered, the research on race, gender, and sexuality is rather large, but it creates the opportunity for other stereotypes to be studied. In the case of this thesis, blonde and brunette stereotypes.

**Portrayal of Blonde Stereotypes**

Hair color is an extremely powerful vehicle (Spangler, 2009). Burton (2005) states that blondes are a highly visible sign in the Western culture. Blonde women have achieved an image beyond the stereotypes compared to brunettes and blonde women cannot be dismissed (Young, 2009). There are many stereotypes associated with women who have blonde hair. Some of these stereotypes include the ethereal blonde (that she is exquisite and intangible), the bombshell blonde (whose sexual availability is indicated by her blonde hair, usually coupled with curves and red lips), the girl next door (whose blonde hair lets the leading man know that she is sweet and harmless), the gold-digging blonde (her hair is usually an icy blonde to match her ice cold heart) and finally, the dumb blonde (Cella, 2004; Young, 2009). Burton (2005) mentions that blondes of all types evoke desire. This desire factors into the stereotyping cycle and has led blondes to have certain qualities and roles in the media. Blondes play on a fantasy for the audience
and they bring in the metaphorical sunshine (Cella, 2004). Burton (2005) also notes that blondes show power and privilege portrayed in a feminine way. Alley-Young (2006) agrees, stating that blondes are often shown as very feminine and are usually surrounded by a lot of pink. Another aspect of the blonde stereotype is that men allegedly prefer blondes (Synnott, 1987). This preference could be traced back to the fact that blondes are seen as a genetic rarity, but may also be linked to the idea that blondes evoke desire (Burton, 2005).

There may be some biological evidence that supports Burton’s (2005) ideas. Nur Aini (2009) states that men prefer blondes because of their lighter skin, which was once thought to indicate higher fertility. During the Renaissance Era, when Italian women learned of the perceived connection, they started doing anything to get blonde hair, including using horse urine or crocodile fat or goat fat to dye their hair blonde (Nur Aini, 2009). Scientific research found that men generally find blondes more feminine and more attractive sexually. Blonde hair has become a sexual signal and it also attracts light and attention (Nur Aini, 2009). Nur Aini (2009) notes the media are always capitalizing on the attention incurred by blonde hair, presenting beautiful blonde artists or models in magazines and television shows.

Positive images of blondes are everywhere, but so are negative portrayals. Women with blonde hair are seen as flirty, and even trashy, but these stereotypes associated with sexual availability are usually reserved for the platinum blondes rather than darker blondes (Nur Aini, 2009). Younger blondes are often presented as dumb,
mean, and antagonistic (Nur Aini, 2009). Finally, many blondes are presented as being less intelligent than their brunette peers, if not downright stupid.

The 2001 film *Legally Blonde* is actually based on the “dumb blonde” stereotype. The main character, a very blonde sorority girl named Elle, is crushed when her college boyfriend breaks off their relationship right before he leaves for law school at Harvard University. His rationale is that she is just too blonde to impress his serious, blue-blood family. Elle decides to apply to Harvard Law so that she can follow her boyfriend and show him that she can be serious, too. She is accepted to Harvard, and learns to put her blonde version of smarts to use to save the day. Alley-Young (2006) outlines several of the stereotypes shown throughout this film, including the one for women that says that women only go to school to obtain their “MRS” degree. Even though *Legally Blonde* tries to reinforce the important fact of getting an education, it especially reinforces the blonde stereotypes (Alley-Young, 2006). Blondes are usually seen as happy go lucky and carefree, and Elle is no exception. Manning (2010) agrees with this idea and adds that blondes are seen as fair maidens; Elle is an example of this stereotype as well. Elle manages to be successful at Harvard, which means she cannot easily be defined as an example of a “dumb blonde”, but she is presented as having to work harder at intellectual matters than her brunette peers. Elle represents both the positive and the negative stereotypes associated with blonde women. The success of the film (and the sequels and Broadway musicals it inspired) shows that hair color stereotypes are still a matter of social interest and concern (Box Office Mojo, 2015).
Portrayal of Brunette Stereotypes

Examples of blonde stereotypes are many, but there are also plenty of examples of brunette stereotypes in the media. Kurylo (2011) notices that of blondes and brunettes, brunettes have the least harmful representations portrayed in the media. Banks (2007) interprets the stereotypes of blondes as more fun, energetic, and flirtatious, whereas brunettes are viewed as more shy, mysterious, purely natural, and interested in reading books. Banks (2007) dyed her hair brunette to experience the differences between the two hair colors and she felt as though she was lost in the crowd and that she blended in as a brunette. She notes that because of the shy brunette stereotype, she felt like she had to be overly outgoing in order to try to stand out like a blonde (Banks, 2007). It is interesting and important to note that once she dyed her hair from blonde to brunette, her personality changed with it as she embodied the brunette stereotype. Alley-Young (2006) says that women who are naturally blonde have dyed their hair brunette to appear smarter, but being portrayed as smart is not the only brunette stereotype that has been found.

Ayres (2003) argues that hair color is a major factor that people use to make first impressions. Ayers (2003) and Rouvalis (2005) have similar views on brunette stereotypes depicted in the media. Ayers (2003) found that brunettes are portrayed as more dependable, truthful, and natural. Ayers (2003) also notes the intelligence stereotype, but includes that brunettes have a sense of naturalness, are low maintenance, more reserved, and are more trustworthy than blondes. It appears that previous films and television shows about blondes portray them as high maintenance, which would give brunettes the low maintenance stereotype (Ayers, 2003). Rouvalis (2005) agrees with
Ayers, and adds that in casting, serious roles typically call for a brunette character, whereas more playful, silly, and innocent roles are casted as blonde. Rouvalis (2005) also notices that brunette characters in film are more sinister, more serious, more smoldering, and calculating. While characteristics of naturalness, trustworthiness, and intelligence can be seen as positive attributes, there is no denying that most women would not like to think that their hair color makes them appear sinister or manipulative.

Rouvalis (2005) also notes, however, that brunettes are depicted as the ones men take home to their mothers. Rodgers (2008) shows that even though blondes are desired, men are often seen as wanting to settle down with and marry brunettes. This difference could be because of the trustworthy and reliable stereotypes that are associated with brunette hair. Rodgers (2008) makes the point that although brunettes are seen as smarter and more serious, they do not stand out in the same way blondes do. This lack of shine leads the audience to see that brunettes are more stable and reliable because they are seen as less attention-seeking.

As the previous discussion shows, stereotypes are still commonly used in television and film. Gender and racial stereotypes have evolved, but the original stereotypes continue to be shown today. Stereotypes thrive in the media and rely on a knowledge base viewers must already have in order to survive. This knowledge base is especially important to the success of television comedy. Comedy is popular in media as it provides the audience with an escape from reality, yet it depicts images that stereotype groups of individuals. Stereotypes in comedy provide a way of talking about serious topics without offending the viewer. The portrayals of blondes and brunettes have used
the comedic outlet in television. This thesis will show not only how one television comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*, presents its content regarding the blonde and brunette stereotypes, but also how the show uses dialogue to evolve and redefine the stereotypes.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The method employed in this study is framing analysis. In this chapter, I will begin by discussing what framing analysis is and how it is used. Second, I will provide justification for the use of this method. Finally, I will provide a brief background of the artifact and the procedure used in doing the analysis.

Framing Analysis

This thesis applies framing analysis with cultivation theory to analyze the data gathered. Framing can be defined as the process of selecting a few specific elements of a perceived reality and bringing together narrative examples that highlight connections among them that promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007). Framing is also described as a way to promote a favored outlook of the message presented in the media (Batziou, 2011). Framing analysis, originally proposed by Goffman in 1974, is an interpersonal theory of how individuals come to make sense of their everyday lives (Liebler, Schwartz, & Harpel, 2009). Originally part of psychology of communication, framing was imported into sociology as a way of analyzing how culture is imitated in social interactions (Noakes, 2000). Analyzing the limitations of culture in social interactions was typically done by analyzing social movements (Noakes, 2000), to help better understand the movement and its history. The majority of these frames support existing versions of reality by repeating dominant expressions or viewpoints (Noakes, 2000). Certain aspects of reality are made more salient in order to promote a specific
image or interpretation the media wishes the audience to believe (Batziou, 2011). There are a few different ways the analysis can be done in order for framing to be successful.

Frames first must define who we are as individuals and as groups, which is typically achieved via shared experiences (Kretsedemas, 2000). Defining who we are as individuals or groups is accomplished by having a primary framework. This primary framework uses ideas or images in a scene that would typically be meaningless and turns them into something meaningful (Goffman, 1974). Each primary framework allows the audience to find, distinguish, single out, and label an infinite number of concrete situations defined in its terms (Goffman, 1974). Two classes of primary frameworks guide the inquiry: natural and social. According to Goffman (1974), “Natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided ‘purely physical’” (p. 22), whereas social frameworks “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief of one being the human being” (p. 22). Whether the framework is natural or social, the specific idea is shown through priming.

Priming uses the frameworks to shape and change audience members’ interpretations and desires (Entman, 2007). In other words, priming provides the context and sets the stage for discussing an issue. Agenda setting can be seen as another way to perform the first function of framing: defining problems deserving of public and government attention (Entman, 2007). In other words, in setting the discourse agenda, the media give the audience a list of matters to think about without detailing what the audience should think about those matters. Setting the discourse agenda also involves the
use of motive and intent. Their involvement helps the researcher in selecting which of the social frameworks is to be applied (Goffman, 1974). Once the framework has been applied, some of the premises will be shared by all viewers (Goffman, 1974). The premises are set by the media.

The premises create judgments, which are heavily influenced by elite sources (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). The elite sources in this case are mass media outlets like television production and distribution houses. The mass media are creators of an ideology that is distributed mainly via framing (Powell, 2011). Media institutions are powerful players who devote massive resources to advancing their specific interests by imposing patterns on mediated communications (Entman, 2007). Framing theory focuses on the packages that individuals of the mass media use in characterizing a specific issue (Lee, Kim, & Love, 2014). Frames connect with an audience by compelling the individual to personally identify with a definition of a specific situation (Kretsedemas, 2000). In regards to characterizing issues, mass media may be helping to disburse political power to specific groups, causes, or individuals (Entman, 2007). Mass media members use framing strategies to turn complex issues, like politics, into topics that are more easily understood by a mass audience (Lee, et al., 2014). In turn, the frames set by the media become embedded within and manifest in the text (Entman, 1993). However, this manifestation can create a content bias, which occurs when there are consistent patterns on the framing of media communication that encourage a one sided influence (Entman, 2007). This one sided view allows audiences to embrace a false belief about what is
going on (Goffman, 1974). As the false beliefs are created and embraced, the media have
the ability to influence a stereotype’s impact and power.

Visual stereotypes are particularly effective in framing a group of individuals as a
certain social type (Batziou, 2011). Every story created through the visual stereotypes has
an angle. The angle is used to show which events are to be interpreted, which is how
media create a frame (Powell, 2011). What frames essentially do is provide a guiding line
and indirectly define the way a message is to be interpreted (Batziou, 2011). The way to
analyze media framing is through keying.

Keying is a systematic transformation used across materials that are already
meaningful in accordance with a specific schema of interpretation; without schema, the
keying would be meaningless (Goffman, 1974). According to Goffman (1974), there are
five basic keys employed by our society: make-believe, contexts, ceremonial, technical
redoings, and regrounding. These five different keys can be found within a text. Analyses
of media content traditionally focus on said texts and the importance of the images within
the texts (Batziou, 2011). The images and discourses contain frames employed by media.
The texts and images are manifested by the existence or absence of specific keywords,
phrases, stereotyped images, and sources of information that reinforce groups of facts or
judgments (Entman, 1993). There are different interpretations and meanings that develop
from the texts and images (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). This can cause the meanings to
be categorized by specific metaphors, catchphrases, or other symbolic means to
characterize the texts and images shown by the media (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).
When this is done, media contribute to their own frames that create catchphrases that
draw on popular culture (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The categorization of keys or phrases found in texts makes the text appear more promising because texts can make bits of information more salient (Goffman, 1974). Salience is achieved in the placement or repetition of the image, or by associating the image with culturally familiar symbols (Entman, 1993) that reinforce the stereotype or belief portrayed. Seeing similarities and differences means the individual is seeing what the media is trying to portray (Goffman, 1974); in the case of this thesis, the individual is seeing the portrayals of blonde and brunette stereotypes.

**Methodological Justification**

To discuss the blonde and brunette stereotypes on *The Big Bang Theory*, framing analysis can be used to find common and reoccurring frames within the images and dialogue through which the stereotypes are constructed. Although television uses both visual and verbal aspects to construct stereotypes, the verbal aspect will be the focus of this study. The frames are used to help analyze the context within the conversations. The frames will reveal the similarities or differences in the conversations and language used between the stereotyped characters.

**Procedure**

The artifacts for this study are scenes within episodes of the television show *The Big Bang Theory*. *The Big Bang Theory* is a CBS situation comedy that shows what happens when hyper-intelligent roommates/physicists Sheldon and Leonard meet Penny, a beautiful blonde woman who moves in next door. When they meet Penny, Sheldon and Leonard realize they know next to nothing about life outside of their lab. Rounding out
the crew are Howard Wolowitz, who thinks he is as sexy as he is brainy, and Rajesh “Raj” Koothrappali, who suffers from an inability to speak in the presence of a woman who is not family. Additional characters are also introduced, including Bernadette Rostenkowski (who is blonde and works at the Cheesecake Factory with Penny and eventually obtains her PhD), and Amy Farrah Fowler (a brunette who was found through a dating site for Sheldon and has her PhD in neurobiology). *The Big Bang Theory* distinguishes itself by being unafraid to use scientific and technological references into an otherwise standard sitcom, even employing a physicist on set to keep all scientific references accurate (Metacritic, 2015).

*The Big Bang Theory* was chosen not only for its all-star cast, but also because it is one of CBS’s top rated shows (CBS.com, 2013). The show has increased from 17.8 million viewers in October 2013 to over 20 million viewers by January 2014 (Bibel, 2014). The show has been nominated for an Emmy twenty-six times and has five wins (Emmys.com, 2013). On top of the Emmy nominations and wins, the show also includes guest actors and scientists to help with the ratings (CBS.com, 2013). With the increasing popularity of the show and millions of viewers, it is easy to see that the stereotypical frames it may depict reach millions of viewers. Having such a large audience and credibility among awards shows, this show is right for analysis.

For this study, scenes from five episodes across three seasons (1, 3, and 6) were selected for analysis because they each featured specific interactions between the characters of Penny, Bernadette, and Amy, including how they were originally introduced and how they are most recently portrayed. These characters supplied the researcher with a
robust sample of stereotypical presentations of blondes and brunettes. Framing analysis was used to see how the frameworks show differences in dialogue, language, and identity of the characters.

The dialogue for the three characters of Penny, Bernadette, and Amy was examined to see if the stereotypes were reinforced or changed over the course of six seasons. Each line of dialogue is a unit that was coded into one of four categories: reinforcing the stereotype, changing the stereotype, unsure as to what the line depicts, and neutral. This coding was done to see if any set of lines perpetuated a stereotype. The coding for each category was done based on the portrayals found in previous research (and discussed above). Coding for the dialogue of the blonde stereotype included the use of language that evokes characteristics of femininity, being more seductive, flirtatious, happy, or carefree, and having a less intelligent demeanor. The brunette stereotype dialogue included the use of language that evokes characteristics of seriousness, shyness, intelligence, reserved nature, low-maintenance, and being calculating. The neutral category includes language that does not reinforce or change the stereotype (for example, general greetings and pleasantries like “thank you” or “goodbye” were coded as neutral). The unsure category includes language that did not fall into any of the other categories.

The five episodes were viewed at least three times each and examined for the use of dialogue that could create identity in blonde and brunette stereotypes. Although there are stereotypes portrayed among the male characters, only the female characters are used in this analysis as the blonde and brunette stereotypes are portrayed among women. Based on prior research regarding gender stereotypes (Lauzen, et al., 2008; Massoni,
2004) and hair color stereotypes (Burton, 2005; Young, 2009; Nur Aini, 2009; Rouvalis, 2005), they are all geared towards women rather than men. Because of this connection, this study also examines hair color stereotypes on female characters to further the research in this area.

As there are a large number of stereotypical behaviors, I selected the three most commonly portrayed traits for both blonde and brunette portrayals. Specific interactions were chosen because of the context and identity the actors created through dialogue. Each scene chosen was selected because it was able to display through dialogue the characters’ abilities to reinforce and change their respected stereotypes. The interactions were then transcribed and grouped into categories based on the common frameworks that occurred. The findings from these categories will be analyzed in the following chapter.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSION

The data from the five episodes was collected and coded into two overall frameworks (blonde stereotypes and brunette stereotypes), and each framework also contained sub-frameworks based on the respective personality traits. Although the stereotypes are not necessarily conveyed with repeated words and phrases, they are depicted by the overall idea of each sub-framework. The differences in the portrayal of the stereotypes in the beginning of the series versus the later episodes were noted, as the differences can show if progress or change in stereotypes is being made or not. The first stereotype to be analyzed is the blonde stereotype, followed by analysis of the brunette stereotype.

**Blonde Stereotypes**

The dialogue of the blonde characters Penny and Bernadette was analyzed and coded for the use of blonde stereotypes. As dialogue of the blonde stereotype includes the use of language that evokes characteristics of femininity and being seductive, flirtatious, happy, carefree, and less intelligent, Penny embodies this stereotype and Bernadette displays many of those characteristics as well. Penny is introduced in the Pilot, and Bernadette is introduced in Season 3, Episode 5. Three significant stereotypes were found when analyzing blonde stereotypes: happy and carefree, femininity, and the dumb blonde. The first to be analyzed is the happy and carefree sub-stereotype.
Happy and Carefree.

A happy and carefree attitude is reinforced through the characters of Penny and Bernadette. When Penny is first introduced, as well as throughout the course of the series, she embodies the happy and carefree sub-stereotype. She projects an image of a person with no worries or cares other than becoming an actress. Bernadette embodies the happy and carefree attitude on a different level than Penny. As Bernadette is also a scientist, her portrayal of being carefree is executed on a more reserved scale compared to Penny. Both characters portray a sense of wanting to have fun and live life without worry, but it is accomplished in different ways. Over the course of the series, Penny tends to be reined in of her carefree ways by her fellow characters, while Bernadette is able to explore the boundaries of having fun.

Although there are many examples of this stereotype over the six seasons, three significant interactions stand out when comparing when Penny and Bernadette are first introduced and how they appear in the later episodes. The first two interactions occurs when Penny first meets Leonard and Sheldon in the apartment building. The third interaction occurs when the girls are in the cab on their way to the airport for their Las Vegas trip.

*Leonard:* Yeah, it’s like regular Boggle, but in Klingon. That’s probably enough about us. Tell us about you.

*Penny:* Um, me, okay, I’m Sagittarius, which probably tells you way more than you need to know.

*Sheldon:* Yes, it tells us that you participate in the mass cultural delusion that the Sun’s apparent position relative to arbitrarily defined constellations and the time of your birth somehow affects your personality.

*Penny:* Participate in the what?
Leonard: I think what Sheldon’s trying to say is that Sagittarius wouldn’t have been our first guess.
Penny: Oh, yeah, a lot of people think I’m a water sign. Okay, let’s see, what else? Oh, I’m a vegetarian, oh, except for fish, and the occasional steak. I love steak.

Penny: Oh, you’re inviting me over to eat?
Leonard: Uh, yes.
Penny: Oh, that’s so nice, I’d love to.
Leonard: Great.
Penny: So, what do you guys do for fun around here?
Sheldon: Well, today we tried masturbating for money.

Bernadette: Burbank Airport, please.
Penny: Vegas, here we come.
Bernadette: No husbands, no boyfriends, no rules.
Amy: No rules? We’re not gonna get drunk and have a six-way with the Blue Man Group, are we?
Penny: No.
Amy: So there are some rules.
Bernadette: Fine. No husbands, no boyfriends, some rules.
Amy: Thank you. Vegas!

In the above examples, Penny reinforces the happy and carefree idea when she mentions that she is a Sagittarius because it shows she reads her horoscope for fun and believes it to be true. As we get to know Penny, we find she is easily pleased, as she is genuinely surprised to be invited over to the guys’ apartment. She then jumps into wanting to know what they do for fun, which reinforces the carefree part of the stereotype and the “blondes have more fun” frame. She does not hesitate in getting to know Leonard and Sheldon better and gives off a bubbly and happy vibe when she is speaking with the characters. When the series continues and we have a better knowledge of the characters, we see that Penny continues to embody the carefree stereotype, whereas Bernadette begins to change. This difference was shown in the third exchange above; Penny and
Bernadette are excited for Vegas, even throwing out any rules for the weekend. However when Amy brings up that there should be some rules, Bernadette seems to be reluctant at first, but in the end, she agrees as she knows there should be some boundaries when having fun. When we later see Penny explain the appeal of Las Vegas to Amy, she reinforces the carefree stereotype as she gives off the impression that she has been there and done that when it comes to Las Vegas, that it is not a big deal, and that Amy should be proud of what happened. Although specific words or phrases are not repeated, the idea of being carefree and happy is portrayed through the context and dialogue. In this instance, the characters do not need to use specific phrasing to convey the stereotype; they are able to depict the stereotype by portraying the idea of being happy and carefree. Overall, the happy and carefree stereotype appears to be reinforced in the blonde characters over the course of the series.

As the audience watches the show over time, they see images and dialogue reinforcing the stereotype. By seeing the repeated stereotype, the audience may begin to believe this is how blondes act and these actions are real. This in turn can cultivate and shape the viewer’s conception of reality. Since it appears the stereotype is reinforced, the portrayal does not seem to alter the perception of the blonde stereotype.

Femininity.

As prior research shows, blondes also tend to evoke femininity and flirtation. Although there are changes to this stereotype, Penny and Bernadette often reinforce it. Over the series, Penny uses her looks and flirtatious personality to get the other characters to help her or do things for her. She is presented as recognizing that if she
looks or acts a certain way, then people will cater to her. Bernadette is also presented as understanding that her looks and personality will work to her advantage. Both characters are flirtatious with their male counterparts and tend to constantly have a significant other, or receive male attention, in their lives.

There are three significant interactions that show the feminine and flirtatious stereotype portrayed by Penny and Bernadette. The first interaction occurs when the girls are on their way to Las Vegas for a girls’ trip. The second interaction is when Penny and Leonard are having dinner in Penny’s apartment and recapping their workday. The third interaction is when Penny is trying to help Raj’s new girlfriend feel more comfortable and included with the group.

_Penny_: I got a brand-new bikini, so drinks at the pool are on these (she gestures in the direction of her chest).
_Bernadette_: I got a sexy new tube top that says come hither, and a can of pepper spray that says close enough, Jack.
_Amy_: I got some old underwear I’m gonna throw on stage at the Garth Brooks concert.
_Penny_: I’m sorry, why old?
_Amy_: ‘Cause last time I saw him, I threw new ones and it got me nothing.

_Penny_: So, then, during my afternoon shift, I spilled an entire tray of drinks on myself.
_Leonard_: Oh, that’s awful.
_Penny_: Not really. My shirt was soaking wet. I got, like, the biggest tip of my life.

_Penny_: You know, maybe she’d be more comfortable meeting a girl first.
_Raj_: Good idea. Bernadette?
_Penny_: What the hell?
_Raj_: Well, you’re very pretty. That could be intimidating to another woman.
_Penny_: Oh, yeah.
Bernadette: Hey, you don’t think I’m pretty enough to scare your girlfriend?
Howard: Calm down, Bernie. You’re very scary.

These interactions represent dialogue that seems to shift the stereotypes, but they also reinforce the stereotypes as well. Penny reinforces the flirtatious stereotype by not only stating she will be using her body and new bikini to get free drinks while in Las Vegas, but also by the gesture she makes towards her body. Bernadette also reinforces this stereotype when discussing her new outfit; however, her language attempts to change the stereotype when she brings up the pepper spray she is also carrying to show that while she may appear to be feminine, she has a different and decidedly non-flirtatious side to her. Penny also reinforces the flirtatious stereotype when she does not care that she spilled drinks on herself, as in the end it benefitted her. She used her body and wet clothes to her advantage. This moment appears as more flirtatious because when she did not spill drinks, different results occurred. The feminine stereotype continues to be reinforced in the third scenario when Raj explains that Penny is very pretty, which can be intimidating to other women. As Penny agrees, she is reinforcing the fact that she is feminine and attractive. However the stereotype is then changed when Bernadette is angry and offended that she is not considered pretty, like Penny is. As blondes evoke femininity and attractiveness, Bernadette changes the stereotype when she is not considered feminine or pretty enough. These interactions do not have specific reoccurring words, however the overall idea of femininity is repeated throughout the conversations between the characters. Although these interactions are small, they are significant in showing the challenge of trying to change stereotypes.
As the stereotype is changed in a small way, both heavy and light television viewers may begin to recognize the change. In this regard, the viewer has the opportunity to change their beliefs on the blonde stereotype. From a cultivation perspective, the media changing their portrayal can help change the audiences’ perception of this stereotype.

**Dumb Blonde.**

Probably the most common blonde stereotype *The Big Bang Theory* is that of the dumb blonde. This characteristic is shown repeatedly throughout the series. The characters of Penny and Bernadette often reinforce the stereotype, but they are written to make many attempts to change it as well. Bernadette is blonde, but being a microbiologist alone changes the dumb blonde stereotype. As Bernadette is a scientist, Penny tends to embody the dumb blonde stereotype more often. She is impressed with the other characters’ scientific work, their jobs, and how they see below the simple surface level of topics they discuss. As the series continues, we see that Penny continues to reinforce the stereotype, but she begins to change it as well. She starts to understand Leonard’s work and the significance of the scientific field in general. Although Bernadette does reinforce the stereotype by not always picking up on jokes or comments by other characters, she is clearly presented as the smarter blonde of the two and her character’s presentation is an attempt to change the stereotype more often than not.

There are six significant interactions that reinforce and change the dumb blonde stereotype. The first two interactions are when Penny first meets Leonard and Sheldon. The third interaction is when Amy explains as to why the girls’ trip to Las Vegas was
cancelled. The fourth is when Howard first meets Bernadette on their way to their date.

The fifth and sixth interactions are when Leonard receives an opportunity in his field to expand his research and work with Stephen Hawking. The examples are as follows.

_Penny_: This looks like some serious stuff, Leonard. Did you do this?
_Sheldon_: Actually that’s my work.
_Penny_: Wow.
_Sheldon_: Yeah, well, it’s just some quantum mechanics, with a little string theory doodling around the edges. That part there, that’s just a joke. It’s a spoof of the Bourne-Oppenheimer approximation.
_Penny_: So you’re like, one of those, beautiful mind genius guys.
_Sheldon_: Yeah.
_Penny_: This is really impressive.
_Leonard_: I have a board. If you like boards, this is my board.
_Penny_: Holy smokes.
_Sheldon_: If by “holy smokes” you mean a derivative restatement of the kind of stuff you can find scribbled on the wall of any men’s room at MIT, sure.

_Leonard_: Yeah, it’s like regular Boggle but, in Klingon. That’s probably enough about us. Tell us about you.
_Penny_: Um, me, okay, I’m Sagittarius, which probably tells you way more than you need to know.
_Sheldon_: Yes, it tells us that you participate in the mass cultural delusion that the Sun’s apparent position relative to arbitrarily defined constellations and the time of your birth somehow affects your personality.
_Penny_: Participate in the what?
_Leonard_: I think what Sheldon’s trying to say is that Sagittarius wouldn’t have been our first guess.
_Penny_: Oh, yeah, a lot of people think I’m a water sign. Okay, let’s see, what else? Oh, I’m a vegetarian, oh, except for fish, and the occasional steak. I love steak.

_Amy_: Uh, well, when we were going through security, I got pulled out of line for a pat-down. The, uh, TSA agent got a little handsy. I may have broken her nose with my elbow.
_Bernadette_: Long story short, she’s on the No Fly List and we might have been followed here by a drone.
_Amy_: I’m sorry. I feel like such an idiot.
Penny: Oh, it’s not so bad. You lost money, you’re filled with shame and you got groped by a stranger. I mean, that’s Vegas. You nailed it.

Howard: So, Penny tells me you’re working as a waitress to put yourself through grad school. That’s pretty great. What are you studying?

Bernadette: Microbiology.

Howard: Oh, cool. So you could study me.

Bernadette: I don’t understand.

Howard: Microbiology is the study of tiny living things.

Bernadette: I know. I’m studying it.

Howard: And I said you could study me ‘cause I’m a tiny living thing. It’s a joke.

Leonard: So, listen, do you remember when I said the similarities of the equations of general relativity and hydrodynamics suggest you could find the equivalent of Unruh radiation in a large body of water?

Penny: I thought I said that to you.

Leonard: Anyway, Stephen Hawking’s team is looking into that, and I’ve been invited to join them.

Penny: Wow, Hawking. Good for you.

Penny: Well, I’m his girlfriend. Of course I’m gonna support him.

Sheldon: Yeah, well, you’re his girlfriend for now. You know, maybe you’re not aware of this, but there is a rich tradition of men at sea finding comfort in each other’s arms and britches.

Penny: Honey, this is a big deal for Leonard, okay? He gets to work with Stephen Hawking. Who, by the way, will not be on the boat. I checked it out.

When we first meet Penny, she is baffled and impressed by Leonard and Sheldon because of their scientific work. When Penny comments “so you’re like, one of those, beautiful mind genius guys” instead of using the term “scientist,” it suggests that she would not have assumed they were scientists or that they work for a university. In this case, the way Penny speaks reinforces the dumb blonde stereotype through the choice of words as well as the overall idea of the stereotype. The stereotype is also reinforced when Penny says “holy smokes” and Sheldon’s comment that Leonard’s work can be found in
the men’s room at MIT. Using the term “holy smokes,” shows that Penny is not smart enough to understand the difference between sophisticated and basic works, as she thinks both boards are impressive. As Sheldon uses scientific logic, Penny reinforces the dumb blonde stereotype not only by not understanding what Sheldon says, but also by using different terminology than what Leonard and Sheldon would otherwise use. When the girls are heading to Las Vegas, we begin to see a change in the portrayal of the dumb blonde when Bernadette states that a drone may have followed them. As blondes are typically portrayed as less intelligent, an average dumb blonde would probably not convincingly deliver a line about drone technology.

The stereotype is also changed when Bernadette is introduced. Bernadette states she is studying microbiology in graduate school, whereas the dumb blonde stereotype typically does not include graduate education, especially not in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. Bernadette also changes the stereotype as her words are matter of fact and straight and to the point rather than giving too much detail as Penny is typically written to do. As the series continues and the characters are developed, Penny also changes the stereotype. In the scenario in which Leonard begins reviewing his work, Penny makes a joke as though she is acknowledging she would not accomplish comprehension of complex scientific concepts at Leonard’s level, whereas in the beginning, she would not have been presented as even understanding what Leonard said. Although Penny’s line in this interaction appears to be a neutral line, the context behind it signifies the change in the portrayal. Penny also changes the stereotype when her dialogue suggests she knows who Stephen Hawking is
and she understands he is an important scientific figure. In prior seasons, Penny did not know who Hawking was and her dialogue could not have demonstrated her understanding of Hawking’s significance in the life of a scientist. Although Penny also reinforces the stereotype by informing Sheldon that Stephen Hawking would not be on the boat as she previously assumed he would be (and although her dialogue included a question about how Hawking would stay on the boat, as he could be in danger of rolling away), Penny also changes the stereotype by acknowledging how going on the research trip is a big deal and working with Stephen Hawking is a big accomplishment.

The stereotype of the dumb blonde was both reinforced and changed over the course of the episodes. As the stereotype was changed, and in a positive way, the show may have provided a lesson to the heavy viewers on how blondes are viewed. In this case, the show provided audience members an opportunity to change their views towards blondes and see them in a different light. This also gave the audience the opportunity to view a character that is relatable. Although the characters reinforce stereotypes, they also change them which provides a new connection for the audience and the opportunity for a new bond to be created between the character and the audience member. This bond could help the viewer see blondes in a new light, rather than in the stereotype they are typically portrayed in.

The blonde stereotypes in The Big Bang Theory are reinforced over the course of six seasons, but they are also changed. For the blonde stereotype, it was hypothesized the portrayal of the blonde stereotype will not change over time, however evidence shows this is not the case.
Brunette Stereotypes

The dialogue of the character Amy has been analyzed and coded for the use of brunette stereotypes. As dialogue of the brunette stereotype includes the use of language and context that evokes characteristics of seriousness, shyness, intelligence, reserved nature, low-maintenance, and calculating demeanor, Amy displays those characteristics. Amy is introduced at the end of Season 3 during Episode 26; from that point on, the text contains many examples of dialogue that reinforced and changed the brunette stereotype.

Intelligence.

The most common stereotype of brunettes is that they are depicted as more intelligent than blondes. Amy is presented as a counterpart to Penny. As Penny is characterized as the dumb blonde, Amy is portrayed as the smart brunette. She is often seen as explaining more educated topics and scientific ideas to Penny, whereas Penny tends to explain more fun and social topics to Amy. Amy’s intelligence in the series is particularly shown through her science background (she works as a neurobiologist). Over the course of the series, Amy reinforces and changes the intelligent brunette stereotype. From the time she is first introduced to the later episodes, she becomes less of the stereotypical brunette and she begins to take on characteristics of the blonde stereotype, yet she simultaneously reinforces the intelligent brunette stereotype.

Although one of the brunette stereotypes is that they are considered more intelligent, it is significant that only one interaction depicted this characteristic in the episodes viewed for this study. This interaction occurs when the girls are in the cab on their way to the airport for their trip to Las Vegas.
Penny: I got a brand-new bikini, so drinks at the pool are on these.
Bernadette: I got a sexy new tube top that says come hither, and a can of pepper spray that says close enough, Jack.
Amy: I got some old underwear I’m gonna throw on stage at the Garth Brooks concert.
Penny: I’m sorry, why old?
Amy: ’Cause last time I saw him, I threw new ones and it got me nothing.

Here, Amy reinforces the intelligent and calculating sub-stereotypes. As the girls are heading to Las Vegas, Amy shows that she wants to have a good time; however, her dialogue still shows that she will be smart about what fun she will be having. Amy is shown analyzing the action she took previously and then changing it because her desired outcome did not happen. She found that throwing new underwear on stage did not get her anything; therefore, she decides to try throwing old underwear to see what that action gets her. Although her words are not repeated or specifically depicted as intelligent, the context behind her calculating line shows the idea of the intelligent brunette. Her dialogue presents the act of wild and random fun as a scientific experiment. Even though there was only one intelligent brunette stereotype affirming interaction found in the episodes selected, this interaction does show that even brunette stereotypes can be changed.

From a cultivation view, this interaction gives the viewer a different image of the brunette stereotype that may impact their perception towards brunettes. As the stereotype changed in this example, the more the audience views this change, the more the audience would change their outlook on how they should think or act on the brunette stereotype. This example provides light and heavy viewers an image of a changed stereotype.
Seriousness.

The second stereotype Amy depicts is that of the serious brunette. As blondes are stereotypically depicted as more carefree, brunettes are depicted as tending to take on the serious role. Throughout the series, Amy is more grounded and tends to bring Penny back down to reality rather than letting her be carefree. Amy recognizes that she can hang out with Penny and Bernadette, yet she provides boundaries and reasoning as to why they can or cannot do activities (such as having too much fun on their trip to Las Vegas). Here, there are two interactions that depict Amy reinforcing the serious brunette stereotype. The first interaction is when the girls are in the cab on their way to the airport. The second interaction occurs when the girls have joined the guys in playing a game inside the apartment.

*Bernadette*: Burbank Airport, please.
*Penny*: Vegas, here we come.
*Bernadette*: No husbands, no boyfriends, no rules.
*Amy*: No rules? We’re not gonna get drunk and have a six-way with the Blue Man Group, are we?
*Penny*: No.
*Amy*: So there are some rules.
*Bernadette*: Fine. No husbands, no boyfriends, some rules.
*Amy*: Thank you. Vegas!

*Leonard*: All right, Amy, there’s one ogre left. Take him out.
*Amy*: Okay.
*Penny*: Pretend he’s that TSA agent. Come on.
*Amy*: Nineteen. Yes, this is turning out to be even better than Vegas.
*Penny*: No, it’s not.

While Penny and Bernadette are ready to go out and have fun, Amy is more reserved and insists that there should be some rules. In this example, the word “rules” is repeated which shows the idea of seriousness rather than fun. She also states that they will not do
some things, so Amy’s dialogue implies that the women will have some sort of boundaries while on their trip. She shows that she does not have the happy and carefree attitude that Penny and Bernadette do. As blondes (stereotypically) know how to have more fun, this dialogue shows that the brunette stereotype of being more reserved and serious is reinforced. The repetition of “no” and “rules” and the matter of fact way Amy says “thank you,” reinforces the seriousness stereotype. While Amy believes playing a game is more fun than being in Las Vegas, Penny has to tell her that it actually is not. It appears that as a brunette, Amy is presented as not understanding what it means to be carefree and having fun. As Amy takes on the more serious role, her character also takes on a shy characteristic.

As the serious brunette stereotype is reinforced, heavy viewers may believe all brunettes are serious. This gives the viewer a sense of perceived realism where the viewer dismisses the notion that not all brunettes are serious. Since the stereotype is reinforced, the more often audience members view this stereotype, the more likely they are to believe it to be true.

**Shyness.**

As blondes are stereotyped as more outgoing, brunettes are stereotyped as being the shy counterpart. Amy is more shy and reserved compared to Penny and Bernadette. When we are first introduced to Penny and Bernadette, they are more open with other characters; when we first meet Amy, she is presented as more calculating and not as outgoing. As Amy becomes more involved with the other characters, she begins to open up with them and the shy brunette stereotype starts to change. She starts to voice her
opinion more often and she appears to take on some of the qualities of her blonde counterparts. There are three significant interactions that both reinforce and change the shy brunette stereotype. The first and second interactions are when the girls are trying to help Raj’s new girlfriend feel welcomed and comfortable with the group. The third is when the girls are listening to Raj talk about his problems with his girlfriend.

Penny: You know, maybe she’d be more comfortable meeting a girl first.
Raj: Good idea. Bernadette?
Penny: What the hell?
Raj: Well, you’re very pretty. That could be intimidating to another woman.
Penny: Oh, yeah.
Bernadette: Hey, you don’t think I’m pretty enough to scare your girlfriend?
Howard: Calm down, Bernie. You’re very scary.
Amy: It should be me.
Raj: Why? So you can make jokes about cutting open my brain?
Amy: A, that was not a joke, that was a sincere request. And B, more importantly, I was the outsider to this group, and I know how frightening that can be. But you guys took me in and made me feel loved, like I was family.

Amy: So, after I started dating Sheldon, I met Leonard, and then everybody else, and they’ve all been so wonderful to me.
Lucy: That’s really nice to hear.
Amy: Maybe next week, we could all get together.

Raj: So I guess what I’m saying is, I get where Lucy’s coming from.
Penny: That’s great. Do you want some wine?
Raj: Uh, no, water’s fine. Anyhow, I’ve been thinking about it a lot and, and I totally see why Lucy did what she did. I pushed too hard. But you know what? If I back off and give her enough space, maybe there’s still a future for us. Yeah, the funny thing about life is that, you know, sometimes…
Amy: Does he ever shut up?
Here, Amy begins by acknowledging her shyness. Although she does not bluntly call herself shy, she implies her shyness by explaining her feelings coming into the group. She informs her fellow characters how frightening it was to come into a new group and how rewarding it was when she was accepted by them. The context behind Amy’s comment helps to show how her words are more sincere and reserved, including using the words “loved” and “family,” whereas Penny and Bernadette in this scene are the opposite. Amy is more reserved even when describing how her friends have been so kind to her in welcoming her into the group. Amy still shows a sense of shyness and reservation; however, she does begin to open up by suggesting they get together.

Although Amy plays a huge role in the scene and comes off shyer than Penny and Bernadette, she begins to change the stereotype as the series continues. Rather than being consistently shy, Amy begins to voice her opinion within the group. As Raj talks about his problems, Amy becomes frustrated and annoyed which leads her to bluntly ask the question about whether Raj ever shuts up. As this type of comment would be expected from someone more outgoing and less reserved (like a blonde), this interaction shows a change in the portrayal of the brunette stereotype. In this case, the idea of the shy stereotype is portrayed through context, but it is also portrayed through the specific words written for Amy.

The idea of the shy brunette is both reinforced and changed in the eyes of the audience. As the interaction of changing the stereotype is small, heavy television viewers might not pick up on the change whereas light viewers may see the change. In regards to the stereotype being reinforced, the heavy viewers will continue to think that brunettes
are shy and more reserved because of the repeated portrayal. However, the light television viewers might make the distinction that not all brunettes are shy due to their limited time watching the show. Once again, the way the stereotype changes may provide viewers a new outlook on brunettes. This creates the opportunity for the viewer to begin to see the traits as normal, realistic, and changing. The changing of the brunette stereotype can give brunette audience members a new way of looking at themselves. Rather than viewing themselves as shy or serious, the way Amy changes in the show shows the viewer it is okay to break out of their portrayed stereotype.

Thus, like the blonde stereotypes, brunette stereotypes are both reinforced and changed in this show over the course of six seasons. For the brunette stereotype, it was hypothesized the portrayal of the brunette stereotype will change over time and in this case, evidence does show this to be true. Using framing analysis with cultivation theory allows the researcher to see the changes of stereotypes over time. This analysis shows that the writers for *The Big Bang Theory* are continuing to reinforce the portrayal of blonde and brunette stereotypes. Although the stereotypes are reinforced, the writers show they are also changing the portrayal of the stereotypes; however, the changes are coming at a slow rate.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis studied the differences in dialogue between the blonde stereotype and the brunette stereotype on *The Big Bang Theory* and analyzed how these stereotypes are advancing and being redefined to create something new. *The Big Bang Theory* was chosen as it is not only one of CBS’s most popular television shows, but it has also earned multiple Emmy nominations and wins and the respect of many in the television industry (Locker, 2014). Blonde and brunette stereotypes were examined, as hair color stereotypes have been portrayed often in media. Studies have examined the portrayal of stereotypes, yet few studies have examined the dialogue of stereotypes, and none have focused on the dialogue of hair color stereotypes.

Although significant results were found, *The Big Bang Theory* itself is a rich artifact, and additional studies could reveal more about the text. There are multiple episodes and scenes over the six seasons that could also be used in analyzing the portrayal of blonde and brunette stereotyping. An analysis of more scenes and more episodes could have created more opportunities to find additional significant data, but the results of this study are strong enough to stand on their own.

Prior research created a foundation for this study. This thesis used cultivation theory, as it is rooted in analyzing changes in media portrayals over time, which helps alter audience perceptions. Stereotyping in media has evolved over time, reinforcing and altering images responsive to historical changes. Media often use stereotyping, as the resulting clichés create easy connections with viewers. The stereotypes examined for this
study focused exclusively on blonde and brunette women. Prior research found blondes are portrayed as dumb and ditzy bombshells, while brunettes were found to be shy, intelligent, and more dependable. Both of those stereotypes have been portrayed (and studied) in comedic settings, so it was necessary to examine the changes in these stereotypes over time.

This thesis used framing analysis to examine if the stereotypes are being reinforced or changed over time. This analysis was done by comparing the introduction of the characters versus their portrayal in the later seasons. Examination of the five episodes found that the portrayals of the stereotypes are slowly being changed, but they also continue to be reinforced. The changes in dialogue of the stereotypes are subtle and minimal, but these changes create a foundation for the show, and other media outlets, to continue to alter images and ideas from this point forward.

As changes continue to occur, the changed television texts provide scholars with more research opportunities. One area to consider for future research is to examine the influence that blonde and brunette stereotypes have on one another. As the data in this study found, small changes are occurring, so future research can look into different episodes of this television show (or other shows) and see if the characteristics of the stereotypes are taking on different personality traits other than of their original portrayal. Also, as The Big Bang Theory is a show about scientists, a second area of future research would be to include the portrayal of the scientist stereotype in regards to hair color. Although Bernadette is blonde, she is also a scientist. It would be interesting to see if the blonde stereotype changes because of profession or if the professional stereotype changes
due to hair color. Few studies have focused on the scientist stereotype and it would be interesting to look into the dialogue used by the portrayed stereotype. Another area of potential research is examining the influence of stereotypes on parasocial interaction. As this phenomenon is the connection audience members have with characters, it would be interesting to examine the influence the characters have on audience members. For example, since blondes are stereotyped as dumb, one might ask if blondes watching *The Big Bang Theory* see Penny as the dumb blonde and continue to identify with her and see themselves as dumb, or if they see Bernadette as the smart blonde and begin to identify with her. By moving beyond the portrayed stereotypes, viewers can change their views on the images displayed in the media.

This study builds on previous research about blonde stereotypes, while helping the foundation of brunette research. Doing so helps change how society views the portrayal of stereotypes in general. If audiences, and society as a whole, can see how the stereotypes are not necessarily representative of truth, then we have the opportunity to change our way of thinking. It is okay to see dumb blonde and shy brunette stereotypes, as long as we realize that blondes are not always dumb and brunettes are not always shy. We can change our interpretations on what we see portrayed in the media and possibly even start to defy these and other kinds of damaging and painful stereotypes.

**Implications**

Although the blonde and brunette stereotypes shown are not necessarily damaging or painful, they are however more “acceptable” in society. *The Big Bang Theory* trends on playing it safe when depicting stereotypes as to not have the stereotyped group feel
harmed in their portrayals. The hair color, scientist, and sex and gender stereotypes are shown in this television series; however the writers stray from the more serious stereotypes such as race and sexuality. This could be because race and sexuality hold more social power and implications than that of hair color. Based on recent social and government events regarding sexuality and marriage, showing stereotypes regarding this issue might have too many implications and negative views in society. As there is a lot of controversy regarding sexuality and marriage, it would be unwise to depict stereotypes regarding this topic as the social power is overly popular. In this sense, \textit{The Big Bang Theory} trends on showing stereotypes of groups that have less social power, such as hair color, which is less controversial. As far as hair color stereotypes, the television series reinforces and changes the portrayal of the stereotypes. In the future this could potentially become a bigger topic and have more social power; however there are more pressing groups who hold more social power currently.

With the notion of social power, there also comes the influence of money. As previously stated, \textit{The Big Bang Theory} is a top show on CBS. It generates millions of viewers as well as millions of dollars for the cast and network. Although it may be a “money maker” series for CBS, the shows greatness and societal impact cannot be measured in only money and ratings. The show itself makes important contributions and strides in society when it tries to change depictions of stereotypes through the characters. This study shows the changes, and reinforcements, in the portrayal of stereotypes through the characters, which may influence the way society thinks. As the characters are relatable to viewers, the show appears to set up a Pygmalion effect in regards to society
standards. As the show continues to depict positive changes in the stereotypes and character development, audiences may feel more inclined to project the positive expectations in their own lives. This in turn creates a positive change in society; though it may be at a slow rate, with the millions of viewers the show reaches the change could potentially come at a faster rate. The amount of money the show generates does influence its success. If *The Big Bang Theory* was not generating as much money it may have been cancelled long ago. Although money is an influential factor for the success of the show and keeps the show on air, it does not define the real success and impact the show has on its viewers. The more successful the show becomes, the more of a chance it has on changing society.
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