

“It’s So Wrong, It’s Right!”: Analyzing Feminist Humor in Sitcoms

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*Examining humorous media texts is essential because humor is a cultural entity that can depict social and cultural norms. Humorous representations are vital for analysis to understand the social underlying ideologies in media texts. In particular, this paper investigates the difference between women’s humor and feminist humor in media representation. This analysis traces the rhetorical possibilities within humor and the discourse that results from it. Utilizing the CBS sitcom *Two Broke Girls* and using the theoretical framework of superiority theory and functions of humor, this paper examines how women’s humor differs from feminist humor in media representations. While humor is just one possible avenue for revealing social inequality in media representation, it is one that warrants further discussion. How can the distinctions between women’s humor and feminist humor differentiate between media (re)presentations that highlight marginalized voices in American society and those which continue to suppress them? Humor might be the best genre where depictions of cultural values can be discussed, explored, and scrutinized. Humor is a powerful rhetorical tool and if any genre can begin the discussion about social inequalities in America, humor is the cultural entity that can start those deliberations.*

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Introduction

Humorous media creates a relationship between that media text and its audience; as a result, it is essential to analyze what humor represents to better recognize the social and cultural underlying ideologies in media representation. Yet, women have often faced a difficult path in being humorous within society. Women also faced the harsh criticism that they simply “weren’t funny.” However, as Merrill (1988) suggests, it may instead be that women fail to conform to the “premise of the joke” (p. 273). Therefore, a clearer interpretation between women’s humor – not to be confused with feminist humor – is warranted. Women’s humor features female comedians, who often conform to traditional jokes targeting men or self-deprecatory jokes that marginalize women. In contrast, previous communication scholars (see, for instance, Bing, 2004; Carlson, 1988; Lee, 1992; Merrill, 1988) hoped that feminist humor would use humor to critique social inequalities. Feminist humor would embody the criticism of systematic sources of oppression, rather than specific individuals as the source of the humor (Bing, 2004; Merrill, 1988).

Previous research differentiated between women's humor and feminist humor in a variety of contexts (Bing, 2004; Merrill, 1988). Women’s humor embodies traditional, even hegemonic stereotypes, while feminist humor “empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification” (Merrill, 1988, p. 279). Feminist humor, therefore, celebrates and includes the common beliefs and values of women. Defamatory jokes that use humor to belittle any member of society, no matter the gender, class, or race of those individuals, only reinforce hierarchies of oppression. This hegemonic type of humor – humor that marginalizes and differentiates between individuals – helps to reinforce the status quo and is hardly subversive. It evokes a sense of superiority for the audience that they are socially superior to the comedian.

This paper traces the rhetorical possibilities within humor and the discourse that results from it. Through the theoretical frameworks on why individuals use humor and the rhetorical possibilities within humor, as well as a contextualization using the CBS comedy, *Two Broke Girls*, this paper will also encourage future research in the connections between humor and the rhetorical influence of addressing the target of humorous discourse. While humor is just one possible avenue for revealing social inequality in media representation, it is one that warrants further discussion. Through an analysis of the CBS sitcom *Two Broke Girls*, I will argue the distinctions between women’s humor and feminist humor to differentiate between media (re)presentations that highlight marginalized voices in American society and those which continue to suppress them.

Influence of Sitcom Representation

Within communication and media representation, humor is a constant entity. Jokes and laughter have become a part of our cultural fabric and their impact warrants future research. Humor is representative of the dominant ideologies within a culture. The type of humor that Americans interpret as funny is particularly effective, specifically because it is situated within cultural norms and expectations.

Specifically this analysis examines humor within sitcom representation. Mills (2005) categorizes a sitcom as a half-hour series that includes recurring characters and a plot that can often be resolved within a single episode. Thus, a sitcom presents familiar character types and narratives that usually have simplistic resolutions. While this might be the typical structure of traditional sitcoms, some sitcoms have historically utilized a more serial format. For example, *Friends* used both an episodic, or self-contained storyline, for the central plots of each episode, but also employed a serial format for romantic storylines, such as Ross and Rachel's on-again/off-again relationship and Monica and Chandler's concealment and later revelation of their romantic relationship (Mills, 2005). As a result, the structure of sitcoms can be fluid depending on the narrative being conveyed.

Even though the overall goal of a sitcom is to provide humor, the genre has also been able to express or even sometimes to challenge traditional cultural values. As Mills (2005) observed, the sitcom has often been viewed as less factual than other television genres; however, sitcoms also provide a unique opportunity to reveal social attitudes and norms within a given culture. Therefore, this paper can investigate a television sitcom not to judge the particular characters or the narrative, but to better understand what cultural values are normalized within the text. "In these ways, [the] sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself" (Mills, 2005, p. 9). Using comedy, media content can influence who or what can be laughed at and who or what should be excluded. Landay (2005) observed that comedy, particularly American sitcoms, could be an excellent genre for displaying and even influencing cultural standards. Since it has been labeled as a genre that provides more entertaining than serious narratives, the sitcom then provides one of the best avenues for experimenting with social issues and possible solutions (Morreale, 2003).

Because the sitcom is often viewed as a more amusing genre, it can also provide more subversive representation. Comedy can function as both entertaining and thought-provoking. As a result of its flexible interpretations, humorous media content can depict subversive possibilities that can encourage conversations about inequality. Because the study of television sitcoms is imperative to our knowledge of social norms and the dominant ideologies they portray, it becomes the perfect media text to analyze women's humor and feminist humor.

Humor Theory

Humor theory aims to understand the circumstances and reasons why people laugh in specific situations (Mills, 2005). Within humor theory, there are three reasons why individuals use humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity (Lynch, 2002; Mills, 2005). Because superiority humor comes from a socially based viewpoint (DiCioccio, 2012), it will be the focus of this paper. The source of its humor is typically the inadequacies of someone else. One person finds humor at the detriment of another (Perks, 2012). Plato and Aristotle identified superiority theory in situations in which the joke teller identified the weaknesses of others and utilized humor to emphasize those limitations (DiCioccio, 2012). Humor theorists argue that superiority encourages individualism and competitiveness (Morreall, 2009). Consequently, superiority humor can be a destructive part of human nature (Merrill, 1988).

Humor's meaning also often stems from the ridiculousness of its target (Berger, 2010). The source of the humor comes from the criticism of someone other than the joke teller (DiCioccio, 2012). In essence, with this type of humor, there is always a winner and a loser because superiority humor raises the person over the source of the humor. If the audience perceives themselves to be better than the character, they are more likely to laugh (Morreall, 2009). Consequently, the humor may revolve around social criterion and the perceived violation of those standards; the humor results from the inadequacy of the person to measure up to those models (Lynch,

2002). Therefore, superiority theory would conclude that humor is a binary construction between an “in-group,” that creates the humor, and an “out-group,” that is the source of the humor (Lynch, 2002).

This paper focuses specifically on superiority theory because of its strong rhetorical influences. Superiority theory utilizes humor as a “social corrective” (Meyer, 2000, p. 314). Unwise or foolish behavior is displayed as the source of the humor as an example of unacceptable actions in civilized society. Superiority theory has been viewed throughout history through foolish performances; people would laugh at the town fool who was a symbol of undesirable behavior. Therefore, superiority theory is considered rhetorical in nature because it encourages the laughter toward a “lower” person, behavior, or idea within society (Meyer, 2000). The source of the humor stems from how inferior and wrong a person appears when he or she differs from the social status quo (Meyer, 2000). Therefore, utilizing the framework of superiority theory is essential to this project because this research seeks to explore the dominant cultural values in humor, specifically those of female characters. What “social correctives” are demonstrated within women’s humor and feminist humor and how do those differences contribute to our own perceptions of society?

Functions of Humor

Rhetorical research in humor investigates what is said in the message and how that message creates a persuasive meaning. Therefore, it is best to look at the functions of humor to analyze its rhetorical possibilities. Within humor research, there are also four functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Analyzing the functional approach to humor considers if the end result will be unification or division (Meyer, 2000). Identification and clarification focus on unity and shared expectations, while enforcement and differentiation highlight the diversities of social experience (DiCioccio, 2012).

Through identification, humor can emphasize the collective meaning and experiences within a culture (DiCioccio, 2012). Communicators reinforce shared values and collective insight, which leads to perceived cohesiveness and group identity (Lynch, 2002). Within identification, humor can also be educational as it reinforces the societal status quo (Meyer, 2000). Once again, there is an “in-group” and an “out-group” that people in society can recognize; anyone who violates the perceived social order becomes part of the “out-group” (Carlson, 1988). Any variations from the social order can be ridiculed using laughter as the response to those who do not abide by the social rules (Meyer, 2000). Moreover, audiences who laugh together share an understanding of the cultural values that are inherent in the humor (DiCioccio, 2012). This type of humor ultimately “validates commonly held perceptions” and cultural norms (Lynch, 2002, p. 234).

Clarification, the second function of humor, emphasizes the anticipated social norm instead of defiance of that custom. Moreover this function of humor focuses on accentuating the cultural norms or beliefs within that society (DiCioccio, 2012). The difference with this function lies in its audience member’s ability to remember the remark. These powerful jokes can entertain and persuade at the same time. This function is particularly persuasive when the audience members may not readily agree with the person telling the joke (Meyer, 2000). Similar to identification, clarification emphasizes that the status quo is preferable, reassurance is provided, and compliancy to societal norms is encouraged (Meyer, 2000).

In contrast to the unifying nature of identification and clarification, a person who uses humor as enforcement typically hopes to reinforce customs by criticizing someone or that person’s beliefs, while still maintaining identification with his or her audience (Meyer, 2000). The humor playfully criticizes a violation of a social expectation and underscores that the defiance must be amended (DiCioccio, 2012). Enforcement humor can also demonstrate a concept that someone has yet to learn. When perspectives diverge, particularly those focused on social norms, humor can be the result. Humor may stem from a person not understanding the “correct sociocultural perspective” (Meyer, 2000, p. 321). Rhetorically, the enforcement function hopes that whoever violated or needed to learn the social norm will correct it by conforming in the future.

Finally, differentiation presents a binary opposition within humor. Differentiation is similar to enforcement, but with a harsher undertone. Communicators position two groups opposite each other, one that likely matches their beliefs and one that challenges them. By contrasting the two groups against each other, the communicator demonstrates the superiority of the one. Therefore differentiating is the “most divisive function of humor” (DiCioccio, 2012, p. 28); differentiation presents binary oppositions about the source of the humor

(Meyer, 2000, p. 321). Thus, differentiation humor can continue and expand on pre-existing inequalities of social groups (Lynch, 2002). The opposing group does not get a voice and may even ultimately identify with the joke teller's point of view. As Meyer (2000) noted, this is the most unsympathetic form of rhetoric, since the opposing group does not get a say. With this type of humor, there is a clear divide between two beliefs or values.

Women and Humor

Women's humor has historically focused on two main trends: men as the target of differential humor or self-deprecating humor toward the woman telling the joke. As Bunkers (1997) observed, "Those who hold the power in a culture develop a preference for humor that victimizes the powerless, while the powerless develop a preference for self-victimizing humor" (p. 162). When women utilize humor, they are temporarily taking control of the discourse. Therefore, by focusing the conversation back onto men, they are missing the opportunity to concentrate on their own experiences. As Kotthoff (2006) observed when a person of lower status performs humor, that person is at least temporarily taking control of the conversation from those in a higher status; ultimately this can be a perilous act since the higher status may not want to relinquish control. To minimize any negative effects, the humor is often aimed at a "socially legitimate target" so that it is more likely to be accepted by all (Kotthoff, 2006, p. 10).

Consequently, when humor is directed toward men, particularly individual men, there is still a detrimental undertone. Bing (2004) remarked that humor that targets men ignores women and particularly conceals their lived experiences. By focusing on men, they are still at the forefront of the argument. Therefore, when women use men as the source of their humor, they are conforming to societal norms. Implicitly, men are still superior. This source of humor reinforces social stereotypes that imply what is acceptable and "normal" male and female behavior. Men remain the center of attention if they are the source of the humor (Bing, 2004). Furthermore, it reinforces the "natural" idea that men exist to dominate women. In contrast, women can use "inclusive humor" to stress perceived social problems without inevitably ridiculing men (Bing, 2004, p. 28). Carlson (1988) argued that joke tellers may accent the weaknesses that they actually view inside themselves. This derision ultimately goes beyond differentiation into a harsh binary opposition of "us" versus "the other." As Bing (2004) argued, "The most empowering feminist jokes are not those that frame males as oppressors and females as victims, but those that celebrate the values and perspectives of feminist women" (Bing, 2004, p. 22). This previous research frames the discussion of the difference between women's humor, jokes told by women, and feminist humor that expresses and critiques social and cultural norms.

Moreover, when women use men as the source of their humor, they are deriding individuals, rather than "struggling to negotiate their circumstances" (Merrill, 1988, p. 279). Women can still use humor to criticize and condemn social issues, but their targets don't need to be men (Bing, 2004). Traditional roles and dominant cultural values that serve to marginalize women could be the target of their humor. Social aspects that oppress a particular culture could be the focus of the humor instead of individually focusing on the characters who might be fighting against those limitations (Merrill, 1988). Identifying commonalities among women, rather than positioning them as an "other" to men would allow for greater discourse surrounding female experiences. Yet, when men are the target of the humor, the source of the humor remains directed at individuals, instead of broader systematic sources of oppression.

In addition, women may also choose self-deprecatory humor and use themselves and other women as the source of their jokes. Self-deprecation is conceptualized as "a form of self-censorship" (Russell, 2002, p. 3). Once again, this is hardly a subversive choice, since the binary codes of gender are still in place. Women are just as marginalized when they are the source of their own deprecatory humor. If female comedians perform powerless positions, they undermine their own social status (Gilbert, 1997). Because women have historically been associated with powerlessness, and humor is a powerful tool, women needed a way to "excuse" their aggressiveness and assertiveness in humor (Barreca, 1991). Thus, women who use humor as a source of marginality are still conforming to oppressive tendencies and reinforcing patriarchal ideas. "When the 'other' is culturally represented not only as different but as foreign – a 'thing' to be despised and feared, the result is a systematic objectification, devaluation and dehumanization of the 'other'" (Gilbert, 1997, p. 323). Thus, self-deprecating humor becomes socially acceptable because the joke teller is making fun of herself/himself (Barreca,

1991). Self-deprecation appears less harmful because it doesn't insult the audience, only the joke teller; however it can still endorse conventional values (Gilbert, 1997). Rather than directing humor at others, women deflect the source of their humor onto themselves (Barreca, 1991). This approach only serves to further oppress women instead of embodying feminist, conscious-raising perspectives.

Two Broke Girls

Two Broke Girls was applauded as the highest-testing pilot in CBS history – drama or comedy – even before its premiere (Sepinwall, 2011). The show premiered in September 2011 to the largest rating for a fall comedy premiere since September 2001; the show appeared in a special timeslot and 19.37 million viewers watched the premiere (Seidman, 2011). The second season premiered in a different timeslot from the first season and attracted 10.14 million viewers and a 3.7 ratings share with adults 18-49 (Kondolojy, 2012). The show was created by Whitney Cummings, a stand-up comedian, and Michael Patrick King, writer of *Sex and the City*.

Max and Caroline are the two main female characters of the CBS sitcom *Two Broke Girls*. The show presents these two characters as a mixed-match, female “odd-couple” for the twenty-first century. Max is garish, vulgar, and has always been working-class. Caroline is formerly wealthy, but since her father was sent to jail, she is broke; she has a sense of style, no street smarts, and a business degree. Together, the two women strive to start a business of their own to avoid continuing to waitress at a New York diner. The show mainly focuses on the girls' attempts to become successful business women and have their own cupcake shop. While male characters play a supporting role as co-workers and boyfriends, the series primarily focuses on these two women's triumphs and failures as they try to move beyond their working-class status.

Superficially, one might argue that Max and Caroline are the embodiment of Third Wave Feminism. As Rockler (2006) noted, “Third Wave feminism is better known for its focus on women's postmodern negotiation of individual subjectivities than it is on collective political action” (p. 249). Max and Caroline continue to work hard to achieve their business dreams and imply that their hard work will eventually lead to success. Therefore, their individual successes and failures will be a result of themselves and not any broader, systematic oppression to two females attempting to start a business. With this implied even playing field, Max and Caroline ignore broader concerns and emphasize individual achievement. This exemplifies the individualistic nature of Third Wave empowerment that emphasizes individualistic, rather than collectivistic ideals (Rockler, 2006).

Yet, it would be a simplistic conclusion to interpret that these two characters are strong endorsements of female empowerment when the humor that surrounds these women is extremely problematic. Most jokes are insulting and contain racial and classist stereotypes to the characters around them. Rather than presenting women to emulate and characters who demonstrate female empowerment, the show disparages the characters that surround the two women in an effort to make Max and Caroline seem superior. Their individual empowerment comes from the denigration of those around them.

While Max and Caroline strive to enhance their lives through the ownership of their own business, they work in a diner in the meantime. Their boss, Han, is a short Korean man, whose lack of American social customs and broken English are often the source of humor. The girls' co-worker, Oleg, is a Ukrainian cook at the diner. While physically unattractive, Oleg crassly attempts to seduce every woman he meets. Finally, there is Earl, the elderly African-American former jazz musician; he is the cashier at the diner and usually has one-line jokes. While there are various boyfriends throughout both seasons and Sophie, an upstairs neighbor who moves into Max and Caroline's building later in the first season, this analysis will focus on how the main characters contrast with these three supporting male characters on *Two Broke Girls* to examine the distinctions between women's humor and feminist humor.

This paper utilizes qualitative textual analysis as its method of examination because textual analysis delves beyond the surface level content of media examples to deliberate the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions (Fürsich, 2009). Using textual analysis allows this analysis to identify *Two Broke Girls* as a cultural artifact that contributes to the ways in which people construct their perceptions of feminist humor. As Brennen (2012) wrote, “researchers do not study texts to predict or control how individuals will react to messages but instead to understand how people use texts to make sense of their lives” (p. 194). Additionally, this paper utilizes purposive sampling, which includes strategically selecting episodes that exemplify humor theory and the

functions of humor; since casual observers of the show will not watch every single episode, this sampling method is more comparable to the average television viewer. Moreover, through thematic analysis several themes emerged during the research, most notably the practice of utilizing “the fool” stereotype as well as self-deprecatory humor to marginalize characters. Through this qualitative textual analysis that examines episodes from the first season and several episodes at the start of the second season, this paper questions the distinctions between women’s humor and feminist humor utilizing *Two Broke Girls* as an example.

“The Fool” as a Source of Humor

Sitcom history is full of foolish characters and it isn’t innovative to the genre. Butsch (2005) observed how the character of the fool has been used throughout the history of comedy from ancient Greece to the Renaissance to vaudeville and through current sitcoms. However, Butsch (2005) highlighted that foolishness in sitcoms is typically correlated with a person’s inferior status. Consequently, while the character of the fool is not common to the genre of comedy, television sitcoms are unique in their perpetuation of the fool as a tool for indicating a person’s substandard role in society. Butsch (2005) wrote:

Inferior statuses are represented using negative stereotypes of women, blacks and other minorities, the old and the young, and other low statuses. Already embedded in the larger culture, these stereotypes are useful for their familiarity...The foolishness in sitcoms is almost always attached to a character’s lower status, by representing well-known stereotypes of this status group (p. 112).

Two Broke Girls demonstrates the connection between character stereotypes and “the fool” persona through its supporting male characters. Han conforms to several cultural stereotypes. For instance, Han cannot speak English properly and often misinterprets the meaning of words. For example, in the episode “And the Pearl Necklace”, Han attempts to add additional electrical wiring in the diner. He holds up an electrical outlet and comments, “This thing has been plugged more than the Kardashian sisters.” Han’s opinions and perspectives on situations are also relegated by Max and Caroline. As soon as Han uses broken English, the girls are quick to mock him. Perhaps the most frequent source of humor surrounding Han is his height. Han is the shortest character on the show and both Max and Caroline are significantly taller than him. In the episode “And the Rich People Problems”, Max remarks “There’s nothing big about him. He looks like I won him in a bear claw machine.” After the girls make several jokes about Han’s flaws in the episode “And the Cupcake War”, Han runs away. Max remarks, “Great...now he’ll run under the stove.” The jokes about Han’s height further relegate his character by highlighting his physical shortcomings. By emphasizing Han’s flaws in speaking English and his height, the show underscores Max and Caroline’s authority over Han. Even though Han is technically their boss, Max and Caroline use humor to relegate his status as inferior.

Similarly, Oleg, a Ukrainian cook at the diner, also conforms to sexist stereotypes that foreign men are only interested in sex. Despite his less than traditionally desirable physical appearance, Oleg attempts to seduce every woman that he meets with cheap one-liners. For instance, in “And the Pearl Necklace”, a diner customer asks, “Is there anything special tonight?” Oleg responds, “Yes, here I am.” When Caroline needs money to go to the dentist in the episode “And the Cupcake War”, Oleg agrees to loan her the money for a “sexual favor” to be determined later. In “And the ‘90s Horse”, Oleg invites Max and Caroline back to his place, where he claims there are already several girls waiting to have a sexual encounter with him and they could join them. In “And the Pretty Problem,” Oleg tells the girls, “Once you go Ukraine, you will scream with sex pain!” When Oleg finally meets a girl he wants to date, he expresses that his idea of exclusivity is to stop showing his penis to Max and Caroline (“And the Pearl Necklace”). In addition, Oleg can turn any word, phrase, or overall conversation into a sex-riddled pun. He uses sausage, salami, and celery to express his sexual desires in common conversation. Therefore, Oleg’s entire characterization revolves around his overtly hegemonic sexist tendencies. Through this stereotypical characterization, Oleg embodies the fool persona.

Finally, Earl, the elderly African-American former jazz musician, is the cashier at the diner. Yet rather than focus on his musical talent, the show chooses instead to emphasize other African-American stereotypes, such as that Earl is a thief and is an absentee father to many children. For example, Han wants to improve the diner by

adding a new state-of-the-art ordering system (“And the Pearl Necklace”). After Han walks away, Earl comments: “Ah, girls. We got big trouble. If he starts using a new system, I won’t be able to use my old system where I skim something off the top!” Earl further explains that he gives the “extra” tips to Max and Caroline but the example still perpetuates the stereotype that African-American men are thieves. This stereotype is further continued in the next episode, “And the Hold-Up”, when a robber enters the diner and holds the employees hostage at gunpoint. Earl advises Max: “I’ve been on both sides of this situation...and the best thing to do is play along.” Once again, the source of the humor stems from the African-American stereotype that black men are criminals. Moreover, Earl is excited that his son is coming to visit in “And the Pre-Approved Credit Card.” He is especially thrilled that *this* son is coming to visit if “it’s the one he’s thinking of.” This joke implies that Earl has multiple children, another common African-American stereotype. When his son, Darius, arrives at the diner, he reinforces the stereotype by commenting to his Dad that he doesn’t: “know how far you threw your seed.” As a result, Earl embodies two common African-American stereotypes: a thief and a neglectful father to many children, some he might not even know exist. Rather than focusing on Earl’s positive attributes, the show emphasizes negative stereotypes to reduce Earl’s status on the show.

Through these examples of Han, Oleg, and Earl, it is revealed that the source of the humor of the show focuses on the male characters as “fools.” Even though Max and Caroline act and say foolish things occasionally, their characters are more complex and move beyond these common stereotypes. They are afforded the majority of screen time, given the most plot development, and the narrative concludes in a way that genuinely reflects positively on them. Max and Caroline are afforded more character development by the show, whereas the male characters are relegated to stereotypical attributes. When Max, Caroline, and the jokes presented on the show target the male characters, there is very little for anyone to feel empowered about. Rather a similar pattern develops in which the character of the fool is used to convey the message of inferiority. In the case of *Two Broke Girls*, the main characters are two strong, determined, hard-working female characters. This seems to suggest that female empowerment is achievable. However, the women are also surrounded by inadequate men, who have adopted the identity of the comedy fool. Han, Oleg, and Earl are stereotyped as sexist, uneducated, ignorant of social and cultural ideas, delinquent fathers, and even thieves. These qualities clearly label these men as poor role models, and thus inferior. Therefore, Max and Caroline, despite their occasional flaws, are the only two characters worthy of any emulation. Mills (2005) wrote:

While each gender can only exist within the context of the other, the patriarchal nature of society means that, while masculinity may be seen as a problem, it is so primarily because of how that impacts upon women. The main way this takes place is through the normalization of masculinity and masculine concerns (p. 111).

By depicting the supporting male characters on the show as consistently inferior, the show actually endorses conventional masculinity. These two women are only given supremacy because these men are not “real men” who embrace hegemonic masculine qualities, such as physical strength, intelligence, occupational success, and upper middle-class status.

Butsch (1992) wrote of similar observance in family sitcoms. He noted that in television families, if there was a foolish spouse, it was typically the husband. *The Honeymooners* started this tradition where the husband or father does not have enough intelligence to act as the leader of the family. Consequently, the wife or mother must fill this role and make the important decisions for the family. While one might argue that this insinuates a gender role reversal in which women are receiving an equal amount of power in the family, it is actually the opposite. Since the woman is portrayed as smarter than the foolish man, she must take over his role. “What we end up with is a reversal of traditional gender roles where these guys are essentially incapable of taking their place at the head of the household” (Leistyna, 2009, p. 345). Therefore, the woman is the head of the household merely by default.

This is the result with Max and Caroline. A considerable amount of the humor of the show focuses on the incompetence and ineptitude of the male characters. They exist only to enhance the status of Max and Caroline. The women have no choice but to be perceived as superior and the characters with which the audience likely identifies with and supports. Who wouldn’t encourage these women to succeed in their business endeavors to escape a diner where a chauvinist cook, a socially inept foreigner, and a thieving, delinquent African-American

were your co-workers? Thus, in order to have two strong, independent women as the female leads, the show adapts the sitcom tradition of the fool to their male counterparts; they assume the principal role because the male characters' lack of hegemonic masculine conformity necessitates it.

Consequently, the narrative of *Two Broke Girls* relies significantly on the superiority theory. Because the male characters are portrayed in such an inferior manner, the female characters are not necessarily breaking any social barriers. They seem content to find their own success, specifically in business; given the characters surrounding them, the show establishes a narrative in which the audience cheers for these two women to escape the male "fools" that surround them. The show embodies traditional women's humor by emphasizing the men as the target of the show's jokes. Max and Caroline gain more powerful roles simply because the men on the show are one dimensional stereotypes, incapable of pursuing or obtaining any meaningful contributions.

Yet there is no discussion or consideration for the broader systemic issues that these women face. Because they have each other, Max and Caroline will succeed. This raises the debate between Second Wave and Third Wave feminism, or the deliberation between personal, individual achievement and broader systemic change (Rockler, 2006). Here, the show does not address these concerns because the female characters will succeed through their own actions; the male characters represent negative examples of what could happen if they don't. However, the female characters will improve their own lives and only have themselves to blame if they do not. Systemic marginalization is not discussed or even acknowledged in *Two Broke Girls*. Max and Caroline are self-absorbed in their own lives, without a thought to other women who might also be facing similar social barriers. Not only do Max and Caroline show that there are no obstacles in their way, they also demonstrate a complete disregard for the social barriers that others may confront.

Self-deprecatory Humor

The second main theme to emerge from this analysis focuses on the function of humor, differentiation that is portrayed on *Two Broke Girls*. In his article, "Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic", Russell (2002) argued that if female comedians want to be successful, they need to be self-deprecating. He highlights the path that Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers blazed for female comedians today. "McGhee concluded that the female use of self-deprecatory humour may reflect an internalization of social values, but held out hope that 'changes in socialization' stemming from the 'women's liberation movement should modify . . . humour preferences among women'" (Russell, 2002, p. 2). However, through his analysis, Russell found most female comics to be self-deprecating, rather than empowering. He argued "The threat of a woman comic is multi-layered: she displays aggression, gains dominance (if successful) and, through her words and actions, challenges conventional definitions and power structures" (p. 4).

Yet, Mills (2005) observed:

Studies show that men commonly use humour to mock others, thus reasserting their dominant role within communication, whereas women are only allowed by social convention to joke if they use the opportunity to mock themselves, contributing to their subordinate position (p. 111-112).

Self-deprecatory jokes abound on the show, but are most frequently observed coming from Max. When Max isn't providing self-deprecatory jokes, she is reinforcing others' offensive jokes. For example, the title for this paper comes from her mouth during the episode entitled "And the Pre-Approved Credit Card." Earl's son, Darius, has quit his job to pursue a career as a stand-up comedian. He believes his jokes are funny and Max agrees. However, the source of Darius's material is to reduce everyone he sees to a traditional stereotype. For example, when he first meets Caroline, he enacts the blonde stereotype that they are airheads that always end with the word "whatever." When Caroline doesn't bring him his soup immediately, Darius remarks "Look at blondie here: she's like, oh, my god, do black people even eat soup? It's like, whatever!" He also insults Han's height and broken English and Oleg's lack of hygiene. After each belittling joke, he remarks "You gotta laugh!" to which the target of his jokes responds, "Do you?" This set-up becomes a running joke throughout the episode. However, while the other characters on the show question the target of Darius's humor, it is Max who identifies

with and reinforces it. When Caroline challenges Darius's jokes, Max replies, "Caroline, come on. It's so wrong, it's right." Max's words have undertones of self-deprecation because Darius's jokes frequently target her as well.

The self-deprecatory humor exhibited within Max's and Darius's jokes also demonstrate identification humor. The joke teller assumes the point of view of what is humorous and relies on social inequalities and cultural stereotypes as the source of the humor. Max and Darius reaffirm traditional stereotypes through the jokes. If one of the other characters attempts to speak up, their voice is diminished with yet another joke from Max or Darius. Once again, the humor of the show misses an opportunity to utilize feminist humor. In these examples, there is a shared meaning between the characters that exhibits their group identity, a key aspect of the functions of humor (Lynch, 2002); however, that shared meaning relies on the negative aspects of cultural stereotypes. These characters could utilize identification and acknowledge the social barriers that they collectively face. They ultimately share many cultural values, but use that identification to find humor in other individuals instead of identifying cultural norms that could and should be challenged. As Gilbert (1997) observed, "self-deprecation is safe entertainment because it does not abuse or offend the audience—in fact, it *appears to* reaffirm hegemonic values" (p. 327). Unfortunately, that it is the type of humor emphasized in the show.

Ultimately, Max and Caroline are two women who are clearly designed as the champions of their own destiny and there is little doubt that the show, while providing them some obstacles along the way, will conclude with their triumphs in the end. However, it is not enough to examine only the women's behavior, dialogue, and plot points. Rather the context that these women are presented in warranted this examination. Max and Caroline are presented in a context that is problematic at best. The girls are surrounded by male characters who are reduced to inferior stereotypes that only serve to enhance Max and Caroline; the girls are superior and should be championed only because those around them are substandard.

Conclusions and Future Avenues of Research

At the beginning of this paper, I noted how women's humor embodies traditional, even hegemonic stereotypes, while feminist humor "empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification" (Merrill, 1988, p. 279). Even though there are two female lead characters and the narrative of the episodes focuses on them, women's humor is the type of humor observed on *Two Broke Girls*. Moreover, I interpret that the themes of the stereotypical fool and self-deprecation among the characters emphasizes differentiation, in a negative manner. As opposed to emphasizing feminist humor as "rebellious and self-affirming" (Bing, 2004), the differentiation observed now is one of marginalization. This ultimately disregards an excellent opportunity to engage in feminist humor that would encourage identification, or even clarification forms of humor, to emphasize marginalized individuals. Humor can subvert hierarchies and challenge the societal status quo, only when uniting functions of humor, such as identification and clarification, are utilized.

Moreover, superiority humor can still be a vital tool for revolutionary forms of humor; the solution lies in the source of the humor. Bing (2004) observed "humor can be a double-edged weapon, providing a legitimate means of subverting authority" (p. 23). While studying female comedians in the nineteenth century, Carlson (1988) discovered that a few women could use comedy as a form of consciousness-raising. However, their humor was based on the realization that "the social order was askew" and only a new system would solve that problem (Carlson, 1988, p. 314). Merrill (1988) hoped that in the future:

A feminist comic sensibility would be one in which the details of women's lives were presented in such a manner as to allow the female audience to mock our traditional roles, to "question their sanctity their quality of inevitability" (88). Oppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions (p. 275).

Thereby, subversive humor would challenge the power relations and hierarchies in society as opposed to finding humor in individual sources. Humor would need to evolve from a source of individualistic differentiation to one of identification and clarification of collectivistic desires. Superiority could still be a useful tool for humor as long as the target of the humor is inequality in society, rather than specific individuals. As Lee (1992) argued, feminist

humor ought to illuminate the social structures that trivialize women. Thus far, that is something that appears to be lacking either in media representation or in communication research.

In addition, sarcasm warrants future research on its collectivistic and feminist possibilities. Bunkers (1997) wrote that sarcastic humor must identify the preposterousness of female stereotypes so that society can move beyond them. Several authors have discussed the way in which the sitcom *Roseanne* attempted this (Karlyn, 2003; Lee, 1992; Senzani, 2010). Multiple authors further noted that while *Roseanne* contradicted stereotypes regarding class and gender, the show failed to display any broader systematic consequences (Lee, 1992; Morreale, 2003). Therefore, *Roseanne* likely did not have identification as a function for humor. Instead, Lee (1992) concluded *Roseanne* used “a strategy of resistance that subverts gender identities defining women as trivial, subordinate and marginalised, through the use of mockery, parody and feminist representation” (p. 96). I believe that future research could contribute to this continuing discussion of the differences of self-deprecatory and sarcastic humors. More research is needed that analyzes the functions of sarcastic humor and its feminist possibilities. As Bunkers (1997) wrote:

Social criticism is the cornerstone of sarcastic humor, which provides an outlet for anger that has been repressed for too long. The function of sarcastic humor, as used by women, is to turn the laughter outward rather than inward, to expose the sex role stereotyping in our culture and to reject, either implicitly or explicitly, these rigidly prescribed images of women (p. 163).

Media texts that use sarcastic humor, rather than self-deprecatory, provide an opportunity to begin a dialogue about shared oppression and the collectivistic action that one could take.

Despite the overall conclusion that *Two Broke Girls* rarely demonstrates feminist humor, I remain convinced that media texts can present subversive feminist representations that rise above maintaining the status quo. As previous authors argued, there are ways to express feminist humor, including changing the target of the humor and utilizing the functions of humor to enlighten the audience about social justice concerns. When conscious-raising becomes the focus of the narrative, depicting feminist humor can be possible. Moreover, I interpret humor to be the preeminent genre where interpretations of cultural values can be examined and challenged. Just as superiority theory proposes that there is a winner and a loser within the humor, it is my hope that future research will highlight the collectivistic subversive possibilities in popular media texts, rather than solely emphasizing the inequalities. Humor is a powerful rhetorical tool and if any genre can begin the debate about social inequalities in America, I remain convinced that humor is the cultural entity that can start those discussions.

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