

HIT THEM WHERE IT HURTS: SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR IN ADULT
ANIMATION AS A STRESS COPING MECHANISM

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Emily Rose Tobin
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Thesis Approvals:

Dr. Matthew Lombard, Thesis Advisor, Media Studies & Production
Dr. Geoffrey Baym, Media Studies & Production
Professor Sherri Hope-Culver, Media Studies & Production

ABSTRACT

Nearly one in five American adults are currently experiencing stress and anxiety throughout their daily lives. While there are countless techniques by which to cope with stress and anxiety, evidence suggests that consumption of humorous adult animated television is a popular coping mechanism. This thesis posits the reasons for the success of these popular adult animated television series used for stress coping is the utilization of self-deprecating humor and the relatable narratives stemmed from such humor. To explore the possible similarities of self-deprecating humor within these television series, this qualitative content analysis examined randomly selected episodes from ten of the most popular adult animated television series and coded for different aspects of the utilization of self-deprecating humor. Results from this study found that the adult animated data selected and analyzed all utilize self-deprecating humor, with narratives mainly surrounding self-worth and personal, familial, and cultural stressors. These narratives may lend themselves to aid in the stress coping process through the relation the audiences feel towards these stressors. Acknowledging these specific narratives within television shows that are possibly helpful in coping with mental afflictions and stress could aid in creating more beneficial media narratives for future generations to come.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The American millennial generation is the nation's largest living adult population at 73.2 million people (US Census Bureau, 2021). About half of the members in Generation Z (Gen Z) are adults, making this demographic the third-largest adult cohort in America with 68.2 million people (US Census Bureau, 2021). Dimock (2019) from the Pew Research Center defines the American millennial generation as any individual born between the years of 1981 to 1996, and Generation Z as any individual born between 1997 and 2009. Aside from being large portions of society, these demographics also report facing the highest levels of stress caused by varying cultural factors. More than forty-one percent of millennials and forty-six percent of Gen Z report feeling stressed all or almost all of the time (Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021). Looming societal and political stressors, environmental disarray, financial uncertainties, pervasive social media consumption, higher unemployment rates, slower economic growth, global health anxieties, and other factors are just a few of the contributors to major stress increases amongst these influential demographics (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial Survey, 2020; Hoffower & Akhtar, 2020; Johnson & Dienst, 2020).

Largely due to these cultural stressors, there has been a surge in major depression and anxiety diagnoses amongst millennials and Gen Zers, and their stress levels have climbed higher than any other current American demographics (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; White & Wurm, 2019). In the search to find ways to cope with these high levels of stress, millennials and Gen Zers have turned to the all-encompassing media environment

of the modern world for escape. Due to the rise in streaming services and the ability to dissociate through binge watching, consuming comedic television series is one of the most popular stress management techniques utilized by millennials and Gen Z (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Previous studies have shown that humor can relay positive impacts on those suffering from stress (Bennet, 2014; Folkman, 2007; Galloway & Cropley, 1999; Kuiper, 2014; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is understandable, then, that these demographics find solace in comedic media to escape from the uncertainties and challenges they may face.

Two adult-humor centered basic cable television networks, Adult Swim on Cartoon Network and various programs on Comedy Central, accumulate high viewership from the millennial and Gen Z demographics (Adalian, 2014; Henry, 2007; Johnson-Woods, 2007). However popular these networks may be with these demographics, with the domination of media streaming services in our current media landscape, Adult Swim's viewership dropped twenty-five percent in favor of streaming services. Six in ten people within these age demographics report that they consume television through streaming services, with that rate rising even more during the recent unanticipated quarantines and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2017). According to Nielsen's most recent Gauge report, audiences are spending an average of 180 billion minutes per week streaming television content (Nielsen, 2022a). Most streamed content is consumed through Netflix, with Hulu and Amazon Prime Video following closely behind (Nielsen, 2022b). Comedic series fall within the top three most watched television genres on Netflix, with similar genre viewership for Hulu (Hulu Internal, 2020; Moore, 2021). Further, the adult-humor

centered broadcast television networks and streaming platforms accumulating high millennial and Gen Z viewership of comedic television have seen similarities in the specific genre of comedy series being consumed, with signs pointing towards adult animation as a top contender for the favored genre (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020; Hulu Internal, 2020; Moore, 2021).

As streaming services have grown, so has the genre of adult animation, with most of these adult animated shows generalized into the comedy genre (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020; Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007; Tucker, 1990). Adult animated television can be best described as any type of computer, hand-drawn, or motion work that is catered specifically to adult interests and audiences over the age of 18 (Lenburg, 2009; Perlmutter, 2018). Until recently, adult animation was known to fall into three subgenres – irreverent, sitcom, and anime (Evershed, 2020). As of 2021, adults in the millennial and Gen Z demographic overwhelmingly preferred animated comedy over live action sitcoms (Evershed, 2021).

The recent influx and popularity of adult animated series has introduced new and diverse perspectives into the adult animated genre, ultimately garnering larger audiences and higher viewership (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020; Falvey, 2020; Murray, 2016). This research argues that these new and diverse perspectives have developed a new subgenre in adult animation revolving around self-deprecation. As these adult animated series are being utilized by these demographics for stress coping management, this research explores the possibility that the introduction and use of self-deprecation in these animated series points towards why this genre of television has intrigued the largest and most stressed demographics to consume them at such high rates. Although it may seem

sensible to assume millennial and Gen Z viewers facing stress would turn to humorous television to escape the previously mentioned worldly stressors, this study will examine if these particular, popular adult animated television series tend to make extensive use of self-deprecating humor that relates specifically to these stressors.

How do these adult animated television shows utilize self-deprecating humor, if they do utilize this humor at all? Insight into this query might provide further explanation towards why audiences might willingly use these shows as a coping mechanism, when that same media focuses on the stressors they are looking to escape. A coping mechanism is understood by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to be a constantly changing effort to manage external and internal demands that are troubling a person. With this in mind, shouldn't a coping mechanism focus on distracting from the very thing needing to be coped with? This research proposes that through the common thread of self-deprecating humor, i.e., humorous material where one comedically admits their own faults, focusing on stressors in a disparaging yet relatable manner, adult animated television series may actually create a positive coping environment for audiences, intriguing the largest and most stressed demographics to consume these narratives (Janes & Olson, 2015). Previous research that has focused on the significance and beneficial nature of humor in television for stress coping has focused on live-action television (Falvey, 2020; Giles, 2010; Murray, 2016). Little research has been conducted on self-deprecating humor used as a coping mechanism, and that which has been studied has focused on the possible negative effects of such humor usage (Falvey, 2020; Giles, 2010; Murray, 2016). Quite the opposite, this study explores the positive coping environment self-deprecating humor may create for audiences.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, along with the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, state that viewers choose strategies to cope with stressors in ways that gratify them. Viewers actively seek out different methods of stress coping and continue to use these methods once they deem a particular stress coping method as beneficial to them (Joyce, 2014). This research explores key facets of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping that may speak to the success of using adult animation with self-deprecation as a coping mechanism - social support and selective attention to gratifying and distracting content. The processes within the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping state that individuals experiencing stress often turn to others experiencing the same stress as a way to build community support (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This social support may be found through parasocial interactions when animated characters within these television shows provide the viewers with a sense of comfort and feeling as if the viewer personally knows the character. Individuals dealing with stress oftentimes fear judgment of others over the possibility of talking about their mental health problems (Greenwood, 2008). With the use of animated characters, this need of social support in coping with stress and mental health can still be found without the anxiety around human judgement. Ask and Abidin (2018) found in their study of self-deprecation within online memes that:

They [students] relate to the memefied statements to a varying degree. Some found joy in how self-deprecating memes describe a relatable experience in a humorous way, others simply saw them as exaggerated for the sake of entertainment and not really referring to real-life situations. In this way, humor fuels the memes' virality by expanding their relatability. (p. 841)

Much like engagement with memes on social media, these television shows may provide a collective feeling of support and relatability. Self-deprecating memes are retweeted and commented on daily by others who relate to the joke, both happy to support the person struggling but also happy they are not alone in how they feel. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs emphasizes belongingness, something that struggling with mental illness can make one feel they lack (Maslow, 1943). By utilizing self-deprecating humor within these memes on social media, research has found that there is a sense of comfort within the consumers that stems from the collective feeling of understanding through this new, social form of media communication (Ask & Abidin, 2018). This study explores if these same feelings of collectiveness can be found within adult animated television that utilizes self-deprecation, aiding in the damaged generations' stress coping.

Through a qualitative content analysis of ten of the most watched adult animated television series streamed from 2010 to 2022, this study explores utilization of self-deprecating humor within these popular adult animated television shows in order to explore the possible benefits of using such humor within the context of self-help and stress coping. Self-deprecation tactics and narratives will be coded, and after collecting this preliminary data, this study further intends to build upon this research through a quantitative survey process. This secondary data collection will extensively question millennial and Gen Z viewers concerning their consumption and perception of adult-animation, their stress, and self-deprecation. With both a content analysis and survey data from the demographics, the results may point towards why the previously criticized genre of adult animated television has intrigued the largest and most stressed demographics to consume such media at such high rates. Through acknowledging the potential benefits of

this type of humor, we may determine advantageous strategies towards helping other demographics in need of stress relief, choosing to implement self-deprecating humor in other aspects of media to provide larger audiences with these benefits.

The main objective of this research is to examine existing adult animated television media for utilization of self-deprecating humor in tandem with existing research regarding the consumption and growth of similar adult animated series and viewership. Ultimately, this research seeks to explore these main questions:

RQ1: How do these adult animated television shows utilize self-deprecating humor within the written dialogue, if they utilize this humor at all?

RQ2: How do these self-deprecating narratives within modern adult animated television shows differ from narratives espoused in adult animated television series which aired before 2010, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*?

Through answering these research questions, this study explores the popularity of current adult animated television shows that use self-deprecating humor. This preliminary data can then be used as background evidence for the quantitative data collection to follow this research. Through using the results collected from this qualitative study and the future quantitative study, analysis may provide insight into how millennial and Generation Z audiences relate to and experience self-deprecating humor in adult animated television series. This may further allow for better understanding in creating beneficial narratives in future media to ensure prosocial benefits for society. More often than not, mental health and stress have been negatively portrayed in media, reinforcing negative connotations of mental illness not only in average viewers, but in viewers facing such mental health and stress afflictions themselves (Bridge et al., 2020; Vogel et al.,

2008). As media shows no indication of receding in our saturated media environment, media messages should be inclusive and helpful to all who consume them.

The first chapter of this research introduces the theoretical concepts used as frameworks for understanding the phenomena of self-deprecating humor in popular adult animated television series. Specifically, the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and parasocial interactions are explored to examine the relationship between the media and these self-deprecative narratives. These frameworks are also used to explore the progression of adult animated television through history, examining the third research question of this study in how adult animated television has evolved over time, and how the recent changes in the narratives may benefit the format's genre. Humor and self-deprecating humor are discussed in detail, integrating the history of adult animation and the theoretical frameworks to elaborate on the importance of self-deprecation in modern adult animation. Following chapters explain the methodological choice for this study, as well as provide in depth information surrounding the data selection and collection processes. Finally, this study ends with an analysis of the results, as well as discussion of future considerations and further advancements of this research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Good, the Bad, and the Funny

America's Adults

With American millennials as the largest living adult population at 73.2 million people and half of Generation Z already consisting of adults, ensuring these adult demographics are physically, mentally, and socially cared for is paramount in the future success of this country (US Census Bureau, 2021). Not only do these demographics consist of roughly half the current American population, but they make up some of the highest spenders and consumers in society (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). It is estimated that Generation Z currently has \$44 billion in buying power in the United States, and millennials have approximately \$2.5 trillion (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Within the decade, thirty percent of the global workforce will consist of Gen Z, with millennials already making up seventy-five percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Millennials and Generation Z outvoted older generations in the 2018 midterms and are expected to continue to do so in future elections (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019). These demographics are also the most racially diverse, politically and environmentally concerned, and more digitally adept with media platforms and technologies than any other American demographic (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial Survey, 2020).

The overall wellbeing of millennials and Generation Z in America is vital in ensuring the progression of the United States. Their happiness, stability, health, and welfare are vital. However, with these demographics suffering from the highest levels of

stress, anxiety, and depression than any other demographic, there is cause for concern surrounding our societal trajectory. It is clear that these demographics are struggling with these afflictions, as they are the most plugged-in generations ever - anxious about cultural and societal detriment with looming environmental stressors, pervasive social media consumption, higher unemployment rates, and slower economic growth. Factors such as these have contributed to escalating growth of mental health issues within these generations. This high level of stress plagues millennials and Gen Z and may, in turn, pervade into the workplace, finances, culture, society, and the greater whole of the country. It is imperative to recognize these stressors and mental afflictions and offer assistance in any way possible to aid in remedying the struggles of these large and influential demographics. With such prevalence in society and the future of the country, the mental health of these generations should take precedence.

Stressful Living

Stress can have severe internal and external consequences on an individual over time, including irritability, high blood pressure, fatigue, upset stomach, depression, chest pain, and substance abuse (Dittmar, 1994; Greenwood, 2008; Henderson, 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Due to this stress, individuals often try to find tactics that make coping with it easier. Stress management techniques are considered processes which stimulate new ways of understanding the conditions that produce distress and strategies that can be used to relieve that distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are a multitude of possibilities for managing stress, but studies have found that an increasing number of individuals within the American millennial and Gen Z

demographics experiencing high levels of stress turn to media as a stress management technique, with sixty-seven percent of millennials and Gen Z watching two or more hours of television per day for stress management (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). For the purpose of this study, consuming television can be defined as viewing any broadcasted and/or streamed media series on any device, such as a television set, desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet, or cellphone. Seventy-seven percent of millennials and Gen Z spend most of the time throughout their day consuming video content through streaming services (Donnelley & Sons, 2021). From the majority of those streaming and consuming media for stress management, comedic media makes up sixty-seven percent of the media viewed in those two or more hours (Lupis, 2018). This comedic media may be beneficial to viewers, as experiencing stress can have detrimental consequences for health and well-being. Results of empirical studies have found that humor can beneficially influence mental health and promote self-affirming behaviors (Doris & Fierman 1956; Folkman, 2008; Galloway & Cropley, 1999; Hammes & Wiggins, 1962). Television series that utilize humor like sitcoms, sketch comedy, and improvisational comedy have previously been shown to aid audiences by reducing their mental distress and afflictions (Bartsch, 2012). The beneficial properties of humor in media comes as no surprise, considering the high viewership of media that possess such qualities.

Laughter is the Best Medicine

There have been many studies conducted on the positive effects that humor could have on individuals when used in literature, media, and social situations (Galloway & Cropley, 1999; Janes & Olson, 2015; McDermott, 2019; Navarro et al., 2014; Yim, 2016). In the context of this study, humor can be defined as a message whose ingenuity, verbal skill, incongruity has the amusing power and quality to evoke laughter (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Audience studies have observed humor as inducing physical, chemical, and psychological responses and in reducing mental health issues by moderating the perceived intensity of negative life effects (Bennet, 2014; Folkman, 2008; Galloway & Cropley, 1999; Navarro et al., 2014; Yim, 2016). Laughter has even been found to provide tension reduction and pain relief (Galloway & Cropley, 1999; Navarro et al., 2014; Yim, 2016). Anxiety reduction has been related to humor and entertainment media, as it has been long believed that humor could contribute to improvements in psychological health (Dittmar, 1994; Greenwood, 2008; Henderson, 2018; Joyce, 2014; Kuiper, 2014; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). However, while there is extensive research on the positive effects of humor, there is little research or understanding surrounding the specific type of humor within the highly consumed humorous series that this thesis explores (Janes & Olson, 2015; Kim, 2014; Murray, 2016; van der Wal et al., 2020).

Self-Deprecating Humor

The majority of consumed television shows popular within the American millennial and Gen Z demographics are adult animated comedies (Adalian, 2013). This thesis aims to find a common thread within these adult animated comedies and their possible impacts on millennial and Gen Z audiences. Further, this thesis posits that the common thread is the narrative format of self-deprecation. Self-deprecation, in the specific context of humor, can be defined as humorous material where one comedically admits their own faults, weaknesses, and undesirable characteristics (Janes & Olson, 2015). Additionally, self-deprecating humor refers to humor used in a manner where audience members laugh at shared, self-targeted foibles (Stewart, 2011; Young Lee et al., 2015). Self-deprecating humor derives its humor from identifying and relating with the depicted experiences (Ask & Abidin, 2018). An example of self-deprecation used in online spaces, similar to self-deprecation used in television media is explained by Ask and Abidin (2018) in their study of memefication and self-deprecation.

Exaggeration was a dominant form of expression, where the difficulties of studying or the personal failing of students were taken to extremes. For example, in a meme about how university is going, the answer to the question ‘How would you describe your university career?’ is ‘Failing My Way to Success. An Emotional, Financial and Physical Journey from Hell’. While the meme is referring to a shared experience of distress, the exaggerated nature of the response adds flexibility to the statement by allowing for multiple interpretations. For some, the description of a ‘journey from hell’ is accurate, for others it is mainly an entertaining way of articulating challenging aspects of student living. (p.841)

These faults and shortcomings tend to revolve around the very stressors that millennials and Gen Z themselves have noted as contributing to their rising stress levels, (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Ask & Abidin, 2018; Kim, 2014; White & Wurm, 2019; Yim, 2016). While self-deprecating humor has become widely used in mainstream

comedies, Murray (2016) argues that “there have been few efforts to understand the cultural conditions that evoked this form of expression” (p. 41).

The scarce research that has been conducted on self-deprecating humor has focused mainly on negative behaviors associated with it (Falvey, 2020; Murray, 2016; Owens, 1994; Speer, 2019; van der Wal et al., 2020). Researchers have argued that self-deprecating humor continuously harps on the very stressors that audiences are seeking escape from, causing negative psychological effects (Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Kuiper (2014) and other psychologists argue that individuals who use self-deprecating humor are more depressed, anxious, and suffer from lower self-esteem than those individuals who use self-enhancing humor (Speer, 2019). Others have equated self-deprecating humor to social problems such as poor social achievement, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, and so on (Kim, 2014). Different media formats that have previously discussed sensitive cultural topics and stressors without the use of humor have created measurable negative impacts, such as a sharp increase in suicide rates when faults and undesirable characteristics of oneself were discussed in a dramatic setting, as well as the creation of unfavorable perceptions of mental health and mental health services due to negative portrayals of mental health in sitcoms and dramas on streaming and broadcast platforms (Vogel et al., 2008). But, although these stressful topics are difficult to discuss, using humor to mask the seriousness of the topics as self-deprecating humor does may make these conversations more digestible and approachable than if these topics were to be discussed without humor.

When self-deprecating humor has been researched as positively affecting one’s self esteem, it is usually incorrectly coupled with the superiority theory of humor (Janes

& Olson, 2015; Murray, 2016). This theory is, in fact, not positive or about self-deprecation, as it revolves around ridiculing others for their shortcomings, not one's own shortcomings. The superiority theory of humor states that individuals find it satisfying when humor inflates one's perception of themselves by diminishing the view of others (Janes & Olson, 2015; Murray, 2016; Navarro et al., 2014; van der Wal et al., 2020; Yim, 2016). Thus, self-deprecating humor has not yet adequately been researched or considered as possibly having beneficial properties to viewers specifically in mood and stress management.

Janes and Olson (2015) found that self-deprecating humor actually has the opposite effect of superiority humor. Superiority humor finds the weaknesses of others to be humorous, laughing at the derision or malice directed at the less fortunate (p. 273, p. 285). While this may have been a frequently utilized humor tactic in traditional and legacy media narratives, this is no longer an acceptable form of comedy in society or media, as it is extremely problematic to target people based on out-group membership (p. 273, p. 285). The aforementioned adult animated television series that millennials and Gen Z are consuming would not succeed as they have if they utilized this outdated form of mockery.

Self-deprecating humor, on the other hand, is where the user of the humor notes their own faults, weaknesses, and undesirable characteristics and views them in a humorous vein (Janes & Olson, 2015, p. 274). When using this type of humor certain ideas, arguments, and societal points tend appear gentler rather than as abrasive, because the self-directed humor does not make anyone within the conversation or environment feel defensive (p. 275). This type of humor produces a sense of oneness in groups, as by

jesting about the same shortcomings, the individuals the humor is intended for are made less insecure about their own shortcomings and even begin to view these issues as less serious (p. 277). These ideas in mind that may indicate why adult animated television shows may succeed as well as they do within the millennial and Gen Z viewership ratings even while using self-deprecating humor.

Ask and Abidin (2018) researched self-deprecation in media and the oneness it creates through the use of memes. They found that American college-aged students created and distributed memes to express, share, and commiserate over daily struggles and mental health (p. 834). This shared social phenomenon of societal stressors and the virality of memes became a common instrument for establishing normativity amongst the group (p. 836). Memes not only shape mindsets and influence actions of social groups, but in the particular case of the self-deprecating memes, the memes also make and negotiate collective identities for the consumers through shared ideas (p. 836). This collective identity is explained as a practice between speakers who communicate for exclusively social and bonding functions, which differs from regular information-driven talk (p. 837). As such, the researchers found that the memefication of everyday struggles were not just used as online presentations of offline pain but allowed for public discussions to take place about these struggles and these difficult topics, which do not usually garner public or media attention (p. 383). This use of self-deprecating humor allowed for individuals to connect on deeper levels and create a sense of social support and collective understanding from their peers about life stressors. This positive use of self-deprecating humor in meme culture provides evidence of beneficial aspects of using this type of humor in media and why audiences may be drawn to the format.

Relating specifically to comedic media, van der Wal et al. (2020) define coping humor as humor that is used to deal with stress, the adversities of life, and the cognitive process of turning a difficult situation into something humorous (p. 481, p. 492). Within this definition, they do not specify which types of humor fall into this coping category, just that this type of humor should help mediate anxiety and discomfort that individuals are facing in life and provide them with a sense of relief to tackle these uncertain and stressful life situations (p. 481). With this, self-deprecating humor could in fact fall into the definition of coping humor, as the externalization of life and societal stressors turns difficult situations into humorous acts and allows individuals to deal with the adversities of life through feelings of being understood.

Empirical and theoretical research is still lacking on the use of this type of humor specifically in animated television series aimed at adult audiences. While the collectiveness and social support through self-deprecation is able to blossom in an online community environment, with instant gratification where there is immediate acknowledgement by others that one is not alone in these struggles, television and streaming platforms may not offer the same community. Millennial and Gen Z audiences tend to watch television alone or with those in their immediate household (Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). In addition to often watching television alone or with immediate household members, more than half of millennial and Gen Z viewers watch television on their smartphones, tablets, or personal computers, creating an even more isolated viewing experience (Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Struggling with stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental afflictions can already create an isolating feeling and personal environment. Although turning to media can provide a beneficial coping technique to those seeking out

relief from their stressors, creating a further isolated environment through these technologies may make those suffering feel as if they are even more alone in their stress.

However, through this research, we consider how self-deprecating humor used within the isolated platform of television may provide a sense of community and social support in coping with mental health and life stressors, just as memes do in bustling online environments. As audiences continue to turn towards humorous television content in their search to cope with their stressors, there may be beneficial aspects that audiences are encountering in the popular adult animated series that encourage struggling viewers to continue to intentionally select such media to assist them in their troubles (Lupis, 2018). Further analysis into the structure of these adult animated television comedies may reveal more sophisticated implications that contribute to self-deprecating humor being a gratifying experience for those suffering from high levels of stress. This may glean insight into the psychological processing of this humor, and in turn encourage other media sources to also adopt this humor format technique to provide stress management to individuals and demographics on a larger scale.

The History of It All

The Beginning of Adult Animation for Television

Although not the first adult animated show to air on primetime television, *The Simpsons* has been credited with changing the media landscape and introducing the genre of adult animated television. The show aired its first full-length episode in 1989 and was an instant success (Evershed, 2021; Henry, 2007). This first episode earned approximately 26.7 million viewers, with the first season of *The Simpsons* garnering an

average of 27.8 million viewers (Henry, 2007). In 2022, the show is in its 33rd season, which opened with approximately 3.48 million viewers, which is a fraction of the original audiences (Metcalf, 2012). However, as this study explores, this shift in viewership is due to a much more fragmented media environment with many more network and programming options. The average age demographic of those 3.48 million viewers consisted of adults between the ages of 18 to 49 (Metcalf, 2012). Those age groups fall within the millennial and Gen Z demographic, but have a larger reach than just millennials and Gen Z. Since its inception, the show has produced 717 episodes, one feature-length film, a theme park ride, and one video game. The show is America's longest running scripted primetime television series and was named by *Time* in 1999 as the century's best television series (Henry, 2007; TIME, 1999). It has since won the most Emmy Awards for any animated television series, accumulating 34 Emmy awards, 34 Annie awards, 12 WGA awards, and eight People's Choice Awards, among others. In 1990, the television comedy was called a pop-cultural phenomenon (Tucker, 1990). Why this show was such a hit was simply explained by a Fox representative in 1990, who stated that *The Simpsons* "represent the American family." Tucker (1990) went on to explain that the characters in the show are invested in by the consumers, and that these characters have a sensitive and vulnerable side that most sitcoms with human beings lack.

The second most highly successful adult animated television show with numerous accolades is Comedy Central's *South Park*. *South Park* debuted in 1997 and earned approximately 980,000 viewers for its first episode (Johnson-Woods, 2007). Only three months after the show aired, the eighth episode tripled in viewership (Johnson-Woods, 2007). The following year, the second episode of the second season earned approximately

6.2 million viewers and the show was the most successful and highest rated show on Comedy Central (Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007). The show quickly rose to fame, earning the title as the highest-rated non-sports cable show (Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007). The show is currently airing its 25th season, is slated to release at least four more seasons and fourteen television specials, produced a theatrically released film in 1999, and has nine video games based on the series. *South Park* has won five Emmy awards, one Annie award, four OFTAA awards, and one Peabody award. While this show was and remains almost as successful as *The Simpsons*, the average viewer demographic of *South Park* differed slightly from *The Simpsons* since each series began.

Upon its original release, the age demographic of *The Simpsons* ranged between the ages of 18 to 49, while the median age of *South Park* viewers during the show's initial release was 25 years old with the demographic mostly consisting of college students (Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007; Porter, 2020). This demographic difference is considered to be mostly due to the excessive profanity, vulgarity, and violence used in *South Park* (Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007). Although this may contribute to the characters in *South Park* not being as relatable as the characters in *The Simpsons*, the former president of Comedy Central Doug Herzog did point out that the channel is an adult network that features adult humor (Carter, 1997). Although the content and humor usage of these television shows differ, the overwhelming similarities and the respective popularities of the shows revolve around the relatable storylines masked by adult humor told by fictional, animated characters (Giles, 2010; Johnson-Woods, 2007). Notably, audience members who enjoyed both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* enjoyed the humor surrounding the familial struggles, where *The Simpsons* tended

to focus on marriage and *South Park* focused on adolescence, rebellion, and cultural stressors (Giles, 2010; Johnson-Woods, 2007). Although the average number of original viewers for *South Park* were college-aged, and possibly not yet married, the humor used to explain the stressors being faced by the animated characters provided a relatable and engaging storyline. All the while, these humorous storylines in both television series still had sensitive, vulnerable morals masked under the jokes being made. Familial issues, adolescence, and cultural stressors can be challenging obstacles to overcome, but using humor made these topics approachable to viewers of all ages.

This sensitivity, vulnerability, and representation of real-life people within the characters and storylines of the animated television shows is at the core of what this research aims to explore. The use of animated characters, as opposed to human characters, may create a perceived interaction between the character and the viewer, due to the viewer being able to find solace in the non-human characters that relate to them (Eder, 2006; Giles, 2010). Viewers of media that feature human characters have been shown to develop too close a bond to the human characters, grieving over their breakups, write-offs, and even deaths within these shows (Giles, 2010). However, using animated characters allows viewers to relate themselves to the stories and the characters, without becoming too emotionally invested in the characters. Using animated characters also provides viewers with a sense that it is okay to relate to these characters, as they are not in real time and space with the viewer. The viewer subsequently does not risk fear of judgment from the characters (Eder, 2006). Murch (1998) explained:

It [adult animation] is now widely accepted as a medium with which to entertain, inform, and to unleash the imagination of the viewer. The freedom of animation allows us to tell stories that cannot be told in live-action, and often adds considerable value to those that can.

Despite the durability of these two series, adult animation started to falter after its initial success. Much like the controversy surrounding *South Park*, shows tended to focus more on the grotesque and immature storylines that were newly allowed to be depicted for an adult only show or programming block. Without the restrictions of family cable networks, creators could bend the laws of reality, and did so to such extremes that adult animated television was no longer relatable or enjoyable to the average viewer (Evershed, 2021). This new television format, which originally seemed like a new and innovative storytelling opportunity, found itself overpowered by live action and reality television for quite some time after the initial influx of success.

The New Era of Adult Animated Television

Media creators wanting to explore taboo but important topics that adult audiences deal with did not forget the impact of the early days of adult animation and the influence they felt through those revolutionary series. After shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* led to record-breaking ratings and success, the Senior Vice President of Animated Content at Hulu said, “we saw years ago there was this thirst and hunger from people to watch more great animated shows” (Erwich, 2020). Having new platforms such as streaming services to utilize, adult animation entered a new playing field. Not only were there less restrictions than traditional family and adult broadcast programming blocks, but the elimination of advertisements also meant more viewers would engage with the narratives (Evershed, 2021). According to a 2022 Nielsen Report, twenty-eight percent of

total television use is for streaming, with twenty-six percent of people using television for broadcast (Nielsen, 2022a). Additionally, with the ability to binge watch episodes one after the other through a streaming platform, intense and complex storylines made more sense and were easier to tell. Of a streamed series, *BoJack Horseman*, compared to the broadcast series *Friends*, Falvey (2020) states:

Complex sitcoms such as *BoJack Horseman* demonstrate substantially more intricate character arcs that require greater investment from viewers. While *Friends* offers cross-episode plotting and ongoing romantic subplots, a casual viewer will largely not be disorientated by dipping into a random episode. Complex sitcoms are different; even if they remain principally episodic by nature, the complexities of BoJack's character arc, in particular, forms a trajectory that might alienate an uncommitted viewer. (p. 122)

Previously, nonlinear storylines from the early days of animation were used to ensure if and when viewers missed a broadcasted episode, next week's storyline could still be understood. However, the streaming format made it possible to explore these new ways of storytelling for audiences who wanted more dynamic stories to follow.

Falvey (2020) makes note of this hunger of viewers wanting new and interesting adult animated series, arguing that the complex storytelling in adult animation manifests in production tactics that focus on the changing taste cultures. Specifically, Falvey focuses on the streamed television series *Big Mouth* (2017-present) and *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2019). He argues that these television shows specifically produced for adults challenges and complicates portraits of mental health and depict social and emotional development (Falvey, 2020). *Big Mouth* takes the artistic form of *South Park* by using animated child characters. However, where *South Park* gained popularity in the 1990s through the use of profane humor, *Big Mouth* has risen to popularity through drawing on current affairs and personal growth. Audience members may see themselves

dealing with these issues, represented as children by the characters, and find new ways to connect with the storylines (Falvey, 2020).

Just as *South Park* often relies on its audience's familiarity with current affairs, with episodes regularly citing topical events for narrative or gag frameworks, *Big Mouth* certainly exhibits a tendency to do the same, drawing on topical debates such as the ongoing discussion of sex education. (Falvey, 2020, p. 120)

BoJack Horseman, as Falvey (2020) mentions, depicts mental health issues in almost all of the main characters by using dark, existential themes, hyper-awareness, and a sustained nihilistic tone. The show has been praised for its realistic take on depression, trauma, addiction, self-destructive behavior, emotion, abuse, racism, sexism, sexuality, and the human condition. Much like how *The Simpsons* gained popularity by representing an American family that viewers could relate to, *BoJack Horseman* rose to popularity by representing these afflictions that Americans were and are struggling with at alarming rates. The raw and emotional, but most importantly relatable, storylines within *BoJack Horseman* demonstrate more intricate character arcs that require greater investment from viewers (Falvey, 2020). These character arcs are given more attention as viewers relate to the variety of stressors that the characters are facing from episode to episode. Viewers of the show have stated that the self-loathing of the characters are a rare, honest depiction of the hold that depression can have on a person (Falvey, 2020; Sarappo, 2017). The series has received numerous accolades, including four Critics' Choice Television Awards for Best Animated Series, three Annie Awards, two Writers Guild of America Awards, and three Primetime Emmy Award nominations.

Both *Big Mouth* and *BoJack Horseman*, amongst various other currently airing adult animated television comedies including *F is For Family* and *Tuca and Bertie*,

demonstrate how this newly revived genre of adult animation engages with the current cultural economy in order to draw in viewers. Shows now depict the new American life, filled with all of the bleak and undesirable topics that were previously too taboo to discuss on television (Murray, 2016). Although these shows have not yet had the same success that the original adult animated series have, with the rising popularity in the relatability of these cultural issues adult animation is on track to pick up momentum.

In 2017, *Rick and Morty* surpassed the two most watched comedies to rank as the number one most watched comedy across all of television, from streaming to broadcast. Comedy now accounts for the majority of adult animated series, with a total of sixty percent of all upcoming adult animated series categorized into the comedy genre (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020). In 2019, the Fox Corporation bought Bento Box Entertainment, an animation company, in hopes of broadening its offering of animated television series (Evershed, 2020). The same year, the company also brought back their Animation Domination programming block, featuring all adult animated television series every Sunday night (Evershed, 2020). Within the decade, Netflix intends to spend \$26 million on original media content, with a majority of that financial commitment allotted to animation (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020). After the success of *BoJack Horseman*, often regarded as the greatest adult animated television series of all time, the company is looking to continue to create that impact (Evershed, 2021). It has already announced 24 new original adult animated series it is planning to air in the near future, which will be produced at the new animation studio in California it recently purchased (Evershed, 2021; Evershed, 2020). Warner Brothers and HBO, already with a sizable animation studio, plan to release at least 18 new adult animated series in the near future (Evershed,

2021; Evershed, 2020). Needless to say, adult animation has seen a major explosion in popularity, for many different reasons.

Why Now?

Since 2013, there have been approximately 81 United States adult animated television shows released, excluding anime, with 62 of those shows categorized as comedies (Adalian, 2014; Evershed, 2020). Typically, anime is excluded from the adult animation genre, as anime tends to be marketed towards a variety of demographics (Evershed, 2020). Although the art styles, complex storylines, and character developments within anime are similar to the characteristics of adult animation, the range of audience ages restricts the genre from being considered solely animation for adults.

Aside from anime, there are over 100 new adult animated television series on order, a one-hundred percent increase from last year as of February 2021 (Evershed, 2021). Further, a study conducted in 2014 rated Adult Swim as the top-cable rated network in day ratings in the 18-34 age category, the exact target demographics of millennials and Gen Z (Adalian, 2014). Adult Swim currently broadcasts 37 television shows, 19 of which are animated adult comedies, excluding anime (Evershed, 2020).

While it may be logical to assume millennials facing stress turn to humoristic television for escaping worldly stressors, the profuse use of self-deprecating humor in these television programs suggests otherwise if considering solely the topics of the humor. These programs rely on humor that scrutinizes and mocks worldly stressors, such as the environmental disrepair. This may leave one to wonder why television would be so

widely consumed for stress management by American millennials and Gen Z, especially when such humor attacks the same issues that the viewers are trying to escape from.

To contrast, the live action television show *13 Reasons Why* from Netflix depicts stress and mental illness without humor attached (Bridge et al., 2020). Such content without the use of humor has been linked to cultivating negative responses in viewers, critics, and from mental health professionals. An Iowa State University study found that “television portrayals of psychologists may be contributing to an unfavorable perception of mental health services” (Vogel et al., 2008, p. 1). In conjunction with the study conducted by Bridge et al. (2020), a news release from the National Institutes of Health (2019) reported how the television show was associated with the mental health of viewers:

The Netflix show “13 Reasons Why” was associated with a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among U.S. youth ages 10-17 in April 2017 following the show’s release, after accounting for ongoing trends in suicide rates, according to a study published today in *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. The findings highlight the necessity of using best practices when portraying suicide in popular entertainment and in the media. The study was conducted by researchers at several universities, hospitals, and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), part of the National Institutes of Health. The number of deaths by suicide recorded in April 2017 was greater than the number seen in any single month during the five-year period examined by the researchers. (NIH, 2019, p.1)

With this study’s overall goal of exploring self-deprecating humor and the possible benefits of using such humor within the context of self-help and stress coping, understanding how self-deprecating humor may evoke positive responses rather than negative, such as what happened with the live action *13 Reasons Why*, could provide insight into determining advantageous strategies towards helping these and other demographics. This research explores the possibility that adult animated media that

entails self-deprecating humor may allow millennial and Gen Z viewers to find solace in perceived social support of the characters and storylines that relate to their own anxieties and stressors, which may be cultivated through this humoristic view.

Theory

Theory of Uses and Gratifications

As Blumler (1979) describes the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, this theory of media consumption considers the audience as active participants in the viewership of media. Individuals use media programming selectively and intentionally for their own purposes in the search to satisfy a necessity (Blumler, 1979; Joyce, 2014). Media can be gratifying to audiences for senses of pleasure and entertainment, as well as serving as emotional experiences that gratify the social needs of audiences (Bartsch, 2012). Given that American millennials continuously consume media that tend to utilize self-deprecating humor to aid in stress management, there are possible underlying benefits that audiences receive from this tactic of self-mockery (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Theorists of Uses and Gratifications have identified basic needs that are pursued by audience members (Bartsch, 2012; Blumler, 1979; Joyce, 2014). These basic needs consist of cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, and tension release needs (Joyce, 2014). Pertaining to humor and comedic media, affective and tension release needs are most widely considered. Affective needs within Uses and Gratifications consist of the need for gratification of one's emotions through the media they will consume (Joyce, 2014). It is not a coincidence that there has been an increase in humor

usage in media programs, as audiences are actively seeking more gratifying media to put them in a better mood and relieve stress as their levels of stress increase (Joyce, 2014).

However, a viewer's conscious choice about what media to consume as a coping mechanism may not, in fact, have the desired effect they are aiming to achieve.

Regardless, media creators are utilizing this humor in more media, as it has proven to attract audiences, thus becoming an external motivation for the viewer in media selection.

Media conglomerates analyze viewership trends and continue to create media content that intrigues and retains viewers, in this case, self-deprecating humor.

However, internal motivation for media consumption is still the driving factor for selecting gratifying media to consume for stress management. Tension release needs are the needs of audience members to divert their attention and escape their stressors (Joyce, 2014). American millennials and Generation Z find themselves suffering from higher rates of stress and daily stressors more than any other generation in the nation (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; White & Wurm, 2019). With this, it is quite straightforward that these demographic groups intentionally engage with television as an accessible and effortless stress management technique.

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) further found that the goals of individuals who consume media can be divided into five groups. These groups are divided into people who want to be educated, to identify with characters, of simple entertainment, to enhance social interaction, to escape from the stresses of daily life (Blumler et al., 1974). These five categories may speak to the reason why millennial and Gen Z audiences continue to consume animated television series that utilize self-deprecating humor that mocks their own personal struggles. The desire to identify with characters, to enhance

social interaction, and to escape from the stresses of daily life relate to this research in that individuals turn to this animated, self-deprecating media to form an interaction or relationship with the characters.

Self-deprecating humor may be positively received by audience members as a way to deal with inner conflicts and to aid in stress reduction (Janes & Olson, 2015). Audience members may also recognize themselves within the jokes and find solace in the social connectedness and oneness, much like as seen in the research of Ask and Abidin (2018) and Janes and Olson (2015). This interaction with the characters may then allow viewers, although isolated through the platforms and technological devices, to form a bond or perceived relationship with the characters and feel they are understood by and relate with them. With these relation needs being achieved by the consumed media, viewers continue to turn back to the animated media as a coping mechanism. The desire to escape from the stresses of daily life applies directly to the gratification audience members seek out in order to escape and cope with persistent life stressors (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Ask & Abidin, 2018; Kim, 2014; White & Wurm, 2019; Yim, 2016).

Uses and Gratifications Research (Katz et al., 1973) further elaborates on these five goals of gratifying media consumption. Diversion is considered to be a need to consume media, such as diverting attention to find relief from boredom or stress, as well as gratification in substitutions for personal relationships and formation of personal identities (Katz et al., 1973). In relation to diversion as a means for relief from stress, consuming adult animated media that uses self-deprecating humor through the framework of the Theory of Uses and Gratifications poses that those individuals must then receive a beneficial outcome from media to want to continue to consume it (Katz et al., 1973). This

elaboration points to individuals diverting their attention from their stress to the adult animated television media they consume.

Additionally, individuals strive towards consuming media for gratification in substitutions for personal relationships by finding others to relate to. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) states that for individuals to reach their full potential, people need to experience belonging which allows them to feel connected to others. People suffering from stress and anxiety may find themselves worried about being judged or ostracized by those they attempt to confide in about their problems (Greenwood, 2008). When media offers specifically animated characters with personal backgrounds, they are not only creating a means of social support but an approachable telepresence for viewers to relate to rather than a potentially judgmental human (Bracken & Skalski, 2009; Haans & IJsselsteijn, 2012; Rodríguez-Ardura & Martínez-López, 2013).

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Related to the Theory of Uses and Gratifications and the audience desire or need to consume media in order to escape from the stresses of daily life is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Coping in this context can be defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external or internal taxing demands of an individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model was established in 1984 by Lazarus and Folkman and describes human stress and the different processes individuals go through from stress conception to stress relief, as detailed in Figure 1. Individuals choose which strategies or resources they want to utilize to cope with their stressors in ways that gratify

them, and then continue to revisit that method and tool for continued short-term and long-term support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This agency of individuals to selectively choose what gratifies them and what they find beneficial in their own personal coping process provides potential insight into the motivation of viewers to consume self-deprecating humor. Viewers actively seek out different methods of stress coping and continue to use these methods once they deem a particular stress coping method is beneficial to them, which suggests that self-deprecating humor has potential benefits for audiences, as they continue to consume this type of media (Joyce, 2014). Although this is an older theoretical model, the basic principles remain relevant in stress coping processes and management today.

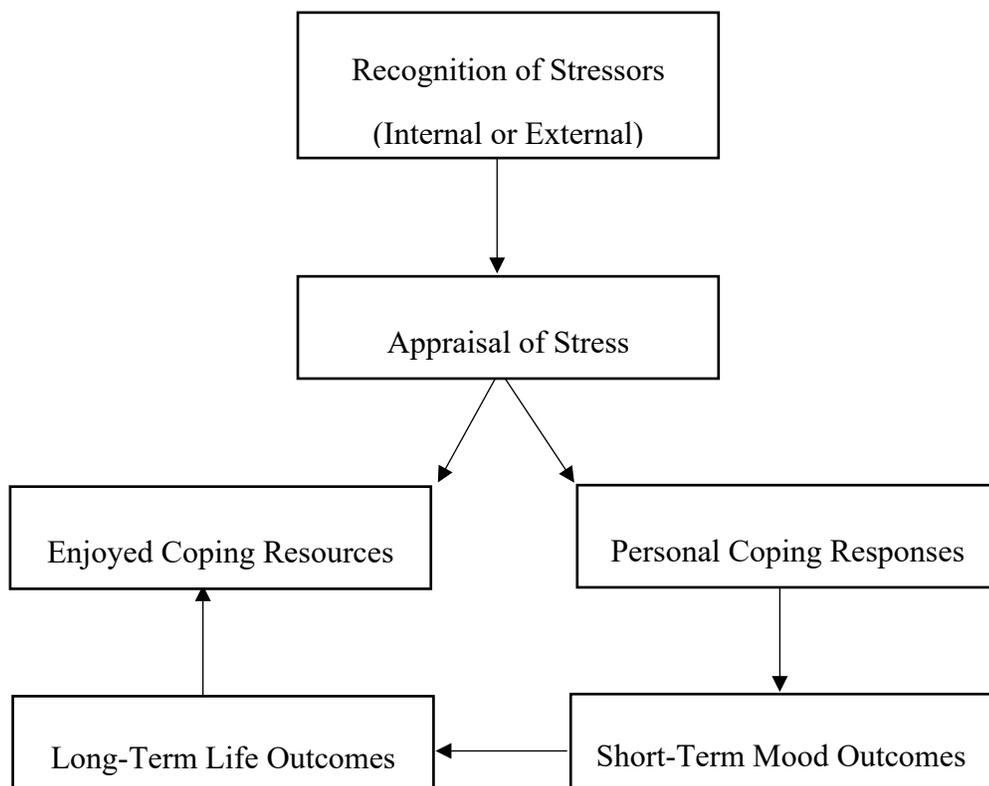


Figure 1. Diagram Of Stress and Coping Processes. Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

This model consists of three main features with various processes and subprocesses (see Figure 1). As explained by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), first observations and recognition of the stressor must be made by the individual. Then the individual must appraise or assess the situation and decide what they choose to do about the stressor they are facing. This process then leads to a cycle, where the individual first identifies the decision of how to handle their stress as a personal coping mechanism. They then begin to experience the short-term and long-term outcomes of this coping mechanism. The mechanism then evolves over time into an enjoyable coping resource as the individual recognizes the benefits from that resource. Thus, the individual continues to utilize that stress coping mechanism as not only a means for personal coping, but also because they enjoy it and the benefits the resource provides. The individual must understand that coping is a shifting process as the status of an individual's relationship to the stressor changes. The individual must continue to cope with their stressors as they deem fit to garner short-term and long-term benefits. To do this, individuals identify their stressors and perform trial-and-error of different coping mechanisms until they find a mechanism which they feel benefits them and relieves their stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, this trial-and-error testing often concludes when the individual finds a personal and enjoyable coping resource, in this instance, media consumption. Regarding the selection of entertainment media, and more specifically adult animated television that utilizes self-deprecating humor, millennial and Gen Z audiences observe their cultural stressors, decide that humoristic media consumption aids in relieving that stress for both the short-term and long-term, and proceeds to consume that media as a personal and enjoyable coping resource.

A subset within this Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is emotion-focused coping, which consists of cognitive processes to lessen emotional distress. A process used in emotion-focused coping is selective attention (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Selective attention is the process by which an individual experiencing stress focuses attention selectively on remediations that make them feel better and regulate their emotions, ignoring all other aspects that may worsen their already negative state (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Similar to the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, selective attention applies in the same sense that individuals turn their attention to the media that will provide most gratification in their relief from stress, and do not seek out media that does not gratify them or relieve their stress.

A key factor in successfully coping with stress according to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is social support. Social support tends to aid individuals finding relief from their own stress by relating to other people who also experience the same stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This social support coincides with the social support experienced through coping humor, as audiences tend to find relief from their own stress through the use of humor in entertainment programming. Through the social support process, viewers find solace in the knowledge that other people are experiencing the same stressors in life and that they are not alone in their struggles. Studies have found that this sense of community within the consumed media promotes a feeling of connectedness and a decline in feelings of isolation from individuals who previously reported high levels of isolation, depression, and stress (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Greenwood, 2008; Janes & Olson, 2015). The ideas of community and human fellowship from cultural theory, reinforce the idea that social support mentioned in the Transactional

Model of Stress and Coping may be cultivated through the self-deprecating humor about worldly stressors. This may, in turn, provide the stressed viewer with the feeling of acceptance and understanding.

Through the lens of the cultural theory of communication, James Carey (1989) states that:

Communication is the most wonderful because it is the basis of human fellowship; it produces the social bonds, bogus or not, that tie men together and make associated life possible. Society is possible because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system. (p.18)

This mirrors the emphasis on social support as a key necessity within the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, where it is stated that:

It is also useful to view social support as a resource that the person must cultivate and use, and as falling under the rubric of coping. The basic assumption is that people will have better adaptational outcomes if they receive or believe that they will receive social support when it is needed. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259)

Much like Ask and Abidin's 2018 study, individuals find community in relating to people who are struggling with the same issues and find support in communicating with others and learning that they are not alone. However, television as a platform does not allow for this same sense of community and conversation as an online space might, with conversations concerning actual people instead of television characters. This raises the question: how do individuals consuming these adult animated television shows fulfill their goal of wanting to escape from and cope with the stresses of daily life? Even if self-deprecating humor proves to provide beneficial effects to the viewer, does the isolation of the format and device not negate those positive effects? Such sought after social support and community in television environments may be found in the animated characters

within these television shows, which may provide the viewers with the same sense of comfort that the self-deprecating online communities foster. Individuals dealing with stress oftentimes fear judgment when talking about their mental health with others (Greenwood, 2008). With the use of animated characters, this need of social support in coping with stress and mental health can still be found without the looming anxieties around human judgement. The self-deprecating memes build a community through commiseration and self-deprecating humor and tell about the stressors faced by the millennials and Gen Zers, rather than just trying to solve the problems the stressors bring (Ask & Abidin, 2018). Telling, rather than solving, builds community and social support, removing the possible judgement some might fear from disclosing this information to a real-life acquaintance. It is the parasocial interaction and the feeling of connectedness between individuals and the media characters that may motivate these individuals to turn their selective attention to the certain media they consume (Xu & Yan, 2011).

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction as defined by Giles (2010) is the one-sided process through which media users treat media figures as if they were real people in society (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although some media figures may be real figures in society, such as broadcast news anchors or reality television stars, parasocial interactions and relationships can still occur between audience members and characters. However, this study particularly examines the parasocial interactions between audiences and animated characters, as there are key differences between animated and real-life characters that the audience members may consider when creating parasocial interactions.

Factoring into why specific media is selected as gratifying and worthy of consumption by struggling audiences, individuals select certain media when they feel connected to beings within the media and a social relatedness between themselves and characters (Xu & Yan, 2011). This perceived interaction with the media characters tends to develop from shared experiences of the viewer and the media figure, such as similar interest, similar personal or familial situations, or similar stressors (Derrick et al., 2008). The concept of treating characters as if they were real relates to both the need for social support and the process of seeking out gratification through social support as discussed in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and the Theory of Uses and Gratifications.

Parasocial interaction relates to the argument in this thesis that individuals find adult animated media to be a therapeutic coping tool due to the familiarity viewers experience between the characters and themselves (Janes & Olson, 2015). Although these storylines and characters use self-deprecating language, the audiences may find these media messages to provide a bonding function with the characters that allows individuals to connect with and create a sense of social support pertaining to their life stressors (Janes & Olson, 2015). Upon viewing and forming a one-sided connection with the media characters, audience members may recognize themselves within the jokes and find that this self-deprecating humor aimed towards relatable issues produces oneness in imperfections, thus helping the audience members cope with these issues (Janes & Olson, 2015). This indicates why adult animated television shows may succeed as well as they do even while using self-deprecating humor. However, within parasocial interaction as it is defined by Giles (2010), these aforementioned shared experiences are considered to be the experience of the audience members sympathizing with the situations they are

perceiving the media character to be going through. In this respect, need for diversion mentioned within the Theory of Uses and Gratifications would also be met, as the situations may distract the viewer from the stressors they are facing in reality.

Adult animated television comedies create characters with storylines based on the stressors of their audience members, ranging from anxiety, stress, depression, addiction, and stressors named by millennials and Gen Z viewers (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; BCBS, 2019; Henderson, 2017; Falvey, 2020). These shows serve the purpose of emotion regulation and function as a stress management technique to the sixty-seven percent of millennial and Gen Z audience members who consume two or more hours of television media as a coping mechanism per day (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020).

Relating back to the affective needs of gratification, these relatable storylines similar to those that the audience members are experiencing in reality fulfills the emotional needs of audience members. The individuals are identifying and referencing themselves within the media characters (de Graaf, 2014). When audience members can connect themselves to the experiences of the media characters, this is called self-referencing (de Graaf, 2014). Self-referencing is the process of being reminded of one's own experiences and comparing them to new information gathered, in this case from the media characters and their stories in the television shows (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1989; de Graaf, 2014). These relatable characteristics of the media characters may provide the audience member with an easier comprehension of the situation with which the character is dealing with. As the individual identifies their own struggles within a character, they may be keener to consume the media, regardless of the humor format used. Upon that

initial media consumption, the individual may acknowledge that the humor used by the character, and further within the show, revolves around self-deprecating narratives aimed at the stressors of the character, and subsequently of the viewer.

Eder (2006) developed a scale by which parasocial interaction can be measured, depending on the type of situations being experienced by the viewer through the characters. The third set of measurement items on this scale is the perceived similarity and familiarity with the character in comparison to oneself, familiar people, ingroup/outgroup members, and other characters (Eder, 2006). The fifth set of items on this scale is the affective closeness viewers experience with characters in feeling for them (sympathy), feeling with them (empathy), and associating with them through sensations (Eder, 2006). The subscales of parasocial interaction scale relate to this study's position that individuals may find adult animated media therapeutic due to the familiarity viewers see between the characters and themselves through the personal storylines.

Greenwood (2008) studied how parasocial interaction gratified viewers as an escape from the self. She hypothesized that individuals who were forming parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters were doing so in order to avoid their own problems. While Greenwood's research differs slightly from the goals of this study in that Greenwood focuses more specifically on using parasocial interactions and relationships to avoid one's own problems, their study also found that individuals with increased general anxiety tend to form more parasocial interactions and relationships with television characters (Greenwood, 2008, p. 419). These findings relate to inquiries of this study, in that those individuals experiencing stress experience perceived parasocial interactions possibly to relieve their own stress. And, because animated media characters

are more approachable than live-action characters who may remind individuals of non-fictional characters that they fear judgment from, the isolated social support from non-real versus live-action characters may also make the oneness and social support more approachable. Individuals, although relating to the issues brought up by self-deprecating humor and the characters, do not have to verbally out themselves as relating to these struggles. Individuals dealing with stress are often insecure and fear judgement from others over the possibility of talking about their mental health problems (Greenwood, 2008). While in Ask and Abidin's 2018 study there was evidence that the open dialogue of these personal struggles with others provided social support in coping, other individuals may not be as keen to divulge their sensitive information to strangers on the internet. These animated characters, then, still provide this social support needed in gratifying audience members who seek out self-deprecating humor as a coping mechanism, but in a less abrasive fashion, allowing individuals to relate to the self-deprecation and cope on their own, private terms.

These animated characters may be less intimidating than human characters for viewers to empathize with. The self-deprecating humor may also provide a softer view of the serious topics. These serious topics, if approached incorrectly or too harshly, may make individuals feel as though they are being judged and that their mental afflictions make them inferior to others. Television functions as an escape from the self and the stressors one faces, but in reality, this escapism of the self leads individuals back to media characters who are facing these same worldly stressors, forging an experience of social support.

Using different frameworks to view the possible benefits of consuming comedic, self-deprecating media for coping with stress may provide different perspectives into which media techniques provide the most benefit to the mental well-being of viewers. Figuring out what type of media serves as an effective stress management technique may benefit the overall mental health of individuals who turn to media as a coping mechanism and could also possibly create better understanding surrounding mental health in general. As millennials and Gen Z are the nation's largest adult populations with large societal, financial, and cultural influence, acknowledging specific media formats that assist in providing them relief from stress and mental anguish may aid in benefiting not only these important generations but future generations to come.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Content Analysis Overview

This content analysis will be used to produce preliminary data for a longer form, mixed methods study. Further research will involve a mixed methods survey and open-ended question collection that asks adult animation consumers to recall and discuss their perceptions of adult-animation, their stress, and self-deprecating humor (see Appendix A). The purpose of this preliminary data collection is to understand what, if any, self-deprecating humor is used in adult animated television series, to ensure there is a possible common link between the narrative trends and formats of these shows and their popularity within the struggling millennial and Gen Z market of consumers. Once further data collection occurs through the survey, the study will more clearly combine the content analysis with survey to examine the possible correlation between adult animated television, self-deprecation, and possible positive and cathartic properties and effects of such television series that use self-deprecating humor. As the impending research continuation for this study may be rather intrusive into the minds and emotions of television consumers, this preliminary research and method allows at least a portion of the project to gather significant data for the more in-depth, intrusive research process.

Content analysis is the methodology of choice for this research as the study aims to explore the possible similarity and patterns of self-deprecating humor within these television series. While content analysis has been used in many professions and areas of interest, content analysis is a particularly well-rounded methodology for media studies, as this methodology focuses on recorded artifacts. Content analysis can be defined as “any

qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). The emphasis on identifying core consistencies is the justification for the use of content analysis for this study, as we are aiming to discover consistencies in the utilization of self-deprecating humor in adult animated television series. As future research within this study anticipates focusing on theory within media psychology, the opportunity to explore meanings underlying messages which one can accomplish with qualitative content analysis makes it a useful method. As these television episodes range from 20 to 30 minutes in runtime, coding was directed and utilized in this study based on the research questions and theoretical frameworks being considered. This way, irrelevant storylines and information could be omitted, and focus could be paid to the relevant data regarding self-deprecation.

In the initial coding phase, a deductive overview of the data was gathered using the research questions and existing theoretical frameworks as a starting point. After this process, the data units of analysis were collected using the guidelines set forth in Appendix B. These data units were separated into the deductive codes gathered through the research questions and theoretical frameworks. Codes can be defined as how you define and categorize the data you are collecting (Gibbs, 2007). This was accomplished by reducing the first set of data that consists of words and short phrases. Then, second cycle coding ensued to create specific categories. As these episodes ranged anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes in length and scripts could not be obtained, the episodes were coded for the vocally spoken lines, without stage directions or scenery considered, though, if necessary, these aspects were taken into consideration as implicit data.

Although these aspects were usually omitted, both coding processes allowed for a thorough and detailed capture of the narratives being considered. Once categories were created, the categories were further coded into a single theme that encompassed the overarching goal of this study, to determine whether and how these adult animated television shows utilize self-deprecating humor and why audiences might willingly use these shows as a coping mechanism, when the initial coded content appears to be, on surface level, focusing on the same stressors the millennial and Gen Z audiences are struggling with (Figure 2). Through this qualitative content analysis, this study investigated the trends and commonalities between some of the most popular adult animated television series in order to understand the use of self-deprecating humor within the narratives, that may be providing audiences with a beneficial outlet for coping with stressors.

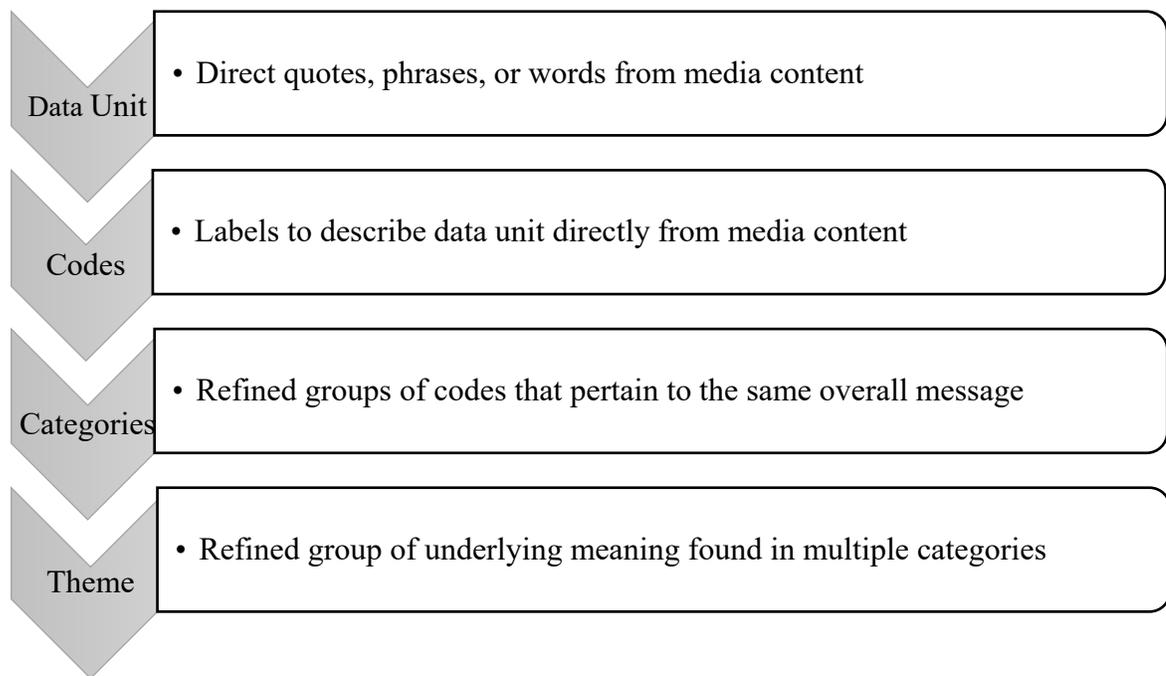


Figure 2. Content Analysis Process.

Design and Procedure

Selecting Data

To analyze the use of self-deprecating humor within the narratives of adult animated television shows, the following research questions were considered in developing codes.

RQ1: How do these adult animated television shows utilize self-deprecating humor within the written dialogue, if they utilize this humor at all?

RQ2: How do these self-deprecating narratives within modern adult animated television shows differ from narratives espoused in adult animated television series which aired before 2010, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*?

After considering these research questions, it became essential to define the exact protocols by which a word or phrase would be considered part of the codebook.

Codebooks provide detailed definitions of the codes and how to apply these codes to the initially collected data (Gibbs, 2007). The codebook also describes guidelines to follow when determining to include or exclude initial data in the study (Gibbs, 2007). To be considered self-deprecating humor, the initial data collected must:

1. Be void of any superiority humor, mention of the weaknesses of any characters other than oneself, and laughing at the derision or malice directed at the less fortunate.
2. Must be spoken by the character the self-deprecation is targeted towards, otherwise this would be superiority humor.
3. Not include stage directions or scenery, as only spoken data will be considered relevant.

Selecting Programs

To choose the adult animated television shows to be analyzed for themes of self-deprecation, episodes were randomly selected from ten of the most popular adult animated television series that aired between 2010 and 2022. This time frame ensures that adults in both the millennial and Gen Z demographics would have been able to consume these shows and utilize them for stress coping. These shows were randomly selected using the Nielsen Media Reports from 2010 through 2022 (Nielsen, 2022a, 2022b). From this random selection, the following adult animated television shows were selected for the content analysis:

Table 1. *Selected Television Programs*

		Characteristics of Television Programs				
Television Programs		Years Aired	Seasons	Episodes	Platform	
		Archer	2009-present	12	126	FXX
		Big Mouth	2017-present	5	51	Netflix
		Bob’s Burgers	2011-present	12	233	Fox
		BoJack Horseman	2014-2020	6	77	Netflix
		Disenchantment	2018-present	2 (4 parts)	40	Netflix
		F is for Family	2015-2021	5	44	Netflix
		Futurama	1999-2013	7	140	Fox/Adult Swim
		Inside Job	2021-present	1	10	Netflix
		Rick and Morty	2013-present	5	51	Adult Swim
		Tuca and Bertie	2019-present	2	20	Netflix/Adult Swim

Of these randomly selected television shows, five of the shows are streamed through Netflix and five are broadcast television shows. *Tuca and Bertie* was previously hosted on Netflix, however, the company canceled the show after one season. As the

adult animated format and the complex, yet humorous, narratives fit the popular schema of marketable adult animation, *Tuca and Bertie* currently airs on Adult Swim.

Random seasons and episodes were then selected for data collection by entering the number of seasons, *n*, into a random number generator code within the software C. This code then returned a random number based on the maximum number entered (Figure 3). In each number generation, the maximum was considered the maximum or current number of television seasons of a particular show.

```
random_num = rand() % n + 1;  
printf("%d", random_num);|
```

Figure 3. Random Number Generation Code Example. (*n* = total seasons or episodes)

The selected television shows have the following number of seasons, respectively: *Archer* – eleven seasons within the needed timeframe, *Big Mouth* – five seasons, *Bob’s Burgers* – twelve seasons, *BoJack Horseman* – six seasons, *Disenchantment* – two seasons in four parts (considered as four seasons), *F is For Family* – five seasons, *Futurama* – two seasons within the needed timeframe, *Inside Job* – one season, *Rick and Morty* – five seasons, and *Tuca and Bertie* – two seasons. Once the season number was generated, the same code was used to randomly select the episode from the chosen season. In this instance, *n* represented the number of episodes within the given season of a particular show. As some of the selected television series ran longer than the final year of 2022 or began before the year 2010, episodes that fell into those periods were not selected. The number of episodes that were utilized in the data collection consisted of:

Table 2. *Number of Episodes Possible Per Season*

		Number of Episodes Possible Per Season											
		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12
Television Programs	Archer	--	13	13	13	13	13	10	8	8	9	8	8
	Big Mouth	10	10	11	10	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
	Bob's Burgers	13	9	23	22	21	19	22	21	22	22	22	22
	BoJack Horseman	12	12	12	12	12	16	--	--	--	--	--	--
	Disenchantment	10	10	10	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
	F is for Family	6	10	10	10	8	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
	Futurama	--	--	--	--	--	26	26	--	--	--	--	--
	Inside Job	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
	Rick and Morty	11	10	10	10	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
	Tuca and Bertie	10	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Collecting Data

Before comprehensive data collection began, initial codes were determined based on the pre-existing theoretical frameworks and research literature utilized in this study, as well as the research questions. The initial codes deduced using the pre-existing theoretical frameworks and research can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Initial Codes*

Self-Worth
Social Support
Anxiety
Depression
Personal
Familial

Self-worth was developed as an initial code stemming from the importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Self-actualization and esteem needs are the two most important needs to be fulfilled within this psychological model (Maslow, 1943). In this

study, reduced self-worth may be depicted through the use of self-deprecating humoristic language about lackluster confidence and personal achievements. *Social support* in the context of this research is vital in understanding why audiences may consume this humoristic, yet self-deprecating media, as has been discussed as relevant to this study within the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and Parasocial Interaction. Should there be mention within the television program of the importance of social support in a troubling situation, the data will be coded within this area. *Anxiety* and *depression* are similar, yet different, codes within this study. Anxiety can be defined as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease and, on the other hand, depression can be characterized by persistently low moods or loss of interest in activities, life, and/or oneself and others (Vogel et al., 2008). With these definitions in mind, data units were coded as anxiety if the speaker was filled with worry, and data units were coded as depression if the verbal content alluded to unhappiness in life, with oneself, or with their circumstances. These data units were important in the study, as millennial and Gen Z audiences, who face the highest rates of these afflictions, are turning to this type of media to escape from these very stressors (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Data units coded as *personal* were considered part of this category if the content spoke about something that could vary from viewer to viewer, for example, gender identity or sexuality. While these are important to code to understand the depiction and discussion surrounding unique stressors, they may not apply to all viewers. *Familial* data was coded in a fairly similar manner to personal data units. These data specifically involve mentions of family or family dynamics, and again, could vary in

reliability from viewer to viewer. For a full description of the coding protocol, see Appendix C.

After the development of these initial codes, the first cycle of data collection was conducted on the television content. This process consisted of consuming and analyzing one random episode from each of the ten most popular adult animated television shows for substantial units of data based on the guidelines detailed in the codebook. A unit of data was considered relevant if the data was a spoken line with at least two words. For the complete description regarding how relevant content was reviewed and selected, see Appendix B.

The relevant data units, spoken lines with more than two words, from the content were only selected if the overarching message of the phrase related to one of the previously determined, initial codes. Additionally, data were considered to be irrelevant if the phrases used superiority humor, mentioned weaknesses of any other characters other than the speaker, or included stage direction. For the detailed data unit collection of these television shows, see Appendix D. After completing the collection of the relevant data units, the data units were further coded for frequency, using the initial codes outlined in Table 1, keeping in mind the study definitions for each of these initial codes. Below is a simplified table of the number of data units coded into these initial codes, for each the television show.

Table 4. Data Units and Initial Codes

		Initial Codes					
		Self-Worth	Social Support	Anxiety	Depression	Personal	Familial
Television Shows	BoJack Horseman	10	3	0	6	0	2
	Big Mouth	2	1	2	0	2	0
	Disenchantment	2	0	0	2	1	1
	F is For Family	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Tuca and Bertie	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Inside Job	4	0	0	1	4	0
	Futurama	1	0	0	0	0	0
	Archer	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Bobs' Burgers	7	0	0	2	1	0
	Rick and Morty	1	0	0	1	0	2

After coding the initial data units into the predetermined codes, inductive coding was used to determine the refined group of codes that pertain to the same topics in order to create new categories. Utilizing both the information gathered during data collection, as well as the theoretical frameworks and prior research used to guide this study, the following categories were developed.

Table 5. Categories

Self
Social
Environmental

This second cycle of coding focused on the data units and the initial codes in order to group these sets into larger, more concise summaries of the constructs of the media narratives regarding self-deprecation in adult animated television shows. This focused coding in the second cycle categorized the codes based on thematic similarities. The Self-Worth and Personal codes and respective data units were combined into the Self

category, as one's self-worth and personal afflictions, anxieties, or differences may influence an audience member to select to consume a particular type of media. Social Support and Familial codes and respective data units were coded into the Social category, as some people may find solace in social support through the media they are consuming, and/or may find social support from family causes the stressors they are using media to escape from. Finally, Anxiety and Depression codes and respective data units were categorized into the Environmental category. As there has been a surge in major depression and anxiety diagnoses affecting millennials and Gen Z caused by various stressors from the environment and culture they live in, this last category focuses on the ways in which adult animated media that utilizes self-deprecating humor may serve as a stress coping mechanism in order to avoid those high rates of anxiety and depression (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; White & Wurm, 2019).

The final step in this coding process consisted of developing a cohesive theme from the categories, to find if there were any commonalities gathered from the research data with the overall goal of the study and that address the research questions. This theme, refined from the multiple categories into one theme of the underlying meaning of the data units, was determined to be Stressors. The theme of stressors, deduced from this research and the refining of data units, codes, and categories, combines the three categories of Self, Social, and Environmental in order to encompass the different types of stressors that millennial and Gen Z audiences are using media to attempt to find solace from. Some of the stressors of millennials and Gen Z include political turmoil, environmental panic, financial uncertainties, pervasive social media consumption, higher unemployment rates, slower economic growth, and health anxieties (APA, 2015, 2017,

2020, 2021; White & Wurm, 2019). While these are specific stressors, they can also be segmented into the categories formulated from this study. Political turmoil, environmental panic, high unemployment rates, and slower economic growth fit into the Environmental category. Pervasive social media consumption can be categorized into both the Self and Social categories, as using social media is a social activity that can cause stress through social interaction, or lack thereof, and pervasive social media consumption can be categorized into the Self category, as the consumption may create a negative view of self in one's mind (Ask and Abidin, 2018). Lastly, health anxieties can be categorized into the Self category, as everyone's concern with their health varies. With the current pandemic anxieties, as well as personal health struggles such as weight, pre-existing conditions, or emerging conditions, individual's perceptions of health may vary. However, health anxieties do cause stress for many, including stress surrounding financial decisions in the event of medical emergencies (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Ask & Abidin, 2018). Whether the stressors revolve around physical, mental, or emotional health, stress can be found within those codes.

In summary, although the stressors of millennials and Gen Z that have been researched are not explicitly mentioned within the data of this study, the stressors named in those previous studies can be categorized into the categories developed by this study. Although the first set of data, the data units, do not explicitly state anything pertaining to stressors, the frequency and context of the data units collected can be narrowed down to an overarching theme of stressors, depicted in the narratives of the adult animated series. Upon the collection and coding of the relevant data units within the adult animated television episodes selected for analyzing, an analysis of the data was able to begin.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Following successful data collection, the data units, codes, categories, and theme were analyzed. The data were analyzed based on the research questions which the study is based around.

Research Question One

Although the codes provide for less detailed answers to the research questions as the codes are based upon the frequency in which self-deprecation occurred in the selected media programs, the data units do represent the utilization of self-deprecation in adult animated media. Through this frequency the inquiry within RQ of how adult animated television shows utilize self-deprecating humor within the written dialogue, if they utilize this humor at all, can be answered.

All of the adult animated television shows and episodes selected and recorded utilized self-deprecating humor at least once through the episode runtime. The utilization of self-deprecation is also essential to the central narratives of the episodes. *BoJack Horseman* featured the highest amount of self-deprecating humor, with 21 instances of self-deprecation coded for within the 25-minute episode. The use of self-deprecation through this show is evident in the consistent and persistent use of the humor, as well as the frequency. Overall, the average occurrence of self-deprecating humor within these adult animated television programs was 2.46. From the data units collected, most messages of self-deprecation revolved around self-worth, with the second most common topic of self-deprecating as depression. Although these are not messages relating to

stressors millennials and Gen Z have explicitly stated they are facing (looming societal and political stressors, environmental disarray, financial uncertainties, pervasive social media consumption, higher unemployment rates, slower economic growth, and global health anxieties), self-worth and one's own perception of self is an extremely important need in living a fulfilled life, as defined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Deloitte Global Millennial Survey, 2020; Hoffower & Akhtar, 2020; Johnson & Dienst, 2020; Maslow, 1943). By utilizing such messaging of self-worth in a humoristic but self-deprecative manner, the audience members programs may draw to the content through their need for social support and understanding of their insecurities as described in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As viewers may actively continue to seek out this media for coping once they identify it as beneficial to them, this may provide an explanation into the current influx of adult animated media seen in the television industry. With comedic media making up sixty-seven percent of the media viewed by millennials and Gen Z and the majority of those shows consisting of adult animated comedies, this research would be remiss if it did not allude to the possibility that this increase in viewership may be due to the use of self-deprecating humor (Adalian, 2013; Lupis, 2018).

In all instances, the self-deprecation utilization in the television shows exist naturally in the narrative spaces, and as key components in the long-term narrative space. The reasons used for the self-deprecation are topics which the characters have struggled with through the season, and even the series. For example, the *Rick and Morty* episode continually features comments surrounding the failing marriage of the parent characters.

As these comments fall under the familial code, it is also a theme throughout the entirety of the series. The series begins with a happy but tired couple, who then progress into a bitter and resentful couple. While these self-deprecating jokes surrounding their marriage began in the series as harmless fun, they have evolved through the series and this episode to draw attention to the struggling couple and the fact that it is common for families to struggle with this.

These jokes are not forced and appear to occur during average conversations between friendly characters. There was no malice surrounding the self-deprecating jokes, and when other characters were present for these conversations of self-deprecation, they did not continuously harp on the stress and anxieties the self-deprecating character was exhibiting. In most instances, the self-deprecating jokes were either brushed past, opened a conversation for a reassuring compliment, or instigated a similar self-deprecating comment from the other character involved. Much like Ask and Abidin's (2018) study on the social support and community built through self-deprecating memes, the self-deprecating humor within the adult animated narratives influenced caring and community, not vicious attacks. With this in mind, these self-deprecating moments that are met with kindness and social support from other characters may provide struggling viewers with a feeling of relief in understanding there is no reason to be ashamed, and other people are struggling as well.

These animated characters may be less intimidating than human characters for viewers to interact and connect with. Such serious topics as self-worth and depression may make individuals feel as though they are being judged and that their mental afflictions make them inferior to others, and thus only further the shame they are

struggling with (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Greenwood, 2008). However, with the wavering self-worth as depicted within these self-deprecating narratives as the overarching narrative theme, viewers may find solace in knowing they can still relate to the struggles of the animated characters as opposed to facing potential judgement by sharing these obstacles in real-life situations.

How the different shows utilized this type of self-deprecating humor within the narrative differed from television show to television show. Self-deprecating humor was utilized most broadly in the newer adult animated television shows: *Big Mouth*, *BoJack Horseman*, *Disenchantment*, *F is For Family*, and *Inside Job*. These shows are all hosted on streaming platforms, which tend to have fewer restrictions than legacy broadcast platforms and can afford to represent a broader, more taboo range of topics and stressors, which may be more relatable for millennial and Gen Z adult audiences (Evershed, 2021).

Additionally, these television series did not restrict their narratives to strictly comedic or dramatic environments. Combining humoristic environments within moments of drama and emotion, the messages of self-deprecation were able to be used in a humoristic setting to ease the delivery and content of the messaging. For example, in the *Bob's Burgers* Season 11 Episode 1 "Dream a Little Bob of Bob," the self-deprecating character is continuously noting his low self-worth and personal problems of laziness, forgetfulness, and becoming older (see Appendix D). Yet while he does this, he is talking to his inner conscious, which is a rubber band ball. Although the character is struggling and dealing with negative feelings of self-worth, the overall dramatic message is easier digested by viewers in the comedic setting.

However, this study specifically omitted stage cues and descriptions of environments from relevant collectable data. As such, many of the messages surrounding self-deprecating humor must be taken at face value for the purpose of this study. In this case, it may be difficult for some viewers to understand and/or relate to the self-deprecating humor if they do not fully pay attention to and immerse themselves in the content. As binge watching is an extremely prevalent form of media consumption in modern media, with six in ten people within the millennial and Gen Z age demographics reporting that they consume television through streaming services, it is easy to lose narrative environments when consistently “zoning out” during binge watching (Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2017).

Research Question Two

To reiterate Falvey’s (2020) insight into the benefits of narrative arcs portrayed through streaming services:

Complex sitcoms are different; even if they remain principally episodic by nature, the complexities of BoJack’s character arc, in particular, forms a trajectory that might alienate an uncommitted viewer. (p. 122)

Although streaming services may allow for the opportunity to feature intense and complex storylines as audiences no longer need to wait week-by-week for new content, this binge-watching feature also gives audiences the ability to dissociate, which in turn is what makes streaming and consuming comedic television series a common stress management techniques utilized by these demographics (APA, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021; Lupis, 2018; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). Insight into the investment and understanding audiences have or do not have in the full environments of the television shows, and

whether audiences are truly paying attention to the media they are consuming for their stress coping, will be explored during the future extension of this research, via the survey questions in Appendix A.

The other collected and analyzed television shows – *Archer*, *Bob's Burgers*, *Futurama*, *Tuca and Bertie*, and *Rick and Morty* – air on broadcast television. Therefore, although the shows aired on adult programming blocks, there were tighter restrictions pertaining to what can and cannot be discussed through the narratives. Thus, self-deprecation tended to be less common within these shows, and usually only regarded one or two codes. For example, self-deprecation regarding self-worth was mentioned an average of 3.8 times in the streamed series, whereas self-worth was only mentioned an average of 2.6 times in the broadcast series. It is also worth noting that these four adult animated television series were conceived and originally aired before any of the streamed adult animated television series analyzed in this study. As discussions of mental health and stressors has only recently become a commonly discussed topic in media contexts and society at large, these shows may have struggled to incorporate these self-deprecating messages of stressors in their content. Some networks and television shows may not have wanted to include these self-deprecating messages at all. With older audiences, as well as creators, there may still be a stigma attached to the discussion of such topics. Regardless, these shows still did utilize self-deprecating humor, but at a fewer frequent rate and covering less topics than newer, streamed adult animated television shows.

The narratives of using self-deprecating humor, whether prevalent or lacking, were apparent in all of the analyzed adult animated television shows. RQ2 asks how these self-deprecating narratives within modern adult animated television shows differ from

narratives espoused in adult animated television series which aired before 2010, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. This can be answered through understanding of the changing societal and cultural trends. Early successful adult animated television shows, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, aired on broadcast platforms, with restrictive programming laws that may have made taboo topics, and certain language, difficult to include. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines indecency in broadcast as:

Language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities. Once established by the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC began to regulate the program content of television and radio broadcasts to prevent the airing of inappropriate material. (Strickland, 2017, p.1)

Congress also passed the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act of 2005, which raised maximum fines for airing indecent material on television between the hours of 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. to \$325,000 (Strickland, 2017). *South Park* aired on Adult Swim's programming block, which runs from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. at 8:30 p.m. on Comedy Central, meaning this show had to follow these restrictive guidelines and laws regarding what material they could and could not discuss on television. Similarly, *The Simpsons* aired at 8:00 p.m. on the primetime network FOX, meaning they also had to adhere to the restrictions.

South Park and *The Simpsons* also tended to focus on superiority humor and slapstick and irreverent comedy formats. This may be justified given the cultural time and platform these shows originated in. Irreverence and hyperactivity were on trend in the 1990s and early 2000s (Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007). Unlike the self-deprecating humor portrayed in these new adult animated television series, many original television series would turn self-deprecation into malice or superiority humor from other characters

(Carter, 1997; Johnson-Woods, 2007). In this situation, a character would express dismay about their external struggles or personal challenges, and other characters would bully the dismayed character for feeling that way. For example, from the “Butterballs” Season 16 Episode 5 of *South Park*, a character expresses their upset about being bullied and beat up by another character, and the character they confide in harasses them more about being weak and subsequently makes the bullied character feel worse.

The popularity of modern adult animated television series may coincide with the lack of superiority humor based around self-deprecation. Instead, the struggling characters are met with kindness and support, which previously mentioned, may provide a safe space for struggling viewers to understand they are not alone and have a social support group in others, these characters, if they need it. As the social support may come from these characters for the viewers, parasocial interactions and perceived relationships may be formed for viewers with certain characters. With the comfort of knowing the characters are struggling as they are, and the knowledge they will not ridicule the viewer for struggling, characters may become a friendly commonality that audiences return to in order to gratify their needs of coping and catharsis. As the cultural and social climate has changed, so has discussion and comfort in discussion formerly taboo topics. With the recent increase in adult animated content in popular culture, the ability and comfort in discussing more difficult topics may have contributed to this growth. As more and more people within the largest demographics in America, the millennials and Gen Z, are binge consuming media to deal with the many stressors they are facing, the frequent use of these narratives surrounding stressors, self-worth, and personal and social afflictions may be the very tactic that is drawing audiences towards this type of media in such masses.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Future Considerations

Upon reflection of this research process, there are multiple considerations to discuss and possibly improve upon in future research processes regarding this study. First and foremost, it is important to consider the reality that qualitative content analysis can be rather subjective. There are predetermined assumptions being used to guide the research from the beginning, which may reinforce or confirm with researcher bias. This could be mitigated in future research environments through using intercoder reliability with multiple independent researchers from various research backgrounds. Reliability refers to the consistency with which coding segments are assigned to the same categories, and intercoder agreement measures the extent to which coders assign the same codes to the same set of data (Geisler & Swarts, 2019). This is crucial to determine unbiased data collection, as the inquiry studied should be stable and the analytic procedures so explicit that replication of the study would yield the same results (Geisler & Swarts, 2019).

However, even with intercoder reliability, it is possible for contention to arise between coders. In Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman's study (2014) which analyzed 130 short humorous texts (jokes, photos, cartoons, YouTube clips, etc.) selected for an intercoder reliability test from a large-scale dataset, they found the study failed the intercoder reliability test (p. 982). 55 of the humorous texts elicited disagreement between coders (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). In this study, however, codes were formed inductively, where the codes were derived once the data were already collected. Within this thesis research, the opinions on the subjective nature of humor are mitigated

through the deductive codes formed before data collection. By including coders from various backgrounds, the bias of prior knowledge could possibly be removed or at least minimized from the situation (Geisler & Swarts, 2019).

However, as there was only one coder through this research process, bias was able to be at least partially set aside in data collection and analysis. Although the study was started with presumptions surrounding the amount and common use of self-deprecating humor in these adult animated television series, results otherwise pointed to a varying amount of self-deprecating humor, with that same humor not being as obvious or common as previously considered.

Initial impressions of the utilization of self-deprecation in the data were not surprising, as previous research has mentioned the opportunity that newer television programs can discuss a wider range of controversial topics. However, the frequency of the use of self-deprecating humor was surprising. From the biased perspective of one researcher, this frequency of self-deprecation seemed as if it would be higher. This may have been due to the fact a limited dataset was analyzed, as there were not as many instances in one episode as there may be in an entire series. As this research was conducted in a small period of time using one researcher and coding manually by hand, certain time constraints made it difficult to gather data on a larger sample of the possible television episodes and popular adult animated television shows. These initial impressions also allowed for refinement of the survey questionnaires to be used in later research. While the frequency of self-deprecation recorded in this study may not have yielded high results, the accounts of frequency from individuals who regularly consume the media may in fact represent a greater frequency in self-deprecation throughout entire

series and plotlines. Regardless, the initial findings and impressions of this study do reinforce the belief of this study in that audience members are actively choosing and using these adult animated television series as coping mechanisms. Social support is a key component in the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and parasocial interaction. Social support was also the most frequently occurring use of self-deprecating humor within the adult animated episodes. As this is such a big factor in the theoretical framework guiding this study and the future study, it may still be a possibility that audience members are using self-deprecation in adult animated media as a stress coping resource, especially with the high viewership numbers from this media genre.

As this study is situated as preliminary data for a long-form, mixed methods study which involves a comprehensive survey process, the results gathered have provided insight into the alterations needed for the continuation of this project. By conducting this same qualitative content analysis with more adult animated television episodes, there may be a more distinct pattern that emerges regarding the types of self-deprecating humor used in television programs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore a possible explanation behind the viewership increase in adult animated television shows, positing that the introduction of a new subgenre of adult animation, revolving around self-deprecation, may be cause for the emergence in popularity. While this study confirmed that there is consistent use of self-deprecating humor in these television shows, the results did not specifically confirm the importance of the context in which these self-deprecating jokes are utilized in the

narrative spaces, although this was alluded to. To gather these results, a larger data set will need to be analyzed, along with consideration of the environment in which the self-deprecating humor is utilized.

Without narrative and environmental context, self-deprecating humor may seem to be harmful self-deprecation if the non-threatening veil of humor overlaying the more difficult topics of discussion is not considered. Previous research has argued that self-deprecation could only be used in a negative environment, and may lead to more depression, anxiety, self-confidence issues, poor social achievement, and substance abuse (Kim, 2014; Speer, 2019). At face value, as presented in the initial data collection and the codebook for this study, the self-deprecation may seem to be more harmful than beneficial. With this, it is crucial to ensure the audiences consuming these television shows as a coping mechanism are doing so actively and consciously as in the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, as well as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and not just as a diversion tactic or avoidance. As a key factor in successful coping is the need for social support and understanding, the opinions of the viewers and their relationship to the media they are consuming is paramount.

This study gathered preliminary information concerning whether self-deprecation truly does exist in the adult animated media space. The further quantitative study will then build upon this collected data to inquire about the specific aspects of self-deprecation in adult animated television shows that viewers may use as a personal coping resource and subsequently as an enjoyment coping resource. This preliminary research was primarily utilized to evaluate the approach and feasibility of the future project. If results concluded there were no instances of self-deprecating humor in the adult animated

television shows, the research questions and questionnaires would not be able to be tested and analyzed, as the research questions of the future survey are:

RQ1: Does the use of self-deprecating humor in adult-animated television provide audiences with a sense of catharsis from stressors and other mental health afflictions?

RQ2: Does the use of animated characters using self-deprecating, yet relatable, storylines allow audiences to cope with their stress through social support?

This preliminary research also informed the design of the future survey by considering, again, the potential bias of the researcher. To avoid subjective survey questions, the preliminary data, codes, and results were utilized to guide the survey research questions. Specifically, the initial codes of self-worth, social support, anxiety, depression, personal, and familial were used to consider a stable foundation for the questionnaire to avoid ambiguous and biased questions. For example, the code of social support from the preliminary data was used to develop closed and open-ended questions regarding the interaction and community viewers might experience while consuming adult animated media. The literature review and theoretical frameworks gathered for this preliminary research has also assisted in the development of the future questionnaire and research questions. The theories of this research are the driving theories to be used in the future research. The compiling of this literature early on has ensured there are enough relevant and similar studies in the current media studies field. This ensures that the overall goal of the future research is timely.

Overall, while this study did not explicitly determine the possible positive effects of self-deprecation on struggling audiences, there is evidence of continued use of self-deprecation humor relating to stressors in current adult-animated series that relate to the central narrative and plot. In tandem with the one-hundred percent increase from last year in adult animated content airing and the rising viewership numbers, the frequent, uncensored use of self-deprecation should not be overlooked as an important factor in the media these audiences use as a possible coping mechanism (Evershed, 2021). As the overall goal of the future study revolves around acknowledging the potential benefits of self-deprecating humor to determine possible advantageous strategies towards helping future demographics in need of stress relief, the frequent use of self-deprecation in these popular adult animated television shows promise towards accomplishing that goal and understanding how media can better serve its audience.

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APPENDIX A

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

Preliminary Questions

1) What year were you born?

Before 1978
1978-1981
1982-1985
1986-1989
1990-1993
1994-1997
After 1997
Prefer not to disclose

*** Selecting 'before 1978,' '1978-1981,' 'after 1997,' or 'prefer not to answer' will end the survey as this is not the preferred demographic ***

2) Do you identify as any of the following protected identities: a child (under 18), a prisoner, a pregnant person, or someone with any disability that would hinder you from filling this survey out on your own?

Yes
No
Prefer not to answer

*** Selecting 'yes' or 'prefer not to answer' will end the survey***

Question Section One

Please complete the following general information about yourself. If you prefer not to answer, please respond with "N/A" or "Prefer not to disclose."

- 1) What is your home country?
- 2) What is your gender identity?
- 3) What is your sexual orientation?
- 4) What is your highest education level completed?
- 5) What is your relationship status?
- 6) Where do you live?

Suburbs
City
Town
Rural
Other
Prefer not to disclose

7) With whom do you live?

Self/Alone
Parents
Significant Other
Roommate
More than one roommate
Other
Prefer not to disclose

Question Section Two

For the purpose of this study, watching television can be defined as viewing any broadcasted and/or streamed media series on any device (television set, desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet, phone, etc.). Please keep this in mind while completing responses.

1) Do you watch television?

Yes
No

*** Selecting 'no' will end the survey as this is not the preferred demographic ***

2) How often do you watch television during the week?

I do not watch television
Seldom (once or twice a week)
Occasionally (multiple times a week)
Frequently (every day)

*** Selecting 'I do not watch television' will end the survey as this is not the preferred demographic ***

3) What screen do you most frequently use to watch television?

Television Set
Desktop Computer
Laptop Computer
Tablet
Cellphone
Smart Watch
Portable Game Console
Other
Prefer not to disclose

4) What platforms do you use to watch television? (Select all that apply)

Netflix
Hulu
Amazon Prime Video
Disney+
HBO Max
Peacock
Apple TV
Paramount+
Crunchyroll
YouTube
Broadcast TV/Cable
Other
Prefer not to disclose

5) What is your favorite genre(s) of television? (Select all that apply)

Action/Adventure
Animation/Cartoons
Comedy
Cooking
Crime
Drama
Fantasy
Game Show
Historical
Nature
News
Reality
Romance
Science Fiction
Soap Opera
Sports
Talk Show
Other
Prefer not to disclose

6) Who do you most frequently view television with?

Self/Alone
Parents/Family
Significant Other
Roommate(s)
Other
Prefer not to disclose

7) Have you watched adult-animated television before? ** Adult-Animated Television: any type of computer or hand-drawn or cartoon motion work specifically for a target audience over age 18 **

Yes
No
Unsure

8) Have you watched any of the listed adult-animated television shows? (Select all that apply)

Archer
Big Mouth
Bob's Burgers
BoJack Horseman
Disenchantment
F is For Family
Futurama
Inside Job
Rick and Morty
Tuca and Bertie
None of these

Question Section Three

If you prefer not to answer, please respond with "Prefer not to disclose."

1) Have you experienced stress in your life due to any of the following reasons? (Select all that apply)

Financial and economic worry
Family issues
Relationship issues
Social media consumption
Environmental factors
Work related issues
Health related issues
Job market issues
Education struggles
Self-doubt
Other
Prefer not to disclose
No, I have not experienced stress in my life due to any of these

2) Has stress in your life caused any of the following to happen to you? (Select all that apply)

Difficulty listening or speaking to others
Negative self-views
Self-isolation
Irritability
Difficulty concentrating
Inability to rest, relax, or sleep
Change in eating habits
Apathy or indifference
Avoidance of others and/or responsibilities
Guilt
Sadness
Worry
Loneliness
Fear
Harmful thoughts towards self
Other
Prefer not to disclose
No, stress in my life has not caused any of the following

3) If you have experienced stress in the past, how have you relieved and/or coped with stress? (Select all that apply)

Eating
Sleeping
Spending time alone
Reckless behavior/substance abuse
Exercising/participating in sports
Seeking support from others
Shopping
Using the internet
Watching television
Watching movies
Listening to music
Using social media
Other
Prefer not to disclose
I have not experienced stress in the past

4) Are you likely to turn to friends for support and/or advice in times of need?

Yes
No
Only if you are both experiencing similar situations/feelings
Other
Prefer not to disclose

Question Section Four

For the purpose of this study, watching television can be defined as viewing any broadcasted and/or streamed media series on any device (television set, desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet, phone, etc.). Please keep this in mind while completing responses.

1) You prefer to watch television shows where you relate to characters and storylines.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

2) You tend to think of your favorite television character(s) as a friend.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

3) You often watch television to relieve stress.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

4) Humor used in television shows relieves your stress.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

5) You feel support and understanding from television characters who experience stressors similar to your own.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

Question Section Five

Adult-Animated Television: any type of computer or hand-drawn or cartoon motion work specifically for a target audience over age 18.

1) Please rate your enjoyment in watching adult-animated television shows.

Strongly Dislike
Dislike
Neutral
Like
Strongly Like

2) Please rate your enjoyment of the following adult-animated television shows:

Archer

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Big Mouth

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Bob's Burgers

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

BoJack Horseman

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Disenchantment

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

F is For Family

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Futurama

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Inside Job

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Rick and Morty

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

Tuca and Bertie

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy
I do not know this show

3) Please rate your enjoyment of the following different types of humor:

Deadpan Humor: deliberate display of emotional neutrality

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Self-Deprecating Humor: humor aimed at oneself (the character) and their misfortunes, or aimed at worldly misfortunes

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Expense of Others: humor directed at a character other than the character delivering the joke

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Farcical: humor that is too unbelievable to be actual

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Juvenile: humor involving immaturity

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Parody/Satire: humor intended to ridicule another party or society

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Sitcom: situational comedy centered on reoccurring characters

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Slapstick: humor mocking physical harm

Very Little Enjoyment
Little Enjoyment
Neutral
Enjoy
Very Much Enjoy

Question Section Six

Self-Deprecating Humor: humor aimed at oneself (the character) and their misfortunes, or aimed at worldly misfortunes

1) You find self-deprecating humor amusing.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

2) You relate to other's self-deprecating jokes when you are feeling stressed.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

3) You tend to make self-deprecating jokes when you are feeling stressed.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

4) When someone makes a self-deprecating joke (in real life), that helps you to feel more comfortable talking to them about your similar struggles.

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly Agree

Question Section Seven

1) How stressed do you feel daily?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not Stressed at All

Extremely Stressed

2) How well do you feel you handle your stress?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not Well at All

Extremely Well

3) Do you think television aids in your stress relief?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

4) Do you think television aids in your stress relief through a sense of catharsis (a cleansing and relief from strong and/or repressed emotion)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

5) Do you think television aids in your stress relief through engagement (working through and providing solutions to problems)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

6) Do you think television aids in your stress relief by providing a place to dissociate from yourself and your situation (zone out)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

7) Do you think television aids in your stress relief through social support from characters experiencing similar situations?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

8) Do you think humor aids in your stress relief?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

9) Do you think the discussion of stress and mental health in television is helpful in providing you with relief from these afflictions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

10) Do you find yourself enjoying television shows where the characters are experiencing the same stressors as you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

11) How much do you see yourself relating to characters in television shows you watch?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All

Extremely

12) Watching the characters in television shows face stress and mental illness with openness and honesty makes me feel I can do the same without judgement.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not True at All

Extremely True

13) Watching the characters in television shows face the same stress I am facing provides me with comfort in knowing I am not alone.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not True at All

Extremely True

14) How much do you relate to self-deprecating humor in television shows?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at All Relatable

Extremely Relatable

Question Section Eight

For the purpose of this study, viewing television can be defined as viewing any broadcasted and/or streamed media series on any device. Please keep this in mind while completing responses.

1) How many hours a day do you watch television?

Zero
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

2) How many hours a week do you work?

Zero
1-5 hours
6-10 hours
11-15 hours
16-20 hours
21-25 hours
26-30 hours
31-35 hours
36-40 hours
More than 40 hours a week
I do not work
Prefer not to disclose

3) How often within the last month have you felt stressed?

I have not felt stressed within the last month
Rarely
Sometimes
Often
Always
Prefer not to disclose

4) How often within the last month have you watched adult-animated television?

I have not done this
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

5) How often within the last month have you sought out ways to relieve your stress?

I have not done this
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

6) How often within the last month have you watched television to relieve stress?

I have not done this
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

7) How often within the last month have you watched television that uses self-deprecating humor to relieve stress?

I have not done this
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

8) How often within the last month have you watched adult-animated television to relieve stress?

I have not done this
Less than one hour but more than zero
1-2 hours
3-5 hours
6-8 hours
More than 8 hours
Prefer not to disclose

Question Section Nine (Optional)

1) Can you describe the screen you most often use to watch television and the location you most often watch television from while using this screen? (For example: on a laptop on the couch, on a television set in a living room, on a cellphone in your bed, etc.) If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

2) Can you describe the screen you most often use to watch television and the social group you most often watch television with on this screen? (For example: on a television set with your parents, on a cellphone alone, on a laptop with your significant other, etc.) If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

3) Who is your favorite animated television character and why? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

4) Have you ever watched television to help you cope with stress? How does television to alleviate your stress? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

5) How have characters in adult animated television shows helped you cope with stress before? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

6) Can you describe how your stress makes you feel before participating in stress relieving activities? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

7) Can you describe how your stress makes you feel after participating in stress relieving activities? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

8) What is the stress relieving activity of your preference and why? If choosing not to disclose, please respond with "N/A."

APPENDIX B

RECORDING GUIDELINES

Data Units of Analysis: Vocally spoken lines by leading/supporting characters regarding themselves.

Viewing and Recording Procedure: During the coding process, the entirety of each episode will need to be viewed at least twice. The first viewing should be done relatively uninterrupted. Record timecodes where vocally spoken lines may coincide with one of the possible predetermined codes. After the initial screening, view the television show again, recording each line spoken and coding lines that fit the predetermined codes. This will ensure you gather any vocally spoken lines you may have missed upon the first viewing. Continue to view the episode until all possible units of analysis have been recorded and coded. Be sure to include the below information when recording the data, as to ensure the program meets the set criteria.

Television Series:

Date Originally Aired:

Season:

Episode:

Content that justifies exclusion from data collection:

1. Any use of superiority humor, mention of the weaknesses of any characters other than oneself, and laughing at malice directed at the less fortunate.
2. Any self-deprecating must be said and/or confirmed by the character the self-deprecation is targeted for, otherwise this would be superiority humor.
3. Data must not include stage directions or scenery, as only spoken data will be considered relevant.

APPENDIX C

CODING MANUAL

Data Units of Analysis: Vocally spoken lines by leading/supporting characters regarding themselves.

Coding Procedure: Code lines in no more than two words representing the overarching message of the data units collected.

Codes: Self-Worth, Social Support, Anxiety, Depression, Personal, Familial

Code Definitions:

Self-Worth: Language pertaining to lackluster confidence and personal achievements

Social Support: Language regarding another character experiencing the same emotions, or a character expressing they find comfort in social support

Anxiety: Speaking regarding feelings of worry, nervousness, or unease

Depression: Language regarding a low mood or loss of interest in activities, life, and/or oneself and others, as well as allusion to hatred of oneself or one's circumstances.

Personal: Situations discussed that may not apply to all viewers but focus on personal struggles such as gender identity or sexuality.

Familial: Situations similar to personal codes, but family or family dynamics must be explored.

APPENDIX D

CONTENT ANALYSIS DATA UNITS

***Archer* Season 1 Episode 10 “Dial M for Mother” – March 18, 2010 – 21 minutes**

1. “I think incredibly awkward just about sums me up.” 2:55
2. “I’m a desirable, full-bodied woman but nobody will have sex with me. And I have so much love to give.” 17:00

***Big Mouth* Season 2 Episode 9 “Smooch or Share” – October 5, 2018 – 26 minutes**

1. “I’m the biggest perv in the world.” 4:20
2. “What? That’s impossible. You can’t be the biggest perv in the world. Because you’re looking at him! Me!” 4:25
3. “I think I understand what you’re trying to do here Andrew and I appreciate it but I’m a horny spaz and everyone knows it. What could be worse than that?” 4:30
4. “Telling you that and you not being grossed out or kicking me in the shins or something makes me feel less alone.” 5:30
5. “I can’t just hook up with a girl. First I’ve gotta be nervous for at least like a year.” 8:00
6. “I crave order, you see. I suppose that’s why mummy called me Mr. Bookshelf.” 13:10
7. “And I only said those terrible things to him because I feel bad about myself.” 17:00

***Bob's Burgers* Season 11 Episode 1 “Dream a Little Bob of Bob” – September 27, 2020 – 21 minutes**

1. “I’m just not good at that being responsible stuff.” 0:55
2. “What a mess. I’m a monster.” 4:38
3. “How can I live like this?” 4:50
4. “I’m a sleepy, middle-aged man and I fall asleep a lot.” 5:47
5. “So, everyone can do this except me? Is that what’s going on?” 8:05
6. “I’m not good at maintaining things or knowing how to do the things I should know how to do. But I’m trying.” 8:50
7. “Once you have back problems you kind of always have back problems.” 10:00
8. “There’s too many things to do as a person. How does anyone do anything?”
14:20
9. “My shame is so strong. It’s very strong right now.” 15:35
10. “Oh, I’m so weak. This might be a bad idea.” 17:55

***BoJack Horseman* Season 4 Episode 6 “Stupid Piece of Sh*t” – September 8, 2017 – 25 minutes**

1. “You’re a real stupid piece of sh*t. But I know I’m a piece of sh*t. That at least makes me better than all the piece of sh*t who don’t know they’re pieces of sh*t. Or is it worse? Breakfast.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:10
2. “Oh, I don’t deserve breakfast. Shut up. Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Get breakfast, you stupid fat *ss.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:15
3. “These are cookies. This is not breakfast. You are eating cookies, stop it. Stop eating cookies, go make yourself breakfast. Stop it, don’t eat one more cookie.

Put that cookie down. Do not eat that cookie. I can't believe you ate that cookie."

[Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:40

4. "She's not grubby, she's your daughter, you piece of garbage. You're a piece of garbage, a real sh*tty piece of garbage." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:00
5. "Think, idiot. If she takes the car, then you're trapped here with Mom and her spooky lazy eyes. But if you get the milk and leave Hollyhock here with Mom, then she could tell her things about you, poison your own daughter against you, is that what you want?" [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:15
6. "They're all looking at you. Say something, dumb dumb. Open your idiot dumb*ss mouth!" [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:20
7. "What are they talking about right now? Probably you and what a dumb piece of trash you are, you fat sack of idiot." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:30
8. "Is that life? You're there, you do your thing, and then people forget." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:40
9. "You could be eating breakfast with your long-lost daughter and your dying mother. You are a terrible person." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 4:15
10. "It's always nice to be included in a sentence someone says." 4:30
11. "Idiot. Stupid animal. Oaf." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 6:40
12. "You stupid garbage fire. Everything sucks." [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 8:20

13. “This is what you do. This is what you always do. This is why Mom loves Doll more than you. She’s right. Doll never hurt anybody. Gotta make things right, gotta get Doll back. Okay, one drink, and then Doll back.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 10:40
14. “You screw-up. You’re making your daughter hate you. Which is good because look what happens when people love you.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 10:59
15. “Welcome to the nightmare, non-sexy version of *Three’s Company* that my life has become.” 13:50
16. “What if I kill myself by throwing myself off the deck and into Felicity Huffman’s backyard?” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 19:00
17. “He knows. He knows you’re terrible. He’s the biggest idiot in the world and even he knows you’re terrible.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 19:10
18. “I can feel her getting attached, and I just know I’m gonna BoJack things up...Obviously I meant screw everything up until she hates me.” 19:20
19. “Go talk to her idiot. Drink first. No, you stupid alcoholic. Talk to your daughter. You’re ruining her, you know that right? No matter what your poison is already in her. There’s nothing you can do. You’re a real stupid piece of sh*t, and everywhere you go you destroy people. Of course your mother never loved you. What did you expect?” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 22:00
20. “If I’m sh*tty, that’s just because I’m sh*tty. You’re allowed to be mad at me, but you need to know that whatever I do, it’s not your fault.” 24:00

21. “Sometimes I have this tiny voice in the back of my head that goes ‘Hey, everyone hates you! And they’re not wrong to feel that way!’” 25:00

***Disenchantment* Season 3 Episode 6 “Last Splash” – January 15, 2021 – 27 minutes**

1. “She’s kinda sassy for a fish and she has a super annoying voice. Wait, so do I. Oh my god!” 0:49
2. “I’m both obnoxious, and amazing.” 1:45
3. “At least I have this dream card to remember you by. But now all my dreams are dead.” 6:40
4. “I’ll never find a place to fit in. I’m just gonna crawl back to my dad because I’m a loser who can’t keep a job. You might as well ride me back like a horse.” 8:08
5. “Tell me what drugs you’re on so I know what to do when you pass out. Also, where are the drugs?” 9:00
6. “It can’t be any worse than all the talks I’ve had inside my head. Like, ‘Hey Bean, why are you so lonely? I don’t know, maybe because nobody loves me? Maybe you don’t deserve to be loved because that’s just not in the cards for you. But maybe it is? I don’t know. Everyone else has it.” 10:24

***F is For Family* Season 1 Episode 4 “F is for Halloween” – December 18, 2015 - 25 minutes**

1. “I haven’t won anything since my high school softball team went to state.” 0:50
2. “I’m a mockery in my own g*ddamn house. I might as well go sleep in the basement.” 3:30

***Futurama* Season 7 Episode 7 “Six Million Dollar Mon” – July 25, 2012 – 21 minutes**

1. “What, you mean the remarks and the hits? You don’t understand, he was the only one who cared enough to insult me.” 3:30

***Inside Job* Season 1 Episode 4 “Sex Machina” – October 22, 2021 - 27 minutes**

1. “I’m single by choice, because I have a fulfilling career where I am doing really important things.” 0:45
2. “I’m a Republican, I have no shame except for the deep-rooted sexual kind.” 3:00
3. “What is my attractiveness score? Wait, don’t tell me. Subtract a point for being divorced, add one for being a veteran. Then there’s...the face.” 4:15
4. “When I try to unlock my phone with my face, it sends out an Amber Alert.” 4:48
5. “I’ve been rejected by almost every man in D.C. I can’t give my coworkers the satisfaction of watching me fail out of the gene pool.” 5:00
6. “The last boyfriend I could see a future with said that he’d love me for as long as Pluto was a planet. I’m pretty sure he knew what was coming.” 7:20
7. “I missed my only shot with my one true match, and I’m expecting at least a written warning from the Italian Anti-Defamation League.” 9:30
8. “I’m gonna go home and shop for a casket online.” 9:40
9. “I am not an Animorph. I am a human being. Sort of.” 11:45

***Rick and Morty* Season 1 Episode 8 “Rixty Minutes” – March 17, 2014 – 22 minutes**

1. “Who wants to narcissistically obsess about their alternate self? I want to.” 3:20
2. “It seems like when I exist life gets a little more predictable.” 7:25

3. “Thank you guys so much. It’s a real treat to be raised by parents that force themselves to be together instead of being happy.” 8:17
4. “You’re the little brother. You’re not the cause of your parent’s misery. You’re just a symptom of it.” 17:20

***Tuca and Bertie* Season 1 Episode 9 “The Jelly Lakes” – May 3, 2019 – 25 minutes**

1. “Yeah, that’s me, I always let sh*t get out of hand.” 1:55
2. “If I’m so brave, why don’t I deal with my sh*t? 19:12

APPENDIX E

INITIALLY RECORDED DATA UNITS

Archer Season 1 Episode 10 “Dial M for Mother” – March 18, 2010 – 21 minutes

1. **Self-Worth:** “I think incredibly awkward just about sums me up.” 2:55
2. **Self-Worth:** “I’m a desirable, full-bodied woman but nobody will have sex with me. And I have so much love to give.” 17:00

Big Mouth Season 2 Episode 9 “Smooch or Share” – October 5, 2018 – 26 minutes

1. **Personal:** “I’m the biggest perv in the world.” 4:20
2. **Personal:** “What? That’s impossible. You can’t be the biggest perv in the world. Because you’re looking at him! Me!” 4:25
3. **Self-Worth:** “I think I understand what you’re trying to do here Andrew and I appreciate it but I’m a horny spaz and everyone knows it. What could be worse than that?” 4:30
4. **Social Support:** “Telling you that and you not being grossed out or kicking me in the shins or something makes me feel less alone.” 5:30
5. **Anxiety:** “I can’t just hook up with a girl. First I’ve gotta be nervous for at least like a year.” 8:00
6. **Anxiety:** “I crave order, you see. I suppose that’s why mummy called me Mr. Bookshelf.” 13:10
7. **Self-Worth:** “And I only said those terrible things to him because I feel bad about myself.” 17:00

***Bob's Burgers* Season 11 Episode 1 “Dream a Little Bob of Bob” – September 27, 2020 – 21 minutes**

1. **Self-Worth:** “I’m just not good at that being responsible stuff.” 0:55
2. **Self-Worth:** “What a mess. I’m a monster.” 4:38
3. **Depression:** “How can I live like this?” 4:50
4. **Self-Worth:** “I’m a sleepy, middle-aged man and I fall asleep a lot.” 5:47
5. **Self-Worth:** “So, everyone can do this except me? Is that what’s going on?” 8:05
6. **Self-Worth:** “I’m not good at maintaining things or knowing how to do the things I should know how to do. But I’m trying.” 8:50
7. **Personal:** “Once you have back problems you kind of always have back problems.” 10:00
8. **Depression:** “There’s too many things to do as a person. How does anyone do anything?” 14:20
9. **Self-Worth:** “My shame is so strong. It’s very strong right now.” 15:35
10. **Self-Worth:** “Oh, I’m so weak. This might be a bad idea.” 17:55

***BoJack Horseman* Season 4 Episode 6 “Stupid Piece of Sh*t” – September 8, 2017 – 25 minutes**

1. **Depression:** “You’re a real stupid piece of sh*t. But I know I’m a piece of sh*t. That at least makes me better than all the piece of sh*t who don’t know they’re pieces of sh*t. Or is it worse? Breakfast.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:10

2. **Depression:** “Oh, I don’t deserve breakfast. Shut up. Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Get breakfast, you stupid fat *ss.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:15
3. **Self-Worth:** “These are cookies. This is not breakfast. You are eating cookies, stop it. Stop eating cookies, go make yourself breakfast. Stop it, don’t eat one more cookie. Put that cookie down. Do not eat that cookie. I can’t believe you ate that cookie.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 0:40
4. **Self-Worth:** “She’s not grubby, she’s your daughter, you piece of garbage. You’re a piece of garbage, a real sh*tty piece of garbage.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:00
5. **Familial:** “Think, idiot. If she takes the car, then you’re trapped here with Mom and her spooky lazy eyes. But if you get the milk and leave Hollyhock here with Mom, then she could tell her things about you, poison your own daughter against you, is that what you want?” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:15
6. **Self-Worth:** “They’re all looking at you. Say something, dumb-dumb. Open your idiot dumb*ss mouth!” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:20
7. **Self- Worth:** “What are they talking about right now? Probably you and what a dumb piece of trash you are, you fat sack of idiot.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:30
8. **Depression:** “Is that life? You’re there, you do your thing, and then people forget.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 1:40

9. **Depression:** “You could be eating breakfast with your long-lost daughter and your dying mother. You are a terrible person.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 4:15
10. **Social Support:** “It’s always nice to be included in a sentence someone says.” 4:30
11. **Self-Worth:** “Idiot. Stupid animal. Oaf.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 6:40
12. **Depression:** “You stupid garbage fire. Everything sucks.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 8:20
13. **Self-Worth:** “This is what you do. This is what you always do. This is why Mom loves Doll more than you. She’s right. Doll never hurt anybody. Gotta make things right, gotta get Doll back. Okay, one drink, and then Doll back.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 10:40
14. **Self-Worth:** “You screw-up. You’re making your daughter hate you. Which is good because look what happens when people love you.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 10:59
15. **Familial:** “Welcome to the nightmare, non-sexy version of *Three’s Company* that my life has become.” 13:50
16. **Depression:** “What if I kill myself by throwing myself off the deck and into Felicity Huffman’s backyard?” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 19:00

17. **Self-Worth:** “He knows. He knows you’re terrible. He’s the biggest idiot in the world and even he knows you’re terrible.” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 19:10
18. **Social Support:** “I can feel her getting attached, and I just know I’m gonna BoJack things up...Obviously I meant screw everything up until she hates me.” 19:20
19. **Self-Worth:** “Go talk to her idiot. Drink first. No, you stupid alcoholic. Talk to your daughter. You’re ruining her, you know that right? No matter what your poison is already in her. There’s nothing you can do. You’re a real stupid piece of sh*t, and everywhere you go you destroy people. Of course your mother never loved you. What did you expect?” [Internally speaking to oneself in third person] 22:00
20. **Social Support:** “If I’m sh*tty, that’s just because I’m sh*tty. You’re allowed to be mad at me, but you need to know that whatever I do, it’s not your fault.” 24:00
21. **Self-Worth:** “Sometimes I have this tiny voice in the back of my head that goes ‘Hey, everyone hates you! And they’re not wrong to feel that way!’” 25:00

***Disenchantment* Season 3 Episode 6 “Last Splash” – January 15, 2021 – 27 minutes**

1. **Self-Worth:** “She’s kinda sassy for a fish and she has a super annoying voice. Wait, so do I. Oh my god!” 0:49
2. **Self-Worth:** “I’m both obnoxious, and amazing.” 1:45
3. **Depression:** “At least I have this dream card to remember you by. But now all my dreams are dead.” 6:40

4. **Familial:** “I’ll never find a place to fit in. I’m just gonna crawl back to my dad because I’m a loser who can’t keep a job. You might as well ride me back like a horse.” 8:08
5. **Personal:** “Tell me what drugs you’re on so I know what to do when you pass out. Also, where are the drugs?” 9:00
6. **Depression:** “It can’t be any worse than all the talks I’ve had inside my head. Like, ‘Hey Bean, why are you so lonely? I don’t know, maybe because nobody loves me? Maybe you don’t deserve to be loved because that’s just not in the cards for you. But maybe it is? I don’t know. Everyone else has it.” 10:24

F is For Family Season 1 Episode 4 “F is for Halloween” – December 18, 2015 - 25 minutes

1. **Self-Worth:** “I haven’t won anything since my high school softball team went to state.” 0:50
2. **Familial:** “I’m a mockery in my own g*ddamn house. I might as well go sleep in the basement.” 3:30

Futurama Season 7 Episode 7 “Six Million Dollar Mon” – July 25, 2012 – 21 minutes

1. **Self-Worth:** “What, you mean the remarks and the hits? You don’t understand, he was the only one who cared enough to insult me.” 3:30

Inside Job Season 1 Episode 4 “Sex Machina” – October 22, 2021 - 27 minutes

1. **Personal:** “I’m single by choice, because I have a fulfilling career where I am doing really important things.” 0:45

2. **Personal:** “I’m a Republican, I have no shame except for the deep-rooted sexual kind.” 3:00
3. **Self-Worth:** “What is my attractiveness score? Wait, don’t tell me. Subtract a point for being divorced, add one for being a veteran. Then there’s...the face.” 4:15
4. **Self-Worth:** “When I try to unlock my phone with my face, it sends out an Amber Alert.” 4:48
5. **Self-Worth:** “I’ve been rejected by almost every man in D.C. I can’t give my coworkers the satisfaction of watching me fail out of the gene pool.” 5:00
6. **Personal:** “The last boyfriend I could see a future with said that he’d love me for as long as Pluto was a planet. I’m pretty sure he knew what was coming.” 7:20
7. **Personal:** “I missed my only shot with my one true match, and I’m expecting at least a written warning from the Italian Anti-Defamation League.” 9:30
8. **Depression:** “I’m gonna go home and shop for a casket online.” 9:40
9. **Self-Worth:** “I am not an Animorph. I am a human being. Sort of.” 11:45

***Rick and Morty* Season 1 Episode 8 “Rixty Minutes” – March 17, 2014 – 22 minutes**

1. **Self-Worth:** “Who wants to narcissistically obsess about their alternate self? I want to.” 3:20
2. **Depression:** “It seems like when I exist life gets a little more predictable.” 7:25
3. **Familial:** “Thank you guys so much. It’s a real treat to be raised by parents that force themselves to be together instead of being happy.” 8:17
4. **Familial:** “You’re the little brother. You’re not the cause of your parent’s misery. You’re just a symptom of it.” 17:20

***Tuca and Bertie* Season 1 Episode 9 “The Jelly Lakes” – May 3, 2019 – 25 minutes**

1. **Self-Worth:** “Yeah, that’s me, I always let sh*t get out of hand.” 1:55
2. **Self-Worth:** “If I’m so brave, why don’t I deal with my sh*t? 19:12