

# 미디어 유머에 대한 내용분석: 1950~1990년대 미국 가족 시트콤을 중심으로

## A Content Analysis of the Family Sitcom Humor from the 1950s to the 1990s in the USA

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### 요약

본 연구는 미국 텔레비전의 여성 재현과 유머 유형을 탐색하기 위해 1950년대부터 1990년대까지 반세기 에 걸쳐 방영된 가족 시츄에이션 코미디(시트콤) 프로그램 중 닐슨 시청률 데이터 자료에 의해 가장 인기 있었던 상위 10개 프로그램에서 여성을 포함한 가족구성원이 반영된 코미디 이벤트를 내용분석 했다. 연구 결과, 슬랩스틱(slapstick) 코미디가 가장 빈번하게 이용된 것으로 나타났다. 또한 로맨틱 및 성적인 내용이 가장 흔한 코미디 소재로 이용됐다. 특히 가족구성원 중 어머니를 중심으로 한 여성의 재현과 관련해 점차 여성을 희화화의 대상으로 그리고 있는 점은 여성을 대상으로 한 유머가 종종 극단적인(tendentious) 속성으로 흐른다는 기존의 연구결과를 뒷받침 했다. 끝으로 '미디어 유머'와 관련한 후속연구 및 국내연구의 필요성을 논의했다.

■ 중심어 : | 유머 | 시트콤 | 어머니 | 내용분석 |

### Abstract

This study content analyzed the comedic events that include mothers to explore a typology of humor and representation of women in family sitcoms over the last decades. The study found that slapstick has been the most prevalent humor type over time. The study also found that romantic and sexual topics were common themes in family situation comedies over the last decades. The study confirmed an increasing pattern for foolishness in terms of the portrayals of sitcom mothers. The result also substantiated the tendentious nature of humor involved in sitcom mothers. Based on the findings, limitations and further research are discussed.

■ keyword : | Humor | Sitcom | Mother | Content Analysis |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humor permeates every social context. According to a survey[1], humorous males are preferred as

possible bridegrooms among singles. The survey indicated that 70% of singles believe they are most likely to fall in love with someone who makes them laugh; only 30% expressed a preference for someone

\* 본 연구결과는 미국 저널리즘 및 매스커뮤니케이션 교육 학회(AEJMC)의 연예오락연구 분과 (Entertainment Studies Interest Group)에서 발표되었음.

접수일자 : 2013년 12월 23일

수정일자 : 2014년 04월 07일

심사완료일 : 2014년 04월 15일

교신저자 : 김균수, e-mail : kimk@chonnam.ac.kr

who makes them think. Furthermore, humor can be used as an effective educational tool[2]. Humor and laughing are undoubtedly an essential part of our lives[3].

Humor and comedy are among the most popular television genres[4]. Of the top 100 rental films of all times, and of the all-time highest rated television programs in the United States, more than 40% are comedies[5]. Indeed, humor can be found in virtually all television programming, including news, sports, soap operas, situation comedies, religious programs, and television commercials[6][7].

The family situation comedy, the genre that is the focus of this study, is defined as serial programming that focuses on problems affecting the family and subsequently reflecting various situations generated by the surrounding social environment[8]. Family sitcoms have been popular throughout television's history. For instance, about 50 different sitcom families appeared on prime-time and Saturday morning television every single week in 1981 alone[9]. This half-hour genre involves major characters who are members of the same family and primarily interact with each other in a home setting[10].

Humor researchers generally acknowledge that any research on audience perception of humor must begin with an identification of types of humor[11-13]. In special relation to this particular study, various efforts to theorize humor and comedy in many settings and to explore women's relationships to laughter have been made[14-17]. However, few studies have addressed the content and specific types of humor used in audiovisual media, such as television situation comedies. This study represents an effort to broaden the knowledge on humor by applying a typology, established through analysis of audiovisual advertisements by Buijzen and Valkenburg[11], to television family situation comedies.

## 2. RELATED WORK

### 2.1 Theories of Humor

Although we do not have any overarching humor theory, there are three major conceptualizations of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity[11][18-21]. First, relief theory indicates that people laugh because they need to reduce physiological tension[11][19][21]. In other words, this theory assumes that the basic mechanism of humor operates as a part of the nervous system, and laughter and mirth have much to do with a release of nervous energy[11][21]. Sexual and aggressive items are involved in the humor themes explained by relief theory[11].

Second, superiority theory posits that people laugh at others because they feel some kind of triumph over them or feel superior to them[21]. Superiority theories emphasize the "emotional" function of humor in that it can help humorist to build confidence and self-esteem[11]. Ridicule and making fun of those who are less fortunate than who deviate from the norm are typical themes of humor explained by superiority theory[11][18].

From the perspective of incongruity theory, people laugh at what surprises them or is unexpected[11][21]. Incongruity theories emphasize "cognitive" aspects in that people must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice differences[21]. Absurdity, nonsense, and surprise are key ingredients in humor from the incongruity perspective[11][21][22].

As mentioned, there is no consensus among humor theorists about which of these three conceptualizations of humor is most viable because each has its own emphasis. However, there is agreement that many actual events of humor can be explained by more than one theory[18][21]. Accordingly, we argue that evidence of the three

theories would be detected by analyzing the narrative of situation comedies.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to examine trends of humor in the family situation comedy over the last 50 years. In doing so, this study seeks to develop a typology of humor useful for analysis of family situation comedies and applicable to other audiovisual television genres. In particular, media portrayals of women may contribute to and reinforce biases against women[23]. Therefore, this study reveals the characteristics of humor revolving around mothers in television sitcoms in the United States with an emphasis on foolishness and tendentiousness.

## 2.2 Humor Typology in the Family Situation Comedy

Examining program narratives allows us to explore the principle components used to construct humor in family situation comedies. Through such an examination, one can begin to identify the rules, patterns, typology, and nature that help to create “meaning,” in a particular genre of television story[24]. We begin by analyzing the structure of humor narratives, focusing on their typology and nature.

Buijzen and Valkenburg conceptualized seven humor categories represented in television advertisements: slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody[11]. This typology represents the global characteristics of humor. Most of all, Buijzen and Valkenburg’s typology directly represents the functions or theories of humor, which were described earlier.

To summarize, slapstick denotes comedic events related to body gestures, facial and voice quirks, odd coincidences, clumsiness, stereotyping, ridicule, malicious pleasure, and repartee. Second, surprise

includes conceptual surprise, visual surprise, transformation, and exaggeration. Third, irony involves sarcasm, embarrassment, puns, and exaggerated scale. Fourth, clowning indicates clownish behavior, anthropomorphism, speed, and chases. Fifth, satire includes irreverent behavior, outwitting others, and peculiar music. Sixth, misunderstanding includes ignorance, disappointment, and peculiar sounds. Lastly, parody indicates that a comedic event imitated a style or genre of other literature or media. Every category is a principal component of sitcom humor. This study expects that each typology would be found in television situation comedies as well as advertisements.

As an effort to build a global typology of humor, this study examines the humor types and themes of situation comedies over the last decades based on Buijzen and Valkenburg’s typology[11]. Therefore:

- RQ1. What is the relative prevalence of different humor types in television sitcoms over time?
- RQ2. What is the relative prevalence of different humor themes in television sitcoms over time?

## 2.3 Mother in the Family Situation Comedy

While viewers often delight in the vicarious experiences of sitcom narratives, television programs influence viewers by presenting values that advance the dominant ideology[24]. As Butsch noted, “television drama uses gender, age, occupation, and ethnic stereotypes to signify a number of different values[25]”. In relation to the ethnicity, for example, middle-class black families were rarely portrayed until the Bill Cosby show became successful[4]. Recognizing the potential power of the media urges us to examine the roles and references to women, particularly mother, in family situation comedies.

As Hanke argued, “situation comedies situate us, offering some of the subjects positions which women and men may inhabit to make sense of their own lived gender relations and realities[14]”. Families as portrayed on television have provided a historical record of gender role[26]. Gender roles have been one of the changing aspects of family life in the past 50 years. A number of studies have commented on changes in situation comedies during the 1970s and 1980s[27][28].

However, Scharrer indicated that “in television sitcoms, humor is often based on negative emotions, with one character getting the better of another[29]”. Furthermore, television comedic events typically “involve a departure from a norm, whether the norm be one of action, appropriate behavior, conventional dress, or stereotypical features[30]”. According to Goldstein (1993), it is not surprising that comedies are offensive to some people in that sitcoms deal in stereotypes rather than fully rounded characters. Similarly, there are “innocent” jokes which generally elicit less powerful responses and “tendentious” jokes that can elicit uproarious humor through the use of emotionally potent sexual or aggressive content[31].

At this point, we need to pay attention to the “power struggles” in joke-telling, which is mainly gender based[29]. Likewise, “conflict between male and female characters is often the foundation on which domestic comedies lies[29]”. Suls and Gastoff (1986)[32] classified humorous events sampled from prime-time family viewing hours, 8–11 p.m., on the then three major U.S. commercial networks. Males were more often the object of humorous disparagement than were females. However, males appeared more often in principal roles. More importantly, controlling for frequency of appearance, males disparaged females significantly more often than females disparaged males. In that sense, feminist

groups have contended that women are portrayed more often as the tendentious target of humor on prime-time television than are men, citing this as an example of sexism.

Taken together, this study adopts the view that “joke-telling by sitcom characters is a means of expressing power between genders[29]”. In other words, a theoretical foundation for this study is the notion that humorous exchanges are often expressions of power between the joker and the recipient or object of the joke[29].

With this in mind, the study looks at changes in the portrayals of sitcom mothers from a position of wisdom to foolishness and the degree of tendentiousness by analyzing the content of selected sitcoms from the 1950s to the 1990s.

RQ3. What are the portrayals of the sitcom mother over time?

RQ4. What is the degree of tendentiousness of humor over time?

### 3. METHOD

This study involved a quantitative content analysis of a sample of the U.S. situation comedies involving members of a family unit drawn from those appearing in the top 10 programs between 1951 and 1999 based on Nielsen data for network television. All shows in the top 10 per year were identified and inversely weighted to generate a positive value that suggested the importance of each show. For example, the number one show in 1951 would receive a weight of “10” while the number 10 show would receive “1.” The sum of all such ratings for each show were added and tallied to compile a prioritized list. Of those sitcoms which featured a mother (or mother surrogate), father, and at least one child in household

setting, seven were identified. Notably, these were six of the top 10 comedies over the entire period.

To best show a representation of developments over time, and to minimize the problem of dealing with surrogates, only shows featuring a complete nuclear family with a mother were selected. The 1960s appeared to be hard on fantasy families. Within the 1960s, "Bewitched" proved to be the top rated situational comedy with an intact family albeit in 5th place for the decade and 24th across the five decade period. In every decade but the 1960s the selected programs perfectly matched the top 10 list of shows over the last 50 years. The selected programs based on weighting and family composition are I Love Lucy (CBS), All in the Family (CBS), The Cosby Show (NBC), Roseanne (ABC), and Home Improvement (ABC).

### 3.1 Procedures

Two coders coded three episodes of each program. A total of 15 episodes were content analyzed. The two coders had a series of training sessions to familiarize them with the procedures, as well as develop final coding instructions and the code book.

Specifically, the coding procedure consisted of three parts. First, coders recorded program information such as title, network, and decade. Next, the demographic details of each episode were coded. This included family race, family class, parents' occupation, parents' apparent age, number of children, and children's age and gender. Finally, coders recoded several key variables, such as foolishness of portrayal and tendentiousness for each episode.

## 3.2 Definition of Concepts and Inter-coder Reliability

### 3.2.1 Comedic event

This study coded only the comedic events that

involved the mother character. Accordingly, the mother must be present in some fashion for a comedic moment to be coded. Every character including the mother was identified by their role as the originator of the joke, the recipient or an observer.

Just as simple jokes often begin with some development such as, "Why did the chicken cross the road," so humor on television may have some development prior to the punch line. From the point at which coders recognize the punch line eliciting laughter (often cued with a laugh track), the tape was rewound until coders discerned the point at which the setup for the humor began. In some cases there may be a running joke throughout the episode. This particular study only looked at each comedic episode within that string of jokes. For example, the mother has been kidded about her weight three times. After the delivery of each punch line, the coders looked for the start of a new comedic event even if it covered the same topic. For instance, the father pokes fun at the mother's weight - laughter - and then immediately mentions her new "see food" diet - laughter. These were considered two separate events.

### 3.2.2 Humor type

The type of humor is to reveal the typology on humor category. Based on the previous literature[11], this study coded for eight types of humor as summarized in the earlier section. In addition, if the comedic event involved at least two types of the above humor, coders coded it as a multiple type.

### 3.2.3 Dominant theme of humor

Each bit of joke work normally derives from a certain topic area as its starting place, including non-verbal humor. For example, if jokes were to involve sexual relations or lack thereof, it would be coded "1" for its romantic/sexual content. The

possible category were romantic, sexual, intimate relationships, work, children, other family issues, friends, household duties, hobbies, school, and other.

### 3.2.4 Portrayals of the mother in sitcoms

The portrayals of mother character in sitcoms were operationalized using a series of seven-point scales between pairs of opposing adjectives culled from a previous study[29]. The eight adjective pairs ranged from “wise” to “foolish,” “responsible” to “irresponsible,” “serious” to “silly,” “competent” to “inept,” “mature” to “childish,” “sensible” to “a buffoon,” “respectable” to “ridicule,” and “rational” to “irrational.” The possible responses ranged from “0” to “6.” The summated index of portrayals was created by summing the responses of each pair and dividing by eight. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this index was .964

### 3.2.5 Tendentiousness

This is a term that refers to humor that has aggressive or sexual components. It was measured in two ways: nominal and interval scales. For the nominal measurement, each coder decided whether the manifest nature of each comedic event was tendentious or not. In addition, this study asked coders to rate the degree of tendentiousness from none (0; indicating “innocent” humor) to overt threats (6; reflecting a physical threat of physical assault). The Cronbach’s Alpha for this variable was .882.

Cohen’s Kappa was used to assess the inter-coder reliability on each of the variables measured at the nominal level, with results ranging from a low of .669 (type), .741 (theme), .775 (tendentious nature), and to a high of .914 (joker). The overall average for inter-coder reliability among the ten nominal variables was .774. These reliability results were deemed acceptable and could proceed

A daffy woman constantly strives to become a star along with her bandleader husband and gets herself in the strangest situations.

A working class bigot constantly squabbles with his family over the important issues of the day.

The goings-on in the life of a successful African American family.

The story of lower class family struggling with life’s essential problems.

The story often revolves around cars, toys, and etc.

## 4. RESULTS

A total of 603 comedic events aimed at mother characters were content analyzed. On average, there were about 40 jokes per episode that involved the mother in some way. The mother told a mean of 14 jokes per episode and was the target of humor an average of 10 times per episode. The mother appeared as the third-party of humor an average of 4 times per episode. Episodes of programs from the 1950s comprised 22.2% of the sample, the 1970s 24.5%, the 1980s 12.1%, and the 1990s 41.1%.

The first research question investigates the relative prevalence of different humor types in television sitcoms. As shown in [Table 1], slapstick (34.7%) was the most prevalent humor type followed by surprise (19.1%), misunderstanding (16.1%), and irony (13.6%) across decades. On the other hand, parody (2.2%) was the humor type which was the least prevalent. The frequency of at least two types of humor being used simultaneously was very low (1.1%). This pattern was consistent over time.

The second research question focused on humor content, investigating the relative prevalence of different humor themes over time. As indicated in [Table 2], romantic/sexual topics (36.3%) were the

dominant theme over time except in the 1970s.

Table 1. Trends of Humor Typology

Type	1950s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
Slapstick	45 (33.6)	60 (40.5)	27 (37.0)	77 (31.2)	209 (34.7)
Surprise	25 (18.7)	24 (16.2)	13 (17.8)	53 (21.5)	115 (19.1)
Irony	26 (19.4)	12 (8.1)	7 (9.6)	37 (15.0)	82 (13.6)
Clowning	12 (9.0)	5 (3.4)	9 (12.3)	12 (4.9)	38 (6.3)
Satire	9 (6.7)	3 (2.0)	7 (9.6)	22 (8.9)	41 (6.8)
Misunderstanding	15 (11.2)	43 (29.1)	6 (8.2)	33 (13.4)	97 (16.1)
Parody	— (0.0)	— (0.0)	3 (4.1)	10 (4.0)	13 (2.2)
Multiple Types	2 (1.5)	1 (0.7)	1 (1.4)	3 (1.0)	7 (1.1)
Total	134 (100)	148 (100)	73 (100)	246 (100)	602 (100)

$\chi^2=60.941, df =21, p < .001$

The topic relevant to household duties is equal to 16.9% across decades, followed by other family issues (15.9%). Since the 1970s, children-related themes (12.4%) began to appear in the situation comedies content analyzed for this particular study.

Table 2. Trends of Humor Content

Content	1950s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
Romantic/Sexual	39 (32.5)	21 (18.8)	20 (29.9)	105 (49.8)	185 (36.3)
Work	2 (1.7)	3 (2.7)	3 (4.5)	22 (10.4)	30 (5.9)
Children	— (0.0)	32 (28.6)	10 (14.9)	21 (10.0)	63 (12.4)
Other family	21 (17.5)	26 (23.2)	25 (37.3)	9 (4.3)	81 (15.9)
Friend	— (0.0)	19 (17.0)	— (0.0)	4 (1.9)	23 (4.5)
Household duties	52 (43.3)	10 (8.9)	6 (9.0)	18 (8.5)	86 (16.9)
Hobbies	6 (5.0)	1 (0.9)	2 (3.0)	3 (1.4)	12 (2.4)
Other	— (0.0)	— (0.0)	1 (1.5)	29 (13.7)	30 (5.9)
Total	120 (100)	112 (100)	67 (100)	211 (100)	510 (100)

$\chi^2=274.68, df =21, p < .001$

The third research question explored the pattern of

foolishness of portrayals of sitcom mothers over time. As indicated in [Table 3], the means were slightly over the neutral mark of 3, indicating that most portrayals of the mother in the sample were relatively neutral, but moderately more foolish than wise on the average (overall M = 3.73, S.D. = 1.19). Though the increases are not linear, the means for the 1970s (M = 4.33, S.D. = .12) and 1980s (M = 4.88, S.D. = .75) are substantially higher than the means for the 1950s (M = 3.19, S.D. = .85) and the 1990s (M = 3.32, S.D. = 1.41).

Table 3. The Foolishness of Portrayals of Sitcom Mothers

Foolishness of portrayal	1950s (n=134)	1970s (n=148)	1980s (n=73)	1990s (n=248)	Total (n=603)
Mean	3.19 <sup>a</sup>	4.33 <sup>b</sup>	4.88 <sup>c</sup>	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	3.73
(S.D.)	(.85)	(.12)	(.75)	(1.41)	(1.19)

F(3,599) = 72.556, p < .001; 0 = wise, 6 = foolish  
a,b,c values with different subscripts were significantly different from each other at least at p < .05.

The last research question explores the pattern of tendentiousness of humor related to sitcom mothers over time. The nature of humor was overwhelmingly more tendentious over all (tendentious: 67.7% vs. non-tendentious: 32.3%;  $\chi^2 = 10.92, df =3, p < .05$ ) in terms of humor aimed at mothers. Although the tendentiousness degree was the highest in 1970s (M = 1.64, S.D. = 1.38), a post-hoc test showed significant differences [Table 4].

As a subgroup analysis, the study compared the degree of tendentiousness of the comedic events in which the mother played as a joker. As indicated in [Table 4], the 1970s showed the lowest degree of tendentiousness (M = .60, S.D. = 1.17) with significant differences between the 1970s and the 1980s (F(3, 209) = 6.09, p < .01). These results are interesting in that they may reflect the “power relationship” prevalent in the society of the 1970s. In other words, the tendentious nature of sitcom mothers in 1970s

Table 4. Tendentiousness Degree of Humor aimed at Mother

Degree of Tendentiousness	1950s (n = 134)	1970s (n = 148)	1980s (n = 73)	1990s (n = 247)	Total (n = 602)	F	P
Mean	1.30 (1.52)	1.64 (1.38)	1.23 (1.29)	1.61 (1.40)	1.50 (1.41)	2.73	$p < .05$
Mean*	1.39 <sup>ab</sup> (1.63)	.60 <sup>a</sup> (1.17)	2.13 <sup>b</sup> (1.55)	1.68 <sup>ab</sup> (1.43)	1.42 (1.51)	6.09	$p < .01$
When mother is a joker	1950s (n = 71)	1970s (n = 35)	1980s (n = 8)	1990s (n = 98)	Total (n = 212)	F	P

\* An additional analysis on the mean differences in tendentiousness of comedic event when the sitcom mother played as a joker.

\*\* 0 = none, 6 = overt threats

a,b,c Row values with different subscripts were significantly different from each other at least at  $p < .05$ .

increased when the mother played the role of recipient or third-party. It shows that women might be described as more “powerless” in the 1970s.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study had two primary goals. First, the study sought to build a global typology and identify themes of humor used in sitcoms. By doing so, it expects to set up a cornerstone for future studies on humor. Next, the study investigated portrayals and tendentiousness of humor involved in mother in sitcoms. Overall, the study charted the evolving characteristics of humor aimed at sitcom mothers from the 1950s to the 1990s.

First, the study substantiated that a previous humor typology used for audiovisual advertisements[11] can be applied to the television situation comedy as an effort to set up a global typology. In addition, the study found that slapstick was the most prevalent humor type over time. The prevalence of slapstick humor directly represents the tendentious humor involved in mother in sitcoms. Put another way, slapstick humor typically has an unfriendly nature and is frequently accompanied by malicious delight[11].

Second, the study showed the increasing pattern of foolishness of the portrayals of sitcom mothers

though it is slightly limited due to non-linearity for one decade. Considering the potential power of the media to construct of social reality, the results express concern about possible influences on viewer’s perceptions and attitudes toward women. This concern is particularly relevant for younger viewers whose attitudes may not yet be fully formed.

Lastly, this study found that romantic and sexual topics were dominant themes in the family situation comedy over the last 50 years. This result can also be related with the tendentiousness and gender role. In other words, when we consider the finding that males disparaged females significantly more often than females disparaged males[32], researchers may question how the relationship between the tendentiousness and gender surrounding sexual topic is. Future research needs to further investigate the differences in foolishness portrayals by mother’s role in the sitcom such as joker, recipient, and third-party, and tendentiousness by the relationship between the characters to explore the power relationship in detail.

As with all studies, limitations exist. The limitations naturally lead to the possible further research. First of all, there are serious limitations of generalizability of the convenience sample that strictly limits these findings to the confines of merely exploratory and preliminary data. Future research can perhaps analyze more samples such as the entire comedic events in the family situation comedy. For



example, the relationship humor type and humor nature needs to be further analyzed with other samples because this study content analyzed only mother related comedic events. In addition, the 1960s were not analyzed in the present study to reflect the top 10 list of shows over the last decades. Future study needs to include data from the 1960s to show well a representation of developments over the last 50 years.

Similarly, the typology of humor needs to be expanded to not only the family-based situation comedies but also the more recent types such as "Friends" to increase the applicability of the typology. Furthermore, future research may be able to consider humor in other types of media such as cable television and the Internet. A future research should also consider analyzing domestic sitcoms that has long been popular in Korean broadcasting industry. For those reasons, caution should be taken when interpreting the findings generated by the American sample.

Finally, the study was only concerned with the trends of individual use of humor. As Lynch mentioned, however, the function humor has within a social setting or society can have an important implication in clarifying theories on humor [3]. The effectiveness of humor in educational setting is a good example of this track. Therefore, analyzing the production of humor through content analysis and consumption of humor through experimental studies at the same time may be highly useful in building theory.

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