Reversed Gender Roles? Interpreting Behaviors of the Female Characters
On the Sitcom “How I Met Your Mother”

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Communication Capstone Seminar
Trinity University
Spring 2012
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Introduction

The sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” has proven itself as a breath of fresh air to the television world, as many of its characters are not placed in conventional roles. This content analysis aimed to investigate if the two female lead characters in the sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” portrayed gender role reversal in their behaviors. For this study, the term “gender role reversal” was defined as when a female exhibits stereotypical behavior associated with males, and vice versa.

According to Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory, stereotypical gender roles on television could play a part in developing people’s perceptions about gender roles in reality. If the two lead female characters, Robin Scherbatsky and Lily Aldrin, on “How I Met Your Mother” were found to demonstrate stereotypical male behaviors, it could be the beginning of a new era in television and ignite a shift in representations of gender roles.

Literature Review

GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES

According to social psychologists Eagly and Steffen, “gender stereotypes, like other social stereotypes, reflect perceivers' observations of what people do in daily life.”¹ Thus, the social roles that people engage in directly effect and define what society deems as stereotypical gender roles. Eagly and Steffen assert that the gender stereotypes of women as

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weaker than men and of women being more likely to be homemakers “stem from the tendency of perceivers to observe women in lower status roles than men.”

Knoll and Steinhagen found that there appears to be four different and self-determining components of gender stereotypes. These include “trait descriptors (e.g. self-assertion, concern for others), physical characteristics (e.g. hair length, body height), role behaviours (e.g. leader, taking care of children), and occupational status (e.g. truck driver, elementary school teacher, housewife).” Additionally, each of these components “has a masculine and a feminine version, with masculine and feminine components significantly more strongly associated with males and females, respectively.”

Ickes, a social psychologist, proposes that stereotypically, females are seen as subordinate, and males are viewed as dominant. He notes, “the ‘paradox’ of traditional gender roles is, in this sense, a product of the opposition between what our genes and past culture dispose us to do and what our present culture now prescribes.” He does not believe there has necessarily been a change in gender roles, but that there has been a change in the interpretation of them.

Knoll and Steinhagen attest to this, stating that social psychologists tend to agree that “gender roles are mainly determined by the social environment, and not by biology, although both approaches provide explanations for gender roles and sex differences. The major changes in gender roles over the prior years, however, provide some evidence that social rather than biological factors determine these outcomes, because biology has not

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changed over this period.”\textsuperscript{6} Eagley and Steffen assert that these solidified gender stereotypes will not evaporate until social roles are divided equally between the sexes.\textsuperscript{7}

In contrast, Garcia-Retamero, Lopez-Zafra, & Muller believe that gender stereotypes are flexible structures that change over time.\textsuperscript{8} They assert that in more modernized societies, these stereotypes are not necessarily perpetuated any longer. They found that in more rural populations, gender role stereotypes, where men are dominant and females are subservient, still hold true.\textsuperscript{9} Despite whether researchers believe stereotypes still hold true in today’s society, most agree on specific gender stereotypes for males and for females.

**GENDER AND TELEVISION**

George Gerbner stands as one of the pioneers of social theories surrounding the long-term effects of television. The cultivation theory, one of his most influential hypotheses, asserts that the more time a person spends watching television, or “living in the television world,” the more likely they are to believe the social reality portrayed on television.\textsuperscript{10} Gerbner surmises that “stories socialize us into roles of gender…and offer models of conformity or targets for rebellion.”\textsuperscript{11}

With the advent of the television, children are now “born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average more than seven hours a day,” according to


\textsuperscript{11} Book: Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research By James Shanahan, Michael Morgan (Foreward by George Gerbner). Page ix (1)
Applying the cultivation theory to gender stereotype portrayals on television, the more time that people spend watching these stereotypical gender roles, then the more likely it is that they will believe them.

Kim and Lowry also found gender inequalities and the adherence to gender stereotypes on prime-time television. They believe that these stereotypical gender roles on television could help develop people’s perceptions about gender roles in reality, according to Gerbner’s cultivation theory. Researchers Emons, Wester, and Scheepers found that “despite developments suggesting a more equal depiction of occupational roles through time, male characters still work outside the house more often, have a wider range of jobs and have higher status and higher-paying occupations than female characters” on television.

In Hill’s gender study on the television show “Desperate Housewives,” she suggests that although lead women in television shows became more empowered by the late 1960s, these shows still “positioned the role of women in the family and placed them firmly in a domestic domain.” Hill notes that even in 2004, many television shows, including “Desperate Housewives,” were still placing women in the home, and males in the workforce.

12 Book: Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research By James Shanahan, Michael Morgan (Foreward by George Gerbner). Page xi (3)
Likewise, Glascock found that women are still underrepresented on prime-time television.\textsuperscript{17} He also states that females were generally portrayed in lower-paying, less esteemed occupations on television. Stereotypes for males on television include physical aggression, while stereotypes for females include sharing, giving, and affection.\textsuperscript{18}

Additionally, a study on television and cultivating gender role attitudes in Japan found that “Despite marked changes in the status of women within Japanese society and heightened consciousness with respect to gender equality, many studies have indicated that equality between the sexes has not been fully achieved.” It is apparent that women are, more often than not, either underrepresented or placed in stereotypical gender roles on television cross culturally.

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN SITCOMS

Much like gender representations on the entirety of television, females are also either underrepresented or represented stereotypically in sitcoms.\textsuperscript{19} Although the female to male ratio in sitcoms slowly began to even out over the decades, during the wave of feminism in the 1980s, sitcoms were used as a way to “break in” single, working women to viewers.\textsuperscript{20} Not until the late 1980s were there even a successful entirely female-centered situation comedy – “The Golden Girls,” which followed the lives of four older women sharing a home in Miami, Florida.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Glascock, J. (2001), 667.
Haimoff found that women on prime-time television’s top five sitcoms are portrayed as unable to find or keep a job, and believes that women are represented stereotypically because the writers’ depiction of women on these sitcoms is sexist. Despite the emergence of female-centered sitcoms in the 1980s, these shows often typically still portrayed women as “needing” men and almost only talking about relationships.

In contrast, Senzani found in her study on the sitcom “Roseanne,” that “Roseanne never misses a chance to mock the male gender and reaffirm women’s voice”. “Roseanne” used humor to debunk typical stereotypes, but this sitcom was an exception to the norm. Ultimately, sitcoms have evolved over the years. While some gender stereotypes remain, others have become more slanted towards feminist ideals, although these are the very few.

REPRESENTATIONS OF MEN IN SITCOMS

Fursich, Jefferson, and Walsh found that in popular sitcoms, attractive and smart women are often married to generally unattractive and incompetent men. Despite this, the husband in these sitcoms still appears to run the household. They note that, in general, “fathers and husbands in situation comedies often play by different rules than men on other kinds of television shows.” They found that unlike dramas or other television shows, men on sitcoms are rarely “macho men,” and usually have quirky, funny, or dumb personalities.

A clear evolution of sitcom males as “intellectually superior” to “being mocked” happens from the 1950s to the 1990s.\textsuperscript{27}

However, Kulshrestha found that new millennium men, specifically on the sitcom “How I Met Your Mother,” are defined by their “bromance,” which “demonstrates a new stereotypically feminine approach to the typical male-male homosocial relationship.”\textsuperscript{28}

Haimoff believes men are still stereotypically represented and are stuck in the past, while Kulshrestha believes that in many sitcoms, men’s relationships have evolved and become less stereotypical.

\textbf{Significance}

The concept of gender stereotypes is both a relevant and important aspect of television, specifically sitcoms. In the past, many sitcoms adhered to stereotypical gender roles, but throughout the decades gender roles have evolved. After women began entering the workforce, the stereotype of women solely as homemakers could no longer hold true. Thus, by the 1970s, sitcoms evolved and broadened, incorporating working mothers into their plots, such as the sitcom “Alice,” where a single mother finds a job at a diner in Phoenix, Arizona, and she and her son start a new life.

“How I Met Your Mother” is different from many sitcoms. While some aspects may seem like they adhere to stereotypical gender roles, like Lily as an elementary school teacher and Marshall as a lawyer, many of the characters’ behaviors are not conventional regarding gender. The two female lead characters display behaviors, such as frequenting bars and engaging in beer chugging contests, normally attributed to males. In many cases, this

specific sitcom portrays stereotypical gender role reversal, which is something that has not been frequently researched.

It is worthy to examine these behaviors regarding gender roles because, according to Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory, stereotypical gender roles on television potentially play a part in developing people’s perceptions about gender roles in reality. In this sense, the gender role reversal in “How I Met Your Mother” has paved the way for gender representations on future sitcoms, which could potentially help mold the perceptions about gender roles in future generations of television programming. This analysis of potential gender role reversals could also provide significant information for future sitcoms as to why “How I Met Your Mother” is so popular.

“How I Met Your Mother” also illustrates a societal shift. It has become much more prevalent, and acceptable, to see certain aspects of gender role reversal in daily life. As women have become more established in places like the workforce and the political sphere, stereotypical gender roles cannot necessarily apply to the majority of women any longer. “How I Met Your Mother” and other sitcoms like it have become more true representations of society today than sitcoms which adhere to stereotypical gender roles.

**Research Question**

The specific research question this study attempted to answer was “Do the two female lead characters in the sitcom ‘How I Met Your Mother’ portray gender role reversal in their behaviors? The term “gender role reversal” was defined when a female exhibited stereotypical behavior associated with males, and vice versa. The hypothesis of the study
was that the two female lead characters would in fact portray gender role reversal in their behaviors.

**Research Methods**

The method for this research was a content analysis. First, behaviors had to be defined which are traditionally attributed to males and females. To determine which behaviors were gendered, research in the areas of media, studies, gender studies, and sociology were consulted.

A codebook containing 31 questions examining the type of behavior (i.e. “going to a bar”), the frequency of the behavior in the episode, and if the behavior could be categorized as typically male or typically female, was devised. The codebook was applied to the behaviors of the two characters in one randomly selected episode from each of the past six seasons. These six episodes were selected by putting the total number of episodes for each season into a random number generator.

The characters that were coded were the two female lead characters: Robin Scherbatsky and Lily Aldrin. The two characters were not coded separately because this study focused on looking at female behaviors as a whole, not individual characters’ behaviors. The codebook was split into two sections: stereotypical male behaviors and stereotypical female behaviors. Coding was based on if the female character engaged in the following behaviors:

**Stereotypical Male Behaviors:**
- Talking about drinking beer/scotch
- Drinking beer/scotch
- Talking about sports/games
• Participating in sports/games
• Engaging in casual sex
• Talking about casual sex
• Engaging in outdoor and/or rugged activities
• Talking about outdoor and/or rugged activities
• Swearing/cursing/offensive language
• Talking about career or job
• Breaking the law
• Ridiculing/Insulting/Taunting/Joking
• Verbal aggression
• Physical aggression
• Talking about not wanting children
• Talking about picking up women
• Smoking cigarettes or cigars

Stereotypical Female Behaviors:
• Nurturing/Affection
• Flirting
• Primping
• Shopping
• Whining
• Gossiping
• Talking about feelings/emotions
• Being emotional
• Drinking wine
• Talking about relationships
• Talking about wanting children
• Mediating
• Talking about fashion/clothes
• Crying
In total there were 17 stereotypical male behaviors to code for, and 14 stereotypical female behaviors to code for. Because the study focused on gender role reversal of females, i.e. acting like males, it was appropriate to have more male behaviors to code for. The stereotypical female behaviors were added to the codebook to have a basis on which to verify findings.

An inter-coder reliability test was used before coding the episodes. Two other coders viewed three episodes of the sitcom, which were not used in this study, and marked their findings. There was more than 90% agreement between all of the coders in the inter-coder reliability test. Once the six episodes for the study were coded, all of the information was placed into SPSS to develop frequency tables and statistical representations of the data.

Results

Stereotypical male behaviors occurred more frequently in the six coded episodes than stereotypical female behaviors. Out of the 17 stereotypical male behaviors, six of the behaviors were exhibited by either of the females in four or more of the episodes, or 66.7% or more of the time.29 Out of the 14 stereotypical female behaviors, only two behaviors were exhibited by either of the females in four or more of the episodes, or 66.7% or more of the time.30

For significant findings regarding stereotypical male behaviors, the female characters either participated in or talked about sports or games in five of the six episodes, or a total of

29 Refer to Graph 1
30 Refer to Graph 2
83.3% of the time. Likewise, one or more of the female characters engaged in swearing, cursing, or offensive language in five out of the six coded episodes for a total of 83.3%. \(^{31}\)

Combing the male gendered behaviors of “Verbal aggression” and “Physical aggression” resulted in one “Aggression” category for the final analysis. One or more of the female characters engaged in aggression, either verbal or physical, in five out of the six coded episodes, or 83.3% of the time. However, the most significant result regarding conventional male behaviors was one or more of the female characters either engaged in ridiculing, insulting, taunting or joking in all six of the coded episodes, for a total of 100% of the time. \(^{32}\)

For significant findings regarding stereotypical female behaviors, one or more of the female characters engaged in talking about relationships in four out of the six coded episodes, or 66.7% of the time. Combining the female gendered behaviors of “Being emotional” or “Talking about feelings/emotions” resulted in one “Emotional” category for the final analysis. One or more of the female characters engaged in being or emotional or talking about emotions in all of the six coded episodes, or 100% of the time. \(^{33}\)

One unanticipated finding involving stereotypical female behaviors was that neither of the female characters engaged in shopping or talking about fashion/clothes in any of the six coded episodes, or 0% of the time. This was surprising in general, as these behaviors are commonly expected of women, and also because there were other significant findings in a few of the stereotypical female behavior categories. \(^{34}\)

\(^{31}\) Refer to Table 1
\(^{32}\) Refer to Table 1
\(^{33}\) Refer to Table 2
\(^{34}\) Refer to Table 2
TABLE 1

Significant Findings for Stereotypical Male Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Stereotypical Male Behaviors</th>
<th>Episode 1</th>
<th>Episode 2</th>
<th>Episode 3</th>
<th>Episode 4</th>
<th>Episode 5</th>
<th>Episode 6</th>
<th>Total Percent of Time Exhibited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports/ Games (participating or talking about)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swearing/ Cursing/ Offensive Language</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression (verbal and physical)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridiculing/ Insulting/ Taunting/ Joking</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2

Significant Findings for Stereotypical Female Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Stereotypical Female Behaviors</th>
<th>Episode 1</th>
<th>Episode 2</th>
<th>Episode 3</th>
<th>Episode 4</th>
<th>Episode 5</th>
<th>Episode 6</th>
<th>Total Percent of Time Exhibited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional (being or talking about emotions)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about relationships</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion/Shopping (participating in or talking about)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graph 1: These are significant male behaviors that occurred in four or more of the six coded episodes, or 66.7% or more of the time.

Graph 2: These are significant female behaviors that occurred in four or more of the six coded episodes, or 66.7% or more of the time.
Discussion

Many aspects of gender role reversal are indisputably apparent in the results of this study. The two main female characters in the sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” engaged in more stereotypical male behaviors than stereotypical female behaviors in the six coded episodes. 52.94% of the total stereotypical male behaviors occurred in more than half of the coded episodes, while only 28.57% of the total stereotypical female behaviors occurred in more than half of the coded episodes.

As a whole, the hypothesis that the two female lead characters would portray gender role reversal in their behaviors is supported by the findings in this study. However, the female characters do no portray complete gender role reversal. The characters still maintain some female stereotypical behaviors, such as being emotional and talking about relationships.

This is a realistic result, as complete gender role reversal would most likely not seem reasonable to an audience. Making the characters exhibit both stereotypical male and female behaviors was a strategic move when creating a new sitcom, as it easily makes the characters more relatable and more appealing to a broader audience.

SPORTS/GAMES

The two main female characters either participated in or talked about sports or games in five of the six episodes, or a total of 83.3% of the episodes. This finding supports the hypothesis that the two female main characters would engage in gender role reversal. In five of the six episodes coded, either Lily or Robin participated or competed in sports or sports-like games, or talked about this subject matter.
Social psychologists Eagly and Steffen purport that gender stereotypes reflect peoples’ observations of what other people do in daily life.”\(^{35}\) Thus, the social roles that people engage in directly effect and define what society deems as stereotypical gender roles. In this society, males are much more typically associated with sports – especially sports such as football, where almost no women are present. Eagly and Steffen also assert that there is a gender stereotype of women seen as weaker than men which solidifies why women may have not historically engaged or competed in sports.\(^{36}\)

When either Robin or Lily engage in or talk about sports, it makes them appear as “one of the guys” to their male friends. In many of the coded episodes where engaging in or talking about sports is present, these behaviors form a social bond with the male characters on this sitcom. Because these actions occurred in 83.3% of the episodes coded, it is clear that the female characters, through gender role reversal, perpetuate this typically male stereotype.

OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

The two main female characters swore, cursed, or used offensive language in five of the six episodes, or a total of 83.3% of the episodes coded. This finding supports the hypothesis that the two female main characters would engage in gender role reversal, as


males on prime time television have been found to use offensive or foul language more often than females.\textsuperscript{37}

Researchers Sapolsky and Kaye found that on prime time television, “women not only utter profanity less [than men], they also hold more negative attitudes toward the use of such language.”\textsuperscript{38} However, results from this study on the two female characters from “How I Met Your Mother” clearly contradict this stereotype. Noting the high percentage of episodes in which swearing, cursing, or offensive language was found, it clear that the female characters exhibit gender role reversal in this behavior as well.

Despite the growing percentage of women using offensive language on prime time television, “the perception remains that swearing is acceptable for men but inappropriate behavior for women.”\textsuperscript{39} By using the male-associated behavior of offensive language on five of the six coded episodes on this sitcom, it is evident that the main female characters portray gender role reversal in this aspect.

AGGRESSION

Combining the behaviors of verbal aggression and physical aggression into one “Aggression” category, the two female characters portrayed aggression in 83.3\% of the coded episodes. As this is more than the majority of coded episodes, this finding also supports the hypothesis that the females would engage in gender role reversal of their behaviors. Often, this aggression was coupled with another male gendered behavior such as engaging or competing in sports, or taunting and ridiculing.

Glascock found that stereotypes for males on television include physical aggression, while stereotypes for females include sharing, giving, and affection.\(^{40}\) Likewise Eron and colleagues contend that there has been a long history of aggression associated with males on television.\(^{41}\) Consequently, it is evident from these research studies that aggression is predominantly associated with males.

Based on these assertions, the female characters on “How I Met Your Mother” clearly show gender role reversal in this verbally and physically aggressive behavior. This reinforcement of stereotypical male gender behaviors by scholars validates that the findings in this study support gender role reversal of the two main female characters.

**INSULTING/JOKING**

The most significant finding in this study was that regarding ridiculing, insulting, taunting and joking with others. This behavior occurred the most number of times throughout the study. At least one of the main female characters engaged in this behavior in six out of six, or 100%, of the episodes coded.

Fursich, Jefferson, and Walsh found that unlike dramas or other television shows, men on sitcoms are rarely “macho men,” and usually have quirky, funny, or dumb personalities. Men typically taunt or joke with each other on sitcoms as a form of camaraderie, while it is much less typical for women to do this.\(^{42}\)

The reason for the women demonstrating this stereotypical male behavior more than any of the other male gendered behaviors may have to do with the behavior’s ability to

\(^{40}\) Glascock, J. (2001), 667.


easily cross genders. While it is more often associated with males on sitcoms, when women taunt or joke with other characters, especially males, it provides an outlet for humor because it is unexpected. This specific behavior is also associated with males less than the other stereotypical male behaviors such as engaging in sports, using offensive language, and exhibiting aggression.

RELATIONSHIPS

For findings regarding stereotypical female behaviors, one or more of the female characters engaged in talking about relationships in four out of the six coded episodes, or 66.7% of the time. This finding was unexpected, as it is a significant percentage and contradicts the hypothesis that the female characters would engage in gender role reversal. Glatzer notes that despite the emergence of female-centered sitcoms, these shows often typically still portrayed women as “needing” men and almost only talking about relationships. Although the female characters on “How I Met Your Mother” are not portrayed as necessarily needing men, it is apparent from the findings that in the majority of episodes coded that they engaged in talking about relationships. While this result is somewhat surprising, it makes sense for the female characters to have some female gendered behaviors, or the character would not be believable to the audience.

EMOTIONAL

Another significant finding regarding female gendered behaviors involved the “Emotional” category of behavior. This was devised by combining the female gendered

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behaviors of “Being emotional” or “Talking about feelings/emotions.” One or more of the female characters engaged in being or emotional or talking about emotions in all of the six coded episodes, or 100% of the time.\textsuperscript{44}

Although this behavior was observed in 100% of the coded episodes, as with the behavior of “Talking about relationships,” it is not completely unexpected. This finding does contradict the initial hypothesis, but this stereotypical female behavior is needed to balance out the female characters. Without the emotional aspect, the female characters would not be convincing.

**FASHION/SHOPPING**

One unanticipated finding involving stereotypical female behaviors was that neither of the female characters engaged in shopping or talking about fashion/clothes in any of the six coded episodes, or 0% of the time. This was surprising in general, as these behaviors are commonly expected of women, and also because there were other significant findings in a few of the stereotypical female behavior categories.

However, this finding does in fact support the hypothesis that the female characters would engage in gender role reversal. When the female characters exhibit certain female stereotyped behaviors, they tend to regard emotions and feelings, not superficial things like clothes or fashion.

**Conclusion**

As this was merely a minor study, a much larger sample size would have been necessary for a completely accurate analysis of gender role reversal on “How I Met Your

\textsuperscript{44} Refer to Table 2
Mother.” However, despite demonstrating some characteristic female behaviors, the two main female characters on the sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” do ultimately portray gender role reversal much more in their behaviors. The female characters did not demonstrate complete gender role reversal, but many more of the stereotypical male behaviors were demonstrated than the stereotypical female behaviors, thus ultimately proving the hypothesis that the two female lead characters would portray gender role reversal correct.

Having these females exhibit more stereotypical male behaviors than stereotypical female behaviors created a new style of sitcom that could relate to a wider audience. Males possibly see Robin and Lily as identifiable or someone that they wanted to be friends with themselves. This apparent gender role reversal could also possibly account for the popularity of this sitcom, as it presents something new within the sitcom genre.

Further research on this genre could include incorporating more characters on popular sitcoms that portray gender role reversal into a larger study regarding stereotypical gender roles. If more characters on popular sitcoms engage in gender role reversal, this could provide important information regarding audience research for writers and television experts. Likewise, these new representations of gender roles could potentially help mold the perceptions about gender roles in future generations of television.
References


Episodes


