THE GANG’S IN A THESIS: AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICAN TELEVISION’S DARK HORSE SITCOM “IT’S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA”

A Senior Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in American Studies

By

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Washington, D.C.
April 26, 2017
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ABSTRACT

Rob McElhenney’s television series “It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia” goes against all conventional and traditional norms of the sitcom genre. With the initial pilot costing less than $100 to produce, a group of three friends signed with the sub-network FX in order to bring their unique and off-the-cusp twist on the traditional family sitcom to life. However, while it goes against the mainstream, the show has risen in popularity and is currently the longest running live-action comedy series to date. Following a brief examination of the evolution of the sitcom genre itself and a deeper analysis on “Always Sunny” through fan blogs, interviews with the producers and cast, and reviewing of particular episodes, one can better understand how the outlandish nature of the show has led to its success. Through disrupting the classic sitcom formula, creating unlikable characters, using low-budget/gonzo-esque cinematography, and mirroring current events with a unique twist, “Always Sunny” has gone where no other sitcom has gone before and rendered the unconventional effective.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my adviser Ed Ingebretsen, Ph.D, for providing me with invaluable insight and guidance throughout this entire process. Without his mentoring, this piece would not have been possible. Professor Ingebretsen challenged me to complete my best academic work and encouraged me to pursue my intellectual curiosities in film and media. I am honored to have had the pleasure of sharing this journey with him.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge and extend my sincerest gratitude to Professor Erika Seamon for deepening my thirst for knowledge and passion in the field of American Studies. As her student over the past three years, my writing, analytical skills, and ability to create thoughtful and convincing arguments have improved exponentially. Professor Seamon has contributed to my development into the American Studies scholar I am today.

I also would like to thank Colva Weissenstein, who initially inspired me to pursue my thesis topic. Her knowledge on my subject matter as well as her constant support greatly impacted my writing process and I cannot thank her enough.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my American Studies peers, family and friends for all of their encouragement and support, and for putting up with my uncontrollable laughter.
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INTRODUCTION

2:30pm. On a Friday. Philadelphia, PA. Muddled argument in the background. “Paddy’s Pub” appears on the screen as the employees argue over whether the janitor should wear gloves as he serves customers ice with his bare hands. An old man enters the shot, sits down with the arguing group of people at the bar, and brings up his latest news. “The gang” discuss their lack of care and interest for ever being nominated for the “Best Bar” award. The screen blacks out, displays the episode title “The Gang Tries Desperately to Win an Award,” and the theme music commences whilst displaying token areas of Philadelphia.

“It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” created by Rob McElhenney in 2005, is unlike any American Television sitcom to date due to its unconventional film techniques and controversial themes. The show is currently running its 12th season, but has signed up for 14, tying it with “Ozzie & Harriet” (a comedy-variety show that ran from the 50’s-60’s on the ABC Network) for the longest-running comedy series in television history.¹ Over the years, “Always Sunny” has accumulated a large fanbase, especially with college students, becoming one of the most popular shows on Hulu when it was added in 2008.

“Always Sunny” effectively pushes television norms with its idiosyncratic production format and outlandish themes, which has led to the show’s success. With its unique plot-lines, distinct psychologically troubled characters, and low-budget cinematography, the show has picked up a cult-like status: it has accumulated a large group of passionate fans who are dedicated to the cast, particular phrases, songs, memorabilia, etc. Unlike other more traditional sitcoms, “Always Sunny” is not family friendly and targets a specific audience with its offensive

sense of humor. Although we live during a time where political correctness is of the utmost importanc,
discusses the methods by which the show influences and is influenced by contemporary American culture. Hilmes centers her essay on the show “Cheers” and how it is an explicit example of the mediation of rhetoric, economics, and ideology of high versus low culture on television. I found her essay helpful because she discussed the idea of the “workplace family” as a situational premise, which is a similar format to that of “Always Sunny” especially as it relates to the mediation of cultural and ideological differences and the representation of class/cultural backgrounds through characterization and conflict resolution. These essays allowed me to gain a better understanding of the evolution of the sitcom as well as a better glimpse at other works that are providing similar narratives concerning the sitcom genre and its place in American television.

Mary Garis’s article “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom, From Studying 1980 To Predicting 2020” provides a different perspective on the evolution of the sitcom. Through its chronologically organized time periods, Garis includes the top 10 sitcoms of that time as well as a variety of different subcategories that mark the changes to the sitcom formula over time. This source is significant because it provides a more recent take on the development of the sitcom genre, given that the article was written in 2015. It also provides a clear criteria for tracking the changes in the sitcom format over time. Overall, Garis’s article provides important background information on the evolution of the sitcom through its utilization of a particular checklist to mark important changes made over the years. At the end of the article, Garis discusses where she believes the sitcom genre is headed, especially in regard to the implementation of hilarious lead women, which is an interesting thought to consider given the comedic and raunchy nature of

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5 Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, xix.

Dee, the only female main character in “Always Sunny.”

Gerard Jones’s *Honey, I’m Home!: Sitcoms, Selling the American Dream*, further examines the sitcom by observing pop culture through popular family sitcoms. The author believes that family sitcoms reflect and mold public taste. Jones’s book explores the way in which family sitcoms create and influence public opinion.\(^7\) His work demonstrates how family sitcoms promote and interact with the American Dream and the picture of the ideal American family. While “Always Sunny” goes the opposite route by poking fun at the typical American dream and family in an outrageous manner, the show nonetheless offers a skewed version of very topical societal and political issues.

Nicholas Laham’s *Currents of Comedy on the American Screen: How Film and Television Deliver Different Laughs for Changing Times* further delves into the inner workings of the sitcom. This source examines the progression of comedy in television programs, expanding beyond the sitcom. The author discusses five periods in particular and analyzes the most prevalent comedic trends of each and asks how each trend relates to the era in which it was created. The first period examines the years of 1934-1942, focusing on how “screwball comedies,” a type of comedy popular during the Great Depression, deflected from the gloomy truths of the era.\(^8\) The second chapter analyzes the period of 1940-1951, which is characterized by the use of suspense comedy, which showcased an even darker outlook on social affairs due to

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America’s position in WWII. The 1950’s mark the next time period, where husband-and-wife sitcoms seemed to reinforce post-war sexism. The fourth chapter goes further into detail on the evolution of the sitcom in the 1950’s from a more physical and exaggerated form of comedy to a more realistic one. Finally, the fifth chapter examines the reintroduction of the suspense comedy during the 1970’s-1980’s, with the idea of the “dumb cop/spy.” This source promotes the idea that television comedy has so much more to offer than initially meets the eye and that the evolving cultural background of the sitcom has defined American society.

In Meg James’s “It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia: A low-budget hit,” as well as Stefan Blitz’s “The $85 TV Pilot: The Origins of IT’S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA,” the two articles discuss the evolution of the series. These two sources provided accurate chronologies laden with quotes from interviews with the creators of the show and producers from FX, original and unedited pilot episode footage, and monetary information regarding the show’s budget and overall profit. These articles provide significant background information to my thesis topic, allowing me to provide thoughtful analysis on the development of the show and how it fits into the sitcom narrative.

---------------- METHODOLOGY ----------------

At the beginning stages of my thesis research, I explored the evolution of “Always Sunny’s” production value; I hoped to better illuminate our understanding of contemporary television sitcom productions as well as demonstrate how the show connects with and pushes


social boundaries in American society, especially as applied to relevant political and cultural issues. Through this research, my thesis became structured around a close analysis of the show itself, with particular attention paid to the production value of the show and its development over the years into a successful and critically acclaimed dark horse version of the sitcom.

Aside from the show, which I used as my primary source for background information and critical support, I also looked at various works focusing on the critical theory of situational comedies and how they fit into American television. Further, I reviewed interviews with the cast/creators of the show. Though the central theme of my proposal has not altered, my methodological process has proved more flexible than I had initially predicted. Although my thesis was proving to be more flexible, I still maintained my close analysis of “Always Sunny” through episodes, scholarly reviews, and interviews. This research served as a means of understanding key elements that make the show unique. I have described any changes made to my research question/thought process in the following methodology analysis. I conclude by explaining how such revisions and interdisciplinary focus have been beneficial for my continuing project.

Joanne Morreale’s *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader* and Gerard Jones’s *Honey, I'm Home!: Sitcoms, Selling the American Dream*, provided background information in describing the evolution of the sitcom, especially in its relation to the American viewer. To better understand how “Always Sunny” fits into the American sitcom narrative it is important to understand why the show is unique; what does the show do differently that makes it successful?

Through interviews and podcasts, I was able to gain an insider perspective on how the cast members interact with one another as well as their thoughts on the changes that have been made over the duration of the show. Due to the fact that “Always Sunny” is a relatively new
show, there are no archives with interviews; however, I was able to find interviews with the cast on YouTube, fan websites, online news publications, as well as the official “Always Sunny” website. The interviews that I decided to watch and include in my thesis were all chosen because of their content, which either related to the evolution of the show, provided background/behind the scenes insight, discussed the show in relation to current events, or showcased the cast discussing their own or each other’s characters. These interviews offer a unique window into the insight associated with my research question that other types of texts cannot because no secondary source can accurately describe why or how the cast members truly connect with each other to come up with their witty banter and improvised scenes. Interviews provide a necessary foundation before analyzing how the show connects and pushes social boundaries in American society. These interviews also helped me formulate my final research question and claim. The more the cast talked about the craziness of the episodes, the more I realized that the success of the show is due to the outlandish themes and uniquely formatted plotline.

The creative twist that the creators use to alter political/social events provides a completely different narrative to such a mainstream topic. The show is not necessarily taking a stance on a certain issue; rather, it is taking an issue that is in the mainstream and turning it completely on its head, thus shocking and drawing the viewer into the episode. This goes along with an idea mentioned in my analytical map about fiction mirroring reality. The show takes these real events that are currently occurring and flips them into something seemingly unrecognizable. Through analyzing the interviews, I am able to understand how the cast accomplished this in a way that was effective.

Finally, I studied the show itself in order to examine why the show attracts people to its unusual episodes. The creators turn a relevant news story into something absurd. Through
examining cast interviews, I uncovered that NPR played a role in influencing episode themes: I connected the release of several episodes to NPR stories. Aside from analyzing how the show is able to provide a unique commentary on current political/social events, I was also interested in tracking any changes that were made throughout the progression of the show. For example, I looked behind the scenes at budgets, original scripts/pilots, interviews of the cast members and producers, and any connections that episodes may have had with important social/political events occurring around the time of filming. The show is currently the longest running live-action comedy series to date, recently signing on to film two more seasons, adding up to a total of 14. With my thesis, I am attempting to pull away the curtain and see why “Always Sunny” is able to remain successful despite its outlandish take on sensitive themes that would ordinarily scare away an audience.

---------------- OVERVIEW ----------------

This thesis paper will be a traditional written thesis divided into four chapters along with an introduction and conclusion that demonstrate the power of the show’s outlandish nature. In my introduction, I will begin with a discussion of the show “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” followed by my main claim suggesting that the show has achieved its cult-like status due to its uniquely effective thematic schemes, cinematography, character development, and production values.

The first chapter will focuses on the evolution and analysis of the traditional sitcom formula from the 1950’s to present. While providing this background information, I also weave in similarities and differences between the classic sitcom formula and the often idiosyncratic formula of “Always Sunny.” Finally, I examine the evolution of “Always Sunny” and how it both differs from and fits into the sitcom narrative. The objective of this chapter is to analyze the
development of the show’s outlandish tendencies over the years, which allowed the show to evolve into a successful and critically acclaimed low-class version of the sitcom while also noting the format and influence of sitcoms preceding “Always Sunny.” It is important that the reader understands background information regarding the traditional sitcom formula in order to better understand how it has transformed over the years, leading to the creation of “Always Sunny.” This chapter supports my thesis statement because a thorough analysis of the evolution of the show allows the reader to better understand how the show has become increasingly successful over time due to the outlandish themes presented in the episodes.

The second chapter centers on the production value and cinematographic style of the show. This section begins with the show’s unique origin and relationship with the FX Network, followed by a description of its tumultuous start and struggle to gain viewership before its eventual breakthrough. While the first half of this chapter is dedicated to the more quantifiable reasons for the show’s success, the second half of the chapter analyzes the unique cinematography and improvisational tendencies that account for the qualitative reasons for its success.

Viewers are attracted to the absurd schemes and themes in each episode. The show has a particular style of gonzo-esque cinematography and dark sense of humor that make it unique amongst other mainstream comedic television series, which may in turn be a commentary on viewership/consumerism as a whole. It is important to understand that the production value and filming/thematic methods go hand in hand and contribute to the unconventional and against-the-mainstream qualities that make the show unique. The objective of this chapter is to describe how the unique nature of the show’s cinematography enhances the overall production value and vice versa. I review where, how, and when the episodes were filmed and research whether the budget
for each episode changed as the series became more successful, describing why the low-budget entertainment quality of the show is a part of what makes it so unique.

The third chapter focuses on the characters of “Always Sunny.” The show is centered on a group of people that the audience loves to hate. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the relationship between the cast members both in real life and on the show allows the eccentric themes and schemes presented throughout each episode to be effective. The absurdity of “Always Sunny” is a main reason for the show’s success; however, in a way, the characters of the show are realistic: the show is fiction mirroring reality. This chapter contributes to my thesis because it demonstrates how the outlandish nature of the characters desperately trying to prove themselves allows the show to be successful.

My final chapter discusses how “Always Sunny” mirrors and utilizes current events. This section notes the importance of NPR and the need for the writers to stay informed on current social/political events as a means of coming up with material for the series. With an examination of how the show evolves around current events, I further analyze the political incorrectness of the episodes. The objective of this chapter is to inform the reader that this political element enriches the schemes and prompts the ludicrous behavior of the characters as they attempt and fail to prove that they are morally sound. The chapter also hopes to demonstrate how “Always Sunny” provides a hyperreal sense of reality; the show is able to take a current event and turn it into an over exaggerated version of its reality.

To conclude, I tie together my arguments from each chapter in order to support my main claim: through breaking away from the conventional sitcom formula, “Always Sunny” appeals to a large viewership and emerges as the longest-running live-action comedy series to date. I reiterate how one of the main themes in the show is the idea of unpredictability: in contrast to
traditional sitcoms, the producers follow no comedic formulas when creating episodes (no laugh track, no real plot, no typical catchphrases, etc.). This is one of the reasons why the show is attractive to viewers; viewers have learned to expect the unexpected. The eccentric nature of the show with its unique production values, cinematographic style, characterization of unlikable people, and twist on current events leads to the show’s success.
CHAPTER I

Sitcom Formulas and Predictability

American television has evolved through the years; from the 1950’s to present day, the
domestic sitcom genre especially has altered dramatically from its humble beginnings. During
the 80’s, sitcoms represented the clean cut and pure American values. Over the years, the sitcom
has transformed into a multidimensional entity with eccentric cast members and circumstances.
The Merriam-Webster dictionary’s definition provides us the most simplistic classification of a
sitcom, as “a show that is on television regularly and that is about a group of characters who are
involved in different funny situations.”\(^\text{12}\) “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia”, exemplifies how
the stylistic and cultural elements of the sitcom have evolved since the 50’s. However, “Always
Sunny” is not your typical sitcom. The show has unique production values that have matured as
the seasons continue. “Always Sunny” does not adhere to the normal standards of present-day
sitcoms; it rejects convention through its raunchy content and explicit themes. Unlike other
traditional sitcoms, it is not a cookie-cutter/all-American television series for the whole family.
The terms “situational comedy” or “sitcom” were not used with frequency until the 1950’s, with
the introduction of the first television sitcom “Pinwright’s Progress” on the BBC network
between the years 1946-1947.\(^\text{13}\) However, the sitcom format itself was created in 1926, with the
radio broadcast of “Sam ‘n’ Henry” on WGN in Chicago, Illinois.\(^\text{14}\) This radio program and
other forms of entertainment including vaudeville and the minstrel show, continued to reflect the

webster.com/dictionary/situation%20comedy.

\(^{13}\) “Pinwright’s Progress,” British Comedy Guide, accessed April 17, 2017,
https://www.comedy.co.uk/tv/pinwrights_progress/details/.

henry.
classic American entertainment customs of the time.

------------ 1950’s-1960’s -------------

In 1947, “Mary Kay and Johnny” became the first sitcom to air on a television network in the United States. Following suit, another sitcom called “I Love Lucy” started running from 1951-1957 on CBS, and became the most watched show in the United States for four out of its six seasons; the show is still broadcast in a multitude of languages throughout the world, and continues to remain popular in the United States with an estimated audience of 40 million people per year. Due to its success throughout the years, even after conclusion of production of the show, “I Love Lucy” is commonly regarded as one of the greatest and most influential sitcoms in history. Not only did it sustain a large number of viewers, but it also revolutionized the television industry. Among many of its innovations, one prominent change the show made included the fact that it was the first program ever to be filmed before a live studio audience and to be filmed in sequence using the three camera technique. In addition to influencing the format of subsequent cinematography, “I Love Lucy” was the catalyst for sitcoms in years to come. With the scatterbrained yet clever women, loud and indignant man, and friends who were fools and accomplices, the series set the tone and pattern for sitcoms in the United States for decades. William Asher, the director of “I Love Lucy,” has often been credited as the “man who invented the sitcom.”

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The television series “M*A*S*H”, which aired from 1972-1983, built upon the growing sitcom trend in the United States.19 “M*A*S*H” stood out from “I Love Lucy” because it provided a mixture of comedy and drama, allowing it to have a sort of dark humor as it dealt with war and death in a way that resonated with the viewers. “Always Sunny” displays a similar sense of dark humor through its use of topical events. Examples of such darker humor include situations where the characters purposely got addicted to crack in order to increase their chances of receiving welfare, hunted homeless people for sport, pretended to have cancer to manipulate girls into liking them, and painted a baby they found in the dumpster brown in order for him to count as a minority and have a better shot at being cast in advertisements. “M*A*S*H” also depicted events that happened during a three-year period; however, the events depicted specifically revolved around important members of the United States Army Mobile Army Surgical Hospital throughout the Korean War, having a more realistic sense of dark humor rather than a primarily outrageous one like that of “Always Sunny.”20 Due to the sensitive subject matter, the series walked a fine line, attempting to comment on the war while not protesting it. Anytime the show poked fun at the United States’ stance on military conflicts it was cleverly hidden as comedy. While the producers of “M*A*S*H” tried to stay away from the laugh track, they were unsuccessful and followed the trend of other sitcoms during this time period.21

Examining the show from an outsider’s perspective, it makes sense that the creators of the


show did not want a laugh track. When one thinks of war and medical personnel operating
dangerous procedures on soldiers during a controversial and gory conflict, one doesn’t usually
think these are laughing matters. Further, the filming technique for “M*A*S*H” was fluid and
real; unlike other sitcoms, “M*A*S*H” was not filmed on a stage with a studio audience, thus
making the use of a laugh track, where there was no audience in sight, awkward. One of the
main reasons for the inclusion of a laugh track was due to the fact that CBS had never previously
produced a comedy series without one and the network thought laugh tracks helped affirm the
jokes. According to the series developer Larry Gelbart, “I always thought it cheapened the
show…. The network got their way. They were paying for dinner.” While the show was unable
to eliminate the laugh track altogether, the producers were able to negotiate some of the terms for
getting rid of the laugh track wherever possible, stating that “Under no circumstances would we
ever have canned laughter during an O.R. scene…. When the doctors were working, it was hard
to imagine 300 people were in there laughing at somebody’s guts being sewn up.” Ultimately,
due to the fact that networks and viewers considered laugh tracks as a necessary element in a
sitcom, they remained constant throughout the 70’s and 80’s.

Other General trends that occurred in sitcoms during the 1980’s included family
misadventures where some sort of lesson is learned at the end of each episode as well as the

22 Greene, “Why Did M*A*S*H Have A Laugh Track?”
23 Greene, “Why Did M*A*S*H Have A Laugh Track?”
24 “Larry Gelbart Interview,” Emmy TV Legends, accessed April 17, 2017,
http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/larry-gelbart.
25 “Larry Gelbart Interview.”
26 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
“Cheers,” “Family Ties,” “Night Court,” “Who’s The Boss,” “Newhart,” and “Growing Pains” are some of the other noteworthy sitcoms employing these trends during this time period.

--------------------- 1980’s-1990’s ----------------------

From 1989-1998, “Seinfeld” ruled the airwaves as a mix of Jerry Seinfeld’s stand-up comedy routines along with the eccentric conversational scenes between Jerry’s character and other people on the show. Often times it is referred to as “the show about nothing,” given that a majority of the episodes are about the pleasantries and minute details/pleasantries of daily life. Similar to “Seinfeld,” the characters on “Always Sunny” spend their days concocting various schemes that never actually come to the conclusion for which they were initially hoping. The two shows lack a sense of premise, and nothing substantial is ever resolved at the end of each episode. Some television critics even go so far as to call “Always Sunny” “Seinfeld on Crack,” due to the fact that “Always Sunny” will similarly take a common issue, but will increase the absurdity level of the scheme. In 2013, Entertainment Weekly named “Seinfeld” the third best television series of all time and TV Guide [italicise tv guide] even ranked it at number two.

Some of the other noteworthy sitcoms during this time include: “Friends,” “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” “Everybody Loves Raymond,” “Fraiser,” “The Simpsons,” “Roseanne,” “Married…With Children,” “Saved by the Bell,” and “Home Improvement.” Many of these


shows featured either singles living in New York trying to figure out their crazy lives, or dysfunctional working class families. At this point, boundaries were definitely being pushed, in terms of family friendly appropriateness for television, but the shows were still relatively tame in comparison with today’s standards. Take for instance the relationships and sexual tension between the characters on “Friends” as well as how the characters on “Seinfeld” acted openly promiscuous with peripheral characters. While sex was openly discussed, the depiction was still heteronormative and marriage was still an important end game. “Always Sunny” takes this level of promiscuity and amps it up tenfold with episodes including characters pimping and prostituting themselves out in order to win elections, get information, or use as blackmail. The lasting impact of these sitcoms is substantial, given that “The Simpsons” has been airing for 27 years now, “Seinfeld” was named TV Guide’s greatest show of all time, and “Friends” continues to provide cultural influence in syndication.

------------------------ 2000’s-Present ------------------------

The 2000’s were filled with sitcoms consisting of bold personalities and distinct friend groups, with less focus on the classic family format. As the years have gone on, family friendliness has been continually pushed, allowing the shows to become more risqué and TV-14 shows becoming more prevalent. Characters generally are more promiscuous and loose with their sexuality before eventually finding the “one” and getting married. As for set locations, New York and the suburbs remain prevalent, along with the introduction of workplace backdrops.

31 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
32 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
33 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
34 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
Noteworthy sitcoms during this era include: “Scrubs,” “How I Met Your Mother,” “Malcolm in the Middle,” “That 70's Show,” “The Office,” “Will & Grace,” “30 Rock,” “Two and a Half Men,” and “Sex and the City.”

Over the years, the sitcom genre experienced various transformations in family friendliness, diversity, and character development while still following the generic sitcom formula. From 2010 to present, the theme of workplace, families, women, and nerds have all taken an eccentric turn. Producers are more open to bringing in various side characters who recur throughout the season. “Always Sunny” similarly utilizes its fair share of notorious side characters that bop in and out of the series. One of the more noteworthy examples of supporting characters includes the McPoyles, a huge incestuous family with unibrows who can almost always been seen sporting pajamas/robes drinking glasses of milk. The McPoyles appear throughout the series at the most random times, where they then proceed to get their day/life ruined by the main characters on the show. Every time the McPoyles appear they act in a peculiar manner, whether it be obsessing over milk, discussing their intense love for one another, or licking their lips. They provide an interesting nuance to the show and help turn the scheme of the day on its head.

Another example of a recurring character is that of Rickety Cricket. Cricket was a former high school classmate of the gang who became a priest. During high school, Cricket had a huge crush on Dee, who strung him along to get what she wanted and then left him in the dust when she had no more need for him. After realizing that Cricket had become a priest, the gang bet Dee...

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35 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”

36 Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”

that Cricket would never fall in love with her again. Towards the end of the episode, Dee convinces Cricket to leave the church for her and then dumps him when she realizes that she still had her charm. Cricket continues to appear in various episodes throughout the series. However, each time Cricket comes into contact with the gang, he leaves even more damaged than before, until eventually he is a street hermit, addicted to crack cocaine, who results to prostitution in order to get lemons to subdue his scurvy. The devolution of Rickety Cricket provides yet another example of the selfish and ruthless nature of the gang to manipulate and ruin the lives of people in order to get what they want.

As for women, a strong female presence can definitely be noted in these later sitcoms, allowing women to take part in crucial moments of the series. Along with an increase in female presence, the shows are also more diverse and the relationship statuses are more mixed and fluid.\(^{38}\) The level of family friendliness has fallen significantly from its traditional roots, with most sitcoms rated either TV-14 or TV-MA.\(^ {39}\) Given the changes made to the sitcom genre over time, some modern critics debate whether the more recent shows, coming into existence since the turn of the century, can even be classified as sitcoms. Numerous contemporary American sitcoms use a single-camera setup/portable single camera and do not have laugh tracks, both of which were important aspects in earlier sitcoms.\(^ {40}\) Lacking these two aspects, these more recent sitcoms may be considered to take on the form of a dramatic comedy (“dramedy”), rather than the traditional sitcom with a nuclear family or group of close friends engaging in light content on mundane problems occurring in their lives. Another issue that comes into play when defining the

\(^{38}\) Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”

\(^{39}\) Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”

One standard element that has remained constant despite other significant changes to sitcoms over the years is that of the necessary comedic element. In some cases, however, the genre has evolved so much only to end up in the exact place it started. The conventional themes for sitcoms have generally continued unchanged, whether it be attempting to reflect societal changes or events that are occurring throughout the globe, or simply being a show about nothing, with no real significance other than the typical trials and tribulations one goes through throughout their day/life. For instance, in an episode of “Friends” titled “The One Where no One’s Ready,” the women struggle to find outfits to wear to a museum benefit while the men impatiently wait and engage in their own banter over who truly owns the best armchair in the room.\footnote{Colleen Skells, “12 Best Friends Episodes of All Time,” \textit{Screen Rant}, September 29, 2015, accessed April 25, 2017, http://screenrant.com/best-friends-episodes-all-time/?view=all.} As for cinematography/style, more and more sitcoms are featuring the single camera as opposed to the multi-camera, thus making the scenes feel more real and less scripted. The laugh track is also going out of style, being used only for certain shows that need to reinforce their humor.\footnote{Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”} Considering all of the changes these stylistic elements have undergone throughout the years, it is important to note that the genre is following a more realist sense of direction, especially with the rise in mockumentaries such as “The Office” and “Parks and Recreation.”

\textbf{--------- Characters ---------}

The characters in sitcoms have also stayed relatively consistent throughout the years, following the classic model of the sitcom family. Whether the cast is made up of an actual family, or a group of close-knit friends, there is an element of togetherness that is present...
throughout the genre. However, the need for characters to be likable is no longer a point of concern. For instance, *Seinfeld* showcases a cast where the main four characters are narcissists/selfish. “Always Sunny in Philadelphia” has taken this trend and accentuated it to the fullest, bringing in a group of people the audience loves to make fun of and hate. Sitcoms of the 90’s first developed this idea of the dysfunctional family, where the characters are flawed, yet proud.43 Women also continue to have a more prevalent role in sitcoms, oftentimes as the comedic woman who’s either in power, struggling to keep it together, or both.44 With sitcoms turning towards the single camera, the true essence of the characters will be highlighted, thus capturing their unique quirks while also questioning their morals.

Some critics fear that the changes made over the years, in an effort to make the sitcom more real and in some ways cynical, will in turn lead to a rejection of the traditional roots of the sitcom where typically a heartwarming lesson was learned at the end of the show.45 However, with good script writing and the proper cinematographic elements, the same emotive core will be there--the only difference is that the emotion will be less contrived. At the end of each “Always Sunny” episode, there is no heartwarming end message and the characters don’t all really love each other like in “Friends.” “Always Sunny” characters are constantly walking all over one another in order to come off on top, doing whatever it takes to help get them there. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that “Always Sunny” is not a true sitcom, it just means that the show is not afraid to break the rules and present its own version of the sitcom.

---------------- Evolution of “Always Sunny” ----------------

43Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
44Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
45Garis, “Evolution Of The Television Sitcom.”
Similar to the evolution of the sitcom genre over time, “Always Sunny in Philadelphia” has also experienced a transformation over time. The development of the show’s outlandish tendencies over the years has allowed the show to evolve into a successful and critically acclaimed low-class version of the sitcom. What began as a small group of friends meeting up and filming a mini-series with hand-held video cameras for fun has turned into a widely known cult-classic comedic television series. The evolution of “Always Sunny” mirrors the evolution of current events and political issues, but with a unique perspective on events: its wild schemes and sly comments draw in a large, intrigued audience and render the show’s outlandishness effective. The show has become increasingly successful over time due to the zany themes presented in the episodes.

In 2004 Rob McElhenny, the creator of the show, was a struggling actor in Los Angeles when he came up with an idea for a potential short video plotline.\textsuperscript{46} McElhenny approached his friends, Charlie Day and Glenn Howerton, and they brought McElhenney’s idea to life by using two video cameras and shooting at one of the three friends’ apartments.\textsuperscript{47} This demonstrates that the project was very low-budget and adhered to a gonzo-esque cinematographic style. In an interview McElhenney states, “It was just an idea of a guy going over to another guy’s house to ask him for sugar, and the other guy telling him that he has cancer. And instead of the friend being compassionate, he just wants to get the sugar and get out the door. I knew that nobody else would think that was funny except Glenn and Charlie. So I wrote a script and showed it to them.”\textsuperscript{48} Once McElhenney and his friends finished the pilot, they took their tape to a variety of


\textsuperscript{47} Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”

\textsuperscript{48} Kate Ward, “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia’: The Cast Tells Their Story,” Entertainment Weekly,
networks including HBO, Comedy Central, FOX, CBS, MTV, VH1, and FX to see if their idea had any traction and made anyone laugh. After getting offers from four networks, McElhenney accepted the offer from FX.

Originally, the characters in the show were intended to be actors: however, due to the many series with similar struggling actor related plotlines, McElhenney altered the characters’ professions to that of employees working at a bar in his hometown, as a means of setting the show apart. Initially this change of location and character occupation seemed minor, however, as the series progresses, this modification completely changes the trajectory of the show. The characters’ lives revolve around the bar that they own. While they don’t truly care if the bar is successful, they do use it as their own relatively private sanctuary. The characters are able to hide from the world in the bar and fall deeper into their own delusions.

Aside from this initial change, FX allowed McElhenney and the other producers/cast members to do whatever they wanted. This starkly contrasts with the relationships that most television series have with their networks; usually the people holding high positions within network control the content, leaning more conservatively and forcing shows to adhere to strict guidelines. Networks are always looking to protect their image, which is why they tend to closely monitor all of the content being discussed within the shows on airing on their network. One of the reasons why FX granted the producers of “Always Sunny” more leniency in their content was because FX is a lesser known, non-mainstream network that wanted to produce shows that were more raw in their sense of humor and unlike any other show to date.

McElhenney and Howerton state in an interview with Backstage that “They allowed us to do exactly the show that we wanted to do. They didn’t want to change it in ways that we felt like

were going to ruin the essence of what the show was.”

The change in setting from Los Angeles to Philadelphia placed the show in a more blue-collar background. FX also allowed Day and Howerton to join the show as both actors and executive producers, even though both of them along with McElhenney were inexperienced on that front.

The first season of “Always Sunny” was budgeted at $450,000 an episode, which is less than a third of a network standard. Oftentimes three episodes were filmed simultaneously and much of the music used in the shows was in the public domain. Day says that “the show’s opening credits sequence are the cheapest credits ever, filmed with a digital camera while driving around Philadelphia one night capturing landmarks including the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, Penn’s Landing, Lincoln Financial Field, Swann Memorial Fountain, Boathouse Row, 30th Street Station, and South Street.”

The show thus presents itself as a DIY, gonzo-esque approach to filming and creating art that embraces all the technical merits of professional filmmaking, yet eschews the attitudes and common practices of typical Hollywood and budget-driven films. However, even though the show received critical feedback, it still had low ratings with only a little over one million viewers. The producers knew that something needed to change if the show were to continue past the first season.

According to McElhenney and Howerton on The Nerdist podcast, after a first season of low ratings, they were given an ultimatum by FX to either add a star name to their relatively unknown cast as a means of bringing in audiences or their show was finished. When Danny

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50 Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”

51 Ward, “‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’: The Cast Tells Their Story.”

52 Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”

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DeVito’s name was raised, Howerton states “It’s not that we were reticent to the idea of adding Danny to the show,” Howerton recalled, “it's that we were reticent to add a name to the show. You know, because we kinda liked that we were no-names and it was this weird, small thing, you know.” This demonstrates the importance that the producers of “Always Sunny” placed on the integrity of the show; they didn’t want to have to change it to appease FX. In the end, they did decide to go with DeVito, stating that he was “perfect for the role because he had played so many ‘despicable characters’ but had a warmth underneath that seemed to fit the show’s tone.” The change did end up bringing in a lot more viewers while not compromising the authenticity of the show; DeVito made a significant and meaningful contribution to the show and the viewers and cast members definitely recognized this.

------------------ “Always Sunny” vs. Political Correctness ------------------

As for the show’s humor, Day and Howerton remark in the Backstage interview that: “To me we are just making jokes that are funny to us. Crossing the line just means going into territory that other shows don’t necessarily go into, especially network shows, just because they can’t because of standards.” This idea of “crossing the line” is interesting because it can carry a different meaning depending on the person you ask. To some “crossing the line” could mean the use of expletive language, vulgar themes, or racist/sexist/rape humor. For the creators of “Always Sunny,” there seem to be little to nothing stopping them from coming up with raunchy content that adheres to all of the aforementioned criteria and yet the show is still being aired.


54 Davis, “Here’s How Danny DeVito Saved ‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’ from Getting Canceled.”

55 “‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’ Cast Interview,” Backstage.
What does this tell us about America, what’s successful and what’s funny? Especially in a day and age where maintaining a politically correct stance on issues is of the utmost importance, how is “Always Sunny” able to not only get away with its politically incorrect humor, but also receive positive feedback for its taboo content?

One reason “Always Sunny” might not receive copious amounts of backlash could be due to the fact that the main characters are not relatable to the viewers. The audience can watch these degenerates make shameful decisions while still remaining a third-party observer because the viewer does not identify with them. Rather than accepting the risqué narrative as fact or a stance of the producers, the audience considers their own prejudices and mistakes. For example, Dennis, one of the male lead characters, consistently brings up his thoughts of placing a woman in a scenario where there is no escape and she can’t refuse his advances “given the implication” that harm will come to her if she does refuse. This rape theme is constantly shut down and looked down upon by the other characters. While this unwavering and fruitless persistence to seduce/trap women in this manner has some dark humor, this story line also could serve to educate the audience on the nuances of rape and its implications.56 Through watching Dennis, the viewer can reevaluate his/her own actions and understand that one should never be or want to be like Dennis.

Another example of “Always Sunny’s” blatant display of political incorrectness includes the use of blackface. In the episode where blackface is used, the characters have a discussion on whether or not it is acceptable for one to use blackface when acting/portraying a character. They conclude that blackface is not tolerable and that there is no tasteful way to pull it off. “Always

Sunny” uses blackface to create shock and humor out of the unexpected use of this taboo topic while also recognizing that just because an issue is being made light of, doesn’t mean that it isn’t being taken seriously. An incredible amount of thought gets put into each episode and the producers carefully select problematic content to be used in a mindful, yet humorous way. While the content of “Always Sunny” raises eyebrows, it does so intentionally to make the audience laugh and also think about issues in new ways.

The cast gets a lot of their information and ideas for episodes from NPR. Day stated in the an Entertainment Weekly interview, “I listen to what everybody’s talking about on NPR and say, ‘Alright guys, people won’t shut up about North Korea.’ Our characters take sides, whatever the issue is. As a show, we don’t tend to preach any sort of side. Everybody ends up being wrong.” The cast pays special attention to important issues facing American society and uses it as material for their episodes. With the show’s depiction of relevant political and social issues, it pushes social boundaries in American society. Some of the topics presented in the series include: Jihad, abortion, political corruption, the mortgage crisis, gun control, welfare, rape, use of blackface, racism, and misogyny to name just a few.

One of the main themes in the show is the idea of unpredictability, in other words, there is no comedic formula the producers follow when creating episodes (no laugh track, no real plot, no typical catchphrases, etc.). For instance, episodes will start off with a certain issue that the characters will attempt to solve, yet their schemes to go about quelling the problem will lead

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57 Eloise, “‘What’s So Offensive About ‘It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia’?’”

58 Ward, “‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’: The Cast Tells Their Story.”
them in a completely different direction and the conclusion of the episode will have the characters no longer caring about the original issue and going right back to where they started. This is one of the reasons the show is attractive to viewers: viewers have learned to expect the unexpected. The creators signed with the FX network allowing the show to pursue creative avenues that they would not have been able to do had they signed on with a more mainstream network like FOX or ABC. The FX producer gave “Always Sunny” creators a lot of freedom to pursue various out of the ordinary creative venues. Thus far, the creators/producers of the show have not nixed any episodes for being too extreme/far out of character/repellent. FOX did not understand the show’s humor, while FX thought the plot line was hilarious due to its unpredictability. FX told the “Always Sunny” creators that they would not force them to mold the show to fit consumer needs.

59 “’It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia’ Cast Interview,” Backstage.


61 Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”
CHAPTER II

Production Value and Cinematographic Style

The viewers of “Always Sunny” are attracted to the absurd schemes and themes in each episode. With its particular style of gonzo-esque cinematography and raw/risque sense of humor, “Always Sunny” stands out and is unique in comparison with other mainstream comedic television series. The unique nature of the show’s cinematography enhances the overall production value. The show presents itself as a DIY, raw approach to filming and creating art that embraces all the technical merits of professional filmmaking, yet eschews the attitudes and common practices of typical Hollywood and budget-driven films. The low-budget entertainment quality of the show is a part of what makes it so unique.

John Landgraf Discovers “Always Sunny”

John Landgraf, the current President and General Manager of FX, came to the FX network in 2004 wanting to contribute a more comedic genre and bring in new viewers to the network; before Landgraf, FX was known for its dark dramas. After hearing about McElhenney’s new show idea, Landgraf decided to grant McElhenney a meeting as a courtesy to his agents. Unlike usual show pitches where the producer describes the main themes and characters in the show, McElhenney simply showed Landgraf a pilot of the show that he had recorded with his friends. This pilot featured a low-budget, DIY production, given that the entire cost to produce the pilot was under $100 and McElhenney wrote, directed, and operated the video camera. Not only was the cost to film inexpensive, but the three main characters were all friends and were willing to shoot the video for no compensation, just for fun. In fact, the friends

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initially had no intentions of turning their short story into an actual television series.\textsuperscript{63}

The unconventional sense of humor and casual, low-effort feeling of the show was exactly what Landgraf was looking to bring to FX, so he gave McElhenney and his associates $400,000 to refilm the pilot with a professional crew.\textsuperscript{64} The only adjustments made were the change in premise (switching it from a group of struggling actors obsessed with their careers to a group of friends running a bar in South Philly) and the recasting of the female lead. Given the low popularity of the FX network with viewers who were more attracted to a more avant-garde/progressive style of television, Landgraf gave extensive creative leniency to McElhenney so as to adhere to the low-key/free nature of the network. This leniency encouraged the producers to instill the show with their own voice, and impacted McElhenney decision to join FX.

Landgraf’s main goal in taking on “Always Sunny” was to demonstrate how one could create a compelling show at an affordable price. While McElhenney, Howerton, and Day were all talented actors, they had absolutely no experience directing or producing television. Not only were they unfamiliar with production, but they were also given a very low budget to bring McElhenney’s plans to fruition. In order to cut corners and stay on budget, the crew shot scenes out of order and three episodes at a time, using the old Los Angeles Herald-Examiner plant as a set (instead of using a soundstage, which would have been more expensive) and sharing a trailer.\textsuperscript{65} According to McElhenney, he earned approximately $70,000 during his production of the first season, which is similar to what a mid-level actor typically earns per episode for a

\textsuperscript{63} Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”

\textsuperscript{64} James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”

network show, which is why he continued serving as a waiter on the side in order to support himself. McElhenney stated in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, “I would direct episodes, produce and act and wrap shooting around 6 so I could go home and change into my uniform.”

--------------- “Always Sunny” Attempts to Stay Afloat ---------------

While Landgraf and the gang thought that the season one episodes of “Always Sunny” were ingenious, the show was not gaining a lot of viewership. All the while, Landgraf was sending episodes to his former business partner, Danny DeVito, thinking that he would enjoy the show due to his similar comedic tendencies. After the first season, Landgraf knew that they needed to bring in some star power in order to gain attention and draw in viewers, which is why he asked DeVito to join the cast. While the gang was hesitant at first to add DeVito because they were worried that an addition of a big name star would change the dynamic and authenticity of the show, they ended up deciding to give DeVito a shot. McElhenney stated in an interview with the LA Times, “We needed to do something because nobody was watching.”

The addition of DeVito drastically changed the production value of the show, not only in content but in cost. The budget of the show increased to more than $800,000 per episode in order to pay for DeVito as well as a raise for the four other main characters. Even including DeVito and a higher budget, the show still lacked viewership. The low viewing numbers caused the people situated at the top of the Fox (the owner of FX) Network totem pole to threaten to cancel

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66 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
67 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
68 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
69 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”

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the show. However, thanks to the persuasion of FX executives, they released “Always Sunny” on DVD. Fox’s home video division didn’t think that the show would sell; however, the sales were so strong that the show went on to become a top seller for Fox.

---------- The Breakthrough ----------

Following the selling of the show on DVD and the addition of college students into the rating firm Nielsen Co.’s rating sample, the viewership of the show had increased significantly. FX found that college students were the show’s fan base, which is why FX began a marketing campaign on college campuses, leading to a ratings jump of 24%. While these two tweaks in marketing and production value helped jumpstart the show’s viewership, the real breakthrough came when Hulu added the show in 2008: “Always Sunny” became one of the most popular shows on Hulu. McElhenney adds that “People who had been hearing about the show suddenly had an easy opportunity to watch it at work. We saw everything skyrocket from there.”

When the fourth season of “Always Sunny” ran it did not garner a larger number of viewers. Landgraf then realized that Hulu, while first created to battle online piracy, ended up pulling viewers away from television. This lead to the pulling from Hulu of some episodes of “Always Sunny”, much to the chagrin of the fans. However, in order to further promote the show, the cast decided to take one of their episodes on the road with their live performance of “The Nightman Cometh.” The gang was greeted by fans dressed up as characters from the show.

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70 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
71 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
72 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
73 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
74 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
who sang along with the cast; DeVito stated “It turned out to be an amazing boost for the show….we knew there were rabid fans, but we finally got an up-close look at them.” Seeing the fans dressed as the characters, singing all of the lyrics to the songs, showcases how the show rapidly gained a large following. Transforming the show into a live musical allowed the cast to further spread the word of their show as well as keep their fans hyped and ready for the upcoming season.

The following season saw a ratings increase of 60%, and at this stage, 4.3million people were watching “Always Sunny.” The show was becoming more widely known, leading to high interest levels of other networks in gaining the rights to the reruns. Comedy Central, for instance, filed a deal for more than $33 million, paying FX $400,000 an episode, including any sort of ad revenue that went along with the episode. This deal, along with the episodes airing on local stations, ultimately resulted in FX earning $800,000 an episode. Finally, after five years, “Always Sunny” had made a profit. While the initial purpose of the series was to appear as a more transgressive sitcom, the producers realized that in order to keep the show on air, they needed to increase viewership, which led in turn to an increased profit for the network. This success led the show’s budget to increase to $1.5 million an episode, which is similar to that of a normal network sitcom. With this growth in budget, the quality of the show increased. Not only were episodes now being filmed in HD, but the show received free reign to use the Fox movie lot, the ability to add in more extras, and triple the amount of people on the writing staff.

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75 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
76 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
77 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
78 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
79 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”
While the show is now no longer as inexpensive as it was at the start, it is profitable, thus ensuring that it will air longer.

Following the business models of other network shows, producers tend to vie for larger paychecks. “Always Sunny,” however, has altered this traditional business model by accepting lower fees upfront in exchange for a larger share in the profits if the show becomes a success. According to Landgraf, “We've actually kind of invented and perfected a new business model…. There is a connection between creative freedom and price.” In 2013, the series moved from FX to FXX at the start of its ninth season in an effort to rebrand the FXX network from being an underperforming soccer channel to the channel that carries the network’s most popular comedy series. With this focus on comedies, FXX can help push “Always Sunny” and other similar shows to achieve even greater success and viewership by putting all of the comedic shows in one place. While the money “Always Sunny” accrued certainly helped keep the series alive by allocating funds to spreading the word of the show, the producers did not use the money to alter the content or cinematographic process of the show, striving to keep the show authentic.

--------- Fame Does Not Alter Format ---------

“Always Sunny’s” viewership has increased over the years, allowing it to be signed on for an additional two more seasons. This addition of two seasons ties the show with “Ozzie and Harriet” for the longest running live-action comedy series to date. However, despite this rise to fame, the content and cinematographic style of the show has remained relatively unchanged.

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80 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”

81 James, “‘It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’: A low-budget hit.”

While the marketing techniques and advertising schemes have led to increased viewership, ultimately it is the unique and outlandish themes/style that are present throughout the show that make it stand out from other shows and cause it to be successful. At the beginning of the series, the crew started off with an extremely low budget, which could have proved disastrous for other shows, yet, for “Always Sunny,” this limitation helped motivate the producers to work effectively with what they were given. With a small budget, producers have to be really creative; it’s what the show does with the limitations that makes it funny. The show demonstrated that it is possible to make a low-cost, high-quality scripted comedy. The show’s ability to make due with limited funds caused it to seek different ways to make up for the strained budget. Instead of paying for high quality equipment/cameras, higher-rated actors, and experienced producers, the creators of “Always Sunny” used the low-budget to their advantage, creating a more DIY feel to the show. They reused sets, had few extras, and used a single-camera technique to create a feeling of cheapness that added to the tawdry and gross nature of the characters.

--------- Cinematography and Improvisation ---------

The cinematography is quick, cheap, original, and hyperreal. “Always Sunny” does not adhere to the normal standards of present-day sitcoms; it rejects convention. The gonzo-esque cinematography and production value, the signing to an “edgy” network like FX, and each episode’s relationship to society and current events have allowed the show to push boundaries and leave the mainstream. The outlandish themes and visual style of the show make it unusual in the traditional genre of situational comedies.

Because it signed with FX, a lesser known/edgier subnetwork of Fox, the show had more leeway with both its language and subject matter, in sharp contrast to the limited freedom given to other mainstream network sitcoms. For instance, some of the episode titles for the first season
include “Charlie Wants an Abortion” and “Charlie Got Molested.” Another unique aspect of “Always Sunny” is the way the show is filmed, using three to four hand-held cameras that are all moving at the same time.83 This differs from how other comedies are produced, with their use of either multiple-fixed position cameras (channeling the vibe of the show “Cheers” where the show was filmed on a stage and the characters were surrounded by a live studio audience) or a single camera that is able to move around but typically focuses on one character at a time (following the style of “The Office.”)84 While shooting “Always Sunny,” the creators make sure to keep several characters in the frame at once. Improvisation is also a classic technique used by the characters as they provide an improvisational and random dialogue; the characters are constantly talking over one another, which further adds to the scrappy feel of the show and the desperate-to-please nature of the characters. The fact that much of the scripted dialogue is altered as a result of improvisation while on set and in the moment of a scene is a testament to the exaggerated sense of reality/hyperreal vibe of the show. Rather than following the script line by line, the cast fully assume the role of their characters and act like friends in a bar instead of actors on a set.

While the budget for the show has increased over the years due to the success of the show, the initial elements and style of filming that went along with the low-budget has stayed the same. The low-budget quality of the show is a part of what makes it so unique. The show uses a distinct form of cinematography, which allows the episodes and their themes to become more effectively peculiar. When the show is broken down and taken out of context, viewed solely as a script, the bizarre moments that make the show funny end up appearing offensive and disturbing.

83 Wyatt, “The Writers Are the Actors Are The Producers.”

84 Wyatt, “The Writers Are the Actors Are The Producers.”
The unique cinematography and cast bring the show to life and make the eccentric and sometimes cringe-worthy scenes effective. For this reason, the show features a re-developing of the comedy and sitcom genres through its DIY sense of cinematography, use of improvisation and eccentric plotlines.
CHAPTER III

Characterization of “The Gang”

The eccentric nature of the show continues with its portrayal of the main characters, or rather, “the gang.” Throughout the duration of the show, the characters are constantly trying to prove to everyone around them that they are intelligent, successful, and considerate, but in reality they exhibit none of those qualities. The viewers can distance themselves from the main characters and follow their crazy schemes, narcissistic tendencies, and ruthless desire to rise to the top from an outsider’s perspective, all the while laughing as the characters’ lives go down in flames. This starkly contrasts with the characters portrayed in other more traditional sitcoms, where the personalities are relatable and the viewers have their own characters with whom they proudly resonate and identify. In “Always Sunny,” the viewers experience oscillating feelings of pity and curiosity. By altering the traditional sitcom character, “Always Sunny” stands out from other television shows in the situational comedy genre.

The genre expectations of “Always Sunny” differ from other, more mainstream sitcoms because the characters are given more freedom and don’t have to adhere to the generic status quo of the traditional sitcom. The viewers of “Always Sunny” are attracted to the show because it defies the expected elements that come with sitcoms, especially episodes with light-hearted themes. Unlike other television series with huge budgets that are spent on costumes and set-design, “Always Sunny” is able to spend more time focusing on character development rather than visually pleasing scenery. With all the attention focused on these characters who mainly hang out at the bar they own, the audience can analyze the specific traits of each character and better come to grips with the nuances of that character’s peculiar behavior. In some ways, the characters are trapped in their own little world, making their character development even more
fascinating with each new element/plotline that is introduced.

The show centers on a group of five dysfunctional, alcoholic, self-absorbed owners of “Paddy’s Pub”: Charlie Kelly, Ronald McDonald (Mac), Dennis, Deandra (Dee), and Frank Reynolds. Throughout the series, this group is consistently referred to as “the gang.” Charlie, the janitor of Paddy’s, is an easily excitable man-child who is prone to emotional outbursts and is often flustered/unable to cope with daily problems. Given his illiteracy, anger management issues, alcoholism, poor hygiene, lack of common sense, and poor grasp on reality, Charlie is prevented from achieving any sort of success in his life, and thus he lives his life in filth and squalor.85

Mac is a co-owner/self-proclaimed “Sheriff” of Paddy’s who often boasts of his heightened sense of athletic/martial arts prowess, or as he calls it “badassness.” In reality, however, it is evident that he lacks any real skill. Throughout the series the show suggests that Mac is gay, with everyone in the gang knowing his sexual orientation except for Mac, who denounces all gays as sinners— a viewpoint that is driven by his Catholic upbringing. The show uses Mac to discuss and bring attention to the idea of being “in the closet.” All of the other members of the gang are fine with Mac being gay and are always trying to get him to feel comfortable with being open about his sexual orientation. However, Mac is so stubborn in his way of thinking and his idea of Catholicism that he has convinced himself that he is straight. Through this theme of homosexuality, the show pokes fun at Mac’s inability to come to terms with his true self while also bringing up an important topic of discussion that allows the audience to reflect.

Dennis, the other co-owner of Paddy’s, is perhaps the most narcissistic and psychologically troubled of the entire gang; the show repeatedly suggests that he is a sociopath with borderline personality disorder who has rape fantasies and may even be a murderer. His sense of self-worth is wholly reliant on the opinions others have regarding his appearance; he is constantly attempting to sleep with as many women as possible in order to prove his worth.

“Sweet Dee” is the main bartender at Paddy’s, the show’s main female character, and Dennis’s twin sister. Much like Dennis, Dee showcases egotistical tendencies, thinking that she is an amazing actress/comedian even though she has no experience and no talent. While she was originally intended to be a sensible and compassionate counterpoint to the other characters, she ends up being just as morally corrupt as the rest of the gang; she constantly uses others for her own ends. Dee is also not considered by the others to be a member of the gang and is often berated for being “bird-like” and unattractive; she poses as an exaggerated form of what it is like for most adult women who feel like they still haven’t quite put their lives in order.

The final and latest addition to “the gang” is Dennis’s and Dee’s legal father and Charlie’s roommate/potential biological father, Frank. Frank has what seems like an unlimited amount of wealth, funding all of the gang’s adventures, yet he chooses to live in squalor with Charlie as a means of adding excitement to his life following his divorce. Hanging out with the gang allows Frank to live without inhibitions; he frequently wields guns, runs illegal operations, goes to strip clubs, and sleeps with prostitutes. Much like the rest of the gang, Frank has substance abuse issues and claims to have the gang’s best interests at heart, but frequently exploits and berates the gang. Add together all of the dysfunctional and toxic qualities of each character and you get wacky, outlandish schemes throughout the series such as the gang’s buying

gasoline and selling it off the market for a lower cost in order to solve the gas crisis.

The show is centered on “the gang,” a group of five dysfunctional, alcoholic, self-absorbed bar owners. The show follows the classic sitcom formula in which a problem is presented, and in your traditional sitcom this problem is a typical or slightly exaggerated issue with which people can relate. However, the way the characters go about solving the problem is what makes the show unique. The gang is unpredictable and almost everything the gang does goes awry; even when attempting to solve the most mundane issue the gang goes above and beyond in the most backward manner. The audience learns to expect the unexpected. Another nuance that the characters offer is the fact that they think they are dealing with these everyday problems in a pragmatic manner. In reality, they are handling the issues horribly wrong, but still struggle to understand why they are not socially accepted.

At the beginning of each episode, a problem is presented to the characters, who then split into two groups with two/three members each. This allows the series to showcase each member of the gang, displaying how each person deals with the problem at hand. This is important because it displays the goal of each group, rather than trying to squeeze five different quests into the episode. Mac and Dennis often join forces in order to triumph over a common obstacle, while Charlie and Frank team up to work together on their separate goal, often leaving Dee to follow her own plotline. However, in another episode the groups could be completely mixed up from their prior alliances. It all depends on the task at hand; each character has its own reason for wanting to address the problem, allowing him/her to approach the same problem from drastically different angles.87 Regardless of the alliances/groups that the gang forms, each episode

showcases a major problem that affects each member of the gang, forcing them to work together in order to solve the issue.

Narcissism plays a huge role on the show, forming a major component of the main characters’ psychologies and behavior. By definition, a narcissist has an inflated sense of his/her own importance, a deep need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. The characteristics of narcissism also include behavior and fantasies of grandeur, an unreasonable sense of entitlement, exploitation of others, arrogance, and the constant need to be admired.\textsuperscript{88} However, behind this mask of supreme confidence is a sense of fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism. The gang definitely embodies narcissistic tendencies, with all of the members embodying some or all of the aforementioned traits to various degrees.

Consequently, the gang is a group of toxic, flawed people who can’t truly connect with any of the other members in their supposed friend group, nor can they relate with other people in society. Each member of the gang will do whatever it takes, even if that means manipulating or exploiting the others or outsiders, as long as it is for their own benefit. While the entire gang showcases narcissistic tendencies, Dennis is perhaps the most egotistical and arrogant member. He is so selfish, sociopathic, and psychologically troubled that trained medical professionals in real life have created audio commentaries on episodes in order to weigh in their thoughts and attempt to diagnose him. His narcissistic tendencies even propel him into showcasing signs of a sociopath.

In an episode where the gang is getting analyzed by a therapist, Dennis states “To be in someone’s mind. To have complete control. It’s like the thrill of being near the executioner’s

switch. Knowing that at any moment, you could throw it, but knowing you never will… but you could. Never isn’t the right word, because I could… and I might… I probably will.”

Charlie Day commented that “There’s nothing funnier to me than a man, like Glenn’s character, who is so consumed with vanity, and that vanity is challenged at every turn…. Every turn he makes he’s confronted with conflict.”

---------- Character Development ----------

No matter how despicable each character may have seemed in the past, there is still room for them to devolve into something worse, as showcased by the progression of the series. In an interview with UPROXX, DeVito stated, “It seems like I always say from the very beginning this is going to be the craziest, we’re not going to do anything wilder than this…. And every year we just keep going more and more, farther and farther.”

In season eight episode five, “The Gang Gets Analyzed,” the gang goes to see Dee’s therapist in order to figure out who needs to clean their dishes from a recent dinner, and in the process, they all open up and get real about each of their deep/different psychological issues. They all go through tremendous breakthroughs, whether or not they realize it at the time, but at the end of the episode they remain unchanged, unwilling to act on or acknowledge any of the realizations.

While the characters remain consistent in their morals and general standing, the schemes and adventures that they go through appeal to the viewer. The audience may know that the gang

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91 Kurland, “Psychoanalyzing ‘It’s Always Sunny’s’ Dysfunction Through Its Bottle Episode.”
is dug in too deeply to ever really change, yet each episode provides a new deranged plot that appeals to the viewer’s curiosity. At the end of the episode, none of the characters are any worse for wear. The only person who does experience any sort of change is the therapist, whom the gang has eventually broken down and turned into a shell of herself.\(^{92}\) This supports the theme that the gang members are not only destructive to each other, but are so blissfully ignorant and intolerant of their own toxicity that they are never ultimately affected by it. However, anyone who comes across the gang’s path will leave either damaged or with his/her life completely ruined.

While the characters do exhibit many awful characteristics such as narcissism, alcoholism, greed, etc., they have this endearing quality to them, even if one would never want to be around them in real life. At the start of the series the characters were a group of unethical strangers with whom viewers had no connection at all. However, as the years progressed, the gang became a group of people that fans all knew and loved; the audience has grown to love the characters’ absolute disregard for the people around them and their downward spiral into complete insanity.\(^{93}\)

The group dynamic and unique characteristic of each member within the gang differs significantly from that of any other sitcom. In season four episode two, “The Gang Solves the Gas Crisis,” Mac explains this traditional group theory, causing the gang to adopt new identities in order to fit in with this standard group dynamic. According to Mac, the five characteristics that make up a functional group include: the brain (who thinks up all of the plans), the looks (uses

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\(^{92}\) Kurland, “Psychoanalyzing ‘It’s Always Sunny’s’ Dysfunction Through Its Bottle Episode.”

their charm), the muscle (the one who does any physical task), the wildcard (the random/unpredictable one), and the useless chick (the girl who is just there to be the girl of the group). Once each character understands its supposed assigned role within the group, each member subsequently devolves into a shadow of its former self. Dennis, the looks, becomes even more self-absorbed and egotistical. Charlie, the wildcard, becomes even more random and strange than before. Frank, the brains, continues making various random schemes to fuel the gang. Dee, the useless chick, continues being seen as useless by the gang as she tries desperately to prove her self-worth and “talent” as an actress. Finally, Mac, the designated muscles of the group, becomes even more focused on “cultivating mass”, which in turn causes him to gain a massive amount of weight. No matter how hard the gang tries try to fit into conventional roles, it always fails, which is one of the reasons the show is so popular. For this reason, the audience keeps tuning in to see what kind of deranged mess the gang will get itself into next time.

----------------- Off-Camera Relationships -----------------

All of the characters will step all over each other and do horrible things to one another to get what they want, but in real life all of the main characters are close friends. In fact, four of the cast members are married in real life, but on the show they have a very different relationship that makes the audience feel like it is in on a private joke. Charlie often stalks “the Waitress” on the show, but in real life he is actually married to her. On a similar note, Mac and Dee, who would seem to be an odd couple based on their relationship on the show, are also married in real life. Finally, Glenn Howerton (Dennis) is married to Jill Latiano, a guest actress who appeared on the


show for one episode, “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System.” In the episode, he tricks her into falling in love with him, treats her horribly, and then leaves her in the dust as a part of his elaborate dating system. DeVito spoke of the filming and group dynamic, stating “It’s why I get out of bed in the morning to go to work. I know there is going to be some craziness going on at the show. But we’re having a good time, every day is a lot of fun.”

The relationship between the cast members both in real life and on the show allows the eccentric, improvisational banter to be effective. Due to the fact that the main characters are all friends, they are more comfortable to improvise and throw even more outlandish themes/comments out during scenes. This, in turn, allows the show to seem more authentic and cultivates a more creative and fluid dialogue between the cast members. Howerton spoke with UPROXX regarding the show’s unique approach to creativity, “Every year we all come into it, usually one of us has one episode where we’re like, okay I want to do this fucking thing and it’s weird, but I want to and we just figure out a way to do it because that’s fun,” going on to say “And things don’t last. I don’t know if I’ll ever create another show again, so let’s fucking go nuts. I’m going to do whatever the fuck I want and see what happens.”

The friendly nature that the cast shares with one another outside of the show allows them to really take what we know and push it to the limit.

The outlandish nature of the characters desperately trying to prove themselves allows the show to be successful. The characters can be outlandish because there are few, if any, boundaries

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on “Always Sunny.” DeVito tells UPROXX that “It’s fresh, it’s off the wall, it’s a little bit random, and the rules… There aren’t very many rules…. We stick to the characters. Frank is always Frank. Charlie’s Charlie and so on and so forth. But the basic thing is we’re a little anarchistic in a way, which is really fun.” There is no “typical” episode when it comes to “Always Sunny.” The gang is always getting itself entangled in complicated schemes and situations as they attempt to solve what initially were simple daily problems. The viewer looks forward to seeing how the gang will go about fixing its issues, even though in the end, they know that the gang will be no worse for wear. It is this unpredictable and crazy nature of the characters that has drawn in viewers and allowed the show to be successful.

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CHAPTER IV

“Always Sunny” vs. Current Events

While the producers of “Always Sunny” place the show in context with society, the characters end up coming to the most extreme conclusions [regarding what? Do u mean the characters come up with the most extreme reactions to current events?]. “Always Sunny” pushes social norms in a way that is different from any other sitcom, or television show in general, for that matter. The gang is constantly chasing the logic in each episode to the very end, pushing it to the limit of the rational.

Typically when shows discuss current events or problems facing society, they take an academic and rational approach, most times staying fairly moderate as they attempt to bring a particular issue to light. For example, in an episode of “New Girl” titled “Booze Girl Wants Your Vote,” the main female characters rally for Hillary Clinton, speaking on why they think it is crucial she get elected, while they make a bet with one of their male friends that they can register five new voters. The episode is fairly tame with only minor things going awry when the women realize that the sorority girls they are trying to register to vote are Ivanka Trump supporters.

Most episodes of “Always Sunny” are not so tame, however, with the deranged antics and characteristics of each character resulting in outlandish schemes that bring various controversial issues to light. The gang takes on a social issue/political event in its own depraved way, which always leads to disastrous results. The characters’ distorted and egotistical points of view lead them into treacherous waters with schools, rival bars, the authorities, gangs/drug lords,

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Always Sunny, however, adopts their version of comedy from a completely different standpoint than that of other situational comedies. Not only do the creators strive to go against the mainstream, but they also aim at connecting a lot of the episodes with contemporaneous current events. “Always Sunny” attempts to redevelop the comedy genre; in a way, the show is an inversion of your classic sitcom. In some instances, the show has been referred to as “Seinfeld on Crack.”\footnote{Blitz, “The $85 TV Pilot.”} “Seinfeld” is often referenced as “the show about nothing,” which is similar in a way to “Always Sunny.” Although at first the show may seem to have no direction with no stable/known plotline, the creators of the show do in fact try to write about issues affecting society. Charlie Day commented to this effect in an interview, stating: “It looks at what is terrible for us as a society and terrible things keep popping up and we make terrible episodes about it. In our first season we did an episode about the problem with gun violence, and I guess it’s still a problem so we made another episode in 2010.”\footnote{Drea, “‘It’s always Sunny in Philadelphia - a critical analysis.’”}

“Always Sunny” tackles the issue of abortion with the episode titled, “Charlie Wants an Abortion.” In the episode, Mac, a religious conservative, joins an anti-abortion group in order to woo a girl in the group. When the girl tells Mac that she is pregnant, Mac tells her to get an abortion. Dee on the other hand sides with the pro-choice rally and attempts to persuade the rest of the gang to her side of thinking. At the same time Dennis is flipping from pro-choice to pro-life in order to find a girl with whom to have sex. This episode is another example of how the show presents an important social issue, and twists it in a way where nothing is truly solved in
the end.

As for political issues, in the episode titled “The Gang Goes Jihad,” an Israeli businessman moves to Philadelphia and buys land next to the bar. As it turns out, the man’s property extends half way through the gang’s pub, which prompts him to tell the gang to vacate the premises. This then motivates the gang to go to extremes in order to get the man to leave, which escalates from throwing toilet paper all over his building to dressing up as Arabs and making a threatening tape to convince the man to leave town. The episode recognizes the political tensions between the United States and the Middle East; however, it neglects to take a concrete stance on the issue and instead devolves into the gang accidentally burning down the man’s building with a flaming bag of poop.

The social commentary provided by “Always Sunny” stands out because regardless of whatever issue the gang attempts to tackle and how the episode concludes, the gang never changes. Perhaps this is a reflection on American culture in general and how Americans are hardly ever swayed from their initial beliefs. For example, in the episode titled “Reynolds vs. Reynolds: The Cereal Defense,” Mac states “I can't change their mind, I won't change my mind. Cause I don't have to, cause I'm an American. I won't change my mind on anything, regardless of the facts that are set out before me. I'm dug in and I'll never change.”104 Throughout the series, the episodes examine politics, gay marriage, religion, etc., and regardless of how the episode concludes, the Gang remains unwavering and ignorant.

--------------- “Always Sunny” and NPR ---------------

Always Sunny demonstrates a sort of scrappy/nitty-gritty/gonzo-esque production value that makes the show unique and stand out from other comedic television shows. The show pushes social boundaries by tying episodes to whatever significant political or social event that is happening around the time the episode is being filmed. The National Public Radio plays an important role in influencing the themes in some of the episodes of “Always Sunny,” which demonstrates the show’s ability and interest in connecting episodes with current political/social events. When the cast gets together and start brainstorming potential storylines, they go through a variety of ideas that are sometimes influenced by the NPR episode that aired during their morning commute. In an interview with the cast by AV Club, Charlie Day remarked, “Sometimes I’ll be just listening to NPR in the morning, and they’ll be talking about North Korea, or the gas crisis, and I’ll say, ‘We should work this into one of our episodes.’” He’ll listen to NPR en route to the office and then riff off the news of the day. Through improvisational methods, the creators of “Always Sunny” are able to come up with absurd twists on mainstream topics.

When season three was released, there was an episode titled “The Gang Solves the North Korea Situation.” In 2006, the relationship between North Korea and the United States was especially tumultuous, given that North Korea claimed that it had set off its first nuclear test on October 8th, just two days after the country was warned by the United Nations Security Council that the action would lead to severe consequences. NPR constantly discussed the subject of North Korea’s instability and dangerous threats, which is why it makes sense that “Always

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105 Kimbel, “There’s A Real Bar And Other Things You Didn’t Know About ‘It’s Always Sunny.’”

106 Ward, “‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’: The Cast Tells Their Story.”

Sunny” decided to take this issue, put the good old fashioned “Always Sunny” twist on it, and release it to the public. While the title of the episode may be politically charged, the episode ends up not even being focused on the crisis at hand; rather, it centers on how the gang is preparing for their annual Pub Crawl and becomes horrified when they learn that they are facing competition from a new Korean bar. Other than a few snide comments including the gang calling the owners North Koreans because they are challenging the status quo of their Pub Crawl, the episode takes an unexpected turn and focuses on a talent show and Charlie’s accidental marriage to a twelve-year-old. Here again we see another example of how the conclusion of each episode strays drastically from its initial starting point and avoids taking a stance on the political theme of the episode.

------------ Politically Incorrect Themes ------------

In 2009, “Always Sunny” created episodes addressing the latest recession. With the utilization of Frank, the wealthy former business owner of the gang, the episode “The Great Recession” showcases him losing all of his money, attempting but failing to kill himself, and becoming a door to door knife and vacuum salesman until he receives a bailout from the government and returns to his wealthy status. At this point in time, the world recession was negatively affecting the American economy and millions of its citizens. “Always Sunny” writers knew that this would be a great opportunity to grow its audience by turning this well-known event into comedic episodes.108

Another instance where “Always Sunny” pushed boundaries was in 2013 when they aired the episode “The Gang Makes Lethal Weapon 6.” The episode is about a short film that the gang

108 Drea, “It’s always Sunny in Philadelphia - a critical analysis.”
made, which includes the use of blackface. Normally it is never okay to use blackface given its lengthy cultural history rooted in racist traditions; however, the uncomfortable content in “Always Sunny in Philadelphia” is put there to make the viewer feel uncomfortable and force him/her to address his/her own issues. The show recognizes that racism is an ongoing issue in society, and although the episode is meant to be humorous as the gang attempts to determine whether the use of blackface is ever justified, the episode is not making light of a serious issue. Rather, it is bringing the issue up as a means of reflection. When asked in an interview with AV Club whether there was anything the cast has come up with for the show that was ultimately nixed as being too extreme/far out of character/repellent, Rob McElhenney responded:

I know we've changed a couple of things, but I can't think of anything where we've flat-out said, ‘No, that's not going to work.’ Generally, we tend to stay away from things that are just gross, or shocking for the sake of being shocking. We don't want to do that. We tend to stay in the arena of, ‘Okay, what's going on in the world?’ and see where we can go with it. See if we can make it funny. If it just seems cruel, we'll nix it right away. Although in the first year, the gym teacher that molested Charlie was going to be a priest, and we didn't nix that; that was nixed for us. Which sucks, but what are you going to do?109

They never stop themselves from going to a strange or taboo place if it is funny. However, they are the judges of how funny something is, which is another factor that makes the show unique.

------------ Evolution of “Always Sunny” With Current Events ------------

In order for the show to last as long as it has, it is crucial that the show evolve with the times and with its characters. As time has progressed, the characters have gotten more and more well-defined; the characters are given a backstory and character traits. For example, Charlie Day’s character is revealed to be more than just the buffoon who does all the hard “Charlie

109 Kimbel, “There’s A Real Bar And Other Things You Didn’t Know About ‘It’s Always Sunny.'”
“Work”; he is also revealed to be some kind of strange musical genius. As for the development of episodes, they still don’t come out entirely as planned, with some of the best ones based on ideas that came up on the spot.

Understanding how episodes are received by both fans and society in general is an important element in understanding how the show got to where it is today and where it stands in comparison to other American television series. According to the FXX Network, the Season 12 series premiere of “Always Sunny” broke a network-record viewership number at 1.41 million people, thus making it the most viewed original telecast in FXX history in adults aged 18-49, 25-54, and total viewers. The viewership was up 7% from last season’s finale as well as 16% higher than Season 11’s average. These statistics adhere to the idea of reception theory and demonstrate how well received “Always Sunny” is among both young and older adults. The show continues to accumulate more viewers and fans as the series progresses.

While the show has risen in success, the creators/cast try to keep the show as authentic as possible and create the show because it’s fun. Charlie Day responds in an interview by AV Club in regard to whether or not he takes into account fan reactions:

A little bit. From time to time. I try not to take too much of it to heart, 'cause everyone's got an opinion. And obviously, comedy, or art in general, or television, or whatever you want to call it… it's all subjective. But I do like to know what people are thinking. I don't know how long I'll keep doing that. As it goes on and on, I might become more fearful of it.

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110 Ward, “‘It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia’: The Cast Tells Their Story.”


For the time being, I'm not opposed to reading what people write.\textsuperscript{113}

This demonstrates that the main priority of the show is to keep it authentic and produce it in accordance with the creators’ desires; however, from time to time, the creators will take into account how it may be received by the audience. Obviously viewership is important because it allows the show to make a profit, and in turn stay on the air longer, however, due to the fact that creators initially created the show for themselves, and not for an audience, the content of the show tends to revolve around things they think are funny. Thus, the producers of the show attempt to adhere to both their own desires for the show as well as what the viewers are hoping to see. The authenticity/DIY nature of the filming and writing process adds to the show’s character/charm, which in turn allows the content to remain edgy and therefore humorous.

Through illuminating the absurdities in political events, rather than picking sides, the show takes current, real events and flips them into something seemingly unrecognizable, providing a unique perspective to the ongoing narrative. Although boundaries are pushed in the show, with the use of blackface as just one example, the show remains popular. It is important to note that these issues, when discussed carelessly or insensitively, result in an uproar of debates on what our society deems respectful versus tasteless. With a majority of the episodes referencing cultural and social events, the fan base has to have a certain amount of cultural awareness in order to understand the nuances and why the episodes are satirical and not serious. Accordingly, it makes sense that college students make up a large portion of the show’s fanbase. “Always Sunny” is able to remain successful despite its outlandish themes that would ordinarily

\textsuperscript{113} Murray, “It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia’s Rob McElhenney, Glenn Howerton, and Charlie Day.”
scare away an audience.
CONCLUSION

In the final part of the season nine episode “The Gang Tries Desperately to Win an Award,” the gang’s scheme to try and fit in with the rest of the bar scene and win an award fails in epic proportions with Dee and Mac strangling each other, Charlie crawling through the floorboards, and Frank trying to display public sex as art. After spitting on all of the people from the Restaurant and Bar Review and forcing them to exit the premises, the gang realizes that it neither needs nor wants the acceptance of anyone outside of the gang; the gang is awesome and it doesn’t need any validation from outsider “jabroni’s.” While at the end of this episode the gang fails to achieve an award and asserts it is better than everyone else (claiming to not need any validation), subsequent episodes begin with a similar scheme where the gang tries desperately to prove to others that it is normal/superior with morals.

The characters in “Always Sunny” are unique from any other sitcom characters in that they are unrelatable and narcissistic, but yet, have an endearing quality to them. Viewers are attracted to the strange lives of these deranged people because they take what we know and blow it out of proportions. They take simple issues of daily life and warp them into something that has never before been showcased. Through tying in current events and applying their own “Always Sunny” charm/twist, the show attracts a large number of viewers, especially college students who have a sense of current events and can appreciate the outrlandish results. The show rejects conventional sitcom traditions including the nuclear family/close-knit group of friends, laugh tracks, catchphrases, and heart-warming end messages, and has evolved into its own dark horse sitcom genre. With the addition of a low-budget inspired production value, the show is also able to incorporate an off-the-cusp and DIY style of cinematography, which adds to the show’s scrappy nature. These factors allow the show to make outlandishness effective and account for
the success, large fan base, cult-like status, and longevity of the show.

So what? Why does my thesis matter? Through providing a thorough examination of the show “It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia,” I provide a new perspective into the narrative of the sitcom genre. Understanding the evolution of the sitcom genre can better help one understand the evolution and changes of the cultural and political climate in the United States throughout the ages. My thesis notes how the sitcom formula changed over time in order to mirror the changes occurring in society. Viewership is essential when examining/determining the success and overall value of the show. While sitcoms were molded around what would attract viewers, viewers were similarly shaped/effected by the content and style presented in sitcoms. With my examination of the nuances and intricacies of “Always Sunny,” I hope to further contribute to the discussion and analysis of the evolution of sitcoms as well as provide an analysis and commentary on how American culture is reflected in this evolution. Some important questions that are raised throughout my thesis include: what are the real implications of Always Sunny’s success? What does “Always Sunny” tell us about America? What makes a sitcom funny and successful?

One area of my research that I found particularly interesting was that of the political incorrectness throughout the series. Upon first viewing the show, I was shocked to see that the taboo and alarming content was allowed to air on television. My second thought was, how is this show so popular when there is an offensive theme in each episode? These questions allowed me to reflect on reception theory and examine how the success of the show reflects on American viewers. I came to the conclusion that one reason “Always Sunny” isn’t criticized more harshly for its content may be due to the fact that the viewer can distance themselves from the character acting in an offensive manner because he/she doesn’t find the character relatable. Instead of
Taking offense to the politically incorrect theme, the viewer can laugh from a distance and also reflect on the issue at hand.

Writing this thesis has been an important milestone in my development as an American Studies scholar. While this journey has been a year-long endeavor of research, analysis, and formulation of a cohesive argument, I have only just begun to scratch the surface of this area of study. I would encourage readers, if interested, to pursue further understanding of the dark horse sitcom genre that is “Always Sunny” through a comparison of the show to similar series such as “South Park” or to the online internet publication of “The Onion.” Both of these sources are similar to “Always Sunny” in that they reject convention and poke fun at current events and serious topics. Another area of research that may prove fascinating is that of reality television and how the thematic elements and filming techniques compare and contrast to that of “Always Sunny.”

Even though “Always Sunny” is the longest-running live-action comedy to date, it has received little to no recognition/acknowledgement of its success. After over a decade of airing and a large fan base, the show has only been nominated for three Emmy’s. The Emmy nominations weren’t even recognizing the content and wit of the show, but rather its stunt coordinator. In the years of 2013-2015, “Always Sunny” was nominated for “Outstanding Stunt Coordination For A Comedy Series Or A Variety Program,” and lost each year. Why is it that the series is consistently snubbed and yet continues to make groundbreaking milestones/records? Is it because “Always Sunny” is too edgy to fit the mold of what award shows are looking for? In 2016, “Always Sunny” won a People’s Choice Award, but nobody told them and they weren’t


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invited to the ceremony.\textsuperscript{115} Given that the show is signed on for two more seasons, it will be interesting to see if “Always Sunny” will gain critical acclaim within the American television community given its increasing popularity and fan base, or if it will continue to be slighted.

I hope that my readers come away from this piece with a better understanding of the way American television, more specifically American sitcoms, reflect and shape society throughout the ages. I particularly hope that my reader will view the show “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” in a more academic and thoughtful light, paying heed to the nuances and intricacies presented throughout each episode. Understanding how the show can bring up serious topics and current events in a humorous manner while also allowing the audience to reflect is an important aspect of the show that adds to its unique style. Finally I hope that the reader understands that while “Always Sunny” does not follow the traditional sitcom formula, it is still successful and has a powerful effect on society.

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