A SATIRIST’S RIGHT TO CRITICISE

SATIRE IN IT’S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA: A GENRE AND AUDIENCE RECEIPTION ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the utilisation of satire within the television series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Employing Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as a theoretical framework, this study delves into the complexities of how satire is constructed, received, and interpreted by viewers. Hall's model will be paired with a genre studies and audience receptions studies. The research employs two methods; a text analysis of a specific episode (“A Woman's Right to Chop”); and interviews. The issues displayed in the episode are: gender roles, women's rights, abortion and adoption. These issues are portrayed in a satirical manner by the use of humour, exaggeration, irony, critique, stereotypes and symbolism. The majority of the interviewees were found to understand and engage with the satire. Parts of the interviewees understood some of the underlying meanings. Few of the interviewees did not understand or misunderstood the material completely. Apart from satire, the additional interpretations stemmed from viewers fixating on minor details, misconstruing the portrayed messages, taking a literal approach, and harbouring dismissive sentiments towards the episode's content.

A Satirist's Right to Criticise; Satire in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*: A Genre and Audience Reception Analysis

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1. Introduction

Communication is an essential part of human life and can be used in many diverse forms to convey messages. In a world where humour can act as a means to critique and wit can reveal subtle insights, the study of satire becomes a thrilling journey into the heart of societal discourse. Satire, with its artful blend of humour and criticism, surpasses mere entertainment to unveil the hidden contours of culture, politics, and human nature. This thesis explores the theme of satire, revealing the nuanced ways in which it shapes our understanding of the world, challenges conventional norms, and sparks the flames of critical thought.

In the boisterous universe of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, humour and blunt social commentary collide in an explosion of comedic inventiveness. Using satire as its sharpest tool, this cheeky gem of television dares to confront the most disputed societal issues. Given the USA's dominance in global cultural industries (Crane, 2014:365), exploring an American television show becomes compelling to contemplate as they exert some form of power within other media landscapes. Through ludicrous escapades and cleverly crafted scripts, the show satirises subjects that may be difficult to discuss. Among its many targets such as racism, homophobia, stereotypical gender roles, activist movements et cetera, none have escaped unscathed in the 16 seasons the show has been on the air. This includes the highly debated question of women's reproductive rights in the episode “A Woman's Right to Chop”. However, even though the creators intentionally use satire to highlight societal issues and create discourse surrounding these topics, does satire, with all its comedic flair, possess the power to educate and enlighten on matters as meaningful as reproductive freedom? Or does its potency become lost in the chaotic world of humour? This thesis embarks on a journey to dissect the complex interaction between satire, societal issues, and its audience reception, investigating whether this form of comedy can go beyond its layer of humour to serve as a powerful tool for raising awareness and the potential for social change.

Co-authored by two individuals, every aspect of this thesis reflects collaborative effort, including preliminary research and the written text. It's important to note that only the concluding discussions are authored individually.
2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the depths of satire and how it is used as a communicative tool to create discourse around current societal topics. Examining satire is of interest because it employs an indirect approach of communication in order to bring awareness to certain issues. It is a literary device that can effectively convey a message to its audience, yet its subtlety may lead to it being overlooked or undetected. To explore its actual influence, this study will employ a text analysis and audience reception analysis to examine the utilisation of satire in the TV-show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. The show often targets “hot topics” to evoke reactions and reflections on the current state of society. The focus will be on the episode "A Woman’s Right to Chop" that problematizes the pro-life point of view in the current debate of abortion rights. Combining text analysis with audience reception analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the communicative dynamics from encoder to decoder.

2.1. Purpose

This thesis will explore how satire is used in the TV-show *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, specifically in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop”, and how it is received by its audience.

2.2. Research questions

The study aims to answer these questions:

1. How is satire used to communicate societal issues in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in the TV-show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?
2. How do viewers interpret and engage with the satire in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in the TV-show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?
3. Are there other interpretations, aside from satire, that can be found regarding the content in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?
3. Contextualization

*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (from now on referred to as *Always Sunny*) is a popular American sitcom known for its dark humour and edgy satire. The show can be viewed all over the world on multiple streaming sites. It first aired August 4th 2005 and is currently the longest-running live-action sitcom as its 16th season aired in June 2023. The show's longevity suggests a high level of popularity and viewer loyalty. It indicates that the show has successfully obtained and maintained the interest of its audience, therefore making it an advantageous show to use in our study.

The creator of the show, Rob McElhenney, had an idea for a short film where a “friend [comes] over to another friend's house to get sugar, and the friend tells him he has cancer, and all the guy can think about is getting his sugar and getting out of there” (McQuirter, 2022). McElhenney along with his two friends, Glenn Howerton and Charlie Day, created a home movie based on this premise. After this, the trio felt inspired to create a follow-up, and soon recognized the potential for a more extensive series (ibid).

The show revolves around a group of five friends (Mac, Charlie, Dennis, Dee and Frank) who own “Paddy's Pub”, a rundown bar, in Philadelphia. Each episode follows “The Gang” on their misadventures as they navigate personal and social challenges, often leading to outrageous, ethically questionable and controversial situations.

Satire can be defined as a literary style that combines a critical perspective with humour and cleverness, aiming to better human institutions or humanity itself. Satirists recognize the weaknesses in human-created systems and endeavour, through amusement, to critique them but also to encourage a process of transformation and improvement (Thrall et al, 1960: 436).

The show critically portrays and dissect various aspects of modern culture and human behaviour. Satire demands a profound level of dedication and engagement with the distressing issues of the world (Hodgart, 2010:11). The show encourages open discussions about issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and mental health, thereby potentially contributing to societal progress and change. The show unapologetically addresses taboo subjects and opposes authority, which sparks conversations that otherwise may remain
avoided or silenced in today’s society. Through exaggerated humour, or satire, the show provokes an alternative way of looking at current events, which could be both problematic and/or fruitful depending on the audience.

In an FX Network press conference, McElhenney explains that:

“my barometer is off for what’s appropriate sometimes in situations because, like, we’ve spent 15 years making a show about the worst people on the planet, and because it’s satire, we lean so heavily into this idea. And then we are always, like, right on the razor’s edge, but that’s the only way that satire works.” (Haring, 2021)

He goes on to explain that the characters portrayed can be seen as cartoon characters, which means they can get away with a lot more (Haring, 2021).

In an interview with Upprox, co-creator and star Howerton explains that the show raises questions, confronting irrational perspectives or motivations, regardless of their stance on a specific matter. The essence of the show is about poking fun at the extremes of oppositional sides in a debate. (Tabry, 2021)
4. Literature overview

This literature overview discusses satire's definition, major themes (political and racial), its benefits and challenges, and prior research on audience reception of satire.

4.1. Satire

Our research begins by exploring scholars' diverse definitions of satire, aiming to establish a comprehensive understanding of this commonly disputed concept.

Satire can be used in many different ways and has no characteristics common to all its uses, which makes it very hard to define (Stinson, 2019:1). However, LeBoeuf (2007:1) states that satire is an art form with the ability to identify weaknesses in society, institutions or certain individuals in a humorous, absurd and/or hilarious way. Satire is therefore entertaining and can be consumed by a wide audience. In addition, she claims that satire also has an ability to protect the satirist from accountability for criticism because it is implied instead of overtly stated, which makes it a powerful tool (ibid). Further, satire is undefinable with countless adaptations throughout history and it is a timeless tradition (Stinson, 2019:2).

On the other hand, Marshall (2013:241-242) argues that scholars have reached a consensus and lists that there are five properties of satire: it is considered literary art; it strikes its targets; its targets are historical events; the execution is partly humorous; and it essentially holds a negative tone. Tesnohildkova (2020:2) states that satire is a part of the humorous genre, but also holds a citational nature using satirical impersonations or parodies. Nonetheless, satire’s primary focus is not humour but is used to criticise with the purpose to uncover failures of society, institutions or individuals by ridicule and mockery (ibid:3). Bore and Reid (2014:454) adds to the definition by describing satire as using humour as a weapon by attacking its target by encouraging the audience to laugh at them. The way of using this “weapon” fluctuates between various approaches and remains both flexible and surprising (ibid:455). According to Hewitt (1913:293) satire needs to be seasoned with humour to reach its full effectiveness. Irony is used in satire to reveal problematic behaviour, often in a humorous way (LeBoeuf, 2007:3).
Satire is defined differently by different people and scholars, because of this variation some satirical work can be dismissed from the genre but accepted by others (LeBoeuf, 2007:2). The wide collection of definitions is criticised for using the term 'satire' too liberally, where simply making fun of something is considered satire. This particular discussion is resolved by presenting three characteristics: critique; irony; and implicitness (ibid:3).

4.1.1. Common themes in satire research

In the research found, political and racial satire emerged as dominant topics.

4.1.1.1. Political satire

Many sources discuss political satire as a potent commentary medium that goes beyond humour. Shows like *Always Sunny* often turn real-world political issues into thought-provoking narratives, adding a unique perspective to the discourse.

Gray et al. (2009:11) state that satire not only provides meaningful political commentary but also prompts viewers to engage with politics actively. It invites them to scrutinise, examine, and challenge political narratives instead of passively accepting them as “truths” from authoritative sources. Through manipulating the political sphere by using humour, individuals can attain a heightened sense of control over it. This can cause a greater sense of empowerment, encouraging active engagement (ibid). One of the benefits of political humour lies in its potential to offer “healing effects” to audiences, acting as a means to “cleanse society” and shelter a portion of the population from authoritarian claims (Tesnohlidkova, 2020:4).

However, Kilby (2018:1942) points out that satire can be used to draw attention to different issues, but comedic approaches alone cannot contribute to actual long-term changes. She mentions that satire in television shows can encourage political apathy and can potentially be destructive to the democratic process (ibid). Although Tesnohlidkova (2020:4) addresses satire as a “hopeful genre”, she also maintains that it does not provide solutions to the political issues that it addresses, but that it can potentially stimulate people to reflect on politics and encourage political engagement in society.
In terms of the use of political satire in *Always Sunny*, Kimmel (2017:55) raises the point that without taking a stance on political events, the show uses real, contemporary topics and transforms them into something almost indistinguishable which adds a unique perspective to be admired.

### 4.1.1.2. Racial satire

Racial satire is an ongoing theme in *Always Sunny*, leading to the removal of episodes from streaming sites due to controversial blackface scenes. Numerous research articles explore racial satire, especially focusing on stereotypes. Stereotypes are common across various topics, including traditional gender roles and toxic behaviour.

Perks (2012:298) identifies two ways in which people understand racial satire. The first way, "laughing with," means finding enjoyment in understanding the deeper meanings and symbols in the text. The second way, "laughing at," is about simply finding humour in the obvious jokes or stereotypes presented in the text (ibid).

Ladenburg (2015:859) specifically delves into the controversies of the pilot episode of *Always Sunny* named “The Gang Gets Racist”. He states that humour can be a potent but risky rhetorical tool due to the fact that audiences tap into their preconceived notions when consuming satirical texts (ibid).

Zakos (2009:45) states that racial satire can be problematic when trying to highlight the issue, the satire ends up depending on the very ideas and images it is trying to criticise, even if it was well intentioned. Similarly, Ladenburg (2015:860) mentions that although *Always Sunny* aims to shed light on oppressed and marginalised groups in society, the depiction becomes highly stereotypical and can cause the audience to disregard the positive social critique inserted in the pilot episode. Likewise, Winburg (2017:392) highlights that the early seventies sitcom *All in the Family* employed satire to criticise bigotry and politics but faced accusations of promoting racism. Even then, there was a debate about whether television comedy could fight prejudice or if it unintentionally normalised such attitudes. This relates to Johnson et al. (2010:411) mentioning that in addition to possibly missing the joke, the audience might also fail to recognize that the content is fictional, as more than 50 percent of their respondents missed the satire completely.
4.1.2. Benefits and challenges of using satire

Bore and Reid (2014:454) mentions how satire can be used to promote active and positive engagement, although under the risk of restricting representations to a humorous sphere. The solution to the potential risk is to understand that the audience has different humour preferences. Tesnohlidkova (2020:3) adds to this discussion by arguing that satire is not aiming to produce a humorous result but to criticise various subjects, while placing importance on cultural norms and symbols. Furthermore, Thompson (2009:49) refers to the producers of the TV-show *King of the Hill* as working hard to have a realistic approach by using satire that is grounded in cultural authenticity, “getting the details right in order to get the big picture right”.

According to Bore and Reid (2014:458), it is also of importance to note that the satirist’s intention is one thing and what the audience does with satire is another. The first benefit from the use of satire is, as mentioned earlier, that it can promote active engagement and does this by encouraging reflection, investigation and action (ibid:463). A challenge is to make the message clear enough to its audience to be able to seek information elsewhere. Satire can promote positive engagement through its humorous tone, but the satirical mode can also be used in a way that leaves the audience feeling scared and guilty (ibid:465-466). The purpose of using satire to prove a point, instead of presenting the information straightforwardly, is to combine elements that invite the audience to grasp the issue in a new light (Fife, 2016:323).

4.2. Audience receptions of satire

There are a number of studies about satire and its audience’s reception. All coded communication has several possible meanings and a reader can both navigate between them or create new ones (Fagerstöm & Nilson, 2008:34). This is especially evident when looking into audience reception of satirical texts. Zakos (2009:68) identified a split among the audience in terms of understanding racial satire, in the TV-show *Chappelle’s Show*. Some acknowledged the satire’s existence and its purpose, while others dismissed the show as pure comedy with no deeper meaning, or they viewed it as toleration of spreading racist ideas and hate (Zakos, 2009:68-69).
Additionally, Zenor (2014:35-36) presents four perspectives of the audience of the TV-show *Family Guy*. The first perspective understands the show as the producer intended; the second perspective were fans of the show yet also thought the show was unsophisticated and disrespectful; the third perspective is described as “it’s perfectly fine to laugh without it meaning anything”; and the final perspective was very critical to the show (ibid).

Johnson et al. (2010:413) states that many individuals of the audience in their study did not recognize the satire, although their interpretations still tended to align with the intended messages. This suggests that even when the audience fails to grasp the humour or satire they can still identify the underlying meaning. Similarly, Florberger and Lundborg (2014:49) found the audience to be familiar with many parts of satire but not satire itself. They also state that the audience can engage with presented information at a greater level if they are fascinated and entertained by a show (ibid). Fife (2016:325) explains how the serious messages in satire can be discredited as pure comedy, because of the association between comedy or irony and amusement. Even if the audience does not recognize the text as satirical, it does not mean that the satire has failed to achieve its purpose - if the audience reads the text literally and dismisses it as absurd, then the producer has partly reached the goal of making its target look ridiculous (ibid:327).

Furthermore, Kimmel (2017:58-59) mentions that one reason for the audience not relating nor taking offence to the satire in TV-shows is because they have no personal connection to the characters or issues depicted.

### 4.3. Summarization

The use of satire has both benefits and challenges. For example, it has the ability to discuss sensitive and taboo-marked topics in a light-hearted manner, but runs the risk of contributing to the ideas and images it aims to critique.

There have been multiple studies on audience reception of satire. They present different ways that the audience understands satirical texts; starting from producers' intentions to the audiences’ misinterpretations of the text. Studies show that many members of the audience do not understand satirical messages. Other studies show that the audience is familiar with
parts of satire but not satire itself. The distinct association between satire and humour is often discussed.

While the existing literature provides some insights into satire, we noted that there are some areas where further research could be useful. We found that broader overviews of satire in general were difficult to find. A lot of research on satire relates to very specific themes such as politics and race.

Since our study proposal relates to a particular TV-show, we were only able to find two sources that mention Always Sunny, neither of which include audience reception research. This suggests that this topic is unexplored, and it can therefore be useful for us to fill this gap with our own research and study. Another unexplored topic is satirical material regarding sexism, traditional gender roles or women’s rights. There are studies examining stereotypes which could be applied to many different themes, although we were unable to find this in relation to sexist satire. Therefore, this is a theme worth exploring and researching.
5. Theoretical perspective

This study takes inspiration from Stuart Hall's theory about encoding and decoding. Hall’s encoding/decoding model is used to explain how people interpret media messages (Pollai, 2006:221). The theory underlines the active role of the audience shaping the message's meaning, how media producers encode messages and how its audience decodes them. The encoding/decoding model reformed the first “straight line process” view of mass communication to start including the meaning-making processes of both its creator and its audience (Bengtsson et al., 2017:74-75). Hall (1973:3) explains that in order for a message to have any impact, or to fulfil a requirement, or serve a purpose, it must initially be perceived as meaningful communication and decoded with a purpose.

![Figure 1 Encoding/decoding-model (Hall, 1973)](image)

Both the encoding and decoding process is formed by frameworks of knowledge, production conditions and specific infrastructure (Bengtsson et al., 2017:75). Producers encode while they are producing material and in their finished media text. This results in signs constructing meaning which creates a meaningful discourse. As viewers interpret, or decode, this material, they construct their understanding using the same elements, but they are influenced by the prevailing societal discourse (ibid).

Considerable research has been dedicated to determining the extent to which the audience retains or remembers the message on a factual level. Television producers, or 'encoders', become concerned when their message struggles to convey its intended meaning (Hall, 1973:15). They often work to resolve any issues in the communication process, aiming to enhance the overall effectiveness of their messages. It is acknowledged that there are some
instances of 'misunderstandings', although the exact prevalence remains uncertain, however some explanations can be found. The viewer may not be fluent in the discourse surrounding the material and message. They might struggle to grasp the intricate logic of arguments or explanations, find the concepts unfamiliar, or feel overwhelmed by the condensed, or advanced editing. On the other hand, encoders also imply that their audience has interpreted the message in a manner divergent from the intended meaning. Essentially, this indicates that viewers are not adhering to the predominant or favoured code. The aspiration is for flawless, easily understandable communication. However, what they often encounter is the reality of 'systematically distorted communication' (ibid).

Morley and Brundson (1999:123-124) apply Hall’s encoding/decoding model in their own study. They reflect upon the model by naming three premises for the process:

1. The production of a meaningful message can be problematic because the same event can undergo multiple encodings. It is important to examine why and how specific production practices and structures consistently generate particular messages.
2. In social communication, messages inherently possess a complex structure and form, offering multiple potential readings. While messages may suggest and favour certain interpretations, they never fully restrict themselves to a single reading; they persist in being polysemic.
3. The process of extracting meaning from a message, despite its apparent transparency and "natural" quality, is inherently problematic. Messages encoded in a specific manner can always be interpreted differently (ibid.)

Essentially, their perspective aligns with Hall’s perspective, as they also state that a television message functions as a complex sign, carrying an intended interpretation, yet maintaining the capacity to convey an alternate meaning if decoded in a manner that's different from its original encoding (Morely & Brundson, 1999:124).

**5.1. Genre studies (encoding)**

This thesis will begin by examining the producer's encoding process, using a genre studies perspective. We aim to gain an overall understanding of the encoding of the producers, by decoding their encoding.

Genre studies focuses on the analysis and classification of media texts as it examines how different genres differ from each other or are similar to each other (Bengtsson et al., 2017:144). To establish a genre the text needs to be conceptualised and then compared to
other genres, which means that the genre being studied already has to be defined and characterised in advance (ibid). Hall (2013:352) suggests that certain signifiers such as settings; locations; character types; iconography; and plots determine different traits of fictional worlds. The genre can be described as an semiotic arena of production and negotiation of representations, identities and meanings (Lindgren 2009:93). A genre provides a type of framework that is more or less flexible, it is not an automated reproduction even if pop culture genres often are said to be reproducing stereotypes (ibid). This also means that genres are continuously evolving and are subject to change. Some may disappear to some degree; and some may overlap with each other to create hybrids (Bengtsson et al., 2017:146).

Genres can be divided into main genres and subgenres, for example Always Sunny is a TV-show in the form of a sitcom with the theme of comedy and satire. Intertextuality means that the concept of genres involve the text's relation to other texts (Lindgren 2009:93). A text's meaning can be dependent on another text. This second text is called intertext, and this dependency can refer to intertextual loans, references, imitations et cetera (ibid). Always Sunny uses multiple intertextual references such as other TV-shows, films, commercials and events in their jokes and storylines.

Characteristics of genre formation includes standardisation, repetition and broad recognition (Bengtsson et al, 2017:150). This can lead to the use of characters of a stereotypical nature. A stereotype is a negative image that belittles individuals by associating them to group beliefs based on ignorance, prejudice and massive simplifications (ibid.). Stereotypes serve as a means of establishing order and significance; they act as a type of "signal language" to simplify the complexities of society. Simultaneously, stereotypes carry the prevailing values and beliefs of a society, playing a role in the exercise of symbolic power by diminishing, devaluing, and ridiculing (ibid:151). Satire and stereotypes essentially share the same objective; to mock and ridicule societal norms and ideologies. Therefore, it is interesting to consider how satire and stereotypes are interrelated and used in the episode used in this thesis.

Fundamentally, genre studies seek to find the core elements of the genre in question. To do so it questions the characteristics and elements; what narratives and storytelling are used; its history; context of production; and intertextual connections (Bengtsson et al., 2017:150). Certain expectations arise when a text is described or associated with a specific genre, for
example if you watch a comedy movie you would expect it to be funny and to laugh. This also means that the audience interprets the material based on these expectations surrounding genres. We will use this approach to understand how genres are created and how this can be applied by media creators and influence audiences expectations. The understanding of what different genres key-elements and contexts are, can help the understanding of the viewers reactions. If we delve into how this show is considered satirical as a genre, we can further understand how this affects the audience. We connect genre studies with the encoding part of the earlier mentioned model of Hall, to then build an overall perspective on the process of media messages and how they are created, and later decoded and understood by an audience using audience reception studies.

5.2. Audience reception (decoding)

The second theoretical perspective that we base our study on is audience reception. We aim to focus on an audience reception study to examine how the audience receives and interprets the satirical messages of the episode from Always Sunny. This part of the study represents the decoding part of the encoding/decoding model, as it sheds light on the audience rather than the producers of the show.

Schröder (2018:105) explains how within audience reception research the media audience is viewed as active as they engage with and make sense of the media content that they consume. The audience’s process of meaning-making is shaped by their expectations, identities, values, pre-understandings, interests, needs et cetera (ibid). Therefore, we are interested in how the TV-show’s audience interprets the messages that they are consuming and if the opinions differ or if there is a consensus to be reached.

Hall categorises decoding positions into three hypothetical categories: "dominant-hegemonic or preferred", "negotiated", and "oppositional". Collectively, this framework is commonly recognized as the preferred reading model (Hall, 1980:59). Hall uses the term “dominant”, and not “determined”, as it is possible to arrange, categorise, and decode an event through multiple 'mappings'. The choice of “dominant” is employed due to the presence of a pattern of ‘preferred readings,’ wherein these mappings inherently bear the imprints of institutional, political, and ideological orders (Hall, 1973:13).
The initial hypothetical form of reading text is the dominant-hegemonic position. When the viewer straightforwardly extracts the presumed meaning from a text and decodes the message according to the reference code in which it was encoded, the viewer is described as utilising the dominant code. This scenario represents the optimal case of “perfectly transparent communication”, or at least as close as possible (Hall, 1980:59).

The second form of reading text is referred to as negotiated, which blends adjustable and oppositional elements. It recognises the validity of the hegemonic definitions for constructing overarching meanings on a more specific scale. It establishes its own guidelines, operating with exceptions to the norm. It gives precedence to the dominant definitions of events while also maintaining flexibility in opinion (Hall, 1980:60).

The third and final form is the oppositional position. It is a decoding position in which the audience actively challenges and rejects the dominant or preferred meanings embedded in a text (Hall, 1980:61).

In an audience reception study, exploring various models of communication can offer valuable insights. For instance, Jansson (2009:29) discusses Shannon and Weaver's linear communication model, which employs mathematical principles to optimise message transmission. This model involves six essential elements: sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, and receiver (ibid). The model sheds light on the potential for message misinterpretation during the journey from the information source to its destination.

An interesting part of this model is the noise-aspect. It refers to any disruptions that happen while a message is being transmitted from a sender to a receiver. During the transmission process, it is common for unintended elements to be introduced to the signal. These unintended additions could include alterations in sound quality, or background interference, or errors in the visual representation of an image, or mistakes in the transmission process (Shannon & Weaver, 1949:8). When there is background noise, the message we get may have mistakes, making it more difficult to understand and causing more uncertainty. However, if there is more uncertainty could mean that there is more to consider and learn from. So, although noise usually makes messages harder to understand, it can actually provide more information to reflect upon (ibid:19).
As mentioned, this audience reception perspective will represent the decoding process in Hall’s encoding/decoding-model. The cause is to examine how the audiences’ interpretations relate to the producers intent, or not, and why. This will determine whether or not the encoding and delivery of these messages are effective or not.
6. Methodology and material

This section presents, motivates and evaluates the research methods used in this study, as well as discusses ethical considerations and the validity.

The two methods used are a text analysis and interviews, both of which are qualitative research methods. Qualitative research provides broader empirical material with richer descriptions (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Alvehus (2019:20) adds that qualitative research focuses on meaning or signification, rather than statistics. Qualitative research makes it possible for the researchers to present complex and nuanced material, which makes it possible to analyse different types of social settings, for example in the subjects’ daily life as well as hypothetical situations (ibid:21). Although, a difficulty as researcher is to see the reality through someone else’s eyes and interpret it from their perspective (Bryman, 1997:89). Another obstacle with qualitative research is connecting theories and empirical material in an early stage, creating inaccurate assumptions and/or drawing rushed conclusions (ibid:99). This is usually the result when researchers begin by specifying theories and theoretical concepts. Using qualitative research does not cancel out the possibility of having elements of quantitative material, for example whether problems are common or not (Alvehus, 2013:21). It is difficult to know to what extent studies’ results can be generalised. Generalising a result depends on the amount of subjects and environments examined, therefore the conclusions are only applied to the study that they originated from (Bryman, 1997:106-107).

6.1. Text analysis

The first method is a text analysis. The purpose of the analysis is to examine the content of the episode in order to account for the satirical content and discuss the producers’ intentions, as the encoding part of Hall's encoding/decoding-model. We decode their encoding to determine the preferred reading.

Lindgren (2009:73) explains that text is a concept regarding all meaningful and cultural expressions. A text contains signs, which are the carriers of meaning (ibid). Texts are produced and viewed in endless amounts and by interacting with these texts people’s thoughts and actions can be affected (Bergström & Boréus, 2012:17).
The first step in a text analysis is to get familiar with the material and obtain decent knowledge about the genre (Bergström & Boréus, 2012:55). Therefore, a genre studies perspective will be used to further understand the content in terms of a genre. The researcher is also required to be aware of the discourse that the text is manifesting, what it expresses, and the social context in which it is produced (ibid:51-55).

Everything that is distinguishable in the text can be analysed, such as the use of certain words, metaphors, numerous themes or particular types of arguments (Bergström & Boréus, 2012:55). When analysing the episode, the focus will be on what elements make the episode satirical and how the producers apply them to get their message across. The elements that are applied can be portrayed in different ways: in a neutral; appreciative or; dismissive way. If more than one person analyses different parts of the material, it is of importance to verify that all parties have made similar assessments (ibid:55-57). The potential risk of this could be that subjectivity plays a role, resulting in different assessments of the elements in the material. To ensure that this does not occur, and to avoid ambiguities, we will analyse the episode together.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005:1277) mentions three approaches for a qualitative content analysis: conventional; directed; and summative. A conventional content analysis avoids the use of preconceived categories and themes of categories by allowing them to appear from the text. This strategy is also called inductive category development, where the researchers engage with the text to let new insights emerge. A directed content analysis is used to validate or extend an already existing theoretical framework, which essentially means that categories, coding schemes and relationships between codes are predetermined. Finally, the summative content analysis starts by identifying and mapping the usage of words, to get an overview of the text (ibid:1279-1283). This study’s text analysis will take inspiration from what is suggested in the conventional approach and let the episode “speak freely” to generate themes that describe the content. Considering that the study only will examine one episode and do not need a comparable type of result, we do not need to consider the quantitative aspects that this approach lacks and that other approaches possess.


6.2. Interviews

The second method is interviews. Qualitative interviews are used to study individuals' way of understanding and experiencing things (Ekström & Larsson, 2019:102). Interviews allow the interviewee to describe their reality with their own words, unlike other methods such as surveys which provide definitive alternatives (ibid). In order to answer our research questions regarding how viewers interpret and engage with satire, it is required to use a method that can provide individual, personal and in-depth answers. To ensure that the interviewees felt comfortable to express their opinions, the interviews were held individually. The interviews were held in our apartment due to the fact that a calm, quiet space and a television was required to fulfil the criteria of a fruitful interview. We planned interview times according to the participants schedules within a two-week timeframe.

6.2.1. Interviewees

Our selection of interviewees consisted of 13 people. The participants were not required to have any prior knowledge about the TV-show or satire as a genre. It was of interest to us that the selection of interviewees included both *Always Sunny*-fans, regular watchers and people that are unfamiliar with the TV-show and its concept. We also aimed to have a wide selection of age, our age span is 19-72 years old. Among the interviewees there was a mix of gender, backgrounds and nationalities, such as Swedish, Dutch, German, British and Lithuanian. Using a strategic selection refers to selecting interviewees that can provide the researcher with the information that they seek, the selection is based on the research questions (Alvehus, 2019:71). This study’s selection of interviewees was a strategic choice, to get a broad group that was as diverse as possible, in terms of gender, age, background, nationality and experience with the TV-show.

6.2.2. Type of interview

The semi-structured interview is flexible and adaptable. It is structured enough to provide an insight into the research questions, while also allowing room for participants to introduce fresh perspectives on the topic (Galletta, 2013:2). The aim is to create an unrestricted dialogue between the interviewee and ourselves to allow for free reflection to occur by both parties. For this reason, we are using a semi structured interview. It creates a more open dialogue; where the topic is stated but digressions are welcomed and can provide new perspectives (Lindstedt, 2017:211).
This type of interview allows for a mutual exchange, or back-and-forth, which provides an opportunity for the researcher to inquire further into a participant's answers, seeking clarification, exploring their interpretations, and encouraging reflective thinking (Galletta, 2013:24).

Being a hybrid approach, the semi-structured interview can be organised into sections, transitioning from entirely open-ended questions to ones that are more guided by theory as the interview unfolds (Galletta, 2013:24). Three stages of a semi-structured interview are presented. The first stage aims to evoke the initial ideas from the participant as a foundation that will provide the interview with a direction. The questions are intentionally open-ended to allow participants to recount their personal experiences. The next stage, after a level of trust has been established, includes more narrow probing questions designed to ensure that the research topic is sufficiently covered. The final stage should maintain a lighter, more relaxed tone. Interviewer should inquire if the participant has any additional thoughts to share, and ultimately express gratitude for the participants contribution in the study (ibid:47-52).

The semi-structured interview is advantageous for our study as it promotes in-depth insights by creating a comfortable environment for participants to share personal thoughts. This openness encourages free expression, providing valuable perspectives. Additionally, the format allows for clarification through follow-up questions, ensuring accurate understanding of participants' responses.

6.2.3. Interview questions

Ekström and Larsson (2019:105) identify three types of interview questions: Q-word questions (based on how, what, who, and why), polar questions (answered with yes or no), and alternative questions (asking the interviewee to choose an alternative as an answer).

The interview questions are:

1. Please describe what happened in this episode? How would you describe it to someone who has not seen it?
2. What do you personally think about the episode?
3. Please reflect over the producers’ intent with the episode. What do you think the purpose of this material is? Is there a point with the episode?

4. If you think there is a purpose and a point, do you think they make their point effectively? How?

5. Do you agree with what the producers are trying to say? Why?

Kvale and Brinkmann (2014:176) discuss introductory questions, which aim for the interviewee to give spontaneous and detailed descriptions of what they think are the important aspects of the studied phenomenon. Question 1 and 2 are introductory questions that allow our interviewees to reveal their spontaneous thoughts about the episode. There are three Q-word questions and two polar questions. The Q-word question provides less guidance and has an open agenda (Ekström & Larsson, 2019:106). Question 4 and 5 are polar questions, but are followed by Q-word questions to motivate their answer.

### 6.3. Material

**6.3.1. “A Woman’s Right to Chop”**

We have shown the interviewees one full episode of *Always Sunny* called “A Woman’s Right to Chop”. We found it a challenge to find short and efficient clips from multiple episodes without giving a broader context of the scene. Therefore, we have decided to use one full episode. After thorough research, deliberation and discussion, we chose this particular episode because it prominently features multiple uses of satire. Almost every scene hints at some form of satire, ensuring that the entire episode contributes significantly to our study. This selection aims to prevent interviewees from focusing on scenes included purely for comedic effect.

#### 6.3.1.1. Plotline

To provide some sort of context and background of the episode, we have summarised it into its key points.

The episode starts off with The Gang hanging out in Paddy’s Pub. Women with short haircuts are in the bar and this brings forth the males opinions of the hair, saying that they
are untraditional, unnatural and ugly. Dee, the only female present, states that it’s the
woman’s right to control their own appearances and bodies. Mac’s dog, Poppins, returns to
him and is admired by the men for his ability to come and go as his right as a male.
However, in the next scene, at a veterinary clinic, he finds out that the dog is a female and
pregnant, although she is too old to deliver the puppies and survive. Mac immediately
wants to abort the puppies. In another storyline, Dennis and Frank are trying to stop
women from getting short haircuts by standing outside of the newly-opened hair salon
protesting against these haircuts. Dee decides to get the haircut to stand up for the women
and the right to decide over their own bodies. In an additional storyline, Frank tries to bribe
Dee into not getting the haircut. Meanwhile, Mac tries to get his dog an abortion but
figures out that it is not his dog as his actual dog comes by. Dee walks into the bar with a
hideous haircut that she has given herself. After which, the guys decide that they do not
care about the hair. The final scene shows Dee getting a wig.

6.4. Ethical considerations

It is imperative to address four fundamental ethical questions to prioritise the safety and
autonomy of the participants. These include: informed consent; confidentiality; consequences; and the researcher’s role (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:105). Informed consent
involves clarifying the study’s purpose, procedures, and potential benefits or risks for
participants. The participant should be informed that they can withdraw from the interview
at any time (ibid:107). All interviewees were briefed on the study’s purpose, the
implications of participation, their right to withdraw, and the assurance of anonymity.
Confidentiality involves determining accessible information, its recipients, and the potential
identification of participants in the material (ibid:109). Interviewees were informed that
their interviews would be recorded but deleted after transcription. The interviewer has to
be aware of the seductive power over the interviewees’ openness and intimacy, which can
lead to statements that later can be regretted (ibid:110). The interviewees have the right to
regret and erase statements, and will have the chance to review the material before it is
employed. Understanding the researcher’s role involves recognizing the impact of their
pre-understanding. Researchers should strive for high scientific quality, ensuring accurate
and representative results within their research area. (ibid:111). Maintaining integrity is
crucial for researchers and individuals alike.
6.5. Validity

It is of value to discuss and evaluate the validity of the research study, to ensure the accuracy of the research. Validity refers to the extent to which the study investigates what it is intended to investigate (Alvehus, 2019:126).

In qualitative research, the researcher's interpretations are at the forefront due to the fact that the researcher’s interpretation will act as the foundation for how the empirical evidence is understood (Alvehus, 2019:127). Likewise, the interviewees are influential, as it is not possible to guarantee that they would have answered exactly the same thing on different occasions (ibid). The researcher should constantly review, question and theoretically interpret the results, in order to maintain validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:298).

Kvale and Brinkmann (2014:298) argue that presenting the researcher's choices is essential to counteract selective perception. The personal connections between interviewees and researchers may enhance comfort and truthfulness, but there's a risk of prompting answers aligned with expectations. To capture diverse perspectives, interviewees were selected based on gender, age, and nationality rather than personal connections.

We conducted interviews in our apartment due to a lack of alternative suitable locations, aiming to provide a potentially comfortable environment for interviewees. One interview was conducted on Zoom for convenience, which could have potential impacts on outcomes, but as the majority were under similar conditions, the Zoom interview is not expected to influence results significantly.

The questions we asked deliberately excluded the use of the word satire to avoid leading the interviewees' answers in a specific direction, allowing for multiple interpretations to arise. We debated including the term "satire" in the questions, but doing so might alter the main goal of assessing whether individuals genuinely perceived it.

We opted to analyse a single episode, addressing specific themes like abortion, pro-choice, and traditional gender roles, instead of exploring various scenes from different episodes. This focused approach provides clarity on characters and the overarching plot while
delving deeply into fewer issues to enhance audience understanding. The decision also aimed to fill a gap in existing literature on these themes.

Due to the fact that we did not encode this material, we can only speculate what the preferred reading is through the use of a text analysis. This foundation will be used in the analysis of the interviews. This implies that if another person were to conduct a similar analysis on the same material, there is no assurance that the findings would be identical.
7. Results and analysis

7.1. Text analysis

A text analysis of the chosen episode is conducted to discern its preferred reading and address the research question “How is satire used to communicate societal issues in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?” The analysis explores the presentation of societal issues, examining the tools employed to convey these ideas.

7.1.1. Character summary and plotlines

Before delving into a comprehensive analysis, introducing a character summary and reiterating a basic plotline serves as the foundational framework, providing a contextual narrative that not only grounds the discussion but also lays the groundwork for an exploration of the elemental themes within the content.

The Gang consists of five main characters who own and run a below par bar, Paddy’s Pub, in southern Philadelphia. Dennis Reynolds is a vain, self-absorbed and manipulative bartender. His twin sister, Dee Reynolds is a struggling actress/bartender. Frank Reynolds is the eccentric and wealthy father of Dennis and Dee. Mac is body fixated and often seeks approval from his friends and family. Charlie Kelly is the endearingly child-like janitor.

Each of the cast members have their own storylines in which they drive different themes forward in this episode. Dennis tries to stop the ladies from cutting their hair short. Dee opposes him by wanting to get the haircut and, in turn, standing up for women’s right to choose over their own body. Mac and Charlie deal with the dog, Poppins, and attempt to terminate her pregnancy to save her life. Frank tries to convince Dee not to get the haircut by bribing her with a car.

7.1.2. Societal issues

As discussed earlier, it is established that the writers/producers, who also serve as the stars of the show, employ satire as a means to convey their messages. Their goal is to bring
attention to various topics by adopting extremely polarised stances in any given argument. Since this study adopts the theoretical perspective of genre studies, it is important to investigate how this show falls under the satire category. This poses the question; what are the key elements that make this episode satirical?

The encoding process is formed by frameworks of knowledge, production conditions and specific infrastructure (Bengtsson et al., 2017:75). These factors can influence how issues are handled from a satirical standpoint and how this shapes the overall composition of the episode. Hall (1973:15) mentions that even though the ambition is to create a flawless communication, there are multiple reasons as to why the decoding process can differ from the encoding process. Examining the reasons behind the observed differences highlights the significance of the factors that contribute to the encoding process, particularly when the audience has diverse backgrounds. Initially, we can pinpoint four overarching themes that propel the discourse and satire within the episode. While the episode encompasses various subjects, it prominently addresses and targets traditional gender roles, women's rights, abortions, and adoptions.

7.1.2.1. Traditional gender roles

One theme that is very apparent and brought up in the first part of the episode is traditional gender roles. The cast of five, includes only one female lead character, which leads to her opinions often being overlooked or ignored. The conversation about gender roles is sparked when Mac’s dog, Poppins, enters the bar. Dee questions Mac’s love for the dog because he only comes around every three-four years and leaves again. Mac states that “Poppins comes and goes as he pleases because that’s his right as a male” and that women will never be able to understand this. Mac is stating that there is a fundamental difference in how men and women perceive or exercise their rights, particularly in terms of independence and the ability to make their own choices. He straightforwardly distinguishes that men and women have different viewpoints which could be because their frame of references differ from a historical perspective. He maintains that the current state has persisted over time and, consequently, will continue to remain unchanged.

The male cast goes on to state that it is natural for men to leave if they want to because it is “tradition”. This implies that there is a belief or justification based on long-lasting customs or practices. The use of the term "tradition" suggests that this behaviour is not only
accepted but also considered an expected action within the cultural or social context. Dee opposes their statement by expressing that; “Traditional roles are ridiculous, and they’re made up by men”. She faults the patriarchy for the existence of these roles. The dialogue suggests a dismantling of the power structures that perpetuate gender stereotypes and expectations. When Dee states that she too has the right to abandon a baby, Dennis disputes this as being “unnatural” and links it to the short haircuts, saying that it upsets the “natural balance of things”. The connection made between short haircuts and the disruption of the "natural balance of things" suggests that these haircuts serve as a metaphor for larger societal issues. In particular, the idea that the haircuts symbolise women's rights adds depth to the interpretation, implying that societal expectations regarding women's appearance are linked to broader questions of equality and autonomy.

In essence, this scene introduces and contributes to the show's broader narrative by dissecting and satirising traditional gender roles, challenging the patriarchy, and using seemingly mundane elements like short haircuts to symbolise and comment on more profound issues related to women's rights and societal expectations.

Another illustration of the exploration of traditional gender roles arises when Mac and Charlie discover that Poppins requires an abortion. Their reaction involves expressing distrust in the veterinarian solely because of her gender, preferring to seek the services of a male doctor instead of a female nurse. This brings up the idea that the medical field has been mainly male-dominated in the past, reiterating the old stereotype that men serve as doctors, and females are nurses. In another scene, they complain about not being able to reach any doctors, that they always talk to secretaries who put them on the phone with other female secretaries. The preference for a male doctor over a female nurse aligns with outdated stereotypes, reinforcing the idea that certain professions are inherently suited to one gender. This mindset contributes to the persistence of gender-based stereotypes in society. The characters' reactions offer an opportunity to address and confront stereotypes regarding the roles of men and women in the medical field, and in general. This exploration can contribute to broader discussions on gender equality and representation.

7.1.2.2. Women’s Rights

Another theme that stems from the traditional gender roles, is the topic of women’s rights. Two sides of the argument are clearly presented. First Dennis, who opposes the haircuts
and therefore indirectly opposes the fight for equality. And Dee, who advocates for the women’s choice to cut their hair and in general because “it’s their body, their choice”. Thus, we can understand that the haircuts can function as a metaphor for women's rights. The opposition and the advocacy of the haircuts serves as a symbolic representation of the fight for and against women's right to make choices about their own bodies.

Dee fights for the right to get the haircut, but not because she genuinely wants it, but only to take a stance against her brother. She supports the women who get the haircut, but simultaneously belittles them by calling them “bored”, “lonely” and “broken inside”. She insinuates that there has to be an underlying problem with these women for them wanting to get this “monkey cut”, as they are referred to in the episode. Dee's fight for the right to get the specific haircut takes on a symbolic dimension, serving as a means to assert her autonomy and challenge her brother's opposition rather than stemming from a genuine desire for the haircut itself. This underscores the haircut as a battleground for sibling rivalry and a tool for expressing opposition, tropes that recurring throughout the series. She introduces a layer of irony, a common tool within satire, suggesting a contradiction between her vocal support and subtle belittlement. This dichotomy implies a complex relationship between outward advocacy and underlying judgement. This might be seen as commentary on individuals who passionately advocate for a cause through loud declarations but may not genuinely invest in or care about it in the long run.

7.1.2.3. Abortion

In the second scene, Mac and Charlie find out that Poppins is female, pregnant and will not survive the birth of the puppies. He immediately opts for an abortion for the dog. Considering the whole debate of women's rights, we can link and deduce that all of these different perspectives are interrelated and contribute to the deeper meaning of the episode. We can consider the possibility that the entire episode is essentially about abortions. The haircuts serve as a metaphor for abortions and the advocacy for women's rights in this context addresses the ongoing pro-choice debate in the United States.

The episode portrays the topic of abortions through the use of the dog, instead of directly using a female character. Metaphors can be used to address a sensitive or controversial topic such as abortion, allowing for more freedom when it comes to satirically humorising such a serious debate. Metaphors can be a way to engage with difficult themes while
providing some distance or abstraction, potentially making it easier for audiences to approach and reflect on those topics. The subject matter is still important but the audience may not be as agitated by the humour if it is put in the perspective of the dog. However, in a 20-minute sitcom, metaphors might not be obviously apparent, posing a risk of the audience missing nuances if they are simply watching for quick and easy entertainment. The decision to take on this risk is a deliberate choice made by the producers when they categorise their show within the satire genre. If the show was labelled solely as comedy, it could openly make jokes about women’s rights and abortions without any subtlety. The satirical nature arises from this approach.

Furthermore, as mentioned, immediately after Mac learns that his dog will not survive the pregnancy, he promptly wants an abortion. Charlie is shocked because Mac is generally known to be pro-life to which Mac states “I am, but this is different. This affects me”. Mac’s hypocritical reaction could be interpreted as a commentary on how individuals may hold different views on certain issues, including abortion, based on their personal circumstances and emotions rather than strict adherence to a particular ideology. It highlights the complexity of individual beliefs and the ways in which personal experiences can influence one’s stance on certain issues. Mac’s willingness to consider abortion, despite being generally portrayed as pro-life, might challenge stereotypes or assumptions about how individuals, especially men, are expected to conform to certain ideologies.

7.1.2.4. Adoption

Lastly, the topic of adoptions becomes a satirical theme, also cleverly introduced through metaphors. Frank attempts to dissuade Dee from getting the haircut by offering to buy her a car. Sharing a tale from his past, Frank, a bald man, reveals he once sold his own hair as a toupee for financial gain. The recipient of this hairpiece is a car salesman. Frank contends that the salesman cares for the hair better than he ever could, and he occasionally visits to check on it, while also buying cars to support its care. The scenario draws parallels with adoptions, as Frank "gave up" the hair and still feels the need to continually check on it. Notably, the show deliberately places this narrative on a male character, challenging traditional gender roles by associating a man with decisions related to women’s reproductive choices. This choice adds a nuanced layer to the exploration of traditional gender roles within the episode.
Moreover, Frank's attempts to dissuade Dee prove unsuccessful. When questioned by the salesman about the nature of their conversation, Frank casually responds; "Oh, nothing, just trying to save a life". This remark reiterates the implication that the hair serves as a metaphor for an unborn child, deepening the symbolic connection between the unconventional scenario and the theme of preserving life.

By intertwining these themes, the episode satirically dissects traditional gender roles; explores women's rights through the metaphor of haircuts; addresses abortion with unexpected character perspectives, and uses adoptions as another layer of satire, ultimately contributing to a multifaceted commentary on societal expectations and individual choices.

7.1.3. Satirical tools

Having identified the societal issues depicted in the episode, we can now explore in greater detail exactly how satire is utilised to communicate these concerns. This section concentrates on the utilisation of language and irony.

Firstly, it is important to note the language employed in the episode for mocking and ridiculing its targets. The utilisation of extremely strong language vividly depicts the absurdity of their humour, amplifying its impact. When Dennis describes the haircuts he uses words such as “mutilated” and “abomination”. Both words, due to their potent negative associations, are chosen to evoke strong emotional reactions and to emphasise the severity or repugnance of his feelings towards the haircuts. Dennis also refers to the hairdresser, who gives the ladies these short haircuts, as a “butcher”. In a literal sense, a butcher is someone who slaughters animals for meat. Within the framework of discussing abortion, the employment of this term may be intended to critique individuals involved in performing or undergoing abortions. Words like this function as a form of hyperbole, which can enhance the impact of a statement, add humour, or emphasise the extremity of a situation. When Mac and Charlie discuss terminating the dog’s pregnancy, they use the words “kill” and “murder”, which also illustrates the use of extreme language for dramatic effect. This can also point out their ignorance and insensitivity to the topics surrounding abortion. The irony lies in the fact that, despite supporting abortion by opting to terminate the puppies to rescue the adult dog, these characters employ remarkably harsh language, contributing to the nuanced layers of satire.
Irony is something that is used frequently by the creators of this TV-show. Dee’s position involves irony as she advocates for the right to have the haircut while expressing a lack of attractiveness to it. Mac’s stance could be viewed ironically since, despite being generally pro-choice, his attitude swiftly shifts when the abortion issue becomes personally relevant to him. However, the most ironic part of the plotline in this episode appears in the penultimate scene (scene 8) of the episode. Typically, in episodes of Always Sunny, the Gang arrives at some resolution. It either involves one party conceding to the other, acknowledging defeat and learning a lesson, or everyone remains unchanged, with no discernible lessons learned. In this particular episode, during scene 8, the male members of the gang return from their individual ventures and reconvene at the bar. Dennis remains agitated about the haircuts and his inability to prevent women from getting them, having only successfully deterred Dee. He maintains that; “We can’t rest until every single woman is free from the choice of ruining their lives forever”. This statement is notably ironic as it implies that women will experience freedom when their choices are being restricted. At this point, Dee reappears with an uneven haircut that she did herself using dull and unsanitary scissors. Dennis experiences remorse for pressuring his sister into a “back alley chop”, a possible metaphor for home abortions, triggering an epiphany. He comes to the realisation that he cannot prevent women from making their own choices regarding their bodies. Instead, he suggests providing a space for them to make what he considers "stupid and selfish" decisions. This reflects character development, as he acknowledges his inability to control women, yet retains his judgmental perspective on their choices. Charlie now emphasises his lack of interest in the entire matter, prompting the other male cast members to also express indifference towards the haircuts. Dee inquires about their earlier exaggerated reactions, and in response, they attribute it to being "a guy thing" and that they are “used to being in charge”. They have returned to the primary discourse on traditional gender roles, essentially downplaying the significance of the entire episode and its underlying message.

7.1.4. Summarization

To reiterate, Hall’s concept of preferred reading refers to the interpretation or understanding of a text that aligns with the intended or dominant meaning as intended by the producers (Hall, 1980:59). To explore how the audience responds to the satirical elements in the episode, it was first necessary for us to decode the episode to attempt to identify the preferred meaning as intended in the encoding part of the production.
By employing irony, metaphors, language, and stereotypes, it becomes evident that the producers aim to initiate a discourse on women's rights, particularly concerning abortion. We can conclude that the preferred reading, in this case, is that the producers meant to target the pro-choice debate through the symbolic use of the haircuts and the dog. Although this may not be immediately apparent upon initial observation, a closer examination of the language and subtle nuances reveals the intended message. Notably, the deliberate incorporation of direct pro-life statements, such as "just trying to save a life" or "my body, my choice", acquires additional layers of meaning as it is employed in diverse contexts, such as the preservation of hair. These considerations collectively contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the conveyed message.

According to Tesnohildkova (2020:3), satire's central emphasis lies not on humour itself but rather on the critique aimed at exposing the shortcomings of society, institutions, or individuals through the means of ridicule and mockery. By simplifying the pro-choice debate to a mere haircut they are making a mockery out of the people who do and do not support women's rights, conveying the impression that the matter is of minimal significance; that the debate is as important as getting a haircut. The characters refrain from adopting a definitive stance; instead, they introduce the issue and employ humour to illuminate it. This indicates that the episode's intention was not to declare a right or wrong side but rather to underscore the existence of this societal issue.

What lends it a satirical tone is the absence of straightforward statements in the correct context as they would in news reports; instead, they employ amusing scenes, humorous commentary, and outrageous examples to subtly touch upon these subjects. All of these aspects combined is what makes this show fall under the genre of satire.

### 7.2. Audience reception study

This study's empirical material involves interviews with 13 individuals who watched the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” and were subsequently interviewed. This will be used to answer the research questions “How do viewers interpret and engage with the satire in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?” and “What are other interpretations, aside from satire, regarding the content in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?” The findings will be analysed in relation to previous research and Hall’s theory on the decoding process.
7.2.1. Dominant readings

As mentioned, Hall (1980:59) describes three ways of the decoding process where the audiences’ readings can be; dominant, negotiated or oppositional. The audience with dominant readings has interpretations that match the producer's intent (ibid). Eight out of 13 interviewees can be considered to have dominant readings. This claim is based on the fact that the participants throughout the interviews showed that they understood the satirical messages. These eight all understood the irony and the metaphorical use of haircuts as abortions. When asked to describe what happened in the episode Subject 1 expressed that there is “an underlying seriousness to it, with the topic being abortion and controlling women”, which was a common description among the dominant readers. Adding to this discussion, Subject 4 reflected over the metaphors used in the episode thinking that it is “a metaphor for an abortion, [...] he gave away his hair to someone else, so I guess it is like an adoption metaphor”. Subject 3 added that the topic “is also a very common criticism of more right-wing, republican ideas”, showcasing that they understood in order to take it further by adding a political statement related to what they have seen. Subject 5 grasped the satirical execution by stating that “they veil it under a discussion about a woman’s right to chop her hair, but it is about abortion, some points it might be about adoption”. The interviewees say that the episode poses a bigger picture. Some of them add that it portrays a complex debate in a less complicated matter. The underlying messages to be found, according to the dominant reading interviewees, are women’s rights, abortion rights, women’s choices, men’s controlling behaviour over women and the patriarchy. These thoughts about the underlying meanings show how the participants have reflected in depth over the messages in the presented material.

Is there a particular reason why these eight interviewees understood the underlying message? Three of the interviewees categorised as dominant readers have watched the TV-show before. Seeing that the three subjects are familiar with the concept, genre and the producer's discourse implies that they will not be surprised by the content and know what to expect. This prior knowledge comes with certain expectations and interpretations, as described earlier regarding genres. Bengtsson et al. (2017:75) explained how the encoding process is based on the producers’ frameworks of knowledge, production conditions and specific infrastructure, and the decoding process is based on the same factors but from the audiences’ perspective. By recognising that the three interviewees possessed this knowledge one can argue that they share this discourse with the producers, thus their preferred reading
aligned with the producers’ intent. Similarly, the interviewees themselves mentioned that shared values influence the reading and understanding process. Subject 3 suggested in order to understand “it also pre-supposes that the audience already has similar viewpoints to what the producers are trying to communicate [...] if this issue had never been brought up in discourse I don’t think that you would even get that type of message”. Multiple interviewees discussed this idea, suggesting that individuals with values opposite to those of the producers might encounter greater challenges in understanding the intent. Perks (2012:298) differentiates “laughing with” and “laughing at”, explaining that “laughing with” requires understanding the deeper meanings and symbols used in the text. This corresponds with the interviewees having a dominant reading also having shared values with the producers. Five of the interviewees did mention satire during their interviews, which again shows an understanding of the material. Florenberger and Lundborg (2014:49) found the audience to be familiar with many parts of satire, although not satire itself. This statement encompasses the other three of the interviewees with dominant readings, who did not explicitly talk about satire but understood the elements on which satire is built.

### 7.2.2. Negotiated readings

The second type of reading is the negotiated, which implies that the audiences’ reading partly matches with the producer’s intent (Hall, 1980:60). Three of the 13 interviewees are considered holding a negotiated reading position, because they partly understood the messages. They all stated that the episode discusses women’s rights without specifying further. Due to the lack of specification, precisely not mentioning abortion rights, indicates that they have missed some of the points portrayed. Subject 11 stated that “they use the euphemism of women getting military haircuts as like women's rights”. The same subject mentioned men’s controlling behaviour towards women related to the patriarchy, in the means of women’s haircuts but missing the metaphor about abortions. One of the interviewees mostly discussed gender identity, regarding haircuts. For example, Subject 8 expressed that “it’s nice to see little hidden things, poking at these societal issues but then of course the main issue being the identity of a girl or gender identity, the whole problems flowing around that”, omitting messages related to abortion rights.

One of the interviewees had difficulties concentrating when watching the episode. This could partly be an explanation to why they missed parts of the message. Shannon and Weaver (1949:19) sheds light on how external factors can come between the viewer and the message of the presented material, leading to messages being mistaken. There is a general
consensus that the episode is about abortions. However, one interviewee deferred from this preferred reading by picking up on smaller aspects in the episode. This could be because they had a critical look at the whole episode rather than the main points being made, which in that case could mean that they got stuck in the details missing the bigger picture. One explanation for the audience to neither relate nor take offence to satirical content in TV-shows is that they do not have a personal connection to the characters or issues being portrayed (Kimmel, 2017:58-59). When asked if they agree with what the producers are potentially trying to say, Subject 11 answered “I don't care, it's not my place”. Subject 11 distanced themselves from the message, because they did not feel that the problems of women’s rights were their personal concern. The distancing from the message could be an explanation to why it did not fully resonate with them.

7.2.3. Oppositional and additional readings

The last reading is the oppositional, which means that the audience actively challenges the dominant reading (Hall, 1980:61). This oppositional position could not be found among the interviewees. The interviewees that understood the producers intent did neither challenge nor reject it. One of the subjects expressed anger towards the theme of the episode, although not towards the producers’ underlying message but because of the actual problem being criticised. The last two interviewees did not align with any of Hall's decoding positions. They did not grasp the purpose of the material at all. Subject 10 expressed that “I had a little difficulty understanding what it really is that they wanted to say. [...] I'm a little doubtful, actually, if there was a point to it”. They focussed on the fact that they did not find the material funny and could not understand the jokes. Subject 10 even mentioned the word satire and expressed that if it was supposed to be satirical the producers failed in this regard. The same subject had difficulties with the language, since their familiarity with the English language was very limited. As mentioned earlier, this is an aspect of Shannon and Weaver's discussion about disruptions in communication preventing the message from being delivered. Lastly, Subject 2 understood the material as a long discussion about haircuts and that ultimately no one cares about it. They mentioned the sarcastic humour and “harsh” jokes, thus you need to be open minded in order to enjoy the show. Zakos (2009:68-60) mentioned among her categorisation of audiences that one dismissed the satire as pure comedy, without deeper meaning behind it. Subject 2 suggested that the message being portrayed in the penultimate scene in the episode is that “it's very easy to take yourself very seriously, sometimes you can take a step back and laugh about it”. This way of understanding the material loses the point of criticism towards the debates
about women's rights and abortion rights. Therefore, Subject 2, as well as Subject 10, are categorised as not understanding and/or misinterpreting the material.

7.2.4. Other findings

We found no differences in understanding and interpretations based on gender or nationality. However, age played a role, with older interviewees (55 to 72 years old, including Subjects 2, 10, and 9) facing more difficulty interpreting the material in line with the producers, displaying a greater tendency to miss the intended message and hesitating in their responses. There is not a definite answer as to why, but some speculations can be made. Comedy is subjective, and individuals have different taste in humour. The older interviewees expressed how they thought the comedy used in the episode was too silly, far-fetched and as Subject 9 expressed “they try very hard to be funny and all of it isn't funny”. For these particular interviewees the comedy and humour appear to hinder rather than facilitate the progression of the message. The tone and the style of the humour used in Always Sunny is often considered dark, rude and absurd. The three of our older interviewees seem to appreciate more traditional comedic styles, rather than the edgy humour. Subject 2 thinks “it's a very different genre to what I enjoy watching”. Generational differences may contribute to a lack of relatability and understanding of the perspectives and humour portrayed in the satire. Older interviewees may struggle due to a potentially limited familiarity with current pop culture and social trends satirised. Their varied perspectives and experiences on certain issues might lead them to find the show less relevant or amusing. Again, Subject 2 expresses that “it doesn't give me new thoughts, I've experienced so much of these discussions already”.

This poses the question: is satire, comedy and humour a good way of sending important messages? According to our interviewees, the answer is parted in three; yes; under the right circumstances; and no. Tesnohlidkova (2020:4) claims that satire cannot provide solutions to political issues, although it can encourage people to reflect and engage upon them. Subject 1’s thoughts align with this suggestion as they expressed “I think it's made to make people rethink [...] Like it's made to be silly and make you think”. Ten of our 13 interviewees were positive about using comedy to send important messages. Subject 12 stated that comedy and humour “is very disarming, mixing in humour makes it easier to lift the heavy topics”. They continue the discussion by explaining how they think heavy questions need to be presented along with a feeling, for example something that makes you sad, angry or in this case something that makes you laugh. They explain their thought by
claiming that “this episode it’s more laughing at it but it leaves a sour aftertaste because you realise what it is about”. They, as well as Subject 4, added that you can joke about anything, but that does not make the subject less important. Similarly, Subject 7 thought the show makes you see the problems with what they are portraying, but in a fun and “light” way. They added “I think they do it in a way that we are supposed to react to it, why they do this and how come they are this ignorant to the matter”. They also think that comedy allows rethinking and could make you further investigate the topics. Four subjects discussed the educational aspect of the episode and how it can be used as a conversation/debate/discussion starter. Subject 8 proposed that “if you watch these episodes with other people and you start talking about it, it’s a very fun way to address these certain societal issues”. Some of the interviewees discuss how the material could be convincing. Because of the episode’s soft undertones of politics presented in a comical and educational way, Subject 11 believes it can slowly affect change. This statement opposes Kilby’s (2018:1942) claim that comedic approaches alone will not contribute to long-term changes. Despite Kilby’s statement, humour and comedy seem to be an important part of approaching societal issues for the majority of the interviewees. Florenberger and Lundborg (2014:49) claim that there is a greater chance for the audience to engage with the information if they are entertained and fascinated by the show. Similarly, Subject 12 stated “when it’s entertaining, then you absorb it differently”.

On the other hand, six of these ten interviewees discuss their concerns regarding humour for this specific purpose. Four of the interviewees think that if you have similar views as the producers it will be easier to understand and engage with the messages being sent, if you are going to use comedy sending it. Two of them think it is easier to grasp the meaning if you have similar views as the producers. The other two frame it differently, focusing on whether individuals with opposite views might struggle to understand, misunderstand or reject it. Subject 12 thinks that people with the opposite standpoint to the producers would laugh at the wrong thing, “they may not draw the parallel that it could be about themselves actually, that there’s a bigger problem behind”. Returning to Perks (2012:298) explanation that “laughing at” is about finding humour in the obvious jokes or stereotypes in the text. Subject 12 continued; “They would laugh and be like ‘it’s funny because it’s like true’ in their opinion”. What Subject 12 discussed is Perks explanation of “laughing at”, although the viewers misunderstanding the comedy considers themselves to be “laughing with”. Additionally, Subject 12 expressed; “Maybe it’s not effective on the people that it really has to be effective at, like these men that do behave poorly and control women”. Subject 13 thinks “it made it seem quite trivial”. Following this statement they mentioned “I don’t feel
like people who are misogynists would watch this and say ‘oh I never thought about it this way’. I feel like they would watch this and say ‘uuuh see it’s true, it’s so trivial and so stupid’”. Zakos (209:45) raises the risk of satire enhancing what it is criticising, since the content depends on the very ideas and images that it critiques. A discussion that confirms what Subjects 12 and 13 just discussed. Correspondingly, Subjects 5 and 7 addressed the metaphors, stating that in order to understand the message you need to understand the metaphors. Subject 5 thought it is the metaphors that make the message clear. While Subject 7 stated that if you miss the parallels between the dog and abortions then you will miss the joke completely. Subject 6 approaches the producers, stating “I think making jokes about issues, you have to be educated about the issue”. They also mentioned that the viewers need to be educated in order to understand the joke. Subject 10 thought humour could be a good tool to get a point across but only if it is funny, which is highly subjective.

The third opinion was that comedy and humour is not a good way to send important messages. Three of our interviewees expressed that it is not beneficial. Two of them were the older interviewees and the third one was the youngest. The general opinion among these interviewees was that the humour is overtaking the societal issue being portrayed. Subject 9 did not think that humour is a good tool for change. “What one person feels is funny is not for another person, so comedy or jokes are difficult” Subject 9 explained. Subject 1 found it hard to navigate through serious topics and funny jokes, and suggested that these should stay separated to be enjoyable. Subject 2 simply thought that sarcastic humour is meant to be fun rather than to start a debate.

7.2.5. Summarization

The purpose of the interview study was to answer two of our research questions, to do so 13 individuals with different backgrounds were interviewed. Applying Hall’s decoding process, the majority (eight out of 13) found to have a dominant reading, meaning that they aligned with the producers intent by understanding the satirical messages regarding women’s rights, patriarchy and abortion rights. Three of these participants had prior knowledge of the show, suggesting that familiarity with the producers’ discourse contributes to a shared understanding. Additionally, shared values between the audience and producers play a role in interpreting satirical content. Three interviews belonged to the negotiated reading category, who partly understood the underlying messages about women’s rights and a few vague connections to abortion rights. External factors, such as difficulty concentrating or focusing on other details over the main points, influenced their
interpretations. None of the interviewees were said to have an oppositional reading, actively challenging the dominant interpretation. Although, two of the interviewees missed or misunderstood the underlying messages, and formed a new reading category of missing the meaning completely.

Differences related to generation, or age, were observed. The older participants showed more difficulty aligning with the proders’ intent. Possible explanations are due to differences in comedic preferences, unfamiliarity with the show’s edgy humour, or a lack of connection to the current societal issues. Overall, participants acknowledged the potential of satire, comedy and humour as a tool for conveying important messages, because of its disarming nature and ability to encourage reflection. However, some concerns were raised in terms of the dependency of shared views for effective communication and the risk of trivialising serious issues within society. Finally, a minority of participants expressed scepticism about the efficacy of humour in addressing societal problems, suggesting a potential disconnect between humour and the seriousness of certain issues.
8. Results & discussion

8.1. Summary

The goal of this research study was to investigate how satire is used as a communicative tool to discuss societal topics, by employing text and audience reception analysis of *Always Sunny*, specifically on the episode "A Woman's Right to Chop". The following section presents the outcomes of these investigations and will answer the research questions:

1. How is satire used to communicate societal issues in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?
2. How do viewers interpret and engage with the satire in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?
3. Are there other interpretations, aside from satire, that can be found regarding the content in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*?

8.1.1. *How is satire used to communicate societal issues in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia?*

The societal issues that are brought up in the episode are traditional gender roles, women’s rights, abortion and adoption. These issues are made satirical by the use of humour, exaggeration, irony, critique, stereotypes and symbolism.

The portrayal of traditional gender roles is exaggerated for comedic effect. The almost all-male cast’s assertion that men leaving is "natural" due to tradition is an exaggerated stereotype. The use of terms like "it's his right as a male" and "tradition" plays on exaggerated notions of gender norms that are both humorous and critical. The irony lies in the characters' adherence to traditional gender roles while simultaneously critiquing their absurdity. Furthermore, the preference for a male doctor over a female nurse underscores the historically ingrained gender biases in certain professions. This commentary contributes to broader discussions on gender equality and representation in society.
The use of short haircuts as a metaphor for women's rights adds a symbolic layer to the narrative. By linking the disruption of the "natural balance" to short haircuts, the show satirises societal expectations regarding women's appearance and suggests that such expectations are arbitrary and restrictive. The use of Poppins, the dog, as a metaphor for abortion serves as a symbolic representation of the broader debate on women's rights and the pro-choice movement. By employing a metaphor, the episode engages with a serious and contentious issue in a way that provides distance and abstraction, allowing for a satirical exploration of the topic. The decision to use a dog as a metaphor for abortion introduces a humorous element to a serious and emotionally charged debate. This choice allows the show to satirically approach the topic, making it more palatable for audiences and potentially encouraging reflection on the subject matter without immediate agitation. Mac's willingness to consider abortion for his dog highlights the inconsistency and complexity of individual beliefs, providing a satirical lens that highlights the dynamics of personal convictions. Finally, the use of Frank's past experience of selling his hair as a toupee serves as a metaphor for adoption. This metaphorical exploration adds a layer of satire, as the unconventional scenario of selling hair parallels the concept of giving up a child for adoption. The absurdity of comparing hair-selling to adoption humorously critiques societal attitudes toward reproductive choices.

This episode employs satire to humorously dissect and critique societal issues. The show navigates these serious topics with a comedic lens, highlighting the absurdities and contradictions within societal norms. The portrayal of exaggerated gender stereotypes; the symbolic use of short haircuts; the metaphorical exploration of a dog as representative of abortion; and the humorous comparison of selling hair to adoption, all contribute to the satirical tone. These satirical elements not only entertain but also encourage reflection on societal expectations and individual beliefs, offering a nuanced and humorous commentary on complex issues.

8.1.2. How do viewers interpret and engage with the satire in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia?

The viewers in this case are represented by a selection of interviewees, with different backgrounds and preconceived knowledge about the show. It was found that the majority of the interviewees did interpret the satirical content like the producers intended. Usings
Hall’s theories, the interviewees' interpretations were initially divided into three categories of reading. Eight participants were categorised as having a dominant reading and three had a negotiated reading. The three interviewees holding negotiated readings understood that the episode was referring to women’s rights, whilst the eight participants with dominant readings understood the references to abortion and adoptions.

The interviewees thought the material could be used for educational purposes, as well as being able to start discussions/debates to re-evaluate social norms. Interviewees thought the episode portrayed a complex debate in an easy and entertaining way, although there were concerns whether the issue was too simplified. The interviewees thought humour and satire, in general terms, are effective communicative tools that are able to convey important messages. In this way, the entertaining aspect of the TV-show lures the audience into processing and possibly accepting certain messages and ideas that the producers are attempting to communicate. On the other hand, there were interviewees that thought the serious messages and the comedic touch collided, which made the episode irrelevant to the interviewees with this point of view.

8.1.3. Are there other interpretations, aside from satire, that can be found regarding the content in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop” in It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia?

Among the interviewees with a negotiated reading, some excessive interpretations were found. None of the interviewees were found to have an oppositional reading. In light of the inability to categorise two interviewees according to Hall’s framework, a new category was devised to encompass the unforeseen interpretations. This new category attempts to group the outlying interpretations that appeared to have missed the underlying messages conveyed in the episode.

What did the interviewees that did not have a preferred reading interpret? One of the interviewees perceived details such as American gun laws and how veterans are treated in America. These elements were found on t-shirts and thought the character Z. A second interpretation focused on literary looks, haircuts, and how you present yourself to other people carrying the message that you should not take yourself or others too seriously. A different interviewee followed a similar perspective, associating the subject with gender
identity. This interpretation was grounded in the analysis of haircuts but tended more toward traditional notions of the appearances associated with women and men. Lastly, one interviewee did not engage with the material, and their interpretation of the episode was that it was simply comedy. These interpretations presented above do not give any thoughts to social criticism, which differ from the interpretations of the interviewees that noticed the satire in the episode.

8.2. Discussion by Fanny Andersson

This study has provided me with new perspectives on how an audience interprets messages. Personally, there has been a particular interest for me in studying the audience's interpretations of the TV-show and understanding the reasons behind the variations in these interpretations. Throughout the study, have we as authors been careful in avoiding the assumption that there exists a definitive right or wrong answer to the questions posed to the participants, as well as to the research questions guiding our study.

During the interviews, it was interesting to observe that a majority of participants expressed a notable confidence in asserting that their interpretations of the episode were not only correct but also self-evident to the general public. This confidence persisted even when some participants did not align with the so-called 'preferred reading' advocated by the producers. Participants expressed this certainty by statements such as ”it’s obviously a parallel [...]” and “it's pretty clear what it's about”. To illustrate this further, Subject 2, categorised as having entirely misunderstood the material, stated that it is “pretty obvious what the point was” despite not aligning with the preferred reading outlined by the producers. One of the significant findings of this study is that understanding and “correct” interpretations are neither constant nor inherently recurrent, rather they are highly dependent on various factors. The study indicates that interpretations depend on preconceptions, preferences, entertainment value, experiences, background and other influencing factors. Although a message may be easily understood by an individual or a producer, it does not necessarily imply the same clarity of interpretation for another. In Hall's encoding/decoding model, he shed light on how these two processes are shaped by specific conditions and discourses, occurring on two separate fronts; the producer and the audience (Bengtsson et al., 2017:75). This theory is evident in our results, where the outcome of the encoding process does not always align with the outcome of the decoding process, thereby resulting in the categorisation of the audience based on their type of readings.
There are additional aspects and questions to explore in future research. It would have been interesting to observe another author and/or researcher conduct a similar study. Alvehus (2018:127) explains how the researcher is central to the study, as their interpretations form the basis for the empirical material. Therefore, it is not self-evident that the results appear as they do. If another person had interpreted the same material and empirical data as us, the results might have been different. Consequently, it would have been meaningful for another individual to execute the same study. Furthermore, it would also have been of interest to make this study more extensive, both in terms of the number of interviewees and the number of episodes from the TV-show. With more interviewees, the results could have been more comprehensive and saturated, as interpretations are influenced by every individual. By studying more episodes, one could have explored various societal issues and observed whether the use of satire differs among different subjects, as well as whether audience interpretations vary depending on different subjects. Since audience interpretations depend on individual experiences and backgrounds, it would have been interesting to explore the extent to which it is possible to generalise the three different readings Hall describes in his theory. In addition, an alternative approach could have been taken in another type of selection of interviewees for the study. It would have been intriguing to interview people with no connection to us researchers. By choosing a different interviewee selection the responses could potentially have differed, as the personal relationship with the participants may have had a certain influence on the outcomes. Exploring a sample of individuals with no prior connection to the researchers could provide a more objective perspective and suppress potential biases introduced by the pre-existing relationships between us and the interviewees.

Before the method for this study was finalised, the alternatives were discussed. One method that was ruled out was interviewing focus groups. The reason why this method was not chosen was that we did not want to put interviewees in an uncomfortable position by asking them to discuss potentially sensitive topics. It would have been interesting to see what responses they would be by discussing a similar questionnaire in groups, for example with 6 individuals at a time. This would be particularly intriguing since the interviewees in our study thought “A Woman’s Right to Chop” a favourable way to encourage discussion. Another method that was proposed during the early stages was online ethnography, also known as netnography. The reasoning behind considering this method was to explore the “real” opinions of the broad audience. Netnography means that the researcher observes the audience online, to then analyse those findings. Many discussion forums and comment
sections also allow users to remain anonymous, which we believed could lead to the most raw responses. However, anonymity also makes it impossible for the researcher to investigate the factors behind the subject’s opinions. For this reason we chose not to use netnography as a method. Although this could be a part of a bigger study in the future, where there are opportunities for multiple methods.

Lastly, what potential impact does this study have on the research area? The research has the potential to enrich the research area by providing nuanced insights into the uses of satire in media, its impact on societal discourse and the various ways audiences engage with and interpret satirical content. The study does this by examining how satire is used to communicate and critique societal issues, which contributes to a better understanding of the role of satire in pop culture and media. By studying how the audience interprets and engages with satire in a specific episode gives insights into the audience’s role in the consumption of the satirical content. This could contribute to the field of audience studies, providing nuanced perspectives on how individuals understand and interact with satirical messages. The study is focusing on satire, but it also explores alternative interpretations. Recognising these interpretations adds depth to the research by acknowledging the complexity of audience responses, increasing our understanding of the many ways individuals engage with and make sense of television shows. The findings for this study can also be applied in media production. The knowledge of how satire is received by an audience can be valuable for producers, to understand how different elements of satire are understood can create a better connection with their audience and reach a flawless communication.

8.3. Discussion by Sanne Pårup

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how satire is used in Always Sunny in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Chop”, and how it is received by its audience. Satire, using humour and irony, is a powerful communication tool that skillfully highlights societal issues, encourages critical thinking, and engages audiences to provoke reflection. In its 16th season, this TV show’s longevity suggests that it possesses some form of credibility and persuasiveness in the manner that it uses satire to create discourse on contemporary topics. Personally, I have followed the development of this TV-show for many years, and often found myself contemplating its clever rhetoric and the distinctive manner in which it broaches subjects. The show displays a tendency to lack tact and can be viewed as rude or
impolite whilst addressing these societal topics, however it remarkably possesses a sense of legitimacy. Therefore, it was of interest to investigate whether others would also have similar experiences or not; to what extent and for what reason.

During our review of existing research, we identified a study with a similar objective to ours. Johnson et al. (2010) presented their interviewees with various clips from different shows to determine if they could identify the satire. Inspired by this approach, to avoid restricting our research to one societal issue, we aimed to select scenes from multiple episodes. To provide a more comprehensive exploration of the show's use of satire, we intended to show multiple clips that portray different themes. However, we quickly discovered the impracticality of this approach, due to the fact that the scenes could not stand alone, without context. Thus, we opted to focus on one single episode. After the text analysis, we quickly realised that this specific episode delved into multiple topics and themes. It turned out that it was beneficial to limit our analysis to one episode, because it enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the show's use of satire in multiple contexts. During the first viewing of this episode, we initially only focussed on satirical elements in relation to abortion, and overlooked many other hints and messages embedded into the narrative. Applying Hall's model of encoding/decoding to the study, allowed us to view the episode in a new, more fruitful light as it triggered us to examine the text from multiple angles, from the encoder to the decoder. Additional themes that we established after the attempt to decode the encoding, included traditional gender roles, women's rights, and adoptions.

The objective of the text analysis was to gain an overall understanding of the "preferred reading", providing a foundation for our interviews in order to be able to apply the interviewees answers to fit them into Hall's three categories of understanding media messages; "dominant-hegemonic," "negotiated," and "oppositional". It proved to be advantageous to have a genre studies foundation as we conducted the text analysis, because it provided insights into how this show can be classified as satire. The text analysis allowed us to examine the elements that constitute satire, such as language, irony, critique and stereotypes, which allowed a distinction between comedy and satire to arise.

The interview process proved to be an enjoyable method of gathering information while also accommodating interesting responses. The majority of the interviewees understood the satirical elements within the dominant-hegemonic reading, with eight out of 13
interviewees expressing an understanding of the symbolic use of haircuts to represent abortions. Three interviewees fell into the negotiated reading position, demonstrating a partial understanding of the underlying messages. They mentioned that the episode addresses women's rights without elaborating. The absence of specificity, particularly by not naming abortion rights, suggests a potential oversight of certain aspects of the conveyed messages. None of the participants fall into the oppositional category; none expressed a comprehensive understanding of the topic while completely dismissing the entire concept. Hence, it became necessary for us to alter Hall's categories and establish an additional section for the two interviewees who entirely overlooked the key points. Several explanations exist for their oversight, but a conclusion that we reached is that age could be a contributing factor, given that these participants were above the age of 55. We are not implying that individuals over the age of 55 are incapable of understanding the intended message or satire; it is simply an observation. Another interviewee of a similar age was very close to overlooking the point, but upon closer examination of their responses, we discovered that they did, in fact, comprehend it. Other reasons for these not understanding the overall message can also be due to the fact that they did not find it amusing, making it challenging for them to engage and comprehend the material. This aligns with Florberger and Lundborg's (2014:49) statement that an audience may be familiar with satire but not fully grasp the satire itself, and that an audience will engage more with information that they are entertained by. An unusual aspect of this situation was that one of these two participants explicitly used the term "satire" but expressed the view that, if it indeed was satire, the producers did not effectively communicate it to them.

The interview questions were effective, although I maintained reservations after the initial interviews. Participants acknowledged symbolism, irony, and societal critique, integral elements of satire, yet none explicitly used the term "satire". However, upon reviewing the transcripts, we recognized that their understanding of the content remained in accordance with what we were searching for, leaving the choice of terminology less important. It was apparent that sufficient information had been obtained after completing all the interviews and analysing their responses. Nevertheless, it was pleasing to find out that five interviewees specifically referenced the term "satire".

Overall, considering the time constraints, our collaborative efforts effectively gathered the required information to answer our research questions. However, an area for potential improvement is the desire for more empirical material. Ideally, we would have preferred to interview a larger number of participants because a restricted sample size can have an effect
on the applicability of the findings to a broader population. Furthermore, it would be interesting to interview individuals to whom we have no personal connection, because it could have revealed other more candid and unbiased perspectives. Additionally, exploring the perspective of an even younger generation in relation to this material could also be intriguing to consider in future research. However, we made an effort to include responses from diverse genders, nationalities, and age groups as much as possible.

Prior research focused on racial and political satire, overlooking the examination of sexist beliefs. Our study aimed to fill this gap by exploring these themes. Additionally, it’s interesting that despite the longevity and popularity of Always Sunny, there has been very limited research based on this TV-show. Furthermore, our audience reception analysis aimed to reveal observations about the audience’s capability to understand satire as a genre and its impact. This exploration holds potential significance for audience reception studies, as it offers a deeper understanding on the efficacy of satire. The study contributes to discussions on how entertainment media can be used to convey social and political messages through satire.

In conclusion, our journey into satire has uncovered the subtle elements that make this show satirical. Through a text analysis, we dissected how satire can be used to transform everyday scenarios into humorous social commentary on bigger societal issues. We delved into the minds of 13 viewers, unravelling their perceptions and uncovering the layers of satire in the show. This helped our understanding of how satire, when skillfully applied, not only entertains but also provokes contemplation.
Reference list


A Satirist's Right to Criticise


Fanny Andersson & Sanne Pårup