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Where Are Those Good Ol' Fashioned Values? Reception Analysis of the Offensive Humor on *Family Guy*

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Abstract: Over the last ten years, *Family Guy* has made its mark by pushing the envelope as an equal opportunity offender. For the writers, no subject is too sacred. This study examines how the key demographic for the cartoon (viewers age 18-24), a group that has grown up immersed in political correctness, read the value, meaning and intent of the show. The study uses Q methodology to extract several readings of the show. Four factors emerged from the study. The first factor reads the show as an intelligent critique on society that demystifies stereotypes by bringing its absurdities to light. The second represents a view of the show as low-brow humor aiming to make the viewer uncomfortable, but not as a product of bigotry. The third reads the show as a guilty pleasure, dismissing it as a silly cartoon, while understanding why people are often offended by it. The final factor reflects a perspective that reads the show as perpetuating the wrong message about minorities by turning sensitive issues into a joke. The article further discusses the characteristics of each perspective and the implications for audience studies and the acceptance of offensive speech.

Introduction

In October 2011, the cartoon *Family Guy* (FOX) made headlines after it aired an episode that made light of spousal abuse. The episode titled "Screams of Silence: The Story of Brenda Q" revolved around the sister of Quagmire, a neighbor to the Griffin family, who is in an abusive relationship. In response to her situation, Peter Griffin and his friends decide to murder the abusive boyfriend.

The title and plotline seem like an examination of a very serious societal problem. But, *Family Guy* is known for its crude humor and desire to push the boundaries of decency. Accordingly, the episode was filled with distasteful one-liners, such as Peter saying "Well, let's hope she's good at talking because we know she doesn't listen so good." In another scene, the boyfriend drags Quagmire's sister off-screen and the viewer (along with the Griffin family) is left to hear the sounds of physical abuse ("Screams of Silence" Season 10, Episode 3).

Once again, the cartoon was at the center of a debate as to whether comedy programs had "gone too far." Over the last ten years, *Family Guy* has made its mark by being an equal opportunity offender. There have been multiple times when *Family Guy* has found itself in the middle of media firestorms for the content it has aired. Such examples include: Peter informing a person that he has AIDS through an a cappella song; another episode where Peter was injected with the gay gene or a scene where Jesus undressed

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for a man who was painting his portrait. For the writers, it seems that no subject is too sacred.

The Parents Television Council has routinely deemed *Family Guy* as the worst program for family viewing (ParentsTV.org, 2010). Yet, the show remains extremely popular. According to the producers, *Family Guy* is intended to be satirical in nature. Thus, as a satirical text, the cartoon is supposed to “transform...the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous” (Thompson, 2009, p. 12-13). Satire’s intended end is to make scathing commentary through playful means. Satire is meant to have the audience laugh at someone whose behavior deserves ridicule. Of course the question is “who does the audience understand that person to be?” (Thompson, 2009, p. 4).

Though there have been several journal articles analyzing *Family Guy* as a text (see Ricke, 2012, Hughey and Marudi, 2009, Crawford, 2009), there are no published articles about how audiences read the offensive humor on the show. This study attempts to expand the understanding of how audiences negotiate the text, particularly its crude and offensive humor. Accordingly, this study uses Q methodology to examine how the key demographic for the cartoon (viewers age 18-24), a group that has grown up immersed in political correctness, reads the value, meaning and intent of the show

First, the paper will outline the history of *Family Guy*, including its history of controversy. Next, the paper discusses the grammar of reading satire and some scholarly readings of *Family Guy*. The third part of the paper discusses Q methodology and its role in reception studies, followed by an analysis of the data and a discussion of the implications of the findings.

The Text: *Family Guy*

The history of *Family Guy* has been indicative of contemporary television programming in the post-network era (Medjesky, 2008). At first glance, the show is about a classic sitcom family: Peter Griffin (the working-class father), Lois Griffin (stay-at-home mother), Meg Griffin, Chris Griffin and Stewie Griffin (the three children) and Brian (the dog). But, the characters have developed into “anti-family sitcom” characters. Peter and Chris are borderline mentally disabled. Lois has several social disorders such as drug addiction and kleptomania (though they are not reoccurring). Meg suffers from low self-esteem issues (often fostered by her family). Brian, the talking dog, is the voice of reason, though it is often drowned out by his alcoholism. Finally, Stewie is a talking baby who is seemingly homosexual (though he is non-sexual) and determined to achieve world domination (Medjesky, 2009). There is also a cast of reoccurring secondary characters such as Cleveland (the subdued African-American neighbor), Quagmire (the sex-starved bachelor neighbor), and Joe (the paraplegic former cop with anger issues). Despite the cast of characters, the show has very few reoccurring plotlines and most of the characters and storylines are surreal in nature.

In 1999, *Family Guy* started on FOX to little fanfare and a lot of criticism from reviewers. Initially, the show was criticized as being sophomoric, crude and offensive (Medjesky, 2009). Consequently, FOX cancelled the series shortly after its release. But, *Family Guy* found a second life with its release on DVD and repeats of the show played on the Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim (late-night scheduling block of adult-oriented cartoons). *Family Guy* soon garnered a cult following among younger audiences (especially males), who related to its post-modernist and pastiche approach. The cartoon often beat the broadcast network’s late-night talk shows in the ratings, especially among the key 18-24 year old demographic. Consequently, FOX decided to

bring the cartoon back in 2004. Since then it has been very successful in the ratings, has demanded some of the highest advertising costs on television and has won 12 Emmy Awards (Itzkoff, 2009).

The key demographic for the show is young males (18-24 year old). Market research of the show's psychographics reveals that people considered to be "rule-breakers" or "rebels" are more likely to watch *Family Guy*. These people do not like rules, especially ones that are seen as unfair and they are quick to use sarcasm (Bulik, 2010). Another psychographic for the cartoon is "risk-takers," people who are open to challenges and are easy-going in nature (Bulik, 2010).

Offensive Humor in *Family Guy*

Since its earliest episodes *Family Guy* has been criticized for its offensive content (Medjesky, 2009, p. 3). *Family Guy* primarily has a TV-14 rating. It is certainly not meant to be a children's cartoon. Nonetheless, it has been criticized as being more offensive than its contemporaries such as *The Simpsons*, or even Comedy Central's *South Park*.

Family Guy's often relies on stereotypical depictions. For example, disability is a common theme in *Family Guy*. Over the series, Peter Griffin has been diagnosed as being mentally impaired, blind, and having had a stroke (all for only one episode before being magically cured). Joe Swanson, Peter's neighbor and friend, is confined to a wheelchair. He also suffers from incontinence and impotence. In another episode accused of insensitivity, a cutaway scene has Peter as a member of an a cappella group informing a man that he has AIDS through song ("Cleveland-Loretta Quagmire " Season 4, Episode 5).

The elderly are also the target of jokes in *Family Guy*. The elderly are under-represented in the media (Potter, 2008) and when they are represented they are often portrayed as stereotypes: being in poor health, senile, constipated, and incontinent (Deets, 1993). The same is true on *Family Guy*. Herbert the Pervert is an elderly neighbor. He and his dog are shown as slow and wrinkled. Herbert is confined to a walker, while the dog cannot use his hind legs.

The gay community is another target of *Family Guy's* jokes. A running joke in the show is that the infant Stewie Griffin is homosexual. While the elderly neighbor, Herbert the Pervert, is attracted to young boys and is constantly harassing Chris, the Griffin's teenage son. Herbert also has a high-pitched effeminate voice. Another character is Jasper, who is Brian the Dog's flamboyant, homosexual cousin.

One controversial episode had Peter injected with the "gay gene" ("Family Gay" Season 7, Episode 8). Another episode dealt with Quagmire's father receiving sex reassignment surgery. In the episode, Brian has sex with Quagmire's transgendered father, not knowing who she was. When Brian finds out whom he had sex with, he responds with excessive vomiting ("Quagmire's Dad" Season 8, Episode 18).

Family Guy has several main characters that are from ethnic minorities. One commonly reoccurring character is Cleveland, who is African-American. (In 2009, Seth MacFarlane started a spin-off show titled *The Cleveland Show*). Cleveland is mild mannered – the opposite of his former wife, Loretta Brown who was loud and sassy. In the early years of the series, the majority of Loretta's lines were "mmm-hmmm." Mort Goldman is another neighbor of the Griffins. He is Jewish and his occupation is as a pharmacist. He embodies many Jewish stereotypes such as neuroticism, hypochondria and being physically weak.

Two other minor characters are Ollie Williams and Tricia Takanawa from the local news station. Ollie Williams is the "Black-U-Weather" reporter. Ollie will only appear for a few seconds in an episode. When he does appear, his lines are delivered very loudly

and quickly. Tricia Takanawa is the “Asian Reporter.” Her voice is a stereotypical high-pitched, nasal delivery of broken English dialogue. Finally, there is Consuela, a Hispanic-American woman who is the head of the Maids’ Union. She also speaks in broken English. Additionally, *Family Guy* has been accused of being anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic (Tucker, 1999).

Reading Satire

Satire is not a realistic text – yet it has to have its basis in reality. Satirical cartoons have to use sophisticated humor devices such as irony, hyperbole, farce and absurdity (Gamson and Stuart, 1992). Satirical cartoons are able to critique contemporary culture by using images and language that could not be used in live action shows (Medjesky, 2008). Thus, in order to decode the intended meaning of a satirical text, consumers must understand the actual image (the mockery) and its underlying message (opposition to the image) (Burke, 2003). Unfortunately, not all audiences are able to recognize (or choose to ignore) the underlying message. As Booth (1975) argued, any reading outside of the satirical one would in fact be incongruous with the text’s use of irony, thus it is nonsensical to read it any other way.

In understanding the intent of satire, audiences must be able to recognize the character’s knowledge, beliefs and values as well as how the character’s dialogue supports such notions (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). So, when interpreting satire, audiences have to consider the producer’s intent as well as the motivations behind their own interpretation – or the satire will fail. Unfortunately, for the satirist, the text is interpreted through the consumer’s own ideologies. Therefore, satirical cartoons can become very controversial when consumed by the unintended audience that does not share the same cultural language, mores and sensibilities as the producer (Muller, Ozcan & Seizov, 2009).

Consequently, creators of insensitive cartoons (which may very well be based in bigotry) will simply defend the text as simple satire. The producers will then dismiss critics as unable to understand the text because they are not viewing it through the correct lens (Medjesky, 2009). Whereas those who do understand the “grammar” of the satire will be rewarded, as they end up “getting the joke” (Medjesky, 2009, p. 11).

Reading Adult Cartoons

Because of the difficulty in interpreting satirical texts, it can be offensive to people who disagree with its actual image. Thus, satirical programming was rarely found on television during the broadcast network era (1950-1980), when the programming strategy was to air the least “objectionable” material (Thompson, 2009, p. 41). It was not until the proliferation of cable channels and “narrowcasting” that there was an increase in satirical programming (Thompson, 2009).

Family Guy is one of several cartoons in the last fifteen years that has targeted mass adult-aged audiences. Others include *The Simpsons* (1989-Present), *Beavis & Butthead* (1992-1997, 2011), *South Park* (1997-Present), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2010-Present) and *American Dad* (2005-Present). These cartoons have a “double-codedness” since they are massively popular and commercial, while also being blatantly subversive (Knox, 2006, p. 73). These cartoons are dually promoting and subverting dominant ideologies. (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 11). So, *The Simpsons*, which gave rise to primetime animation aimed at adults, employs representation of the nuclear family, while also satirizing the sitcom family (Mittell, 2007). While the *King of the Hill* employed characters that were “wise-fools,” which allowed for it to critique traditional masculinity (Palmer-Mehta, 2006). But, *Family Guy*

breaks all rules of traditional television narratives and realism. Instead it is more akin to children's cartoon in its use of "magical realism," including a talking dog and baby, the real Adam West as the mayor, a chicken that stalks Peter, and time travel (Crawford, 2009).

One consistent character throughout the history of television has been the "mock intolerant" character. This character is usually racist, sexist, ageist, or generally a bigot. This character's beliefs and willingness to express him or herself unapologetically, will go beyond that which is socially acceptable. Famous examples have included Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* and more recently, Sarah Silverman's persona from the *Sarah Silverman Program* (Thompson 2009, p. 42). These characters are supposed to be so outside the established norm that the audience can agree that they are to be laughed at (Thompson, 2009, p. 42). *Family Guy* also utilizes this character. Most often it is Peter Griffin, but sometimes it can be seen in Stewie and other secondary characters such as Quagmire.

It is also arguable that, unlike *All in the Family* producer Norman Lear, Seth MacFarlane and *Family Guy* are not trying to create satire meant to promote change. It may be more akin to the *Sarah Silverman Program* and simply using "transgressive humor" – which does not expect nor desire change, because that would end all of the fun (Tueth 2005, p. 29). Fredric Jameson (2006) argued that this type of humor is most prevalent in our postmodern world. Moreover, such humor is "blank parody" because it simply imitates "without any of [true] parody's ulterior motives" (p. 493). Postmodern humor has simply become pastiche, which does not oppose norms, but instead promotes the dominant ideology (Jameson, 2006).

For example, to mark its anniversary, *Family Guy* aired "Family Guy-100th Episode Celebration" (2007). MacFarlane started the episode by telling his audience that he is there to tell them about "some of the amazing work that is being done with the Dana Farber Center for Cancer." Then he mocked the idea of *Family Guy* dedicating a show to such a cause (Medjesky, 2009). On other occasions, MacFarlane has argued that *Family Guy's* pastiche style, constant pop culture references, and nonsensical cutaways are just a means to make people laugh. MacFarlane essentially argues that it "is perfectly fine to laugh without it meaning anything" (p. 12).

Yet, despite its popularity and awards won, *Family Guy* is still fighting against those who object to its message. In the 100th episode celebration, MacFarlane show clips of the program to first-time viewers, who are all outside of the key demographic of being young, white and male. The episode showed the first-time viewers' negative reactions to offensive clips. MacFarlane also interviewed the first-time viewers, and to a person, they despised the show. But, MacFarlane sarcastically pretends that their comments are positive. Medjesky argued that the episode paints the non-fans (thus the critics) as ignorant, thus making them unable to have a legitimate argument and unable to "get the joke" within the show (Medjesky, 2009, p. 2).

So, an implication is that those who do not get the show are not smart enough to understand it (p. 17). Furthermore, for non-fans and critics to believe that television has to be presented in a certain way (babies are cute, dogs do not talk), puts a them in direct opposition to *Family Guy's* fan base (p. 18). MacFarlane also argues that *Family Guy* is intelligent humor, and one has to have superior intelligence in order to understand such satire. As MacFarlane claims "*Family Guy* likes to hold a mirror up to society and say, 'Society, you're ugly and we don't like a lot of what you're doing'" (Family Guy-100th Episode Celebration).

Method

Textual analysis has been employed many times to study the meaning of satirical texts, but very few studies have been conducted on how audiences decode satirical texts (Johnson, del Rio & Kemmitt, 2010). Reception studies examine how consumers read media text, with the belief that texts are open to many readings and evaluations of those readings. The belief is that texts do not have any meaning until it is interpreted by the audience (Fiske, 1986).

This article used Q Methodology as a way to extract how consumers read and evaluate the television series *Family Guy*. More specifically, its purpose was to examine how consumers of the cartoon read and evaluated the humor that is often criticized as being crude and offensive. Q Methodology is an appropriate approach when studying audience reception because it is a methodology that studies subjectivity holistically. Media texts are open to subjectivity as meaning-making is at the level of the consumer and is only bound by the producer's construction and the cultural context (Carlson and Trichtinger, 2001). Due to the ambiguous nature of cartoons and satire's reliance on symbolism, it has been the subject of several Q-Methodology studies (Bormann, Koester, & Bennett, 1978; Kinsey and Taylor 1982; Root 1995; Trahair 2003).

Research Design

The author examined critical reviews of *Family Guy* found in over 80 popular press articles and online reviews sites such as metacritic.com. The author carried out a "long preliminary soak" (Hall 1975; Fursich 2009) of the reviews. From there, the author conducted a thematic analysis of statements about the perceived meaning, value and effect of the cartoon. From this, a total of forty-three statements were extracted, representing the most common opinions about the cartoon (see Appendix A).

Respondents for this study were chosen from a midsize Northeastern public university. They were all students in a survey of electronic media class, and in *Family Guy's* key demographic (18-24 years old). Forty-four respondents (26 males and 18 females) were shown an episode of the show in class and immediately sorted the statements. They were then asked to sort the statements from "agree" to "do not agree" (see Appendix B). The respondents were also given a post-sort survey that collected demographic information as well their beliefs on political correctness in the United States, the extent of free speech protections and whether the media perpetuates stereotypes.

Results

The sorts were analyzed using centroid factor analysis and varimax rotation. Four factors emerged from the analysis representing four dominant perspectives on the show. The first perspective reads the show as an intelligent critique on society that demystifies stereotypes by bringing its absurdities to light. The second perspective reads the show as low-brow humor aiming to make the viewer uncomfortable, but not as a product of bigotry. The third perspective reads the show as a guilty pleasure, dismissing it as a silly cartoon, while understanding why people are often offended by it. The final perspective reads the show as perpetuating the wrong message about minorities by turning sensitive issues into a joke (see Appendix C).

Factor 1: Pointed Satire

The first reading of the *Family Guy* series (with 7 unique loadings) saw it as an intelligent critique of contemporary American culture.

Table 1: Factor 1: High- and Low-Ranked Statements

Factor Statements and Scores				
Reveals hypocrisy in society	+4		It should be taken off the air	-4
Funny, entertaining	+4		Homophobic	-4
It is a social critique	+4		The producers are cruel	-4
Parodies political correctness	+3		Racist	-3
It is funny, because we know it is wrong	+3		Borderline child porn	-3
Some people will always take things the wrong way	+3		The FCC should regulate FOX more	-3
You can laugh at it without being bigoted	+3		It is wrong to watch it and laugh at it	-3

The perspective believes that people will always take things the wrong way and will see the cartoon as promoting stereotypes, when in fact it is a parody of those beliefs. The writers are very intelligent and in tune with current cultural issues. Thus, the cartoon is clever commentary, not ignorant bigotry:

"The show is a satire of America...the social criticism can be eye opening."

Respondent 4 [23 year old white male]

"Very intelligent and real humor that criticizes all corners of society."

Respondent 5 [20 year old white male]

The perspective believes that *Family Guy's* intent is illustrated by the fact that it is an equal opportunity offender. No one group is targeted; just as no one group is safe from its wrath. This perspective understands why people are offended by it because it makes inappropriate jokes about all types of minority groups. But, this is why the cartoon is so funny – because in our 21st Century multicultural society we are fixated on political correctness. Americans have been trained to “feel” that this type of comedy is “wrong”. But, *Family Guy* is meant to be comedic satire and social critique- not personal attacks on a group of people. This perspective believes that they are in on the joke (while presumably others are not):

"The producers do have an agenda when producing the show. They aim to poke fun at the many issues, showing everyone has their downfalls."

Respondent 9 [20 year old white male]

Across the board, the respondents commented that this is a great show. This perspective was made up of hardcore fans. They felt anyone that was offended by *Family Guy* had a bad sense of humor. Moreover, they felt that the show was doing a public service by discussing topics that society tries to avoid. In fact, by mocking stereotypes, it strips the power from them:

"The social criticism can be eye-opening and the way Family Guy presents it may soften the blow."

Respondent 7 [23 year old white male]

Most of the people sharing this perspective were white, but most claimed to have many friends that were minorities. There was a split in gender (not true of *Family Guy's* key demographic). They were mostly liberal and supported free speech rights. They also believed that the United States is too politically correct. This perspective was adamant

that *Family Guy* should not be censored (by the government, the networks or the writers themselves) and it definitely should not be taken off the air. The perspective did not read the show as anti-religion, racist, homophobic, or sexist. They also said that it is not obscene.

This perspective felt that the show destroyed bigotry by bringing to light the absurdity of such beliefs. *Family Guy's* satirical target is the United States' new religion of political correctness and the nation's blind commitment to it. The respondents in this perspective could be categorized as the new "post-everything" American. They supposedly do not judge people based on race, gender or sexuality.

Factor 2: No Harm, No Foul

The second reading of the *Family Guy* series (with 10 unique loadings) is that the cartoon is an unsophisticated jest:

Table 2: Factor 2: High- and Low-Ranked Statements

Factor Statements and Scores				
Though I do not find it offensive, I can understand why others do	+4		I do not get it	-4
You can laugh at it without being bigoted	+4		It should be taken off the air	-4
Funny, entertaining	+4		Borderline child porn	-4
It is written for young males with frat boy mentalities	+3		It is just a cartoon, no big deal	-3
The producers have no real agenda, they just know that it will get a cheap laugh	+3		The producers are bigots	-3
Silly, sophomoric	+3		The FCC should regulate FOX more	-3
I can see why others think this promotes stereotypes	+3		It is wrong to watch it and laugh at it	-3

This perspective felt that the show was certainly created for young males who enjoyed sophomoric humor. This explains why the female characters on the show are not well-developed or beloved by fans (as much as Peter, Stewie and Brian). This perspective felt that the show is a mindless cartoon and the writers go for the easy jokes (not the intelligent ones) and is too focused on random pop culture references:

"[It] is geared towards young, simple minded males who enjoy referencing things [they] never heard of, fart jokes and the occasional anti-conservative message."

Respondent 35 [20 year old white male]

This perspective did not feel that the *Family Guy* was a product of bigotry. They did not read it as racist, sexist or homophobic. The producers do not have a real agenda. They are just going for the stupid, crude jokes that they know the young male audience will like. This perspective believed that viewers can certainly enjoy the show without seeming bigoted:

"I enjoy getting a good laugh and it has taken a few [shots] at my personal beliefs. It cannot be taken to heart."

Respondent 39 [22 year old male]

But, that being said, this perspective also understood why *others* may be offended by it. But this perspective argued that is what the show is meant to skirt the edge of decency and that is why it is funny:

"I know it is wrong and offensive, but it pushes the envelope until we feel uncomfortable."

Respondent 2 [33 year old white male]

Since it is a cartoon, it can get away with it, because this type of comedy is less offensive in that genre:

"[Being a cartoon] makes it less offensive because there is really no victim."

Respondent 30 [21 year old female]

This perspective also feels that they get the joke, but it is just not that funny most of the time. Certainly, the show is not raising any television standards or adding any intelligence to the political discourse. But, nor are its portrayals of minorities setting us back to the 1950s. People should not be so critical about how characters are developed and represented in the show, because:

"It is just a cartoon, and a poorly written one at that."

Respondent 28 [23 year old white male]

Thus, there should not be content regulations placed on it, nor should it be taken off the air. People should just watch it (or not) and not take it so seriously:

"Just because some people find it offensive, it should not be furthered censored or taken off the air."

Respondent 14 [20 year old white male]

Furthermore, they commented that there is nothing special about *Family Guy* as there are many other shows like this (*South Park* for example). These shows will try to make you feel uncomfortable. In fact, the respondents in this perspective said that sometimes even they are offended. But, basically it is just low-brow humor that relies on "toilet" humor:

"It is a TV show, so one can simply not watch it if they do not like it."

Respondent 11 [21 year old white male]

The respondents on this perspective were generally fans of the show. Eighty percent of them were males and all were self-identified as Caucasian. They were politically very liberal, but split on the extent of political correctness and free speech in the United States. But, most of them agreed that the media does perpetuate stereotypes.

They enjoy the show, yet feel they recognize that the portrayals, plotlines and jokes can be very offensive to minorities. But, they rationalize it by dismissing the show as a silly cartoon – with little consequence. If people do not like it, they can turn away. For this perspective, people are being too politically correct when analyzing *Family Guy* (notice this perspective did not dismiss political correctness on the whole as Perspective 1 did). Ultimately, this perspective feels that they can enjoy the show and laugh at it, and because they recognize the stereotypes and offensive nature, they

believe that are immune to any effects from it (such as incorporating it into their values and beliefs).

Factor 3: Guilty Pleasure

The next reading of *Family Guy* (with 8 unique respondents) felt that it does have offensive humor, but critics need to lighten-up:

Table 3: Factor 3: High- and Low-Ranked Statements

Factor statements and scores				
It is so outrageous that no one can take it seriously	+4		It is wrong to watch it and laugh at it	-4
Though I do not find it offensive, I can understand why others do	+4		The producers are cruel	-4
Funny, entertaining	+4		It should be taken off the air	-4
Good-natured fun, nothing is meant by it	+3		It is written for young males with frat boy mentalities	-3
I can see why others think this promotes stereotypes	+3		Very intelligent	-3
You can laugh without being bigoted	+3		Borderline child porn	-3
It is funny, because we know it is wrong	+3		The producers are bigots	-3

Foremost, this perspective felt that this show is so outrageous that no one could take it seriously. It is not meant to be an intelligent socio-political discussion – that sort of material should be left for legitimate news programs and documentaries:

“I feel that it’s okay to watch it and find it funny despite some crude jokes that people see as going too far with being homophobic and racist because of how it is a cartoon.”

Respondent 40 [20 year old white female]

But this perspective also understood why others may find it to be offensive. They believe that the show is funny because they know that it is just ‘wrong’ to air this type of offensive material. Consequently, they agree that it may perpetuate stereotypes. But, nevertheless, people can watch this show and laugh at it without being bigots themselves:

“The majority of the population seems to find the show funny despite its obvious bigotry, racism, and profanity. I do think that most people still know right from wrong and laugh at the humor because they know it is wrong.”

Respondent 38 [19 year old white male]

“Bottom line: this show is a comedy. The goal is to get people to laugh at it. The show has a unique way of going about that. Yes, they are offensive towards stereotypes. Yes they are offensive towards serious issues. But viewers must know what they are watching.”

Respondent 34 [20 year old white male]

This perspective believes that the cartoon is simply good-natured fun and nothing is meant by it. The producers are not being cruel. However, this perspective would not

deny that it is can be racist, homophobic, and sexist at times. Nonetheless, they believe that the writers are equal opportunity offenders and no one group is safe from its humor:

"I think it is funny and entertaining because it is really making fun of society as a whole and the view it holds. It allows us to laugh at ourselves essentially."

Respondent 3 [22 year old white female]

Overall, they believe that is a solid social critique. Unfortunately, people will always take things the wrong way. The respondents on this perspective commented that this is just a silly, moronic cartoon. It is television, not reality. It is just trying to get a rise out of you by using what they know offends people. Really, people need to be able to laugh at themselves:

"I have learned not to take offense to anything [that] I see on TV."

Respondent 38 [19 year old white male]

Interestingly, the respondents belonging to this perspective were only occasional viewers. They were also a majority of females on this perspective (77%). They were split in ideology on issues of political correctness and free speech. But, they did believe that media causes stereotypes. Female viewers are not the key demographic for *Family Guy*. Though there are female writers on the show, the driving force behind the show is Seth MacFarlane. Arguably, this may be why female characters are not as well-developed on the show or as much beloved by fans. It may be this tension that led this mostly-female perspective to have reservation about the show's effect and value.

Much like Perspective 2, this perspective rationalizes by arguing that it is a silly cartoon. But unlike Perspective 2, this perspective does not dismiss the critics and their arguments. Perspective 3 is willing to admit that there are some issues with the show, but maybe time spent critiquing media texts, would be better spent on more important issues (news programming, children's programming, effects of advertising, etc.):

"People need to stop being so uptight."

Respondent 37 [21 year old white female]

Factor 4 +: Offensive and Desensitizing

The fourth reading of *Family Guy* had 5 loadings. It was bipolar with two of the respondents loading negatively. (Three of the loadings on Perspective 1 also had negatively loaded on factor 4). There was also one respondent on factor 4 who negatively loaded on factor 1.

Those who loaded positively on this factor 4 believed that this show is offensive as it perpetuates stereotypes and turns sensitive issues into a joke:

Table 4 Factor 4: High- and Low-Ranked Statements

Factor statements and scores				
Stupid, moronic	+4		Funny, entertaining	-4
I do not get it	+4		Very Intelligent	-4
It is wrong to watch it and laugh at it	+4		Good-natured fun, nothing is meant by it	-4
It should be taken off the air	+3		Silly, Sophomoric	-3

Factor statements and scores				
Desensitizes us to real issues	+3		Though I do not find it offensive, I can understand why others do	-3
Crude, rude and profane	+3		It is just a cartoon, no big deal	-3
The producers have no real agenda, they just know that it will get a cheap laugh	+3		TV-14 rating is appropriate	-3

Unlike the other perspectives, Perspective 4 does not dismiss the show as simple good-natured fun. This perspective believes that the writers are cruel. They believe that the writers on the show have a political agenda and that they may even be bigots. They read the show as sexist, racist, homophobic and that it targets the handicapped:

"I find it offensive to many, including females"

Respondent 17 [21 year old white female]

"This show is racist toward every race except White people"

Respondent 24 [20 year old Latino Male]

Furthermore, this perspective believes that viewers who enjoy this show are probably bigots as well. Ultimately, this perspective does not understand why people watch and enjoy this show:

"I believe watching this program dumbs you down"

Respondent 24 [20 year old Latino Male]

This perspective finds it offensive and understands why others have boycotted the show. They do not find *Family Guy* to be intelligent writing – this is not the equivalent of pointed satire. It is just crude and profane. They even feel that some of the scenes with Stewie Griffin (naked, trying to seduce another toddler, Brian the Dog eating feces from his diaper) are borderline child pornography. For this perspective, the fact that the show is written for young males, who revel in sophomoric humor, is no excuse for the offensiveness:

"Family Guy shows no signs of intelligent or funny writing and is only on the air because a small few find it funny[.]"

Respondent 13 [21 year old white male]

The respondents on this perspective were obviously not fans of the show. Several were self-described as a member of a minority group (Latino and African-American). They tended to feel that the media perpetuates stereotypes. They also believed that the United States was not too politically correct. The respondents also believed that there needed to be restrictions placed on free speech

This perspective is obviously the "target" perspective – the people who are often the subject of many of *Family Guy's* most offensive jokes. This perspective argued that *Family Guy* turns every subject into a joke, thus marginalizing real issues about diversity. *Family Guy* makes it acceptable to "make fun" of anybody and everybody and this is a terrible message to send out to viewers. Perspective 4 believes that many viewers will absorb this message and will become less culturally sensitive. They believe that the show is a mockery of diversity and the advancements in cultural sensitivity that

have been made in the last couple of decades. Thus, unsurprisingly, Perspective 4 was very willing to have the FCC regulate the show's content or at least force the networks to give it a rating higher than TV-14. But, preferably, for this perspective, *Family Guy* should be taken off the air:

"I believe they can joke [about sensitive issue] as long as there is a moral with it - but with Family Guy there isn't...It really desensitizes kids to many issues in society."

Respondent 24 [20 year old Latino Male]

Factor 4 - : Comedy that Challenges Culture

This final perspective (the negative loadings on factor 4) admits that the show is sophomoric and may be offensive in nature (like other shock comics like Daniel Tosh). But, they are satisfied with the show's rating and ultimately believe that it is just a fun cartoon and that there is nothing wrong with it. They actually argue that this type of humor and language is indeed smart comedy (like George Carlin's use of offensive language to question our cultural mores). They believe pushing the envelope and questioning the culture is a sign of intelligence.

The Punchline: Mocking Intolerance or Mocking Tolerance?

MacFarlane intended *Family Guy* to be both silly humor and a satire of contemporary culture. Of the four perspectives, only the first (the most prominent perspective) read the cartoon as the producer intended. This perspective was made up of fans of the show that watched it on a regular basis. They "understood" that the show was meant to be a joke - not meant to perpetuate stereotypes. These viewers believed that they were intelligent enough to know what they were laughing at: Peter Griffin and the other caricatures and how they interacted in a world dominated by political correctness.

This perspective not only believed that a viewer could enjoy *Family Guy* without being a bigot - they believed that they were less bigoted for enjoying it. For this perspective, Peter Griffin was ultimately good-hearted, but naïve. Mr. Griffin was not well-versed in political correctness (as Brian and Lois were) and he consequently got himself in trouble. But this allowed for the audience (and Brian - the conscious) to condemn Peter's action, while still loving the character. [Similar to how on the television show *The Office*, Jim and Pam were the voices of reason to the outrageous Michael Scott]. Peter's outrageous conduct (often offensive towards many groups) made this perspective laugh, not at the sake of the wronged group, but at the buffoonery of the offender.

This perspective still saw a "mock intolerant" concept within the show. But instead of it being a character on the show, it was the response to Peter's actions (from both the characters on it and the critics of it) that had become the "mock intolerant." Thus, this perspective echoed MacFarlane when he said "*Family Guy* likes to hold a mirror up to society and says, 'Society, you're ugly and we don't like a lot of what you're doing'" (*Family Guy*-100th Episode Celebration). Except it is society being too sensitive and over-reactive that is ugly. This perspective believed that they are "in on the joke."

The second and third perspectives were not as enamored with the show. They did not read any critical message about political correctness. Both of these perspectives read the show as transgressive humor (Tueth, 2005) simply meant to get people to feel uncomfortable.

The second perspective was made up of fans who enjoyed the show, yet they also felt that the show was unsophisticated and disrespectful. This perspective rationalized this conflict by arguing that was a simple-minded cartoon and they were well aware of the

destructive messages. But, they did not apologize for the cartoon's content. If someone did not like it, they could turn away. Thus, the second perspective echoed Jameson's (2006) argument that much of postmodern comedy is "blank parody" without any real meaning or desire for change. But, Perspective 2 did not dismiss the medium of cartoons as being influential. In fact, many respondents on Perspective 2 reported that they were fans of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* and felt that those cartoons were pointed satires.

Perspective 3 paralleled MacFarlane's attitude that it "is perfectly fine to laugh without it meaning anything" (Medjesky 2009, 12). The respondents on this perspective were occasional fans of the show, who chose not to watch it as often as those on perspectives one and two. They apologized for the content, understanding how it was offensive to some. Yet, they were also apologists for the producers, arguing that since the medium was a cartoon it should not be considered offensive.

Perspective 3 was less critical of show than Perspective 4. But, the third perspective did admit that the humor in the show can be offensive. Interestingly, most of the loadings on the third factor were female. On *Family Guy*, there are few female characters outside of Meg and Lois, thus there is less direct targeting of females specifically (whereas there are more jokes targeting cultures and ethnicities). This could begin to explain the third perspective's acceptance that people will be offended, yet still arguing that it is just a cartoon.

The final perspective was very critical of the show. They felt it was offensive, mostly to the groups to which they belong. The respondents on this perspective were the ones that were targeted by *Family Guy*. When characters that you relate to are the butt of the joke, then to you, the joke is usually not that funny. This is especially true if you have been a target of such humor in your own life. Respondents on this perspective probably believed that being politically correct was beneficial to society, not something to mock (as Perspective 1 believed).

Unlike Perspective 2 and 3, Perspective 4 cannot dismiss *Family Guy* as a simple cartoon. Perspective 4 believed that fans of the show were not laughing at it because they were the above the fray, or were in on the joke, or because it was a harmless cartoon. This perspective believed people who enjoy the show actually held the same viewpoint as Peter Griffin. Thus, people liked these characters because they *were* like these characters.

The fourth perspective did have the least amount of respondents on it, but this study focused on young college-aged students (who are the key demographic for *Family Guy*) and there was a limited amount of minorities surveyed (all of whom scored on Perspective 4). Undoubtedly, if an older or more diverse group were to be surveyed, then Perspective 4 might have more representatives (such as those interviewed by MacFarlane in the 100th Episode Celebration, who universally despised the series).

Family Guy certainly pushes the envelope as to what our society finds to be appropriate, especially on issues of social politics (race, sexuality and religion). The show is filled with jokes that are not in good taste and we would prudently not tell them at our place of employment. There is no denying that there is crass humor in the show and this study examined how people reconciled the offensive humor. The results showed that the dominant perspective believed that the jokes needed to be offensive in order to show the absurdity of being offended. This perspective was also populated with young, white males who were fans of the show. Those who held this perspective were rarely the target of the jokes, but more often were the target of political correctness. But, for Perspective 4 it was the exact opposite – they would not accept this

humor because it was targeted at them as it was in much of the media. But, Perspectives 2 and 3 gave little credence to those who actually criticized the cartoon as having gone too far. Those perspectives were able to find ways to reconcile the conflict between discomfort and enjoyment by devaluing the cartoon, thus avoiding the issue of how the humor affected others.

Conclusion

Humor is subjective. But audiences do get the final say on whether something is funny. If a certain audience does not laugh, it may not mean that they do not “get the joke.” It may mean that the comedy is not funny, not only to them but probably many others. Similarly, decency is subjective. But, it is our culture that gets to decide when something has gone too far. If a certain audience is offended, it may not mean that they are overly sensitive. It may mean that the material is offensive, not only to them, but probably many others.

Family Guy has received great criticism for its crude humor and insensitivity from those that ostensibly “do not get the joke.” But, despite the critics, it remains a very popular show and has won many industry awards. Being a satirical cartoon steeped in surrealism and pop culture pastiche has allowed it to push the boundaries of decency. As a result, the show is very successful among its key demographic – young, white males. It speaks to their sensibilities, a group that has grown up in a post-everything (postmodern, post-racial, post-feminism) world that is bound by the seemingly contrived rules of political correctness. Fortunately for *Family Guy* and FOX, this key demographic is a massive audience that is greatly desired by advertisers. As a result, the cartoon has been able to survive a network cancellation, the disdain of the Parents Television Council, and ten years in an industry where many shows do not make it past a couple of seasons. The truth is – no matter how people read the show – the producers of *Family Guy* will continue to write their own rules.

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Appendix A: Statements

Statement	A	B	C	D
1 Stupid, moronic	-2	0	+1	+4
2 Silly, sophomoric	+1	+3	+2	-3
3 Offensive toward sensitive issues	0	+1	0	+2
4 Targets handicapped people too often	-1	-1	-2	+1
5 Goes for the easy joke	0	+2	+1	0
6 Homophobic	-4	-2	-1	+2
7 Racist	-3	-2	-1	+2
8 Funny, entertaining	+4	+4	+4	-4
9 Indecent and offensive	-1	-1	0	+1
10 Raw and real	+1	-3	-2	0
11 Very intelligent	+2	-2	-3	-4
12 Crude, rude and profane	+1	+1	+1	+3
13 Borderline child porn	-3	-4	-3	+2
14 Female characters are developed in plotlines	0	-1	-1	-2
15 Anti-religion	-2	-1	-1	-1
16 Though I do not find it offensive, I can understand why others do	+2	+4	+4	-3
17 I do not get it	-2	-4	-2	+4
18 Too many outdated pop culture references	-2	+1	-2	+1
19 Perpetuates stereotypes	0	0	+2	0
20 It sets us back to a time when stereotypes were accepted	-1	-2	-1	-1
21 Reveals hypocrisy in society	+4	+1	+1	-1
22 It is funny, because we know it is wrong	+3	+2	+3	-2
23 Being that it is a cartoon makes it less offensive	0	+2	+1	-2
24 It is just a cartoon, no big deal	0	-3	-2	-3
25 Sends a terrible message to kids	-1	0	0	+1
26 The FCC should regulate FOX more	-3	-3	-2	+1
27 The TV-14 rating is appropriate	+1	0	-1	-3
28 Desensitizes us to real issues	0	-1	0	+3
29 It should be taken off the air	-4	-4	-4	+3
30 Some people will always take things the wrong way	+3	+2	+2	-1
31 I can see why others think this promotes stereotypes	+2	+3	+3	0
32 You can laugh at it without being bigoted	+3	+4	+3	-1
33 Parodies political correctness	+3	+1	0	-1
34 It is a social critique	+4	+1	+2	0
35 Good-natured fun, nothing is meant by it	+2	0	+3	-4
36 It is a scathing political humor	+1	0	+1	-2
37 It is wrong to watch it and laugh at it	-3	-3	-4	4
38 It is so outrageous that no one can take it seriously	+1	-1	+4	-2
39 It is written for young males with frat boy mentalities	-1	+3	-3	+1
40 Equal opportunity offender	+2	+2	+2	0
41 The producers are bigots	-4	-3	-3	0
42 The producers are cruel	-2	-2	-4	+2
43 The producers have no real agenda, they just know that it will get a cheap laugh	-1	+3	0	+3

Appendix B: Factor Loadings

<i>Q-sort</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>
1	64	26	14	- 29
5	66	08	02	-02
15	66	05	38	- 09
25	62	47	22	23
29	46	36	28	- 39
36	70	13	17	- 17
44	53	27	24	03
4	57	43	20	14
7	48	47	33	09
3	45	20	52	09
23	56	04	50	- 30
9	62	19	16	- 42
22	45	07	20	- 41
2	36	61	16	06
11	15	45	11	- 09
14	29	53	32	- 17
16	07	56	19	- 04
26	38	40	07	- 30
28	- 08	45	07	00
30	15	46	24	- 03
35	22	67	06	- 15
39	38	41	21	- 03
43	- 01	73	33	15
19	23	48	34	- 56
6	05	23	76	01
8	38	27	59	-02
12	18	38	60	- 02
20	27	34	56	- 04
38	39	07	59	-03
40	21	15	55	02
34	33	44	50	04
37	37	50	50	13
13	- 46	30	- 02	49
17	01	12	01	60
21	37	25	16	- 41
24	- 10	- 06	39	43
32	31	21	24	- 60