



Satire and Humor Utilization in Social Commentary: An Analysis of 'Family Guy'

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ABSTRACT

Family Guy is Americas popular Adult comedy animated show series which depicts the American culture, politics, and society along with its traditions. A number of researches have been carried out that explore the depiction of racism and American culture through the comic series but there is inadequate research that highlights the usage/role of humor and satire in social commentary in the series Family guy. By utilizing qualitative research method, through Stuart Halls content analysis methodology, this study aims to highlight the usage of humor and satire in social commentary in the series Family guy The findings of this study reveals that family guy utilizes Humor and Satire to comment and critique on sensitive social issues.

1. Introduction

Family guy is an American adult animated comedy series created by Seth MacFarlane. It has been a significant cultural phenomenon since its debut in 1999. The show acts as a special window through American culture, issues, norms, and society are displayed and also criticized. The series is about the Griffin family which consists of Peter, Lois, Meg, Chris, Stevie, and their logical dog, Brian, who spend time in a fictional town called Quahog, which is located in Rhode Island and they are mainly involved in absurd and sometimes controversial situations. Besides the show's underlying focus on the showcase of racist and American culture studies done so far, there is a gap in the literature on the role of humor/satire in Family Guy that needs to be addressed. This gap is crucial because Satire is not just the means for fun in Animated series. According to Rickie (2012) the series through irony becomes a device for intense social analysis, bringing the issues of responsibilities and conflict to light in a manner that is funny and thoughtful. Grounded in Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, this study research hereby seeks to close that gap through a qualitative research approach that will explore the various ways humor is used in Family Guy to criticize different social issues. Hall's model is particularly relevant as it emphasizes the relationship between media content (encoding) and cultural critique. By analyzing specific episodes and scenes, this research will highlight the ways in which the show employs satire and humor to provide commentary on topics such as racism, religious fundamentalism and freedom of

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expression. This chapter will introduce the study by first discussing the background and context, followed by the research problems, the research aims, objectives and questions, the significance and finally the limitations.

1.1. Problem Statement

Satire and humor are the one of the literary tools used by writers and movie directors to provide a social commentary as used by Seth MacFarlane in his animated series family guy. Despite this there is limited research that highlights the role of humor and satire in social commentary in the series Family Guy. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the usage of satire and humor in social commentary in the animated series the family guy.

1.2. Research Aim

- This research aims to highlight the role of humor and satire in social commentary in the series “Family Guy”

1.3. Research Gap

There is inadequate research that highlights the role of humor and satire in social commentary in the series “Family Guy”.

1.4. Research Objectives

- To analyze specific episodes of "Family Guy" to identify and highlight textual instances of humor and satire used for social commentary.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of humor and satire in "Family Guy" in conveying social and political messages to its audience.

1.5. Research Question

1. How specific episodes of “Family Guy” identify and highlight the instances of or humor and satire used for social commentary?
2. How humor and satire have been used in “Family Guy” to convey social and political messages

1.6. Research Significance

The findings of this research will further contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the animated series "Family Guy," providing deeper insights into its use of humor and satire for social commentary. The findings of this study will be significant for organizing seminars and conferences, highlighting the use of satire and humor to raise awareness about important social issues.

1.7. Research Limitations

This study focuses on specific episodes so it may not capture the full range of social commentary present in the entire series. The study has taken scripts from an authentic resource which is mentioned below , Any other source if utilized might fail to prove authentic <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewforum.php?f=430>

1.8. Structural Outline

In Chapter one, the context of the study has been introduced. The research questions, objectives, gaps and aim have been identified, and the significance of this study argued. The limitation of this research is also discussed. In Chapter two, the existing literature has been reviewed to overview the work of scholars on Content analysis of Stuart hall and Animated series “The family Guy”. In chapter three, a detailed view on methodology has been provided. Textual analysis along with qualitative approach has been used in this study. Furthermore, encoding decoding techniques are applied steps by step to the selected text. In the chapter, theoretical framework also has been discussed, which helps in exploring main aspects of Content Analysis by Stuart hall. Afterwards a detailed analysis of the selected text has been done. The discussion has been made on the analysis to further explain the use of Satire and Humor for social commentary in chapter four, the conclusion of the whole study is given.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hall (1973) discusses in his paper **Encoding and decoding in the Television Discourse** that media communication is a dynamic process involving the encoding of messages by producers and the decoding by audiences. He emphasizes that the encoded message, shaped by socio-cultural and institutional contexts, must pass through a "message form" to be meaningful, where it is subject to cultural codes and conventions. This process transforms raw events into structured communicative acts. Hall further elaborates that decoding is not a passive reception but an active interpretation, leading to dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings based on the audience's cultural positioning and ideologies. This perspective underscores the complexity of media's role in shaping societal narratives and ideologies

Cici (2024), in his paper **Analysis of Verbal Humor Used in Family Guy by Using Relevance Theory: A Pragmatic Study** discusses that the application of relevance theory is crucial for understanding the mechanisms of verbal humor in *Family Guy*, as much of the humor relies on relevance communication principles. He elucidates the importance of context as he highlights that the humor often reflects aspects of daily life, including friendship work culture and responsibilities. Moreover, Cici emphasizes that viewers need to understand the contextual references in the scenes, such as "Wall Street," "Stock Market," and "Lasik," to fully grasp the humor being conveyed in the series. Without this contextual awareness, the humor may be lost on the audience. The writer has emphasized the contextual awareness as it sets the base for satire to be prospected.

Sienkiewicz and Marx (2014) explore *Family Guy's* unique relationship with postmodern aesthetics in their paper **Click Culture: The Perils and Possibilities of Family Guy and Convergence-Era Television**. They examine the show's non-linear storytelling techniques and its intertextual bricolage, which are emblematic of postmodern television's reliance on fragmented narratives and the constant circulation of cultural references. Sienkiewicz and Marx assert that *Family Guy* engages with the postmodern condition by drawing from a wide array of pop culture references, including ephemeral internet memes and iconic moments from past television history. However, they contend that while *Family Guy's* reliance on these techniques invites semiotic play and intertextuality, it often sacrifices the opportunity for deeper social critique. Instead of fostering meaningful commentary on issues such as race, gender, and power dynamics, the show's rapid, disjointed cutaways what Olson (as cited in Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2014) refers to as *ilinxes* serve primarily to disrupt the narrative and offer sensational, attention-grabbing moments that engage viewers in superficial ways. This strategy, Sienkiewicz and Marx argue, reflects the changing dynamics of media consumption in the convergence era, where quick, fragmented content often takes precedence over sustained narrative coherence or critical engagement with cultural issues.

Crawford (2009) discusses in her paper **"Family Guy as Magical Realism"** that the show employs elements of magical realism to blend the real and the fantastical seamlessly. She highlights the show disrupts conventional narrative structures by introducing unexpected, fantastical elements into otherwise realistic settings. For instance, the disruptive arrival of the Kool-Aid Man in a courtroom setting is an example of the absurdity brought about through this technique, thus dislocating the viewers' expectations and subsequently adding a dimension of absurdity to the plot. She also claims that the inclusion of truth and lies in their coexistence makes the series more appealingly and creatively handle the ethical and societal matters addressed. Conversely, by putting the practical alongside the unrealistic, *Family Guy* can take serious matters as jokes. This technique is also characteristic of Garcia Marquez's novels, which make use of magical realism in the form of metaphor called to life to produce unexpected storytelling as well as reveal the human character in a deeper manner. She also pointed out that the show's usage of magical realism not only for the purpose of comedic effect but also for the purpose of critiquing and satirizing present-day culture. Through the utilization of fantasy elements in the ordinary setting, *Family Guy* offers a fresh perspective on societal norms and expectations, making it a significant example of modern animated satire.

Rickie (2012) discusses in her paper **"Funny or Harmful: Derogatory Speech on Fox's Family Guy"** that the show employs derogatory language to provide satirical social commentary. She investigates the presence of derogatory messages in the show and their potential cultivating effects when presented in an animated format. Rickie's study found that derogatory messages were present in roughly 9% of *Family Guy's* scenes with hate speech being the most frequent type. The paper explores how such language, when used humorously, might desensitize viewers and normalize derogatory speech, especially among younger audience.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to analyze the role of humor in *Family Guy* as a tool for social commentary. The methodology employs content analysis technique with Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to explore how the show encodes its messages and how audiences decode them. The process involves the following steps:

3.1. Data Collection

The Series family guy consists of 21 seasons with 424 episodes but our study will be focused on the scripts of three episodes which includes **Season 7 Episode 11 “Not All Dogs go to heaven”**, **Season 4 episode 14 “PTV”** and **Season 4 episode 5 “The Cleveland-Loretta quagmire”** “which are that explicitly address controversial social issues. These episodes are selected based on their thematic relevance to race, gender, and sexuality, as well as their popularity or cultural impact. Key scenes and dialogues are transcribed for detailed analysis, ensuring that both verbal and non-verbal elements of humor are included.

3.2. Data Analysis

The selected episodes are analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns, symbols and comedic devices that encode social commentary. The analysis focuses on uncovering satirical elements parody which serve as critical tools for addressing sensitive topics.

3.3. Theoretical Framework

This research on the animated series *Family Guy* is grounded in Stuart Hall’s *Encoding/Decoding* model applied within the realm of media studies to explore its satirical representation of social issues. The study aligns with Hall’s approach due to its focus on the intricate relationship between media content (encoding) and cultural critique

Encoding: Encoding refers to the process by which media producers embed messages within their content. These messages are shaped by the creators' cultural contexts, ideologies, and intended meanings. Through various techniques such as satire, parody, and absurdity, media producers can encode critiques of social issues, including but not limited to racism, gender roles, and power dynamics. The exaggerated portrayal of characters and situations often serves to highlight the absurdity of societal norms and prejudices, thereby making the social commentary more impactful. As Hall (1980) notes, "the apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue, at a certain moment (the moment of 'production/circulation') in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'" (p. 128).

Decoding: Decoding is the process by which audiences interpret and make sense of the media content. According to Hall, audiences may decode messages in different ways based on their own cultural and social contexts. There are three hypothetical positions from which audiences decode messages:

- **Dominant (or preferred) Reading:** The audience fully accepts the encoded message and interprets it as intended by the creators. This involves recognizing and agreeing with the underlying critique or commentary embedded in the content.
- **Negotiated Reading:** In this type of reading the the encoded message is relatively accepted by the audience but they modify it based upon their personal experiences of the encoded message while also incorporating personal interpretations and reservations.
- **Oppositional Reading:** The audience rejects the encoded message entirely; the message is deciphered in a subjective way oppositional to the creator’s intent. In oppositional reading the content is viewed as offensive which rejects the intended critique.

As Hall (1980) explains, "the consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense" (p. 52). This highlights the active role of the audience in interpreting media messages, rather than passively receiving them.

4. Analysis and Results

In the **Season 7 Episode 11 “Not All Dogs go to heaven”** of **Family Guy** there is an encounter between Meg and Brian.

Meg: "Brian, you're a thoughtful person. Are you willing to open yourself up to God's truth?"

Brian: "You're barking up the wrong tree, Meg. I'm an atheist."

Meg: "What's that?"

Brian: "I don't believe in God."

Meg: "Brian, how can you say that? We believe in God in this house. I mean, an atheist? That's just about the worst thing a person can be. You're not going to get anything for Christmas, Brian."

Brian: "Guys, I'm just trying to say..."

Meg: "Shut up, beast. I have dominion over you. And I command you to believe in God."

In this episode the character dynamics between Meg and Brian are used to explore themes of religious intolerance and atheism. Meg, representing a newly converted, zealous Christian, is eager to share her newfound faith, while Brian, a rational atheist, values evidence and reason over faith. The satirical elements in this exchange highlight the nature of new converts and the ignorance towards atheism in some religious communities. Meg's question, "What's that?" upon hearing the term "atheist," underscores a lack of understanding or awareness about atheism. The humor in this scene arises from the stark contrast between Meg's earnestness and Brian's bluntness, with Brian's straightforward declaration, "I don't believe in God," delivered in a matter-of-fact tone that sharply contrasts with Meg's passionate plea. The absurdity is amplified by the fact that Meg, who has just recently embraced her faith, is already trying to convert others, while Brian, a dog, is portrayed as a rational atheist. The above mentioned dialogue criticizes religious intolerance by showing how Meg's new faith leads her to impose her beliefs on Brian. This reflects real-life situations where people are pressured to conform to religious expectations. Brian, in contrast, calmly explains his atheism, using humor to highlight the stigma that atheists often face. Meg's comment, "That's just about the worst thing a person can be," shows her intolerance toward his beliefs, reflecting a common prejudice. The humor exaggerates her intolerance to an extreme, making a point about the discrimination atheists can face. Through Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, the creators of *Family Guy* use humor to critique religious intolerance and the stigma surrounding atheism. By blending satire and absurdity, they highlight Meg's ignorance and Brian's rational perspective, making the social commentary more effective. When decoding the message, viewers may interpret it in different ways. A dominant reading would involve viewers understanding and agreeing with the critique, finding the scene humorous and thought-provoking, and appreciating the show's boldness in addressing sensitive topics. A negotiated reading might involve viewers finding the scene funny but feeling uncomfortable with the portrayal of religious characters as ignorant, appreciating the humor but disagreeing with the extent of the critique. An oppositional reading would involve viewers finding the scene offensive, feeling that it disrespects religious beliefs, and rejecting the humor and critique entirely, viewing the show as inappropriate. As Hall (1980) discusses in his paper "Encoding/Decoding," media messages are not passively accepted by audiences but are interpreted through various lenses based on individual cultural and social contexts.

Similarly, in **Season 4 episode 14 "PTV"** Peter is frustrated with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for censoring television content. He decides to start his own TV network, PTV, which broadcasts uncensored content.

Peter: "Tired of the FCC? Then come to Peter Griffin's PTV, where you can say anything you want!"

Lois: "Peter, you can't just start your own TV network."

Peter: "Why not? They can't tell me what to do. I'll show them!"

Brian: "Peter, this is a bad idea. The FCC exists for a reason."

Peter: "Yeah, to ruin our fun! Well, not anymore. On PTV, we can say and do whatever we want. No more censorship!"

Stewie: "I must say, this is quite liberating. Finally, I can express my true self without those pesky censors."

Lois: "Peter, this is irresponsible. There are rules for a reason."

Peter: "Rules are meant to be broken, Lois. This is America, the land of the free!"

The writers encode a critique of censorship and the role of regulatory bodies like the FCC, using humor to highlight the tension between freedom of expression and the need for regulation. Satire and absurdity are employed to exaggerate Peter's rebellious attitude and the consequences of an uncensored TV network, showcasing the extremes of both sides of the argument. According to Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, viewers may interpret these messages differently. A dominant reading would involve viewers agreeing with the critique of censorship, finding the scene humorous and thought-provoking, and appreciating the show's boldness in addressing free speech versus regulation. A negotiated reading might involve viewers finding the scene funny but feeling uncomfortable with the portrayal of regulatory bodies as purely restrictive, acknowledging the necessity of some level of regulation. An oppositional reading would involve viewers finding the scene offensive, feeling that it undermines the importance of regulatory bodies like the FCC, and rejecting the humor and critique entirely. As Hall (1980) discusses in his paper "Encoding/Decoding," media messages are not passively accepted by audiences but are interpreted through various lenses based on individual cultural and social contexts. In this episode, the creators encode a critique of censorship through exaggerated and humorous dialogues, which are then decoded by viewers in different ways, reflecting the complex relationship between media content, creator intent, and audience interpretation. The use of humor in this social commentary allows the show to address sensitive issue of freedom of expression in a thought-provoking manner.

Similarly, in Season 4 episode 5 “The Cleveland-Loretta quagmire” Cleveland’s overly polite reaction to being cheated on plays on the stereotype of submissiveness, contrasting cultural expectations of masculinity and assertiveness in Black men

Loretta: "I'm a woman, Cleveland. I need some passion in my life. I need a real man. And Lord knows that ain't you."

Cleveland: "Well, I admit after a long day at work, I don't always come home with that 'Riunite on ice, that's nice' mentality. And for that, I apologize."

Loretta: "Apologize? I cheat on you, and you apologize to me? Cleveland Brown, you are pathetic!"

Cleveland: "I disagree, but I respect your candor."

Cleveland's overly polite reaction to being cheated on plays off the stereotype of submissiveness, which contrasts cultural expectations of masculinity and assertiveness in Black men. Loretta's demand for passion and a "real man" underlines societal pressures on men to be like certain masculine ideals. The humor comes from the contrast between Loretta's aggressive confrontation and Cleveland's calm, almost passive response. The writers encode a critique of gender roles and cultural expectations of masculinity by using humor to highlight the tension between societal ideals of assertiveness in men and the stereotype of submissiveness in Black men. Satire and irony are used to exaggerate Cleveland's politeness and Loretta's aggressive demands to make the social commentary more effective. The dialogue is written to illustrate the extremes of both sides. Those viewers who understand the satirical point of the critique against gender roles and cultural expectations would find the scene to be humorous and thought provoking. They would appreciate satire and the show's boldness in raising issues such as this. Some might have laughed but felt uncomfortable about how Cleveland was depicted as too submissive to others, appreciating the humor but recognizing that cultural expectations around masculinity are complex. Other audiences might find the scene offending since it perpetuates negative stereotypes against Black men and gender roles, rejecting the humor and critique entirely, and viewing the show as perpetuating dangerous stereotypes.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that "Family Guy" successfully uses satire and humor as tools for social commentary. By putting critiques of social issues like racism, gender roles, and power dynamics in exaggerated and absurd portrayals, the show makes fun of the absurdity of societal norms and prejudices. Comedic devices such as satire and parody make social commentary more impactful and thought-provoking. Overall, the style of "Family Guy" represents the power of animated comedies in discussing and critiquing relevant social issues.

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