

Correlation Analysis on the Maternal Role in American Family Sitcoms During 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

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ABSTRACT

Family sitcoms, as part of the cultural industry, are viewed by millions of people, if not more, every year. This study looked into the transition of maternal role in American family sitcoms, thus reflecting corresponding change in perception of mothers in the society. The paper utilized a quantitative and correlational analysis method to examine if differences exist between the representation of mothers in 1951-1960 and in 2011-2020. After retrieving a list of all television and radio sitcoms ever made, items that were produced outside the US, produced outside the designated time range, or did not focus on family were excluded. Thus a sample of 65 sitcoms, with 14 released between 1951 and 1960, and 51 released between 2011 and 2020, was created. Implemented relativity tests included a Chi-Square Test and a One-Way ANOVA Test between the variables of Starting Year and Marital Status/Number of Kids. As a result, an association was found between the year and marital status of mothers, while little association was found between year and kid numbers. The analysis revealed that while pervasive ideas regarding kid number and couple marriage remained dominant, qualities such as mothers' marital status became more diverse, indicating the growing independence of mothers from their spouses.

Keywords: sitcoms, motherhood, family, gender roles, cultural industry, media studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Sitcom, also situation comedy, is a major television genre. Roy Stafford defined sitcom as a setting and a group of characters providing the opportunity for a comic narrative, usually resolved in 25-30 minutes and broadcast in a series of five or more episodes[1]. Family sitcom is yet one of the branches of that genre, which mainly focuses on a domestic setting and members of the family, along with their derivative stories.

As a part of the mass media, sitcoms can reflect the daily habits, popular trends and even value pursuit of social groups in its content and form of the very time that they are produced. Thereby, by looking into how the specific social role of "mother" are depicted in sitcoms in different time, the variation of people's perception of mothers in reality can be revealed.

The research aimed at answering the following question through quantitative research: Has the role of mother in family sitcoms changed between 1951-1960 and 2011-2020? If so, what specific change are we talking about?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, a family is built on the basis of blood ties or state-sanctioned relationships[2]. Besides the biological and legal part, family has its cultural connotation. The composition of two married couples and their children is a traditional perception[3]. Standard North American Family(SANF), which Smith claimed to be the dominant structure in the United States[4], was also similar to that traditional nuclear composition. However, in the last decades of America, divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and gay and lesbian marriage and parenting, which used to be considered as abnormal, have added to the representation[5].

The transformation of the maternal role cannot possibly be discussed without mentioning that of women in the society. Recent years, with the development of economy and civil right movements, the number of women who pursue higher education, enter the workforce, acquire higher social status has increased[6]. Along with women's changing position in the society came the same of mothers. Traditionally, a stay at home mother (SAHM), a White, middle-class

woman who was entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations, would be the typical image toward motherhood[7]. The economic dependence on their male counterparts were stressed[8]. Other identities and selfhood were greatly restricted[9]. Nowadays, conceptions of motherhood has become more diverse and inclusive.

Many have attempted to prove the change of women's social roles by looking into their portrayal in sitcoms. Stafford listed out several female roles in comedies from the 1950s, including "Matron/Working Battleaxe", "Sexy assistant", "Woman in a Man's World"[1]. According to Simmons and Rich, in the early days of television, women were "funny, wacky, foolish, senseless, self-centered, impatient, impulsive, needy, sweet, and mothering, or some combination thereof"[10], which has changed over the years. Gender roles have also been examined under family backgrounds. Pehlke, Hennon, Radina and Kovalanka described fatherhood in family sitcoms by examining 12 domestic sitcoms from the fall 2004 season[11].

However, despite the large amount of existing feminine researches, those which center on mothers remain scarce. Moreover, a large proportion of cultural studies researches that are based on sitcoms makes their attempt to explain through a qualitative measure with little data. The author attempts to resolve these disadvantages in this passage.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research sample

The name list of sitcoms related to this study was retrieved from the comprehensive web list of television and radio sitcoms, visited on Aug 4th, 2021. After filtering out items that are produced in regions outside the States (i.e. the "Country" cell does not include "United States") and released in years that are excluded from consideration, i.e. the starting year from the "Years" cell lies outside 1951-1960 and 2011-2020, the brief summary of the rest 228 programs on IMDb were examined. IMDb is the world's most popular and authoritative source for movie, TV and celebrity content. The searchable database includes millions of movies, TV and entertainment programs and cast and crew members[12]. Sitcoms whose introducing text include one or more words of "family" "son" "daughter"

"father" "dad" "mother" "mom" "parent" "child" and "kid" were identified as family sitcoms. After that, animated items, items that do not practically feature a family, whose family do not include a mother role were removed. As a result, a starting sample of 65 sitcoms was created, including 14 released between 1951 and 1960, and 51 released between 2011 and 2020.

3.2. Data analysis

The explanatory variable was constructed to be the year in which the sitcom started releasing, with two categories of "1951-1960" and "2011-2020". Two response variables were set. The first one, Marital Status of the mother characters, was divided into eight categories of "Married" "Widowed" "Separated" "Divorced" "Single" "Dead" "Remarried" and "Others". The second one, the Number of Kids of these mothers were recorded. The necessary data of these two variables were collected through content-viewing, based on the very first status that the mother character appeared in these sitcoms. The retrieved data were analyzed by descriptive methods including chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA. The level of significance was $\alpha = 0.05$.

Based on existing research and public opinion, there were two hypotheses for the two response variables, respectively:

H_M : "Marital Status is associated with Starting Year".

H_K : "The population means of Number of Kids of the two Starting Year periods (1951-1960 and 2011-2020) are not equal".

4. RESULTS

4.1. The traditional family structure remains dominant in sitcoms.

According to Table 1 and Figure 1, overall speaking, married mothers in the two decades combined take up a percentage(52.3%) larger than the sum of all others. On the other hand, Table 2 and Figure 2 demonstrated that the distribution of the number of kids in sitcoms was right-skewed. Most items concentrated in the interval between 1 and 3 children, with three outlines located between 7 and 8.

Table 1. Marital Status of Mothers in Family Sitcoms, 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

	Frequency	Percent
Married	34	52.3
Widowed	1	1.5
Separated	2	3.1
Divorced	9	13.8
Valid Single	4	6.2
Dead	7	10.8
Remarried	2	3.1
Others	0	0.0
Total	59	90.8
Missing	6	9.2
Total	65	100.0

Marital Status of Mothers in Family Sitcoms, 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

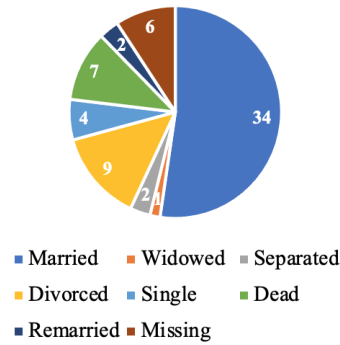


Figure 1. Marital status of mothers in family sitcoms, 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

Table 2. Number of Kids of Mothers in Family Sitcoms, 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

	Frequency	Percent
1	23	35.4
2	18	27.7
3	16	24.6
Valid 4	2	3.1
7	1	1.5
8	2	3.1
Total	62	95.4
Missing	3	4.6
Total	65	100.0

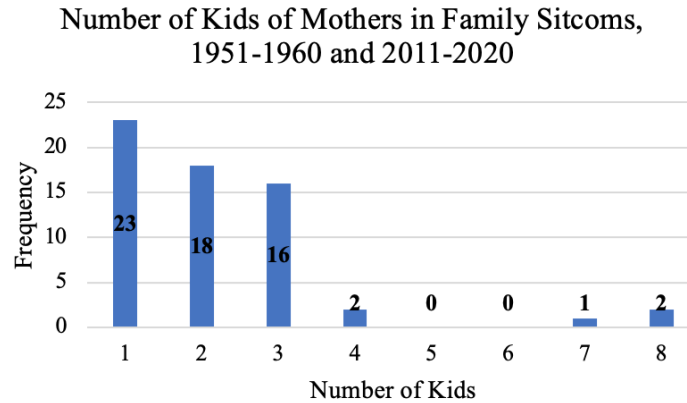


Figure 2. Number of kids of mothers in family sitcoms 1951-1960 and 2011-2020

A married male-female couple with several biological kids—but not too many—is precisely the traditional cultural perception that was considered pervasive in the country, as mentioned in this passage before. That idea has deeply rooted in the society possibly long before the 1950s, and can be considered as the dominant family picture regardless of time.

According to Table 3, the corresponding p-value of the first test statistic (Marital Status) was $p = 0.030$. Since the p-value was lower than the chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), the hypothesis H_M was supported. It could be suggested that there was an significant association between starting year and marital status of mothers.

4.2. The marital status of mothers on screen has become more open and diverse.

Table 3. Chi-Square Test of Independence: Starting Year and Marital Status (N=65)

	Marital Status							Total
	Married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced	Single	Dead	Remarried	
Starting Year 1951-1960	7	0	0	0	1	5	0	13
Starting Year 2011-2020	27	1	2	9	3	2	2	46
Total	34	1	2	9	4	7	2	59

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.960 ^a	6	0.030
Likelihood Ratio	14.777	6	0.022
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.502	1	0.220
N of Valid Cases	59		

After taking a closer look at the data in every cell, the ways through which screen mothers were engaged in their own marriage were restricted to “Married” or “Dead” in the 1950s. Only one was single to raise her child(ren). On the contrary, choices have been

significantly expanded by 2020 to include separated, widowed and remarried female. The greatest increase was seen in the divorced mothers, whose percentage rose from zero in the 1950s to 19.6% in the 2010s.

Compared to more than a half century ago, when separated or divorced individuals were also considered as social outcasts[13] in reality, the result suggested the growing acceptance toward such social changes. This is of particular importance for female, whose dependence on their male spouses used to be more often stressed both in real and virtual world.

4.3. The expected number of children in television families has hardly changed.

According to Table 4, the corresponding p-value of the second test statistic (Number of Kids) was $p = 0.716$. Since the p-value was greater than our chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), there was not enough evidence to suggest a significant difference between number of kids of mothers in sitcoms of 1951-1960 and 2011-2020. The hypothesis H_0 was not supported. In fact, both time periods share a similar mean that lies between 2 and 3 kids in every household. The standard deviations were also quite close.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA Test: Number of Kids by Time Period (N=65)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1951-1960	14	2.36	1.823	0.487	1.30	3.41	1	8
2011-2020	48	2.19	1.439	0.208	1.77	2.61	1	8
Total	62	2.23	1.519	0.193	1.84	2.61	1	8

ANOVA						
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Between Groups	0.312	1	0.312	0.133	0.716	
Within Groups	140.527	60	2.342			
Total	140.839	61				

To explain the discord, the original hypothesis must be illustrated again with more care. It was based on the reasoning that since women has been more involved in their career and education, the time and energy distributed to their household and children should have been reduced. In this way, as more kids naturally lead to more resources required, mothers in recent years would tend to have less kids. The same trend should have been reflected in the TV series.

Several explanations could be considered to address the discord. Firstly, although mothers have devoted more time to their career rather than care-giving, it is possible that fathers in the household have become more attentive to child nurturing, easing burden on mothers. Secondly, more comprehensive social security and insurance systems constructed in the recent decades may have reduced mothers' pressure of nurturing. Hence, with either approach, the ultimate number of kids that is "affordable" to one family remained unchanged.

5. CONCLUSION

There are still several flaws in the research with space to improve. For example, due to limited sample size and video resource, the inclusion of more sitcom items, longer time periods and the establishment of more response variables were not realized. Despite the shortcomings, the conclusions and significance of this study cannot be ruled out.

The previous discussion was carried out in attempt to reflect people's cognition of mothers through the maternal characters in sitcoms that have been produced. Despite the overall complexity of a role, a peek into how mothers have been expected to engaged in marriage and care-taking was successfully achieved. American family sitcoms provide its culture with an answer of how an ideal mother should be for the general public to follow. A proper representation of screen mothers has the capability to positively influence the perception of maternal roles of the public. That is why expression of different social roles in sitcoms should be examined with greater care.

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