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### All joking aside

*Towards an understanding of humor and aggression in adolescents' media entertainment*

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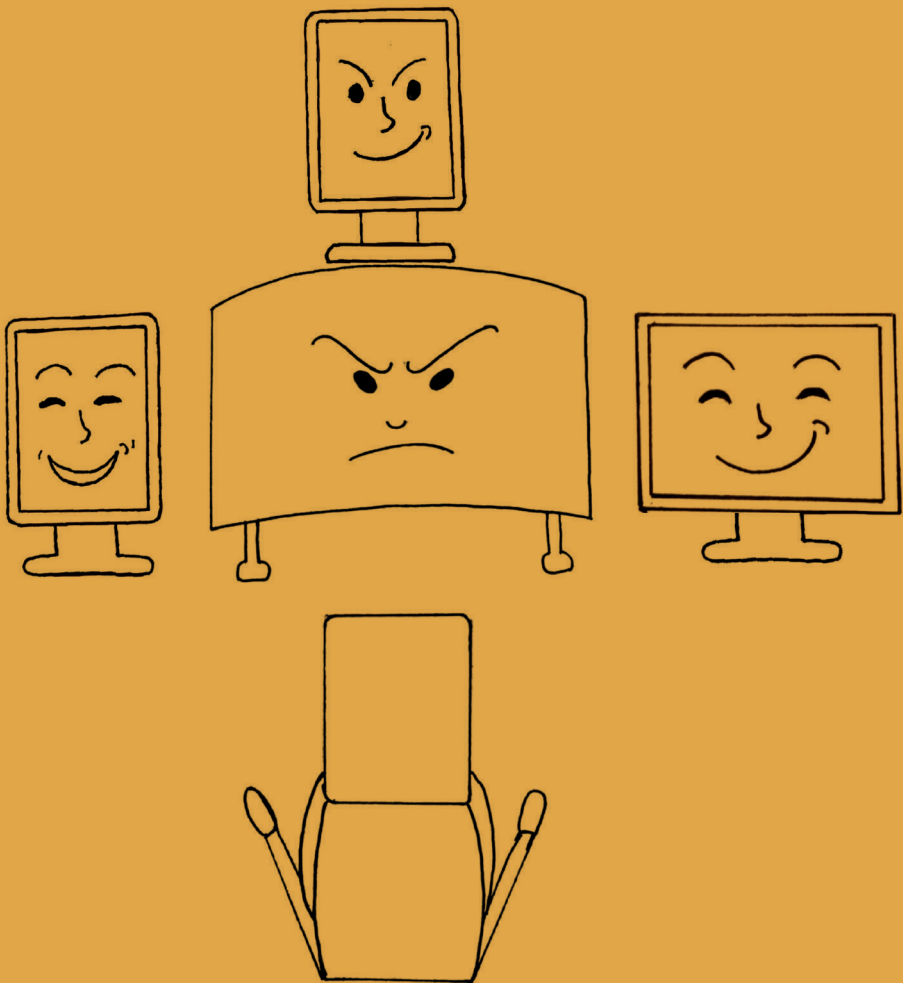
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# Chapter 1:

## General Introduction



## General Introduction

Remember this classic scene from the television hit series *Friends*?

Monica and Rachel have organized a last-minute stripper (played by Danny DeVito) for Phoebe's bachelorette party. When Phoebe sees him, she says: "Are you kidding?!" In response, Rachel says: "We are so sorry, we didn't know you wanted a stripper so we just called the first name we saw in the phonebook." Phoebe: "How old is your phonebook?!" Monica: "Oh my god, this man is going to get naked in my apartment", looking all nauseous. Phoebe: "Oh god, no, I don't want to see him take his clothes off."

This is a clear example of disparaging humor in media entertainment, with the audience laughing after each of these comments, thoroughly enjoying Danny DeVito – short, middle-aged, and overweight – being ridiculed as "a sexy stripper". We might not always notice it, but aggression and humor often go together in media entertainment. Not only in the form of disparaging humor, but in several other ways as well. For example, cartoons (e.g., *South Park* and *Family Guy*) usually contain a lot of slapstick humor – that is, physically aggressive humor involving degradation of someone's status such as the classic pie in the face. Or take this tweet: "Best part of my day: Finding a cool new library near me. Worst part of my day: Running into the glass door when I was leaving it, in front of everyone" (Coleman, 2018). This is an example of self-defeating (also called self-deprecating) humor in media entertainment, which refers to people joking at their own expense.

Although seemingly innocuous and often highly enjoyable for the audience, with these types of aggressive humor there is always a victim who may get hurt by being the "butt of the joke". Indeed, in one of the next *Friends* scenes, Danny DeVito starts crying after he finds out that he is being made fun of. And while self-defeating humor is often well-received because it signals that someone doesn't take himself too seriously and is able to make fun of one's own shortcomings, research has found that habitually making fun of oneself can have detrimental effects on one's psychological well-being (Martin et al., 2003). In light of this, there is concern about the frequent pairing of aggression and humor in media entertainment, because the presence of humor can trivialize the aggression (as it is "just a joke") and by doing so,



send the message that this is acceptable behavior, which may stimulate the audience to copy this behavior (Potter & Warren, 1998). This may be especially the case for adolescents, as media entertainment has been argued to be an important socializing agent for them (Dajches, 2021). However, little is known about adolescents' exposure to aggression and humor in media entertainment and as such, there is a need for further research on this topic.

Yet, in doing so, it is paramount to take the broader picture into account, as aggression can also occur without humor and humor can occur without aggression. There are many different manifestations of non-humorous aggression in media entertainment that may decrease or increase the likelihood that the aggression might be imitated by adolescents (Bandura, 2001). For example, exposure to indirect, behind-the-back aggression might be of particular concern because the threshold for engaging in indirect aggression may be lower as there is less risk involved (Card et al., 2008). In addition, if the portrayed aggression is justified or rewarded this may send the message that aggression is "good" behavior, whereas unjustified and punished aggression may do the opposite (Bandura, 2001; Smith et al., 1998). In this regard, previous research has been limited by mainly focusing on the dichotomous presence or absence of physical aggression (i.e., "media violence") in media entertainment (Fikkers et al., 2017). And indeed, a range of researchers have ended with the conclusion that future research should specify type and context when examining the attraction of aggressive media content (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2009; Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Rosaen et al., 2006; Weaver, 2011) – with several explicitly inquiring about aggression in humorous contexts (Cantor, 1998; Weaver, 2011).

At the same time, there are also many harmless or even positive ways in which humor may be featured without aggression in media entertainment, such as playing with words (e.g., puns and riddles), clownish behavior (making silly gestures or movements), or coping humor (joking to deal with difficult situations). In contrast to the aggressive humor types, these instances of humor may convey an educational message as to how to strengthen friendships, release tension, and keep a positive outlook on life (Martin, 2007). And then there are those humor types that are more difficult to categorize as conveyers of either harmful or harmless messages, such as sexual humor, as this depends entirely on the context in which it occurs (for example, a sexual joke may facilitate talking about a sensitive topic, but can also be perceived

as vulgar or inappropriate). Yet, little is known about different types and contexts of humor in media entertainment, as studying humor is notoriously difficult due to its subjective and multifaceted nature (Martin, 2007). However, this current status quo leaves the field of humor research underdeveloped and the great potential and versatility of humor sold short. To that end, there is a great need for a systematic approach towards the study of humor in media entertainment.

Finally, just as the content of media entertainment is surely not monolithic, neither is its audience. As such, it is important to consider individual differences in adolescents' attraction to (different types and contexts of) aggression and humor, which are called *differential* preferences (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Previous research has shown that factors such as age and sex may influence adolescents' preferences for certain forms of content (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For example, boys have been found to show a greater attraction to physical aggression in media entertainment than girls, while girls may prefer other forms of aggression in media entertainment, such as verbal and indirect aggression. In addition, due to increases in social and cognitive development over time, adolescents may show different preferences for humor in media entertainment as they age. Yet, the role of individual differences in guiding adolescents' preferences has often been disregarded (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). With this in mind, to fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the overarching aim of this dissertation is to provide an in-depth picture of adolescents' differential preferences for types and contexts of aggression and humor in media entertainment and the possible lessons these preferences may teach them.

### **Step 1: Assessing Adolescents' Differential Preferences for Types and Contexts of Aggression in Media Entertainment**

In Chapter 2, this dissertation aims to better understand not only which types and contexts of aggression are present in adolescents' media entertainment, but also whether specific adolescents are more likely to seek out such content (i.e., differential preferences). We already know that male and aggressive adolescents show a greater preference for physical aggression than female and non-aggressive adolescents (Weaver, 2011). However, clearly not all aggression is equal, as it ranges from exaggerated cartoon violence (e.g., in *Tom & Jerry*), to gruesome depictions of blood and gore (e.g., *Game of Throne* or *Assassin's Creed*), to behind-the-back bad-

mouthings (e.g., in *Orange is the New Black* or *Gossip Girl*). Consequently, adolescents' preferences for these various forms of aggression may differ as well. For example, girls may prefer verbal and indirect aggression over physical aggression as these types of aggression are more in line with their self-concept, and more commonly accepted among girls (Archer et al., 1988; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

At the same time, aggressive adolescents may seek out depictions of justified aggression as a way to justify their own aggressive behavior and similarly may avoid punished aggression (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997). As a consequence, such differential preferences for different types and contexts of aggression may also have different kinds of effects (Bartsch & Mares, 2014). For example, Slater, (2007) argues that people select identity-consistent media content, which in turn confirms and reinforces existing attitudes. This could mean that by selecting aggressive content, aggressive adolescents may become even more aggressive (called the "reinforcing spiral", Slater, 2007). Yet, adolescents' differential preferences for types and contexts of aggression have not been empirically examined. To that end, Chapter 2 is devoted to examining how adolescents' sex and level of aggression guide their preferences for different types (physical, verbal, and indirect) and different contexts of aggression in media entertainment (i.e., whether the aggression is rewarded, punished, justified, graphic, realistic, and/or humorously portrayed).

## **Step 2: Assessing Adolescents' Differential Preferences for Types and Contexts of Humor in Media Entertainment**

As noted at the start of this introduction, aggression and humor are often linked in media entertainment, making it logical to study the two in tandem. However, compared to the study of aggression in media entertainment, the field of humor research is quite underdeveloped. This is partly due to the multifaceted nature of humor, which makes studying humor rather difficult. For example, although a few attempts have been made at providing a humor typology (Berger, 1998; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Long & Graesser, 1988; Speck, 1991), some of those were based on the structure of humorous material, whereas others were based on content, complexity, or style of expression. Given the differences in focus, these typologies vary greatly, with none of them giving a complete picture of the different types of humor. Or as Paul McGhee, a prominent early humor researcher, put it: "The number

of discernible types is limited only by our own capacity to make distinctions between humorous events" (McGhee, 1979, p. 8). As there is surely some truth to this, a different approach is needed.

To that end, Chapter 3 of this dissertation applies a novel intertheoretical approach towards the development of a humor framework in media entertainment. This framework integrates motivations for liking specific types of humor as specified in the three leading humor theories: incongruity, superiority, and relief theory (Freud, 1960; McGhee, 1979; Zillmann, 1983). First, superiority theory argues that aggressive humor types are enjoyable because people like feeling superior by favorably comparing themselves to the inadequacies or misfortunes of others (Zillmann, 1983). Second, relief theory posits that exposure to certain humor types (e.g., sexual humor) may be enjoyable because it provides tension release (Freud, 1960; Wolfenstein, 1954). Third, according to incongruity theory (McGhee, 1979), certain humor types, such as wordplay, are enjoyable because of the cognitive challenge they provide. By combining these explanations, Chapter 3 shows that ten specific types of humor can be reliably distinguished in adolescents' media entertainment: disparaging, slapstick, self-defeating, sexual, irreverent, coping, parody, wordplay, incongruity, and absurdity humor.

Yet, it is important to not only examine these humor types as separate entities in a vacuum, but also consider the context in which they occur. Just as with aggression, the context in which humor occurs may heavily change the meaning and perception of the humor. Where for aggression, the literature has put forth several theorized contextual features of aggression (i.e., reward, justification, etc.), in the case of humor, it is especially important to focus on the co-occurrence with other humor types. Take, for example, sexual humor. On its own, sexual humor may often be considered inappropriate or vulgar (Socha & Kelly, 1994). However, if sexual humor is paired with, for example, coping humor, it may suddenly function as a coping strategy for adolescents to deal with the sensitive topic of sexuality, which enables them to release build-up tension. As such, it is important to take the co-occurrence with other humor types into account. Therefore, Chapter 3 also aims to provide a better understanding of the context-dependency of humor in media entertainment by examining whether and in what way the ten humor types co-occur.

Finally, as with aggression, it is important to take audience characteristics into account. However, compared to aggression, we had to lay a lot more theoretical groundwork for humor first. Consequently, Chapter 3 leaves no room to examine *differential* preferences for humor in media entertainment. As such, this is the start of Chapter 4. Again, adolescents' level of aggression and sex seem to be important in explaining differential preferences for humor types. For example, previous research suggests that aggressive adolescents and boys may prefer aggressive humor types and girls may prefer more innocent humor types, such as coping humor. In addition, in line with the moderate-discrepancy hypothesis (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000), adolescents' level of development may guide their selective exposure to humor types, as they typically prefer media content that corresponds with their age-related comprehension schemata. For example, coping humor may be too complicated for young adolescents because it requires the cognitive flexibility to change perspective and turn a difficult situation into something lighter (Führ, 2002). As cognitive flexibility develops over the course of adolescence, popularity of coping humor may increase as well. Yet, hardly any research has been conducted on adolescents' differential preferences for humor in media entertainment. Inasmuch, in the first part of Chapter 4, the development of adolescents' humor type preferences from age 10 to 17 and its relationship with adolescents' sex and level of aggression will be examined.

### **Step 3: Assessing the Relationship Between Adolescents' Differential Preferences for Humor in Media Entertainment and Real-Life Aggression**

The second part of Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between adolescents' humor type preferences and aggression in real-life. As mentioned before, the potential co-occurrence of aggression and humor in media entertainment has raised concerns, because humor can trivialize aggression and by doing so, increase the likelihood of imitation (Potter & Warren, 1998). However, this assumption has never been empirically tested and as such, an important goal of Chapter 4 is to fill this gap. Yet, it is crucial to not only focus on the potential negative effects of exposure to humor, but also explore potential positive effects. To give an example, humor can be used to teach adolescent girls to resist harmful media messages they encounter on websites and social media (Merskin, 2006). For instance, previous research has shown that humor helps adolescents to counter sexualization messages in media entertainment, for example through parodies of existing entertainment messages

(Burns & Eaton, 2016). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of humor in dealing with the stress and uncertainty of the situation. Memes were spread at an incredible pace in WhatsApp groups, on Instagram and Facebook, and humorous TikTok videos of healthcare workers went viral (Southwick et al., 2021). As such, frequent exposure to coping humor in media entertainment may build resiliency by showing adolescents how to maintain a humorous perspective in the face of adversity. Expanding this line of thinking to the current context, exposure to coping humor may actually counter aggression by showing viewers a more functional way for dealing with their frustration or anger (Kuiper, 2012; McCullars et al., 2021). Therefore, the second part of Chapter 4 focuses on the longitudinal relationship between adolescents' development of preferences for aggressive and coping humor in media entertainment and their real-life aggression.

### **Dissertation Background**

In all three studies, adolescents' preferences for (types and contexts of) aggression and humor in entertainment are a central concept, so it is important to provide some background on how these have been conceptualized in this dissertation. In communication research, over the past decades, there has been a paradigm shift from focusing heavily on media consumers as passive recipients that may be "cultivated" by whatever message they are frequently exposed to in the media (cf. cultivation theory, Gerbner, 1969) to an increased focus on selective exposure (Potter, 2014). This perspective entails that media users actively select specific content in response to their needs or desires (Katz et al., 1973; Zillman & Bryant, 1985), which subsequently influences whether the behavioral message is later modelled (Slater, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Thus far, the few youth-based studies on this topic have asked youth about their media preferences (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999) or what they find funny in media entertainment (Bergen, 1998; Dowling, 2014; Lemish & Reznik, 2008). However, selective exposure theory argues that media users are often not (fully) aware of why they select certain content (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Furthermore, studying preferences for humor is especially challenging as adolescents find it difficult to explain what they find funny (Bergen, 1998; Dowling, 2014).

Given these challenges, this dissertation takes a different approach by analyzing the content of adolescents' *favorite* media entertainment. The studies build on data

previously collected as part of Patti Valkenburg's ERC funded project called "The Entertainization of Childhood", in which a national Dutch sample of 10- to 14-year old adolescents was followed for four consecutive years. Each year, adolescents filled in a survey in which they were asked (among other things) to list the titles of their favorite television shows. Not only is this something that all adolescents are cognitively capable of, but researchers have argued that examining favorites gives a reliable indication of an individual's general tendency (i.e., repeatedly chooses) to favor a specific kind of media entertainment content (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). However, the use of favorites is generally associated with a significant pitfall: the use of crude measurements of content to describe the favorites, such as dichotomous ratings of whether a show contains aggression (yes/no) or self-reported amounts of aggression (e.g., "does this show contain no - a little - a lot of - aggression?"). Yet, shows can differ greatly in the prevalence of aggression and self-report measures are quite unreliable (Fikkers et al., 2017).

To address these shortcomings, this dissertation takes a different approach by utilizing content analysis to examine the prevalence of different types and contexts of humor and aggression in adolescents' favorite shows. For Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, survey data on adolescents' favorite television shows from Wave 1 were used as input for the content analysis. For Chapter 4, a longitudinal cohort-sequential design was employed in which data from all four waves regarding adolescents' favorite television shows were used as a measure of longitudinal preference data. Taken together, the content analytic sample of the three studies combined comprises more than 15,000 scenes, which were manually coded for this dissertation as an operationalization of adolescents' preferences. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 and 4, using a relatively novel approach in the field of youth and media research called linkage analysis, the content analysis data were then connected to adolescents' individual ERC survey data (e.g., their sex and age) to determine *differential* preferences.

Finally, it may seem somewhat surprising to the reader that this dissertation focuses on television in an era immersed by social media such as Tik Tok and Instagram. Yet, this was a deliberate choice. While it is surely true that adolescents today enjoy a wide array of media entertainment, the majority of their screen time remains devoted to watching television (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Although watching television takes multiple forms nowadays; live, time-shifted or on-demand, through various

mediums (e.g., television, laptop, or smartphone) and platforms (broadcasted on television, or via a streaming service such as Netflix, Hulu, or YouTube), recent data show that media shifts are primarily seen in *how* and *on what device* adolescents watch television, not in the amount of television they watch. As such, this dissertation adopted a broad operationalization of favorite television shows, including all shows listed by adolescents as their favorite, regardless of the platform or medium they were watched on.

### Dissertation Structure

In line with the overarching aim of this dissertation, it encompasses three studies (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) on adolescents' differential preferences for aggression and humor in media entertainment - and their potential consequences. Table 1 provides an overview of the sub aims of this dissertation and the chapters in which they are addressed. Chapters 2 and 3 are already published, Chapter 4 is currently under review. In addition, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings and the main conclusions of this dissertation. Based on these conclusions, several theoretical and practical implications, as well as suggestions for future research will be discussed.

**Table 1**  
*Overview of Aims Addressed per Chapter*

Chapter	Aim
2	Assessing adolescents' differential preferences for types and contexts of aggression in media entertainment
3 & 4	Assessing adolescents' differential preferences for types and contexts of humor in media entertainment
4	Assessing the relationship between adolescents' differential preferences for humor in media entertainment and real-life aggression



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