

TGIF: THANK GOODNESS IT'S FAMILY:  
FAMILY MESSAGES IN ABC'S 1990S FRIDAY NIGHT LINEUP

by

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## ABSTRACT

Early television sitcoms in the 1950s focused on families with traditional nuclear structures and conventional values. Almost four decades later, ABC's Thank Goodness It's Funny 1990s lineup featured families whose premise and themes were based on reconfiguring family structure. By studying television families in *Full House* (1987-1995), *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Step-by-Step* (1991-1998), *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000), and *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999), we see traditional family values of love, friendship, togetherness, and instilling the importance of hard work and education in children. TGIF's theme songs reconfigure the American family through song, and emphasize that reconfiguration leads to a better family. This narrative qualitative analysis of the TGIF lineup provided insight into how American sitcoms have evolved in ideologies about the family in-between the traditional early portrayals to today's postmodern television families.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, *Girl Meets World* debuted on the Disney Channel. This sequel to the 1990s family sitcom *Boy Meets World* chronicles the challenges of growing up through the eyes of Riley Matthews, daughter of Cory and Topanga Matthews (Gennis, 2014). *BMW* was one of the longest running shows on the American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) Thank Goodness It's Funny lineup, the early 90s Friday-night lineup featuring programming specifically catering to the American family. While much of 90s primetime began to focus on friendship shows such as *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), ABC created the family-focused TGIF lineup in order to bring families back together for Friday night television entertainment. Shows like *Boy Meets World*, *Full House*, *Family Matters*, *Step-by-Step*, and *Sister, Sister*, provided specific family lessons/themes from a mix of family structures, socioeconomic statuses, and American geographical locations.

From television's early programming in the 1950s to today, American sitcoms that focus on the family have evolved in their depictions of characters in diversity of race, gender, and sexual orientation representation, to their discourse of social issues. After World War II, television prolifically entered American homes, offering happy family entertainment without the controversy of war or other social issues. Therefore, the "electronic hearth" stoked the fires for family time, especially through the situational comedy (sit-com) genre of programming (Tichi, 1991). Early fictional television families portrayed traditional roles and family structures, and a generic, idealistic life. Sitcoms like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963),

*The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) embodied the portrayed view of the postwar America, where traditional marriage and gender roles became central themes in television families (W. Douglas, 2003, p. 74). Many scholars such as “Coontz (1992), Jones (1992), and Skolnick (1991) have each argued that contemporary dissatisfaction with the family occurs, in part, because persons rely on postwar television portrayals when they think about real families” in the 1950s (as cited in W. Douglas, 2003, p. 68). This distortion of family life on television over the years has led to frustration with traditional family structure. A little over six decades later, today’s TV sitcoms like *Two and a Half Men* (2003-2015), *Modern Family* (2009-present), and *Mom* (2013-present) provide discourse on a greater diversity characters, family structures, and gender roles. TGIF’s 1990s television families provide insight into how American sitcoms have evolved in ideologies about the family in-between the traditional early portrayals to today’s postmodern television families.

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION

This study analyzes early episodes and theme songs from the Thank God It's Friday lineup including *Full House*, *Family Matters*, *Step-by-Step*, *Boy Meets World*, and *Sister, Sister* to better understand messages about the 1990s American television family at this time. People view television for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to: entertainment, information, and cultural practice (ritual). In *Matrix Media*, Michael Curtin (2009) asserts that “American TV exports not only entertain and inform audiences in far-flung locales, they also influence local production practices, programme formats, institutional behaviors and audience tastes” (p. 9). Television portrayals are a product of perceived culture, and do not always reflect true culture practices or identify with every viewer. David Morley (1992) in his book *Television Audiences & Cultural Studies* suggests that television viewing requires active participation through personal lenses of semiotics (signs, symbols) and sociology (culture) (p. 75). Beyond entertainment and information, Morley (1992) claims that television viewing is an expression of culture, as “the role of the media [has become] a part of the ritual of daily life” (p. 79). By focusing on the family, both as an audience and as the main subject of entertainment, TGIF warrants examination of overall messages about family structure, issues, and values in the shows' early episodes and opening credits/theme songs.

Theme songs and opening credits introduce us to a show's premise, including key characters, setting, family structure, and unique storyline, which can help the viewer personally identify with the show. Jon Burlingame (1996) discussed how theme songs

can help connect a viewer to the overall story plot and/or explain more complicated show premises (p. 164-6). Pilot episodes are also a great introduction to a show's early episodes, and are ultimately responsible for getting the show on air. Modern spinoffs of the TGIF shows, such as *Girl Meets World* and the 2016 Netflix production of *Fuller House* (based off of *Full House*), demonstrate the lasting popularity of these sitcoms and their family-centered themes, both during their on-air runs and through syndication (Netflix 2015).



## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

Early television sitcom families in the 1950s focused on portraying traditional gender roles within nuclear, middle class family settings. While 60s and 70s television saw some improvement in diversity of race representation and women's roles outside the home, marriage and family structure still appeared limited to traditional methods and values. Women on television were limited to homemaking and child rearing, although real American women began to enter the workforce as the need for two-parent incomes increased (Coontz, 2000, p. 163). The television sitcom family began to change over the next four decades to reflect the expansion of the roles for women and people of color in real-life.

### **Early Television Programming**

The 1950s American family set a cultural standard as the decade in which the focus became happily maintaining the traditional nuclear family. Stephanie Coontz's (2000) *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* depicts this focus on family as "profamily," as marriage, parenthood, and "the family was everywhere hailed as the most basic institution in society" (p. 24). After the end of World War II, the birth rate increased from 18.4 births per 1,000 women during the Great Depression, to 25.3 per 1,000 women by the late 1950s (Coontz, 2000, p. 24). Economically, families began to climb the socioeconomic ladder, as "By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of the population had what was labeled a middle-class income level...compared to only 31 percent in the 'prosperous twenties,' before the Great

Depression” (Coontz, 2000, p. 24-5). American families were enjoying being together after WWII, and began to spend money on household pleasures and conveniences that they had spent the previous decade without. The majority of these white, middle-class families moved to the suburbs, as “Eighty-five percent of the new homes were built in the suburbs...with 240 percent more appliances and furniture” (Coontz, 2000, p. 24-5). The demand for appliances and cars was great, with “Car ownership by families [rising] from 54 percent in 1948 to 77 percent in 1960,” and television sets became a staple entertainment appliance (Rugh, 2008, p. 18-9).

Television set ownership began to significantly increase post World War II, as “4.4 million families [in 1950] owned television sets; by 1960, 50 million sets had been sold” (Taylor, 1989, p. 20). The three major networks (that still exist today), “CBS and NBC in the 1920s, [and] ABC joining them in the 1930s” controlled programming (Taylor, 1989, p. 19). Early programming adapted from early forms of entertainment including radio shows and anthologies. Preexisting the episodic series, anthologies were considered part of the ‘golden age of television’ and were basically live broadcasts of theater productions that contained themes of present-day social problems (Taylor, 1989, p. 22). While the anthologies provided a more realistic look at America’s postwar social problems, anthologies did not “build program loyalty and (advertisers hoped) brand name loyalty among viewers,” (Taylor, 1989, p. 22). Therefore, the episodic series in the form of the half-hour family comedy sitcom became the popular and perfect programming scheme to satisfy networks and advertisers (Taylor, 1989, p. 22-28).

Fictional television invaded households across America in the 1950s, bringing with it specific ideals about family with an underlying motive of commercialism through advertising (Taylor, 1989, p. 19). The episodic series gained its popularity by the late 1950s and consisted of “two major forms, the half-hour family comedy and the one-hour drama (usually a Western or other action-adventure show)” (Taylor, 1989, p. 24). Both of these forms were based off of radio show formats, produced around advertisements and/or commercials, and their importance focused around the actors who played the main roles rather than the complexity of the plot (Taylor, 1989, p. 24). Shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953), *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) followed this formula in order to build audience relationships with the stars and their characters, which in turn satisfied producers’ and networks’ needs of branding and ratings popularity (Taylor, 1989, p. 24-25). The financial relationship between the major networks and advertisers “helped establish the nuclear family in corporate eyes as the basic unit of consumption” (Taylor, 1989, p. 20). Merely a commodity, the half-hour family comedy “was less the experience of most family lives than a postwar ideology breezily forecasting steady rates of economic growth that would produce sufficient abundance to eliminate the basis for class and ethnic conflict... Thus, the Nelsons and the Cleavers were both advertising and embodying the American Dream” (Taylor, 1989, p. 40).

The Nielsen ratings system was (and continues to be) a significant influence in the programming survival of 1950s and 1960s family television shows. Compared to modern people meters to measure individual ratings, early ratings used paper diaries and set-top

meters, and “conceived of its audiences not as a diverse body of viewers but as an undifferentiated mass audience watching as family units” (Taylor, 1989, p. 24). The half-hour family comedy is the quintessential “creation of Nielsen families during television’s first two decades [and] expresses precisely the search for a mass audience composed of average families with predictable viewing habits” (Taylor, 1989, p. 24). Therefore, family television series “fashion[ed] images of ‘normal’ domestic life,” or in other words, sold the idea of the nuclear family through television programming and advertising (Taylor, 1989, p. 24). The half-hour family comedy consisted of the traditional nuclear family as happy and humorous, oblivious to major social, political or economic issues (violence, drugs, major relationship hardships, the Cold War), with only slight mishaps that occurred to produce comedic entertainment (Taylor, 1989, p. 27). Early sitcoms sold “an image of desirable family life with consumption casually woven into the fabric of its stories” (Taylor, 1989, p. 20).

### **1950s Families and Their Depictions**

Middle-class families in the 1950s culturally linked increased economic spending to the ideas that marriage and childrearing were now the focal points of everyday American life. Women began to marry younger (average age for marriage was about 18-24 years old for young men and women), divorce rates decreased, and fewer women attended college compared to men (Coontz, 2000, p. 24, 181). For these parents of the “baby boomers,” “the average age of a woman at the time of her last birth was only thirty” (Coontz, 2000, p. 161). These trends were not segregated by race or socioeconomic status, as “People married at a younger age, bore their children earlier and

closer together, completed their families by the time they were in their late twenties, and experienced a longer period of living together as a couple after their children left home” (Coontz, 2000, p. 26). Teenage and unmarried births were at all-time highs in the 50s, since “97 out of every 1,000 girls aged fifteen to nineteen gave birth [in 1957], compared to only 52 out of every 1,000 in 1983,” and the adoption rate of babies born to unwed mothers rose about 80 percent from 1944 to 1955 (Coontz, 2000, p. 39). However, because people were marrying younger in the 50s, “between the 1930s and 1960s, about 50 percent to 60 percent of women with a premaritally conceived birth married before their child was born” (Bachu, 1999, p. 3).

As women began to marry younger and have more children, the cultural depictions of women in television began to create a mold restricting female characters to predominately wives and mothers. Many shows like *Beaver* displayed women mainly in the home, whereas “*The Dick Van Dyke Show* was one of the first series to push the domestic sitcom into the public sphere by entering the world of work and setting up a work-family” (Taylor, 1989, p. 32). Women on television struggled to break free from the domestic character stereotype. Sally’s character in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* was the perfect example of this struggle, as she was portrayed as “mannish and plain and could not get a date,” compared to Laura, who was depicted as a more attractive woman, better wife and mother, and a mediocre employee (Taylor, 1989, p. 31-2). The fictional female gender role in early television reflected the perceived reality of the 1950s housewife fictional role, rather than reality of working American moms and single working women who became a significant part of America’s workforce. Women held jobs in secretarial

work, teaching, and nursing, but received less financial compensation and recognition compared to their male colleagues (Coontz, 2000, pg. 161; Marcellus, 2011, p. 39-41). Marcellus (2011) discusses how for a few years post-WWI, women were encouraged by media to seek new employment opportunities “for *themselves*—not for their parents, their husbands, or their children” (p. 54-5). However, as America entered the 1920s and The Great Depression in the early 30s, female workers were somewhat blamed for taking men’s jobs, and views about two-job wives became more controversial (Marcellus, 2011, p. 149-50).

As far as socioeconomic status is concerned, the early television family aspired to be part of the “middle class of happy American families who had already made it to the choicer suburbs...or were on their way there” (Taylor, 1989, p. 25). However, these television families were primarily white and lived in suburbs, compared to the realistic large amounts of ethnic and racial tensions mounting in populated urban cities (Taylor, 1989, p. 26). Historically, America was experiencing the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. *Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* made school segregation illegal in 1954 (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 94). In 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was chosen to lead the bus boycott movement (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 96). The Civil Rights Movement and other political issues were not as significant in cultural discourse in 50s, but later reached a boiling point in the 1960s. Culturally, the 1950s were portrayed as a time of innocence; in which traditional gender roles, family structure, and family values were highly idealized. Diversity was not a priority, because “In many ways, the 1950s probably *were* a kinder,

gentler time. For many Americans—provided they were white, middle-class, Christian and heterosexual” (Caputi, 2005, p. 10). The decades following the 1950s would struggle with the traditional cultural representations and ideals it portrayed

### **1960s: Political and Social Revolution and the Television Family**

From the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 to the sexual revolution, the 1960s was a turbulent decade politically and culturally. Politically, the 1960s was a decade of turmoil and dissatisfaction. After World War II, the American people met the Vietnam War with much more controversy and disapproval. Intervention into foreign affairs was fresh, with “Every event, everywhere in the world, soon bec[oming a] part of the fierce Soviet-American competition. The struggle in part was over power, dominion, and national security” (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 48). The war finally ended in 1973, but American occupation and death toll was its greatest in 1968 (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 92-3). The 60s political and social landscape included “the modern civil rights movement” (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 94). After many years of boycotting, fighting for equality, and suffering violence, in 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed into law “barring discrimination in public accommodations and in employment, [and] creating an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and a Community Relations Service,” which made it illegal to prevent black voters from registering (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 104). The unstable 60s ended with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on April 4, 1968 leading to national riots (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 134).

Economically, the 60s experienced the financial prosperity of the 50s, but began to decline towards the end of the 1960s. The increase in pleasure spending in the 1950s

on appliances and goods for consumer entertainment, created competition in the job market for American families to keep up with their new lifestyle (Coontz, 2000, p. 163). As in the 1950s, women in the workplace grew by 39 percent, with more wives going to work to help their families financially (Coontz, 2000, p. 163). However, towards the end of the decade, the economy and its growth began to lose steam. The U.S. dollar began to lose value against other currencies, and America began to import more than they were used to exporting (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 34-5). Economically, “the seventies would be a decade of obstinate inflation, slumping productivity, and declining international competitiveness. Economic growth rates would drop from a yearly average of almost 4 percent in the period 1947-67 to under 3 percent in the next dozen years” (Unger & Unger, 1993, p. 46). While the 1960s television family still focused on reaching the middle class or higher level of socioeconomic status, social problems within family structure became somewhat more discussed in the 1960s TV family.

The early 1960s also saw a change in television advertising. Per consequence of the quiz show scandals and the need for programming diversity, the single-sponsorship strategy began to decrease, making way for multi-sponsored programs and more diverse programming opportunities, such as “light entertainment in the form of comedy-variety and action-adventure series (Taylor, 1989, p. 29). The 1960s sitcoms retained their 1950s themes and kept their audience appeal, ushering in more room for primetime programming (Taylor, 1989, p. 28). Amidst new comedies featuring fantasy families made of monsters (*The Munsters/Addams Family*-1964), magicians (*Bewitched*-1964, *My Favorite Martian*- 1963), and astronauts (*The Jetsons*-1962), shows that portrayed the



realistic, average American family were still the most popular (Taylor, 1989, p. 29). *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) featured a small town country family who moves to the suburbs of Beverly Hills, CA, and was among the most popular, as it “extoll[ed] the virtues of unpretentious rural innocence at the same time as it poked fun at the double standards, avarice, and snobbery of the Los Angeles suburban nouveaux riches” (Taylor, 1989, p. 31). Although middle-class Americans were still trying to live the dream as told to them by the prosperous 1950s television family, the American family and its gender roles were evolving in the 60s and 70s.

The 1950s foundation for the American family left little room for other family configurations. For example, divorced or single parent families were highly underrepresented in television programming. Widowhood was a much more popular way to represent these families, as it became “a popular device in 1960s comedy and drama for opening up the lives of characters to romance and increased contact with the outside world without risking the stigma of divorce” (Taylor, 1989, p. 28). *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) featured a similar happy family plot formula to that of the 1950s nuclear family, but employed it through a blended family made up of two widowed spouses and their children (Taylor, 1989, p. 28). In reality, Americans began to postpone marriage and starting a family due to the saturated job market (Coontz, 2000, p. 163). Divorce rates in the early 1960s were lower (6 in 1,000 for men in first marriages) than later in the decade, with a probability figure of 13 per 1,000 for the first 10 years of marriage (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971, p. 3). The 1970s brought an increase in divorce rates, “from 2.3 per 1,000 population in 1963 to 4.8 in 1975” (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976, p. 2).

Census data attributes the spike in divorce rates to the young marriage age, with more young women than young men listed as divorcees (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976, p. 4). This was the unraveling of the 1950s “happy” family, as “This change brought liberation and relief to millions of people, but also psychological distress and considerable downward mobility for many women and children” (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 2). Gender roles, especially for women, were challenged in the 60s and 70s with the ushering in of second wave feminism and sexual revolutions.

The 1960s experienced a “sexual revolution” which included “the growth of a singles culture, predating the rise of political and cultural protest, that accepted sexual activity between unmarried men and women...[and women’s] demand that this singles culture be readjusted to meet their needs” (Coontz, 2000, p. 197). By the 1970s, sexual activity among unmarried women gained more cultural acceptance and practice, as “the percentage of women aged fifteen to nineteen who had had sexual intercourse at least once increased by one-third between 1971 and 1979” (Coontz, 2000, p. 182, 198). The oral contraceptive pill and IUD was also introduced in the 1960s (Coontz, 2000, p. 197). Teen pregnancies often resulted in marriages (59 percent), but this rate began to decline (16 percent in the early 1990s) (Bachu, 1999, p. 5). Women gained sexual freedom compared to the previous restrictive culture of the 1950s and its distaste for “women to assert their own sexual desires against unrealistic definitions of ‘normal’ female sexual response” (Coontz, 2000, p. 197).

Politically, the 1970s brought about uncertainty in U.S. government stability, as the executive branch suffered political scandals and weak leadership. After President

Nixon's attempt to rig the reelection campaign in the Watergate scandal in the early 70s, "public confidence in the decency and effectiveness of the federal government waned" (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 41). Nixon became the first president to resign, and Gerald Ford was declared president in 1974. President Ford and his successor, President Carter, had the morality and likeability Nixon lacked, but "the nation did not receive the kind of effective political management that it desired" (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 41). On the social front, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 not only changed the equality rights for people of color, but also paved the way for the discussion of women's rights.

The Women's Liberation Movement focused on two main issues of "discrimination in the public sphere (primarily in employment and education) and the broad critique of sex-role conditioning (related to media images of women as sex objects and traditional roles within the patriarchal family)" (Dow, 1996, p. 28). While Americans could relate more to the problem of unequal pay and employment opportunity issues, sex-role conditioning was seen more critically as part of radical feminism (Dow, 1996, p. 28-9). Therefore, the Women's Liberation Movement was given more attention for its battle for the Equal Rights Amendment; an amendment that asserted that equality "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 80). The ERA "became a unifying focus for feminist groups between 1972 and 1982 and the most visible feminist issue for the public at large" (Dow, 1996, p. 30). Mansbridge (1986) and Solomon (1979) explain the opposition by Phyllis Schlafly and STOP ERA groups, who asserted "that the ERA would deprive women of the joy and fulfillment of traditional roles—cement[ing] the notion that feminism entailed an anti-

family ideology” (as cited in Dow, 1996, p. 91). Feminist movements “became even more professionalized and fragmented” after the ERA was defeated in 1982, as individual groups tackled issues like “domestic violence, abortion, legal reform, and women’s studies” (Dow, 1996, p. 91).

### **1970s Television: No Longer the “Happy Family”**

From the turbulence of the 1960s, fictional television portrayals remained fairly loyal to the fictional 1950s family. However, the 1970s ushered in social unrest and evolutions, and this began to show through the fictional cracks in the “happy family.” The change began with a shift from programming based on viewership to that of product consumption, and young people were the key target for advertisers and programming (Taylor, 1989, p. 44). Instead of ratings, ‘demographics,’ “breaking down the mass audience by age, sex, income, and other sociological variables that would isolate the most profitable sources of revenue,” became the new standard for determining programming (Taylor, 1989, p. 45). Upon investigation, it was determined that this new audience was youth from ages 18, all the way up to a mainly female audience aged 49, who were the primary target for entertainment and advertisement (Taylor, 1989, p. 45). Therefore, 1970s programming began to focus on reaching young people and the social issues they faced. For example, CBS’s Saturday night lineup, featuring *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *All in the Family* (1971-1979), and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983), all of which “were centrally concerned with rapid social change...the daily confusion thrust on ordinary people...[and] facing puzzling and often painful new conditions without adequate rules to guide their actions” (Taylor, 1989, p. 47). Working within the confines

of the traditional family and conventions of comedy, these shows created discourse for social issues that had not been addressed previously in fictional television (Taylor, 1989, p. 47).

### **1980s and 1990s: Political Landscape**

The 1990s saw a dramatic shift in political policy, public opinion, and political power. From two terms of Republican leadership to distaste for conservative policies due to economic hardship, the American people began to lose the trust in the federal government from the 1980s to the 1990s. The 1980s was the decade of “Reaganism,” in which conservative president, Ronald Reagan focused on restoring American patriotism, defeating communism, and restoring the economy (Cook, 2011, p. 27). His policies were favored by “conservative pro-family interest groups [who] objected to the cultural excesses of the sixties” (Cook, 2011, p. 25). Vice President George H. W. Bush succeeded Reagan, and ushered in a term of dealing with international issues, specifically the Persian Gulf War (Parment, 1997, p. 445). Americans’ dissatisfaction with the lack of political change at home in the U.S. led to democrat Bill Clinton’s two-term administration beginning in the early 90s. The Clinton administration focused on fiscal responsibility, and balanced the federal budget (Schier, 2000, p. 52-57). Clinton was indicted for impeachment in the late 1990s for allegations of a marital affair. Tried and found not guilty, Clinton stayed in office through his term, and although “nearly 70 percent of Americans approved of his job performance,” they did not trust his character (Schier, 2000, p. 19).

### **1980s and 1990s: Women's Expanding Roles and the Family**

The modern 80s and 90s American family reflected the changes in employment that had been occurring since the 1970s. Working mothers still continued to enter the workforce, increasing from 30 percent in 1970 to 50 percent in 1985 (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 82). Building careers and seeking higher education had become the norm for the 90s woman, as “By the mid-1980s, more than half the college students in the United States were women... [and even] majoring in traditionally male fields such as chemistry and engineering” (Gourley, 2008, p. 121). By the end of the 90s, 90 percent of young women had a high school diploma and 30 percent had a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 38). As more women became focused on gaining an education and establishing careers, they began to wait longer to get married. Thus, “the proportion of married persons among adults declined from 67 percent in 1960 to 57 percent in 1990,” and the amount of people who had never married increased 22 to 27 percent from 1960 to 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 1). In 1990, 59 percent of men and 55 percent of women ages 15 and older were married and “about 72 percent of persons 20 to 24 years old had not yet married, compared with 41 percent of their predecessors in 1960” (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 1-2). From 1980 to 1998, the median age of first marriages rose from age 22 to age 25 for American women, and to age 27 from age 25 for American men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 22). Overall, changes in marriage age and divorce rates lowered the marriage rate about 10 percent from 1960 to 1990 (67 percent to 57 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 1). Since the end of the

1950s, divorce was a rising trend for three decades, “tripl[ing] during the 1960-90 period from 3 to 9 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 1). As the marriage rate lowered and marrying age increase, fewer children were born compared to the 1950s baby boomer generation.

Babies born in the 1990s were born to older parents and fewer siblings than in past generations. Women in their thirties were more likely to give birth married compared to fifty percent of women in their twenties were more likely to give birth outside of marriage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 17). Marital age increased, and marriage had not become necessary for teens who became pregnant outside of wedlock, as “The total proportion of first births which were either premaritally born or premaritally conceived to women 15 to 19 years old increased from 28 percent in the early 1930s to 89 percent in the early 1990s” (Bachu, 1999, p. 5). “60 percent of births to women who had not graduated from high school were out of wedlock,” while college graduates accounted for three percent of unmarried births (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 17). A 1980s United Nations report suggested “both the birth *and* the abortion rates of U.S. teens were twice those of other countries in the developed world. In 1960, 15.4 percent of all teen births were to unmarried mothers; by 1970, that proportion had doubled; and by 1986, it had doubled again, with the result that a majority of all teen births” occur outside of marriage (Coontz, 2000, p. 202). Instead of marrying after conception, the 1980s saw a drop from 60 percent of premarital conception marriages in the 1960s to 29 percent of people marrying after premarital conception (Bachu, 1999, p. 3). Cohabitation rather than marriage became more prevalent, as data from 2000 showed that “Approximately three-

quarters of a million unmarried couples in America are raising children together” (Coontz, 2000, p. 182). Increases in higher education, cohabitation, and delaying or ending marriage were major factors in the changing modern family.

As more women entered institutions of higher education and the workplace, issues of inequality and mistreatment they experienced on campus and in the office were brought to light. “The phrase ‘date rape’ only entered the public consciousness in the 1980s,” but scholarly research led to its discovery, and began to pave the road for awareness and justice in the courtroom (Neumann, 2011, p. 273). The 1990 Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act passed by the H.W. Bush administration required colleges and universities to report campus crimes, report arrests and violations, and release yearly reports of crime prevention and security measures (Department of Education, 2005; Nobles, 2013, p. 1133). The Jeanne Clery Act amendment in 1992 helped to “afford the victims of campus sexual assault certain basic rights” and include further campus reporting measures. (Clery Center.org).

Also, as more women entered the workforce, so did more cases of sexual harassment (Gourley, 2008, p. 121). Sexual harassment in the workplace became a controversial issue for women in the 80s and 90s, with the Anita Hill testimony and Tailhook scandal as prime examples (Gourley, 2008, p. 121). During the 1991 Senate nomination hearings, Anita Hill accused nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, resulting in investigative hearings and sparking public interest (Bobel, 2010, p. 14). Although Hill’s accusations did not stop Thomas’ confirmation, the hearings became a hot topic among feminists about sexism and racism (Bobel, 2010, p. 14). *Harris v.*



*Forklift Systems, Inc.* was the major Supreme Court case that finally recognized sexual harassment as a physical and/or emotional violation of “the Civil Rights Act of 1964, [as] no person shall be discriminated against because of race, religion, or gender” (Gourley, 2008, p. 129). After Teresa Harris’ victory in the Supreme Court, other victims felt that they could also come forward and “The number of sexual harassment court cases increased dramatically in the 1990s,” (Gourley, 2008, p. 129). These rulings in the 90s increased awareness about sexual harassment in the federal arena and workplace, which encouraged training programs and those who had been affected by sexual harassment to come forward (Gourley, 2008, p. 129).

### **1990s: Third-Wave Feminism**

After a decade without much activity, feminism began moving within a younger generation in the 1990s, leading to the Third Wave Feminist Movement (Henry, 2004, p. 3, 13). Angered by the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, Rebecca Walker’s article published in a 1992 edition of *Ms.* magazine called men and women “to take up the mantle of feminist activism,” not the post-feminism stance of the 1980s, but ‘third wave feminism’ (Bobel, 2010, p. 14). Naomi Wolf distinguishes third-wave feminism from the ‘victim feminism’ (or second wave feminism) by “deemphasize[ing] oppression and instead focus[ing] attention on women’s expanding opportunities” (Bobel, 2010, p.15). Rather than “attempts at institutional change” like the Women’s Liberation Movement, the third wave focused on restoring activism and leadership individually and personally, by “addressing the context of culture and the realm of the everyday” (Bobel, 2010, p.15). Therefore, third wave feminists were urged to take on feminism in a new way in with

themes of inclusion, multiplicity [of diversity in the forms of race, class and sexual orientation], contradiction, and everyday feminism” (Bobel, 2010, p. 18).

Culturally, the 1990s saw significant changes in family structure compared to the 1950s. Women were more focused on education and workplace opportunities. Marriage occurred at an older age for both men and women, and cohabitation increased.

Generation X couples had fewer children compared to their baby boomer parents. While America’s culture had changed, had television’s portrayal of the American family also changed to reflect its culture?

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The American family has long been a subject staple in television entertainment. Through television, the audience sees portrayals of society: values, morals, structure and various forms of culture. Although there are many different types of family, “Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms” (Coontz, 1992, p. 23). Early American sitcoms starting in the 1950s held the nuclear family structure and traditional gender roles as the ideal family. Lucy struggled against star breadwinner Ricky in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), while *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) featured a working father and housewife mother raising their rambunctious sons, and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) where father Jim is the intellectual head of house. Shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968) and *My Three Sons* (1960-1972) used socially traditional methods (widowhood) to explain the nuclear gap, and filled in the missing parental roles by live-in family members (Aunt Bee/Bub and Uncle Charley), or kept traditional gender roles alive in the theme/lesson of episodes.

Theme songs with visual character introductions also contain messages about television families. Theme song show opens introduce us visually to a television show’s premise, and research has suggested that theme songs can help viewers with recognition of a shows name, characters, and even its place in media history (Reifer, Kevari, & Kramer, 1995, p. 1383). Jon Burlingame (1996) in his book *TV’s Biggest Hits: The Story of Television Themes from “Dragnet” to “Friends”* discussed the evolution of sitcom

theme songs. As television formats derived from radio, many early shows, such as *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957) took their theme songs from their preceding radio shows (Burlingame 1996, p. 3). Early sitcom theme songs were mainly instrumental, but in the 1960s, producers began to use theme songs with lyrics to explain overarching themes, characters, and plotlines of shows (Burlingame, 1996, p. 163-4). Songs like “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” were “designed to outline the show’s premise,” and helped sell shows with a complicated backstory like “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Island” (Burlingame, 1996, p. 164-8). The creator and producer *Gilligan’s Island*, Sherwood Schwartz explains that theme songs became a storytelling through music and lyrics, as it is ‘highly identifiable when you can tell the story of a show in a lyrically and musically interesting way. It nails down the focus of the audience’ (Burlingame, 1996, p. 169).

Katherine Foss (2008) conducted a study measuring culture change depicted in theme songs from the 1970s to 2001. Of the 47 programs analyzed, Foss identified themes that remained specific to certain decades, and themes that transcended all three decades. As far as the American television family was concerned, there was a shift from the individualistic “American Dream” focus in the 70s to the ‘traditional’ values of “home, family, and tradition” in the 1980s (Foss, 2008, p. 51). Subsequently, Foss (2008) found that the 1990s family began to focus outward toward non-biological friends as part of a family, rather than only biological ties. Theme songs have become a crucial product to display socioeconomic characteristics, family structure, and overarching themes in American family television shows.

Collectively, “television family relations are purposive, that is, they achieve outcomes expected of families such as limitation and resolution of conflict, successful socialization of children, and effective management of day-to-day life” (W. Douglas, 2003, p. 160). However, such portrayals of family life can be misleading, causing unrealistic positive or negative views of how family life functions or how the world works. Inaccurate depictions in fictional television programs can shape cultural views of the world. Because of these inaccurate fictional portrayals, research is necessary to study television’s effects on human thoughts and behaviors.

Mares & Cantor’s studies dealt with children’s emotional reactions and effects related to television exposure. Fear was the top emotion studied, as “75% of respondents in two separate samples of preschool children and elementary school children said that they had been scared by something they had seen on television or in a movie” (Wilson, Hoffner, & Cantor, 1987 as cited in Cantor & Mares, 2008, p. 318). Their research built upon previous findings, such as “exposure to dramatized depictions of a deadly house fire or a drowning increased children’s self-reports of worry about similar events in their own lives (Cantor & Mares, 2008, p. 318). Exposure to fear-inducing television affected these children’s behaviors short-term, but further research suggested that longer exposure could result in longer lasting effects (Cantor & Mares, 2008). Emotional effects vary depending on a child’s level of development, “as children mature, they become more responsive to realistic, and less responsive to fantastic (fantasy-based television) dangers” (Cantor & Mares, 2008, p. 322). No matter the age, “there is evidence that children are widely exposed to televised stimuli that were originally intended for adults and that are

considered frightening by a large proportion of adult moviegoers,” which implies the danger in viewership (Cantor & Mares, 2008, p. 327). The problem of negative media influences lies in the amount of exposure and the ability of the child to cope with such media, which determines their emotions, and subsequent behaviors and perceptions of the world (Cantor & Mares, 2008).

Gender role portrayal in American fictional programming has often perpetuated stereotypes of the “traditional” family. Signorielli (1982) studied the portrayals of married and non-married characters in major network (ABC, CBS, NBC) primetime dramas from 1975-1979. Overall, Signorielli (1982) concluded, “that home and family, marriage and romance are important themes and are usually presented as the domain of the female” (p. 594) The study found that role portrayals between married female characters (26.1 percent of female characters analyzed) and unmarried or single female characters (45.1 percent) were very distinct and followed traditional conventions, with married females as homemakers and/or child caretakers, and single females as young employed socialites. Signorielli (1982) also conducted an evaluation of character traits and found that women were portrayed as “more attractive, fair, sociable and warm” than their “potent, rational, smart and strong” male character counterparts (p. 594).

Susan Douglas discusses the disconnect between gender portrayal on television and the reality of American society. Compared to the news delivering hard hitting pieces on the Cold War’s battle for space exploration, the civil rights movement, and other significant political events, Douglas (1994) asserts that entertainment took a soft approach with “harmonious nuclear families and wasp-waisted, perfectly coiffed moms

who never lost their tempers” (p. 26). Douglas describes the discontent of real American mothers with their television counterparts resulted from mixed messages about working outside the home, equality in pay, and expectations inside the home (1994, p. 43-46). Television moms like June Cleaver did not work outside the home, but were expected uphold household cleanliness, “good mothers, like true princesses, [who] never complained, smiled a real lot, were constantly good-natured, and never expected anything from anyone” (S. Douglas, 1996, p. 44). Although Douglas credits characters like Lucy Ricardo and Imogene Coca who used slapstick comedy as a way of challenging the boundaries in “the battle of the sexes,” subsequent 1950s sitcoms like “*Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave it to Beaver*, with their cookie-cutter moms [sealed] television’s physical and linguistic containment of women” (1994, p. 51).

Bonnie Dow’s (1996) analysis of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) as a show that diverted from the mold of housewife and mother and “liberated single-woman sitcoms from narratives dominated by husband hunting...charming incompetence and/or troublemaking...or widowed motherhood” (p. 34). Although *Mary Tyler Moore* brought a single, television woman out of the strictly domestic setting of previous programs, the television woman still struggled with workplace family dynamics, as “Within her family of co-workers, Mary functions in the recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, and daughter” (Dow, 1996, p. 39-40). Therefore, women on television were limited to nuclear family roles and functions, even in the workplace (Dow, 1996, p. 38-40).

Early television sitcoms centered around the nuclear family. Skill and colleagues (1987) completed a study on early 1980s television family structure. Using *TV Guide* and

*The Complete Directory of Prime Time Network TV Shows* from 1979 to 1985, Skill (1987) chose shows that used “family configuration as [a] primary story vehicle” in order to define and quantify different types of family structures (p. 362). Skill and the researchers defined families by the terms conventional (married couples with/without children and living with/not living with extended family members) and unconventional (single parents that are either divorced/widowed/never married raising biological, adopted, or fostered children) (1987, p. 363). The study found that 65.7 percent of the 58 family-identified shows concentrated on the conventional family structure, while only 34.4 percent concentrated on the unconventional family structure (Skill et al., 1987, p. 364). Basically, primetime 1980s television focused on conventional family structure, not necessarily reflecting the accurate emergence of unconventional families (Skill et al., 1987).

Television has not always accurately represented family structure and/or gender roles compared in historical context. Skill and Robinson’s (1994) similar study looked at primetime fictional television series that centered on the family “as the primary story vehicle” from 1950-1990 (p. 449). Using similar definitions and measurements from 1987, the study found that “the greatest changes in the television family have been in three areas: childless couples, extended families, and single-parent families” (Skill and Robinson, 1994, p. 449). The childless couple portrayal dropped dramatically from the 50s to the 80s (23 percent to 7 percent), not accurately reflecting the reality of childless baby boomer couples in the US (Skill and Robinson, 1994, p. 449). On the other hand, extended family portrayals grew from 18 percent (1950) to about 30 percent (1980), and became a popular way to depict family life (Skill & Robinson, 1994, p. 449). Single-



parent family portrayals also grew during this time period, which television depicted as due to widower/widowed parents rather than divorce (Skill & Robinson, 1994, p. 449). However, when compared with census data, “divorce and separation have been the predominant reasons for single-parent families for the last 40 years,” as depictions of single-parent/divorced families appeared in limited quantity (3%) in the mid to late 1970s (Skill & Robinson, 1994, p. 449). Compared to Skill’s earlier study, the 1994 research concluded that the television representations of the American family from 1950-1980 did not accurately reflect the reality of American family structure.

Morgan & Signorielli (2001) assert that “Marriage on television is also likely to be depicted as conventional and happy,” without representing divorce rates, relationship problems, or characters struggling to accept gender roles (p. 341). Researchers argue that past programming “overwhelmingly presented husbands and wives in traditional roles,” with working wives portrayed as having more marital and home life difficulties than the stay at home mothers (Morgan & Signorielli, 2001, p. 340). Portrayals of family life on television can affect how viewers see their own experiences. For example, in Berry’s 1992 study of perceptions in *Good Times* (1974-1979) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), the lower class teenagers in the study found relatable content in the father character of *Good Times*, but did not relate to *Cosby*’s Theo, as his “upper middle-class lifestyle did not reflect the way in which most of these teens lived” (Morgan & Signorielli, 2001, p. 343). Inaccuracies in portrayals can paint erroneous, inflated, or narrow views of a non-existent culture, which plays a part in shaping viewers’ outlook on culture.

### CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although meant for the purposes of enjoyment, fictional television has had an influence in American culture representation. As seen through history beginning with the 1950s, television influences our perceptions about family, values, and behaviors. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality and Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding can help analyze messages about the 1990s TGIF families.

Institutions, including media representations, construct our meaningful world. The themes and lessons hidden within entertainment influence the lens through which we interpret the world: family life, culture, and morals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 15). Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality asserts that "Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world" (p. 19). Although we each see reality through individual lenses, common sense meanings in the forms of signs, language, and communication aid in developing institutions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 35-67). "Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors," or in other words, media representations are institutions that have "social control" over society's reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 54-6). Therefore, media representations of the American family have had "social control" over the perceived social reality of marriage, gender roles, and family structures.

Therefore, if media representations can be social constructions of reality, their meanings can be deciphered through the lens of the viewer. In Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of encoding and decoding, media producers encode content with a specific and dominant message that can be decoded differently by the individual viewer (p. 137). These messages are embedded with particular meanings that must be "translated—transformed, again—into social practices" in order for media 'consumption' to take place (Hall, 1980, p. 137). Viewers can reject the 'dominant' or 'preferred' meaning, and instead decode the message in a negotiated view, where the viewer "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule" (Hall, 1980, p. 142-3). Television messages about family life have dominant encoded messages about family structure, marriage, relationships, and values that, when decoded, can shape viewers' perception of reality.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This study explores the pilot episodes (first seven episodes) and opening title sequence of *Full House* (1987-1995), *Family Matters* (1989-1999), *Step-by-Step* (1991-1998), *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000), *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999). The pilot episodes introduce the audience to the major themes and characters that the entire series will portray. Likewise, theme opens and songs “introduce the television program, providing physical or emotional background for the program itself” (Foss 2008, p. 43). The 1990s marked the ending of opening title sequences for sitcoms that feature character/actor introductions set to the track of a specifically designed theme song. This study will also examine the prominent themes in the visual depiction (character depiction, geographical location), music style, and lyrical phrasing of each show’s theme song open.

### Research Questions

1. RQ1: What are the messages of the American family in the 1990s early episodes of ABC’s TGIF lineup?
2. RQ2: What messages about the American family are in the opening credits of TGIF shows?

A qualitative narrative analysis was used in order to conduct a study of TGIF families. These scholars emphasized that popular culture media could be analyzed as worthy historical and cultural texts. Jensen (1991) suggested that “by including both

popular culture and everyday social practices among the objects of textual analysis,” research was richer in context and breadth (p. 27). Larsen (1991) asserted that the “study of visual communication has emerged as the central and most promising aspect of content analysis. Studies have demonstrated that a better theoretical understanding of how meaning is produced by (sequences of) images, as opposed to written texts, is a necessary precondition for the detailed analysis of heterogeneous visual media messages and their reception” (Larsen 1991, 133). Therefore, popular culture can be analyzed in the form of television as a visual text. Furthermore, Carolyn Kitch’s (2007) approach to narrative analysis seeks out “common thematic and structural choices [producers] made, consistently over time and across media,” by looking at overall plot themes and character development (p. 40-1). By applying Kitch’s approach to narrative analysis, we can see the overall themes, characterizations of families and gender roles, and how these portrayed characters (adult and child) dealt with social and economic issues in the late 1980s through the mid 1990s.

To examine the shows of TGIF, this study analyzed the characters, setting, and dialogue of each episode. It also discussed the overall messages about family, using the following questions: What is the make up/structure of the family? Are they biologically-related? Is anyone part of the cast who is not considered family? What are the economic implications (clothing, occupations, type of housing, urban or suburban location) of each family? What is the lesson/overall message or theme of each episode? What types of issues and/or conflicts occur between family members and main characters? How are these conflicts/issues resolved, and are there reoccurring family conflict themes? What

context do the opening credits give about the setting? What does the visual context imply about the characters, their family structure, and gender roles? What do the lyrics say about the show's family themes and values? These questions were essential to analyzing the overall themes of the 1990s TGIF lineup.

### **Sample**

This study analyzed family themes using DVD and available online episodes of seven TGIF series. Series included from the TGIF lineup in the 1990s: *Full House* (1987-1995), *Family Matters* (1989-1999), *Step-by-Step* (1991-1998), *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000), *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999). The sample analyzed the first seven episodes of each series, as well as the opening credits of each series. Shows that did not air primarily during the 1990s, or were not successful (only aired for one season), are excluded from the sample. Sample shows must also have parents and children. Also, shows that were not a part of ABC's TGIF lineup (any other networks) were not included in the sample. Shows that did air on TGIF, but are not available for viewing now, such as *Hanging with Mr. Cooper* (1992-1997) were also excluded from study. There were other successful family shows on ABC such as *Growing Pains* that became part of subsequent re-branding of ABC's Saturday night lineup, but are not a part of this TGIF study.

The TGIF lineup contained several shows with configurations of the American family across the country. *Full House* (1987-1995) is centered on single parent Danny Tanner raising his three daughters in San Francisco with the help of his live-in brother-in-law and best friend. Similarly, the Winslows are an African American family in Chicago raising their three children and living with extended family in *Family Matters* (1989-

1999). *Step-by-Step* (1991-1998) depicts Frank Lambert and Carol Foster's blended family set in Port Washington, WI. The Matthews in *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000) are a traditional nuclear family living in suburban Philadelphia. Finally, *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999) is the most unusual family structure, with two single-parent families who move in together to co-parent their adopted twin daughters in Detroit, MI. Through examining these five family-centered shows, the study can determine similarities in themes, plot, and overall programming put in to place by TGIF.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Through analyzing the theme opens, theme songs, and seven episodes of each series, the TGIF block of family programming depicts glimpses of American families across the nation. *Full House*, *Family Matters*, *Step-by-Step*, and *Sister, Sister* all depict families who undergo major structural changes and learn how to love and work together in their daily lives. All the shows stress the importance of family bonds, love and relationships, whether dealing with a new family structure or just the everyday trials of growing up. And, as many of the theme songs depict, staying together and building on family love are the most importance foundations for any family.

### **Theme Songs: “It’s the Bigger Love of the Family”**

TGIF theme song introductions presented the actors of each show to the tune of catchy theme songs with family-specific lyrics. *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Step-by-Step* theme introductions follow a similar visual introduction by using establishing geographical camera shots and focusing on introducing the characters/actors. Jesse Frederick & Bennett Salvay produced *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Step-by-Step*’s theme songs, and Frederick recorded all three vocally. The later produced TGIF shows, *Boy Meets World* and *Sister, Sister*, both use green screen graphics and symbols to introduce their shows’ premises and characters. Each introduction, either through edited camera shots or graphics, portrays the storylines and overall themes of each series. All of



the lyrical songs contain family themes such as love and togetherness, emphasizing strength in family and familial love.

**Location, location, location.** Produced in the beginning of TGIF and within a five-year period of each other, the character introductions of *Full House* (1987), *Family Matters* (1989), and *Step-by-Step* (1991) all establish their geographical location in the United States using aerial establishing camera shots of landmarks or shots of road signs. *Full House* opens with a shot of the Tanners driving down San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge in their red convertible. *Family Matters* depicts the Winslow home in a neighborhood nestled near downtown Chicago. The first shot in the theme introduction of *Step-by-Step* is a population sign that reads "Port Washington, WI Population 9,338." All three of these Miller-Boyett series introductions end on these helicopter-wide establishing shots. The later produced series, *Boy Meets World* and *Sister, Sister*, themes were visually produced using a lot of computer generated and green screen effects that didn't focus on their geographical location, but more so on the themes or storyline of the series. Instead, the characters in *BMW* and *Sister, Sister* verbally revealed their locations. Tia and Tamara break the fourth wall by speaking into the camera to tell their audience directly that Tia was raised in downtown Detroit, while her sister grew up in the "burbs." In *BMW*, Cory subtly hints that the Matthews' live in Pennsylvania, and specifically Philadelphia by his Phillies' clothing, memorabilia, and mention of frequent game attendance. Each of these shows is supposed to give viewers a glimpse into family life across America. However, three out of the five shows are set in the Midwest, with equal representation of the west and northeast, and no representation of the southern United

States. While many of these families are set against urban areas (San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia), many of their homes reflect suburban outskirts, making them more ideal for family living.

**Reconfiguring the family through song.** Theme opens introduce viewers to the overall plot of the show. Therefore, family structure change plays a significant role in the theme opens of each unique TGIF family. *Full House* immediately claims that their family is not the norm with the opening lyric, “What ever happened to predictability?” after a shot of three men, two girls, and a baby riding in a red convertible across the Golden Gate Bridge (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). This unique family structure is explained through the lyric “How did I get to livin’ here/somebody tell me please,” as the actors who play the family’s adult figures, Jesse, Joey, and Danny, are introduced (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). In *Family Matters*, there is an implied growing in the family as “real love [is] bursting out of every seam” (Frederick & Salvay 1989). We are introduced to this extended family’s characters by a rank of nuclear family to extended, and authority figures (starting with Dad Carl, Mother Harriette, and Grandma Mother Winslow) to children (Eddie, Laura, and Judy). The last characters to be introduced are baby Richie and Aunt Rachel, showing that they are a secondary branch off of the nuclear family that live in this full house, but “there’s room for you, and room for me” and the family growth is seen as an “opportunity” (Frederick & Salvay, 1989).

*Step-by-Step* and *Sister, Sister*’s themes depict families born out of non-biological relations blending together to become whole families. *Step-by-Step* introduces a new family through the eyes of two single people blending their families together through

marriage. Theirs is a traditional marriage (“we got the woman and man”) as they attempt to bring their children together to see “if all these dreams fit under one umbrella” (Frederick & Salvay 1991). Conversely, *Sister, Sister* blends two non-romantically involved parents who happened to separately adopt biological twins. Upon meeting, the twins decide they “ain’t ever gonna let [each other] go,” which “shake[s] up the family tree” by forming a nonconventional family (Heintz, Petersen & Quinn, 1994). The TGIF theme songs question whether structure change will be a positive experience for each family, but the songs resolve that everything is going to be fine, if not better because of the changes in family structure.

**Everything’s gonna be alright.** Although the structure changes depicted in the TGIF families are usually born out of negative circumstances, they are also the solution and/or add strength to the new family. *Full House*’s theme song is a light rock song with some heavy, but hopeful lyrics. The audience can gather that something sad and negative has happened to create this family structure, as the kid actors are shown with the lyrics “Clouds as mean as you’ve ever seen/ain’t a bird that knows your tune” (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). However, hope builds in the lines “then a little voice inside you whispers/kid don’t see your dreams so soon” because “everywhere you look” there will be a new family member to help you through the tough times (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). This new family is the resolution to its referenced broken state, as Danny picks up baby Michelle and everyone gathers around the dinner table, demonstrating the lyric “a light is waiting to carry you home/ everywhere you look” (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). Similarly, *Family Matters*’ theme starts with tough times (“It’s a rare

condition, this day and age/to read any good news on the newspaper page”) that are made easier by the Winslow family’s “love and tradition of the grand design” (Frederick & Salvay 1989).

However, the song indicates “there’s room for you/room for me” and that together, they will “smother the blues with tenderness” (Frederick & Salvay 1989). There are shots of members hugging, kissing, and working together through mishaps (Eddie breaking a window). Like *Full House*, the final shot shows the “bigger love” of the whole family crowded together, with the patriarch and matriarchs (Carl, Harriette, & Mother Winslow) sitting above the rest of the family on furniture watching Rachel and the kids play with baby Richie on the floor (Frederick & Salvay 1989).

Starting a blended family is visually compared to riding a roller coaster in the theme song open of *Step-by-Step*. This theme song is a unique male-female duet that signifies Frank and Carol’s coming together as a new family, and is unique compared to Frederick & Salvay’s other single-voice songs for *Full House* and *Family Matters*. Like *Full House*, something sad ended their Frank and Carol’s first marriages, (“The dream got broken/seemed like all was lost”) but “when the tears are over” they meet each other and become a “better” family (Frederick & Salvay 1991). Their new family is portrayed positively, as “A fresh start over/a different hand to play,” and that they can make it through the trials and problems that come their way (the deeper we fall/the stronger we stay”) (Frederick & Salvay 1991). The theme songs portray TGIF families as better and stronger because of their structure changes.

**Graphics and symbolism.** The earliest shows (*Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Step-by-Step*) used specific choreographed camera shots to tell the storyline in their opening theme songs. *Full House* and *Family Matters* used static text graphics, while *Step-by-Step* added graphical motion to their logo by bringing both “step” words together from opposite sides of the screen, and bumping them together to produce the “by.” *Boy Meets World* and *Sister, Sister* depict the mid-to late 90s’ advancement in graphics, as they both use green screen, heavy graphics-oriented introductions.

*Boy Meet’s World’s* theme song is a purely spirited brass/horn instrumental track. Visually, *BMW’s* theme open focuses on Cory, bouncing around different graphical elements to introduce the other actors, and then includes memorable shots from the show’s early episodes. A world globe and baseball are significant symbols, as they interchange with each other throughout the open. Baseballs, paper airplanes, and teacups are used to describe the kids’ characters (Cory, Shawn, Morgan), while the adults are represented by role-base symbols, such as a Band-Aid for Cory’s mom (Amy), a lawn mower for Cory’s dad (Alan), and books and a pencil for Cory’s teacher (Mr. Feeny). The open begins and ends with the Boy Meets World logo, in which the “o” in Boy is a baseball and the “o” in World is a globe with a paper plane behind it.

In *Sister, Sister*, the theme open graphically and textually tells the story of how Tia and Tamara were separated as babies through adoption and reunited to live together with their respective adopted parents. The open graphically divides two cartoon babies with the word “separated” written between them, and then shows their parents each holding a twin with the word “adopted” written between them. We see that baby Tia was

raised in a city apartment with fences, while Tamara was raised in a yellow house with a green lawn, reflected a socioeconomic difference that is confirmed in the early episodes. Grown Tia and Tamara walk up a graphic pathway to each other, and we see the words “We look alike, but we’re different.” The twins push their adoptive parents together and there is a graphical light bulb between them, symbolizing the idea for everyone to live together, as “No way!” and “yeah right!” graphics appear above Lisa and Ray’s heads. Lisa and Tia move in a cartoon moving van from their “Vacant” cartoon apartment to Ray and Tamara’s yellow home. Ray pushes a graphic roof over their heads, symbolizing him as the provider/breadwinner for this new family. In both show, graphics are used to symbolize family roles, values and statuses.

*Step-by-Step* talks about the power of a fresh, second start (“We’ll make it better/The second time around) (Frederick & Salvay 1991). *Family Matters* emphasizes many family members living under one roof (“real love burstin’ out of every seam” “we’re gonna fill our house with happiness” “there’s room for you/room for me”), while *Sister, Sister* holds tight to biological family ties (“Never knew how much I missed ya/Now that everybody knows/I ain’t ever gonna let you go”) (Frederick & Salvay 1989, Heintz, Petersen & Quinn, 1994.). *Full House* has more of a somber tone, (“When you’re lost out there, and you’re all alone), but provides hope that family will always be there in a time of need (“Everywhere you look, everywhere you go/There’s a heart, (There’s a heart”) (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay 1987). *Boy Meets World’s* theme song is completely instrumental, with an upbeat, jazzy tone. Although *Family Matters*, *Full House*, and *Step-by-Step* have visual shots of humor and trials, as the *Family Matter’s*

theme song says, “the bigger love of the family” is the overall theme permeating the storylines of the TGIF shows.

### **Analyzing the Episodes: Reconfiguring the Family**

In most of the episodes and themes examined, the TGIF family undergoes significant family structural changes at the beginning of each series, affecting and establishing the entire show’s premise and themes. These structural changes have physical and emotional ramifications for each family. In *Full House*, Danny Tanner is a widowed father raising his three daughters with the help of his best friend Joey and brother-in-law Jesse, who both come to live with the Tanners after the death of Danny’s wife. Similarly, *Family Matters* depicts the theme of togetherness, as Carl Winslow and his family’s adjustment to his mother coming to live with an already extended family in the pilot episode. *Step-by-Step* portrays a very different family adjustment, the blending of two single-parent families into one after Frank and Carol have a whirlwind marriage in which everyone moves in under one roof after barely knowing one another. *Sister, Sister* is particularly unique, as the show explores the idea of separated biological sibling relationships forming a family with their non-married live-in adoptive parents. These transitional moments make a new family dynamic and are the foundational premise to the plot of each show. These changes in structure are necessary to fuel the unique situations each family goes through, from single men learning to raise children to non-married parents working together to parent teenage sisters. Although their structures may be very different from the traditional nuclear family, TGIF uses these unconventional family units to portray unchanging values of love, family togetherness, and friendships.

**Sticking together through the transitions.** With each family's structural change comes the physical and emotional reconfiguring of what family means. In *Full House*, the Tanners live in a four-bedroom house in which everyone had their own room. After the mother dies, Uncle Jesse and Danny's best friend Joey move in, forcing daughters DJ & Stephanie to share a room, and cramming Joey in the living room alcove. In the pilot episode, oldest daughter D.J. (age 10) struggles to accept the changes brought on by her mother's death. According to DJ, "everything keeps disappearing," but her dad, Danny, empathizes with her and reminds her that she still has a family to hold on to:

Danny: I know exactly how you feel. And I know how much you girls miss your mother. Because I miss her too. Very much. But you still got me.

Stephanie [walks over and grabs DJ's hand]: you got me too.

Danny: You've got Michelle, and you have your Uncle Jesse and Joey. DJ, we're still a family. And now is when we really need to stick together...nothing is going to break up this team (*Full House*, "Our Very First Show").

As Danny, Jesse, and Joey attempt to parent the girls, many of the conflicts center around the home (keeping the house clean, how to take care of a baby, and children's boundaries/discipline) and the lessons focus on learning how to work together to function in this new family.

Carl and Harriette Winslow already share their urban neighborhood home with their children Eddie, Laura, and Judy, as well as Harriette's widowed sister Rachel and her infant son, Richie. When Mother Winslow comes to live with them, and Carl and Harriette struggle to maintain authority over the family. Carl reasserts patriarchal



authority over the household and his mother, but does so because he wants this new family structure to “work” (*Family Matters*, “The Mama Who Came to Dinner”). To fix the situation, Carl allows Mother Winslow to play the role of an advisor rather than the head of household role. Through trials and mistakes, the Winslows agree, “family sticks together” because, as Carl says, “your problems are my problems” (*Family Matters*, “Body Damage”).

The theme of togetherness is presented differently in *Step-by-Step*, as it springs out of a love the spouses have for each other and their desire to bond their two families into one in their new marriage. Frank Lambert met Carol Foster on a vacation; they fell in love and got married, and then came home to tell their six children. Frank has two sons, J.T. and Brendan, and a daughter named Alicia or “Al,” while Carol has two daughters, Dana and Karen, and a son named Mark. During the pilot episode, we are graphically introduced to “His House” and “Her House,” but whenever the Lamberts move into Carol’s house it becomes “Their ~~Her~~ House” in a suburban Wisconsin house (*Step-by-Step*, “Pilot”). However, their children have a difficult time accepting the bonding process due to the quickness of the marriage and living under one roof.

Contrary to the blended families in *Step-by-Step*, the show *Sister, Sister* emphasizes the importance of biological family members family sticking together in hopes of building the bonds of familial love they should have naturally shared. Friendship plays a large role in this show, as Tia and Tamara want to develop a relationship after they meet each other. The twins even attempt to run away when Tia’s mom, Lisa, tries to

make plans to move to St. Louis. Their togetherness is born out of biological ties they missed out on by being split up:

Tamara: We shouldn't have been split up in the first place!

Tia: And now that we've found each other we want to stay together. (*Sister, Sister*, "The Meeting").

Ray grudgingly allows Lisa and Tia to move in with him and Tamara in order for the girls to get to know each other. The theme of family bonding is unusual in *Sister, Sister*, as it begins with the siblings rather than parents bonded by love and/or marriage.

In the conventional nuclear family, parents and children each contribute distinct roles to the family, such as a homemaking mother and breadwinning father raising children who play and go to school. Because of their unconventional structural makeup, the TGIF families must work together to fulfill roles that have changed or lost in the transition. In *Full House*, two men have to fill the role of the lost mother. Children and extended family members have to fill the financial gaps to supplement the size of the family, or when a parental income is lost (*Family Matters*, "Two Income Family"). Although these families' structures and ways of operating have changed, they still operate under traditional family values of love and staying together.

**The foundation of love: friendship.** Love and friendship are what bind these TGIF families together. Some pre-existing relationships are already in place to demonstrate love, while new relationships are formed and must start with friendship. In *Full House*, Jesse comes to live with the Tanners out of familial love for his late sister, while Joey comes out of friendship to Danny. As these three men learn to parent and run

a household, the new family operates off of unconditional love, teaching the girls that “we’re right behind you no matter what you do,” (*Full House*, “The Return of Grandma”). There is also the lesson of learning to make new friends outside of their family, from the girls’ anxieties about starting school to the men’s complicated dating lives. Operating as an extended family (biological and non-biological), *Full House* asserts that unconditional love and the willingness to stay together are important operating themes for families.

The first step in blending a family starts with friendship, as exemplified in Carol and Al’s relationship in *Step-by-Step*. Al fakes sickness before school at the beginning of the episode when it’s just the Lamberts living with Frank. Later in the episode when Lamberts are now living at the Fosters, Al claims to be sick and Carol is the only one to take her claim seriously. Al ends up having her appendix removed, and thanks Carol for believing her when she thought no one else would. Because she is Al’s stepmother, Carol tells Al she wants to start with friendship rather than forced familial love “because that’s the first step in becoming a family.” She tells Al she believes that they can all become a happy, bonded family with time because of her love for Al’s father.

*Sister, Sister* depicts two non-romantically connected parents who form a friendship of sorts out of love for and effort to co-parent their children. Not biologically or romantically connected, Ray and Lisa struggle more so to live under the same roof with their girls. However, as with married parents, Ray and Lisa often discuss their girls’ problems, and help each other through their own adult situations. They also try to protect one another, as Ray tries to spare Lisa’s feelings when her new business venture is

rejected. She initially rejects his help and tries to maintain her independence by retorting “Who gave you permission to protect my bubble? My bubble’s not in trouble” (*Sister, Sister*, “The Pimple”). However, she ends up taking his business advice, showing that their individual roles and personalities can balance and work well with one another as parents and as friends. They also act as mother/father role models for the opposite twin, like in episode seven when Ray gives Tia appearance advice and Lisa gives Tamara dating advice. Although they are very different people, Ray and Lisa’s similar love for the twins makes them a great set of parents for this strangely combined family.

Although family structure change does not play a big role in the early episodes of *Boy Meets World*, young Cory Matthews learns many lessons about love. Eleven-year-old Cory lives in a middle-class nuclear family with his parents, Alan and Amy, older brother Eric, and younger sister Morgan in the suburbs of Philadelphia. In the pilot episode, Mr. Feeny teaches Cory the importance of love, romantic and familial. Cory feels betrayed by his family after Eric decides to take a girl to the baseball game instead of Cory. While pouting in his tree house, Cory witnesses Mr. Feeny prepare dinner for a guest, only to have them cancel at the last minute. Later in detention, Cory tells Mr. Feeny that love “leads to no good” and that he thinks Mr. Feeny would feel the same way after that rejected dinner. Cory sees love as only the romantic kind between a man and a woman, something he’s not interested in at his age. In a passionate speech, Mr. Feeny explains the need for love, romantic and familial, to young Cory:

“I live on the other side of the fence from you, Cory. And it’s impossible not to face in your direction every once in a while and notice the people in the next yard.

And through the years, I've got to know them, it is apparent that they are fine individuals. But, their real strength comes from being a family. And do you know why they're a family, Cory? Because at one time a man and a woman realized that they loved each other, and pursued the unlimited potential of what may come from that love. And here you are. There is no greater aspiration than to have love in our lives, Mr. Matthews." (*Boy Meets World*, "Pilot").

Cory realizes that love is more significant in his life than he realized, and displays it by sitting down to a tea party with his little sister Morgan, who has been trying to love on Cory throughout the entire episode.

The importance of love and familial relationships continues throughout the series, particularly for a parent-child relationship. In episode three, "Father Knows Less," Alan struggles to spend individual time with Cory because of the demands at the grocery store. When Cory fails a test after staying up late with Alan to watch a baseball game, Feeny and Alan battle between the importance of family relationships and the importance of a good education. In the end, both Feeny and Alan admit fault, and Feeny agrees "It is important that a boy spend time with his father" (*Boy Meets World*, "Father Knows Less"). Alan also teaches Cory that even when family lets you down, like his grandma does in episode seven, they still love you, and you should still love them. The TGIF lineup emphasized love in the forms of familial and friendship relationships as the foundation for family ties.

**Overcoming trials together.** Once the new families are physically and emotionally rooted together, they all work together through various trials and situations.

After the loss of the mother figure in *Full House*, Danny, Jesse and Joey must learn how to make their new family function, from taking care of three girls keep the house clean and orderly. In “The Return of Grandma,” Danny and the guys receive surprise visits from their mothers, who threaten to constantly supervise the new family since the men haven’t kept the house in good working order. The men comically attempt to clean, but eventually hire a maid to clean the house. However, when Jesse’s pet turtle goes missing because of the girls, the women are more proud of how the men emotionally care for the girls in spite of their lack of housework. Even though their family may not function in a conventional way, Danny’s mom feels secure that her granddaughters “are getting a lot of love” (*Full House*, “The Return of Grandma”).

*Family Matters* provides an example of how extended families face and work together through financial challenges. When Harriette loses her job, Carl constantly encourages her to believe in herself and her talents until she gets another job. The other family members pitch in as well. Aunt Rachel, Laura, and Judy take a small job stuffing envelopes at home, while Mother Winslow makes meals that stretch. Eddie even offers his savings from his part-time job to go towards bills. Harriette thanks Carl and her family for their support during her search, as “These last few weeks weren’t easy. But we pitched in there and got through it” (*Family Matters*, “Two Income Family”). Even after just adding an additional member to the family (Mother Winslow), the Winslows worked together to prepare for financial hardship and support their large family.

In *Step-by-Step*, the Fosters and Lamberts learn to live and operate as a newly blended family. By episode six “Pulling Together,” Carol wants the whole family to

participate in the annual Port Washington Family Games. The Lamberts hesitate because the Fosters aren't very athletic, and the Lamberts were previously reigning champs of the games. However, once they all start working together, Frank sees the strength in their collaboration, while Carol sees the fun in winning and not just participating.

Frank: "You know you were right, seeing you all work together, well that's more important than winning some stupid trophy."

Carol: "And I would like to add one thing to that, if we work together we can kick butt and win that stupid trophy!" (*Step-by-Step*, "Pulling Together").

In *Step-by-Step*, being together as a complicated blended family makes them better and stronger facing life's issues long-term rather than being apart. The newly reconfigured TGIF families endure various trials that test the stability and values of their new structures.

**Values for the kids: hard work, education, and individuality.** Many of TGIF's families focus on their children's everyday situations regarding relationships, school, and the trials and tribulations of growing up. American ideals such as the value of hard work, a good education, and the search for individuality are highlighted and emphasized by parents and authority figures in these children's lives. In *Family Matters*, Carl encourages his son Eddie to be good in school and work toward a college education. Carl expresses his desire for Eddie to become a first generation college student, stressing that through education, you "can do anything you want if you work at it. I wouldn't be pushing you so hard if I didn't think so" (*Family Matters*, "Straight A's"). Carl goes a step further

promoting the American dream, by offering Eddie his help to chase whatever dream he finds (*Family Matters*, “Basketball Blues”).

As his teacher and next-door neighbor in *Boy Meets World*, Mr. Feeny gives many lessons to young Cory on the importance of education and respect. Cory’s ongoing relationship and influence by Mr. Feeny lends to the importance of a good education. Cory talks Minkus, the smartest kid in class, out of competing in the geography tournament so that he can compete and win the batboy baseball prize. Although he loses the tournament, Mr. Feeny counts Cory’s hard work in the form of getting an “A” on the weekly geography test as a win. Similarly, Feeny teaches Cory about academic respect when Cory cheats on an IQ test to make everyone think he is a genius. Mr. Feeny that academic perfection does not equal respect, but that hard work equals respect (*Boy Meets World*, “Boys to Mensa”). Similarly, Cory learns to respect hard work by watching his “superhero” dad teach him the importance of enjoying childhood.

Many of the themes and lessons in *Sister, Sister*’s early episodes deal with adolescence trials and tribulations. Physical appearance and dating woes dominate the girls concerns, from needing dates for the school dance, to being afraid of having a pimple. Tia and Tamara use their identical appearances to switch places as a solution for variety of situations, such as cheating on a test (Episode 4, “Cheater, Cheater) or getting out of a date (Episode 7, “The Pimple”). However, being twins causes competition between the sisters, and worries about being unique. Tamara could care less about school, but when she perceives her dad’s pride over Tia making the honor roll, she begins to become jealous. After asking Tia to cheat on a test for her and both of them getting



caught, Tamara angrily admits to Ray that she thinks that he thinks of her as “the dumb one” (*Sister, Sister*, “Cheater, Cheater”). Ray reminds Tamara of her individuality, that she was very creative, and not to be compared with Tia. This issue of uniqueness finally comes up between Tia and Tamara in episode six, when the girls attempt independence by riding the bus by themselves:

Tia: “Tamara, why does having a twin bother you so much? I mean, I thought you were happy that we found each other?”

Tamara: “I am happy, but I was used to being the only child. I guess I felt like I was, you know, unique or something.”

Tia: “I’m sorry I’m getting in the way of your uniqueness.”

(*Sister, Sister*, “Out Alone”).

Tamara asks Tia to honestly admit that even though they are sisters and have chosen and grown to love one another, that the relationship hasn’t always been easy. Once Tia admits that there are some things she doesn’t like about her sister, they both admit that they are glad to have one another. This is represented by Tamara suggesting that Tia put her hat back on, which would make them have identical outfits. Tia proudly puts her hat back on.

The common themes within these TGIF shows revolve around family and establishing a good life, from learning about love, teamwork, and boundaries, to valuing hard work and education. These themes do not pertain to only biological or nuclear family members, but to extended family members and friends. All of these shows follow the formula of introducing a problem or situation at the beginning of the episode, and resolving it or revealing the lesson at the episode’s end. However, the themes of family

togetherness, love, friendship, and growing through structure change or persistent people in one's life permeate this family Friday night lineup.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Using qualitative narrative analysis, this study analyzed the first seven episodes and theme song opens of five prominent TGIF shows. TGIF theme songs indicate that unconventional change leads to positive effects on the family. Dynamic family structural change is the driving theme and plotline for the majority of the TGIF shows. Most of the shows included family structure change that celebrated physical and emotional togetherness, friendship, and education/hard work.

Media representations operate as social constructions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 19). Therefore, the ritualistic viewing of television media can influence our perceived reality of social institutions such as marriage and family. Television can assert messages that can physically and emotionally misrepresent family life. Perse, Pavitt, and Burggraf (1990) assert that “Marriage on television is also likely to be depicted as conventional and happy,” without representing divorce rates, relationship problems, or characters struggling to accept gender roles (p. 341). Many of the TGIF shows used their common themes of love and working together to mask a resolution of emotional problems and/or problems with family structure. In many of the episodes there was a point toward the end of the episode where a character would reveal his or her frustrations or problem. A family member would explain one of the main themes (love, sticking/working together, friendship) as a resolution to the other character’s problem, and this usually resolved these situations immediately. Danny dissolves DJ’s sadness over not getting to spend enough time with him by just talking about her feelings (“We

didn't solve anything, but just talking about it helps"-DJ) (*Full House*, "Daddy's Home"). Carl resolves the authority crisis when Mother Winslow moves in by allowing her to be an advisor (*Family Matters*, "The Mama Who Came to Dinner). The quick resolution of these problems does not reflect the reality of life, where issues of grief and conflict take more time and effort to work through. These lesson moments in the episodes reinforced traditional family values in non-traditional, reconfigured fictional families that did not necessarily reflect 1990s American society.

In Stuart Hall's depiction of textual analysis, he asserts that while viewers gather the producer's dominant encoded meaning from media, "others will take a negotiated position, understanding the intended meaning but also considering their own experiences and decoding the text while taking both views into consideration" (Brennen, 2013, p.193-200; Hall, 1980, p. 143). TGIF utilized dominant themes of family structure as the main plot basis for many of the TGIF shows. The salient themes throughout the series included working together through family structure changes and every day family challenges while valuing familial love and American dream values such as education and hard work. Some of the negotiated meanings revolve around gender role portrayal. *Full House* is a perfect example of Hall's negotiated meaning where audiences accept the unconventional notion of three men raising three little girls under the conditions of traditional values ties of love, friendship (Joey), and extended family (Jesse). Even though there are moments in *Full House* that have gay undertones with the male characters (Jesse singing "Love Me Tender" to Joey in the bathtub) viewers were able to decode these laugh track moments as funny situations (such as learning to change Michelle's diaper and cleaning the house)

that were part of the three bachelor men learning to live with each other and raise three little girls (“The First Day of School”). However, some viewers may considered a negotiated view that one or more of the male characters was gay, as the actor who played Danny Tanner did of his own character (People.com, 2000). Overall, hegemonic traditional family values were manifested in non-traditional TGIF family configurations.

The narrative TGIF theme songs provide premises of hope and family success in the midst of trial and reconfiguration. With these themes, the TGIF families confirm Skill and Robinson’s 1994 study, in which extended family and single-parent family portrayals grew in popularity (p. 449). The TGIF shows also followed the inaccurate portrayal of single-parent families forming due to the cause of widowhood instead of the reality of divorce (Skill and Robinson, 1994, p. 449). The theme songs of *Full House* and *Step-by-Step* reflect this inaccuracy by providing any visual representation in the theme song and by keeping situational lyrics vague. In *Full House*’s theme open, viewers are immediately introduced to this new family of three men and three children in a convertible driving across the Golden Gate Bridge. Although viewers learn of the widowhood situation at the beginning of the pilot episode, their main connection to the song is that “everywhere you look” there is a family member who is there to help you (Franklin, Frederick & Salvay, 1987). Similarly, *Step-by-Step* does not visually tell its audience specifically what caused both families to become single other than a brief mention in the song lyrics by the male voice (“The dream got broken/ Seemed like all was lost”) and female voice (“when the tears are over”) in the theme song (Frederick & Salvay, 1991).

Previous studies of television show that portrayals have focused on conventionally structured (nuclear, married parents) families rather than families formed in unconventional ways (divorce, widowed, or raising non-biological children) (Skill et al., 1987). Although *Full House* reverts to traditional methods of producing single-parent families through widowhood, three bachelor men raising three little girls certainly didn't follow traditional TV at the time. However, this strange structure is what made the show a success, as American families tuned in to watch relatable characters, "a teen heartthrob, ultracute kids and a weekly moral that any parent could applaud" (People.com, 2000). Similarly, Frank and Carol's marriage forms a large unconventional family when they combine two single-family households, as 90s viewers were able to decode a modern retelling of *The Brady Bunch*. Rachel's character in *Family Matters* is also a part of this widowed, single-parent trend. While *Sister, Sister* portrays a very unique family brought together by long-lost twin sisters' desire to live together and cultivate a relationship, this storyline was already made popular in film by Disney's *The Parent Trap* in 1961, with a remake of the movie in 1998. The restructured TGIF families indicate that unconventional is acceptable, as families branched out from nuclear family to extended families and families made of non-biological (friend, neighbor) members.

While other 1990s sitcoms began to focus primarily on friendship relationships, (*Friends*, *Seinfeld*) the family sitcom began to branch out by bringing in friends and neighbors to play key roles within a family. Skill and Robinson's 1994 study discussed the welcoming of a reconfigured, unconventional family in the 1990s, ones that were still full of love and support despite their structure or any biological relation. *Family Matters*

featured a very extended family with a nosey neighbor who eventually becomes a main character within the Winslow family. As the breakout character, Urkel became essential to the storyline and survival of its nine season run (Jaleel White, 2015). *Boy Meets World* features a nuclear family under one roof. However, next-door neighbor and teacher, Mr. Feeny, also becomes a crucial part of the family as a third parental/authority figure for the Matthews' children. While Alan and Amy are loving parents who know their kids and their antics, Feeny plays the role of a mentor outside the home, who also happens to give the Matthews' kids lessons by the adjoining fence. Both Urkel and Feeny become family by proximity and frequency of interaction rather than by biological relation.

In previous decades, American television families were also depicted within traditional gender roles, limiting women to marriage and home life, while their breadwinner husbands displayed strength and intellectual power (Signorielli, 1982, p. 586). Signorielli's (1982) study noted that that home and family, marriage and romance are important themes usually represented in female characters, but this is only partially true for TGIF (p. 589). In *Full House*, Joey and Jesse move-in to help take over mothering duties of the three Tanner girls. Harriette (*Family Matters*), Carol (*Step-by-Step*), and Amy (*Boy Meets World*) all have careers outside of their roles as wives and mothers. Lisa (*Sister, Sister*) works as a seamstress, and becomes her own boss when she moves in with Ray and Tamara. While these wives are more equal to their husbands by having careers, the husbands/men tend to have more prominent positions than the ladies. Grocery store manager, Alan Matthews, describes his wife's career first in the home setting, as "a "homemaker [who] wrangles three kids, runs this house, and still manages

to sell real estate quite successfully” (*Boy Meets World*, “Boys to Mensa”). Harriette receives a management position because of her speech about being a working mother and wife, rather than for her work experience and police academy training (*Family Matters*, “Two Income Family”). Even though both Carol (*Step-by-Step*) and Lisa (*Sister, Sister*) own their own businesses, their workplace is attached to their homes. The employment positions held TGIF mothers (Harriette-elevator operator to building security manager, Carol-hairdresser, Amy-real estate agent, and Lisa- seamstress) do not imply that any of these women attended college. Therefore, TGIF did not reflect the reality of an increase in American women attending college in the 1990s (Gourley, 2008, p. 121; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, p. 38).

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study**

This study faced limitations due to sample size and its focus on a particular lineup day slot and network. While the first seven episodes and initial theme songs provide the basic premise and reason that the show made it air, further study of later seasons could provide even more insight to family themes, relationships and values. Furthermore, studies of shows that aired in a different day slot on ABC or on other networks (NBC, CBS & FOX) could provide a more broad understanding of the 90s television family. Additional research into the early 1990s/late 1980s audience could also afford significant findings into the creation of TGIF, its family structures, and themes. Finally, a similar study of ABC’s current Wednesday comedy block of current family sitcoms (*The Middle*, *The Goldbergs*, *Modern Family*, and *black-ish*), or other networks’ family sitcoms would



reveal how the family has changed in a little over two decades since TGIF first premiered.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

By creating family-focused shows on Friday nights, the TGIF lineup was a unique block of programming that provided values, lessons, and laughs for American families. Many shows in the 80s and 90s such as *Cheers* (1982-1993), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Frasier* (1993-2004), and *Friends* (1994-2004) began to focus on single, non-married people whose lives revolved around friendships. Programming for teens in the forms of “nighttime teen and young adult drama” also increased, such as *Dawson’s Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Emery, 2013, p.1190). Children’s programming became readily available in the 1980s through niche cable networks such as Nickelodeon and The Disney Channel (Kundanis, 2003, p. 156-158). Programming for children also became federally regulated in advertising practices and educational content by the Children’s Television Act in 1990 (Kundanis, 2003, p. 15, 139-140). During the development of niche cable programming and television cultural changes to friendship and the single life, TGIF used unconventional American families made up of biological parents, extended family members, and even friends and neighbors to convey traditional values of love, family togetherness, and friendship.

Today, Thursday night is king of prime time, as ABC has re-branded it to TGIT, Thank God it’s Thursday. TGIT is focused around three strong female-lead dramas created by producer Shonda Rimes (Bacle, 2015). While still a popular format, suspenseful dramas dominate the broadcast ratings, with sitcoms relegated to less popular nights or time slots (Rice, 2015). After a less successful revival of TGIF in the early

2000s (Pasiuk, 2005, p. 12 -4), ABC started focusing on drama series such as *Desperate Housewives* with over 20 million viewers and *Lost* with 18 million (Jefferson & Roberts, 2004). Reality television shows also started to rise in popularity, like ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003-2013) and *Wife Swap* (2004) (Jefferson & Roberts, 2004; Pasiuk, 2005, p. 14). Many of ABC's family sitcoms are part of the less popular Wednesday night comedy lineup, which finishes with drama *Nashville* at the prime nine o'clock slot (ABC11.com, 2014; ABC.com). These postmodern sitcoms do not employ a long introduction to the show's characters/actors, plot/premise, or the geographical location of a show. Instead, today's theme opens are ten to fifteen second graphical introductions with short music ditties. The diminishing length, detail, and need for theme songs can be reflective of new media's effects on television viewing. Although viewers now require less visual and lyrical information to get into a show, theme songs continue to be pieces of media nostalgia and recognition.

TGIF's shows were marketed as comedies and were successful with the coveted young demographic (ages 18-49) during their broadcast run, and have continued through syndication (Pasiuk, 2005, p. 12). *Full House* "was routinely a Top 25 show during its original run," and has continued to fair well in syndication (seven percent increase on Nick at Nite) (FoxNews.com, 2014). Older fans and younger generations are able to view the full series of *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Boy Meets World* through digital video libraries like Amazon Video. Decades after their first airing, sitcoms like *Full House* and *Boy Meets World* are being re-launched as popular spinoff series. Netflix will release its first season of *Fuller House* in 2016 (Netflix, 2015). *Girl Meets World*, which premiered

on the Disney Channel in 2014, was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Children's Program (Gennis, 2014; Emmy.com). Some argue that nostalgia for the 1990s have sparked these reunion series (McDonald, 2015). However, while viewers rejoice over these shows and many others returning to television, others claim that "all these revivals, reunions, and remakes [are] a sign[s] of the industry's creative exhaustion" (Breger, 2015, p. 68). Nostalgia may motivate reproduction, as "networks capitalize on our collective nostalgia, churning out more of what we have already proven we like," rather than financial risk new programming (Breger, 2015, p. 68). While "nostalgia for all things '90s" may be reason for revival, revival does not always measure a show's original quality (McDonald, 2015). While family structures and portrayals may have seemed cheesy or unrealistic in TGIF's family shows, their success could lie in their ability to make Americans laugh and relate their own families, as 'the most successful shows, comedies especially, have families that you can look at and see parts of your family in them' (France, 2010).

From the 1950s family to present day, television has aimed to sell an idea or culture rather than present realistic depictions of the real world. Although family structure plays a significant role in how families physically operate, it does not necessarily change their values or love for one another. However, it is important to continue to study and seek out the misrepresentations and misperceptions of the American family depicted in television in order to gain insight into how family is changing. TGIF's portrayal of traditional family values in non-traditionally structured families prepared the way for today's more modern representations of television families.

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