

“SILLINESS, SHENANIGANS AND GENERAL MISBEHAVIOR”:
DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS IN AMERICAN SITCOMS
FROM LUCY AND ETHEL TO LESLIE AND ANN

by

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Abstract

The portrayal of female friendships are a significant and influential feature of American situation comedies. This study conducts a comparison of female friendships pairings in four popular sitcoms that span across six decades to determine whether or not portrayals have changed over time. The analysis focuses on different aspects of conversations between the friends. The results reveal that while some aspects, such as the setting and the presence of advice, have changed over time, other features, such as who provides the advice and the results of the Bechdel Test, have remained the same. The results of this study point to shifts in power relations between the friends, as well as how audiences can perceive these relations and possibly apply them to their own lives. Further research in the area of a qualitative study would offer even better insight into the study.

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“Hoes before bros, uterus before duderuses, ovaries before brovaries.”

-Leslie Knope (Muharrar & Sackett, 2012)

Chapter I: Introduction

Leslie Knope from the NBC sitcom, *Parks and Recreation*, uses the above phrases to enlighten viewers on the importance that her female friends have in her life. In the episode, she introduces “Gal-entines Day,” the day before Valentine’s Day where her closest female friends get together and celebrate their friendship over brunch. The sole purpose of Gal-entines Day: “Celebrating lady friends” (Muharrar & Sackett, 2012). Just like in *Parks and Recreation*, female friendships have long been a staple of American television programming. From Lucy and Ethel to the women of *Sex and the City*, these female friendships and their importance have been embedded in popular culture. While these friendships may seemingly be an obligatory addition to a sitcom’s storyline, their importance lies in the ability to shape viewers’ expectations of friendships or relationships in their own lives.

Situation comedies, or sitcoms, have embedded themselves in the culture of American society. Debuting in the late 1940s, sitcoms over the years have introduced viewers to beloved characters, relatable storylines and entertaining comedy. While the evolution of sitcoms has brought a variety of changes such as character dynamics, or even filming styles, the humor in these programs remains throughout. Sitcoms have showcased many different types of relationships from the traditional, nuclear all-American family, the workplace family, to friends who act as family, among many

others. Female friendships have been exemplified on television since the 1950s and are still a relevant aspect of television today.

This study examines the friendships of Lucy and Ethel from *I Love Lucy*, Mary and Rhoda from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Rachel and Monica from *Friends*, and Leslie and Ann from *Parks and Recreation*. Each of these shows has a leading female who has become an icon in her own right. Lucy's slapstick schemes to break into show business, Mary's navigation of adulthood and single life as a working woman, Monica's motherly ways towards her group of friends, and Leslie's tenacity to make her town the best it can be all make these characters endearing. Their best friends may be perceived as inconsequential sidekicks, but they add substance to both the television show and the lead character: Ethel plays the "straight man" in Lucy's schemes but always ends up right beside her as an accomplice, Rhoda provides sarcastic humor when something goes wrong in Mary's life, Rachel and Monica's childhood friendship provides an important bond that is just as valuable in their adult life, and Ann acts as Leslie's muse and sounding board for many decisions that Leslie has to make. The bond that these characters have has become one of the enduring legacies from each of their respective television shows.

Existing research shows that women can learn about the importance of female friendship from television representations (Spangler, 1989, p. 14). In determining the themes or actions that structure these television friendships, researchers can gain insight into what cues audiences use to interpret messages about female friendships. These cues are important to study because these interpretations can be applied to their own, real-life friendships. Applying the framing theory and Foucault's power relations not only will

help discern how female friendships are framed in the media but will also provide better insight into the power dynamics within the friendships. Furthermore, the theory of uses and gratifications, as well as Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality, can help explore how audiences can use depictions of female friendships as a model for their own real-life friendships.

While there is significant research on the various types of relationships in sitcoms, as well as on how portrayals of female friendships can influence audiences, this study will contribute to the existing research by comparing specific friendship pairings across time. Comparing depictions from popular sitcoms that span across six decades gives the researcher the information needed to determine whether portrayals of female friendships have changed over time or whether they have remained the same. The researcher chose to explore these friendships through the conversations between the characters. This study examines specific features of their conversations to determine the power relations between the friends.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Television and the culture surrounding it have proved to be prolific areas of study. Accordingly, there is a strong foundation of existing literature from which to draw. This literature review will focus on three main areas: sitcoms as a genre, the four specific sitcoms chosen for analysis: *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Friends*, and *Parks and Recreation*¹ and the portrayal of relationships on television.

Sitcoms on American Television

Sitcoms, or situation comedies, are an important, prevalent, and beloved slice, of both television in particular and American culture in general. Mintz (1985) defines sitcoms as “weekly half-hour plays involving a recurring cast of familiar characters who face adventures initiated and resolved in each episode” (p. 42). There have been many sitcoms broadcast over decades and they have increased in popularity. Out of the top 10 programs in 1952, only one was a sitcom. In 1972, only three of the top 10 were sitcoms. By 1992, sitcoms occupied seven of the top 10 slots (Friend, 1993, p. 114). This trend declined over the next 10 years. In 2002, only three sitcoms were in the top 10, and by 2012 no sitcoms were on the list (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1696; Nielsen Tops, 2012). It is worth noting that *Survivor* premiered in 2000 and led the wave of reality television that swept television programming and continues to impact network television content. Reality programs give sitcoms a dose of healthy competition when it comes to Nielsen Ratings because the genre not only attracts audiences with its content, but also proves to

¹Throughout the literature review section, the television shows named are accompanied by the dates in which the shows aired. All dates were retrieved from the website <https://www.imdb.com/>.

be successful for networks due to advertising tie-ins and low-cost production. Minimal scripts, no need for sets, as well as the casting of “everyday people” instead of actors make the production of reality shows inexpensive compared to fictional programming (Douglas, 2006, 631). However, with reruns of sitcoms spanning from the 1950s still in syndication today and available on streaming services, newer generations can still enjoy the comedy that attracted audiences from the beginning and leaves an everlasting legacy on the culture of television.

Friend (1993) divides all sitcoms into two basic categories: high-concept comedies, which feature preposterous characters and farcical situations, and character-driven comedies (p.114). Character-driven comedies, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), tend to be the most beloved because viewers treasure the characters and their relationships more so than the writing or the jokes (Friend, 1993, p. 119). The classic comedy of sitcoms derives from the situation that the characters find themselves in and the predictability of how they handle each situation (Mitz, 1980, p. 3; Mitz, 1980, p. 8). Simply put, “What sitcoms have in common is that they make people feel good, make them feel comfortable” (Mitz, 1980, p. 4). While the characters and storylines have varied in all types of sitcoms over time, they have a simple, but important, commonality: the ability to offer viewers the idea that all of life’s problems are solved with humor and within a short period of time (Henry, 1994, p. 86).

While sitcoms remain a common genre in American television, they are certainly not new. Sitcoms made their debut in 1947 with *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947-1950) on the now nonexistent DuMont Network (Bianculli, 2016, p. 261). This inaugural sitcom had a simple concept: it followed the day-to-day escapades of straight-laced banker,

Johnny, and his wacky wife, Mary Kay (Bianculli, 2016, p. 261). Hundreds of sitcoms have followed since its premiere. Although sitcoms have evolved over time, they continue to highlight the shifting of American values (Glatzer, 2010, p. 8). When sitcoms first gained traction in the 1950s, storylines focused on the lives of traditional, nuclear American families (Winship, 1988, p. 53). Sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) exemplify this model with a husband who works outside the home and a wife who works in the home, cleaning and cooking meals, and tending to other household chores. The couple offers advice and wisdom to their children who are navigating the uncertainty of growing up. As the decade shifted into the 1960s, audiences became exhausted of the traditional family shows and writers decided to introduce “strange families” to audiences in shows such as *My Favorite Martian* (1963-1966), *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *Bewitched* (1964-1972) (Winship, 1988, p. 56). These “strange families” differed from traditional American families in that they had a family member or close friend who possessed magical powers or originated from another planet. Yet, they were still shown navigating the day-to-day challenges that “normal” families faced. Sitcoms of the 1970s deviated from the conventional husband and wife family sitcoms that preceded them by shifting the perception of what a family could be. Shows such as *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) not only reflected the social changes happening in America, but also changed the definition of what a family could be (Winship, 1988, p. 56). Instead of talking *at* each other like other sitcoms, these characters had conversations *with* each other about their personal lives, such as recapping a date they had been on the night before or trouble within their marriage (Mitz, 1980, p. 261). These conversations not only drew viewers in

with more personal details, but provided them with a new set of friends, instead of just characters to watch week after week (Mitz, 1980, p. 261).

Although the connection between the audience and characters grew, many television analysts and critics predicted that the 1980s would see the demise of the popularity of sitcoms (Gray, 1992, p. 467). The prediction of this downfall came from large amounts of workplace sitcoms that were on the air and the thought that audiences would grow tired of them, as well as the growing success of dramatic series such as *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-1988), and *Dynasty* (1981-1989) (Gray, 1992, p. 468; Bianculli, 2016, p. 275). Gray (1992) credits *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) with keeping sitcoms on the map (Gray, 1992, p. 468). *The Cosby Show* achieved great popular success; it is only one of three television shows to hold the number one spot in the Nielsen Ratings for five consecutive years and brought back the traditional family dynamic that was absent from popular workplace sitcoms (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1691-1692; Bianculli, 2016, p. 279). Sitcoms created in the 1990s brought a new pace to the shows. The dialogue and the scenes moved more rapidly, and one broadcast would be comprised of several different situations and storylines (Tueth, 2000, p. 100; Tueth, 2000, p. 103). For instance, in a season three episode of *Friends*, Joey is teaching a class on soap opera acting for the first time, Monica shops for a new bed and when the company delivers the wrong bed, Phoebe signs for it. Meanwhile, Rachel and Ross prepare to have dinner with Rachel's father, whom Ross does not get along with, and Chandler is dating a woman who is going through a divorce (Kurland, 1996). By the end of the 23-minute episode, the four storylines involving all six characters saw a resolution.

Even when these sitcoms changed certain aspects, such as the type of relationship, the shows still featured a family of sorts whether the bond was biological or not.

Something else that never changed across the different shows over time is the humor. No matter the situation portrayed in a show, comedy was always used to resolve it.

Although the popularity of sitcoms has fluctuated throughout the decades, they have remained an important part of American television culture. Whether it is the storyline, the humor, or simply the characters themselves, sitcoms provide a sense of comfort for the viewer.

A Closer Look at Select Sitcoms

Before analyzing the female relationships in the individual television shows, it is important to know the background, as well as the research that has been done on the sitcoms chosen for analysis: *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Friends*, and *Parks and Recreation*.

I Love Lucy (1951-1957). Premiering in October of 1951, *I Love Lucy* caught the eye of America immediately (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 8). Referred to as “one of the most enduring and influential transformations of a public persona in American culture,” *I Love Lucy* quickly became the most popular show on television (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 19). Starring real life couple Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, *I Love Lucy* displayed comic representations of married life. The show had a simple concept: A happily married couple that consists of a band-leader husband, Ricky, and Lucy, his wife. Lucy has a strong desire to break into show business, while Ricky has a strong desire to keep her out of it

(Kanfer, 2003, p. 123). The show turned contradictions of marriage, gender roles and middle-class life into a screwball comedy for millions to enjoy (Landay, 1999, p. 33).

Lucille Ball herself says, “People identified with the Ricardos because we had the same problems they had” (quoted in Landay, 1999, p. 33). While Lucille Ball’s physical comedy exaggerated these situations, it was still the familiarity that drew viewers in.

I Love Lucy not only obtained popularity on the air but made history in many respects. Behind the scenes, *I Love Lucy* revolutionized the way in which sitcoms were made (Landay, 1999, p. 26). It was the first sitcom to be filmed in front of a studio audience (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 17). Ball and Arnaz felt as though filming in front of a live audience would enable them to “recreate the sensation of performing for a crowd and feed off of the audiences’ energy” to create a more genuine audience reaction, similar to what they had experienced in vaudeville acts. (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 17). Another historical change the show brought was the number of cameras involved in filming the show. Producers used three cameras to film which allowed for long shots and close-ups to be done in the same take. This became a visual staple for this and sitcoms that followed such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) and *Happy Days* (1974-1984) (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 18; Bianculli, 2016, p. 268). It was not just technical developments the show made, but also revolutionized storylines. On January 19, 1953, Lucy Ricardo became the first television character to deliver a child. When “Lucy Goes to the Hospital” aired, 44 million people tuned in to watch. Compare that to the next day when President Eisenhower’s televised inauguration received less than half of those viewers with 20 million (Mitz, 1980, p. 46). The success of the pregnancy and delivery storylines was not only groundbreaking for *I Love Lucy* but also for sitcoms in general in that the storylines

expanded the boundaries of what was considered suitable for family programming (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 19).

The relationships within *I Love Lucy* are interesting in that the series revolves around a husband and wife couple and their everyday life. However, the bond the Ricardos have with their neighbors and landlords, the Mertzes, became an integral part of the show. Many episodes turn into a battle of the sexes pitting Lucy and Ethel against Ricky and Fred. In other episodes, Lucy enlists the help of both Ethel and Fred to plot against Ricky or to help get her on one of his shows. Just as prominent as the husband and wife relationship in the show is the friendship between Lucy and Ethel. Buchanan (2003) describes Ethel's role in the relationship as acting as Lucy's conscience, warning Lucy of the dangers of her schemes but then remaining loyal to her and most of the time joining in on Lucy's plans (p. 22). Seeing the bond between close friends, in addition to a husband and wife relationship, would continue in sitcoms that followed.

I Love Lucy continued for six seasons, airing a total of 180 episodes. On May 6, 1957, the last episode of *I Love Lucy* aired ending the series the same way it had begun, as the most popular show on television (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 22). In her biography, *Love, Lucy*, (1996), Lucille Ball talks about the show's impact:

Our show changed the Monday-night habits of America. Between nine and nine-thirty, taxis disappeared from the streets of New York. Telephone calls dropped sharply during that half hour, as well as the water flush rate, as whole families sat glued to their seat. (p. 215)

However, the popularity did not end when the final show aired. With the development of syndication, *I Love Lucy* was just as popular as reruns as it was when it originally aired

(Austerlitz, 2014, p. 23). Today, between reruns, DVD collections, and streaming services, *I Love Lucy*'s legacy remains and continues to reach new generations.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977). After her success of playing Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), Mary Tyler Moore was ready to grace the small screen once again in 1970, this time with her own show, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The sitcom would revolve around Mary Richards, a single divorcée played by Moore, moving to a new city on her own. CBS however, would not allow a show centering on a divorced woman to air (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 96). Instead, Mary Richards would break up with her longtime beau in the pilot explaining to viewers why she was a then-socially-acceptable, single woman (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 96). This character, purposely single and looking for a new job, was meant to attract a younger, “hipper” audience than other sitcoms on the network such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) and *Green Acres* (1965-1971) (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 97).

The driving theme behind *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was both navigating and balancing a career and personal life (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 100). The show also modified what a family could be. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s sitcom predecessors centered around traditional families but when Mary Richards moved to Minneapolis, she left her biological family behind. Instead, audiences saw her form strong, familial bonds with her neighbor, Rhoda Morgenstern, who was also a single woman, as well as her co-workers, Lou Grant, Murray Slaughter, and Ted Baxter at the fictional WJM news station. The show also familiarized audiences with serial storylines that crossed multiple episodes. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* allowed for storylines, such as Lou's divorce and the

aftermath, to extend across multiple episodes (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 103). In doing this, the creators trusted that viewers were smart enough and invested enough to keep up with both the characters and the storylines in the show.

In addition to showcasing a new kind of family, the character of Mary Richards was also an inspiration for a new generation of women (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 102). Women could see Mary as idealistic while being naïve, but under pressure, she was tough (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 102). This reflected millions of the young American women watching her every week and provided them with a role model (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 102). The show's employment of female writers opened the door for sitcoms to not only be *about* women, but sometimes *by* women (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 105). These differences led to the show being like its protagonist: "politely rebellious" (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 104). While the form of the sitcom is similar to its 1960s predecessors, the content sometimes pushed the envelope in terms of decorum (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 103).

Throughout its seven-season run, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* won four Emmy Awards and is a pioneer of 1970s sitcoms along with *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983). All three are credited with leading the way for more sophisticated sitcoms that followed (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 97).

Friends (1994-2004). *Friends*, which follows the lives of 20-somethings Rachel Green, Phoebe Buffay, Chandler Bing, Joey Tribbiani, Monica Geller, and Ross Geller, premiered in 1994, and was the last sitcom to dominate the Nielsen ratings (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 260). During *Friends*' 10-season run, it averaged 23.6 million viewers in the

United States alone and according to a 2018 article, it remains the fifth most popular program ever in reruns (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005, p. 281; Kutulas, 2018, p. 1172).

Friends centers around the tensions, pains, responsibilities, and gratifications that the main characters experience in their journey of becoming adults (Kutulas, 2018, p. 1175). The popularity of the show derived from the fact that Generation X fans were coming of age with the six friends and were learning how to navigate life in the 1990s (Todd, 2011, p. 856). While the premise of single people negotiating life was not new, the shows that came before, for example, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *Cheers* (1982-1993), focused on relationships within the workplace (Kutulas, 2018, p. 1175). Conversely, the characters in *Friends* met outside of a workplace setting in different scenarios. Ross and Monica are siblings, Rachel and Monica met in grade school, Chandler and Ross were college roommates, Chandler and Joey became roommates in New York City and met Monica and Phoebe after moving into the apartment across the hall. By having these relationships outside of a workplace, they became connected by shared experiences throughout life such as navigating professional careers, dating and simply conversing over a cup of coffee at Central Perk.

The show's most influential innovation was having six lead actors/actresses in an ensemble cast (Kutulas, 2018, p. 1180). From conception, all six lead characters were meant to be equally important to the show. Because of this, the creators adjusted the plot structure that had been used in earlier sitcoms in order to give ample attention to all six characters by using multiple plotlines (Kutulas, 2018, p. 1180). This need for thorough character development led to the introduction of origin stories in sitcoms (Kutulas, 2018,

p. 1180). This tactic helped viewers to gain a deeper understanding of not only the characters, but also the relationship dynamics in the show (Kutulas, 2018, p. 1180).

The characters and the chemistry between the actors was a demonstration of an “alternative family” or chosen family. Sandell (1998) states that *Friends* “captures and romanticizes the formation of alternative kinship networks made up of friends and neighbors, while also self-consciously citing and reworking sitcoms from the past” (p. 145). This self-selected family illustrates the progression of sitcoms and their character dynamics through the years. While *Friends* introduces a new cast of characters and more complex serial plots, the show also pulls influence from earlier sitcoms. The creators and writers of the show explored the interpersonal relationships as a basis for its plots, and this helped to make the viewers to feel like they were a part of the friend group instead of just looking in on the characters’ lives (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 503). The audience, as the show’s title states, was one of the friends of the group.

Friends seemed to achieve the perfect blend of humor, sentiment and comfort of the familiar that many later sitcoms would try to achieve (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 262). Although the influence of *Friends* is noticeable in other sitcoms such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), Austerlitz (2014) likens watching an episode of *Friends* to “flipping through an old photo album, a simultaneous experience in nostalgia and humiliation” (p. 269). This statement suggests that *Friends* can evoke a feeling of familiarity, friendships, and perhaps a feeling of being at home for its viewers. And based on the popularity in reruns and on streaming services, the experience of “nostalgia” is still one that America enjoys.

Parks and Recreation (2009-2015). The sitcom *Parks and Recreation* premiered on April 9, 2009 and centers around Leslie Knope who works as deputy director of Indiana's Parks and Recreation department in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana (Swink, 2017, p. 15). Portraying her as a "go-getter" who is passionate about her work in public service, the show follows Leslie's career advancement as well as the development of relationships with her work family and her best friend Ann Perkins (Swink, 2017, p. 15).

Unlike the selected sitcoms before it, *Parks and Recreation* uses a different style of storytelling, the mock-umentary. The series mimics the mock-documentary style made famous by its NBC predecessor, *The Office* (2005-2013). The mock-umentary takes the handheld camera style used in documentaries and uses it in a sitcom setting (Bianculli, 2016, p. 304). While *Parks and Recreation* followed *The Office*'s model, it paid less attention to "the fictional logic of its omnipresent documentary cameras" (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 350) meaning that the characters of *Parks and Recreation* did not acknowledge the cameras when going about their everyday life. No acknowledgment of the cameras allows for the filmmakers to capture glimpses of the characters' impulsive interactions and moments when they are caught off-guard while in their fictional world (Nardi, 2017, p. 80). However, the sitcom used "confessionals" where the characters would explain or talk about their feelings towards a moment that the camera crew had captured (Bianculli, 2016, p. 305).

Unfortunately, the first season of *Parks and Recreation* did not strike the successful balance that the show later would attain and suffered from low viewership (Farmer, 2015, p. 109). A change in Leslie Knope's character development would help

achieve this balance. Leslie goes from a good-hearted bumbler to a hyper-competent feminist role model who is ready to take on any challenge that comes (Farmer, 2015, 112). While the viewership ratings were not spectacular throughout the show's run, a loyal and consistent following helped to keep this show on the air. However, the show did achieve further popularity in the age of digital streaming as the third most popular non-original series to be streamed on Netflix (Katz, 2018, para. 4). This suggests that while the ratings and storylines suffered at the beginning of the show's run, the characters' friendships and development helped this show to become a beloved series.

As these shows demonstrate, families and relationships between characters play a significant part in the construction of a sitcom. Whether the relationship is biological or chosen, it is important to look at the different portrayals of relationships in sitcoms throughout time for insight into the messages that they can convey.

Relationships on Television

While sitcoms focus on the family, the changing definition of family allowed television to explore other relationship models. In the 1950s, television, especially sitcoms, focused on traditional, American family relationships (Winship, 1988, p. 53). These families typically consisted of a married heterosexual couple and in some cases, their children. As television moved into the 1970s, television shows introduced a different type of relationship where co-workers in an office setting, or friends who hang around a main character's home, became a second family, replacing the traditional family, thus straying from the commonly seen husband-wife relationship (Tueth, 2000, p. 102). These television shows reject the idea of what Tueth (2000) refers to as "locked-

door privacy” (p. 102). This means that the characters employ the idea of all being welcome into their home. Whether they are co-workers, neighbors, or friends from down the street, they are welcome to be a significant part of the main character’s life. This trend of an “alternative family” continued into the 1990s with shows such as *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2005) (Sandell, 1998, p. 145). In fact, when popular sitcoms did feature the biological families of the main characters, they were generally problematic and a little bizarre (Tueth, 2000, p. 102). For instance, in an episode of *Seinfeld*, George Constanza’s boss in the Yankees organization, George Steinbrenner, believes George to be dead when he sees his car in the parking lot and thinks he has been in a wreck. He travels to George Constanza’s parents’ house to inform them of their son’s death. After he expresses his condolences, George’s father, Frank, begins to yell at Steinbrenner for trading a popular baseball player, instead of being upset about his own son’s supposed death. All the while, George’s friend group knew that he was alive and well (Kavet & Robin, 1996). George’s father’s unconventional and indifferent reaction demonstrates a vast contrast to the way in which families, specifically biological parents, were portrayed in earlier sitcoms. The emphasis shifted from the biological family to the importance of friendships or chosen family.

Friendships have always been a very significant aspect of television shows, specifically in sitcoms. Press and Strathman (1993) go as far as to say that in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), Lucy’s schemes would be inconceivable without her best friend, Ethel Mertz by her side (p. 8). In most episodes, Lucy and Ethel were always together and planning different ways to rebel against the patriarchal values in their households (Press & Strathman, 1993, p. 8). “Couple friendships” are also a prominent form of relationship

in sitcoms, such as the Petries and the Helpers on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) (Spangler, 1989, p. 16). Even though all four characters were friends, Laura and Millie's friendship emerged on its own as a strong bond. Later audiences would see female friendships transform as friends such as Laverne and Shirley from *Laverne & Shirley* (1976-1983) would begin to talk about their jobs and professional careers instead of just their home life. The 1980s brought deeper relationships and perhaps a more realistic portrayal of friendships (Spangler, 1989, p. 18). Shows such as *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989) and *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) shifted the conversation to more serious issues such as divorce, single motherhood, and death (Spangler, 1989, p. 18). This shift in topic reflects a shift towards the authenticity of what was relevant to women in their everyday life. However, while these portrayals could be seen as more realistic, some sitcoms strayed from the strong friendship between females found in earlier sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) (Dow, 1996, p. 99). For example, in the popular sitcoms from the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *Roseanne* (1988-1997), both Clair Huxtable or Roseanne Conner are strongly connected to their respective families, but outside of the family they lack a strong bond with a female character, a stark contrast from the bond between Lucy and Ethel in the 1950s (Press & Strathman, 1993, p. 14).

The female friendship bond portrayed on television can be influential to viewers. In fact, Spangler's 1989 study found that women can learn the importance of female friendships by their representation on television (p. 14). Press and Strathman (1993) describe how Lucy and Ethel's friendship can be seen as "wish fulfillment" for the female viewers of the show who may want a "partner in crime" of their own (p. 9). While these studies focus on female friendships, they can also be applied to many different

types of relationships. Seeing a variety of relationships portrayed on television impacts how people think about these relationships in real life, making it important to study the relationships that they represent.

Chapter III: Theoretical Framework

This thesis seeks to examine the way in which female friendships are depicted on fictional television through conversation. In order to provide a foundation for this study, several theories will be applied including Erving Goffman's theory of framing and Michel Foucault's power dynamics. This study will also apply Elihu Katz's theory of uses and gratification, as well as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction of reality. Applying these theories will not only give greater insight into how female friendships are framed in the media but will also look at the power dynamics within the friendships. Applying the uses and gratification theory and the social construction of reality can be insightful to the messages that audiences garner from the depictions of female friendships and how, and whether, they use them to shape their own lives. Before applying the theories to this study, it is important to understand how the theories work.

Framing

Framing theory is useful in helping people because they can "quickly identify, classify, and understand large quantities of information" (Goffman, 1974, p. 11). The theory describes how the presentation of an idea or issue influences audiences' understanding of that idea or issue (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 17). By framing information received from a media text, aspects of a "perceived reality" are made more prominent than others (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As the salience of the specific topic increases, it "enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory" (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

Framing differs from other media effects by making information or ideas more *applicable* to a concept, as opposed to making them more accessible like other effects, such as agenda-setting (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 21). This means that frames are used to connect associations between concepts that are already known by the viewer (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 19). Information or themes from media can reinforce a link, but a frame is what builds the associations (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 19). Applying framing theory to the portrayals of female friendships is important because it can give insight into how audiences make sense of the representations that they see in the media.

Power Relations

Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), that it is difficult to recognize power when it is not in the context of the law, but more contemporary methods of power are “not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, and not by punishment but by control” (Cooper, 1981, p. 86). This makes it a much subtler form of power that is easy to overlook (Cooper, 1981, p. 89). Foucault states that power is a part of all relationships, such as romantic relationships or friendships (Cooper, 1981, p. 95). However, power is not something that people have or can acquire, because they are constantly involved in many different networks of power, but it is possible to be in a “more privileged position than others” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94).

Foucault introduces the term “spatialization” as being a principle of the science of discipline (Fillingham, 1993, p. 120). Spatialization is essentially defining a separate space and where someone’s “space” is indicates “who and what he is” (Cooper, 1981, p.

86). Therefore, a person or character in their own space is more comfortable in who they are, therefore allowing them to hold a more privileged position.

It is important to take a deeper look into the power relations between female friendships portrayed on television because as stated above, the power can be very subtle and easily overlooked. While subtle, these notions can easily be picked up by the viewers and applied to the expectations they have of their own real-life friendships.

Uses and Gratification

Elihu Katz's theory of uses and gratification studies what audiences do with media, as opposed to what media does to audiences. Unlike most media theories which, in the case of this study, would examine the impact that the portrayals of female friendships have on the viewers, uses and gratification explores how the audiences uses the portrayals to satisfy their own needs.

These "needs" that are set out to be fulfilled come from a variety of institutional areas such as family and religion, or from areas of self-identity and self-growth (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973, p. 165). In the case of this study, the need would be the viewers' real-life need for a relationship, or more specifically, for their own female friendship. A depiction of a female friendship on television can help to fulfill their need of a female friendship by acting as a model for what the friendship could be.

Social Construction of Reality

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction of reality describes how media representations can shape our world. Themes hidden in entertainment media

such as movies and television can impact the way people interpret the world and their own lives (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 15). This tells us that media representations can have “social control” over the reality of society. It can be assumed that media representations of female friendships can have “social control” over a viewer’s real-life friendship. This theory shows that by watching various female friendships on sitcoms such as Lucy and Ethel, Mary and Rhoda, Monica and Rachel, and Leslie and Ann, viewers can come to believe that their female friendship should reflect what they watch on television. Therefore, it is important to study the way in which these female friendships are portrayed.

Applying these theories will help to inform and make meaning of the messages that can be garnered from the portrayals of these on-screen friendships and how they can be applied to real life situations.

Chapter IV: Method

Statement of Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the depiction of female friendships through conversation portrayed in four sitcoms: *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Friends*, and *Parks and Recreation*. Existing research finds that women “can learn about the importance of female friendships” from representations on television (Spangler, 1989, p.14). Therefore, it is an important area of study because viewers can use the representation of these fictional friendships to shape their own real-life friendships. To determine what aspects can be influential to real-life relationships, this study will closely examine interpersonal dynamics of female friendships portrayed on television through their conversations. These aspects include: the character who initiates the conversation, as well as the character who has the last word in the conversation, the overall tone of the conversation, and whether or not advice is present. Additionally, the study will note locations where the conversation takes place, and whether the conversation passes the Peirce and Bechdel tests. By examining these elements, the researcher hopes to provide insight into the messages that sitcoms are relaying to viewers regarding the importance of and interaction within female friendships.

This study goes beyond prior research by specifically focusing on four specific sitcoms where the female friendship is a prominent feature of the show. Taken together, the sitcoms span over 65 years of television to examine whether the female friendships have evolved over time. Even further, this study focuses on the conversations between the friendship pairings. Observing exchanges between characters can be beneficial in learning about their relationships. This study examines the content of the conversations

by observing whether the conversations tend to be trivial, superficial and along the lines of small talk, or whether they are deeper, more meaningful conversations about each of their lives. Conversations such as these can give audiences insight into the role that the friends play in each other's lives based on what they choose to converse about.

The overall research question guiding this study is: How are conversations in female friendships between lead characters portrayed in sitcoms on television over time?

Sub-questions include:

1. Have power dynamics in female friendships on American sitcoms changed over time?
2. What is the tone of the conversation? Does it change throughout?
3. Is advice given in the conversation? Was advice asked for?
4. Who begins the conversation and who ends the conversation? What is the main topic of the conversation?
5. Where does the conversation take place?

Sample

The series chosen for analysis were *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015).

The programs selected are popular sitcoms based on Nielsen ratings that are each approximately 20 years apart. The spacing of 20-year increments gives insight into how sitcoms, and the relationships within them, have evolved over time. It should be noted that the length of time between *Friends* and *Parks and Recreation* is not a full 20 years. However, *Parks and Recreation* represents a popular sitcom from the 2010s with a

female lead and a significant female friendship that is part of the overall plot of the series. While other female-led sitcoms such as *Superstore* premiered in 2015, these shows do not offer the central female friendship that *Parks and Recreation* provides. Within the selected television shows, the study focuses on the friendships of Lucy and Ethel, Mary and Rhoda, Monica and Rachel, and Leslie and Ann through analyzing their communication with each other. The researcher chose these friendships pairings for analysis because the relationships are essential to the show in regard to both the storylines and development of both characters throughout the entire series.

A purposive sample was chosen for analysis. The researcher chose two episodes from each season of the four series, resulting in 54 episodes total. These selected episodes involve both characters and in some cases the storyline revolves around their friendship. It is worth noting that in the cases of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Parks and Recreation*, episodes from later seasons of both shows were excluded from analysis because the best friend characters of Rhoda and Ann both departed their respective shows before the series finale. Rhoda left in season four of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and Ann left in season six of *Parks and Recreation*. Both characters returned for the series finales, and each of those episodes is included in the sample. A list of the episodes included in the sample can be found in Appendix A.

Coded for analysis was each conversation between female characters within the episodes, resulting in a total of 141 conversations. The researcher chose the number of collective episodes because it provided a greater opportunity for a significant number of conversations to analyze. The episodes included in the sample were obtained from DVD

collections for *I Love Lucy* and *Friends*, and streaming services Hulu for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and Netflix for *Parks and Recreation*.

Analytical Approach

This study was conducted with a content analysis. A content analysis helps to accurately interpret the content as “a research technique for the systematic, replicable, and quantitative description of manifest or latent features of communication texts” (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 240). Therefore, it is a useful method to observe the themes in conversations within sitcoms. While earlier definitions of content analysis was only specific to manifest content, Klaus Krippendorff would later argue that content analysis should not be limited to surface features but should intend to interpret the deeper meaning of the messages (Baxter and Babbie, 2004, p. 240.)

Along with interpreting these deeper meanings, content analysis can help in “describing the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention” (Weber, 1990, p. 9). Because this study aims to assess the portrayal of female friendships in the media, a content analysis is most appropriate to use. Performing a content analysis is useful because it provides data that can be used to determine patterns in themes over time which will help to provide a result to the overall research question for this study.

Operationalization

The researcher developed a coding sheet to analyze the dialogue between the characters, the tone of the conversations, as well as the location where the conversation takes place. The Bechdel Test and the Peirce Test are also applied to each conversation.

(See Appendix B and Appendix C.) The unit of analysis is a conversation. In the case of this study, a conversation is defined by a verbal exchange taking place for a period of time in one location. A conversation concludes when there is a change of location or a different character appears and changes the subject within a conversation.

It should be noted that while *Friends* has an ensemble cast without a true lead character, Monica Gellar will be the lead character for the purpose of this study. The researcher chose Monica over Rachel because in the pilot episode, Monica is an established member of the friend-group while Rachel is meeting most of them for the first time. Also taken into consideration is the actors that play these characters. At the time that *Friends* premiered in 1994, both Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston had appeared in a number of smaller roles, but Courtney Cox was the more well-known name thanks to her appearance in Bruce Springsteen's 1984 music video for "Dancing in the Dark" as well as roles in *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994). For these reasons, she is considered the main character for this study.

As stated previously, the Bechdel Test will also be applied to each conversation. The Bechdel Test, originating in a comic strip by Alison Bechdel, gives media a pass or fail rating based on certain criteria:

1. There are at least two named female characters.
2. These characters talk to each other about something other than a man

(Bechdel, 1986, p. 22).

While the Bechdel Test can be appropriate when studying conversations between two female characters, as this study aims to do, it is not all encompassing. Therefore, the Bechdel Test is paired with The Peirce Test, created by female film director Kimberly

Peirce (Hickey, Koeze, Dottle, & Wezerek, 2017, Female Protagonists section, para. 2).

The Peirce Test was created to modernize the Bechdel Test because, according to women currently in the film and television industry, the Bechdel Test “doesn’t address the core inequalities in Hollywood” (Hickey et al., 2017, Female Protagonists section, para. 1).

The Peirce Test aims to ensure that audiences do not reduce female protagonists to a stereotype and that the characters have their own story that is separate from a male character’s story. This test focuses on female characters who have their own needs and desires and their actions stem from those needs and desires (Hickey et al., 2017, Female Protagonists section, para. 1). The media must abide by the following principles to pass this test:

1. Includes a female character who is a protagonist or antagonist with her own story
2. The female lead has dimension and exists authentically with needs and desires that she pursues through dramatic action
3. And the audience can empathize with or understand the female lead’s desires and actions. (Hickey et al., 2017, Female Protagonists section, para. 2).

Because the Peirce Test focuses on one character at a time, it is appropriate to pair this test with the Bechdel Test. In doing so, the researcher can gain insight on the individual characters as well as their relationship.

One coding sheet was completed per scene in which a conversation between the female friendship pairing took place in an episode. After coding the scenes, the researcher compiled a data set into an Excel spreadsheet. The sample generated 141 conversations for analysis. The independent variables for this study was the sitcom in

which the scene appeared, measured categorically as “I Love Lucy,” “MTM” (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), “Friends,” or “P&R” (*Parks and Recreation*). Of the conversations coded, 22.79% were from *I Love Lucy*, 18.01% from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 36.40% from *Friends*, and 22.79% from *Parks and Recreation*. The dependent variables were sorted into the following categories: who initiated the conversation, the tone of the conversation, whether or not the tone changed within the conversation, the presence or absence of advice, the presence or absence of advice being asked for, which character offered advice, who ended the conversation, the setting of the conversation, pass or fail of the Peirce Test and pass or fail of the Bechdel Test. Because both the independent and dependent variables were categorical, analysis was performed through multiple pivot tables and chi square tests. In total, 12 frequency tests and 10 chi-square tests were conducted using Excel. Within Excel, the researcher used the PivotTable tool, a manual calculation of the expected values, and the “=chitest” function to compute the chi-square tests’ probability level.

Intercoder reliability results for each of the variables in this study, assessed using Krippendorff’s alpha, was 0.80 or higher, with the exception of the “Tone Change” category which was 0.66. Intercoder reliability was computed using the “Reliability Calculator for Ordinal, Interval, and Ratio data” (ReCal OIR) (Freelon, 2013). In cases where there was a disagreement in coding between the two coders, it was resolved by using the researcher’s result, because it is understood that there is a better understanding of the research, and therefore the observations.

Chapter V: Results

As previously stated, Krippendorff's alpha intercoder reliability scores for all but one test calculated to 0.80 or higher. Table 1 lists the individual scores for each test.

Table 1

Intercoder Reliability Results

	Result
Test conducted	
Who initiated the conversation?	0.863
What was the tone of the conversation?	0.878
Did the tone change during the conversation?	0.661
Was advice given?	0.913
Was advice asked for?	0.830
Who gave the advice?	0.924
Who had the last word in the conversation?	0.918
Setting where the conversation took place	0.948
Peirce Test	0.888
Bechdel Test	0.893

Of the 10 chi square tests conducted, three tests produced significant results: who provided advice in the conversation, the setting where the conversation took place, and the results of the Bechdel Test. While these three tests were the only categories with statistically significant results, the chi square test for whether or not advice was given was nearly significant with a p-value of 0.057. Therefore, the results have been included in this section. The results for who initiated the conversation, the tone of the conversation, whether or not the tone changed within the conversation, whether advice was asked for, and the results of the Peirce Test produced nonsignificant results. For a comprehensive list of results for all tests, refer to Table 7 in Appendix D.

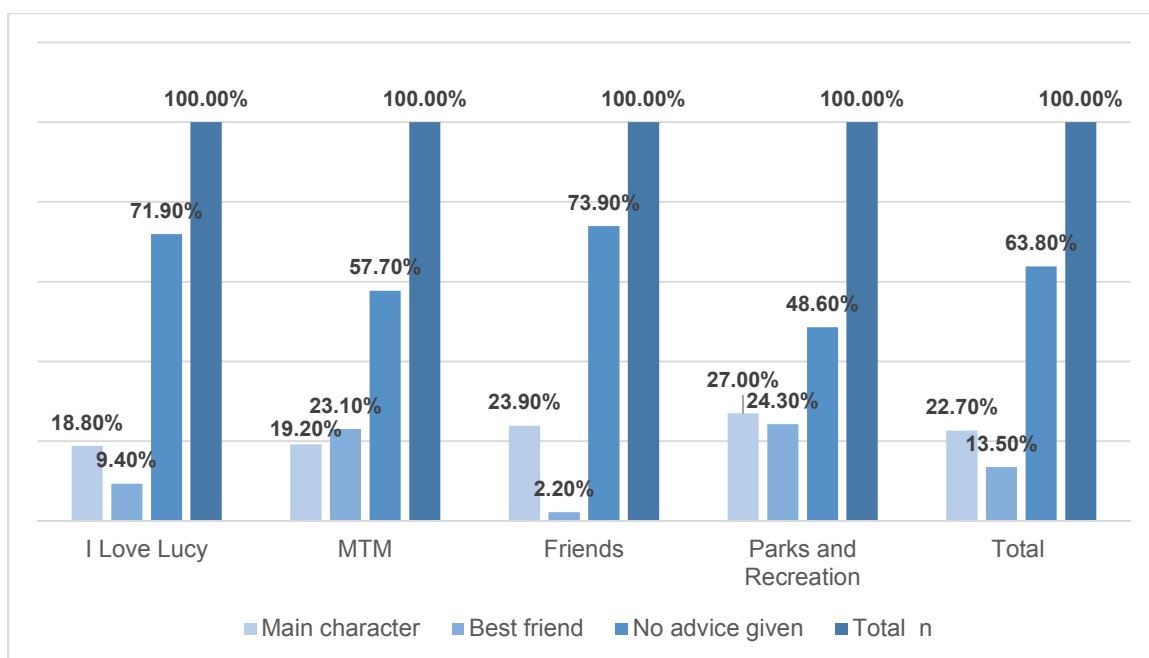


Figure 1. Who gave advice and show name crosstabulation.

In regard to which of the characters gave advice, the overwhelming response was that no advice was present within the conversations ($\chi^2 = 13.009$, $df = 6$, $p < .05$). (See Figure 1) A follow-up analysis excluding the “No advice given” option found that the main character provided most of the advice in *I Love Lucy* (66.7%), *Friends* (91.7%), and *Parks and Recreation* (52.6%). Only in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was the advice more likely to be given by the best friend character (54.5%). While the pattern was nonsignificant, due at least partly to the small number of cases involved ($\chi^2 = 6.591$, $df = 3$, $p > .05$), the probability was deemed small enough to warrant further investigation of the pattern in future research.

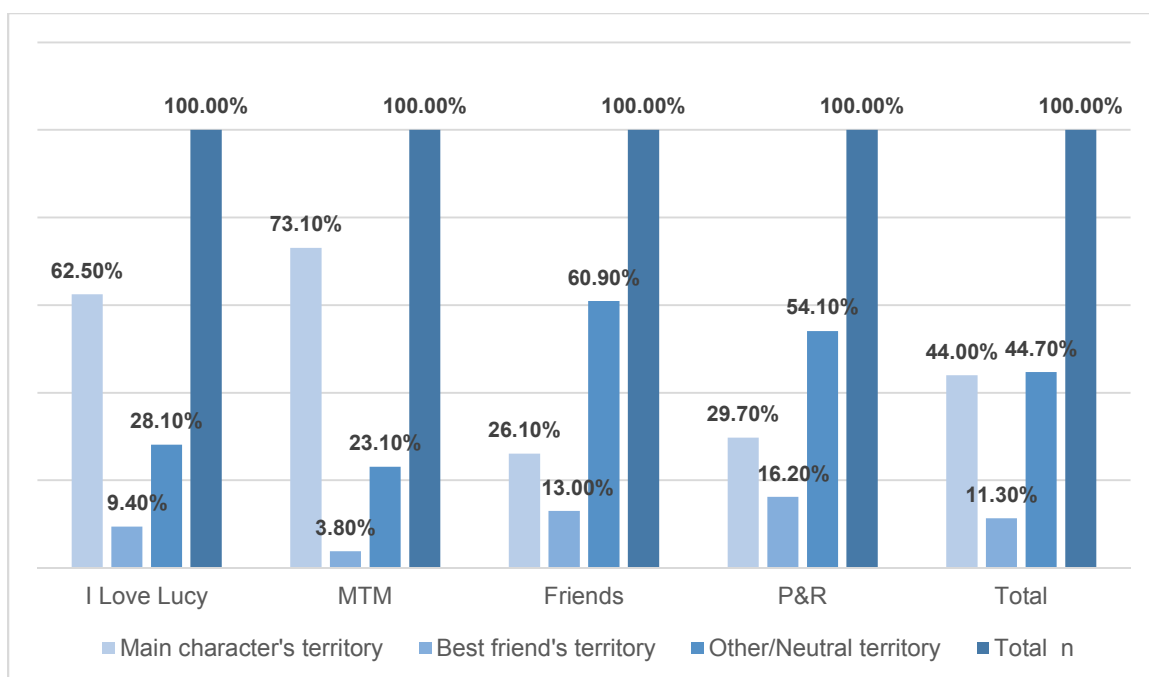


Figure 2. Setting and show name crosstabulation.

As Figure 2 shows, in both *I Love Lucy* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the conversations were more likely to take place in the main characters' respective territories (62.5% and 73.1%, respectively). *Friends* and *Parks and Recreation* produced a different result with the majority of conversations taking place in an "other" or neutral location (60.9% and 54.1%). The result is statistically significant ($X^2 = 22.953$, $df = 6$, $p < .05$). It should be noted that during seasons one through six of *Friends*, conversations that took place in Monica and Rachel's shared apartment were coded as "Other/Neutral territory."

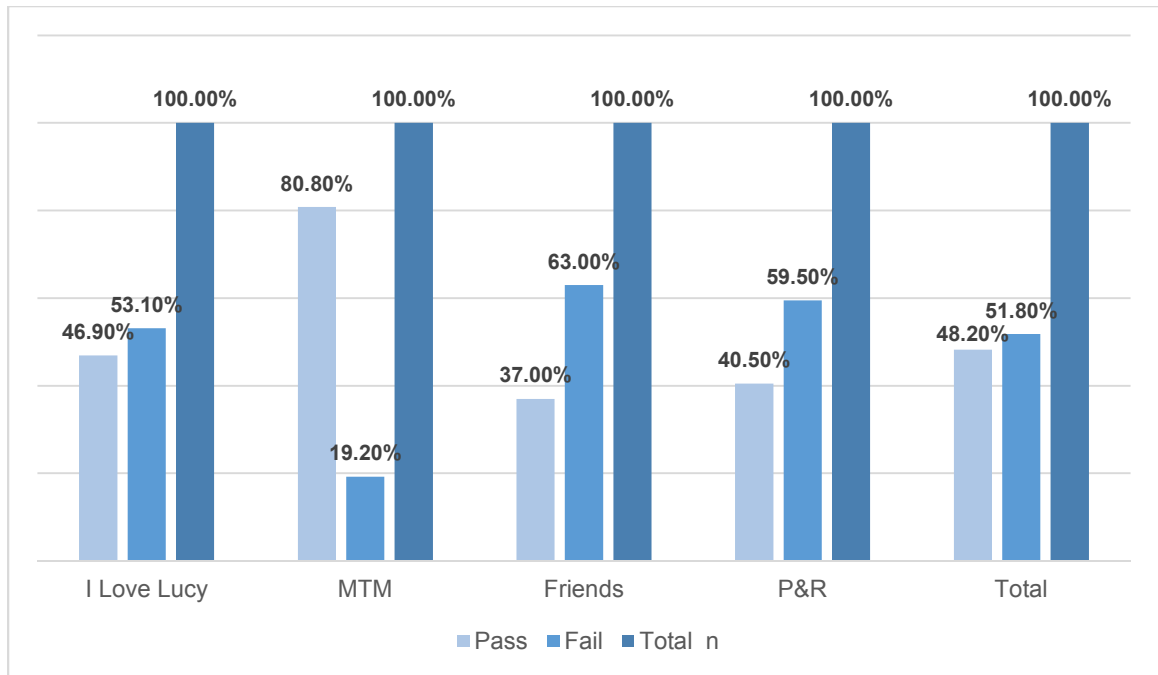


Figure 3. Bechdel Test and show name crosstabulation.

The results of the Bechdel Test (Figure 3) show that three of the shows failed most often: *I Love Lucy* (53.1%), *Friends* (63.0%), and *Parks and Recreation* (59.5%). However, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, produced a significantly higher passing percentage (80.8%). The results proved statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 14.267$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$).

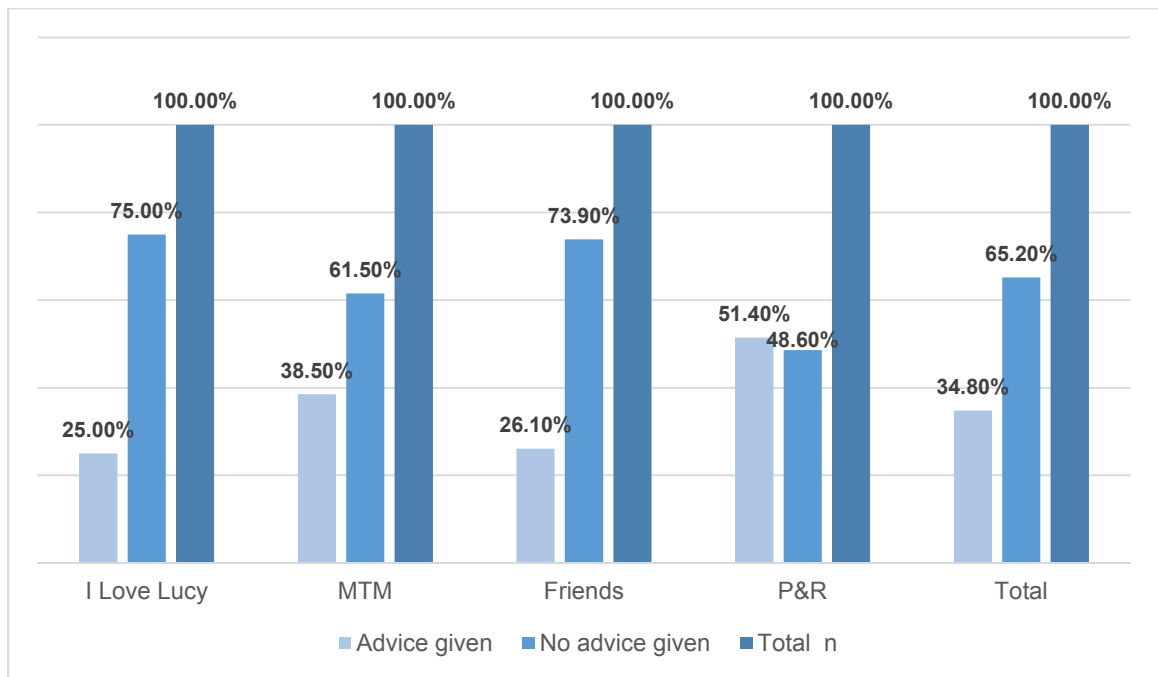


Figure 4. Advice given and show name crosstabulation.

While the test for the presence or absence of advice did not produce a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 7.519$, $df = 3$, $p > .05$), it is close enough to becoming significant to warrant further examination. Among the scenes examined (Figure 4), it was more common that advice was absent from the conversations: *I Love Lucy* (75.0%), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (61.5%), and *Friends* (73.9%). However, in *Parks and Recreation* the results were more evenly split, but advice was present in conversations more often than not (51.4%).

Chapter VI: Discussion and Conclusion

The genre of sitcoms has proved to be a significant area of study with research spanning from the characters, the relationships depicted within them, as well as specific sitcoms and the impact they have on popular culture. While prior research has focused on the way in which female friendships can be influential to viewers and how audiences can model their own friendships after those portrayed on television, it has neglected to look closely at the features of the friendships.

This study was tasked with answering the question as to if, and how, portrayals of female friendships in sitcoms have changed over time through conversations. Overall, the significant data suggests a change in portrayals over time, however, some aspects of the conversations have remained the same. For instance, more advice is given in the more contemporary sitcoms than in the earlier sitcoms. Perhaps this implies that the relationships are becoming deeper, in terms of relying on each other for advice about both major and everyday events. The setting where the conversation takes place has changed as well, with more conversations taking place in a neutral location as opposed to in the main characters' territory. This shift in location infers a change in power relations between the characters.

Conversely, what has not changed is the majority of conversations failing the Bechdel Test. This result suggests that conversations between women continue to revolve around men and the content has not progressed much. Although it produced a nonsignificant result, the results show that the characters have overwhelmingly passed the Peirce Test overtime. As stated previously, the Peirce Test was created to update the Bechdel Test in terms of stereotypes and to ensure female characters have a storyline that

is separate from a male character (Hickey, Koeze, Dottle, & Wezerek, 2017). While the failing of the Bechdel Test is a disappointing result, the overwhelming passing of the Peirce test shows progression regarding the way that females are portrayed in the media as well as carrying their own storylines.

The results of the study point to a few key elements that are worth discussion. An interesting pattern was in the test of who provided the advice in the conversation. While the overwhelming result was that advice was not given, a subsequent test revealed that when advice was present, it was more likely to come from the main character, except in the case of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. This can be explained by Austerlitz's (2014) description of Mary being idealistic, but still naïve. Perhaps the naivety of her character would lead to her needing the advice more than providing it.

On the other hand, the other main characters, Lucy, Monica, and Leslie are portrayed as more strong-willed and opinionated characters, so it is no surprise that they would be quicker to provide advice to their best friend, even if it is not asked for or even desired. A couple of relevant examples of this would be in *Friends*, in the aftermath of Rachel's bad decisions, she informs the group that she wants someone else to make all of her decisions for her. Monica quickly volunteers and spends the remainder of the episode offering Rachel advice on what she should do, and sometimes instructing her what she can and cannot do (Calhoun, 1998). In *Parks and Recreation*, Ann informs Leslie that she wants to go to the sperm bank to begin the process of becoming a mother. Leslie inserts her opinion, saying, "I fully believe that a woman should be in charge of what happens to her body. In this case, the body is Ann's and the woman in charge of it is me" (DiMeo, 2013). Being stronger-willed characters who are more inclined to insert their opinion, it is

no surprise that they are more likely to provide advice. This could also be a suggestion of power from the writers of the show. Perhaps they intentionally wanted the main characters to be seen as having more power than the best friend character.

Another pattern of note is the setting where the conversation took place. This study finds that over time, the location of the conversation has shifted from the main character's territory to a more neutral location. In *I Love Lucy* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the conversation was more likely to take place in the main character's territory. In *Friends* and *Parks and Recreation*, the conversation more likely occurred in an "other" or neutral location. As mentioned in the methodology, for the first six seasons of *Friends*, Monica and Rachel shared an apartment. Therefore, conversations that took place in their apartment for these seasons were coded as "Other/Neutral territory," which could help explain this shift. In examining the specific locations that were coded as neutral, other than the shared apartment, there was no specific pattern as to where they are held. In comparison, the neutral locations reported in *Parks and Recreation* appeared to be related to work, for example, public forums or work events.

This is a significant finding in that it could be implying the shifting of power relations in the friendship. Foucault's idea of "spatialization," expresses that by being in their own territory, a character can be considered to be in a more privileged position than another character. By shifting the setting of the conversations from the main character's territory to a more "neutral" location could suggest that power is shifting from the main character to being more evenly distributed between the friend pairings.

It is also worth reiterating the decision to name Monica as the main character in *Friends* instead of Rachel. In the pilot episode, Monica is already an established member

of the group, while Joey, Chandler and Phoebe are all meeting Rachel for the very first time. It is also important to remember that at the time of *Friends*' premiere in 1994, the actress playing Monica, Courtney Cox, was a more well-known name thanks to her appearance in Bruce Springsteen's 1984 music video for "Dancing in the Dark" and other television and film appearances. The argument could be made that at the time of this study, Jennifer Aniston, who plays Rachel, is the more well-known actress. However, the researcher made the decision based off of the character's standing in the group in the pilot episode as well as the actresses' prestige at the time of the series premiere.

Regarding the results of the Bechdel Test, this study finds that there has not been much change over time. The conversations across all series, with the exception of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, were more likely to fail the Bechdel Test. Perhaps this can be explained by the difference in Mary Richards' relationship status from the other main characters. Lucy is a married woman, and Monica and Leslie's relationship with their spouses are developed on the shows. But Mary, on the other hand, is a single woman and her status remains for the entirety of the show. While she had an active dating life, her conversations with Rhoda tended to revolve more around their careers and other life events that did not involve men. The significance of this finding is that it implies that a character's romantic relationship can play a large role in their lives, and therefore their conversations. This interpretation contradicts Spangler's (1989) claim of a shift in portrayals of female friendships in sitcoms to include more exchanges between friends that revolve around work and professional careers instead of strictly their home or personal lives (p. 18).

Another explanation of this result can be the fact that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not only centered around a woman, but some episodes were written by women (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 105). Intended to be a role model for women, it is possible that the writers deliberately created the dialogue to be more progressive for women.

Unfortunately, this trend did not stand the test of time. The fact that the majority of conversations in newer sitcoms are reverting back to failing the Bechdel Test implies can have a negative impact on its viewers. Based on Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction of reality, the hidden themes in media texts can affect the way that people interpret the relationships in their own lives. With a majority of conversations failing the Bechdel Test, it can lead audiences to believe that the majority of conversations that they have with friends should revolve around a man.

While most of the tests in this study produced non-significant results, it is worth mentioning a few patterns found in the results that further research could expand upon. The character who initiated the conversations has shifted from the best friend to the main character. Perhaps this can be explained by the shift in setting mentioned above. Since this study suggests that the majority of conversations in *I Love Lucy* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* took place in the main character's territory, it could be assumed that the best friend characters of Ethel and Rhoda would initiate conversations by essentially announcing their arrival in the main character's territory. For instance, Ethel calling for Lucy as she enters in the Ricardo's front door without knocking, or Rhoda simply saying, "Hey Mary," when she walks into Mary's apartment.

With the exception of *Parks and Recreation*, advice was most commonly absent from conversations and across all four shows advice was not asked for. Looking

qualitatively at the topics of the conversations can provide explanation as to why advice may not have been asked for or absent all together. In the case of *I Love Lucy* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, many of the conversations centered around predicaments that they were in, such as Lucy trying to figure out how to get a pound of cheese home for free, or Mary feeling guilty that she lied to a group of people about being a divorcée. However, they rarely asked for or offered advice about the situations they are in. While Ethel would simply go along with plans that Lucy came up with on her own, Mary and Rhoda usually worked as a team to figure out how to get through it. Ethel first resists Lucy when she instructs her to start eating the cheese, but eventually Lucy just shoves the cheese in Ethel's mouth. And Rhoda supports Mary as she comes clean to the group about being a single woman. With *Friends*, the topics of conversations between Monica and Rachel lead one to believe that the two were quick to share moments in each others' lives, such as Monica being unhappy in a relationship or Rachel telling Monica that she does not know what to do about feelings she has developed for Joey. Examining these topics of conversation begs the question as to why in situations such as these, neither of them would ask for advice or offer it to one another. It can be inferred that the conversations between the friends can lean more toward the trivial side, instead of relying on each other for advice or help.

Regarding the results of the Peirce Test, the majority of conversations were more likely to pass the test across all shows. This can be explained by the fact that all of the characters in the study were crucial to the storylines. Therefore, their needs and desires are more apt to be conveyed to the audience more so than a character such as June Cleaver from *Leave It To Beaver* (1957-1963). While June is a named character that is

important to the Cleaver family, it can be speculated that her character's storylines depend mainly on her husband and her sons. While still passing the Peirce Test, *Friends* had the lowest passing percentage with 65.2. This can be explained by Tueth's (2000) explanation of sitcoms from the 1990s comprising of several storylines within one episode (p. 103). This suggests that Monica and Rachel's storylines may have been more rushed than *I Love Lucy*, because they are having to share the episode with four other characters, while *I Love Lucy* usually revolves solely around Lucy's character. However, the predominantly passing results of the Peirce Test provide a positive outlook for the representation of female characters on television.

As evidenced by the results, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is an outlier in multiple categories. For instance, it is the only show that is more likely to pass the Bechel Test and is the only category where the best friend is more prone to offer advice. This is worth further exploration into *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as a whole. While female-led sitcoms were not an abnormal concept, as proved by *I Love Lucy*, it was uncommon to find a single woman lead the show. The literature tells us that the network would not allow the character of Mary Richards to be a divorcee, so instead they make sure the audience is aware why she is single in the pilot episode (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 96). This itself was very progressive for the time and because Mary was meant to be a representation for women of the time, it is very possible that the producers and writers had to be intentional with her character traits and her storylines. If Mary was to be as opinionated and rebellious as Lucy, but as a single woman in the 1970s, she may not have been as well-accepted. In terms of the Bechdel Test, perhaps the writers thought that if they put too much emphasis on her dating life, she would be perceived as being loose.

This calls to mind the theory of framing. The writers were having to combat how viewers' negatively perceived single women at the time. By shifting the perception of a single woman in the era to a successful woman who does not depend on a man, the perception can begin to change. This era was an important time for women in the United States and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was influential during that time by showcasing a strong, independent female lead. Perhaps this is a reason for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* being an outlier in this study because the writers were intentional and vigilant about how the character would come across to audiences.

The results of this study are limited by the sample size. While the size of the sample was able to provide significant results for three tests, a larger sample size would be needed to see if the other tests would produce significant results. Future studies should consider examining more episodes in each series to add to the sample size. Another recommendation is to include a series from every decade, instead of every other decade. Incorporating popular series from the 1960s, 1980s and early 2000s would help the determine when exactly a change in pattern occurred. It would also be beneficial to conduct this study qualitatively in order to determine themes in the conversations, in terms of what has remained and what has changed over time.

Overall, this study contributes to field of television research by comparing different portrayals of popular female friendships in sitcoms through their conversations. As prior literature states, sitcoms are a significant part of television history. Because of this, it is important to look at themes within the friends' conversations that have changed over time or that have remained the same.

This study infers that features within conversations such as advice being present, as well as where the conversations took place have changed over time. Whereas the results of the Bechdel Test and who provided advice has remained the same. The results of this study are relevant because it points to shifts in power relations between the friends over time, as well as how audiences can perceive these relations and possibly apply them to their own lives.

The friendships of Lucy and Ethel, Mary and Rhoda, Monica and Rachel, and Leslie and Ann's are an endearing and important part of their respective television shows as well as popular culture. While the friendships can be dismissed as a simple part of a series or storyline, the results of this study help to emphasize the importance of looking deeper into the relationships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Episodes in Sample

#	Name of Show	Season #	Episode #	Title of Episode
1	I Love Lucy	1	1	The Girls Want to go to a Nightclub
2	I Love Lucy	1	29	The Freezer
3	I Love Lucy	2	6	Vacation from Marriage
4	I Love Lucy	2	29	The Camping Trip
5	I Love Lucy	3	2	The Girls Go Into Business
6	I Love Lucy	3	13	The Million Dollar Idea
7	I Love Lucy	4	8	Ethel's Birthday
8	I Love Lucy	4	19	The Fashion Show
9	I Love Lucy	5	20	Lucy Gets a Paris Gown
10	I Love Lucy	5	26	Return Home from Europe
11	I Love Lucy	6	15	Lucy Wants to Move to the Country
12	I Love Lucy	6	19	Lucy Raises Chickens
13	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	1	1	Love is All Around
14	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	1	4	Divorce Isn't Everything
15	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	2	7	Didn't You Used to Be... Wait. Don't Tell Me
16	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	2	12	Is a Friend in Need
17	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	3	6	Rhoda the Beautiful
18	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	3	24	Mary Richards and the Incredible Plant Lady
19	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	4	19	Best of Enemies
20	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	4	22	Lou's Second Date
21	The Mary Tyler Moore Show	7	24	The Last Show
22	Friends	1	1	The One Where Monica Gets a Roommate
23	Friends	1	21	The One With the Fake Monica
24	Friends	2	10	The One With Russ
25	Friends	2	13	The One After the Super Bowl Part 2
26	Friends	3	8	The One With the Giant Poking Device
27	Friends	3	25	The One at the Beach
28	Friends	4	12	The One With the Embryos
29	Friends	4	15	The One With all the Rugby
30	Friends	5	2	The One With all the Kissing
31	Friends	5	20	The One With the Ride Along
32	Friends	6	2	The One Where Ross Hugs Rachel
33	Friends	6	6	The One on the Last Night
34	Friends	7	1	The One With Monica's Thunder
35	Friends	7	24	The One W/ Monica and Chandler's Wedding
36	Friends	8	1	The One After I Do
37	Friends	8	19	The One With the Tea Leaves
38	Friends	9	2	The One Where Emma Cries
39	Friends	9	20	The One With the Soap Opera Party
40	Friends	10	6	The One With Ross's Grant

41	Friends	10	16	The One With Rachel's Going Away Party
42	Parks and Recreation	1	1	Pilot
43	Parks and Recreation	1	5	The Banquet
44	Parks and Recreation	2	13	The Set Up
45	Parks and Recreation	2	22	The Telethon
46	Parks and Recreation	3	1	Go Big or Go Home
47	Parks and Recreation	3	13	The Fight
48	Parks and Recreation	4	8	The Smallest Park
49	Parks and Recreation	4	14	Operation Ann
50	Parks and Recreation	5	4	Sex Education
51	Parks and Recreation	5	12	Ann's Decision
52	Parks and Recreation	6	4	Doppelgangers
53	Parks and Recreation	6	13	Ann and Chris
54	Parks and Recreation	7	13	One Last Ride, Part 2

Appendix B: Coding Sheet

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Show Name | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. I Love Lucy | 1 |
| 2. The Mary Tyler Moore Show | |
| 3. Friends | |
| 4. Parks and Recreation | |
| 2. Season & Episode Number
Written (S#, E#) | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| | 2 |
| 3. Character that initiates conversation | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Main character | 3 |
| 2. Best friend | |
| 4. Tone of conversation | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Positive | 4 |
| 2. Negative | |
| 4a. If the tone changes during the conversation, how does it change? | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Positive tone turns into a negative tone | 4a |
| 2. Negative tone turns into a positive tone | |
| 5. Advice given | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Present | 5 |
| 2. Absent | |
| 5a. Advice is asked for | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Present | 5a |
| 2. Absent | |
| 5b. If advice is given, by whom? | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Main character | 5b |
| 2. Best friend | |
| 6. Character that has the last word in the conversation | <hr style="border: none; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> |
| 1. Main character | 6 |
| 2. Best friend | |
| 3. Other | |
| 7. What is the main topic of the conversation? | |
| | |
| | |

8. Setting where conversation takes place 8
1. Main character's territory
 2. Best friend's territory
 3. Other/Neutral territory
- 9a. Where specifically does the conversation take place?
-
-
9. Peirce Test 9
1. Pass
 2. Fail
10. Bechdel Test 10
1. Pass
 2. Fail

Notes:

Appendix C: Instructions for Coding Sheet

Code all scenes in which a female friendship pairing engages in a conversation.

Complete one sheet for each conversation coded.

A conversation is defined by a verbal exchange taking place for a period of time in one location. A conversation concludes when there is a change of location or a different character appears and changes the subject within a conversation. Only conversations held in person will be coded. This excludes conversations that are conducted over the phone.

It is important to note that while *Friends* has an ensemble cast without a true lead character, Monica Gellar will be named the lead character for the purpose of this study.

1. Write the number that corresponds to the show in which the scene occurs in blank one.
2. Write the season and episode number that corresponds to the show in which the scene occurs in blank two. It should be written as S#, E#. For example: S1, E5 for season one, episode five.
3. Write the number corresponding to the character who initiates the conversation in the scene in blank three.
 1. The main characters for each show are Lucy Ricardo, Mary Richards, Monica Gellar, and Leslie Knope.
 2. The best friend characters for each show are Ethel Mertz, Rhoda Morgenstern, Rachel Green and Ann Perkins.
4. Write the number corresponding with the tone of the conversation between the pair in blank four.

1. Positive tone: Characters are engaged in a light or encouraging dialogue. The conversation can be optimistic, constructive, or simply trivial.
 2. Negative tone: Characters partake in a serious conversation. The conversation can be confrontational, argumentative or unenthusiastic. This also includes conversations where a character is frantic or worried about a situation.
- 4a. Write the number that corresponds to the changing tone in the conversation in blank 4a. If there is no change, this question can be skipped.
1. The conversation begins in a light, optimistic tone, but the tone subtly or abruptly changes to an argumentative or confrontational conversation.
 2. The conversation begins in a serious, somber, or confrontational tone but in the midst of the conversation changes to a lighter, more optimistic tone.
5. Write the number corresponding to the presence or absence of advice in the conversation in blank five.
1. Present: Either of the characters offers guidance, direction, recommendations or suggestions regarding a situation pertaining to the other character's life.
 2. Absent: No guidance, direction, recommendations or suggestions are made.
- 5a. If advice is present, write the number corresponding to the presence of absence of advice being asked for by one of the characters in blank 5a.
1. Present: Either of the characters asks for guidance, direction, or suggestions from the other character such as, "What should I do?" Asking

for advice can also include statements not in the form of a question such as, “I need your help.”

2. Absent: No guidance, direction, recommendations or suggestions are asked for.

5b. If advice is present, write the number corresponding to the character who is offering advice to the other character in blank 5b. If no advice is given, please leave this blank.

1. The main characters for each show are Lucy Ricardo, Mary Richards, Monica Gellar, and Leslie Knope.
2. The best friend characters for each show are Ethel Mertz, Rhoda Morgenstern, Rachel Green, and Ann Perkins.

6. Write the number corresponding to the character who ends the conversation in the scene in blank six.

1. The main characters for each show are Lucy Ricardo, Mary Richards, Monica Gellar, and Leslie Knope.
2. The best friend characters for each show are Ethel Mertz, Rhoda Morgenstern, Rachel Green and Ann Perkins.
3. Other includes any other character in the show that abruptly inserts themselves into the conversation. This is also used if both characters are talking at the same time when the scene ends.

7. In one sentence or less, describe the main topic of the conversation discussed between the characters. For example, “problem at work” or “devising plan.”

8. Write the number that corresponds with the appropriate setting where the conversation takes place.
1. Main character's territory: This includes, but is not limited to, any room in the main character's home, place of business, or automobile.
 2. Best friend's territory: This includes, but is not limited to, any room in the best friend's home, place of business, or their automobile.
 3. Other/Neutral territory: Neither of the characters have claim to this setting. Can include any public setting including coffee shops or retail stores. For seasons 1-6 of *Friends*, this will also include Monica and Rachel's apartment because they are roommates and share their apartment.
- 9a. If the conversation takes place in the main character or best friend's territory, write the specific location in the blank provided. Some examples are, but are not limited to, the following:
- Living room: A large gathering place in the character's home. The room usually includes a couch and a television.
- Bedroom: The room where the character sleeps. It contains a bed, dresser or closet.
- Kitchen: This room has a sink, oven, stove and refrigerator. It can sometimes include a table where the characters eat their meals.
- Dining room: If the characters eat their meals at a table that is not in the kitchen, it will be considered the dining room.
- Office: The character's place of business. This room usually includes desks and office supplies such as computers or typewriters, filing cabinets and telephones.

9. Write the number that corresponds to the main character in the conversation passing or failing the Peirce Test.

1. Pass: The character has her own story and is shown pursuing her own needs and desires. The audience has a clear understanding of her needs. To pass, the character must exhibit **all** of the attributes.

2. Fail: The female character does not exhibit all of the above attributes.

10. Write the number that corresponds with the conversation in the scene passing or failing the Bechdel Test.

1. Pass: The characters talk to each other about something other than a man.

2. Fail: The characters' conversation revolves around man.

Additional notes:

Use this section for any additional observations that you believe are noteworthy. For instance, in a conversation between Leslie and Ann, they are both intoxicated. This could be significant to the analysis.

Appendix D: Comprehensive List of Results**Table 2***Show Name Frequencies*

		Frequency	Percent
Show	1 I Love Lucy	32	22.7
Name	2 The Mary Tyler Moore Show	26	18.4
	3 Friends	46	32.6
	4 Parks and Recreation	37	26.2
	Total	141	100.0

Table 3*Frequencies Table*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Initiate	1 Main character	67	47.5	47.5
	2 Best friend	74	52.5	52.5
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
Tone	1 Positive	72	51.1	51.1
	2 Negative	69	48.9	48.9
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
ToneChange	1 Positive to negative	16	11.3	11.3
	2 Negative to positive	22	15.6	15.6
	3 No change	103	73	73
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
AdviceGiven	1 Advice given	49	34.8	34.8
	2 No advice given	92	65.2	65.2
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
AdviceAsked	1 Advice asked for	14	9.9	9.9
	2 No advice asked for	127	90.1	90.1
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
AdviceWho	1 Main character	32	22.7	22.7
	2 Best friend	19	13.5	13.5
	3 No advice given	90	63.8	63.8
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
AdviceWho_2	1 Main character	32	22.7	62.7
	2 Best friend	19	13.5	37.3
	Total	51	36.2	100.0
	Missing 3 No advice given	90	63.8	
	Total	141	100.00	
LastWord	1 Main character	64	45.4	45.4
	2 Best friend	69	48.9	48.9
	3 Other	8	5.7	5.7
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
Setting	1 Main character's territory	62	44.0	44.0
	2 Best friend's territory	16	11.3	11.3
	3 Other/Neutral territory	63	44.7	44.7
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
Peirce Test	1 Pass	108	76.6	76.6
	2 Fail	33	23.4	23.4
	Total	141	100.0	100.0
Bechdel Test	1 Pass	68	48.2	48.2
	2 Fail	73	51.8	51.8
	Total	141	100.0	100.0

Table 4*Crosstabulation Results*

		ShowName				Total
		1 I Love Lucy	2 MTM	3 Friends	4 P&R	
Initiate	1 Main character	46.9	26.9	56.5	51.4	47.5
	2 Best friend	53.1	73.1	43.5	48.6	52.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Tone	1 Positive	50.0	69.2	39.1	54.1	51.1
	2 Negative	50.0	30.8	60.9	45.9	48.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Tone Change	1 Positive to negative	12.5	23.1	10.9	2.7	11.3
	2 Negative to positive	15.6	7.7	17.4	18.9	15.6
	3 No change	71.9	69.2	71.7	78.4	73.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Advice Given	1 Advice given	25.0	38.5	26.1	51.4	34.8
	2 No advice given	75.0	61.5	73.9	48.6	65.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Advice Asked	1 Advice asked for	12.5	7.7	6.5	13.5	9.9
	2 No advice asked for	87.5	92.3	93.5	86.5	90.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Advice Who*	1 Main character	18.8	19.2	23.9	27.0	22.7
	2 Best friend	9.4	23.1	2.2	24.3	13.5
	3 No advice given	71.9	57.7	73.9	48.6	63.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Advice Who_2	1 Main character	66.7	45.5	91.7	52.6	62.7
	2 Best friend	33.3	54.5	8.3	47.4	37.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Last Word	1 Main character	56.3	26.9	41.3	54.1	45.4
	2 Best Friend	37.5	73.1	47.8	43.2	48.9
	3 Other	6.3	0.0	10.9	2.7	5.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Setting*	1 Main character's territory	62.5	73.1	26.1	29.7	44.0
	2 Best friend's territory	9.4	3.8	13.0	16.2	11.3
	3 Other/Neutral territory	28.1	23.1	60.9	54.1	44.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

		ShowName				
		1 I Love Lucy	2 MTM	3 Friends	4 P&R	Total
Peirce	1 Pass	90.6	80.8	65.2	75.7	76.6
Test	2 Fail	9.4	19.2	34.8	24.3	23.4
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Bechdel	1 Pass	46.9	80.8	37.0	40.5	48.2
Test*	2 Fail	53.1	19.2	63.0	59.5	51.8
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Denotes a statistically significant test.