

Zach Smith - Communication Independent Study - Final Research Project

## Enlightened Sexism and Female Misrepresentation: Gender Issues on *The Big Bang Theory*

### Introduction



During its 12 years on the air, *The Big Bang Theory* was one of the most successful primetime sitcoms. The show gave us a lot of humorous and compelling characters, and the laughs from viewers had a lot to do with the comical take on everyday life, especially behind the awkward social encounters to which many of us can relate. One significant impact *The Big Bang Theory* had on its audience was its distinctiveness in showcasing women working in the field of science. While the show focuses on the events and interactions of the four main male scientists, we get to see the roles the female scientists play in their work environments, as well as their capabilities in a domestic setting. Including female scientists is an excellent addition because the show establishes the narrative of women working in a male-dominated profession, whereas other sitcoms play around the traditional norms where the female characters spend most of their time at home. Showcasing women in valuable positions sends a better message to viewers that they are as intelligent as men to fulfill the same roles as them in any job environment, and that no one should prevent them from going into a male-dominated field because of their gender. Although the show brought success with its comical taste and going beyond the traditional ideologies of gender, many of the stereotypes that emphasize sexism and downplay female intelligence were very prevalent episode after episode. All of the female characters had at least one stereotype go against them during the show's run, and, unfortunately, the messages do not imply that "we've come a long way, baby." In this paper, I will discuss several aspects of *The Big Bang Theory* that do not correctly fulfill the proper depictions of gender. I will focus on the role of the scientists and how they get portrayed; the impact of the "dumb blonde" ideology, and how it impacts certain attitudes, outfits, and personalities of a specific blonde character; and the significance of male characters using sexist and derogatory remarks on women. Lastly, I will conclude by

discussing how writers of current and future sitcoms should do to make the gender stereotypes less of an issue for viewers, so they do not become embedded in everyone's perceptions of society.

### The Show's Setup



The *Big Bang Theory* made its premiere on CBS on September 24, 2007, and ended after 12 seasons on May 16, 2019. While no new episodes air today, reruns regularly continue on cable stations, particularly TBS, and in syndication on local stations across the country. Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady created the show, and both served as executive producers and head writers of the show. Lorre has created other successful shows on CBS, including *Two and a Half Men*, *Mom*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Bob Hearts Abishola*. CBS has rights to all shows, and they were all distributed by Warner Bros. All of the shows have different premises, but they have similar audience demographics. *The Big Bang Theory* was most popular among the 18-49 demographic, and, throughout its run, generally averaged between 10 and 20 million viewers per episode and season (Watson, 2019). The show's rating was TV-14, and it was due to the consistent raunchy humor and inappropriate dialogue, especially regarding the frequent references to hypersexuality and sexual intercourse, as well as the persistent use of traditional gender stereotypes. A lot of the episodes and characters' goals and desires revolve around sexuality, which can send the wrong messages to viewers that sex is the ultimate goal of any relationship. During the series, both genders got regularly hit with traditional narratives about gender, especially the women. The male characters got portrayed as geeky scientists with peculiar interests, but most of the female characters had hyper-sexualization and low intelligence define who they were. Fortunately, *The Big Bang Theory* had minimal violence to tone down the ideologies of male domination, and advertising did not play a significant role in highlighting gender representations. However, the show's ongoing use of sexual and gender-stereotypical perceptions fit right into its satirical and comedic narratives, which did not bode well with every viewer. Most viewers laughed right along with the humorous jokes and punchlines, but some frustratingly shook their heads because of how unrealistic the show portrays sex and the norms of gender. Sitcoms should not overdo their presentation of gender stereotypes since it can lead to an imbalance with viewers on how shows accurately depict societal values. Unfortunately, *The Big Bang Theory* never found that balance; however, understanding the flaws of what went wrong can help future shows not implement any tactics to offend their audience.

## Characters



*The Big Bang Theory* revolves around the lives of four male scientists living in Pasadena, California. Physicists Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) and Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki) share an apartment and work together at CalTech. Their two co-workers and friends, aerospace engineer Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg) and astrophysicist Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar) share the same hobbies and socially awkward characteristics as them. Major female characters include Penny (Kaley Cuoco), a waitress and aspiring actor who lives across the hall from Sheldon and Leonard; neuroscientist Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik); and microbiologist Bernadette Rostenkowski (Melissa Rauch). As the series goes on, Sheldon marries Amy, Leonard marries Penny, Howard marries Bernadette, and Raj goes in and out of relationships. I will also discuss physicist Leslie Winkle (Sara Gilbert) when I go over the role of female scientists on the show. While she mainly appeared during the show's first three seasons, her actions and behaviors do not fit the ideal presentation of female scientists, which is why I feel her characteristics are relevant to figuring out how to improve the misrepresentations.

## Representations of Female Scientists



Scientists of all types, doctors, forensic experts, chemists, biologists, physicists, among others, regularly appear throughout films and TV programs. In shows and films that feature scientists, they exhibit intelligent features, but remain less attractive, sociable, or warm than other characters. Moreover, scientists are not shown as often as other professions in the mainstream media, such as doctors or law enforcement personnel. As far as the prominence of female

scientists are concerned, Heather McIntosh discusses three themes that go along with the emergence of female scientists into shows and films. The first theme is male domination in various science fields. Shows and films continue to include scientists that are male and white, furthering the traditional ideology that science fields are male dominated. The second theme demonstrates the disparity in valuing the capabilities of male and female scientists. A literature review explains how female scientists' capabilities get downplayed while their ineptitude gets played up in professional settings, where their lack of skills comes into play. These women become known as "naïve experts," where they might make scientific contributions, but their emotions define them the most. The third theme focuses on female scientists struggling to find an equilibrium. These characters frequently fall in love and marry male characters, but are not as likely to have children, and some may struggle to engage in romantic relationships. As a result, female scientists can succeed at home life or work life, not both (McIntosh, 2014).

*The Big Bang Theory's* setup goes beyond the first theme since the show has two main female scientists and one recurring female scientist among the four main male scientists. Having that setup helps tackle the traditional gender norms regarding male-dominant professions that have gone against women dating back to the mid-20th century. The show relates to the ranks of programs such as *Law & Order* (Lieutenant Anita Van Buren), *The Closer* (Deputy Police Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson), and *The West Wing* (White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg) that feature women in male-dominated positions. While those shows and others with women in top roles looked to flip the switch from enlightened sexism to embedded feminism to help present aspirational characters (Douglas, 2010, p. 278), *The Big Bang Theory* failed to do so, where it got left with perceptions of female scientists not living up to their true capabilities. That philosophy is why the show falls under the second and third themes of McIntosh's analysis of female scientists, especially more so with Bernadette than Amy or Leslie; although, the latter two bring other common narratives to the table (i.e., intelligence and social interactions, manipulative relationships). While *The Big Bang Theory* did an excellent job adding female scientists into the mix, it did not minimize the traditional stereotypes of their intellectualism for their work and home lives. More work needs to get done for providing women to get better represented as hard-working in the position in which they work, and for some, juggling it with their duties as a mother. Women working in male-dominated roles gives programming a better feminist reputation, but ensuring they get portrayed for the insightful contributions they make instead of presenting their wrongdoings will help improve the potential they bring to any role in any field.

## Bernadette and Amy

### Professional Role and Intellectual Representations



Often, professional aspirations for female characters become an opportunity for ridicule within sitcoms. The humor looks to highlight social issues, and reinforce the dominant social values regarding those issues (McIntosh, 2014). On *The Big Bang Theory*, the reinforcing nuances appear through Bernadette and Amy’s discussions of their areas of expertise and their careers, their work performances, and their external recognitions for their achievements. Amy gets portrayed with more knowledge and insight, whereas Bernadette gets portrayed as the “naïve expert” because of her frequent mishaps that take place on the job, as well as a “ditzy blonde” for her absent-minded and careless attitudes. For example, she mentions making a pinky swear with her colleagues about crossing the ebola virus with the common cold virus, which could lead to catastrophic implications. When Howard questions her about the wisdom of doing so, she smiles hugely and denies it (“The Desperation Emanation,” 2010). In another episode, Bernadette misses a key event because she remains under quarantine for possible yellow fever because of drinking out of contaminated petri dishes (“The Justice League Recombination,” 2010). Those narratives give viewers the notion that women are not fit to work in science because they are not as skilled as men to lead their company to success. The show adds Bernadette’s mishaps as a way to humorously emphasize the faults female scientists might make in their work environment, which distorts our perceptions for the true capabilities and qualities they can provide for their specialized field.



As far as Bernadette’s career and achievements go, they only get spoken of, and she does not use them in a practical setting that often. The mentions of her accomplishments usually bear some

comedic implications to them either at her or Howard's expense. For instance, at the end of the fourth season, Bernadette announces that she successfully defended her dissertation and earned her Ph.D., and she then announces being recruited by a pharmaceutical company and getting paid a "buttload" of money. The announcement gets used to downplay Howard for his lack of Ph.D. and his less-significant career ("The Roommate Transmogrification," 2011). Howard being the only scientist not having a Ph.D is a recurring joke throughout the series, and Bernadette uses it to emphasize her intelligence and dominance in their relationship. While that is the case, her work ethic as a scientist does not fully validate her overall intelligence. Along with how her accidents go against her, she does not appear in a lab setting throughout the show's run. Scientists and workers in other professions normally get shown in their work environment, but Bernadette never got seen working with her equipment and doing experiments. She does get shown in an office when she video chats from work, and she visits other characters' labs, but her time in her lab is nonexistent. All employees in shows and films, regardless of gender, should get shown in their work environments to show the progress of projects and assignments they are working on, so it validates how their work ethic plays a role on themselves and others. Not showing someone in their work space does not add to the same degree of excellence since it sends the message that they might not take their work seriously. Providing a better account for the level of work one accomplishes will allow us to see the contributions he or she makes, and if it is positive, which it should be, we will have better perceptions of work ethics and knowledge that folks in society have to lead the organization.



Amy gets portrayed in a better sense regarding her knowledge and experience, and her achievements are more notable. She represents the more traditional intelligent female character shown in other sitcoms, such as Lisa on *The Simpsons*. Since Amy becomes a mirror to Sheldon, she must be intelligent, but sometimes her intelligent interactions came off as awkward. For example, Amy lacks the ability to understand social cues. She is unable to function in what folks call "normal" social situations, such as searching on the internet on the elements for the perfect sleepover ("The 21-Second Excitation," 2010). Amy also relies on Penny and Bernadette to teach her feminine activities, including painting nails, applying makeup, and wearing heels. Lauren Sele believes that Amy's personality, especially her lack of "feminine" knowledge, is a negative representation of women working in science, and her unnatural social attributes do not

go along with her profession (D'Amore, 2014, p. 212-213). Amy's socially awkward personality goes along with how she shies away from traditional feminine qualities in favor of ones that highlight her level of expertise in science. She refers to neuroscience and even specific studies as examples to explain the dilemmas behind other people's behaviors (i.e., animals enacting revenge on others to regain power). She also finds creative solutions to certain problems, such as using an electric toothbrush for handling sexual urges ("The Toast Derivation," 2011). She regularly uses her knowledge to educate others, engage in ongoing projects, and challenge Sheldon on the grounds of her own discipline. For instance, in one episode, Sheldon critiques Amy's brain slicing, and instead of accepting his criticism, she asserts that her work is suitable for the "two-photon" microscope she is using ("The Alien Parasite Hypothesis," 2010). In another episode, Sheldon takes his mandatory vacation in Amy's lab, where she has him cleaning beakers and counting phenomena. Even though Sheldon asserts his expertise in science and even in biology, Amy quickly shows the gaps in his knowledge and abilities and asserts not only her expertise, but also her confidence in her work ("The Vacation Solution," 2012). Amy has a vast scientific knowledge, and keeps using it to highlight her intellectualism and the capabilities she possesses within her role. Her intelligence provides a better framework for how the intelligence of female scientists should get presented. However, showcasing them in more realistic social situations will make us see that her relationships flow more fluidly regarding interests and activities, rather than asserting knowledge during times where it might get viewed as irrelevant and inappropriate.

Like Bernadette, Amy has a Ph.D in her area of expertise. However, Amy's achievements hold more significance than Bernadette's because of her contributions and work ethic. Amy actively appears working in her lab, where we see her regularly work with no major distractions preventing her from establishing breakthroughs. Bernadette may have a Ph.D, but she rarely demonstrates her competence (McIntosh, 2014), which takes a downfall on the representations of female scientists. Amy does not use her Ph.D to claim knowledge superiority to Sheldon, but she applies it to social and scientific situations throughout the show. However, there have been a few times where Sheldon overlooks Amy's achievements in favor of his own. In one instance, Sheldon boasts about his Twitter account reaching 100 followers, and that he created a palindrome, "Nice hat, Bob Tahecin." At the same time, Amy shares that her single-author study got accepted as the cover article in a major publication. However, Sheldon downplays Amy through humor by asserting the importance of his Twitter followers, and she gets upset at him for not recognizing her accomplishment. With Penny's help, Sheldon buys Amy a tiara, which goes along with the narrative of the boyfriend finding a way to make up his behavior to his girlfriend ("The Shiny Trinket Maneuver," 2012). Amy made a lot of progress as a scientist throughout the series, but in that moment, Sheldon made it seem that her achievement was not as worthy. His actions mirror the notions that women do not get fully recognized for their accomplishments, and what men do is what matters most. Shows and films should never downplay women's successes,



since it will show female viewers that their contributions do not hold the same weight as the ones men bring, which can cause their self-esteem and motivation to take a hit. Implementing better approaches to highlight female achievement will make women feel that their voices matter in all that they do, and they will have a better outlook on themselves to succeed and boost their pride.

### Gender Role Representations



Traditional sitcoms follow specific gender roles where men get cast as the breadwinners, and women as the homemakers (i.e., *I Love Lucy*, *The Brady Bunch*). Men exercise power over the family, while women cater to support men's needs (McIntosh, 2014). With the feminist movements in the 1960s, they opened the door for portrayals of women in work environments outside the home. Shows such as *Julia* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* focused on women's roles in the workplace, and highlighted the successes they brought for themselves and their companies. *The Big Bang Theory* failed to present fluid gender roles for Bernadette and Amy, especially with misrepresentations of relationship struggles, and the inability to properly handle work and home life simultaneously. The show's faulty arrangement provides that full-time women cannot succeed at both work and home, which distorts our perceptions of the intelligence they bring in all facets of their lives, and how the imbalance impacts the relationships with their significant others.

Bernadette struggles the most with the expectations regarding homemaker and mother. When Howard moves into her apartment, he expects her to take over the roles his mother performed for him. For instance, after an evening of love-making, Howard gets ready to go home, and Bernadette claims that him leaving makes her feel "cheap." Howard wants to leave because he helps his mother in the morning, but after a fight with his mother, he decides to move in with Bernadette. Right away, he wants her to do the same chores his mother would do for him: doing his laundry, shopping for string cheese and detergent, and taking him to the dentist. Bernadette resists these impositions, and Howard moves back home ("The Cohabitation Formulation," 2011). While Howard looks to label Bernadette with specific gender roles as homemaker and mother, she frequently adopts more masculine roles within the relationship. Even though he works as an engineer, she is the breadwinner because she is the one with the important career



that supports them both. Bernadette also manages the budget and keeps Howard in line about not spending money frivolously. In one occurrence, Howard and Raj purchase a \$5,000 3D printer, with which they make a plastic whistle and action figures. When Howard surprises her with the toys, Bernadette likes them, until she finds out the printer's cost, and then yells at him for his irresponsibility. She makes Howard get back the \$2,500 he invested in the printer and she puts him on an allowance ("The Cooper/Kripke Inversion," 2013). Other hints to his bad financial habits come before they get married, when her father demands him to sign a prenuptial agreement because she makes that much more money than he does ("The Vacation Solution," 2012).



Although tension rises between Bernadette and Howard, she remains supportive and caring to him. When Howard trains to become an astronaut before he launches into space to spend three weeks on the International Space Station, he panics about everything from the zero-gravity training and the launch to the weightlessness he will experience. One drill forces him to survive in the wild overnight, and he gets spooned by an armadillo and eats a butterfly. Bernadette listens to his complaining and his fears, offers moral support over the phone, and sends him fresh underwear. At one point the experience becomes too much for him, and she packs up and goes to his hotel room to help him through the difficulties of the training, only to find his mother already there running a bath for him ("The Werewolf Transformation," 2012). As much as she assumes the breadwinner role, Bernadette also plays the caretaker role, though the role sometimes becomes a competition with Howard's mother because of how much motherly support she gave him throughout his life. Despite the positive caretaking representations, Bernadette and Howard's relationship goes along with the traditional narratives where the husband has the wife take care of major household tasks, and how the husband makes careless financial decisions without wife consultation. Viewers should have a better sense of how a relationship works both ways, and that one partner sits back and goes wild, and expects the other partner to do all of the work. Shows and films need to do a better job of presenting adequate communication for any marriage and relationship, where the husband and wife discuss tasks that need to get done and any major financial purchases they want to pursue.

For Amy, the sense of being female and developing feminine gender roles becomes less fluid and less neatly defined, especially because of her relationship with Sheldon remaining awkward and

unclear about its future. Amy wants a traditional relationship than what Sheldon currently wants, but he remains avoidant or clueless about following through with those conventions. Her desire for strengthening the relationships comes through in traditional ways. For instance, she invites Sheldon to her aunt's birthday party; however, he declines the offer, so he can spend the weekend playing video games with the guys ("The Weekend Vortex," 2012). In another episode, Amy draws on neuroscience theories to transfer Sheldon's affectionate feelings from some areas of his life to her. She makes a special dinner just for him with some of his favorite things, including spaghetti with cut-up hot dogs, strawberry Quik, and Super Mario Bros. music, and he soon admits that he finds himself thinking more often about Amy ("The Launch Acceleration," 2012). Less traditionally, Sheldon and Amy establish a "boyfriend-girlfriend" relationship that is bound by a "relationship agreement," which outlines the framework of their behaviors and expectations that they should maintain toward each other. The agreement generally favors Sheldon, however Amy gets the benefit of a monthly date night and occasional hand-holding. One time, Amy lied about being sick to Sheldon with the intention to deceive, so she could gain attention from him, which resulted in him giving her chest rubs, baths, and, as punishment for the lying, a spanking, all of which she enjoyed ("The Fish Guts Displacement," 2012).



As far as traditional domestic roles go for Amy, she also falls under the role of caretaker, especially as a way to get and keep Sheldon's attention. She also offers a domesticating force on him, especially since his intelligence frequently becomes his excuse for his social awkwardness. She regularly explains to him the proper ways to behave in particular situations throughout his life. In one instance, Penny helps Sheldon with his "Fun with Flags" videos, and invites him to see her perform in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but he does not want to because of how boring it sounds. Amy reminds him that the appropriate approach is to return the favor and see her perform, which he ends up doing ("The Monster Isolation," 2013). In another episode, Amy suggests Sheldon's failure as a teacher comes back to haunt him due to his difficulties in interacting with others. While they both exhibit awkward social interactions due to intelligence, she does everything she can to normalize Sheldon into a more traditional, masculine role ("The Thespian Catalyst," 2011). Amy and Sheldon are a great match for each other because they share similar personalities, and they enforce their knowledge in nearly all interactions of their lives. However, the one attribute that goes along as stereotypical is Sheldon's controlling attitude. The roommate agreement gets used more so to favor him, and, most of the time, if there is something that he does not want to do because of how boring it will be for him, he is not afraid to express

those opinions to others. Portraying men that are controlling and selfish enhance male authority, which adds to making women feel less superior about themselves. Providing more content that makes men consider the feelings of others will help bring down the dominant male portrayals, which will help work toward establishing an equilibrium with no one dominant gender.

### Intellectual and Sexual Dominance: The Presentation of Physicist Leslie Winkle



Leslie Winkle was another female scientist who appeared in earlier seasons of *The Big Bang Theory*. She worked in the same lab as Leonard, and the two of them dated for a short period. She also dated Howard for a brief time before he got together with Bernadette. When she got depicted at the lab, Leslie would improperly use the equipment to prepare food. For example, she flash-froze a banana with liquid nitrogen, then smashed it and put it in her cereal, and another time she used a helium-neon laser to heat instant soup. Despite her incompetence with the equipment, Leslie is knowledgeable and takes her job seriously. Like Amy, she used her intelligence to assert her capabilities; however, she was more dominant in showcasing her smarts, especially to Sheldon. Leslie is unapologetic about her intelligence and chooses to flaunt it openly. For instance, when Leonard, Raj, and Howard asked her to replace Sheldon in the Physics Bowl competition, she refers to him as an “arrogant, misogynistic east Texas doorknob” (“The Bat Jar Conjecture,” 2008). When she was regularly on the show, Sheldon frequently insulted Leslie, by saying that her research is sloppy, asserting that she is arrogant about loop quantum gravity and that the only way she can contribute to science would be if NASA continues to send chimps to space. In return, she showcased an indifference to him, and when she could, she would insult him by calling him “dumbass,” and saying that he had been nominated for dumbass laureate of the year. Furthermore, as Amanda Stone explains, “[Leslie] refuses to bow down to the ‘genius’ of Sheldon Cooper and actively participates in proving to him that female scientists are capable of the same levels of intelligence that he himself possesses” (D’Amore, 2014, p. 215-217). Showing Leslie as foolish with the equipment and with a flaunting and insulting attitude that complements her intelligence is not the best approach to representing female scientists. They should get shown with more thoughtfulness and care when working with the equipment, so it does not go along with the traditional notions of women failing at male-dominated professions. Moreover, female scientists should not use their

intelligence as a means to pronounce dominance and ridicule to those who do not agree with their personality or research. Instead, intelligence should contribute to research cooperation and insight regarding company decisions and policies.



During her appearances on the show, Leslie openly expressed her sexual experiences on several occasions. When she was dating Leonard, she admitted to him that she found him sexually attractive after seeing him practice the cello. She says to him, “Just so we’re clear, you understand that me hanging back to practice with you is a pretext for letting you know that I’m sexually available” (“The Hamburger Postulate,” 2007). The exchange made it clear that Leslie was open to a sexual relationship, and, often, she would explicitly share her desires. At first, Leslie did not want a romantic relationship with Leonard, but she was more interested in sexual arousal and satisfaction. However, when they begin a romantic relationship, she takes over the “male” role by telling him what they are going to do, and ending with “light petting, no coitus” (“The Codpiece Topology,” 2008). As Stone discusses, the way Leslie sets rules and regulations for her romantic and sexual relationships is unusual for mainstream television, and her relationship with Howard saw more of those personalities (D’Amore, 2014, p. 218-219). When Leslie and Howard began their relationship, they based it as a “friends with benefits” association with sexual fulfillment. She offered gifts to him as rewards for sexual pleasure, such as allowing him access to experimental equipment despite budget cuts and a research trip to Geneva to see CERN’s supercollider, using unrestricted grant money the university gave her (“The Cushion Saturation,” 2009). Leslie controlled Howard with the new equipment and research trips, as a way to avoid the feelings of a traditional relationship. As a result, she becomes the stereotypical “man,” where she sought sexual fulfillment with no lingering amorous obligation. Eventually, Leslie breaks up with Howard, which makes him very upset. In the end, he becomes the stereotypical “woman,” where he does not separate sex and emotions given that a romantic relationship was not going to happen (D’Amore, 2014, p. 218-219).

Leslie’s sexual tendencies fell similar to the one Amanda Woodward had on *Melrose Place*. Both characters preferred sex over romantic relationships, and the powerful and controlling attributes can any woman into something akin to the Marquis de Sade (Douglas, 2010, p. 37). Representing women with high sexual instincts can make them seem that they do not want to pursue meaningful relationships with their significant others, and can make them more

controlling with rigid expectations regarding certain activities and routines. Using that setup can drastically change our perceptions of women's personalities, where we see them more for their insistent characteristics, and less for their positive qualities (i.e., respect, honesty). Shows and films that shy away from Leslie and Amanda's personalities and present women as supporting, caring, and understanding to others will help make them appear more cooperative and open to how their partners want the relationship to operate. That way, the relationships will get based on each other's wants and desires, which will make them last longer and become more valuable.

### The Impact of High Sexualization and Low Intelligence in Female Characters



A common stereotype that gets overused in shows and films is portraying women that have high sexualization and low intelligence. These women, commonly known as “dumb blondes,” wear clothing that exposes certain parts of their bodies (especially their breasts), and since writers mostly focus on appearance, they do not equip them with the proper intelligence that we would like them to have. Out of the two traits, the one that is more dangerous for women to possess is high sexualization. As Ellen Stone, Christia Brown, and Jennifer Jewell discuss, “Women and girls are both sexualized, via their tight clothing and makeup, and objectified, portrayed as existing for men's pleasure and lacking in their own agency” (Stone, Brown, and Jewell, 2015). With the high number of women that get shown for their appearance rather than their true personalities and capabilities, so many of us do not see them with the same perceptions we used to before the sexualization took off in the early 1990s. We want women to have more realistic representations with how they appear for their jobs and interpersonal relationships, but since men make up the majority of writers and producers in shows and films, they present what they want to see, not what the general audiences want. Having more female writers and producers will incorporate the female perspective into the content we take in, and, hopefully, reduce the sexualization presented in female characters.

Most people associate sexualization with shows and films targeted toward an adult audience; however, many of the false beliefs are reaching the programming that children and adolescents regularly view. Due to their high sexualization exposure, a recent study found that children view sexualized women as more popular than non-sexualized women. When asked why sexualized women are more popular, one child replied, “Popular girls would dress really fancy and they

would have their hair done and they would wear really nice clothes.” Furthermore, another theme the children picked up on was that one attribute that made sexualized women popular was the clothing they wore. Sexualized women wear clothing that shows a lot of skin, and many of the children associated that quality with popularity. When asked why sexualized clothing makes women popular, one child responded, “She has a belly shirt and her shoulders are showing and her hair is well-kept and the popular people in my grade have really well-kept hair” (Stone et al., 2015).

Exposing children to sexualized women at an early age is very concerning because the false representations makes them see women for their appearance above all else. As children, especially girls, look to model their success around female celebrities, Susan Douglas points out that “[t]he vast arsenal of celebrity profiles, successes, and disasters provides raw material, resources we can try on, weave in, and reject as we construct our self-identity. And this has been especially true for young women who have been told that in this age they have to be supergirls” (Douglas, 2010, p. 254). So many girls find from their favorite celebrities that the key to popularity and success is tight, revealing clothes that expose as much as skin as possible. Girls who strive for those characteristics will face negative consequences because the representations will make them compete with their peers for the best appearance. Often, girls use appearance to compete for friends, especially boys, and getting turned down will take a hit on their self-esteem that can result in them taking extreme measures to improve their bodies (i.e., eating disorders, excess makeup). Moreover, sexualized girls will also take a hit on the other characteristic that accompanies hypersexualization: low intelligence. Since appearance takes precedence over all qualities and characteristics, that is the only attribute folks focus on, and they look past intellectualism. According to Fabio Fasoli, Federica Durante, Silvia Mari, Cristina Zogmaister, and Chiara Volpato, “[W]omen who simply show off their bodies are still the target of negative impressions because revealing their body comes with perceptions of being less capable and intelligent” (Fasoli, Durante, Mari, Zogmaister, and Volpato, 2017). Giving girls and women the ideology that their intelligence will also negatively impact their perception of themselves will send them down a negative spiral of emotions. Making women more capable and intelligent in the activities and jobs they do, and, at the same time, reducing their sexualization will help us see them for who they are, and not for their appearance. Unfortunately, shows and films keep emphasizing the notions about sexualization and intelligence going together, so the negative perceptions of gender will continue to exist in the years to come.



## Penny's Presentation



Penny is the stereotypical woman that meets all of the dumb blonde criteria. She lacks academic intelligence, a flaw that Sheldon uses to criticize her about her acting career not taking off, and how she is not able to understand their scientific conversation topics. For example, she is confused when the male characters discuss scientific topics, and is easily bored with their preoccupied interests, such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and other science fiction franchises (D'Amore, 2014, p. 209-210). As the show progresses, Penny's constant interaction with others involved in academia, especially Leonard, proves as a catalyst for her desire to learn, and decides to enroll in community college. Often, she feels that her low intelligence is not good for his high intelligence, and that she is inferior to his expectations. She relies on Sheldon to teach her basic physics, so she can surprise Leonard with having fundamental knowledge of his work ("The Gorilla Experiment," 2009). During their interactions, Leonard's intelligence does not necessarily intimidate Penny. In fact, she goes out of her way to understand his work because she loves him (D'Amore, 2014, p. 211).

Another flaw that goes along with Penny's presentation is her independence as a woman falls along stereotypical lines. While Sheldon and Leonard regularly mention that they cannot afford to live without the other, Penny lives alone across the hall, which gives us the assumption that she is more financially independent than them, but she gets portrayed with a massive amount of debt. She gets paid minimum wage as a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory, but her financial situation goes along with her stereotypical personality and characteristics. For instance, she needed to borrow money from Sheldon to pay her rent ("The Financial Permeability," 2009), and she tried to pay her electricity bill with a Starbucks gift card and photos of herself ("The Friendship Contraction," 2012). She also uses Sheldon and Leonard's Wi-Fi with no intention of ever getting her own connection hooked up. Sheldon has changed their Wi-Fi password from "Penny is a freeloader" to "Penny, get your own Wi-Fi" to "Penny already eats our food, she can pay for Wi-Fi," and she still hasn't taken the hint ("The Thespian Catalyst," 2012). Even later in the series when she became a pharmaceutical sales representative, her past financial irresponsibility has meant that although she now earns substantially more money than Leonard, the Ph.D. physicist, she is still in far more financial trouble than he is from her years of debt



(Sherlock, 2018). The way Penny's attributes get displayed make it seem that sexified women cannot possess intellectual capabilities such as academic knowledge and financial management. Establishing a better perception where we do not associate sexified appearance with incompetence will improve the presentation of women as more insightful, with their knowledge and abilities getting brought to the forefront over how they look.

### Sexual Objectification



Comedies are notorious for including sexually-objectified female characters, and *The Big Bang Theory* is no exception. Nearly every time she is on screen, Penny gets seen wearing arousing clothing, particularly tight, low-cut shirts. While the show does not include explicit or pornographic representations, the shirts and dresses she wears typically expose a lot of skin, and produce very noticeable cleavage. She is the only female character on the show that gets portrayed with so much beauty, as Bernadette and Amy wear more modest, appropriate, and non-revealing outfits. What Penny wears occasionally impacts her personality to attract and seduce men, and other times causes the personality of the male characters to change. For example, in one episode, Penny flirted with Sheldon while taking off a hoodie and exposed her bra, much to his dismay. ("The Cooper Extraction," 2013). Another time, Leonard comes in on Penny wearing a Sleeping Beauty costume, and he begins to undress, hoping for sexual intimacy ("The Contractual Obligation Implementation," 2013). Penny's revealing outfits provide the ongoing narrative to viewers that women get presented from a male fantasy, where they are exclusively shown for their appearance, and do not get acknowledged for their capabilities. Female viewers who regularly see Penny's attributes will think that flirting and cleavage-revealing outfits are the tickets to winning men over, but that is far from the ideal principle. Instead, providing shows and films with female characters who wear non-revealing clothing will not distort any perceptions regarding realistic female appearance, and it will make women see that appearance is not paramount, but how they act and perform is what matters most.

With the vast number of interactions they have with Penny, Sheldon and Leonard associate her sexual objectification with their desires and beliefs. Leonard sees her more so for her appearance, which sparks an interest in him wanting to pursue a romantic relationship with her. Right away, when the two men meet Penny in the show's pilot, Leonard immediately falls in love with her.

He tells Sheldon that “our babies will be smart and beautiful,” meaning that he will provide the intelligence, and she will provide the beauty, going by the common thought men have that women are responsible for providing their progeny with the best looks possible (“Pilot,” 2007). Meanwhile, Sheldon uses her looks to make assumptions that mirror the dumb blonde stereotype, and they were the highlights of several jokes brought on by him during the show’s first couple of seasons. For instance, He and the other male characters feel that Penny’s looks prevent her from entering their world and taking a shine on their interests. For example, Penny joins a Halo tournament with the men and does surprisingly well. When finding out about her success, Sheldon responds by saying, “I don’t know how, but she’s cheating. No one can be that attractive and this skilled at a video game” (“The Barbarian Simulation,” 2008). Sheldon is baffled by Penny’s beginner’s luck at Halo that he brings her appearance into the picture when figuring out how she is playing so well. He associates her looks with all that she does and holds the belief that sexified women cannot succeed at any job or activity in their lives. Sheldon and Leonard’s thoughts about Penny go right along with sexual objectification, and they both take her appearance into the highest consideration. Presenting desires and assumptions relating to a woman’s looks is never the right approach because it will continue to show viewers that they should value women for how they appear, and formulate assumptions on what they see. Providing representations where men do not fantasize or shut down sexified women and consider them for their true personalities and capabilities will improve our perceptions where we solely view them for they are as a human being, and not make any assumptions.

### Penny the Mean Girl?



A common stereotype associated with beautified and sexified is that they possess harsh and cruel personalities. As Susan Douglas notes, these women learn to become “enforcers of their own oppression,” where they impose ridiculous rules on themselves than the beauty-industrial complex does and mocking girls whose clothes, hair, figures, or social status does not match their expectations (Douglas, 2010, p. 237). The film *Mean Girls* brought that ideology to the forefront, where the girls developed certain guidelines about their appearance that they followed.

Then, they used their sexuality as a weapon to steal boys from girls to make the other girls envy them, and each time someone went against their values.

One of the characteristics of Penny that not many viewers are aware of is how mean her character turned out during the show's run. While she did not precisely mirror "the Plastics" from *Mean Girls*, her mean-spirited characteristics got used to degrade the other male and female characters, and reminisce about times when she would torment classmates in high school. The only time her malicious personality came to use was when she stood for Sheldon when another man hacked his World of Warcraft account. After failing to reprimand the bully, Sheldon employed Penny to threaten him. She kicks the bully in the groin and demands that he return the game to Sheldon in the format it was in before he got his hands on it ("The Zarnecki IncurSION," 2011). As Amanda Stones points out, Penny's strength and tough personality challenge what dumb blondes are capable of doing. Rather than being the meek and mild damsel in distress, Penny's mean characteristics were able to help and protect Sheldon and the guys (D'Amore 2014, p. 211). While that incident highlighted how Penny's physical and social abilities surpass the men, the rest of the time, her mean persona played more of a role when demeaning the characteristics and personalities of others.

Although she and Leonard eventually work out their relationship, Penny does not truly get along well with the rest of the main male cast. She and Sheldon constantly clash with each other, and their relationship gets defined by their back-and-forth insults. In the first few years of their relationship, Penny got marred by Howard being a creep, leading her to tell him that he will "grow old and die alone" ("The Killer Robot Instability," 2009). Raj could not talk to women through the show's first six seasons unless he were drunk, and when he and Penny interacted, she found his behavior obnoxious. As far as the other female characters are concerned, she does not establish full and proper respect for Bernadette nor Amy. While Penny was appreciative of Bernadette setting up a job interview for her, she cannot stand her temper or her controlling nature. Meanwhile, she has no regard for Amy and feels sorry that she is a loser, while Amy sees the two of them as best friends (Sherlock, 2018). Furthermore, Penny reveals her high school life to Bernadette and Amy, and she was a true bully. Her actions did not involve calling people names and pushing their books out of their hands. Instead, what she and her friends did mirror criminal activity. For example, Penny explains how there was a girl who got better grades than her, and, in response, she and her friends decided to gag and take the girl. The worst part is that as Penny tells the story as an adult to Bernadette and Amy, who, as former victims of childhood bullying and reasonable human beings, are disturbed by it, she doesn't seem to realize that taking a girl is wrong. She even seems nostalgic while she is telling it, as she fondly looks back on those days (Sherlock, 2018). Portraying women with the mean girl narrative is not the approach to female power because portraying them with those characteristics gives female viewers the ideology that if they want more authority, they should degrade those inferior to them and hurt

their feelings. Women who follow in those footsteps do not gain power and success but have their reputation and personality frowned upon by their peers. Providing a better narrative where women get along with their family and friends can show women watching that their respectful and honest persona are the true characteristics of their success. That way, they will understand that a positive attitude will get them far in life, and degrading others for authority and power will not cross their minds.

### Sexist Remarks and Attitudes from Male Characters



We all associate sitcoms with a satirical take on everyday life, and in the case of *The Big Bang Theory*, awkward social encounters and first impressions that we know too well. However, a lot of the show's humor comes from sexist remarks and attitudes by the male characters to degrade women, or pursue them further. The show's writers use the humor through a technique called "lampshade hanging," where they hide the blatant use of a stereotype by directly addressing it. In other words, it is their way of letting the audience know they are aware of the sexism they are promoting, but since it is in the form of humor, the use for it is fine (Collie, 2017). The show uses sexist humor in a way that seems appropriate, but it is not. The derogatory remarks that get played with invite us to laugh with the humor and make light of the sexism, but in the end, we are laughing at the women and seeing the remarks from a humorous standpoint and not an analytical one.

On one occurrence, Sheldon tells his female lab assistant, Alex Jensen, that she is not succeeding at her job because women are like an egg salad sandwich on a warm day: "full of eggs and only appealing for a short time." As a result, she reported him to human resources for his insensitive comments. When Sheldon meets with the human resources director, he tries to make light of the situation and says that all women are "slaves to their biological urges" ("The Egg Salad Equivalency," 2013). Other times, the show's sexist humor goes along with the male characters making comments based on female appearance, and creating tactics to get together with women. For example, Howard tells Penny that she would be the only "doable girl" at a robot fight ("The Killer Robot Instability," 2009), and Howard and Raj disguise themselves as cable technicians to

gain entrance to the house where the *America's Next Top Model* cast members live so that they can hook up with them (“The Panty Piñata Polarization,” 2008). Making light of sexist dialogue is never appropriate under any circumstances because not only does it objectify women, but it provides a narrative that sexual degradation and harassment can get used for humoristic purposes. Many women are sexual harassment and assault victims, and the last thing they want is for a show or film to make light of sexist jokes and have it seem that the objectification and degradation are not a big deal. No media content should ever fool around with sexist material because of how sensitive the topic is for a lot of folks, and that and it will send a bad connotation by reminding women of any pain and suffering through which they have been. The best approach for solving the problem is for writers and producers to avoid adding any sexifying and objectifying content and dialogue for satirical purposes. Not using sexism as a means for humor will make relationships between men and women more about their characteristics and personalities, and not for men taking advantage of women for their pleasure or asserting dominance.

### Conclusion



*The Big Bang Theory* left a legacy with viewers for its satirical spin on life and captivating characters. The presentation of female scientists was groundbreaking, and having them on the show gave us the powerful narrative that women can succeed in any male-dominated field. While the show was successful with those regards, some of the sexist dialogue and gender representations went too far to alter our thoughts of the ways women act and appear, and how men use those qualities to objectify and degrade them. While the show's run is over, reruns continue on cable and syndication, and when viewers watch and digest their narratives, there is nothing we can do to make them more ideal. However, there are several approaches other shows and films can implement to provide better gender representations for their audiences. Portraying women with better competence in the workplace where they do not use their intelligence to assert dominance will send the narrative that they have potential to succeed without being controlling in their relationships and decision-making. The positive and insightful representations will make women more inclined to fulfill their career aspirations, and they will use the properly-represented characters as a model to build their success. Moreover, women should not get portrayed with so much attention to beauty, and have that be the only

characteristic for which characters and viewers know them. Female characters with sexified looks and low intelligence tend to come from a male writer's fantasy, with no significant purpose besides the pleasure they bring to the men. Presenting women for their abilities and genuine and caring personalities will help us view them in an ideal sense where who they are as a human being is more vital. Female viewers will see themselves with better self-esteem, and not that they exist for the pleasure of pleasing men. Lastly, sexist humor should never get used to objectify or harass women. It is insensitive to make mockeries or narratives of sexual harassment and objectification because anyone who may have been impacted by either case could see them as jokes, rather than major problems. Removing the sexist humor will take out the narratives of men taking advantage of women, so there can be stronger incorporations of men and women having respectful and friendly interactions and relationships. Women are beautiful, intelligent, and strong human beings, and they deserve better representations of their lives and personalities. *The Big Bang Theory* was not able to meet those expectations, but there are plenty of more opportunities for shows and films to deliver those ideal narratives. The more often writers and producers can apply better representation strategies to the media content we consume, it will significantly improve our perceptions of gender, where the narratives get based on our ideal hopes and desires, and women can live joyous lives with no negative representations going against them.

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