

# The Use of a Situation-Comedy in the Delivery of Media Messages: A Content Analysis of Health-Related Themes

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## ABSTRACT

*A quantitative-qualitative historical content analysis of selected Seinfeld television comedy episodes was conducted for this study. Episodes were analyzed for the presence of health-related messages pertaining to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's health priority areas, which include the most harmful risk behaviors affecting today's youth. A random selection of 88 of 176 Seinfeld episodes aired from July 5, 1989 until its finale on May 14, 1998, resulted in 787 health-related messages for the study. Over the course of nine seasons, more health-related messages were found in later years.*

## INTRODUCTION

The need exists to make learning and instruction not only more interesting to the student, but more relevant. Instead of trying to confine students' minds for long periods of time, more success can be found with quicker, visually stimulating techniques<sup>1</sup> and sensory experiences.<sup>2</sup> One way to improve student interest is through the use of prime-time television to reflect the "problematic conditions (and behaviors) that plots and subplots depict."<sup>3</sup> The current study analyzed the health-related content found in the popular situation-comedy, *Seinfeld*.

### Research Questions

Based on a random sample of 88 episodes from the situation-comedy, *Seinfeld*, the following research questions were investigated:

1. To what extent were youth health risk behaviors observed?
2. How has the presentation of youth health risk behaviors changed over time?

### Purpose

Television is an entertainment and educational media present in 99% of all households<sup>4</sup>. Success has been found using television to analyze cultures<sup>3</sup>, enhance vocabulary development<sup>5</sup>, study organizational behavior<sup>6</sup> and teach physics<sup>7</sup>. Situation comedies should not be omitted from this list of potential health information sources. Television comedies are a "seasonally fluctuating barometer of public controversies, fantasies, and disillusionments regarding social norms, values, and human interests."<sup>3</sup> Not only does the public consume more entertainment than before, it is also becoming more of an integral part of people's lives<sup>8</sup>. The National Health Education Standards state that students need to analyze the influence of culture, media, technology, and other factors on health.<sup>9</sup> Use of pop culture can help achieve this curriculum goal while also addressing the health risks of adolescents.

"Television is an influential vehicle for dissemination of knowledge among people of all ages and interests."<sup>10</sup> It has the ability, because of its appeal, to promote positive health behaviors. In their study of whether the

television series *Quincy*<sup>11</sup> could make it as a health educator, Drolet and Davis (1984) found that viewers, as a whole, enjoyed the inclusion of *Quincy* episodes, regardless of topic, and reported knowing a greater quantity of health-related information than those who enjoyed it to a lesser degree. Not only did this finding reinforce that if a presentation is enjoyable more information will be retained, but it also refuted the belief that the rate at which information is conveyed on television is too fast for an individual to comprehend what is going on. This shows that teachers can reinforce the educational content of television programs while expanding their methodological repertoire at the same time.

### **Seinfeld 101**

From the debut of the *Seinfeld Chronicles* on July 5, 1989 to its farewell episode on May 14, 1998, Americans followed the lives of four New Yorkers, Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer as they gave birth to America's new favorite pastime: watching syndicated *Seinfeld*.<sup>12</sup> More Americans began watching this "show about nothing" as it packed life's biggest challenges and most miniscule annoyances into a 22-minute timeframe.<sup>13</sup>

The show, however, wasn't always a success. Conceived and written primarily to get Jerry Seinfeld's act on television, rumors say it was originally rejected by NBC before eventually going on the air as a summer replacement show.<sup>14</sup> It wasn't until it was paired up with *Cheers* on the same night that it became a hit. Once it gained momentum, *Seinfeld* remained atop the Nielsen ratings for 6 consecutive years culminating in a final episode that was a unifying national moment.<sup>13</sup>

## **METHODS**

### **Procedure**

A content analysis of selected *Seinfeld* episodes was conducted for this study. Episodes were analyzed for the presence of health-related messages pertaining to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's health priority areas, which include the leading causes of morbidity and mortality and the most harmful risk behaviors affecting today's youth: inadequate physical activity; unhealthy dietary behaviors; sexual behaviors that contribute to

unintended pregnancies, STDs, and HIV infection; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use, and behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries or violence.<sup>15</sup> Health-related messages were transcribed from episodes and then later matched with a corresponding risk behavior based on their content.

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of a random selection of 88 of 176 *Seinfeld* episodes. Using a random numbers table, the following episodes, appearing in numerical order, were selected: 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38, 41, 43, 49, 51, 52, 55, 56, 58, 67, 69, 71, 72, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 87, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 98, 99, 103, 104, 105, 106, 109, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 126, 127, 128, 131, 132, 133, 135, 137, 138, 139, 143, 151, 152, 154, 156, 158, 164, 165, 168, 169, 174, 176, 178, and 179. Episodes 100 ("Highlights of a Hundred Pt. 1"), 101 ("Highlights of a Hundred Pt. 2"), and 177 ("The Clip Episode") were not counted as part of the content analysis. These episodes were omitted because they repeated data that were previously aired in earlier episodes and, therefore, were not to be coded twice.

All syndicated episodes had been formatted to VHS videocassette with approximately 15-17 episodes appearing on each videocassette without commercial interruption. The 22-minute episodes were viewed and analyzed for the presence of health-related messages involving youth health risk behaviors. Scenes appearing during the opening monologue (i.e., Jerry's stand-up routine) and the closing credits were not coded because in some instances an entire monologue may have been cut or switched around (e.g. a closing serving as an opening).

### **Instrumentation**

A coding sheet contained the name of the episode, number of the episode, date it originally aired, youth health risk behavior(s) observed, and a space provided for direct quotes.

### **Procedure**

The researcher followed four steps during data collection:

1. Fill-in the title of the episode being viewed (e.g., The Contest).

2. Fill-in the episode number corresponding with the title (e.g., The Contest is Episode #51).
3. Fill-in the date on which the episode originally aired (e.g., Episode #51: The Contest was originally aired on November 18, 1992).
4. After health-related messages and quotes were transcribed for that episode, they were matched with a corresponding health risk behavior.

### Data Analysis

Direct health messages and quotes were transcribed from episodes then analyzed. An analysis was then conducted to determine the extent to which youth risk behaviors were addressed and to determine how the depiction of health messages transcribed changed over time from July 5, 1989 until the show's finale on May 14, 1998.

### RESULTS

**Research Question #1:** To what extent were youth health risk behaviors addressed?

A total of 88 episodes of *Seinfeld* were viewed with 787 health-related messages and quotes recorded during the study. Youth health risk behaviors were addressed in all 88 (100%) episodes. The sexuality category contained the most health-related messages (307 or 39%). The other health-related messages were related to nutrition (181 or 23%), injury and violence prevention (157 or 20%), alcohol and other drug use (58 or 7.3%), physical activity (55 or 7%), and tobacco (29 or 3.7%).

Certain themes emerged from the health-related messages. Most messages related to alcohol and drug use dealt with the refusal or acceptance of alcohol consumption by characters or groups. When dealing with individual behaviors, characters were portrayed at extremes as either alcoholics (e.g. Gavin, a man who gives his dog, Farfel, to Jerry after they meet on an airplane) or in recovery (e.g. Hanky, a man currently going through Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve recovery steps). Characters rarely engaged in moderate consumption. In George's opinion, doing so followed the norm. Thus, acting otherwise risked the chances of being "shunned by society."

Themes found within the injury and violence prevention category dealt mainly with characters being involved in accidents and the subsequent treatment of any injuries suffered. In "*The Good Samaritan* (Episode 37)," Michael, a man whose wife slept with George, reacts accordingly. "I'm going to sew his ass to his face! I'm going to twist his neck so hard his lips will be his eyebrows! I'm going to break his joints and reattach them!" The adulterous act is the result of George saying "God Bless You" to Michael's wife at dinner, thus attracting her to him because Michael was never willing to say it in all their years of marriage. Later in the same episode, Angela, Jerry's girlfriend during the episode, threatens him saying "I'll carve my initials in your brain tissue! I'll bash your skull into a veg-o-matic like a bad cabbage...I'll pluck all your body hairs out with my teeth!" when he considers notifying the victim of Angela's hit-and-run accident.

Many teachable moments came from the themes developing around nutrition. The majority of health-related messages dealt with promoting proper dietary behaviors like "you should eat just fruit" or breakfast is the "most important meal of the day," however, there was also a negative trend regarding the dissemination of messages about body image. Examples were, Helen, Jerry's mom, stating that a reasonable excuse for breaking up with someone was "if there was a weight problem", and Miss Rhode Island's refusal of food at a baseball game because she's watching her weight (Episode 87).

Though health-related messages regarding physical activity were limited, the majority of those recorded dealt with working out or pursuing a wellness lifestyle. For example, Bania (a fellow aspiring comedian) asks people if they "work out with weights" only to tell them "you should" regardless of their answer. Another example was recorded for George, who after he thinks he had a heart attack (Episode 13), gains a new perspective on life. He claims: "I'm gonna do a whole Zen thing. Take up yoga, meditate, I'll eat right, calm down, lose my anger."

The general theme that emerged from the tobacco use category was an anti-smoking message regarding health. Quotes dealt with personal opinions regarding the habit, short-term

side effects and smoker's rights. Elaine, who Jerry referred to as the equivalent of "going out with C. Everett Koop," was often found saying "I hate cigarettes" which led her to break up with New York Mets first baseman, Keith Hernandez. She even got thrown out of an apartment when voicing her opinion to a pregnant woman. Elaine stated: "I just don't know how a person, with everything we know about prenatal care, can put a cigarette in her mouth." Kramer, on the other hand, feels that "just because a person's a smoker doesn't mean he's not a human being." Ultimately, his fellow smokers find sanctuary in his apartment after restaurant owners have forced them outside because of their habit. Unfortunately, he didn't know that Babu's Pakistani restaurant was "proud to offer both" smoking and non-smoking.

The sexuality themes that emerged from the health-related messages included: contraception (because, as Kramer said, "birth control should be discussed in an open forum"), promiscuity, and the consequences of risky sexual behaviors between characters with ongoing relationships. Opinions and attitudes regarding sex varied based on the situation. In the infamous episode, "The Contest," Estelle, George's mom, comes home to find her son "treating his body like it was an amusement park." Vowing to never masturbate again, George's sexual misadventures continue in "The Sponge" when he is unable to have sex because Susan is out of sponges and he refuses to use a condom because "condoms are for single men." Though George's sex life has been curtailed, Elaine's efforts are continually successful. Jerry's theory is that "to a woman, sex is like the garbage man...any time you put some trash on the street, a guy is gonna come by and pick it up." He disputes this theory, however, in a later episode stating that "people don't just bump into each other and have sex (This isn't Cinemax)."

**Research Question #2:** How has the presentation of youth health risk behaviors changed over time?

*Seinfeld* aired from July 5, 1989 until its finale on May 14, 1998. Over nine seasons, more health messages were found in later years. Figure 1 shows that from the 88 episode sample selected for the study, the most health-related messages (156 or 19.8%) appeared in season 7

followed by season 6 (128 or 16.2%), season 3 (123 or 15.6%), season 5 (91 or 11.6%), season 8 (100 or 12.7%) and season 9 (100 or 12.7%), season 4 (63 or 8.0%), season 2 (13 or 1.7%), and season 1 (13 or 1.7%). See Figure 1.

While messages regarding alcohol (e.g. consequences), nutrition (e.g. eating healthy), tobacco (e.g. anti-smoking) and physical activity (e.g. working out) remained constant, the topics within the remaining content areas varied from season to season. The following is a summary of those findings. Only seasons with a strong consistent theme are noted.

Regarding injury and violence prevention, season 3 dealt with first aid and responding to emergencies. The prevalence of violence on the show was evident in season 4. During this season, Kramer got kicked in the head by Crazy Joe Davola, was punched in the face by Mickey Mantle at a fantasy baseball camp, and was bitten on the arm by an elderly man accusing him of stealing his record collection. In season 5, viewers saw seven injuries take place: Elaine was bitten by a strange dog, a man committed suicide by jumping from a hospital roof onto George's car, a mohel (pronounced "moil") cut Jerry's finger by accident during a circumcision, George hurt his elbow after banging it on a desk, Tony (Elaine's boyfriend) fell from a cliff while rock climbing, Elaine broke her foot, and a woman was hit in the head by a personal organizer after a famous Russian writer threw it out of a moving limousine. During season 8, viewers saw Kramer get beaten up by the kids in his karate class, Jerry got his arm crushed by a woman with "man-hands," Elaine dropped Frank Costanza (George's dad) "like a bag of dirt," and Raquel Welch beat up both Kramer and Elaine in the same episode.

The area of sexuality was covered in-depth over the course of nine seasons. In season 1, Jerry was concerned with women's feelings and not "how to score on spring break." This conservative approach to sexuality changed dramatically in season 3 when sex became a prerequisite in relationships and the topic of homosexuality came up after George got a massage from a man. In this season, George not only questioned his manhood, but put it to the test by having sex with a married woman and also the cleaning woman at his office. In

addition to those difficult topics, virginity and masturbation were addressed in season 4. With *"The Contest,"* the four central characters set out to see who had the most self-control and was truly "Master of their Domain." The art of euphemism allowed the writers of the show to continue to discuss difficult subject matter about sexuality in season 6. There is a debate between Poppie and Kramer on abortion while making a pizza, a potential sexual harassment suit against George who is sleeping with his secretary Ada, a ménage-a-trois gone badly, homosexuality at the health club, and more masturbation (only this time it's a monkey that has "curbed" his auto-erotic tendencies). Controversy continues into season 7 with discussions of lesbianism, marriage, and birth control. Lessons on sexuality end in season 9 where the characters are just looking to "fool around." Newman sleeps with Sylvio's wife, Nina cheats on George with Jerry, and Elaine and Puddy are on and off again, seeing other people in between. All this infidelity leads Jerry to contemplate the obvious, "I think by sleeping with her I may have sent her the wrong message."

## CONCLUSIONS

From the content analysis of 50 percent of *Seinfeld's* television episodes, the following generalizations can be made.

### 1. During the decade of the 1990's *Seinfeld* addresses a variety of health issues.

These findings indicate that *Seinfeld* may be a more viable source of health information than one would initially think. Its potential use as a curriculum tool, should not be dismissed. Whether utilized to reinforce positive health behaviors or teach media literacy skills, value can be found in both the accurate and inaccurate health messages it disseminates. Also, if the strength of a lesson grows with the frequency of its presentation, then health educators should be encouraged to utilize television medium to their educational advantage. Caution may be needed when viewing an imbalance of negative health behaviors versus positive health behaviors for analysis.

### 2. Current events appeared to influence health issues depicted on *Seinfeld* episodes.

For *Seinfeld's* potential value as a teaching strategy to be realized, we must change our way of viewing education. It is evident that in writing the scripts for *Seinfeld*, both Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld were concerned with not only making people laugh, but making their show connected to the headlines in the world around them. Some episodes did devote a large portion of their 22-minute timeframe to important issues. Even though the majority of episodes in this study did not have a health-related theme by title, health-related messages were disbursed throughout the shows. An example is the tackling of the controversial topic of abortion in *"The Couch"* (Episode 91) using the "birth" of a pizza as a metaphor.

Kramer: *"What gives you the right to tell me how I would make my pie?"*

Poppie: *"Because it's a pizza."*

Kramer: *"It's not a pizza 'til it comes out of the oven."*

Poppie: *"It's a pizza the moment you put your fists in the dough."*

The number of health-related messages disseminated increased in later years. However, not only were many of these factually accurate, but *chronologically* accurate as well. Take for example, *"The Sponge"* (Episode 119). In this episode, Jerry and the gang discuss birth control options. In the episode, it is discovered that both Elaine and George's fiancée, Susan, use the Today Sponge, which was taken off the market causing widespread panic and leading to the development of a screening process to determine if a man is "sponge worthy." The Today Sponge was, in fact, taken off the market in 1995, the same year that *Seinfeld* aired its episode (December 7, 1995), but it has since been made available to consumers. *Seinfeld* didn't just adapt to the sexual world around it, however. In *"The Postponement"* (Episode 112), Elaine consults a rabbi who offers something to eat and his thoughts on perhaps why Americans are so obese.

*"Would you care for a snack of some kind? I have the Snackwells which are very popular. Although, I think with so-called fat-free cookies people may overindulge forgetting that they may be high in calories."*

It is evident from these examples that *Seinfeld*, like the field of health, has changed over the years. By analyzing these health topics, health educators can provide students with classroom instruction that bridges into the real world.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the influence that television has on shaping views and promoting behaviors, attempts should be made by health educators to teach students how to analyze media. As this study shows, the existence of health-related messages is prevalent through mass media. The following limitations of the study, however, should be noted and taken into consideration for replication in the future:

1. A second coder should be involved to assess reliability of the instrument and take into account varying opinions of what constitutes as a health message (when dealing with ambiguous or latent text);
2. An analysis of the remaining episodes should be conducted and compared to the current study's findings;
3. Since it is possible that *Seinfeld* will become obsolete in years to come, the use of current programming, opposed to that in syndication, might be more relevant to students (other situation comedies, dramas, et cetera); and
4. An analysis of nonverbal communication among health content areas was not included.

Shows like *Seinfeld*, along with more current sitcoms like *30 Rock*, *The Office*, or *Modern Family*, can be used as a tool to educate students on how to analyze and talk about media messages. When dealing with euphemisms, like the dialogue found in *Seinfeld*, students can be encouraged to use critical thinking skills to interpret health-related messages and scenarios. In doing so, they enable themselves with important life skills that are necessary in today's society.

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**FIGURE 1: Number of Health-Related Messages Across *Seinfeld's* Seasons**

