

MUJERES AGITANDO EL MUNDO DE LA COMEDIA: VOCES FEMENINAS Y SU ROL EN TALK-SHOWS DE PRIME TIME Y NOCHE

WOMEN DISRUPTING LATE-NIGHT COMEDY: FEMALE VOICES AND THEIR ROLE IN LATE-NIGHT TALK SHOWS

Elisa Paz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7477-0858>

EU Business School, España.

E-mail: elisa.epz@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36132/hao.vi57.2170>

Recibido: 06 noviembre 2021 / Revisado: 22 enero 2022 / Aceptado: 22 enero 2022 / Publicado: 15 febrero 2022

Resumen: Los *talk-shows* de prime time y noche géneros televisivos muy populares. Esto es, principalmente, porque su contenido está relacionado con la vida pública y el tratamiento de la información se hace con tono humorístico. Ambos elementos convierten al formato en contenido de infoentretenimiento reputado, además de una apuesta segura para audiencia y productores. No obstante, la combinación de ambos factores (contenido y tono) supone una doble amenaza para que participantes femeninas aparezcan en roles importantes. Este artículo explora el formato, así como el análisis de mujeres clave para él y cómo han desafiado nociones de género tradicionales.

Palabras clave: representación de género, *talk-shows*, prime time, humor, cómicas

Abstract: Late-night television talk-shows are highly popular, potentially due to their addressing of current affairs, which emphasises their relevance within society and public discussion, as well as their humorous tone. These two aspects turn the programmes in a well-reputed and successful infotainment format as well as a safe bet for the audience and producers. Nonetheless, the combination of these factors presents a double challenge for women to be present in relevant roles. This paper reviews the genre itself along with key notorious female figures throughout its history, comediennes who disrupt traditional gender roles in this privileged time slot.

Keywords: gender representation, talk-shows, prime time, late-night comedy, comediennes

INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, when several prominent late-night talk show hosts were replaced by hosts with a similar profile (male, white, heterosexual), the debate around diversity on late-night and, more particularly, women appearing on notorious roles on late-night television shows has intensified. The relevance of this debate or discussion is related to the influence that media has in shaping society's beliefs and attitudes towards race, class, and gender.

This paper assesses the influence that media productions have on society, more particularly how representations that are depicted on television programmes affect gender expectations and shape the views that people ultimately extrapolate onto their reality. The more popular the media text is, the bigger the influence it may have regarding this matter, which is why this paper analyses one of television's most popular and relevant formats: late-night comedy talk shows.

The aim of this paper is to explore this issue of how women disrupted late-night television talk shows. To do so, essential information about media and society, gender representations and stereotypes, and the significance of late-night shows is addressed to present the reader with a clear framework of reference. This will allow for a proper understanding of how notorious female participation in these programmes is a disruption in the genre itself, and the implications that it has towards gender representation in television in particular, and regarding society in general.

1. TALK SHOWS, SOCIETY, AND WOMEN

Cultivation theory along with the theory of social learning have been used by scholars to explain the impact that media texts, and particularly television productions, have on society¹. Ultimately, these theories highlight how media production and consumption have great influence in shaping and condition how we understand reality, our expectations towards specific aspects of it, and our social behaviours.

Media productions can be of different nature, mainly informative or aim at entertaining the audience. In all cases, media texts fulfil different but essential needs for society, and people use

¹ Berger, Arthur Asa, *Media research techniques*, California, Sage, 1998.

films and television programmes to stay up to date with current affairs, learn about specific topics, spend their time of leisure, and enjoy and sympathize with different stories.

A central element of media texts is the characters that appear and star on these productions, and, among other traits, their gender expression is one of the main traits that audiences identify first². Therefore, it is fundamental to analyse how gender is being represented in media to understand the potential effect it may have on viewers and society at large, including gender stereotypes, gender-based expectations, and relationships of social and institutional power.

Media texts are closely related to the concepts of the private and the public sphere, and so is the idea of gender representation. Women have been traditionally relegated to the former, whereas men have been dominant in the latter. In the particular case of television, the medium also has a particular complex relationship with these dual realms due to its role as a public sphere platform but placed within the intimacy of the home³.

Scholars concerned with and contributing to the field of Feminist Media Studies have worked to broaden the meaning of what is regarded as political, and, at the same time, blur the line dividing the public and private spheres, which traditionally implies that women are dismissed to the private and domestic realm while men dominate the public life, and they are active agents shaping and participating in political life.

Despite this traditional perspective still being used nowadays, and traditional gender roles being the hegemonic representation regarding gender in media productions, feminist media studies scholars have also contributed to challenge these traditional notions by highlighting productions in which women defy gender assumptions, however hegemonic these may still be (examples of this defiance may be the depiction of the single woman in the 1970s, the working woman in the 1980s).

² Barner, Mark, "Sex-role stereotyping in FCC-mandated children's educational television", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43/4 (1999), pp. 551–564.

³ Lunt, Peter and Stenner, Paul, "The Jerry Springer Show as an emotional public sphere", *Media, Culture & Society*, 27/1 (2005), pp. 163–437.

Furthermore, this field of study is also concerned with the concept of “television for women”, which is often regarded as more trivial or unsophisticated by audiences⁴. This concept includes television formats such as soap opera or daytime television talk shows. Nonetheless, these programmes also challenge traditional gender notions, and they are far from being unimportant, as scholars claim that they make feminism meaningful, both as cultural values and social practice, putting a feminist discourse and women in a subject position.

On the other hand, contemporary audiences demand new archetypes regarding gender, and late second- and third-wave feminism theory is particularly concerned with addressing intersectionality, this is, how gender and its oppressions are articulated in relation to age, race, and social class⁵.

Gender representation in television images has been largely studied in the realm of advertising, mainly regarding how women are depicted and the objectification and sexualization of female representations. Other topics addressed when analysing gender in advertising are the roles of men and women, the products they promote and ultimately the associations that are made with them. Nonetheless, although this topic is one of the most widely assessed in academia, advertisements are only one type of media text that is interesting or appropriate for studying the relation of media and gender.

In this piece of research, we focus on gender representation and the voice of women, but more particularly on one of television’s most popular productions, namely the talk show. The talk show is a broad genre originated in the United States and then widely and successfully adapted in different media markets. Although the talk show

⁴ Evans, Heather, “Do women only talk about ‘female issues’? Gender and issue discussion on Twitter”, *Online Information Review*, 40/5 (2016), pp. 660–672.

⁵ Ferguson, Kathy, “Feminist Theory Today”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20 (2017), pp. 269–286. engaged through critical intersectional perspectives. Despite many significant differences, most feminist theory is reliably suspicious of dualistic thinking, generally oriented toward fluid processes of emergence rather than static entities in one-way relationships, and committed to being a political as well as an intellectual enterprise. It is rooted in and responsible to movements for equality, freedom, and justice. Three important contemporary questions within feminist theory concern (a

is not easy to classify or define due to its variety regarding topics and structure throughout its history, some of the common characteristics to all its forms and distinguish it from other infotainment programmes are: (1) the fact that it is a host-driven medium⁶, and the host or group of hosts are responsible for the direction and development of the programme; (2) the use of the present tense when talking and addressing the audience; (3) its strict organization behind its apparent spontaneity; (4) their potential interactivity with a strong entertaining tone; and (5) recording the show (whether it airs live or not) in front of an in-studio audience⁷.

The talk show integrates mainly three subgenres or formats that are directly related to gender representation: the morning talk show, the daytime programme, and the late-night show. In the morning show, usually two hosts, a man, and a woman, present a variety of topics to the audience to discuss it in a homely tone. The daytime television show has been the one studied the most by scholars, usually highly related to femininity due to its emotional and relational content, and with women as the main participants. Lastly, the late-night talk show is the genre’s most acclaimed version, in which a male host discusses current and political issues with a humorous tone in prime time⁸.

It is not uncommon that talk shows are deemed as feminist, but this usually happens when discussing daytime shows concerning private matters, and which talk is usually devaluated as “gossip”, which equates to “women talk” and is a rather derogatory term⁹. Academic attention including these two concepts (gender and the talk show genre) focused mainly on a reception point of view, analysing how audiences perceive and interpret these programmes and the differences that may exist in relation to gender; as well as the content and the discussion that takes place on daytime television talk show programmes. Less attention has been placed on prime-time and late-night television talk shows and how they portray gender or articulate female voices.

⁶ Munson, Wayne, *All Talk: The Talkshow in Media Culture*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993.

⁷ Tolson, Andrew, *Television Talk Shows: Discourse, Performance, Spectacle*, London, Routledge, 2001.

⁸ Timberg, Bernard, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002.

⁹ Wood, Helen, *Talking with Television: Women, Talk Shows, and Modern Self-Reflexivity*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Late-night shows present a very different scenario from that presented in daytime shows, with women playing a much more secondary role and (potentially, as a consequence) with the feminist movement being relegated to a second place. One of the points of interest of late-night shows lies within their good reputation, which has been corroborated by a study¹⁰ carried from the perspective of reception studies, where viewers were asked how they perceive the different talk show subgenres (following the described tripartite classification). Daytime shows are viewed as general-interest products in the case of issue-oriented shows and provoke a very negative opinion in the case of what is known as trash talk programmes, with a content that is much more emotional and that addresses personal issues. In contrast, late-night television talk shows are perceived as a higher quality product, sophisticated and with a clear entertaining tone.

These differences in the perception of television talk shows and, especially, between daytime and late-night programmes, emphasises the idea of the daytime timeslot being secondary to programming and prime time and late-night being the primary and most viewed daypart, at the centre of programming. This type of show is more concerned with satire and public affairs which poses a double challenge for women participating in these shows.

On the one hand, and as aforementioned, women have been traditionally relegated to the private realm, and television formats that are traditionally labelled as feminist or feminine usually emphasise this aspect. In the particular case of the talk show, the genre's format that welcomes women the most is that addressing emotional issues, whereas the late-night show, which is more concerned with public life, political satire, and current affairs, is most likely to showcase male participants.

On the other hand, and as importantly, late-night shows follow a casual structure, and their main objective is to entertain audiences and cause laughter. The use of humour is intrinsic to this type of programmes, and the reaction of the audience in the studio is a key element of the show. Women using humour challenges traditional notions of femininity and what is considered appro-

priate behaviour for them. Numerous scholars have addressed the relationship between humour and gender, mainly focusing on their feminist content and gender representation¹¹.

One of the main outcomes of these studies is that there is a perceived conflict between what is considered as feminine and the performance of comedy. In numerous Western societies, women are considered to lack humour¹². Although most of these studies focus on the sitcom or other contexts, this conclusion is especially problematic when discussing female participation in late-night entertainment and talk shows, which use comedic content and tone persistently.

The lack of female presence on late-night talk shows was recently used as the plot for the movie *Late Night* (2019), directed by Nisha Ganatra and written by Mindy Kaling, in which Emma Thompson performs the role of a late-night talk show host. The production was discussed in media outlets because of this aspect, a woman being the host of a leading late-night talk show programme in the United States, since this is 'a figment of the Hollywood imagination', 'like female presidents'¹³.

Considering all these elements, this paper addresses the challenges that late-night television present for female participants, and highlights the women who have disrupted this format, re-claimed these spaces, and challenged traditional notions about femininity, the public sphere, and the use of humour.

2. METHODS

There are several possible ways of approaching the study of gender representation on television, which is why it is important to explain the goals that this analysis has, and the research questions that it aims to answer.

2.1. Objectives

What this paper aims to achieve is to highlight how women having a prominent role on late-ni-

¹⁰ Mittell, Jason, *Genre and television: From Cop Shows To Cartoons in American Culture*, London, Routledge, 2004.

¹¹ Dykes, Ashli LeeAnn, *Situation comedies and the single woman on television* (Doctoral Thesis), Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2011.

¹² Quemener, N., "Des pratiques subversives ? Les humoristes françaises dans les talk-shows", *Recherches Féministes*, 25/2 (2013), pp. 139–156.

¹³ Blake, Meredith, "'Late Night' makes late night look bleak for women. So we asked how bad it really is", *Los Angeles Times*, 12th of June of 2019.

ght television talk shows is a disruption regarding both the genre itself and gender representation in media.

To do so, the specific objectives of this research are to understand the challenge the late-night talk show presents for women, on the one hand, and emphasise the role of specific women who have disrupted the historical male dominance of the most-watched timeslot on television's popular genre, the late-night television talk show, on the other hand.

2.2. Research questions

The research questions that this piece of research presents aim to be a re-examination of the topic of gender representation on television talk shows, which aspires to lead to a more accurate or complete understanding.

- RQ1: Who are the most prominent female figures who have disrupted the late-night television talk show in the United States?
- RQ2: How are women participating in late-night shows both facing a challenge and confronting the show's historical dynamics?
- RQ3: In which ways have these figures defied traditional gender notions associated with femininity?

2.3. Methodological approach and data collection

This paper follows a hermeneutic, qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of the most relevant prime time and late-night television talk shows in the United States (the sample is discussed below with further detail) throughout several years, which is susceptible of being categorised within the broad field of *media history*.

This field includes several disciplines or approaches, such as cultural history, social history, political history, medium history, and even biography, although it is likely that research that addresses media history combines two or more of these approaches. This is the case of this research, which addresses cultural and social aspects and highlights some biographical elements for female hosts of late-night television talk shows.

More particularly, the methodological instrument that is used is content analysis, which is

defined as a technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use¹⁴. Although it has been largely used quantitatively, and it is done so to a certain extent in this study, this methodology in mainly its qualitative form is the most appropriate for addressing the research question.

By combining the quantification with a qualitative approach, the magnitude of the individual phenomena studied appears more clearly. Furthermore, two depths of analysis structure, manifest and latent analysis, are combined. This analysis is *manifest* because it focuses on what can be seen in the text, describing the visible, which in this case focuses on the gender of the hosts, and it is *latent* because it aims to understand the impact of those hosts who are female and how their presence challenges traditional notions of femininity. This allows for a more complete vision of the issue of the representation of gender, as well as a deepened understanding of how these programmes articulate such depictions.

2.4. Sample and time frame

The late-night television talk show is a popular format widespread across different cultures that has been broadcast for several decades. To comply with the objectives of the research and be able to properly answer the research questions, a specific sample of this subgenre has been chosen.

This paper focuses on the United States, as it is the country of origin of the format and the market of reference for international productions of this subgenre¹⁵. Although media productions from the United States are widely covered in academic and professional publications, this topic is still an unexplored dilemma, particularly when it comes to highlighting the female figures that have agitated this well-established and male-dominated format.

The sample is comprised by talk show programmes that aired during the prime time and late-night timeslot in the United States. Besides

¹⁴ Krippendorff, Klaus, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2018.

¹⁵ Bondebjerg, Ib et al., "American Television: Point of Reference or European Nightmare?", in Bignell, Jonathan and Fickers, Andreas, *A European Television History*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, pp. 154–183.

this geographical region being the origin of the format and an overall reference within media and television industries, talk show productions that are developed in other countries use these programmes as a model or reference, and they aim to replicate their essence. Therefore, it can be argued that since other programmes use this audiovisual market as the example to look up to, its study is priority.

Timewise, the programmes that are part of the sample are those aired from 1983 to today. This timeframe is selected due to two main reasons: on the one hand because by this year the format had already been renewed and consolidated by Johnny Carson¹⁶, who hosted the emblematic *The Tonight Show* for thirty years and, on the other hand, and also related to Carson, because it is in this year when Joan Rivers, after being a recurrent guest on the show, became the first permanent guest host in the programme, male or female. This fact is significant enough to be considered to mark the beginning of women disrupting the late-night show scenario.

To analyse the most significant phenomena, the programmes selected must have aired on the main networks of the country: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and CW, although the latter is ultimately not part of the final sample as it does not include any show meeting the requirements of a late-night show.

There are more channels with popular national, local, and cable television talk shows in the United States, but the selected networks are broadcast leaders and have an important geographical reach, which is why they are selected.

Hence, 23 late-night show programmes meet the requirements and have been selected to be part of the sample. The programmes are shown in Table 1 below classified by network, and a more detailed list including the airing dates and hosts of each programme can be found in appendix 1.

¹⁶ Peterson, Russell Leslie, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2008; Roman, James, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2005.

Table 1: Current and historical late-night television talk shows on major networks

ABC	CBS	NBC	FOX
<i>Jimmy Kimmel Live!</i>	<i>The Late Show</i>	<i>The Tonight Show</i>	<i>The Late Show</i>
<i>One on One hosted by Greg Jackson</i>	<i>The Late Late Show</i>	<i>Late Night</i>	<i>The Wilton North Report</i>
<i>The Dick Cavett Show</i>	<i>Overtime... with Pat O'Brien</i>	<i>Later</i>	<i>The Chevy Chase Show</i>
<i>Into the Night Starring Rick Dees</i>	<i>The Midnight Hour</i>	<i>The Jay Leno Show</i>	<i>Talkshow with Spike Feresten</i>
<i>Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher</i>	<i>The Pat Sajak Show</i>	<i>Last Call with Carson Daly</i>	<i>The Wanda Sykes Show</i>
<i>The Alec Baldwin Show</i>	<i>The Arsenio Hall Show</i>	<i>A Little Late with Lilly Singh</i>	

Source: Own elaboration.

2.5. Process of analysis

Considering the methodology that is being used in this paper, Bengtsson¹⁷ recognises four steps for a qualitative content analysis: (1) decontextualization, for identifying meaning units; (2) recontextualization, including context; (3) categorisation, or triangulation, identifying groups; and (4) compilation, which leads to drawing realistic conclusions.

The author also distinguishes how each process varies depending on the depth of analysis, whether it is a manifest analysis (studying the visible elements, "what has been said?") or a latent one (finding out the motive, what was the intention behind what was said). The full process in both cases and more details can be seen in Figure 1.

The detailed process of analysis is conducted as follows:

1. Decontextualization: the meaning units that concern this research have been created deductively and reduced to two open coding categories: they are the *programme* itself and its technical aspects,

¹⁷ Bengtsson, Mariette, "How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis", *NursingPlus Open*, 2 (2016), pp. 8–14.

and the *main characters* of the programme, which includes the host and permanent (or almost permanent) participants.

2. Recontextualization: in relation to the aim, understanding the challenge the late-night talk show presents for women and highlight women who have disrupted the late-night talk show panorama, the information provided in the introduction is fundamental to interpret the programmes and the context in which they were broadcast. This is taken into consideration when developing the section of results.

3. Categorisation: The themes included in the text are identified and the question “how” is posed and answered in the analysis.

4. Compilation: This paper combines a manifest and latent analysis, since the research addresses explicit content within the shows, that cannot be refuted, which is the host, and identifies meanings and reasons as to why and how gender representation is articulated, which may be implicit rather than explicit.

Although these are the two units of analysis, there is an important dimension that is implied in the second category, that of the character, which is that the fact that they perform the role of host or guest host in the programme also speaks to the relevance

As per the limitations of this method, the main critique that other scholars have made is the potential subjectivity of the researcher. Regardless of the nature of the research, the main objective when analysing data is to organize and draw realistic conclusions from the data collected, and in this process, an acquired familiarity with the text is expected¹⁸.

Furthermore, in spite of the United States being the market of reference when it comes to late-night comedy shows and talk shows, these results do not claim to be generalizable, as they are an in-depth analysis of a small sample in order to answer a very specific question. Future research could analyse a bigger sample across different regions to assess further disruptive narratives by female participants in these programmes.

3. RESULTS

The analysis shows the manifest content of the programme regarding their protagonists, this is, their hosts, and focusing on the gender identification of each one. Afterwards, a latent explanation is provided as to the three most relevant figures and their impact on the late-night television talk show, considering some of the previous remarks made in the section of introduction.

As a clarification, it is pertinent to say that some of the programmes have maintained their name as a franchise brand strategy but included several different hosts throughout the years, which is the case of programmes such as *The Late Show* or *The Tonight Show*. All historical and current hosts have been taken into consideration for this analysis.

General results show that, out of the 23 programmes analysed throughout the timeframe of the sample, only 6 (26%) had a female host, which in most cases were guest hosts. These cases are the ones that are further described and discussed in this section. These programmes are *The Late Late Show*, *The Tonight Show (Starring Johnny Carson)*, *Later*, *The Late Show (Starring*

Figure 1: An overview of the process of a qualitative content analysis

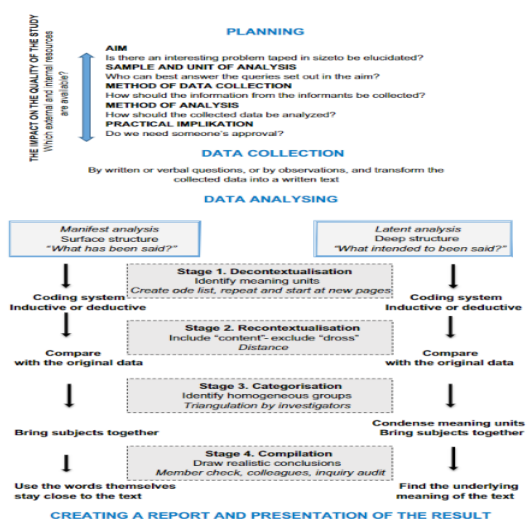


Fig. 1. An overview of the process of a qualitative content analysis from planning to presentation.

Source: Ibid.

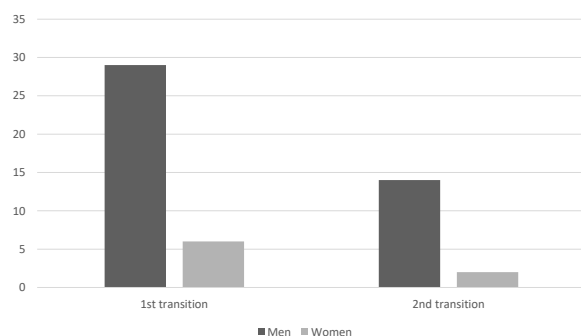
Considering all these aspects, the resulting coding table concerns in two main categories: the programme (in order to categorise them as prime time or late-night shows and classify them in the proper network they belong to) and the main characters (host or guest host), the latter being the main focus of analysis.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Joan Rivers), *The Wanda Sykes Show*, and *A Little Late with Lilly Singh*.

It is worthy of mention that there are women that have stood out in the late-night talk show landscape throughout history, and particularly in recent productions, such as Chelsea Handler or Samantha Bee, but whose shows did not air in the major networks. Therefore, they have not been included in the sample or analysis.

Figure 3: Male and female guest hosts in *The Late Late Show* transitional periods



Source: Own elaboration.

One of the most prominent programmes, *The Late Late Show*, included several female guest hosts in the transitional period between hosts in two occasions: 2004 (September to December) and 2015 (January to March). In the first transition, out of the 29 guest hosts (Jason Alexander, Jeff Altman, Tom Arnold, Michael Ian Black, Tom Caltabiano, Drew Carey, Adam Carolla, Tom Dreesen, David Duchovny, Damien Fahey, Craig Ferguson, Jim Gaffigan, Ana Gasteyer, David Alan Grier, D.L. Hughley, Lisa Joyner, Donal Logue, Rosie Perez, Ahmad Rashād, Jim Rome, Aisha Tyler, Sara Rue, John Witherspoon, Joe Buck, Susan Sarandon, Don Cheadle, Daryl Mitchell, Bob Saget, and *The Late Late Show's* head writer Michael "Gibby" Gibbons), only 6 (20,7%) were women. The female guest hosts were Ana Gasteyer, Lisa Joyner, Rosie Perez, Aisha Tyler, Sara Rue, and Susan Sarandon.

In the second transition the programme had 14 guest hosts [Drew Carey, Julie Chen, Sara Gilbert, Sharon Osbourne, Sheryl Underwood, Aisha Tyler, Jim Gaffigan, Judd Apatow, Regis Philbin, Whitney Cummings, Adam Pally, Sean Hayes, John Mayer, Wayne Brady, Tom Lennon, Lauren Graham, Will Arnett, Billy Gardell, and Kunal Nayyar], out of which only two were female hosts, which translated into an even lesser representation for women (14,3%). This under-

representation of women in both cases is represented visually in Figure 3.

Another important case, although it addresses a much lesser-known programme, is the programme *Later*, which combined late-night talk and monologue formats from 1994 to 2000. This production had two female guest hosts, Rita Sever, and Lynne Koplitz, and finally featured a guest-host-turned-permanent Cynthia Garrett, from 2000 to 2001.

These cases, in spite of highlighting the underrepresentation of women in relevant roles in late-night, present an important milestone for women hosting late-night comedy programmes and the relevance that this has by definition. However, the upcoming cases have had more of an impact in the media industry and popular culture in general, and they are discussed more thoroughly. These are the cases of Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes and Lilly Singh hosting late-night programmes.

The first one of these cases is key to understand the topic discussed in this paper. *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* had a significant recurrent female guest host that first disrupted the late-night talk show scenario: Joan Rivers.

She started as a comedienne in stand-up comedy circuit, in New York in the 1960s. The fact that she had a very strong feminine and sweet image was in full contrast with her performance and discourse, which was regarded as aggressive and outrageous for a woman, double standard that she highlighted herself with the sentence: "you simply don't expect toilet jokes from a woman who dresses like Audrey Hepburn"¹⁹. In fact, an assertive tone is common the stand-up late-night comedy industry, which is a rather male trait. To overcome this obstacle and be accepted as comedians, some women presented themselves with self-deprecating jokes (Phyllis Diller, Roseanne Barr) to relate to the psychology and knowledge of the audience and what they are familiar with²⁰.

¹⁹ Summergrad, Sophie, *Can We Talk? A Discussion on Gender Politics in the Late-Night Comedy Career of Joan Rivers* (Master Thesis), Rochester, University of Rochester, 2016.

²⁰ Horowitz, Susan, *Queens of comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the new generation of funny women*, London, Gordon and Breach, 1997.

This embodiment of contradictions of femininity and a strong discourse resulted in Johnny Carson making Rivers a regular guest and then a permanent guest host. Considering the relevance and popularity of this programme in particular, and how men dominated every signature programme being broadcast, including such an assertive female voice in the late-night schedule implied a disruption in the well-established format.

Such disruption earned Rivers her own show on a different network, Fox, in 1986, which damaged her image severely for “abandoning” Carson, she was regarded as “the cheating wife”²¹. There had been several male collaborators of Carson that followed their own path to seek further success in their career, but none of them were dismissed in the same light as Joan Rivers. Regarding this matter, she said:

“He was not angry at anybody else. I think he really felt because I was a woman that I just was his. That I wouldn’t leave him. I know this sounds very warped. But I don’t understand otherwise what was going on. For years, I thought that maybe he liked me better than the others. But I think it was a question of, ‘I found you, and you’re my property’. He didn’t like that as a woman, I went up against him”²².

The show lasted for one season and Rivers later moved on to daytime, quite successfully. This latter part of her career has not been further analysed because, however interesting in general and regarding gender roles and notions of femininity, the role of women in daytime programmes is not the focus of this paper. The notoriety that Joan Rivers achieved in late-night shows is highly relevant to both her professional career and defying traditional gender assumptions for the first time in a very solid and consistent manner.

The second female host that needs to be highlighted that is part of the sample is Wanda Sykes, who is one of the most relevant examples not only for her role as a female comedian, but also because how her performing the role of a host brings diversity and intersectional feminism to

²¹ Summergrad, Sophie, *Can We Talk? A Discussion on Gender Politics in the Late-Night Comedy Career of Joan Rivers* (Master Thesis), Rochester, University of Rochester, 2016.

²² Rivers, Joan, “Joan Rivers: Why Johnny Carson ‘Never Ever Spoke to Me Again’”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6th of December of 2012.

the conversation about gender representation on late-night shows. She was considered a triple threat to conventional cultural boundaries, since she is a black, homosexual woman.

Sykes also used an assertive tone to claim her identity, as well as for criticising racism and sexist politics. This emphasises the cultural impact that her show had on society and the industry, despite it only airing for one season. It is also noteworthy that in both cases, Rivers and Sykes had her shows running on the same network: Fox. This seems to be the network more committed with early representations of female hosts on late-night television talk shows.

Lastly, the most recent milestone regarding women disrupting late-night talk show programmes is *A Little Late with Lilly Singh*, which airs on NBC. The programme aired in 2019 after *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and it lasted for two seasons. Singh’s case is similar to Sykes’ because of her ethnicity and sexual orientation, as she is of Indian descent and openly bisexual, which brings diversity onto a scenario with a very similar profile among key players. Furthermore, the writers’ room is formed by a high percentage of women and people of colour²³, which ultimately also evokes commitment with the intersectionality aspect of third-wave feminism.

All these cases of guest hosts and permanent hosts of late-night programmes, and particularly the latter three, however reduced in terms of number considering the sample overall, have presented a challenge that shakes the dynamics of a very established format. Producers and audiences expect men to perform the role of the host in late-night programmes, and having women as the main figure of authority, addressing current issues, and performing humour, is a disruptive phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has addressed the social and cultural relevance of the representation of gender in media texts and how including female voices in the late-night television talk show challenges both the notions about traditional femininity and the studied television format.

²³ Wang, Joy Y. and Engelhart, Katie, “Lilly Singh is ready to get weird with the premiere of NBC’s ‘A Little Late with Lilly Singh’”, *NBC News*, 16th of September of 2019.

Before assessing the key questions of this paper, it is noteworthy to mention that Rivers, Sykes, and Singh have marked a specific milestone regarding gender representation in late-night talk shows, and their contribution towards the role of women in this television genre has paved the way for future comediennes and cannot be undermined. Nonetheless, in spite of the relevance of these cases, all three hosts had their own programmes cancelled much earlier than could be expected.

In the case of Rivers and Sykes, the marketing strategy of the network, besides Rivers' controversy concerning Carson, could be of blame, considering that Fox was a newer network and talk shows were not a key signature programme in its timeslot. In the case of Singh's programme, the talk show aired on NBC after two extremely successful late-night shows. Nonetheless, the timeslot of Singh's programme is also later than usual.

To further contribute to this field of knowledge in gender representation and popular culture, three research questions had been set and can be answered after having carried out the pertinent analysis. As per the first research question, which aims to answer who the most prominent female figures are who have disrupted the late-night television talk show in the United States, from the analysis we can conclude that women overall have been (and still are) widely underrepresented, and that mainly three participants stand out: Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes, and Lilly Singh.

The analysis addresses the career of these women and retrieves key notions that concern gender representation, such as gender expectations regarding the performance of humour and use of an assertive tone, and intersectionality. These three comediennes are particularly relevant because they were the few who hosted their own programme in a major network and in the most popular timeslot, which gave them a more significant level of visibility and social impact than that of female participants or hosts in other type of television channels.

Regarding the second research question, which asks are women participating in late-night shows are both facing a challenge and confronting the show's historical dynamics, the conclusion is women have had historically an important role in daytime programmes and they traditionally address emotional or personal topics. Therefore,

addressing topics related to the public sphere and doing so in a humorous tone presents an important challenge for female participants to be represented in relevant roles in talk shows.

From the opposite perspective, how are women disrupting this landscape, the late-night show is a well-established format that has a solid structure and intrinsic elements as part of their successful dynamics throughout its history. These dynamics require having a male voice discussing current and political issues with a satirical tone. Including a female voice in such a male-dominated format is disrupting itself.

Most late-night talk show hosts have been and still are men, they are the figure that the audience is the most familiar with and producers consider a safe bet. Women entering this realm disrupt the familiar idea of the late-night talk show, and particularly when they did so in the major networks, since they are the ones reaching a wider audience and with more repercussion. This translates into women reclaiming this notorious space and the attention of the audience.

Lastly, the third question asked how these women hosting late-night television defy traditional notions concerning gender. The main answer has to do with the challenging traditional notions about femininity, the public sphere, and the use of humour. Discussing current issues and political topics is rather associated with masculinity, whereas woman usually discuss more personal and emotional topics, which is also noticeable in the different formats of television talk show. By addressing topics related to the public-sphere, women hosting late-night television talk shows are challenging traditional gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, women starring on late-night shows use a tone intrinsic to the format, which is the one used by their male counterparts: humorous and satirical. Although this is familiar to the audience when watching prime time and late-night television talk shows, women using this type of voice is uncommon and regarded as a conflict with femininity. By discussing topics related to their identity from an assertive and humorous tone, these women redefine not only the television format, but also the existing association between humour and femininity.

This paper has highlighted the elements of the late-night television talk show that entail a challenge for women, as well as explaining how wo-

men, particularly Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes, and Lilly Singh, have disrupted the male dominance of this format and defied traditional notions about gender that prevent women from having more of a notorious role in one of television's most popular timeslot and format.

It would be interesting for future studies to continue this analysis focusing on either the differences that exist in terms of gender representation between daytime and late-night, as well as addressing female voice in other geographical regions, including a transnational or a comparative analysis. Including a wider sample would help towards further understanding the overall evolution of gender representation on late-night television talk shows.

Feminist Media Studies is a discipline of research that grows at a very fast pace, which implies that there is a need for a constant update to analyse how gender is articulated the media landscape from critical perspectives in order to enrich the complex field of this research line. This piece of research has contributed to explaining how female voices have disrupted the late-night talk show, which hopefully encourages further research regarding gender representation in this and other late-night comedy formats.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Programmes considered for analysis by network and date:

ABC

- *One on One* (April–August 1983) – hosted by Greg Jackson
- *The Dick Cavett Show* (September–December 1986)
- *Into the Night Starring Rick Dees* (1990–1991)
- *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (1997–2002, originally aired on Comedy Central)
- *The Alec Baldwin Show* (March–December 2018)
- *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (2003 – today)

CBS

- *Overtime... with Pat O'Brien* (August 1990) – programme cancelled after three episodes.
- *The Midnight Hour* (July–September 1990) – talk show featuring rotating hosts, out of which Bill Maher stood out.
- *The Pat Sajak Show* (January 1989 – April 1990)
- *The Late Show* (August 1993–present)
- *The Late Late Show* (January 1995–present)

NBC

- *Later* (August 1988 – January 2001) – inconsistent format under the same brand name, either one-on-one interview (1988–1994, 2000–2001) or late-night talk show (1994–2000).
- *The Jay Leno Show* (September 2009 – February 2010)
- *Last Call with Carson Daly* (January 2002 – May 2019) – only considered until 2009, when it changed to a different format.
- *The Tonight Show* (1954–present)
- *Late Night* (February 1982–present)
- *A Little Late with Lilly Singh* (September 2019 – June 2021)

FOX

- *The Late Show* (October 9, 1986 – October 28, 1988) – this programme was the one starring Joan Rivers and then various hosts before it was cancelled.
- *The Wilton North Report* (December 11, 1987 – January 8, 1988)
- *The Chevy Chase Show* (September 7–October 1, 1993)
- *Talkshow with Spike Feresten* (September 16, 2006 – May 16, 2009) – aired on Saturday nights
- *The Wanda Sykes Show* (November 7, 2009 – April 24, 2010) – aired on Saturday nights

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Barner, Mark, “Sex-role stereotyping in FCC-mandated children’s educational television”, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43/4 (1999), pp. 551–564.
- Bengtsson, Mariette, “How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis”. *NursingPlus Open*, 2 (2016), pp. 8–14.
- Berger, Arthur Asa, *Media research techniques*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1998.
- Blake, Meredith, “‘Late Night’ makes late night look bleak for women. So we asked how bad it really is”, *Los Angeles Times*, 12th of June of 2019.
- Bondebjerg, Ib et al., “American Television: Point of Reference or European Nightmare?”, in Bignell, Jonathan and Fickers, Andreas, *A European Television History*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, pp. 154–183.
- Dykes, Ashli LeeAnn, *Situation comedies and the single woman on television* (Doctoral Thesis), Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2011.
- Evans, Heather, “Do women only talk about ‘female issues’? Gender and issue discussion on Twitter”, *Online Information Review*, 40/5 (2016), pp. 660–672.
- Ferguson, Kathy, “Feminist Theory Today”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20 (2017), pp. 269-286.
- Krippendorff, Klaus, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2018.
- Lunt, Peter and Stenner, Paul, “The Jerry Springer Show as an emotional public sphere”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 27/1 (2005), pp. 163–4437.
- Mittell, Jason, *Genre and television: From Cop Shows To Cartoons in American Culture*, London, Routledge, 2004.
- Munson, Wayne, *All Talk: The Talkshow in Media Culture*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993.
- Peterson, Russell Leslie, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Quemener, N., “Des pratiques subversives ? Les humoristes françaises dans les talk-shows”, *Recherches Féministes*, 25/2 (2013), pp. 139–156.
- Roman, James, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Summergrad, Sophie, *Can We Talk? A Discussion on Gender Politics in the Late-Night Comedy Career of Joan Rivers* (Master Thesis), Rochester, University of Rochester, 2016.
- Timberg, Bernard, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002.
- Tolson, Andrew, *Television Talk Shows: Discourse, Performance, Spectacle*, London, Routledge, 2001.
- Wang, Joy Y. and Engelhart, Katie, “Lilly Singh is ready to get weird with the premiere of NBC’s ‘A Little Late with Lilly Singh’”, *NBC News*, 16th of September of 2019.
- Wood, Helen, *Talking with Television: Women, Talk Shows, and Modern Self-Reflexivity*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2009.

