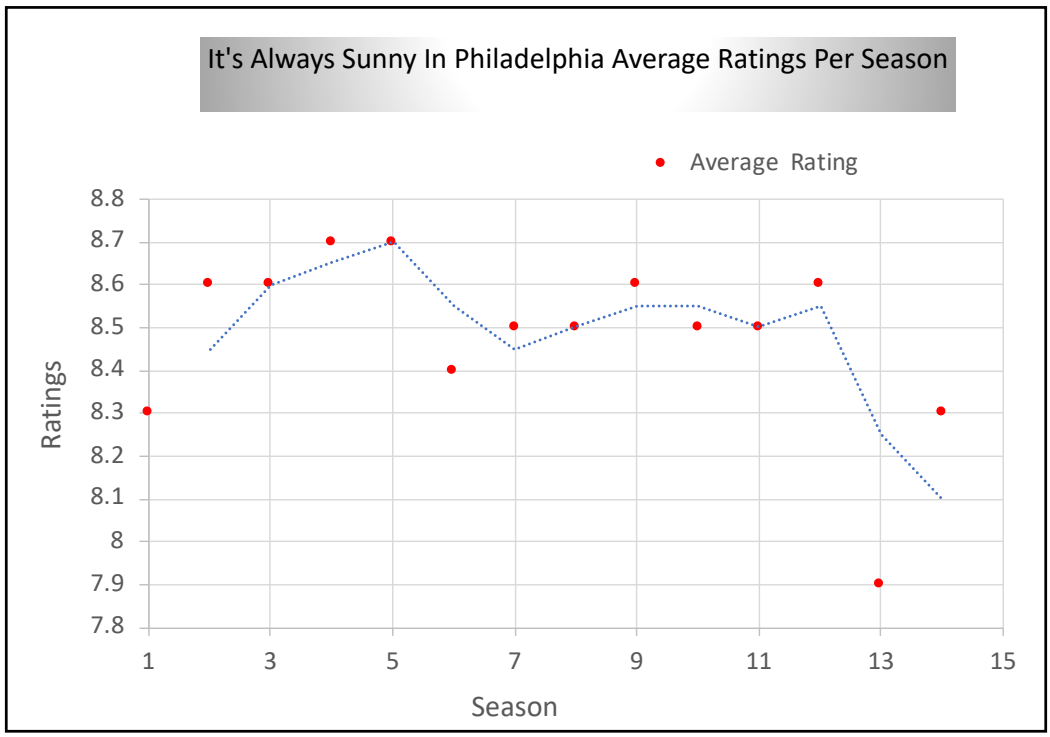
Aviv Tome
Dr. Ramsdell
WRIT 355
Feb. 16,2021

Pop Culture Through Television

From solid fanbases to successful viewership ratings, television shows work as defining factors in shaping popular culture. There are so many shows that develop a golden status in their respective genres and networks. I want to break down the different moving pieces that make a television show resonate with an audience and provide prime entertainment. Some major pieces include themes, characters and plot. I will analyze three different yet successful television shows that over the years have dominated in their field and how one even off the air remains relevant in today's society.

The first show I want to look at is probably one of the most controversial comedy sitcoms ever. FX channel's It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia recently became the longest running live action scripted comedy series. Created in 2005, the show's creators and co-stars Robert McElhenney, Glenn Howerton and Charile Day push the audience's limits further and further every season. What strikes me as an incredible success is how the show has managed to avert the infamous 'cancel culture' and remain at the top of their game.

A voting poll released by Ratin-Graph surveyed 313,517 It's Always Sunny fans to rate their favorite seasons. The two highest fan favorite seasons were seasons four and five. These two seasons explores controversial themes such as sexual assault, misogynistic exploitation of women, people faking their deaths to avoid paying mobsters and shameless marketing scams. I wanted to look at the most memorable episodes from these two acclaimed seasons and see which themes brought in the high ratings.



The highest rated episode for season four was episode thirteen ‘ The Nightman Cometh.' S4E13 is about the gang starring in a musical written by their illiterate friend Charlie where the lyrics hints that Charile was molested at an early age. The implication goes over Charlie's head and he insists it's about a super hero in love with a princess that lives in a coffee shop. The episode went to become so famous that the actors actually toured a few cities performing the musical and using it as a special feature to practice improvisational comedy with their audience. This episode created a running gag joke in the show that Charlie, played by co-creator Charile Day, “writes songs about ghouls, rape and spiders.”

With season five the highest rated episode was episode ten, ‘The D.E.N.N.I.S. System.’ It’s about how co-creator Glenn Howerton's character, Dennis Reynolds, explains his fool proof system to make any woman fall in love with him. The system glorifies emotional manipulation, lying, stalking and slashing women’s tires to make them dependent for rides. It quickly became a fan favorite for the extremes Dennis goes through to get women and it also developed a recurring gag joke that makes the audience question if Dennis is secretly a serial killer.

Despite the show's growing success, there is a visible dip in ratings on season thirteen. It dropped to a 7.9 rating making it the least favorite season. It was later confirmed that this was a product of storyline where one of the main characters, Dennis Reynolds leaves the gang to raise a child he had with a one night stand. Once Dennis' character returns to the show mid-season implying that he abandoned his family, the ratings went back up.

I have to admit that this comedy series is not for everyone. It makes fun of almost every single serious issue there is. Due to the nature of their storylines, the show's creators have done multiple interviews where they explain that they aren't bad people in real life, they just know how to make fun of terrible people in order to get a good laugh.

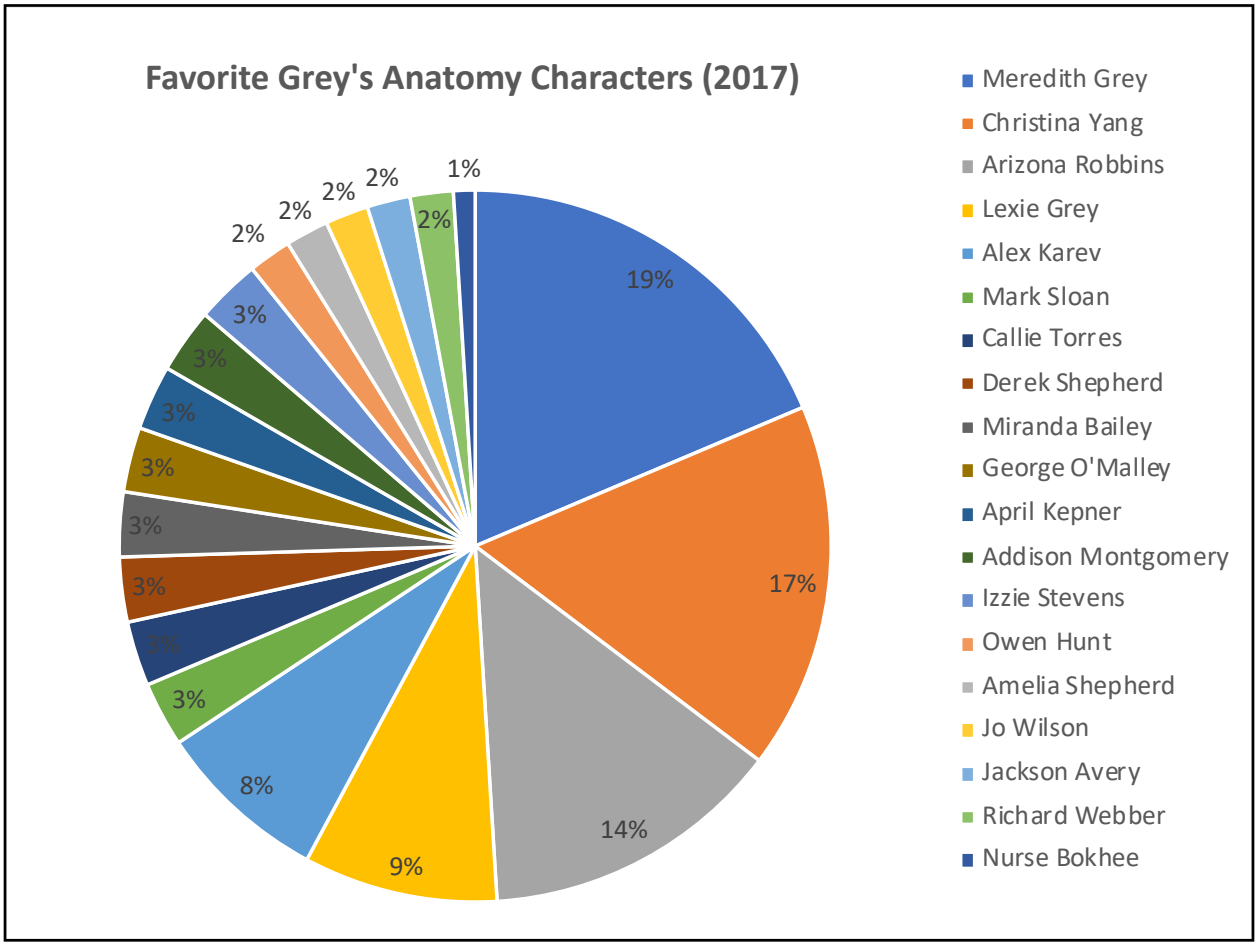
In 2019, Rob McElhenney broke down his theory as to why they haven't been canceled in an interview with The Washington Post, " I think the reason we came out unscathed is we’re sort of grandfathered into some bad behavior…By the time the culture became, I would say, uberly conservative from a leftist standpoint, we’d already been doing extreme stuff.”

The show is clearly a mockery of horrible behavior and the creators never said that they were role models. “We’ve always been a bit of a counterculture show. We started out as the anti-sitcom. There’s going to be nothing warm and fuzzy about this show, and we’re gonna go right for the jugular … I think there’s always going to be an audience for that kind of a show,” said McElhenney. Their massive success in exploring extremely controversial topics in the end boils down to the audience knowing that they're not going to watch a a show with good people in it, just really good actors and funny writers.

Aside from comedic relief, a more serious genre like drama and more specifically, medical drama looms over the horizon with the popularity of Grey's Anatomy. Created in 2005 by the talented show runner and television producer, Shonda Rhimes, Grey's Anatomy has amassed a cult-like following and received multiple accolades. From twenty-five Primetime Emmy Awards nominations to fifty-seven People's Choice Awards nominations, Grey's anatomy continues to go strong seventeen seasons later.

Perhaps one of the most defining factors of the show is the iconic cast. Characters such as Dr. Meredith Gray, Dr. Christina Yang and Dr. Arizona Robbins tug at viewer's heartstrings as they all navigate the hectic life of surgeons and failed workplace romances. I believe it is important to look at some character arcs and the doctor's distinctive personalities to dissect what is is about them that make this show so good. Story-wise, impossibly raised stakes mixed with hospital dynamics create a tense environment perfect for a drama series. However, it's the emotional attachment viewers develop with these characters that blow their problems out of proportion and connect with the audience at a deeper level.

A fan-made poll released in 2017 on SpoilerTV randomly surveyed 2,893 Grey's Anatomy fans asking them who was their favorite character. Out of twenty options, the top three were Dr. Meredith Grey with 19%, Dr. Christina Yang followed with 17% and Dr. Arizona Robbins with 14%. I found these results to be surprising because according to several publications such as ScreenRant, TVLine, Vulture, and Buzzfeed; the favorite usually is Dr. Alex Karev.



Despite the unexpected results, I want to do an in-depth analysis of these fan-favorite characters and pin-point their most compelling traits and challenges.

First, the protagonist Dr. Meredith Grey struggles through the first half of the show living in her mother's shadow that make her develop imposter syndrome. Dr. Grey is never out of the fire because she deliberately puts herself in life-threatening situations that absolutely make her a suicide risk. This protagonist is not immune to grief either. She goes through the death of her husband, a sister, her mother, several friends and is blamed for the death of her step-mother. Dr. Grey's storyline is one of the most tear-inducing stress parades. The show has become quite famous for making fans break down in tears over their favorite characters suffering. Despite all the troubles she goes through, Dr. Grey is one of the strongest characters in the show that make her a representation of overcoming personal demons and rising above suffering. Another thing very notable about Dr. Grey is that through all the obstacles she faces she takes the audience into her fears and anxieties. She is a deeply-flawed character that doesn't hide the fact that she is broken. Instead, Dr. Meredith remains open about her struggles and quickly pulls viewers into a vortex of emotions.

Some of Dr. Grey's most memorable quotes:

"*Okay, here it is. Your choice, it's simple, her or me. And I'm sure she's really great. But Derek, I love you, in a really, really big 'pretend to like your taste in music, let you eat the last piece of cheesecake, hold a radio over my head outside your window,' unfortunate way that makes me hate you ...love you. So pick me. Choose me. Love me*." -S2E5

" *You don't get to call me a whore. When I met you, I thought I had found the person that I was going to spend the rest of my life with. I was done. So all the boys, and all the bars, and all the obvious daddy issues, who cared? Because I was done. You left me. You chose Addison. I'm all glued back together now. I make no apologies for how I chose to repair what you broke. You don't get to call me a whore*." - S2E24

" *Time waits for no man. Time heals all wounds. All any of us want, is more time. Time to stand up. Time to grow up. Time to let go. Time*." - S3E1

The show's writers decided to give Dr. Grey an equally strong and brilliant best friend, Dr. Christina Yang. They both made themselves known as the 'twisted sisters,' and rode every up and down the show gave them until Dr.Yang's departure in the finale for season ten. Dr. Yang is the embodiment of a woman competing in a male-dominated field to prove that she deserves recognition. Christina goes through two marriages and an abortion as she becomes a woman that challenges society's expectations to have children. Her character extensively explores marital and maternity issues. On of the most intense problems Dr. Yang faces is when she agrees to divorce her husband because she refuses to give in and carry out the pregnancy of a child she doesn't want.

Some of Dr. Yang's most memorable quotes:

"*Don't let what he wants eclipse what you need. He is very dreamy. But he is not the sun. You are.*" - S10E24

"*Oh, screw beautiful. I'm brilliant. If you want to appease me, compliment my brain.*" - S7E17

" We can choose to be afraid of it, to stand there trembling not moving, assuming the worst that can happen or we can step forward into the unknown and assume it will be brilliant." -S10E24

Finally, the third fan-favorite character is Dr. Arizona Robbins. Dr. Robbins is a pediatric surgeon with bubbly and contagious optimism. Dr. Robbins' storyline faces several major obstacles but the first one the audience experiences is when she want to marry Dr. Callie Torres and her future in-laws are religious people who threaten to disown Dr. Torres if she gets married. Dr. Robbins charm and golden heart helps her win over her in-laws until tragedy strikes in the form of a plane crash and her wife has to make a call to amputate her leg. Dr. Robbins spirals into depression and experiences phantom limb syndrome as well as feeling betrayed by her wife. It's a major character shift and it defines Dr. Robbins as a resilient woman even when she impulsively cheats on her wife and goes through a divorce. Dr. Robbin's character arc is highly impacted through her amputation and forces her to navigate life and let go of her past easy personality. In the end, Dr. Robbins is a highly complex character with one of the most dramatic character shifts.

Some of Dr. Robbins most memorable quotes:

"So if you don't mind, I'm gonna keep talking relationships and rainbows and crap. And I'm gonna make plans for tomorrow. 'Cause that's what you do, Karev. You make plans. You have to. You turn your back on the tiny coffins and you face forward. To the next kid." - S5E12

"Sometimes we try to make things better and have no idea that we're actually causing more pain." - S14E6

" I had to figure out how to be me." - S5E10

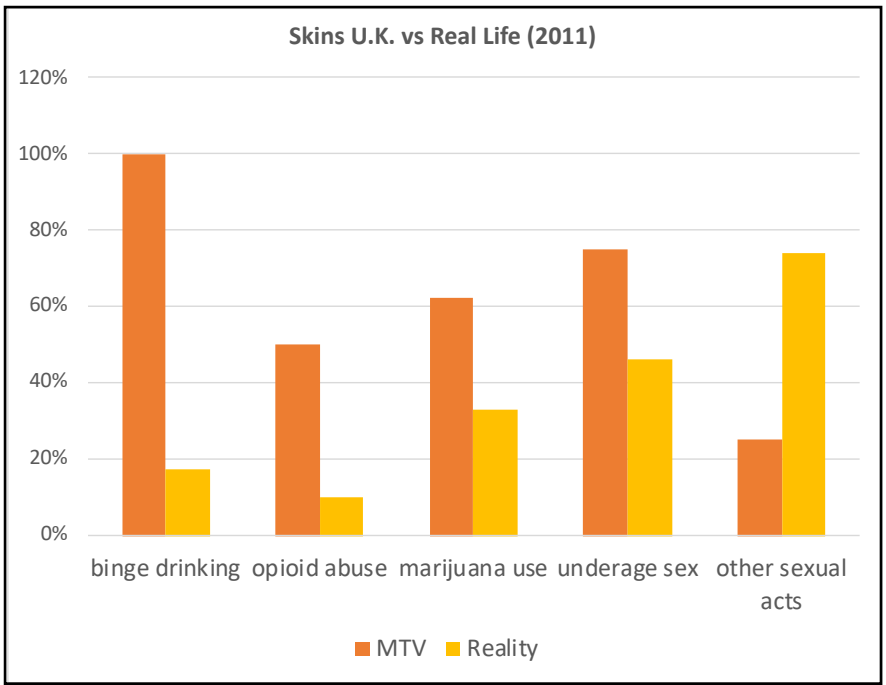
After analyzing these three major characters, it is easy to see why Grey's Anatomy is an incredibly successful and influential television show. It has drama. heartbreak and deep human issues all wrapped up in the form of hospital staff.

In the same area of drama, there's another culturally important show. The British teenage drama series Skins ran from 2007 to 2013 on MTV. Although the show was cancelled by Viacom for being too controversial, it is still considered one of the most inventive and ambitious depictions of teenagers in television. The show tackled a number of issues such as mental illness, teenage pregancy, drug abuse, and abandonment. It was a complicated and messy show with far from perfect characters that unleashed a counter-culture. Despite the show being either hated or acclaimed, it was undeniably hedonistic and ahead of its time.

One highly speculated reason for the show's cancellation was that it was a victim of its time. The show gained speed in the United States right next to the rise of Tumblr and it's detrimental ideologies that glorified mental illness. One clear example of this theory is the glamorization of main character Effy Stonem and her self-destructive tendencies. Effy was a deeply mentally ill character that struggled with bipolar disorder, anorexia nervosa and drug addiction. Effy was never meant to become a role-model. However, she quickly became the poster child for young girls who turned their mental illnesses into an aesthetic. Soon, Effy was all over Tumblr and blogs where millions of impressionable young girls constantly quoted her, followed her mannerisms and saw her as the epitome of beauty. Pressure from executives forced the show's producers and writers to tone down the heavy issues and appeal concerned parents.

But it was too late, Effy's ' I didn't eat for three days so I could be beautiful,' mantra had taken the internet by storm and the heavy drug use in the show didn't help either. Ultimately the show received too much criticism and cancelled production.

Despite the serious backlash, Esquire released a detailed study and article that compared the teenagers on Skins and the real life teenagers. It gave several comparison focusing on sex, drinking and drug use. The article revealed that Skins wasn't a reflection of what teenagers were actually doing and instead exaggerated drug use and underestimated sexual relations. Even though Esquire explicitly bashed the television show, it gave serious insight into the real statistics around teenagers and Skins' characters.



The first distinction was binge-drinking. In the show, it was assumed that all of the characters participated and accepted it as the norm. However, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Social Services noted that only 17.4% of minors aged twelve to twenty drank heavily. Skins exaggerated statistics by a staggering 82.6% and pictured minors constantly blacking out. I have to give it to helicopter parents, this wasn't only a terrible look, but also extremely blown out of proportion.

With drugs, especially opioid abuse and marijuana use, Skins once again inflated the numbers. In the show 50% of the teens ‘pop-pills' regularly and 62.5% of them smoke weed at least once on screen. In reality, The University of Michigan’s Institute for Social research that the worst cases of cannabis consumption for teenagers was amongst high school seniors where 32.8% were heavy smokers. It was also revealed that the television depiction of teens' cannabis consumption resembled more college students where one in three were recreational users. For painkillers and opioids, only 10% of high school students said they had previously consumed Vicodin recreationally. For OxyContin, only 5% of high school students reported regular use.

Interestingly enough, the only aspect of teenage life Skins partially underused was sexual activity. Skins downplayed the whole spectrum of sexual activities teenagers engage in by showing only 25% of it briefly in a few scenes. Despite this odd exclusion, The Kinsey Institute released that 73.8% of male teens and 48.1% of females teens engage in other sexual activities. On the show 75% of the teens were seen having sex by episode six. But, in 2009 the Center for Disease Control reported that the statistic for underage sex was 46%. This statistic had been in decline since 1991 where it originally was 54.1%.

Honestly, as disjointed as the teens on the show were from the real statistics, Skins was and continues to be a cultural phenomenon amongst teenagers. It has managed to retain a fanbase that holds the show in high regards for it's exploited dramatization of teens and unapologetic plot.

Despite the fact that popular culture constantly reinvents itself with trends. It is undeniable that these three television shows retain a solid slice of audience and influence. There are a lot aspects that construct a successful television show. These three examples show how strong themes in a comedy can boost its viewership, impressive character arc create loyal followers and how exaggerated plot lines can turn a show into a staple even years after its cancellation.

Works Cited

Kamer, Foster. “The Truth About MTV's Skins.” *Esquire*, Esquire, 22 Aug. 2020, www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a9421/skins-mtv-controversy-5235797/.

Powers, Lindsay. “'Skins': 6 Reasons Why MTV May Have Canceled the Controversial Series.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 11 June 2011, www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/skins-6-reasons-why-mtv-196823.

Travis, Ben. “Why Skins Was the Perfect Teen Show.” *London Evening Standard | Evening Standard*, Evening Standard, 25 Jan. 2017, www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/skins-was-ambitious-messy-erratic-and-inventive-and-that-s-why-it-was-the-perfect-teen-show-a3449721.html.

Raina. “USD POLL : Which Grey's Anatomy Character Is Your All Time Favorite?” *SpoilerTV*, 14 June 2017, www.spoilertv.com/2017/06/usd-poll-which-greys-anatomy-character.html.

TVLine, Team. “25 Best Grey's Characters Ever, Ranked.” *TVLine*, 13 Aug. 2020, tvline.com/gallery/greys-anatomy-best-characters-ever-ranked/.

Wilson, Mark, and Mark Wilson (175 Articles Published) Mark Wilson has his favorites TV Shows. We're talking The Blacklist. “Grey's Anatomy: Top 10 Fan Favorite Characters, Ranked.” *ScreenRant*, 26 Dec. 2019, screenrant.com/greys-anatomy-fan-favorite-characters-ranked-yang-webber-karev/.

Andrews, Travis. “In Its Record 14 Seasons, 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia' Has Dodged Cancel Culture, Controversy - and Emmys.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 26 Sept. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/09/26/its-record-seasons-its-always-sunny-philadelphia-has-dodged-cancel-culture-controversy-emmys/.

Gindin, Chadd, et al. “It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia (2005-) Ratings.” *Rating Graph*, 1 Jan. 1970, www.ratingraph.com/tv-shows/it-s-always-sunny-in-philadelphia-ratings-22021/.

Fitzmaurice, Larry. “Every It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia Episode, Ranked.” *Vulture*, Vulture, 25 Sept. 2019, www.vulture.com/article/best-its-always-sunny-in-philadelphia-episodes-ranked.html.