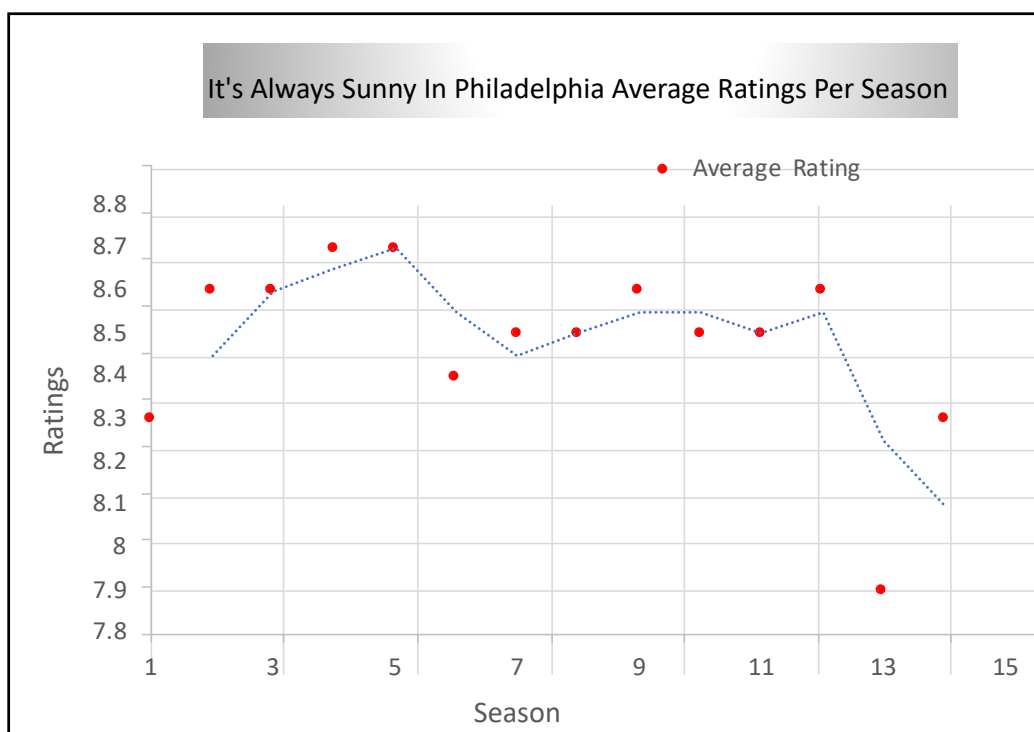


## Television Shows Reshaping Trends in Pop Culture

From solid fanbases to successful viewership ratings, television shows work as defining factors in shaping popular culture. So many shows 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 significant elements include themes, characters, and plot. I will analyze three different yet successful television shows that have dominated in their field over the years 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. 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 Charlie Day, push the audience's limits 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. A voting poll released by Rating-Graph surveyed 313,517 *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* fans to rate their favorite seasons. The two highest fan-favorite seasons were seasons four and five. These two seasons explore 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 hint that Charlie was molested at an early age. The implication goes over Charlie’s head, and he insists it’s about a superhero in love with a princess that lives in a coffee shop. The episode became so famous that the actors toured a few cities performing the musical and using it as a unique feature to practice improvisational comedy with their audience. This episode created a running gag joke in the show that Charlie, played by co-creator Charlie Day, “writes songs about ghouls, rape and spiders.”

The highest-rated episode was episode ten in season five, ‘The D.E.N.N.I.S. System.’ It’s about how co-creator Glenn Howerton’s character, Dennis Reynolds, explains his foolproof 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. 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 was a visible dip in ratings on season thirteen. It dropped to a 7.9 rating, making it the least favorite season. Producers later confirmed that this was a product of storyline edits 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.

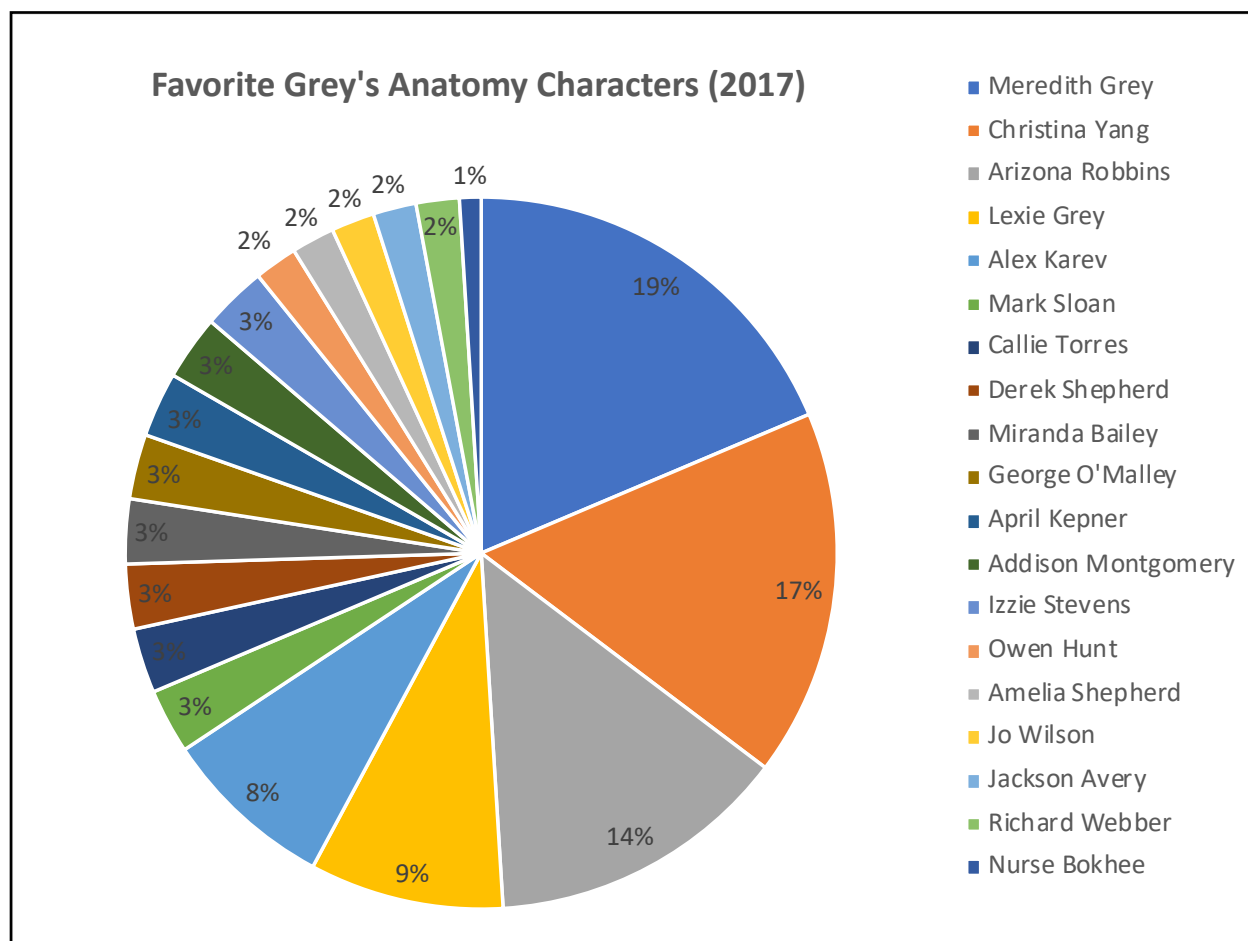
I have to admit that this comedy series is not for everyone. It makes fun of almost every single serious issue there is. Due to the nature of their storylines, the show’s creators have done multiple interviews where they explain that they aren’t bad people in real life; they know how to make fun of terrible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

In 2019, Rob McElhenney broke down his theory about why they haven’t been canceled in an interview with The Washington Post, “I think the reason we came out unscathed is we’re 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 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 as the anti-sitcom. There’s going to be nothing warm and fuzzy about this show, and we’re going to go right for the jugular ... I think there will always be an audience for that kind of a show,” said McElhenney. Their massive success in exploring highly controversial topics, in the end, boils down to the audience knowing that they’re not going to watch a show with good people in it, just outstanding 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 showrunner 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 viewers' heartstrings as they all navigate the hectic life of surgeons and failed workplace romances. I believe it is essential to look at some character arcs and the doctor's distinctive personalities to dissect what it is about them that makes this show so good. Story-wise, impossibly raised stakes mixed with hospital dynamics create a tense environment perfect for a drama series. However, the emotional attachment viewers develop with these characters blows their problems out of proportion and connects 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 surprising because, according to several publications such as ScreenRant, TVLine, Vulture, and BuzzFeed, the favorite is usually Dr. Alex Karev.



Despite the unexpected results, I want to analyze these fan-favorite characters in-depth and pinpoint their most compelling traits and challenges.

First, the protagonist Dr. Meredith Grey struggles through the show's first half. Living in her mother's shadow makes her develop imposter syndrome. Dr. Grey is never out of the fire because she deliberately puts herself in life-threatening situations that 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, and several friends and is blamed for the end of her stepmother. Dr. Grey's storyline is one of the most tear-inducing stress paradises. Despite all the troubles she goes through, Dr. Grey is one of the show's strongest characters, making her a representation of overcoming personal demons and rising above suffering. Another notable thing about Dr. Grey is that she takes the audience into her fears and anxieties through all the obstacles she faces. She is a deeply-flawed character who doesn't hide 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 great. But Derek, I love you, in a 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 I would 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 of 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 abortion as she becomes a woman that challenges society's expectations to have children. Her character extensively explores marital and maternity issues. One 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 significant obstacles. Still, the audience experiences the first one when she wants 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 help 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, and feels betrayed by her wife. It's a significant 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. Robbins' 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

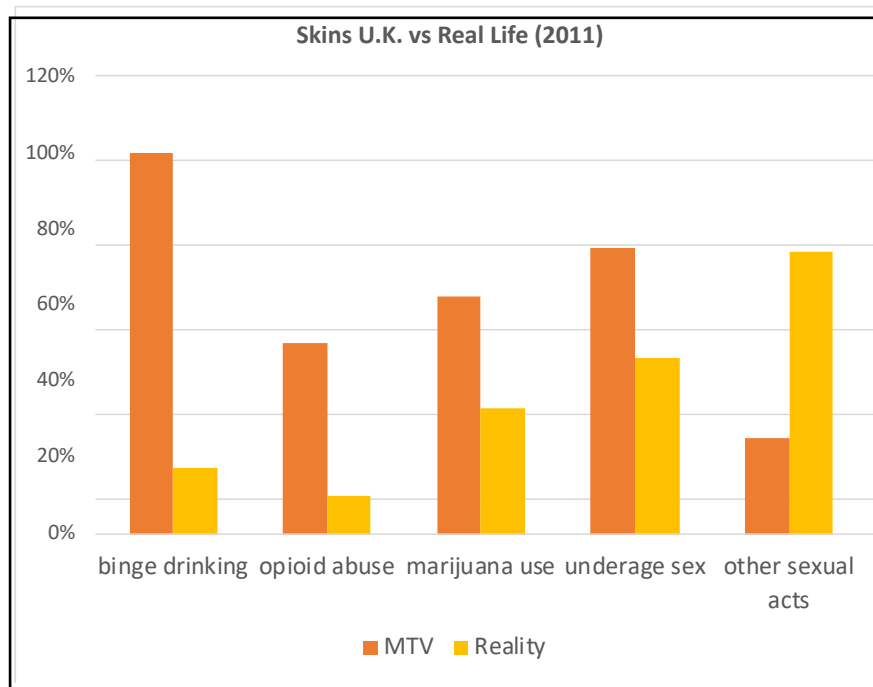
After analyzing these three major characters, it is easy to see why Grey's Anatomy is an incredibly successful and influential television show. It has drama, heartbreak and deep human issues all wrapped up in the fast-paced hospital environment.

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 Viacom canceled the show for being too controversial, it is still considered one of the most inventive and ambitious depictions of teenagers on television. The show tackled many issues such as mental illness, teenage pregnancy, 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 its dangerous ideologies that glorified mental illness. One clear example of this theory is the glamorization of the main character Effy Stonem and her self-destructive tendencies. Effy was a profoundly 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 severe issues and appeal to 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 canceled production.

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



The first distinction was binge drinking. It was assumed that all of the characters participated and accepted it as the norm in the show. However, 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 82.6% and pictured minors constantly blacking out. I have to give it to helicopter parents; this wasn't only a terrible look and highly 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 found that the worst cases of cannabis consumption for teenagers were among 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, *Skins* partially underused the only aspect of teenage life 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 female teens engage in other sexual activities. 75% of the teens were seen having sex by episode six of the show. But, in 2009, the Center for Disease Control reported that the statistic for underage sex was 46%. This statistic had declined since 1991, when it originally was 54.1%.

As disjointed as the teens on the show were from the accurate statistics, *Skins* was and continues to be a cultural phenomenon amongst teenagers. It has retained a fanbase that holds the show in high regard for its exploited dramatization of teens and unapologetic plot.

Even though 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 of 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 exaggerated plot lines can turn a show into a staple even years after its cancellation.

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