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| Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication | **Nerds on television and the lessons they teach** |
|  | A qualitative analysis of the sitcom the big bang theory |

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**Preface**

Thanks to my supervisor Annemarie Kersten who guided me through this project and continuously encouraged me both on a personal and academic level. Thank you, Annemarie for making this a positive and interesting experience where I learned a lot!

**Abstract**

This thesis is a qualitative analysis of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* where friendships and romantic relationships on the show are analyzed. The research question being addressed is which lessons about personal social relationships are taught on the sitcom. *The Big Bang Theory* is an interesting case because the most characters on the show fall into the social category of nerds and fulfill the stereotypes associated with that image such as social awkwardness and physical unattractiveness. One of the key assumptions of this thesis is that television is a relevant factor within society where meaning is constructed and norms and values are discussed and spread. The role that television is assigned is therefore the role of a teacher. This thesis also values the scientific relevance of popular fiction and connects it to reality and its relevance for society. Several approaches of television influence are discussed at which the encoding/decoding model with its conception of a separate media text and active audience is the most important one. Formal aspects of a sitcom are also taken into consideration. The analysis conducted to answer the research question about the lessons of personal social relationships question is a qualitative content analysis. The methodological background draws upon the tradition of Cultural Studies and general scientific canons. The empirical analysis was conducted by applying Grounded Theory because it is an open approach useful for a valid qualitative analysis. This analysis is based on transcripts of the first season of The Big Bang Theory (consisting of 17 episodes) as well as analysis tables designed to fit this thesis’ objectives. There were five themes found for friendships and five for romantic relationships along with several sub-topics for both relationship types. From the discussion of these themes, four main lessons about personal social relationships were derived: they are based both on sameness and difference, they have to be resilient, they are based on honesty and sincerity and the last lesson about personal social relationships concerns the fact that everyone benefits from it.

**Keywords**

Television, Teacher, The Big Bang Theory, Lessons, Personal Social Relationships

# Introduction

## Nerds as a Research Phenomenon

“Look what you’ve created here, it’s like Nerdvana”. This is how Howard, one of the characters of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, describes his friend’s flat. This description fits the setting of the series that revolves around a group of four friends who are nerds. The focus on this social group is what distinguishes *The Big Bang Theory* from other sitcoms and makes it an interesting case for a scholarly analysis.

In contemporary television, the nerd is an often used figure showing several key characteristics such as social awkwardness, sexual failure and mathematical intelligence (Quail, 2010). The figure of the nerd is not a new phenomenon on television. The nerd has been used in series as an additional character to a bigger cast. But the nerd can also be placed as a central figure within a media text[[1]](#footnote-1) which *The Big Bang Theory* does.

*The Big Bang Theory* is a current and popular example, where several nerds make up the cast. The four male friends are all scientists who work at a university. They lack certain social skills, which often leads to clashes between them and other people, such as their good-looking female neighbor Penny. This lack of social skills makes nerds interesting figures to look at. The focus of this thesis lies on personal social relationships, thus on an area where the nerds are no experts but where they want to get better.

Leonard for example is looking for a woman he can ask out but his roommate Sheldon tells him that even with “the dietician at the cafeteria with the limp and the lazy eye” he would have no chances. This example shows that nerds social outsiders who have trouble to connect with other people (also due to the lack of communication skills). They are professionally successful but unsuccessful socially.

This project therefore focuses on personal social relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships. In order to study a phenomenon, it needs to be observable and by being challenged with personal social relationships, the nerds put the issue of these relationships into focus. The nerds can make rules and norms of personal social relationships visible. They become visible due to the lack of social skills, rules and norms of interpersonal behavior becomes a topic of interest within the media text. An example for this is when Leonard tells Sheldon that it is the social protocol to say something nice “when you have a friend who’s proud of something they really suck at”.

*The Big Bang Theo*ry is an interesting example because it builds up on the stereotypes attached to it. Stereotypes are not the focus of this paper and are not analyzed but they are taken as a starting point that provides an interesting perspective of looking at personal social relationships. The main characters (the four nerds) belong to the same social group and while they differ from each other, they fulfill the same role and stereotype. While audience research is not part of this project, it can be assumed that the success cannot lie in the fact that people like to laugh at these characters. It is more likely that the humor arises through the clashing of different everyday lives (Knop, 2007). The series starts with this kind of clashing lives when Penny moves in. She is pretty and while she is unsuccessful in her job (an aspiring actress working as a waitress for minimum wage), she is popular socially (she has friends and boyfriends).

The nerds all have their different ways of dealing with interpersonal situations. While none of them is an expert in this, they all struggle in their different ways. Here the normative idea of how not to act with others becomes visible on multiple levels with several characters showing different kinds of behavior. For example, Howard presents himself as a pick-up artist while Raj does not dare to speak to women at all but both are not successful with their tactic. Looking at these different characters that all fit the nerd stereotype and how they interact, apply or question social norms will be interesting to analyze. The characters and the set-up of the series will be described in more detail in the second chapter.

Being a popular sitcom and a successful show, *The Big Bang Theory*, is a contemporary example in the media. The assumption of this paper is that popular culture is an important part within a society and an important part of culture. Looking at rules and norms of society and how they are presented in a popular fictional program is a way of connecting the two because dealing with contemporary and fictional television in an academic way can give insight into society and existing ideas and attitudes within it (Jensen, 2002).

Despite the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* being fictional, it relates back to reality and lessons for one’s real life can be derived from watching fictional characters interact on screen. *The Big Bang Theory* is a particular interesting example when it comes to looking at social norms.

This research project looks at the stories that are told *The Big Bang Theory*. Television is considered as the teacher within this context. Stories on television can teach people in different ways and about different things (Gerbner, 1999). Stories thus have an effect beyond the time of consumption and beyond the effect of entertainment. Television can cultivate attitudes and, when looking at the content itself (and not the audience) the message can be derived from this content.

The question which can be addressed here is: what is being taught. The focus on the lessons and values which television can teach in combination with the lack of social skills of the nerds on *The Big Bang Theory* (and thus putting social norms and values into focus), leads to the research question of this project: Which lessons about personal social relationships are taught in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*? Personal social relationships are defined as friendships and romantic relationships within this thesis.

## The Relevance of Television as a Storyteller

Television is a central aspect of culture within society where rules and norms are debated. Looking at how personal social relationships like friendships and romantic relationships are displayed, means looking at how they are socially constructed. This is important because social rules and norms are artificial and subject to change, this means they are not naturally given but shaped over time. In contemporary society, television acts as a carrier and teller for many stories (Gerbner, 1999) and can be called “principle storyteller in contemporary […] society” (Kozloff, 1992, p. 67). This thesis looks at the content of these stories and the lessons that can be derived from that, and considers television as a place where ideologies and values are presented (Quail, 2010). Hartley (2008) emphasizes the importance of television studies within the academic field among various levels from freshman students to professors. As a Master Thesis this paper finds its position somewhere between these poles.

The meaning of what is shown on television is not a fixed one that can simply be observed. Instead, it is necessary to critically look at television content and interpret it. Interpreting content means reading television (Fiske, 1987). Speech and dialogue are central aspects of how topics are dealt with on television which is why interpreting verbal elements is a central aspect of this research. Social norms are often not questioned and subconsciously applied. They become most apparent when they are questioned by people who are supposed to follow them or ignore them. The normative idea behind it then is not to portray desirable and appropriate behavior but instead show what it is *not*. So looking at *The Big Bang Theory* is likely to uncover social norms because they are not taken for granted, they are not always applied by all the characters.

Through the repetitive structure of a weekly sitcom, the viewers become familiar with the characters (Keppler, 1995). They get to know them and learn how they behave, what they like and what their social environment looks like. By following a series and talking about it, viewers incorporate the series in their communicative environment (Keppler, 2005).

Media consumption plays a role in what information people are exposed to besides the information coming from their immediate environment. Watching fictional characters on television and perceiving them as such also calls for interpretations of such perceptions (Keppler, 1995). Often one key characteristic feature about a character is emphasized (Newman, 2006).

## Popularity and Reception

The series can be considered as a global product which is consumed in several countries across the globe (it airs or aired in more than 60 countries in original language, subtitled or dubbed). This underlines the relevance of looking at a successful sitcom like *The Big Bang Theory.* “Not everything or everyone is globalized, but the global networks that structure the planet affects everything and everyone” (Castells, 2008, p. 38). It is important to note that the topic and research material of this thesis also exist within the process of globalization and is, as a meaningful product, affected by it.

The global success implies a certain universality of the messages and lessons on *The Big Bang Theory* as a global product. The values and lessons within the series seem to be understood in some way by audiences of different cultures. Critically looking at these messages and lessons and finding out what they are about is in this context more vindicated when it comes to choosing which specific product to look at for an in-depth qualitative content analysis. The aspect of globalization will be discussed in more detail in section 3.1.3.

A big national and global audience of a series means that it has the potential of having a big impact in terms of people who are exposed to the content of the show (and its lessons). Television, in this context, is a teacher that can amend or even replace older forms of teaching such as schools and churches (Hartley, 1999).

The global success of *The Big Bang Theory* underlines the potentially high ratio of influence[[2]](#footnote-2) of the series. It was described as a surprise success because the set-up did not sound like an entertaining sitcom with characters that seemed unlikeable in the first place (Strachan, 2008). The characters cannot be described as role models, yet there is a message about how they behave and act within their environment. After the first season did not get great ratings, the show picked up and has become the highest-rated on television in the United States, already being ordered by the network until 2014 (Kelly, 2011).

When *The Big Bang Theory* aired for the first time in 2007, it was described as “a genuinely engaging homage to the nerd hero” (Stanley, 2007) that takes the unpopular figure of the nerd and makes the character the focus point of a series. The final episode of the most recent fifth season which aired in May 2012 was the most successful scripted series of the year among the viewers aged 18 to 19 (Strachan, 2012). This is the most relevant age group when it comes to selling television advertisement and thus making a series an economical success (Goettler, 2012).

Besides this economical perspective, the social perspective of analyzing a show which consists of several characters fulfilling one stereotype makes for a relevant case when looking at personal social relationships. Stereotypes and categorization of people play a big role in human relationships and society because they are a way for a society to organize itself (DeLamater & Meyers, 2007). Closely studying how social outcasts are portrayed in a popular comedy series can therefore be considered as a way of critically looking at society and its values. Uncovering mechanisms and underlying values which are present in a popular media text like *The Big Bang Theory* not only helps to understand society but is also a critical way of looking at it and its values and how they can be inscribed in an entertainment product like a television sitcom.

In order to answer the research question, the series as well as the stereotype of the nerd will be discussed in the second chapter along with scientific findings concerning friendships and romantic relationships. The third chapter constitutes the theoretical framework for the analysis and will describe and discuss several key assumptions such as the significance of television, the influence of television, television as a teacher and the role of contemporary fiction on television. The third chapter also includes the discussion of key aspects of a sitcom in general. The fourth chapter illuminates the methodological background of this paper as well as the specific method used for the analysis. The findings about friendships and romantic relationships are discussed in the fifth chapter before these findings are concluded and discussed in the sixth chapter along with a reflection on this thesis’ theory and method.

# Case Study – Nerds in *The Big Bang Theory*

Before elaborating on the theoretical framework of this research project, some important concepts and topics specific to this thesis’ case study need to be discussed. This includes the figure of the nerd because the main characters of *The Big Bang Theory* fall into that category. It is important to note what is behind this stereotype since this makes the characters of the sitcom particularly interesting when it comes to studying social relationships. A few remarks are made on friendships and romantic relationships because those will be focused on in this research project in sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

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## The Big Bang Theory

The American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* revolves around a group of four male friends living and working in Los Angeles, who all match the central aspects of the nerd stereotype (this term will be discussed in more detail in the following section). On the official homepage, the set-up of the series is described as follows:

“Leonard and Sheldon are brilliant physicists, the kind of "beautiful minds" that understand how the universe works. But none of that genius helps them interact with people, especially women. All this begins to change when a free-spirited beauty named Penny moves in next door. Sheldon [Cooper], Leonard's [Hofstadter] roommate, is quite content spending his nights playing Klingon Boggle with their socially dysfunctional friends, fellow CalTech[[3]](#footnote-3) scientists [Howard] Wolowitz and [Raj] Koothrappali. However, Leonard sees in Penny a whole new universe of possibilities... including love.” (CBS, 2012)

The first season which aired in the United States 2007, starts with aspiring actress and waitress Penny moving into the apartment next door to Leonard and Sheldon. In contrast to them, Penny has social skills and common sense but no intellectual aspirations. The description on the official homepage states that the nerds on the other hand lack social skills, especially with women but also in general. This lack of social skills makes them a relevant case of studying social relationships. Because they lack them, these social skills automatically become a central aspect of the series story and are focused on instead of being taken for granted.

Leonard is presented as rather shy and physically weak guy who tries to be more social. He often mocks Sheldon for not following a social protocol. He is therefore aware of certain social norms within society but still has difficulties following them. Sheldon is presented as the most arrogant and socially awkward character having no interest in women or social norms and behavior in general. He often oversteps boundaries of politeness because he does not see the reason behind some norms and frequently questions them. Raj has the most difficulties with women because he is unable to speak in their presence but is more aware of social norms in general. He is bothered by this and desires to have a girlfriend. Howard presents himself as a ladies’ man but his cheesy pickup lines and the fact that he still lives together with his mother shows that he is struggling socially as well. He is the one with the most distorted self perception since the others are more self-conscious. Within this group of friends they are aware of each other’s different qualities and shortcomings, both in their professional scientific field as well as with regard to their social skills. They are all aware of their status as nerds.

The picture below shows the main characters in Leonard’s and Sheldon’s apartment, the most frequently seen setting of the show.



Image 1 Main Characters of The Big Bang Theory. From left to right: Howard, Leonard, Penny, Sheldon, and Raj

## The Concept of the Nerd

There are certain stereotypes and perceptions that are common and salient concerning the figure of the nerd. The nerd is usually perceived as a white and heterosexual male with glasses who is good at mathematics and sciences, but lacks social skills and therefore is regarded as a loner, unsuccessful with girls and hence not fitting to the common idea of masculinity (Quail, 2010). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a nerd as an informal identification for a “foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious” (Nerd, n.d.) and a person that is often “single-minded expert in a particular technical field: a computer nerd”. A similar definition is given for the concept of a geek as an „unfashionable or social inept person“(Geek, n.d.), which can be amended by a geek being a “knowledgeable and obsessive enthusiast” (Geek, n.d.). The basic assumptions are similar for the terms nerd and geek, and will be used synonymously in this thesis.

At this point it is important to note that a stereotype as such is a cognitive representation of a social group. A group can be described with characteristics that seem to be common to people belonging to this particular group. In order to create and shape a stereotype, certain characteristics are often exaggerated and individual differences are neglected (DeLamater & Meyers, 2007).

The stereotype of the geek has changed or at least been expanded by the popularity of *geek chic* (Quail, 2010), a cultural phenomenon that considers certain things as *hip* and *cool* that used to be associated with “geekiness” in a negative way. This includes things like a particular clothing style and also being *media*-and *tech-savvy (*Quail, 2010). The lines between the previously described stereotype of the computer geek and the more recent image of the hip geek have become blurred due to technological and economical changes. Technology has pervaded both businesses and everyday life, and the fascination with it allows for computer-affinity to become not only a nerdy interest. Instead, qualities like being able to fix computer problems or being able to find information on the Internet have become socially acceptable and desirable qualities (Kendall, 1999).

The stereotype of the nerd on television has its roots in the way in which scientists are perceived within society. The perception of them being white males, socially incompetent and absorbed in their work still exists, and science is still considered to be a male domain (Eglash, 2002). In her research on stereotypes of scientists in 1983 and 2001, Losh (2010) found that the perception of scientists has changed. In 2001, scientists were perceived in a more positive way, and a career in science as more desirable in comparison to 1983. While these findings are rather general and details about what exactly is perceived as more positive and why that changed are not provided, this research shows that stereotypes are neither neutral nor fixed categories – they are social constructs and therefore subject to change across time.

Identities like the stereotypical nerd are often (re)created in and spread through television content (Newcomb, 2007). A concept of identity and role can be negotiated over time, it changes, and it reflects the time it was produced and consumed in. Thus its representation may also inform people about society in a particular time period (Kim, 2001). *The Big Bang Theory* is a contemporary example where multiple types of nerds and *geekiness* are represented on television.

The image of the nerd can be used both to reinforce as well as challenge common images of masculinity. This means that they can be shown as having success with women and thus challenging the stereotype of the sexually weak geek. This shows that social outsiders can be successful and desirable as well. When the nerd is portrayed as a failure in relationships and more affiliated with his male friends than potential romantic female partners (this again underlines the common conception of the nerd being heterosexual), the stereotype of the nerd being less masculine is reaffirmed (Kendall, 1999).

In contemporary television, the nerd is an often used figure showing several key characteristics such as social awkwardness, sexual failure and mathematical intelligence (Quail, 2010). While the (changing) portrayal of these types of characters on *The Big Bang Theory* is not the main focus of this research project, it was shown, that the nerd is an interesting figure to look at in connection to personal social relationships because the lack of social skills is one main characteristic feature that is used to define the nerd. The social ineptness and lack of romantic skills make the nerd on television an interesting case because he can clearly not act as a role model. It is more likely that behavior of stereotypical nerds serves as an example of how *not* to act in friendships or romantic relationships. When the nerds of *The Big Bang Theory* are shown struggling and failing in social situations this contains a message of how not to act. Negative examples like this can also explicitly or implicitly state what an acceptable way of social behavior would be, both within friendships and romantic relationships.

## Friendships

Human relationships and interactions are essential parts of society and communal and everyday life. Since representations of friendships on television are part of this research project, it is necessary discussing the issue as such. Looking at *The Big Bang Theory* also means looking at nerds and their friendships. Not only among them but also with others who are not considered being nerds. This is interesting because the sitcom starts with Penny entering the *nerd universe* and bringing new dynamics and her common sense logic into their environment. Quail (2011) distinguishes between two forms of a relationship between someone popular (hip) and a nerd (square). She calls this a *hip/square* relationship and describes two forms of how it can be shown on television:

“(1) the odd-couple narrative of the square and his or her friendship with a hipster and (2) the antagonistic narrative of a square and his or her hip/cool competitor: the jock or popular kid.” (Quail, 2011, p. 462)

What she concludes is that hip/square friendships do not debase the geek but emphasize popular masculinity on the side of the hipster by depicting what is cool in desirable behavior by males. This ties in with Kendall’s (1999) findings mentioned above that the figure of the nerd can be used to emphasize common images of masculinity by portraying the nerd as an opposite. Quail (2010) also concludes that when the hipster and the geek are portrayed as antagonists, the difference between them is often described as a fixed boundary and the geeks are depicted as social outcasts. She therefore describes friendships on *The Big Bang Theory* among nerds as “nerds in cultural exile” (Quail, 2011, p. 462). The four main characters and nerds get along with Penny however and humor inflicts when there are misunderstandings because different worlds of everyday lives (those of the nerds and others) are colliding (Knop, 2007).

In friendships there are certain norms that the people involved in it usually feel obliged to follow, such as doing favors for the other, showing interest in the other, and believing in the other’s strengths (Keller, 2004). Norms in friendships can clash however with other norms such as being honest, e.g. when one encourages a friend on their accomplishment even though one might not think it is that good (Keller, 2004). On *The Big Bang Theory*, norms become tangible for example when Sheldon does not act within the norms or questions them. This is related to the topic of codes which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter when talking about semiotics.

Similar to norms of friendships are rules of friendships that are supposed to coordinate behavior and facilitate problem solving among friends (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). During four studies, Argyle and Henderson (1984) deduced rules that people in different countries describe as important for friendships. Among them are sharing stories of success, showing emotional support, volunteer help, trust in the other, be tolerant, stand up for the other person and respect privacy. So even in a relationship that is based on mutual sympathy like friendship, there are rules that the parties expect each other to follow and breaking the rules might result in the failure of a friendship. It is thus interesting to look at characters that are described as social outcasts, the rules they deal with and how they do this.

In general, groups of friends are people who can just be among each other and talk without doing something spectacular that they need to talk about. Such conversations among groups of friends on television are meant to sound like natural conversations (Quaglio, 2009). This is interesting for *The Big Bang Theory* because much of it consist of such conversations. The issues and struggles of the characters usually take place within their private and sometimes within their work lives. Looking at conversations among friends (and lovers) is an interesting aspect when looking at this sitcom. Again, it is connected to the lack of social skills because conversations are social interaction. The struggle with the recognition and acceptance of social rules and norms also becomes apparent in the characters talking about them.

## Romantic Relationships

Besides the friendships presented on the show, romantic relationships also play a big role on *The Big Bang Theory*: after all, the whole series starts after Penny, the attractive neighbor, moves in next to the nerds Leonard and Sheldon and immediately becomes a potential love interest for Leonard. Raj and Howard constantly struggle with girls but express the desire to be in a romantic relationship.

Heterosexual relationships displayed on television often imply who is the dominant part of the relationship and thus reflect on male and female gender roles. Research suggests that the male part is usually more dominant while the female is more submissive. This can have an effect on viewers in the sense that television couples might challenge, manifest or create gender stereotypes (Ivory, Gibson & Ivory, 2009).

Another issue that comes into play with romantic relationships on television is how they are portrayed and evaluated. Idealized images of relationships can create a more positive image about relationships on the viewers’ side (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). One common image, for example, is that friends can become lovers or that lovers can still be friends (Klaassen, 2004). So when looking at friendships and romantic relationships, it is also important to consider that there is a link between the two and people can shift from being friends to being lovers and vice versa. On *The Big Bang Theory* Leonard and Penny become friends first for a long time before becoming lovers. After breaking up they remain friends.

In her content analysis of primetime television, Ward (1995) found several common themes about sexuality. The most common themes and messages she found about romantic relationships are that romantic relationships are a competition, that men choose women according to their appearance, that masculinity is to be sexual with women, and that women are attracted to specific types of men (for example physically attractive or successful ones, this ties in with Quail’s (2010) hip/square distinction). The notion of masculinity being sexual with women matches the stereotype of the nerd as a sexual failure. But since most of the characters on *The Big Bang Theory* still express the desire to have a romantic relationship and try to have one, it will be interesting to see how this will be dealt with and what messages and themes about romantic relationships are addressed and how.

# Theoretical Framework

## The Significance of Television

Looking at television and its content is interesting not only as a source for information and pleasure during one’s leisure time. Television is also an interesting and relevant medium for academics. Critically analyzing its content can lead to insights about the society in which television content is produced and consumed in.

The following section will give an overview on different scholarly perspectives on the academic relevance of television. Emphasizing and clarifying television’s role in academia is crucial to understand the relevance and research of this study project. This is why both recent academic literature as well as more classical writings on television are used for the theoretical framework.

Television is a medium that was created by humans and its contents reflect cultural and social decisions and circumstances, television is reflective of society (Fiske, 1987). Therefore, reading television texts is helpful in understanding the workings of society. A television product can then be considered as a “constantly up-dated version of social relations and cultural perceptions (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 5). In their work on reading television, Fiske and Hartley (1978) argue in favor of considering television as a literate medium as well as for example books. That means that just because it is mostly an oral medium based on spoken and not written language, it does not have less significance than for example books. Just because a story is told on television or news is broadcasted on television does not change the value and significance of the content.

### The Background of Semiotics

When Fiske & Hartley (1978) talk about the constant updating of social relations and cultural perceptions and their meaning, they address the fact that what is seen on television follows certain *codes*. The term code describes a set of signs and symbols that follow certain rules (Jensen, 2002). It relates back to semiotics (the study of signs) which is a helpful approach when interpreting television content. The interpretation of these codes is not fixed but depends upon an agreed meaning and cultural conventions (Jensen, 2002). Fiske (1987) also uses this approach in his later work on television and talks about the codes of television. Before continuing with his work on the codes of television, a few remarks about semiotics will be made in order to grasp the key assumptions that need to be understood in relation to television.

The relevance of semiotics is due to the fact that qualitative content analysis is often concerned with latent meanings. Uncovering these meanings is part of what semiotics is about (Larsen, 2002). The material to which such analyses can be applied consists of different kinds of media content or media *texts* ranging from texts and images to language in general. As such, it is a useful tool for analyses in the field of communication and media studies. But semiotics is not exclusively connected to this field; it is an interdisciplinary approach going back to the early 20th century and mainly to Charles Sanders Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure (Jensen, 2002).

Two key terms in semiotics are *signifier* and *signified*. The first describes the actual object, for example an image on television, the second one describes what the first one stands for, and what it means. The relation between the two is arbitrary and thus not natural but created by society (Jensen, 2002). In the terms of semiotics a signifier can signify more than one thing. This means that an object can stand for more than one thing, and it is loaded with meaning and interpretations. The relationship between signifier and signified changes because it is cultural and socially constructed. This relationship between the two is usually not questioned by people and simply acted upon, often unconsciously (Turner, 2003).

A simple example of the arbitrary relationship between objects and their meaning can be found in the symbol of the heart. Most people would clearly associate it with love although it technically is only a shape like a circle or square. The same logic applies to most traffic signs. Interpreting signifiers is thus a way to make sense of the world around us. Why a traffic sign looks like what it looks is also usually not questioned (Turner, 2003).

The semiotic approach is relevant in this context not only because of the terminology but because it suggests an arbitrary relation between an object and its meaning for people and the interpretations an object evokes. This logic can be applied to television. What is seen on television has not only one fixed meaning that can simply be described. What is seen is loaded with meaning and this meaning needs to be questioned and critically analyzed. The difference between these two levels of a description and what it means is referred to as *denotation* and *connotation*, the first referring to the literal meaning (e.g. a chair is something to sit on), the later referring to attached meaning (e.g. associating a chair with being comfortable or rest) (Jensen, 2002).

When it comes to studying television culture, the semiotics approach is a helpful tool. The term culture is here used in a broad way describing not one particular form of television. While genre specifics will be discussed later on in this chapter, one characteristic feature of *The Big Bang Theory* has already been highlighted, namely that it is a popular series.

### The Popular as a Form of Culture

Often there is a distinction between popular culture and high culture, not only as a way of defining cultural products but also as a way of evaluating them (Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc, 2002). This evaluation is often an undervaluation of popular culture which is often considered to be low culture and thus less valuable. However popular means popularity in terms of numbers so popular culture is what many people enjoy and consume. This makes it even more of a relevant platform when trying to gain insights into society. Academically studying it, and this includes television studies, is an important way of looking at society and its values. Jensen (2002) emphasizes that it is important to establish a theoretical framework when looking at popular culture academically in opposition to watch it as a regular member of the audience. This is why it is important in this chapter to establish the theoretical framework on which the following research of this thesis is based on.

Popular culture, such as primetime television series, is often accused of not offering insights into human characters like high culture does (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). But popular culture is not so different from other kinds of culture in its value. It is simply one form of culture that is popular with audiences and appealing to many people. Its relevance for the academic field is the same as that of other forms of culture, namely that it describes certain ways of life, represents meaning and values. It is the academics’ task to understand this culture and analyze what it is saying (Storey, 2001).

It is therefore important to acknowledge the importance and value of popular culture. It is a part of culture which not is per se better or worse, or more or less significant, than other forms of culture (Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc, 2002). Studying a popular television sitcom is thus a way of looking at culture and qualitatively analyzing its content in order to understand what it is expressing. Contemporary popular culture is as valuable as other forms of cultural content. This relates back to the statement mentioned earlier that television is a literate medium as well (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). The relevance of popular culture is high because the values presented on it connect with many people who watch it (and continue to watch it in the case of a weekly series). In the case of *The Big Bang Theory*, it is consumed and popular in different countries across the globe.

### Fiction in Times of Globalization

Entertainment products like television series must also be seen as economic products that are sold and traded across the globe (Havens, 2002). With the increasing globalization and international trade of media goods as well as the connection of various media outlets under big global players (Arsenault & Castells, 2008); the aspect of media globalization deserves some attention in this paper. As it was mentioned in the first chapter, *The Big Bang Theory* is a series with international success that was sold to other countries. The series can thus be considered as a globalized media product that is produced in one country but consumed in many societies.

Finding one simple definition of globalization that all academics agree on is a difficult if not impossible task. The broad concept of globalization in this paper is understood as the process that creates a social system which can operate on global scale in an international and transnational way. This requires certain prerequisites such as technological, institutional and organizational ones. Globalization happens in multiple fields ranging from climate issues, finance, and security to the global trade of media products (Castells, 2008). Technical conditions include then the production standards of fictional television as well as how programs are distributed. The process of globalization gave way to multi-media corporations that own multiple channels. They produce content that they are able to distribute via multiple platforms in order to create revenue and thus success for their products (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

One aspect of globalization is cultural globalization, which describes the emergence of global cultures that originate in various different regions and nations (Crane, 2002). Different cultural and media products are internationally exchanged and consumed, especially those products that are spread through and consumed in mass media, such as television (Janssen, Kuipers & Verboord, 2008). While the existence of truly global cultures is still disputed, it can be noted that a lot of fictional television content is traded across the globe, sometimes as formats but also as complete products (Crane, 2002). An important global player in the trade of media products are the United States as the most successful exporter (Keohane & Nye, 1998). *The Big Bang Theory* was also produced within these structures, airing on CBS in the United States which is part of one of the big seven media conglomerates (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). The series is not locally adapted; it is sold as a complete product and only subtitled or dubbed in some countries to which it is exported[[4]](#footnote-4).

The international success of a series is influenced both by economic and by cultural factors, this includes the factors in the country of origin but especially those in the countries of reception. The buyers focus on their target audience and decide their marketing strategy accordingly. Distributors thus decide which aspects of a series to emphasize in order for it to appeal to the targeted audience (Havens, 2002). The parameters and constraints for the audience’s interpretation are set by the producers. The viewer can read the text within this range. There is not an endless range of interpretation but the interpretation still depends on what is shown and offered within the media text itself (Hall, 1980). This relationship between producers of a text, the text itself and the audience will be addressed later in this chapter in more detail. How this relates to television and the process of globalization can be illustrated with the well known example of the study of the reception of *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1990).

Liebes and Katz (1990) looked at the cultural adaption of people from different cultures watching the American fictional series *Dallas* in several countries. They understood the series as an open product that was open for interpretation. Through observation of the audience and later interviews, they deduced several forms of how people re-narrated an episode. Some people narrated it in a linear and chronological way, others focused on segments, e.g. talked about a certain character, and others in turn focused their narration on a topic or message that was to be found within the episode. The researchers derived three types of reading from that: the first form being affirmative of the intended message, the second one negotiated and the third form of reading in opposition to the encoded and intended message.

The clear differentiation in three kinds of reading can be criticized for being too schematic and implying an intended reading that would be clearly identifiable as such. That being said, the study provided some interesting results. Liebes and Katz (1990) found that people from the same country and culture could be attributed to the same kind of reading. In Japan, however, the series was a failure because it did not meet the audience’s expectation. Thus the cultural background of the audience influenced how people interpreted the same content and derived meaning from it.

What this study shows is that the narrative plays an important role when watching and reading a television series as a meaningful product. The aspect of narrative will be discussed later in this chapter and is an important aspect of the theoretical framework of this thesis as well as the analysis. The empirical part of this research project will not focus on audience research and their interpretations; neither does it claim to identify one intended form of reading. Audiences look at the product and interpret it within the frame and parameters that are offered, this thesis focuses on this frame and the parameters, thus the product itself.

It was shown that the aspect of culture is an important factor in television consumption, so that one fictional product is consumed in different cultures increases its potential impact and the importance of the sitcom as a meaningful discourse. Popular culture is nowadays often popular on a global scale. While economic and technological constraints influence the globalization of this product, it is also the content itself that needs to be taken into consideration if the stories of contemporary fiction are popular in different countries.

### The Stories of Television

Television reflects values and ideas of the society it was produced in and in which it is consumed. Fictional series are a form of cultural content that is circulated via television and fictional series are connected to reality even if the content, the stories and characters, is fictional and does not claim to directly represent or mirror reality. The world that is shown on a fictional television series functions according to certain values and rules and those are not coincidental. These values and rules influence the meaning of the product, how people evaluate it, and ultimately construct meaning (Buonanno, 2008).

What television does is telling its viewers stories, fictional or real, that tell the audience something about society. They reflect conflicts within it and contain several signs and messages that the viewer decodes in order to create their own meaning.

Television has already been described as a storyteller within society. Gerbner (1999) defines three different functions of television stories. First of all, stories can tell how things work, through displaying causalities and dynamics of how processes work within a society, viewers learn about them. In order for this to work, those stories do not need to be real, they can be fictional. One example is the fairytale *The Red Riding Hood* containing a message about gender roles and power (Gerbner, 1999).

Secondly, stories tell people what things are and describe them. They can deny or confirm what stories of the first kind teach, so if things really work or not. They contain information about several aspects of life such as politics, finances or crimes. Examples for this are news stories that report on events happening in the world (Gerbner, 1999).

The third kinds of stories tell people how to act. They offer suggestions for possible forms of behavior and show how these can be rewarded or punished. Examples for the third kind of stories are commercials and advertisements. These stories relate to the first two types because they combine the lessons of the first two stories and offer possible forms of action and behavior. This can have a normative element of telling people how to act or they can create incentives by presenting the outcomes, in commercial for example the lifestyle that comes with purchasing certain products (Gerbner, 1999).

The lines between these types are not sharp and should “[ideally] […] check and balance each other” (p. 10). Still the distinction that Gerbner makes seems somewhat like a forcedly schematic approach because one and the same story can contain all of these functions, depending on how one looks at them. But despite this criticism, Gerbner’s remarks are helpful since they show that even if a story is fictional it can contain information that shows and teaches viewers about the world, how it works and confronts viewers with new aspects and evaluations.

Television is not a teacher in a traditional school type of teaching, neither does it simply inflict ideologies upon people but it teaches lessons about social roles and identity, it is about “teaching self-hood” (Hartley, 1999, p. 42). Viewers, however, are not likely to turn to television as a teacher which makes the teaching itself non-purposeful. Hartley (1999) also argues in favor of perceiving popular culture and what is considered to be high culture as equal forms which means they can both act as the transmodern teacher as which he describes television.

As it has been said before the repetitive nature of a series plays an important role in the reception. In fictional content, emotional conflicts are presented and mostly solved. While this is also the case for movies, the difference for a series is that similar emotional conflicts are repeated over and over again, usually with familiar characters involved (Hickethier, 1994).

Through the discovery of similarities and differences with as well as the evaluation of fictional characters as described above, viewers become familiar with the characters, as they learn and remember how these fictional figures behave (Keppler, 1995). This is where the sitcom differs from drama series because in sitcoms characters are less likely to significantly change after big impacts. In sitcoms the characters are more likely to stay the same, guaranteeing familiarity and repetition (Newman, 2006).

The learning and remembrance process over time is another factor that points towards considering television as a teacher. People do not only consume one single media product like a movie once. Instead they watch episodes including the same characters in a familiar setting dealing with similar conflict situations (Hickethier, 1994). It can be concluded that there might be less focus on *who* the characters are and what the *setting* is like. Instead the focus can be shifted to *how* these characters interact and what *conflicts* they deal with. Television can thus be a teacher about the behavior and interaction of characters and thus their social relationships. Consequently rules and norms of friendships and romantic relationships that have been addressed in the previous chapter can be encoded in the fictional stories told on television

The teaching happens through the perception of stories on televisions. The *Cultivation Theory* developed by George Gerbner et al. (2002) is an approach that is helpful at this point. It was developed as a result of the *Cultural Indicators Project* which had the aim of studying the influence of television. It is a socialization approach focusing on how people develop norms, values and view of the world. The approach thus is concerned with long-term *media effects*, especially effects caused by television (Nabi & Oliver, 2010). The study of media effects was one of the first concerns in media and communication studies and is concerned with measurable effects of media consumption. These can be measured on different levels, such as changes of knowledge, feelings, behavior etc and are often categorized into strong and minimal effects (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011).

The basic assumption behind the Cultivation Theory is that exposure to the television world influences people’s perceptions about their real world. There is no specific distinction made between different genres or forms of television content, the world of television is regarded as one. Besides this basic assumption there is also the idea that heavy consumption leads to mainstreaming and homogenization. Gerbner et al. (2002) describes these concepts as the outcome of television consumption. Homogenization addresses the assumption that people with different views are influenced by television in a way that their views and opinions become more similar. Not only similar to each other’s views but similar to what is presented on television. The concept of mainstreaming assumes a similar effect of television and states that people who watch a lot of television tend to have similar views and opinions while people who watch little television differ in their points of views.

When researching within this frame, there are two steps to follow: content analysis and audience research (Gerbner et al., 2002). The Cultivation Approach is thus useful in illuminating television’s role as teacher but it can also be criticized for overestimating its effects, lack of theoretical background, it assuming a causal relationship between television and the audience, and the fact that the theory cannot be falsified (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). The remarks about an active audience previous in this paper militate in favor of not overestimating the effect of an intended message as it is. While the effects of mainstreaming and homogenization can be contested, what can be derived from Cultivation Theory is that television can have a strong effect and, most of all, is a product filled with messages regardless of how these messages will be interpreted.

While a causal relationship between television and the audience in the socialization of people cannot be assumed, it can be noted that television still can be one piece of the puzzle of how norms and values are developed, represented and affirmed or changed over time. Therefore the effect of television must neither be overestimated nor underestimated, because it can have an influence. The issue of television influence, however, is not an easy one and constantly discussed among media and communication scholars.

## The Influence of Television

Within the field of communication studies the take on how meaning is sent and received has changed over time. McQuail (1983) describes four models of mass communication that all four assume a different kind of media effect. The table below (table 3‑I) shows an overview and comparison of these four different models.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  Orientation of |
|  | **Sender** | **Receiver** |
| Transmission model | Transfer of meaning | Cognitive processing |
| Expression or ritual model | Performance | Consummation/ shared experience |
| Publicity model | Competitive display | Attention-giving/ Spectatorship |
| Reception model | Preferential encoding | Differential decoding/ construction of meaning |

Table 3‑II Four models of the mass communication process (McQuail, 1983, p. 55)

The first model is the transmission model that sees the sender as transferring meaning while the receiver is dealing with this meaning in a cognitive process. While other and latter theories also assume cognitive processes (which are after all human), the first to explicitly state it within the paradigm of linear meaning transfer were Westley and MacLean (1957). The transmission model however is outdated and can only be applied to few examples like instructional or propagandist media texts (Quail, 1983).

The second model is the ritual model that sees the sender offering a performance that receivers can consume. By consuming a media product, receivers can participate in a shared experience because they consume the same product. This model is useful especially for entertainment products since it does not assume any effects on the audience side other than the experience of consumption itself. Views that fit this ritual model mainly emerged in the 1970s but are still present today, for example in literature on news media (Quail, 1983).

The third model is the publicity model that sees senders as competing displayers of content and the receiver is the one giving attention to one or the other sender. As the name indicates this model is mainly concerned about the audience’s size and thus implies an economical perspective of mass communication than a content-based one (Quail, 1983). Scholars who have written within the parameters of this model are for example Elliott (1972) as well as Altheide and Snow (1979).

The last model is the reception model that differs most from the first transmission model mentioned above. It sees the sender as the encoder who has preferences but the receiver is the one decoding it in his/her own way and thus constructing meaning.

The economic perspective is not relevant for this research project because the focus will be on the content of *The Big Bang Theory* and not its economic success. Although it is important to note that economical circumstances play a big role in mass communication and of course also of the success of a television series.

The expression or ritual model as described by McQuail (1983) seems to be helpful when looking at entertainment content but it has its weaknesses. It is still too strongly based on a linear sender-message-receiver structure that ascribes most of the power to the sender. While the sender is an important part of the communication process, research can be conducted on the product itself regardless of the sender’s intentions about the product’s meaning. The most relevant approach for this thesis is therefore the fourth model.

The last described model, the reception model, can be connected to Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model. The key assumption of this model is that a message is not simply sent via a medium but encoded in a media product. The product is then decoded by the audience independently. The product itself can be considered as a “meaningful discourse” (p. 109) which is influenced both by its producers and their intended readings as well as the audience’s interpretations of it. This idea is helpful for this thesis because it makes a clear distinction between the senders of a message, the message itself and the receivers without simplifying the process to an old and simple transmission model. The researcher as a reader of the television text is able to conduct research on the product itself as “meaningful discourse” (McQuail, 1983, p. 54).

As it was mentioned before the vocabulary of encoding/decoding again comes from a background of semiotics. The television product in this context can be seen as the signifier which is not a representation or distortion of reality but an object with its own set of characteristics (Wren-Lewis, 1983). It thus has the element of denotation in the sense that it is possible to simply describe what is seen and spoken on television, but there is also the element of connotation which means that what is seen and heard on television is open for interpretation and might mean different things to different people. Some of the characteristics of a sitcom will be discussed later in this chapter.

The encoding/decoding model is especially interesting for journalistic broadcasts because an actual event that took place is being televised (Hall, 1980). This thesis on the other hand deals with the fictional content of the series *The Big Bang Theory*. The relation between reality and fiction will be addressed later on in more detail. At this point it is important to know that the product, the series, itself is an aspect in the communication chain that is connected both to its producers and audience but also worth considering as a sole research object. This thesis will focus on the product itself in order to have clear focus for in-depth analyses. This project thus focuses on one aspect of this communicative chain while acknowledging that senders and receivers still play a part in the communicative process.

It is therefore important to now look at the relevance of contemporary popular fiction since this is the material that will be researched. Concluding this section it is important to note that studying television has a long tradition with various approaches. And even if the media landscape is changing, especially in times of globalization and constant new developments in technology, remarks of classical scholars like Fiske and Hartley (1978) and concepts of classical approaches like Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model or semiotics are still applicable and valuable today. This shows that studying television is in general a valuable way of conducting research on society.

One way of looking at contemporary fiction on television is looking at the (fictional) stories that are told. It was already mentioned that these stories can be part of a socialization process because they contain messages, norms, and values that are relevant within society. In this sense television has the potential to teach its audience various lessons.

## Television as a Teacher

As it was previously said, it is important to consider television as storyteller within society and that this storyteller works according to certain techniques. The Cultivation Approach is a theory assuming long-term effects of mass media consumption. The notion of a measurable media effect, however, is concerned with the audience for a large part. The notion of television as a teacher puts the focus more on the product itself which is why this is a more useful conception when looking at one specific product, namely *The Big Bang Theory*.

If television is considered to be a teacher, the question then shifts to “what is being taught to whom, with what outcomes“ (Hartley, 1999). This thesis focuses on the very first part of the question and the analysis conducted will be on the content and thus the messages of *The Big Bang Theory*. To make the area of study more feasible and the focus sharp, the analysis will be concerned with norms and rules about social relationships, friendships and romantic relationships. Teaching through a medium and learning through presented outcomes are two ways of how television can be a teacher to its audience.

### Mediation and Moral Imagination

Besides the Cultivation Approach, two other concepts are relevant at this point because they are helpful to understand why television can be considered as a teacher. These concepts, mediation and moral imagination, will be briefly discussed in this section. Mediation describes the process of exchanging meaning and ideas through a medium and by this process overcoming boundaries of time and space. In today’s society this function is largely fulfilled by modern technologies of communication and mass media to which television belongs. Electronic media can thus confront people with ideas and experiences that one does not experience directly through physical presence (Tomlinson, 1999). From these experiences the audience can derive certain lessons like Gerbner (1999) described.

Closely related to the concept of mediation is the one of moral imagination which is “the ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action (Johnson, 1993, p. 202). The assumption underlying this statement is a similar one to Gerbner’s (1999) three function of stories, in particular stories of the third kind. The narrative as a meaningful structure is of importance here, since it offers insight into situations and consequences (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). Besides the narrative itself, stylistic features such as camera and lighting arrangements, the characters and the genre influence how a story and its outcome is perceived and evaluated (Tomlinson, 1999). The evaluation of what is seen on television emphasizes that television cannot simply be watched without triggering some reaction in the audience. This reaction which is often a cognitive process is a form of teaching since what was presented on television causes people to grapple with what they have seen.

Concluding these remarks it can be noted that television can be a teacher about situations that one does not experience immediately. Instead, situations and experiences are shown on television, containing various lessons about what things are, how they work and what outcomes are to be expected from different kinds of behavior. Therefore, in order to learn from television, one has to learn how to read it.

### Reading Television

Television is usually made to be consumed soon after production or even live, but television also fulfills a historical function (Hartley, 2008). In Western culture, meanings and interpretations of things are added over time so if someone wants to learn about the meaning or interpretation of something, they would try to trace the meaning down over time. In this sense television “both shows and shapes contemporary life” (Hartley, 2008, p. 1). For example when someone wanted to know how people responded to an event like the 9/11 attacks, one could look at how this was broadcasted and discussed on television.

What can be derived from that assumption that television has a historical function because it mirrors current ideas and values is that people would also look at television as a carrier of contemporary meanings and interpretations. Television is created by human beings and therefore spreads people’s ideas about what they think is true and relevant, these ideas are influenced by people’s cultural background and the values they have (Hartley, 2008).

Cultural decisions and values that are reflected on television are arbitrary and can have different connotations. These connotations and the meaning of different kinds of content are not fixed and can change over time. The task of a critical academic is then to question the messages that television sends by learning how to read television and thus grasp the latent meanings of its content. Meaning can be created through different connotations, so latent meanings are important in addition to denotative description. If television is considered as a teacher and the question is raised about what is being taught, it is necessary to analyze the lessons and messages of television. The material of this project, *The Big Bang Theory*, is a sitcom that is meant for entertainment and not designed as an education program. The messages and lessons taught are thus not necessarily explicitly addressed but implied.

A way of uncovering latent meanings is decoding the content of television. In his later writing Fiske (1987) describes a code as a “rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared among members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture” (p. 4). An example of this can be the nerd itself. There are certain stereotypes about the figure of the nerd that most people agree on (like the social awkwardness and unathletic appearance). The audiences of *The Big Bang Theory* as members of a society have previous knowledge about codes of acceptable social behavior as well. Without knowing it or necessarily questioning it, certain standards about what are normal and acceptable behavior have evolved in society and have been established (Fiske, 1987). So only by knowing these codes and having internalized them one can describe the behavior of Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* as socially awkward and connect it to the stereotype of the nerd. Therefore the codes of society are represented on television when it comes to behavior for example. Television’s own codes are about speech, dialogue or camera movement (Fiske, 1987) for example.

Speech and dialogue can also be considered as codes. This becomes clear when looking at metaphors or common sayings that have evolved over time and are often used by people, thus speech and dialogue are largely based on conventions (Fiske, 1987). It is again only by knowing these codes that people understand and interpret the speech and dialogue they listen to, in real life or on television. Another example from *The Big Bang Theory* can be found with Sheldon, when he tries to comfort someone and says “there there”. He only remembers these words like a line studied for a theater play; they do not feel natural to him. This shows that codes that are salient for most people and common in society are only agreed upon and not natural, like common sayings. The arbitrary between a signifier and its meaning becomes visible. When Sheldon questions them or they are obviously violated or discussed on the show, they become a topic and more salient to viewers. Misunderstandings can also arise from people interpreting codes differently or if one party is unaware of them. On *The Big Bang Theory*, an example for this is that Penny is often confused about the nerds’ behavior and cannot understand it.

Through codes, the audience also makes sense of what they see on the screen. The way people look, talk and act on television can also be considered as codes that people interpret, e.g. what acceptable behavior is or what an appropriate way to dress is (Fiske, 1987). This thesis also contains this approach of looking at and interpreting the codes of television. In order to conduct an in-depth research, these codes need to be interpreted and reflected upon. In this sense the aim of this research is to critically read television.

## Contemporary Fiction on Television

An essential characteristic feature of contemporary fiction is that it is, as the name already suggests, fictional and not real. Still it is connected to reality and not detached from it. The scripted narratives of a television series are closely linked to reality. The link to reality and the importance of the narrative are thus essential parts of contemporary fiction that are also important in relation to *The Big Bang Theory*.

### The Relation of Fiction and Reality

Television can be seen as a realistic medium because it creates the picture of an environment that is convincing enough to be real (Fiske, 1987). This of course depends on the specific content (exceptions are found in genres like science fiction, fantasy or animation) but the environment of *The Big Bang Theory* is an environment that essentially could be real. What is seen from the flats the characters live in or their workplace is all presented in such a way that those places could in fact be real. There are no fantasy creatures for example and even though the flats are a set constructed only for the series, flats and other places like the restaurant the Cheesecake Factory that look like that could technically exist in real life.

The reality the characters live in is linked to reality but ultimately they live in their own reality governed by its own rules (Fiske, 1987). In the case of *The Big Bang Theory,* those rules are similar to the present ones since the action takes place in the present time and thus no historical contexts need to be taken into account other than that of the present. For example, the characters use a lot of modern computer technology which implies that these already exist in their world as well as in reality. They also refer to historical achievements in science or other fictional characters like superheroes and frequently use contemporary cultural references. These references premise knowledge in the viewer about reality. This is an important factor when it comes to human relationships since what is considered to be appropriate behavior can change over time, e.g. what is considered to be appropriate behavior of men towards women and vice versa. There are no rules or values that need to be introduced that apply to the world of the series because the series resorts to the ones that are present in reality. So for example going out to a bar is valued in a different way than staying home and playing video games.

Watching a fictional character can even make it easier to identify with a character and discover similarities or draw conclusions from similar experiences (Nussbaum, 1997). It is thus easier to find similarities between oneself and another person if that person is not real but seems like a real person. By identifying with a fictional character one can still keep his/her individualism because the character is not real. Identifying with a real person can easily be confused with wishing to be that person; this is less likely for a comparison with a fictional character (Keppler, 1995).

If a fictional character seems real, it can also create the possibility to distance oneself from a character at the same time. Distancing oneself from a fictional character that one generally identifies with can then lead to a critical reflection of shared experiences and become aware not only of similarities but also of differences (Nussbaum, 1997). So it might be easier to find points of identification and comparison between oneself and a fictional character than oneself and a real person. A fictional character is less complex than a real person with only certain characteristic features highlighted. This allows for the viewer to focus on these highlighted features and evaluate and reflect upon them.

Nussbaum’s argument becomes clearer when looking at some other observations on the perception of fictional characters. There is a difference in how people perceive characters in a series in opposition to real people. While real people are perceived *as* people, fictional characters are only perceived *like* people (Keppler, 1995). Therefore watching those characters is not simply a form of perception but also a form of interpretation in the sense that fictional characters are signs of a person, not defined by a complex character, but certain key characteristics. The nerdiness of the main characters in *The Big Bang Theory* can be considered as such a key characteristic feature. Instead of only watching characters interact as if they were real people, viewers are likely to interpret what they see and decode it in a cognitive process (Hall, 1980). People are aware of fiction and know it is not real, so the process of watching it is not a simple observation of other people’s lives, but an interpretation of what is presented on television. This links back to codes of society and television that the viewer perceives and interprets in order to make sense of what he/she sees on television (Fiske, 1987). The interpretation of fictional characters actions thus is again connected to a tradition of semiotics and follows the paradigm of an active viewer.

In the process of interpretation narrative plays a big role because in order to understand and read the stories that are told on a television series, they have to make sense. Narrative is the basic structure of a story that provides this, for example by introducing all relevant aspects of a story and providing a satisfactory ending (Kozloff, 1992).

### The Importance of the Narrative

Another important aspect when looking at contemporary fiction is the underlying structure of the dialogue and action: the narrative (Mittell, 2006). What is shown on television is not coincidental. Action and dialogue are carefully scripted and planned narratives following a certain structure. Narrative theory focuses on structures and inner formal characteristics of a narrative. This means that the focus is on the text itself, which of course neglects other aspects like network structure, media markets or the audience but it allows for a specific and in-depth analysis (Kozloff, 1992). It is therefore important to elaborate briefly on the formal aspects of a fictional television series and the sitcom as a narrative text because complete episodes following these structures will be analyzed.

According to Kozloff (1992), a narrative can be split into two elements. The first one is “story”, describing what happens to whom, and the second category is “discourse”, dealing with how the story is told. This distinction is valuable because it allows looking at a story on different levels. In a story of an episode, problems and issues addressed in the beginning are carried out over the length of the episode and are usually resolved in the end of the episode (if it is not used as a cliffhanger) (Newman, 2006).

On a discourse level it is interesting to look at how the story is told timing wise and how fast it moves. Different forms of how a story is told timing wise are for example as a summary, an ellipse, a scene, stretch or pause. The time need to tell a story this depends on the form which is used to tell it. Another aspect is the frequency of a story, so if one event is narrated once or several times or if several events are told one time (Kozloff, 1992). Depending on the actual content of a story, techniques like these can emphasize the message contained in a media text and affect the perception of character interaction on screen.

Because a sitcom is a format that is based on repetition and ongoing production it has “learned to compensate for [its] lack of suspense by proliferating storylines” (Kozloff, 1992, p. 74). The narrative structure is therefore denser in opposition to only building up tension until one point of revelation in the end of an episode. This can result in a focus on characters, their relations among each other and also the function that they fulfill within a narrative (such as the hero, the villain or also the nerd). Therefore the conversations among characters also fulfill a function within the narrative, e.g. revealing information. In a story where it is not about suspense and new information for the audience, it is interesting for viewers to see how familiar characters react to that information in their context (Newman, 2006).

What can be derived from these last remarks is that the genre of a television series and a sitcom in particular, influence the narrative and therefore what is told on television. *The Big Bang Theory* falls into the category of a sitcom.

## The Sitcom

As it has already been hinted throughout this thesis, there are certain characteristic features of a sitcom which distinguish this genre from others. These features need to be mentioned at this point because properties and conditions of the research material are an important factor for this project in the sense that these features shape the material, e.g. exaggeration as a form of comedy. Since genre analysis is not a main focus of this paper, only few relevant aspects will be discussed without going too deep into all the nuances and specifics of different genres and sub-genres.

The term genre is used to distinguish different types of texts from one another and group them into different categories. Describing different television texts as belonging to different genres is thus a form of organization that happens outside of the media text. The benefit from it is to be aware of similarities and differences between single texts such as dramas, comedies, cop shows, westerns etc. Another advantage of categorizing media texts into genres is that these genres are reflective of social structures and hierarchies just as the media texts themselves. This means that assigning a genre to a product is also a form of evaluating it. That means that certain genres are connected to certain expectations and rules. Still, genres are not static and strict categories that cannot be changed, transgressed or combined (Mittell, 2004).

A sitcom is the abbreviation of situation comedy, a term used to describe comedy programs in which most of the humor inflicts through the situations the characters are in (Marc, 2005). A key element in situation comedies is the reoccurrence of numerous elements such as characters, places, gestures, discussions, topic etc. These reoccurrences create a relatively stable situation (Attallah, 2010). This stability includes that the main characters are not likely to undergo big changes and are characterized in with a stable and well-defined set of features. This connects with Newman’s (2006) remarks about characters guaranteeing familiarity and repetition. The conflicts and struggles that these characters deal with are usually minor struggles that will not change the reality that the characters live in or the relationships they have. The humor therefore does not evoke through character changes, changes of relationships or big events, but simply the situations that the characters encounter (Attallah, 2010).

For the genre of a sitcom, one central expectation associated with it is that a sitcom is supposed to be funny and make people laugh, even if there are other reasons for viewers to watch it, the comedy aspect is a central aspect of what makes the sitcom a sitcom (Mills, 2009). Savorelli (2010) observes that a lot of newer sitcoms, however, are not so obviously funny anymore and abstain from using a laugh track. In *The Big Bang Theory* however there is still a laugh track present. While the situation comedy genre has been criticized for its lacking connection to reality because of the emphasis on humor, there can also be serious moments. Problems within society and conflict situations can be dealt with in a funny way and yet still reflect their tragic nature (Savorelli, 2010). So for example even if there is a laugh track accompanying a situation where someone is being treated as an outsider, the topics of loneliness and problems of social acceptance are still present.

Another key differentiation between sitcoms and dramas on television is their length. A drama usually gets one hour, a sitcom half an hour including commercials. One episode without interruption is therefore about 40 minutes long for dramas and 20 minutes long for sitcoms (Grawe, 2010). *The Big Bang Theory* is no exception here, with episodes of runtimes about 20 minutes. Studying not any television text but a sitcom is especially interesting because of the inherent characteristics of the genre. They are repetitive because of new episodes, re-runs and annual new seasons if they are successful (Keppler, 1995). There is a constant change of storylines and sometimes even figures but all within the familiar parameters. Viewers expect the series to continue and tell them different yet similar stories. At the same time, viewers expect a solution of the conflicts presented in an episode at the end of it (Hickethier, 1994). The similar situations and the comedy of them are manifested in the dialogue. Through the conversations between characters, topics and conflicts are discussed and attitudes voiced (Marc, 2005).

Due to the repetition, viewers are familiar with the characters of the series and the often similar situations in which they interact (Keppler, 1995). Understanding and interpreting of those characters’ actions and interactions can encroach upon a viewer’s reality since what is seen on screen is part of the communication viewers experience. Thus the media are part of how people perceive their social reality (Keppler, 2005). This connected to the concept of mediation, since a lot of what people know is mediated knowledge or mediated experience (Tomlinson, 1999).

Viewers can compare their own everyday life and environment with those of the fictional world. The topics that are dealt with are often topics that are interesting to a society at that time. Watching a series where these topics (e.g. the importance of family or harmony) are dealt with can therefore be considered as a form of perceiving ones social reality and knowing about what is talked about in a society in what way (Grawe, 2010). This must not be confused with the question whether what is shown on television is real (in the case of a fictional sitcom it clearly is not) but how it can relate to reality as it was previously described (Keppler, 2005). Much could be said about the genre of the sitcom, its characteristics and changes over time. Within this project the previous remarks however suffice to understand the context of the situation comedy series *The Big Bang Theory*.

## Research Question and Sub Questions

It was shown that television in general and popular culture in particular is a valuable aspect in the field of media studies. The stories that are told on television and the messages these stories hold seem to have a certain degree of universality because many media products that originate from one country are globally consumed. This is also the case of the fictional US-sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. People can learn from television by seeing things they otherwise would not see and by watching consequences of certain actions without being actors themselves. Audiences read television and interpret its content. Television can thus be considered as a teacher which raises the question of what is being taught. The research question of this paper therefore is:

**RQ:** Which lessons about personal social relationships are taught in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*?

Personal social relationships are divided into friendships and romantic relationships. The sub-questions thus concern the lessons taught about friendships and romantic relationships. In order to answer these questions, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted.

# Methodology

The research design of this thesis is designed to fit the specific material and research question. It is based on and draws ideas from the tradition of Cultural Studies. This background serves as a base upon which the research design for this project is built. It serves as a collection of general ideas and the paradigm behind this thesis.

## Methodological Background

A first interest in this research comes from a Cultural Studies background, as an interdisciplinary approach that is concerned with critically looking at specific cultural products (which includes television series) and while analyzing them being self-reflecting and interpretative (Hepp, 2010). Cultural Studies suggest a wider context and wider implications of specific products, where wider means going beyond pure description and looking at links to society and how meaning and context is created within it (Turner, 2003). Cultural Studies is thus not only concerned with describing an interpreting a text, but finding relevant aspects for society and finding out what the text says about society. This is again linked to semiotics which was already discussed.

Cultural Studies are concerned with investigating power relations and how they are disseminated in a society and the role that popular culture plays in this process (Hepp & Winter, 2006). There are ideas, norms and values that are more popular than others; they can be described as hegemonic or dominant ideas. An example for this can be a common conception as: You get what you work for. Ideas as such portrayed in popular fiction can then serve to uphold such ideas (Hepp & Winter, 2006). *The Big Bang Theory* is a product that can be described as popular culture. Considering television as a teacher also means ascribing a certain power to it and the Cultural Studies perspective is therefore a valuable approach to look at the norms and lessons about personal social relationships that can be found in the sitcom.

The characteristics of Cultural Studies mentioned above are the ideas guiding this paper. The field of Cultural Studies as such is much broader however, drawing on different research traditions and authors (Turner, 2003).

The aim of this research is to analyze the lessons about personal social relationships within the media product. From a Cultural Studies perspective, in these messages issues of evaluation and power of certain ideas and attitudes are portrayed and discussed. These messages within the product potentially cultivate opinions and attitudes at the viewers’ side (Hepp, 2010). In terms of the Cultivation Theory, which was describes earlier in this thesis, a qualitative content analysis is an essential part of studying the stories of television and the lessons they teach (Gerbner, 2002).

A qualitative content analysis fits a global product like *The Big Bang Theory*. While an analysis on the macro level can also shed light onto the process of globalization (for example analyzing trade mechanisms), focusing on the product itself can provide results on a micro level, such as widely accepted rules and norms (Havens, 2002). A qualitative textual analysis is one way of closely examining one specific product.

## The Qualitative Approach

The method which will be used in order to answer the research question is qualitative content analysis with a focus on the conversations on *The Big Bang Theory*. A qualitative approach is an open one that aims at discovering underlying meanings and ideologies. It allows watching and perceiving the research material like other audience members do but with the critical eye of an academic (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

While there is no one clear definition of qualitative research, since it depends on the researcher’s aim and conception of his or her material, there are certain characteristics and methodological stances that shape qualitative research and therefore also this thesis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). These premises are *scientific canons* guiding empirical research (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The researcher takes the perspective of the people being studied, or in this case the perspective of other audience members watching the sitcom. In order to guarantee reliability and validity of the research, the researcher must assume a neutral perspective and be critical of one’s own interpretations (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The data is collected in the real world and not in an experimental setting which is the case for this research. While the uniqueness of a case is essential, findings and results need to be fit for generalization (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Qualitative research is also an inductive approach which means it takes a single phenomenon and derives more general insights or theory from that (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Working with an inductive approach thus goes together with the notion of an open approach and working without preconceived notions or hypotheses. In this case the conversations in *The Big Bang Theory* can be considered as the single phenomenon from which more general insights and interpretations will be derived. Instead of phrasing hypotheses about possible lessons, the aim of the research is to find the lessons about personal social relationships within the sitcom.

Looking at the dialogue within a television series was already described as looking at how the topics that are dealt with are handled, discussed and evaluated. It was also noted that conversation and dialogue can also be considered as codes, for example when it comes to metaphors or common sayings. For example Penny tells Sheldon that “when one door closes another one opens” with the purpose of cheering him up. Instead of noticing that, he starts talking about the probability of this happening and takes the saying literally. The understanding of language is thus based on the knowledge of how to decode meanings like in this saying.

Analyzing conversations and thus social interactions contains the assumption that with all the verbal interactions and reactions, the participants of a conversation construct a situation and constantly interpret their own actions and what other participants say (Bergman, 1995). This links back to what has been previously discussed about the narrative of a television series. The dialogue, so the characters statements and reactions towards each other, push the action forward and fulfill a function within the narrative structure. In order to analyze conversations, they need to be thoroughly documented in the form of transcripts (Bergman, 1995).

Transcripts are a form of making the material more feasible and accessible for an empirical analysis (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010). They order the research material like a film or series in a lineal way which serves as a basis for all kinds of further analyses (Korte & Drexler, 2004). While transcribing, the researcher automatically takes a close look at the material and examines it in depth. This is why transcribing is more than a simple process of writing down what happens. It is the first step in a qualitative research to gain a deep insight and understanding of the research material (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010).

When it comes to transcripts, there are different ways to do them in terms of detail and focus. The detail in which the material is transcribed depends on the aim of the research, for example if every scene is transcribed in detail or if scenes of a film or series form the smallest unit of analysis (Korte & Drexler, 2004). As far as the dialogue is concerned, there are also different levels of detail, for example if changes of the voice pitch are accentuations are included in the transcript. This again depends on the focus and aim of the analysis (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010). This analysis needs to be structured and must not be a blind interpretation of what is shown on television and read in the transcripts. Therefore only the details of the material and the dialogue are transcribed which are needed in order to answer the research question.

## Grounded Theory

In order to answer a research question, an (semi) organized way of handling the research material needs to be found. Therefore the method is designed by taking into consideration various elements and approaches in order to fit the method to the research material and research question of this project. A way to do qualitative research in a structured way which can provide reliable and valid results is using *Grounded Theory*. The idea behind it is an inductive approach that aims at developing theoretical constructs after looking at the actual data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This is especially useful considering the amount of data and broad topic of social relationships. The sociological approach of Grounded Theory was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967) in order to offer an approach that aims at generating theory instead of testing existing theories.

The theory has four premises concerning the research method. The method needs to fit the research material; it must be understandable so that is easily usable (because results can become unreliable if different researchers interpret a method differently or if one researcher interprets it differently at different times); it must be general so it can be applicable to different situations or variations of the method so that the researcher is not restrained by the research method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory means a constant reflection of one’s data, possible hypotheses, thoughts on the material, and first findings. The data collection, coding and data analysis as well as the theory building happen simultaneously and are constantly reflected upon and advanced (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Using Grounded Theory aims at discovering structures in the findings and organizing them so that they fit “scientific canons” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 3) as they were described above and provide valuable results. The aim of this research project is to look at an interesting phenomenon without a specific predisposition about possible findings. This fits the norm of qualitative research being an open approach while being at the same time flexible in order to adjust to first findings and the research material (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003)

Drawing on a tradition of Cultural Studies and following the methodological stances of qualitative research in general and Grounded Theory specifically, the method for this Master thesis and its research question was designed.

## Research Design

The data, the first season of *The Big Bang Theory* consisting of 17 episodes, is available on DVD and thus easily accessible. The units of analysis are therefore the episodes, each about 20 minutes long. Analyzing the whole series of more than 100 episodes would exceed the constraints of this project. Therefore, in order to get a holistic impression of the material and guarantee a valid and in-depth analysis, the first season was analyzed.

The first season is the most interesting and relevant to this research because this is where the main characters are introduced and the relationships they have are established. From an economical perspective, the first season of *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the most relevant of the series because series get renewed according to their ratings. Thus a successful first season is the prerequisite for further success and popularity. The first season as the research material forms a cohesive whole concerning story arcs that stretch over several episodes. When it comes to personal social relationships in an ongoing sitcom, taking a complete season is more interesting to look at instead of single episodes picked from several seasons. In different seasons the relationships among the characters can change, especially concerning romantic relationships.

Key elements in the analysis are the conversations between and statements of the fictional characters of *The Big Bang Theory,* since these form a main part of what happens during an episode. The dialogue also establishes an image of a character because of how things are phrased by them. Thus the focus is not on film aesthetics or linguistic details such as discourse markers and metaphors. Instead the focus is on the actual content and topics of the conversations and comments.

In order to make the verbal and rather fugitive material of audiovisual content feasible, transcripts of the episodes are used. Through the help of transcripts, it is possible to look at different moments of an episode or scenes from different episodes at the same time. This facilitates the comparison of different scenes which makes transcripts a valuable resource in the realm of Grounded Theory since; in order to find structures and create theoretical constructs, an overview of the research material is essential (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Looking at the conversations and comments only would not provide enough information however to draw conclusions from. The interpretation of what is being said depends on other circumstances because spoken language is about both denotation and connotation (Jensen, 2002). Since dialogue on a series is meant to resemble natural conversations, the context of the dialogue needs to be taken into account as well, because what a natural conversation would sound like depends on the context (for example if the situation is funny or serious). The transcripts of the dialogue on the series were retrieved online (Big Bang Theory Transcripts, 2012) and checked for quality and accuracy.

Mikos (2003) describes five levels of analysis that can be taken into consideration when analyzing television. The first is concerned with the content and the representation of it, so not only what happens but how it happens and how it is represented. The second level, narration and dramaturgy, is concerned with how the story is formally constructed and events are intertwined, so for example when characters are introduced and how a conflict plays out during the course of an episode. This links back to Kozloff’s (1992) observations about narrative because, as it was discussed earlier on, events can be told in different ways and time frames. The third level of analysis described by Mikos (2003) is about characters and protagonists and the social values they represent. This concerns for example roles like *the hero* or *the villain*. The fourth level deals with aesthetics and composition and thus cinematic and stylistic means. The last level is concerned with the contexts in which recipients of media texts consume it. The focus here lies on the side of the audience. Depending on the aim and circumstances of the research, these levels can be incorporated and analyzed to different extents.

For this project the focus is on the third level, the characters, and their interactions and thus the social values they represent. The first two levels are also taken into consideration in order to grasp the messages within the sitcom and therefore need to be included in the transcripts. Aesthetics and composition are neglected in this project since the focus of this thesis is the content and not the formal aspect of *The Big Bang Theory*. The fifth layer of contexts will be not be dealt with since that would involve audience and reception research which is not the aim of this thesis project.

### Method of Analysis

The detail in which transcripts are done can be described as *adding layers* to the transcript and thus making it more detailed. Adding layers to the transcripts is valuable for the analysis as a result to work with, because the transcribed details can be looked at during the analysis. Another value of adding layers to transcripts is that while supplementing the existing transcripts of the conversations, it is possible to check if they are accurate. It also allows intensively watching the episodes and therefore becoming more familiar with the research material which is an essential part of a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The transcribing for each of the 17 episodes was therefore done according to the following structure (table 4‑I):

|  |
| --- |
| **Episode Number and Title** |
| **Sequence Number and Duration****Narration (used to divide the episode into sequences to make the transcript clearly laid out and the narrative structure more visible.** |
| Conversations and Comments among the characters. | Content and Representation (basic descriptions of what is happening and how) |

Table 4‑II Format of the Transcripts

When transcribing dialogue the focus was again on the content and not the form in which things were discussed. This means that accentuation or pitch of voice were not included. If necessary for a better understanding, descriptions of the way in which things are said were added, for example “whispering”, “sarcastically” or “screaming” etc. Linguistic fillers like “ah” or “ehm” were included in the transcripts since they can change the tone of a scene and show for example confusion or insecurity in a character.

The transcripts then served as a basis for further analysis. In order to find out what lessons about personal social relationships are taught and conveyed in the sitcom, the particular topics and questions in relation to friendships or romantic relationships were extracted for each episode. For each topic, the questions were which attitudes and opinions were voiced and by which characters. For each topic it was noted where a consensus exists and characters agree with each other and where there is debate and characters disagree with each other. Sometimes both a consensus and debate existed within the same topic discussion, sometimes only one possibility of the two was found.

The last step of this part of the analysis consisted of describing the solution of the particular topic or question. This can for example be a character changing his or her opinion, characters reaching a compromise, a character giving in into another one’s wishes or simply a changing of topics. Conflicts and discussed questions can be solved either through discussion and the explicit voicing of opinions or through action without explicitly addressing an idea.

This analysis was conducted for each scene, with sometimes multiple topics in one scene. The observations were noted down in analysis tables, one topic per table, according to the following structure (table 4‑III):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Episode Number** |  |
| **Scene:**  | Brief description of the action in the scene |
| **Topic/Question:** | Topic or question that is dealt with on a more abstract level (beyond the specific action) |
| **Positions:** | Actor 1 | Opinion stated by the character, can be a direct quote or paraphrased attitude. |
| Actor 2 |  |
|  | Actor x | Depending on the number of characters participating in a discussion. |
| **Consensus** | Names of the character who agree or the (sub)topic about which the characters agree |
| **Debate** | (sub)topics which are discussed and where characters disagree. |
| **Solution** | The outcome of the situation, how the discussion is ended or the topic is changed. |

Table 4‑IV Format of the Analysis Tables

The topics extracted in these tables were then compared to one another in order to discover reoccurring themes and develop a structure with bigger topics and subthemes of those big topics. These bigger topics serve as a structure for the written analysis in the next chapter. In line with the idea of Grounded Theory of a constant and ongoing analysis process, the results from the tables as well as notes from throughout the transcribing an analysis process were used to discuss the bigger topics in-depth. The structure emerged from the material, the content itself. This goes in line with the focus of Grounded Theory as being an open approach where results must not be influences by preconceived ideas or formal restrictions. Therefore, the number of sub-categories varies between the bigger themes found for friendships and romantic relationships.

Within the discussion of these topics the focus was on the lessons that are taught within these situations and which norms and rules the characters adhere to and which they maybe violate. Both from the actions as well as the discussion between the characters, lessons about friendships and romantic relationships on *The Big Bang Theory* were derived.

# Empirical Analysis

Both for friendships and romantic relationship, five main topics and situations were found and are discussed. For some of the topics, sub-categories were found and are discussed in more detail. Those topics were chosen because of their reoccurrence on the first season, which makes them relevant for a focused analysis concerning the rules, values, and norms discussed and implied in these situations. Some scenes are discussed in several topics because of the multiple topics addressed in them.

## Friendships

The friendships displayed on *The Big Bang Theory* in general are one of the most constant aspects of the series, despite conflicts, fights and friends being annoyed with each other from time to time. Conflicts are resolved by the end of each episode, signaling the consistency of the friendships among the characters. The dynamics within friendships are often an essential part of the narratives which is why many different but also recurring situations were found in which friendships are displayed.

This section about friendships explores five themes that were found in the first season of The *Big Bang Theory*: common interests among friends, completing a task together, encouragement and help, lying to a friend, and arguments and discussions. Sub-categories of common interests are small talk and the issue of teasing and insulting. The only sub-category for completing a task together is working together. Under the category of encouragement and help fall the sub-categories of advice, caring for a friend, evaluating a friend’s chances, and favors. For the category of lying to a friend, no sub-categories are discussed, for the last category of arguments and discussion, three sub-categories were found: egoism and altruism, compromises, apologies. For each of these themes, scenes from throughout the first season will be discussed, analyzed and interpreted in order to derive lessons about the respective theme.

### Common Interests among Friends

Having a common interest in things and being able to get lost in the same activity is displayed as an essential part of friendships on *The Big Bang Theory*. The core group of friends here is the group consisting of the four nerds: Sheldon, Leonard, Howard and Raj. They are shown spending their free time together playing video games together, each sitting in front of their laptops while being in the same flat or playing a board game together in order to pass time after the internet is down. These activities tap into the stereotype of the nerd being the tech-savvy person who rather spends his time inside. Another key aspect of the nerd stereotype is the social awkwardness, especially with girls. This issue will be addressed later on when talking about romantic relationships, but at this point, it is important to note that the social awkwardness and lack of certain social skills do not apply within the nerdy group of the four friends.

A scene where the importance of a common interest and shared enthusiasm in an activity is illustrated is when the guys[[5]](#footnote-5) help Penny assemble her media center. They get carried away by possible technical enhancements and do not pay attention to Penny’s objections that there is no need for technical enhancements. While this emphasizes the group dynamic among the four guys, it also illustrates the nerdy obsession with technology that has lost the relation to reality and practicality. Instead of helping Penny with her furniture assembly they leave to shop for supplies for technical enhancements without having assembled the media center. As far as the priorities are concerned, the guys put their common interest first. The absurdity of the situation (they talk about pumps and cooling systems for a regular piece of furniture) underlines the normative idea as discussed in the theoretical framework; the situation is an example of how not to act. The guys show what help does not look like, indicating that a common interest is important but less important than helping a friend. In this case Penny is the friend who does not get help from them.

During the course of the first season, they get to know Penny more and more and include her in their circle of friends. However she remains on the outside of that circle because she does not share the common interest of the four nerds. Another example for her position as a friend, yet outsider, is when the guys spend time on controlling their electronic devices via satellite, something she does not see the benefit of:

|  |
| --- |
| **Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization**  |
| **Scene 01**  |
| **Sheldon:** Someone in Szechuan Province, China is using his computer to turn our lights on and off. | Several lights around the apartment begin to turn on and off randomly. |
| **Penny:** Huh, well that’s handy. Um, here’s a question-why? |  |
| **Men in unison:** Because we can. | The men look at each other momentarily. |

Table 5‑I Transcript Excerpt Episode09 Scene01

In this scene (table 5‑II) the guys are all committed to the same task that seems pointless to an outsider but earlier caused them to laugh and dance around the flat. Sheldon later describes their time as “eight hours well wasted”. This shows that an activity among friends does not need to make sense to outsiders as long as the insiders of the group enjoy it.

In a later episode Penny wants to plan a surprise birthday party for Leonard. When she knocks on the apartment door, Sheldon is reluctant to let her in, openly stating that they do not have any common interests to talk about. She ends up convincing Sheldon to let her in and tells him, Howard and Raj her plans. While a common interest among friends is displayed as a valuable and essential part of friendships, it is put into perspective in this scene. Sheldon goes as far as to doubting the benefit of talking to Penny altogether, a behavior that turns out to be inappropriate and exaggerated. So as far as common interests and topics of interest are concerned, they are a vital part of friendship but not the sole ground that social relationships, especially looser friendships, are based on.

A group dynamic among close friends thus adheres to different rules than weaker connections to people who might be categorized as friends but not close friends. The interaction and communication with weaker connections requires more tolerance and effort while activities with close friends are shown to be relatively easy for the involved people.

The shared positive experience of a common activity is what makes Leonard, Sheldon and Raj think that they can include Penny in more of their leisure activities. After filling in for Howard during Halo[[6]](#footnote-6) night, Penny is asked to join them for a tournament at the next Halo night. Penny declines and rather goes out with her friends. These friends remain nameless in the course of the episode and only appear briefly in the end when Penny enters Sheldon’s and Leonard’s apartment with them saying they want to have sex with the guys. The guys do not hear this because they are so engaged in their video game.

There is a clash between two close groups of friends who share an experience (enjoying a video game or sharing a laugh) together but who fail to communicate with each other. This again emphasizes a difference between close friends and other people. The lack of communication between the two groups and the girls making jokes at the expense of the tech-absorbed nerds shows that there is a limit to the benefits of common interest. When it is exaggerated, it makes communications with others more difficult. This also reinforces the image about the socially awkward nerd. The same can be seen in the example of the guys assembling Penny’s furniture, they are so absorbed in a common interest among each other, that they do not notice other possibilities around them. This shows again that communication and interaction with non-close friends requires more effort. The guys do not show this kind of effort and miss out on a chance with talking to Penny and her friends.

#### Small Talk

Closely connected to common interest is a common ground for conversations that do not directly address a specific conflict of the episode. These conversations and scenes were grouped together as small talk. Episodes frequently start with small talks and only after this the main conflict of the episode is introduced. Small Talk differs from common interest because it is only about talking, not about doing an activity together. Successful conversations can be based on a common interest though when people talk about a topic they are equally interested in. However, there are also other situations where small talk occurs without a common interest in a topic. This is why this topic needs to be discussed separately but as a sub-category of common interests.

A scene where the connection of small talk and a common interest is shown is when Sheldon wants to tell Leonard something and Leonard saying he is not interested. Sheldon tells him nonetheless, Leonard thinks it is interesting and they successfully start a conversation. This success is based on partly Leonard’s tolerance of still listening to Sheldon and the common interests of them because Leonard is interested in what his friend tells him. Sometimes the friends have conversations that seem absurd (and are accompanied by a laugh track) but they are equally engaged in it, for example when they talk about the scenario of Sheldon being a robot, time-travelling or the reproduction of fictional creatures in movies.

During small talk scenes it often occurs that Sheldon wants to share information and facts that he thinks are necessary in the conversation and the others find boring or annoying. In some of the scenes Sheldon’s talk is preceded by a sarcastic “here we go” from one of the other participants in the conversation. During these small talk conversations the others also mock Sheldon or make sarcastic remarks. Sheldon is unaware of that, mistakes the sarcasm for interest or simply does not care if others are interested in what he has to say or not. In scenes like this Sheldon is the one doing it wrong, the others are tolerating his behavior. This emphasizes the importance of tolerance again. Sheldon doing it wrong and not being able to detect sarcasm or when he is unwanted shows his lack of empathy. Lacking empathy is usually annoying the others, which underlines the importance this quality is assigned in scenes containing small talk. Empathy is thus presented as an important quality within friendships that can be expected from friends and guarantees satisfying conversations.

A last example for this area is the understanding of a joke, because telling a joke, in this context, is a form of trying to engage in funny small talk. When Leonard tells a (scientific) joke, Howard and Raj laugh, Penny does not get it and pretends she does. Not only does this signify a quality among close friends, namely a shared sense of humor, it also shows a difference between Penny and Sheldon. The difference is that Penny seems to know how to make a conversation work (in this case pretending to share the humor) while Sheldon lacks these social skills and is unwilling to go out of his way (for example to stop talking when no one is interested). In terms of lessons on *The Big Bang Theory*, going out of one’s way and being empathic is shown to be an important prerequisite of successful communication. Again, tolerance is an important quality of making small talk work, both with close friends and weaker relationships.

#### Teasing and Insulting

Teasing and insulting someone is also discussed among common interest because it is based on a shared sense of humor, for example when a group of friends teases another. A situation like this is then a shared experience between the friends which is why it is closely connected to common interests.

As it was mentioned before, Sheldon is often met with sarcasm without noticing. The rest of the guys enjoy these moments and share the fun of teasing a friend. Teasing a friend occurred in other scenes of the first season as well. For example Sheldon teases Leonard about his ability in 3D-chess but Leonard asks for a rematch, Leonard enjoys seeing Sheldon bothered by the genius of 15-year-old Dennis Kim but Leonard wants to leave with Dennis when he senses Sheldon’s increasing agitation. Sheldon, Howard and Raj make fun of Leonard after he accidentally gets Penny together with her ex-boyfriend but despite him sulking he joins the others in mocking himself. Closely related to teasing is the joke Penny plays on Sheldon when she secretly mixes alcohol in his drink and she and Leonard watch in amusement as Sheldon sings and plays the piano at the Cheesecake Factory.

All the mentioned examples show that teasing is shown as a part of friendships and an acceptable way of friends sharing a laugh at the expense of another friend. In these examples, the victim of the teasing or mocking is never really hurt or insulted; this means that making fun of another friend always happens within the boundaries of friendliness and a mutual understanding of topics that can be made fun of. Also these situations are mostly harmless situations, for example when Leonard joins the others mocking him or when he and Penny watch over drunken Sheldon.

That there are boundaries to teasing is also shown, for example when Sheldon keeps pointing out that Howard does not have a PhD and is therefore inferior and stupider than the others in his opinion. Table 5‑III below shows an example of when Sheldon insults Howard about his intelligence.

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| **Episode 12: The Jerusalem Duality** |
| **Scene 03** |
| **Sheldon:** […] Today I went from being Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to… you know, that other guy. |  |
| **Howard:** Antonio Salieri? | While looking at his food |
| **Sheldon:** Oh, God, now even you’re smarter than me. |  |
| **Howard:** You know, Sheldon, you don’t have so many friends that you can afford to start insulting them.  | Looking up from his plate |
| **[…]**  |  |
| **Penny:** So, you’ve got a bit of competition, I really don’t see what the big deal is.  |  |
| **Sheldon:** Well of course you don’t, you’ve never excelled at anything.  |  |
| **Penny:** I don’t understand, exactly how did he get any friends in the first place? | Sheldon turns away from Penny staring ahead. |
| **Howard:** We liked Leonard. | Raj nods eagerly. |

Table 5‑IV Transcript Excerpt Episode12 Scene03

While Sheldon is being honest (a quality usually considered positive), he is also rude. Here Penny and Howard agree that Sheldon is a bad friend and clearly state that in the transcript excerpt above (table 5‑V). This shows that not only is there a boundary between teasing and insulting, it is emphasized that friends are not supposed to cross that boundary.

In the same episode Sheldon continues insulting every one of his friends at work until they ultimately treat him as an outsider of their group by asking him to leave when the others have dinner at the apartment. Thus, insulting friends is being punished on the series and shown to lead to being alone and an outsider. The positive quality of honesty is therefore limited by rules of politeness and being supportive of a friend. Both qualities are shown to rank higher and leading to more successful conversations and relationships than honesty. This subject-matter will be addressed again later in this chapter.

Teasing also shows an understanding of a friend, for example when Leonard purposefully says something that is irrelevant but confuses Sheldon, he enjoys his confusion which is a way for Leonard to punish Sheldon. Leonard knew exactly what to say to trigger the emotion in Sheldon that he wanted to trigger. Howard shows the same knowledge when it comes to getting Sheldon to do something he does not want to do (for example when Sheldon refuses to buy a birthday gift for Leonard). Howard comments this knowledge with “he came with a manual”, both teasing Sheldon about his lack of human empathy while knowing exactly to what he responds.

Penny, as a non-close friend, lacks this skill and when wanting to cheer Sheldon up she uses the common saying “when a door closes another one opens”. Instead of the result of him feeling better, he dissects the saying into its scientific probability. There are two things that this scene shows. The first is that knowing someone and teasing him or her leads to more success than relying on a common saying. Friendship thus is not only about politeness and correct behavior, it goes beyond this and different kinds of behavior and utterances that are technically mean or impolite can cause entertaining moments between friends. Since knowing someone as well as accepting that person is a prerequisite for teasing, teasing a friend while not transgressing the boundary to insulting is an important part of friendships distinguishing it from other social relationships.

The second thing the prior described scene shows is that language and dialogue can be seen as codes as described by Fiske (1987). The interpretation of common sayings as in the scene depends upon an agreed upon meaning and not a literal meaning. The lack of knowing how to interpret these codes is the reason why Sheldon cannot participate in conversations containing these common sayings. Thus a cultural knowledge of social and conversation codes is another prerequisite for a functioning communication with others in a community of people who know these codes.

### Completing a Task Together

The previous section of this chapter already mentioned some examples of how friends can spend time together. This section deals with specific examples in which friends not only spend time together but complete a task together, for example when Leonard and Sheldon struggle to carry Penny’s furniture upstairs or they go to her ex-boyfriend to confront him about her television that he still keeps at his place.

The first scene where doing something together is shown, is the very first scene of the series when Sheldon and Leonard go to the sperm bank. Despite them both being uncomfortable they try to go through with their plan but they leave together when Sheldon says he cannot go through with the initial plan. They deviate from their first idea but come to and leave the sperm bank together. This example shows that friends, who complete a task together, can reach a successful outcome (which is not necessarily the initially intended one). But despite the outcome of a situation, a friend’s help in another one’s plan is a valued thing. These types of situations also have potentials for conflicts. When the guys carry a heavy time machine up the narrow stairwell they all struggle, which causes them to give sarcastic remarks to each other, they are passive aggressive and noticeably stressed out. Despite this they manage to carry the time machine upstairs without starting a fight. This shows that friends can deal with the moods of each other, despite the potential for conflict. The following categories explore situations of completing a task together and the conflict potential of this in more detail.

#### Working Together

One form of completing a task together is working together and thus completing a task together professionally with a person who is a friend. This is an important topic in the twelfth episode when Sheldon decides to quit his job and work together with his friends. It was previously said that he insulted all of them during this attempt to work together, mocking and doubting the others’ capabilities.

Another example of friends working together (if not in a strictly professional area) is the Physics Bowl quiz. They want to enter in a team of four but during practice Sheldon answers every question even if one of the others buzzed in earlier. This causes a bad atmosphere, they interrupt the practice and Leonard, Howard, and Raj ultimately decide to remove Sheldon from the team. Sheldon thus violated norms of fairness and teamwork. Instead of apologizing he swears revenge and competes against his friends. The Physics Bowl ends with Sheldon having the opportunity to win if he would accept an answer from one of his teammates (who is however not a friend):

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| **Episode 13: The Bat Jar Conjecture** |
| **Scene 06** |
| **Gablehauser:** […] I need your official answer. |  |
| **Sheldon:** No. I decline to provide one. |  |
| **Gablehauser:** Well, that’s too bad, because the answer your teammate gave was correct.  |  |
| **Sheldon:** That’s your opinion. |  |
| **Gablehauser:** Alright, the winner of the match is… |  |
| **Leonard:** Hang on. Sheldon, is proving that you are single-handedly smarter than everyone else so important that you would rather lose by yourself than win as part of a team.  | Leonard gestures Gablehauser to stop. And looks at Sheldon. |
| **Sheldon:** I don’t understand the question.  |  |
| **Leonard:** Go ahead. | Leonard to Gablehauser. |

Table 5‑VI Transcript Excerpt Episode13 Scene06

This scene (table 5‑VII) highlights the paradox of deliberately losing because of egoism and the inability to work within a team. Leonard is aware of this paradox and proves to be a fairer friend and team player by confronting Sheldon about this paradox. Sheldon’s behavior does not lead to success while the others are rewarded by winning. Teamwork and working together and not competing against friends is displayed as the more successful strategy.

Despite the success of friends in teams as described in the scene above, and the fact that friends make it through conflicts and reconcile in the end (an aspect of friendships that will be discussed later in this chapter), working together is a topic in the series that has a lot of conflict potential for friends both close and more distant. Working together means spending time together and collaborating outside of familiar patterns. The guys and Penny having dinner (with even specific dishes assigned to specific days) is a clearly contrasting example of a routine with friends that functions and is not a source of conflict.

When the friends work together or complete a task together where they do not have an established routine, they need to figure out a new pattern. This process can then cause conflict, like Sheldon being the outsider of the group and competing against his friends. Thus potential dangers and threats to a friendship are also addressed in *The Big Bang Theory* and a lack of support and a lack of teamwork are such threats. When there is a willingness to work within a team, including tolerance for other and the ability to establish a working routine or pattern with friends, teamwork can have a positive outcome and is therefore presented as a positive element of friendships.

### Encouragement and Help

Besides the support of a friend’s work, there are other situations in the series where different forms of support, encouragement and help are dealt with. These themes are analyzed in this chapter which includes different forms of encouragement and help such as giving advice, caring for a friend, evaluating a friend’s qualities and doing a favor for a friend.

One form of encouragement is consolation, for example when Leonard is frustrated about his lack of chances with Penny. He deals with it by buying a cat. Instead of offering consolation, Sheldon is annoyed with Leonard’s coping mechanism. Another example already mentioned in the theoretical framework is Sheldon offering people a hot beverage to comfort them because it is a social convention. This rehearsed action and lack of him offering comfort or displaying understanding in any other situation shows that he does not really know how to deal with these situations; he does not understand the code and the meaning of it.

Leonard on the other hand comforts Penny because he wants to. He does this without taking advantage of her vulnerable situation and is rewarded by her kissing him. This does make him a good friend but also takes him closer to his goal of dating Penny. When Leonard finally has a first date with Penny, he is nervous and thinks about canceling. Sheldon first fails to calm him down and instead starts searching for an academic article that he wants to show Leonard. Instead of encouraging him, he is willing to cancel the date immediately for him.

The discussed situation is another example where by transgressing a norm, the norm becomes obvious. Sheldon willingly wanting to call Penny seems odd and is accompanied by a laugh track. Thus the norm would be to support and encourage a friend to go through with his plan (in this case the date) instead. Encouragement here also requires knowing a friend and going beyond what the friend is saying and discovering the latent meaning (in this case Leonard not really wanting to cancel the date, but being nervous about it).

Closely related to the concept of encouragement is the concept of helping a friend but these terms are used here to distinguish verbal encouragement versus help in the form of direct action. This occurs for example when Sheldon, Howard, and Raj help Leonard to pay for a time machine that he accidentally bought. They split the cost for the time machine and share the item equally.

Another example of the group helping someone shows a different outcome. When Raj is struggling with his decision whether to meet Lalita or not after his parents want to pair him off with her, the others fail to help him with his decision of. Sheldon suggests that he goes through with it and lectures him on the topic of arranged marriages instead of responding to him personally. Leonard and Howard keep drifting off to other topic so while Raj demands his friends’ help; they fail to take his worries seriously. Raj comments on this lack of help with a sarcastic remark about what he needs to do: “Find new friends.”

Therefore the help friends offer differs from situation to situation. When it comes to the example with the time machine (a nerdy hobby), the guys are willing to help but when it comes to women and Raj talking to them (a topic about which they do not know about much), they fail to offer any help. Raj’s sarcastic remark shows that he expected help from his friends nonetheless. It can be concluded that encouragement and help are an essential part of friendship that can be expected from friends and the lack of offering them is a possible threat to a friendship.

#### Advice

A specific form of offering encouragement and help is giving advice. Giving advice can be distinguished from other forms of encouragement and help because it is a situation where someone specifically suggests someone how to act or solve a problem. Giving advice is thus different from comforting someone, encouraging someone or expressing pity for example.

Something Raj wanted in the scene described above, when he does not know if and how he should talk to Lalita, is advice from his friend. The story with Raj continues when instead of offering Raj advice, Howard calls Lalita and pretends to be Raj who is not thankful for that call. Howard does not give Raj a verbal piece of advice but acts on his behalf. This is another form of helping a friend in his opinion but not the advice that Raj wanted.

Another example for the lacking ability of giving romantic advice is Sheldon who is generally uninterested and refuses to comment on these kinds of topics. He honestly and openly states that he is not interested in these topics. Instead of listening to Penny when she asks him for advice about Leonard, he tells her irrelevant (and for Leonard embarrassing) information about him. This inability shows that (similar to the topic of helping), advice giving depends on the issue at hand and as socially awkward nerds, with Sheldon being the most awkward one, fail to help each other in these situations. This social awkwardness which also fits the stereotype of the nerd will be discussed later in this chapter in the section about romantic relationships.

The lack of providing advice on Sheldon’s side is again an example of how not to do it and where honesty is not the quality someone wants a friend to show. The implicated expected way of action would be to conceal the fact that one does not care about the issues of a friend and still give advice. This requires both tolerance and empathy and also the ability to let go of one’s egoism and do something nice for a friend even without personal gain or even a sacrifice on one’s side. The importance of tolerance and empathy as essential qualities of friendships is reinforced here. Since the issue of egoism is an important one, it will be discussed in more detail in 5.1.5.1.

A situation where Sheldon’s advice is of help is when he tells both Penny and Leonard about Schrodinger’s Cat. When he tells Penny about it, she is confused by it and he tells her that she got it wrong. When he gives the same piece of advice to Leonard he gets it immediately and thinks it is “brilliant”. When it comes to understanding advice the same rules as with jokes or small talk seem to apply. Close friends who share a history and a common understanding of things can be of more help to each other than looser contacts.

The difference between giving ad vice to friends and strangers is also focused on in the scene when Sheldon gives detailed descriptions and advice to customers in an electronic store and gets so carried away by it, that he almost missed Leonard’s birthday party. The time and effort he puts into giving advice to strangers seems exaggerated to Penny who is more familiar with social conventions.

It can be concluded that helping and giving advice are desired qualities of a friend that can even be demanded by a friend, but it is also exclusive to friendship. Hence, friendships have a benefit for the people involved in them that set them apart from other people. This goes in line with what has been previously discussed about teamwork and sharing and enjoying a common interest. Friendships are displayed as something positive and desirable that has advantages for the people involved in a friendship.

#### Caring for a Friend

Another specific sub-topic of helping a friend is caring for him or her in sickness. This is the focus of the eleventh episode in which Sheldon gets sick and Leonard, Howard, and Raj try to avoid him and Penny ends up taking care of him. Upon hearing that Sheldon is sick, Leonard flees the apartment and warns Howard and Raj about it. This warning itself is a form of helping in itself because they try to spare one another from the burden of having to take care of Sheldon who is very demanding when sick.

When Sheldon starts bothering Penny at work, she calls Leonard and tells him that taking care of Sheldon is his responsibility as his best friend. Leonard is aware of that because otherwise he would not feel the necessity to hide from him. Sheldon, who usually shows a great deal of egoism and confidence in his own abilities, admits that when in a situation of sickness he needs help:

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| **Episode 11 The Pancake Batter Anomaly** |
| **Scene 07** |
| **Sheldon:** Thanks for bringing me home. | Penny and Sheldon walk up the stair well of their apartment building. |
| **Penny:** Oh, it’s okay, I didn’t really need to work today, it’s not like I have rent or car payments or anything. |  |
| **Sheldon:** Good. Good. | They reach their floor. |
| **Penny:** Okay, well, you feel better. | Penny turns to leave. |
| **Sheldon:** Wait, where are you going? |  |
| **Penny:** Um, home, to write some bad cheques. |  |
| **Sheldon:** You’re going to leave me? |  |
| **Penny:** Sheldon, you are a grown man, haven’t you ever been sick before? |  |
| **Sheldon:** Well, of course, but, not by myself. |  |

Table 5‑VIII Transcript Excerpt Episode11 Scene07

What this scene (table 5‑IX) shows again, is that Sheldon does not get sarcasm, because sarcasm depends on social conventions and being able to interpret what someone is saying. People are supposed to be able to judge from the content and tone of voice if something is meant literally or sarcastically. Penny goes out of her way to help Sheldon because she pities him but it is not her responsibility, as a non-close friend, to take care of him. Sheldon misreading her sarcasm and demanding even more from her is thus an overstretching of the favors and help one can expect from a relationship like theirs. Sheldon, who is taken aback by her wanting to leave, shows that he is not aware of demanding too much from her.

While close friends have the responsibility to take care of their friends, this rule does not apply to non-close friends or other acquaintances. Therefore, in a context like this, it is considered polite (and expected) to keep demands to a minimum. Demanding help from a close or best friend on the other hand, is presented as a reasonable request. Not adhering to these rules is punished in the end when Penny sees Leonard sneaking into the flat. He hurts himself when he tries to leave the apartment. Leonard and Sheldon end up being sick or hurt with no one being able to take care of them and they cannot take care of each other either. Violating Penny’s trust and using her for something that Leonard did not want to do is portrayed as punishable and Leonard ends up in a worse situation than if he would have taken care of his friend in the first place.

That caring for a friend is part of a friend’s responsibility is also shown in relation to alcohol. When the guys and Penny decide that Raj needs to be drunk in order to go on a date with Lalita, they tell him to have the date at the Cheesecake Factory, where Penny works, so they can watch over him. This shows that caring for a friend is indeed a responsibility of friends and applies in different contexts. Penny, Leonard, and Howard being amused by watching Raj on his date is a way of showing that this norm of friends having to take care of friends, comes not only with sacrifices but can also be enjoyable for the friends who are taking care of another.

Caring for a friend is presented as a responsibility within a friendship. This can be an uncomfortable or annoying thing for the friend who is taking care of someone and it can require an extra effort, but it is still expected from friends. The friend who is being taken care of, benefits from this rule of friendship. This shows both benefits and sacrifices are part of a functioning friendship.

#### Evaluating a Friend’s Chances

This sub-category is concerned with scenes where friends comment on another friend’s chances with a girl. There are situations when the partner or love interest is not directly involved and a conversation between friends takes place, in which the romantic qualities and chances with a woman are discussed. This differs from giving advice because no specific practical suggestion about how to act is made, instead the conversation is about a theoretical evaluation. Since the nerds are all insecure in this area, they are likely to need help and encouragement from friends (for example when Raj seeks advice about Lalita). Evaluating a friend’s chances with a girl is thus a part of encouragement and help but a distinct from of it.

The conflict of honesty versus showing support and being encouraging was already mentioned when discussing how Sheldon is honest when he is insulting Howard by doubting his intelligence. This conflict is most obvious when it comes to the topic of evaluating a friend’s chances, in this case with women. Here, *The Big Bang Theory* is an interesting case because as nerds (and the guys often fit the stereotype of the nerd in different ways) they are all romantically challenged and all fail during their attempts to flirt or start a relationship. While this specific topic will be the focus of the second part of this empirical analysis, it is important for this first part about friendships, because despite their lack of abilities, the guys comment on each other’s romantic chances.

Despite Sheldon’s lack of empathy and his scarce interest he is usually aware of Leonard’s sorrow about his unrealistic chances with Penny. Instead of encouraging Leonard, Sheldon repeatedly points out Leonard’s weaknesses and that he does not have a chance with Penny. He thinks Leonard should just give her up. That this is bad advice is shown in Leonard’s ongoing attempts to flirt with Penny or ask her out which finally succeeds.

Still, Sheldon keeps doubting Leonard’s chances and even showing relief when Leonard wants to give up his pursuit. Before his date in the last episode of the first season, Sheldon discourages Leonard instead of encouraging him. All these kinds of behavior are used as jokes and are followed by a laugh track. Sheldon is obviously not acting right and violating a rule of friendship. It can therefore be concluded that support and encouragement are valued more than honesty, at least to a certain degree. This means that it is not implied that lying would be a better option, but overlooking a friend’s weaknesses would.

Sheldon is not the only one who is violating that rule, when the guys play a video game and Leonard is in a foul mood, his problem is not dealt with in a serious way.

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| **Episode 2 The Big Bran Hypothesis** |
| **Scene 07** |
| **Howard:** (to Sheldon) What’s his problem?  | Leonard is sulking. |
| **Sheldon:** His imaginary girlfriend broke up with him.  |  |
| **Howard:** Been there! |  |

Table 5‑X Transcript Excerpt Episode02 Scene07

This part of the scene (table 5‑XI) shows how quickly they deal with the topic. Sheldon emphasizes again, that Leonard does not have a chance with Penny. Howard does not argue with that and only talks about his own experience. This links back to what has been said about them being unable to offer advice or help concerning issues with women.

It is not only Leonard’s chances that are commented on, the scene with Raj’s worries about his parents trying to set him up is another example where they all admit to the chances of him dating Lalita successfully are really small or even non-existent. Sheldon says that all of his friends are unfit partners for his sister Missy. When Howard shows up with a tall and pretty girl at a party, they suspect she is a robot. This emphasizes how unrealistic they think it is for Howard to be with a girl like that. It turns out they were right because Howard had paid her. So while they estimate each other’s romantic chances really low, they are right about it most of the time indicating that as friends, they truly know each other.

There are exceptions to this rule however, for example when Missy would have liked to date Raj or Leonard going on a date with Penny. These situations or similar situations say less about the friendships however than about romantic relationships. This topic will be discussed in the second part of this analysis.

In the last scene of the first episode, Sheldon admits that out of the four of them, Leonard is by far the most realistic and desirable partner for Penny. Upon hearing this, Leonard smiles broadly which indicates that a friend believing in another friend’s romantic chances and encouraging him is a good thing because it makes the encouraged friend happy.

To conclude this section, it is difficult to deduce a specific norm or rule about how to evaluate a friend’s chances with a woman and how to resolve the conflict of encouragement versus honesty. The conflict is still present and sometimes honesty shows that someone really knows a friend and might even prevent him from making a mistake (for example when Christy is using Howard for his money), other times honesty is shown to discourage a friend or even decrease his chances with a woman (for example when Sheldon is willing to cancel Leonard’s date with Penny immediately). The guys frequently misjudge a situation and go with honesty when support was needed or the other way around. It is thus up to the people within a friendship to know their friends and be able to evaluate when honesty is the best option and when someone should keep his or her opinion to him- or herself in order to help and encourage a friend. This quality of being able to judge a situation as well as someone’s mood, underlines the importance of empathy again.

#### Favors

A last topic that can be considered as part of encouragement and helping is favors. Favors are understood in this thesis as actively doing something nice for someone without having to do so and without a personal gain. There are several moments in the first season when favors are offered or asked for, for example when Penny asks if Sheldon needs anything from the supermarket, when Leonard offers Penny to sleep at their place, when Penny asks the guys to try her cocktails or when Howard teaches Sheldon Chinese.

In a similar scenario as when Sheldon is sick and Penny takes care of him, he overstretches her kindness when she offers him a favor which he gladly accepts (table 5‑XII):

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| **Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect** |
| **Scene 04** |
| **Penny:** Hi, hey. I’m running out to the market. Do you guys need anything?  | Penny knocks on the door and looks inside. |
| **Sheldon:** Oh, well this would be one of those circumstances that people unfamiliar with the law of large numbers would call a coincidence. . |  |
| **Penny:** I’m sorry?  |  |
| **Sheldon:** I need eggs. Four dozen should suffice |  |
| **Penny:** (uncertain) Four dozen?  |  |
| **Sheldon:** Yes, and evenly distributed amongst brown, white, free range, large, extra large, and jumbo.  |  |
| **Penny:** Okay, one more time?  |  |
| **Sheldon:** Never mind, you won’t get it right. I’d better come with you.  | Sheldon gets up and hurries past Penny out the door. |
| **Penny:** (sarcastically) Oh, yay! |  |

Table 5‑XIII Transcript Excerpt Episode04 Scene04

Sheldon’s long and detailed description of what he needs goes beyond what one might accept as a favor and when he invites himself to join Penny, it finally becomes obvious that accepting a favor is possible but only to some extent. Putting the one offering the favor through too much trouble is causing a laugh track and shows that there are limits to accepting a favor from someone.

Sheldon on the other hand has problems with offering a favor. His reason behind being against Penny spending the night at their place in the seventh episode is that they only have two earthquake emergency kits. He also refuses to try any of Penny’s cocktails she needs to practice mixing. In the first example Leonard forces Sheldon to give in and in the latter example Penny refuses to serve him any more drinks and later gets him drunk without him knowing.

What can be seen in these examples is that refusing a favor to a friend, even a non-close one, is punished or simply does not succeed. So either through argumentation or action, doing a favor is presented as a nice thing friends can be expected to do for each other without needing many reasons to convince them.

Howard adheres to this norm of friendship and tries to teach Sheldon Chinese even though he is unnerved by him and tells Sheldon this. Similar to the situations that were discussed when talking about friends working together, Sheldon starts insulting Howard who then shifts his attention to something else and more important to him. So crossing boundaries of friendships leads to not being granted a favor anymore. Doing a favor is thus a benefit of a friendship but one needs to earn being granted a favor by following the rules of friendships, e.g. not insulting a friend or not being egoistic.

### Lying to a Friend

This topic will be discussed without any sub-sections because it stands on its own without major differences in the situations that were collected in this category. Going behind a friend’s back also belongs in this category. There are situations where lies are told that are not discussed throughout the whole episode, for example when Sheldon had not told Leonard about a letter inviting them both to a symposium or when Leonard goes behind Raj’s and Howard’s backs to talk to Sheldon about the authority in his sister’s dating life (where he lies about the reason).

In this latter example Leonard talks Sheldon into restricting Missy’s dating habits in order to protect the genetic heritage of his family. This reason is a lie because this is not really Leonard’s attitude. This shows what has been previously observed about a friend knowing how to convince a friend and to which arguments they respond to. The lie backfires because Sheldon also rules out Leonard as a potential partner while the purpose of the conversation was to get Sheldon’s permission to date his sister. Howard and Raj know about Leonard going behind their backs and glare at him.

In the tenth episode, the issue of lying to a friend is the main topic. It starts when Leonard makes up an excuse to not go to Penny’s show (table 5‑XIV):

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| **Episode 10 The Loobenfeld Decay** |
| **Scene 02** |
| **Sheldon:** You could have told her the truth. |  |
| **Leonard**: That would have hurt her feelings. |  |
| **Sheldon**: Is that a relevant factor? |  |
| **Leonard**: Yes. |  |
| **Sheldon:** Then I suppose you could have agreed to go. |  |
| **Leonard**: And what would I have said afterwards? |  |
| **Sheldon:** I would suggest something to the effect of, singing is neither an appropriate vocation nor avocation for you […]. |  |
| **Leonard:** I couldn’t say that, I would have to say, you were terrific and I can’t wait to hear you sing again. |  |
| **Sheldon**: Why? | Sheldon is visibly startled.  |
| **Leonard:** It’s the social protocol, it’s what you do when you have a friend who’s proud of something they really suck at. |  |
| **Sheldon:** I was not aware of that. |  |

Table 5‑XV Transcript Excerpt Episode10 Scene02

Leonard presented his lie as a white lie in order to protect Penny’s feelings. He emphasizes that a friend is supposed to be supportive no matter his true opinion. Again, this is where honesty is limited in a friendship and being supportive is assigned a greater importance. So when Sheldon admits that he never listens to Leonard talking about his work, it becomes clear that honesty can be a negative thing and can be considered as transgressing the boundary of expected social behavior among friends. The conflict of the episode then revolves around Sheldon being uncomfortable with the lie, not for the sake of Penny but because he is afraid of getting caught. He therefore extends the lie out of proportion by staying up all night to create the fake identity of a made-up cousin and finally hiring an actor to portray said cousin.

While Leonard and Sheldon struggle to maintain the web of lies Sheldon has created (a detailed history of the fake cousin), they have to endure feelings like discomfort and the fear of getting caught. Penny does not uncover the lie, however, all their efforts where in vein, when they have to watch her performance after all because she has a video. They watch it while the actor portraying Sheldon’s drug-addicted cousin is pitied by Penny and she strokes his head. Therefore their lie did not have the effect they wanted to have and they even made it worse because Penny tells them she can pause and comment on the video. The lie is never discussed but the action on the screen shows that it failed. Sheldon is also punished because his objections to Leonard’s lie are egoistic reasons, his own feeling of comfort. Leonard’s biggest punishment is probably seeing Penny being nice to another guy which would not have happened if he had not started lying to her. He as well does not show any signs of being sorry about the lie itself. Instead of feeling sorry for being dishonest he feels jealous about Penny being nice to someone else.

When it comes to lies it is important to look at the outcome of them. As friends, the characters on *The Big Bang Theory* never lie to each other for the purpose of lying. When a lie is told, it is because whoever tells the lie wants to achieve something with it, it is a necessary tool. When looking at the outcome of the situation, one needs to consider if the lie helped to achieve something, if the outcome was different or if the lie backfired. In this sitcom, lying never works out for the person who tells the lie and the situation even backfires. The lesson behind this is thus that lying does not pay off and can even put a friendship into danger. It causes more trouble than benefit.

There is thus not a general lesson about lying to a friend being either good or bad. Lying out of egoistic reasons and therefore lying as a form of betraying a friend is punished and shown as a negative thing. This limits the rule Leonard stated in the transcript excerpt above but does not completely negate it (which can be seen by Sheldon’s uncalled for critic of Leonard in the aftermath of that excerpt). There might be situations where that rule is still true but it is not universal. The series thus takes a social rule present in society, discusses it and evaluates it.

Another lesson that can be derived from the examples dealt with in this section is that egoism does not pay off. The initial start of the lie as well as the extension of it was motivated by egoistic motivations. Egoism is therefore portrayed as not leading to success within a friendship. The same lesson was already discussed in relation to teamwork which strengthens the importance that lesson within the sitcom.

### Arguments and Discussions

The last section in which the rules and norms of friendships are discussed deals with arguments and discussion among friends and how they are resolved. There were three sub-categories found for this theme. In general, this theme is an important one when it comes to discussing social relationships on television because within the narrative of a fictional series, there is always conflict to be found.

After Sheldon lost his job, Leonard is unnerved by him and calls Sheldon’s mother to talk sense into him. Sheldon feels betrayed by Leonard and stops talking to him (table 5‑XVI):

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| **Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect** |
| **Scene 10** |
| **Howard:** (to Sheldon) Hey, look who’s come… | Sheldon stalks into the hallway, attempting to sneak his way into the kitchen. |
| **Mary:** Sh-sh-sh! (whispering) You’ll spook him. He’s like a baby deer. You've got to let him come to you. | Sheldon enters the kitchen and spoons cobbler onto a plate.  |
| **Leonard:** (rising from chair) This is ridiculous. Damn it, Sheldon! Snap out of it! You’re a physicist; you belong at the University doing research, not hiding in your room. | He snaps his head toward the crowd in the living room, who quickly pretend to not be watching him. |
| **Mary:** (to Leonard) You don’t hunt, do you? | Sheldon scurries away to the safety of his bedroom. |

Table 5‑XVII Transcript Excerpt Episode04 Scene10

The discussion about if Sheldon should ask for his job back, leaves Leonard no choice in his opinion but to call Sheldon’s mother Mary. In the scene above, he confronts Sheldon and wants to talk sense into him, Sheldon once again flees the discussion which Mary saw coming. She thus knows Sheldon better than his friends do. Thus Mary as an outside party, but also a family member, is more capable of resolving a discussion than his friends. She forces him to ask for his job back at the end of the episode.

Another example where an outside party interferes is when Sheldon and Leonard fight about going to a symposium to present a paper they have written together. Their argumentation is the main conflict of the ninth episode, occurring in several scenes, which can already be seen in the title: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization. Penny tries to get Sheldon and Leonard to reconcile:

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| **Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization**  |
| **Scene 04** |
| **Penny:** Anyway, I was talking to Leonard this morning and I think he feels really bad about it. […] Well how do you feel? | Penny and Sheldon walk up the stairwell of their apartment building. |
| **Sheldon:** I don’t understand the question.  |  |
| **Penny:** Well I’m just asking if it’s difficult to be fighting with your best friend.  |  |
| **Sheldon:** Oh. I hadn’t thought about it like that. I wonder if I’ve been experiencing physiological manifestations of some sort of unconscious emotional turmoil.  | Sheldon indicates that he “couldn’t poop this morning”. |
| **[…]** |  |
| **Penny:** Okay, so you absolutely should talk to him. Look, I know Leonard values you as a friend and he told me himself that without your little idea there’s no way he could have come up with this whole experiment thing. |  |

Table 5‑XVIII Transcript Excerpt Episode09 Scene04

In the excerpt above (table 5‑XIX), Penny tries to mediate between Sheldon and Leonard, while speaking on behalf of Leonard. This fails because Sheldon feels insulted by the expression “little idea” and Penny later admits Leonard said “lucky hunch”. Instead of making the situation better, she makes it worse by intensifying the argument. Before that, Sheldon agrees with her though that reconciliation would be a good thing because fighting with his best friend physically bothers him. Sheldon as the most socially awkward and egoistic of the four nerds is unable to express his feelings about fighting with his friend, but when he shows symptoms of stress, it means that fighting with one’s best friend really is a bad thing that bothers all parties involved in it.

The lesson as far as Penny is concerned, therefore is to not interfere with other friends’ arguments because the dynamic between two people is unique. The argument between Leonard and Sheldon keeps on getting worse after the previously discussed scene. Leonard goes to the symposium and Sheldon hides in the audience to humiliate him after his talk in front of an audience. They end up physically fighting in public. This culmination of their arguing is due to their stubbornness and arrogance about their professional skills. Both qualities are presented as not leading to reconciliation and causing trouble within a friendship. The argument is also without discussing it. They watch the video that Howard took of their fight and are both embarrassed about it. This shared feeling stops them from continuing the fight.

Besides resolutions and apologies (which will be discussed as a sub-section of this topic), letting something go is shown to be a way for friends to end an argument. They are also able to reconcile because they let go of their stubbornness. Instead of continuing their fight, they realize that it made them look silly. Arguing is thus a bad thing for all parties involved (unlike favors where one can benefit from someone and another one is giving something).

 In the thirteenth episode Penny is able to settle the conflict about “who is smarter”, not by speaking on the behalf of one party but acting as a neutral mediator. She does a pop quiz with Leonard and Sheldon at which they are both bad at. They reconcile over that shared experience. Thus the actual conflict is not really resolved or talked through but the two remember what their friendship is about and they have a positive experience together, when Penny lies about them having a right answer. In contrast to the lies discussed previously in this chapter, Penny’s lie is a white lie that she does not tell out of egoistic reasons; it does not have any negative consequences, neither for her nor Leonard and Sheldon.

Another topic which the guys discuss or fight about is women. Leonard, Howard, and Raj start fighting and mocking each other’s flirting skills when they are all flirting with Missy. When Raj has a date with Lalita, Sheldon ends up leaving with her. When he returns Raj blames him for betraying him and the others agree with him, that this is not what a friend does. Sheldon apologizes but still insists that it was Raj’s fault. These last two examples show that competing over a woman is a potential threat to a friendship and cause disputes among friends rather quickly. Similar to the example above, arrogance and stubbornness are shown to be negative qualities.

When Leonard, Howard, and Raj fight about who gets to flirt with Missy and Sheldon wants to decide who an acceptable partner for his sister is, he excludes all of them. Thus instead of encouraging each other, they fight and insult each other by pointing out their weaknesses. This ties in with what has been previously discussed about encouragement by friends being a desirable support among friends, as well as that crossing the line from mockery to insulting is overstepping a boundary. Again fighting is shown as looking stupid or silly for others (Missy leaves the room) and all the parties involved have disadvantages because of the argument (no one goes out with Missy in the end). Arguing among friends is thus presented as a consistently negative thing.

The last example for this section deals with the group losing its dynamic by being out of balance. It starts with Howard abandoning the group on their weekly Halo night in order to flirt with Penny’s friend Christy. Penny fills in for Howard because they play in teams of two. Sheldon protests against Penny joining them because she is inexperienced. It turns out that he is wrong because Penny is good at it and even kills Sheldon’s character in the game. Him not allowing someone else in their group is thus punished whereas being social is shown as the best solution (they can continue their game). Later in the episode, Penny declines an invitation to join them for Halo night again and rather goes dancing with her friends. After having dinner with three people and being unable to order food they can equally divide, Leonard, Sheldon, and Raj start arguing because of the new situation in their group (being three instead of four).

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| **Episode 7: The Dumpling Paradox** |
| **Scene 05** |
| **Sheldon:** Okay, assuming we could dance… which we can’t, there are three of us and two of them.  | Leonard is suggesting they could have joined Penny. |
| **Leonard:** So?  |  |
| **Sheldon:** It’s the Chinese restaurant all over again. I assure you that cutting a dumpling in thirds is child’s play compared with three men each attempting to dance with 67% of a woman. |  |
| **Leonard:** Argh! For God’s sake! Sheldon, you are driving me crazy. |  |
| **Sheldon:** Your anger’s not with me, sir, but with basic mathematics.  |  |
| **Leonard:** No, I’m pretty sure my anger’s with you.  |  |
| **Raj:** What’s happening to us? We’re falling apart! |  |
| **Leonard:** Who are you calling?  | Sheldon suddenly dials a number on his cell phone. |
| **Sheldon:** The only man who can restore any semblance of balance to our universe.  | Sheldon calls Howard. |

Table 5‑XX Transcript Excerpt Episode07 Scene05

In this scene (table 5‑XXI) Raj voices his concern about the instability of their group. They have a situation of crisis because they are thrown out of balance when they are only three instead of four people in their group. Leonard openly and aggressively tells Sheldon that Sheldon is annoying. In other situations, he thinks that of Sheldon, too, but he often does not confront him and tolerates his behavior. Friendships therefore work with logic of checks and balances and the dynamic in a group depends on mutual tolerance as well as habits.

Friends depend on each other and on being in each other’s company. This is shown in the (simple) examples of a game night and having dinner. This links back to what has been previously said about friends relying on routines which guarantee the stability within in the group. Howard abandoning the group thus led to a crisis within the group. He re-joins the group and leaves Christy at home with his mother to join his friends. This ends the dispute (without any apologies on any side) and re-establishes their routine.

Arguments are moments of crisis for friendships. The consequences and experience is negative for everyone involved in an argument, sometimes even a third party is included. Close friends who have established a routine with each other and work within a certain pattern, however, can easily overcome arguments if feelings like egoism, stubbornness, and arrogance are abandoned (because they are undesirable qualities within a friendship).

#### Egoism and Altruism

One form of discussion or disruption in a group is when one member of the group abandons the others to follow his own goals and desires. The opposite would be to do something for the well-being of the whole group. This can be described as altruism as a contrast to egoism. This topic is also closely linked to teamwork, which was analyzed earlier, for example when Sheldon is unable to be in a team with the others for the Physics Bowl because he only cares about his own performance in the team. Other situations are for example when Sheldon abandons the group in a video game to acquire a virtual sword that he then sells online. Howard abandons the group as well and buys it.

In these last examples no harm is done in reality, only within the video game. Leaving the group out of egoistic reasons is shown to have negative consequences and egoism and arrogance are punished. The reversed scenario, not following egoistic reasons for the well-being of the group, is connected to another outcome.

When Leonard, Howard, and Raj look for a new fourth member for their Physics Bowl team, Howard and Raj want to ask Leslie Winkle. Leonard feels uncomfortable about that because he had previously slept with her and then she told him she did not want a relationship with him. Leonard does not overcome his discomfort but asks her nonetheless. Their team ends up winning and her being on the team is a punishment for Sheldon as well. Doing something for the group despite personal scruples is thus presented in favorable light, as leading to success and also being something friends can ask from one another.

A last example in this category is when Penny comes home after visiting her family in Nebraska. While Leonard is happy to see her and interested in what she has to tell him, Sheldon is only worried about getting sick because Penny’s relatives were. He acts impolite and tries to get her out of the flat. Despite this, he later gets sick while Leonard does not. Impoliteness and rudeness are therefore punished whereas showing interest in a friend and their stories is portrayed as being more important than worrying about oneself. In this case Sheldon worrying about his own health is presented as exaggerated and pointless in the end because he gets sick nonetheless. Sheldon getting sick is thus a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, and the price he pays for his egoism.

Egoism within friendships is presented as a throughout negative characteristic treat because it is rude to other friends and ultimately has negative consequences for the egoistic friend as well. This concerns egoism as an opposite to altruism and doing something for the well-being of the group.

Using the benefits of friendships like being granted a favor, receiving advice, being supported in one’s plans by a friend or being cared for by a friend is not a form of egoism even if one person benefits from it more than another. The negative connotation of egoism within the series does therefore not mean that one needs to give up on personal desires and needs in order to be part of a functioning friendship.

#### Compromises

Finding a solution between what different people want or what one person wants in opposition to the well-being of the group can be described as a compromise. This sub-category is a form of discussion where friends find a solution to the problem with the best possible outcome for all the people involved.

There are both cases when compromising works as well as cases when it does not. When the guys all wear the same costume for Penny’s Halloween party, they decide that they all change into something different. The compromise thus is, that when all members of the group want the same thing, they all give it up. Leonard applies the same logic when he wants to sell all his nerdy stuff. He tells his friends that he will sell it to the comic book store instead of selling it to them, so that there will not be a fight about who gets what. Compromises can thus not only be a way to settle discussions, they are also used to prevent arguments. They are a way of avoiding jealousy within a group of friends. After Leonard has proposed said compromise, Sheldon admits that he does not care about the peace within the group as long as he gets Leonard’s stuff. He thus admits that there is the threat of jealousy and competition because he wants to have all of Leonard’s items. But instead of trying to find a compromise like Leonard does, he considers it as a given fact that he should get Leonard’s things.

When the guys want to decide which name they are giving their team for the Physics Bowl, a discussion is started that they settle with a different kind of compromise (table 5‑XXII):

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| **Episode 13: The Bat Jar Conjecture** |
| **Scene 02** |
| **Sheldon:** Point of order. I move that any vote on team names should be unanimous [...]  | Sheldon interrupts the voting for a team name. Howard stares blankly at the table. |
| **Leonard:** Will the gentleman from the great state of denial yield for a question?  |  |
| **Sheldon**: I will yield. |  |
| **Leonard**: After we go through the exercise of an annoying series of votes, all of which the gentleman will lose, does he then intend to threaten to quit if he does not get his way? |  |
| **Sheldon**: He does.  |  |
| **Leonard**: I move we are the Army Ants, all those in favor? | Leonard raises his hand, the others do the same. |

Table 5‑XXIII Transcript Excerpt Episode13 Scene02

The compromise they try to reach cannot be to have no one have his way like in the examples above. The proposed compromise would thus be voting and reach a democratic decision. Sheldon blocks this process and forces the others to do it his way and they give in, unwilling to create a lengthy discussion. It is only Leonard, Howard, and Raj who compromise their own wishes in this scene. Sheldon, as the most socially awkward and egoistic person of the four, is unable to compromise. This inability is therefore connected to social awkwardness and therefore is outside of social norms and conventions. Leonard is the most social one and aware of these norms and conventions. This awareness thus includes the ability to compromise.

While Sheldon does not always respond to compromises, he responds to blackmail. Penny blackmails him so that he agrees to a surprise birthday party for Leonard. This was Penny’s last try after asking him because he was unable to compromise his own comfort for the sake of doing something nice for a friend. Blackmailing a friend is thus shown as the least favorable option of convincing someone to do something, but can be an option if finding or agreeing to a compromise does not work. Sheldon gives in to the blackmail quickly after understanding that Penny is blackmailing him.

Forcing someone to do something is therefore presented as the last resort but a justifiable way when it is for a good purpose. This finding complies with the findings about egoism and altruism, Sheldon is egoistic while Penny is doing something nice for someone else without having any personal gain (and something the majority of the group wants to do). Blackmail as such is therefore not presented in a positive light but as an acceptable form of achieving the well-being of the group.

A last example where the topic of compromise is addressed is when the guys buy a time machine together and set the rules about who gets to use it when and how (table 5‑XXIV):

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| **Episode 14: The Nerdvana Annihilation** |
| **Scene 04** |
| **Sheldon:** Alright, I think we’re going to need some ground rules, in addition to the expected no shoes in the time machine and no eating in the time machine, I propose that we add pants must be worn at all times in the time machine.  |  |
| **Leonard:** Seconded.  |  |
| **Howard:** I was going to put down a towel.  |  |
| **Raj:** I still want it on my balcony. I say we move it on a bi-monthly basis.  |  |
| **Leonard:** That sounds fair. |  |
| **Sheldon:** Hold on. Bi-monthly is an ambiguous term, do you mean move it every other month, or twice a month?  |  |
| **Raj:** Twice a month. |  |
| **Sheldon:** Then no.  |  |
| **Raj**: Okay, every other month. |  |
| **Sheldon:** No.  |  |
| **Leonard:** Sheldon, you can’t be selfish, we all paid for it, so it belongs to all of us.  | He sits and turns it on. The three lights in the front on illuminate. All let out an “oh”. |

Table 5‑XXV Transcript Excerpt Episode14 Scene04

Finding a compromise in order to set some rules is necessary for them to all enjoy the time machine and have fun with it. This works because every one of them is having fun when they start playing with it which shows again that compromising and respecting other friends’ wishes is a good thing and a part of friendship. Not having it exactly one’s way is thus the necessary price friends sometimes have to pay in order to make a friendship work. This theme thus shows again that friendships include both benefits and sacrifices. These sacrifices however are small in comparison to the benefits one can receive.

#### Apologies

Apologies are a way of ending discussions and arguments if they are accepted. After the incident with Sheldon and Leonard cleaning Penny’s apartment at night without her knowing, both apologize to her separately. Sheldon only apologizes because Leonard forced him to, he is not aware of what he did wrong and only thinks it is because Leonard wants a chance with Penny so he tells her that Leonard is a “thorough lover”: Penny does not forgive him but he is fine with that. Leonard on the other hand, writes a lengthy and complicated letter to her, that he reads out loud when she confronts him (out of insecurity). She interrupts him and forgives him because she already knows that he is truly sorry. So Leonard’s sincere apology is accepted while Sheldon’s apology that he just issued out of obligation is disregarded and Penny even considers it offensive because she slams the door shut in front of him.

The value of an apology can also be seen when Penny says she is sorry about Leonard having missed his birthday party. He accepts it and says that the thought is what mattered, so once again it is not about the content of the apology but about the sincerity of it. Sheldon does not seem to understand this when he accepts a sarcastic apology from Leonard who did not mean to apologize. Sheldon only looks at the content and is not able to decode the remark for what it is: sarcasm. The focus on the content and the well meaning of an apology contrasts with what has been said in the section about lying to a friend. If lying to a friend was a good or bad thing was evaluated by the outcome of the lie and it was less about the intensions (although the intensions also matter). For apologies it is the other way around because the intension defines the outcome (whether an apology is accepted or not).

Apologizing also means taking responsibility for one’s action, for example when Leonard apologizes for the “pants-ing”[[7]](#footnote-7) in the first episode because he was the one who got Sheldon into this situation. This taking of responsibility also shows that Leonard is truly sorry and he promises Sheldon to call his mother about the pants (which he has demanded). Apologizing is thus also connected to making up for the wrong someone has done.

All these things (being sincere, taking responsibility and offering compensation) can then be an obligation for the other friend to accept the apology when the issue is resolved and not worth fighting about anymore. Penny realizes this when she decides to forgive Leonard before he even fully apologized to her. The apology is thus a symbolic act offered to a friend.

To conclude this section about friendships, it needs to be noted that there is a difference between close friends and weaker relationships and that they adhere to different rules. There are qualities that are presented as important aspects of friendships such as tolerance, empathy, altruism, sincerity, a shared sense of humor, caring for another friend (emotionally and physically), and being able to compromise. There are also characteristic traits that are presented in a negative light because they can harm a friendship, for example arrogance, stubbornness, and egoism. There are also qualities or actions that are not entirely positive or negative such as honesty or forcing a friend to do something.

Friendships thus do not function according to strict rules but situations need to be interpreted and rules are subject to change. The rules can also be broken which leads to a crisis within friendships. But crises of friendships can be overcome, for example through apologies, compromises and forgiveness.

Lastly, it needs to be emphasized that friendships include both benefits and sacrifices and responsibilities. This must not be confused with not staying true to oneself. In a fair and functioning friendship, the benefits and positive aspect of a friendship therefore outweigh the negative ones.

## Romantic Relationships

In opposition to friendships, romantic relationships are no stable factor on *The Big Bang Theory*; they can change quickly or evolve slowly. There are long story arcs about relationships like the relationship between Leonard and Penny which develops throughout the first season (and is a continuous story arc throughout the series until the present, the end of season 5). There are short story arcs that are only present in one episode, for example when Leonard, Howard and Raj compete for Missy or when Penny’s friend Christy is in town. And there are story arcs that range between the long and the short ones. The best example for this last type is Leslie Winkle who reoccurs in several episodes in the first season (and also has a reoccurring role in the second season). Romantic relationships are dealt with in different situations with different characters. This difference in itself emphasizes the importance of friendships which is assigned to it by being portrayed as a stable personal social relationship. Romantic relationships are more unstable and short-lived personal relationships.

The five themes explored in this section are the relevance of romantic relationships, flirting, being on a date, chances with a woman, and having sex. There were fewer sub-categories found than for the themes of friendships. The sub-category of the relevance of romantic relationship is putting a love interest first. Flirting is discussed with the sub-categories talking to women, being a wing-man, and asking a woman out. The last of the five themes for which sub-categories are discussed is chances with a woman with the topics favors and appealing to a woman.

### The Relevance of Romantic Relationships

The first season starts with all of the guys being single and unsuccessful with women. This situation changes during the course of the series but even without anyone having a serious relationship or success with women, the topic is frequently discussed. There is a major difference between Sheldon and the rest of the group because while all the others desire to have a female partner, Sheldon is content on his own. When the teenage nerd Dennis Kim leaves a party of the university with a girl, Leonard, Howard, and Raj envy him but Sheldon announces in front of the audience:

“While Mr. Kim, by virtue of his youth and naivety, has fallen prey to the inexplicable need for human contact, let me step in and assure you that my research will go on uninterrupted, and that social relationships will continue to baffle and repulse me.”

The audience reacts towards this quote with silence and confusion. What he says is not “normal” underlying once again his social awkwardness. It is implied that personal social relationships should be valued (which he does not do). When the guys later see Dennis in the park as a cliché teenager (drinking with friends and his girlfriend) he is not a nerd anymore. After first thinking that they destroyed his life, they realize that he is happy and has achieved a goal that is still a long-term goal for Leonard, Howard, and Raj: a relationship with a female. They thus admit that his life is not ruined even though he is not a nerd anymore (which links back to the nerd cliché of nerdiness and romantic success not working together). Romantic relationships are valued more than professional success.

The relevance of romantic relationships can be discussed on several levels. When Sheldon thinks it is his responsibility to find a partner for Missy, all he sees is the aspect of biology (the genetic aspect) and not her feelings. When Sheldon, Howard, and Raj discuss sex scenes of made-up species of some science fiction movies, Howard and Raj are interested in the sex scenes while Sheldon focuses on other aspects of the characters. In both examples his focus is different than those of the others. This reveals that feelings and interpersonal contact are more important in relationships than genetic compatibility or biological features. Again, Sheldon is the exception and different from his friends because he is the only one not assigning a big relevance to romantic relationships. This is presented as an abnormal behavior, even for a nerd and intelligent scientist like he is. This justifies the goal of the others who all want to have a romantic relationship and see it as a valuable thing in life.

#### Putting a Love Interest First

Closely connected to the relevance of romantic relationships in general, is their relevance and the relevance of a partner or love interest in comparison to other relationships or people. Both Leonard and Howard abandon the plans with their friends to talk to their love interest or pursue a woman. Sheldon is annoyed by any interruptions of their routine, including these moments. In one scene Leonard explains to Sheldon that he cannot make Howard choose between a video game and sex while Sheldon thinks the question is reasonable. These examples show that, besides Sheldon, the guys are willing to put a love interest first and change their plans for her.

Friends can thus be expected to understand and respect the priorities of a friend. This links back to what has been concluded in the section about friendship. A friend does not need to abandon his personal needs and wishes all the time. This form of egoism that does not hurt anyone and is not a direct opposite of altruism can be tolerated to some extent by friends.

As it was discussed before, putting a love interest first even leads to an argument between them when they fight over Missy. Leonard is willing to make the biggest sacrifice when he is about to sell all his nerdy stuff in order to appeal to Penny. None of the sacrifices made to put a love interest first leads the person to the desired success. A relationship never ensues while the friendship remains and is still intact, for example when Howard returns for their Halo night. When Leonard sees Penny with her boyfriend, he realizes that selling his things does not influence his chances with Penny and he decides to keep them. Thus, giving up one’s own interest and abandoning one’s plans with friends is displayed as not leading to success while possibly offending one’s friends. Leonard’s remark about understanding Howard’s choice shows, that always putting friends first is not an option either. When it comes to dividing the attention between friends and a love interest, the best way indicated is finding a compromise between the two. When a situation changes and a love interest enters someone’s life, new rules for a new situation need to be found.

### Flirting

During the course of the first season, all the main characters are seen at their attempts of flirting with the opposite sex. Penny is the only one who is good at it. She flirts with Leonard by touching his arm when she leaves. He is confused about this and struggles to interpret it but he is thinking about her and his further actions are influenced by Penny’s flirt.

Leonard’s lack of interpretation stands in contrast to Sheldon’s mother Mary and Dr. Gablehauser flirting. They understand each other’s hints immediately and it takes them little time to understand what the other person’s intention is. Sheldon admits that he was baffled by this situation and did not understand what was going on. This shows that flirting depends on social codes and the ability to interpret them (for example understanding sexual hints). Sheldon’s lack of these skills which are necessary for flirting shows when he compliments Lalita and she asks him to join him for dinner. He is not aware that this was a flirt. Ironically his flirt was successful and he has dinner with Lalita. A possible lesson that can be derived from that is that honesty is a good flirt strategy because Sheldon’s compliments to her were honest which made his flirt work even without him intending it.

Another situation where a flirt works is when Leslie seduces Leonard. Again, Leonard is confused about how to handle the situation which reveals his insecurity. Leslie is the one flirting but being a female nerd, she does not do it in a bold and obvious way (table 5‑XXVI):

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| **Episode 5: The Hamburger Postulate** |
| **Scene 03** |
| **Leslie:** Just so we’re clear, you understand that me hanging back to practice with you is a pretext for letting you know that I’m sexually available. | They begin playing again, several seconds pass as they do. |
| **Leonard:** (stunned) Really?  | Leonard fumbles his bow and knocks over his sheet music stand.  |
| **Leslie:** Yeah, I’m good to go.  | He attempts to recover it. |
| **Leonard:** I thought you weren’t interested in me. |  |
| **Leslie:** That was before I saw you handling that beautiful piece of wood between your legs. |  |
| **Leonard:** You mean my cello? |  |
| **Leslie:** No, I mean the obvious crude double entendre. I’m seducing you. |  |
| **Leonard:** No kidding?! |  |

Table 5‑XXVII Transcript Excerpt Episode05 Scene03

The flirting between the two is in contrast to Penny’s subtle way of flirting and also lacks any romance but Leslie discusses her goal in a business-like way. The confusion that causes for Leonard and the laugh-track throughout this scene shows that this is an odd way of flirting and that flirting should not be done in this business-like and neutral way. Despite this, Leslie is honest about what she wants and succeeds in getting it, showing once again that honesty is part of successful flirting.

The clearest example of how not to flirt is Howard. He sees himself as a smooth lady’s man and pick-up artist. The fact that he never succeeds to pick up a girl with his pick-up lines and tactics shows that his perception of himself is not accurate. He uses cheesy pick-up lines, is pushy, exaggerates (for example about his language skills or compliments), and does things that are not popular with the women he tries to flirt with (for example talking about video games or doing a magic trick). His behavior is insincere and Penny describes it as disgusting and creepy. Therefore all the examples above are lessons about how not to flirt. The flirting skills of Raj lead to the same conclusion. He can only talk to women (and thus flirt with them) when he is drunk. He then acts pushy and obnoxious, overstepping boundaries of politeness and privacy (when he talks to Lalita about their future on a first date).

Both Howard and Raj fail because of their insincerity and acting out a role (the one of the smooth lady’s man) that does not fit them. Leonard fails because of his insecurity and shyness. Sheldon fails because of his disinterest in romantic relationships. Penny and Leslie succeed in their flirting attempts because of their honesty and being true to whom they are. Flirting is thus not a skill that one has to learn, but is successful when someone is honest (this can be seen because Sheldon succeeds without intending it or having had previous flirting situations). A last lesson that can be derived about flirting is that the women are better at it than the men (which is due to the social awkwardness of the male nerds) indicating that flirting is not necessarily a male quality.

#### Talking to Women

This sub-category is similar to the previous one but it is used to distinguish situations in which a character is clearly flirting with another person with an intended goal in opposition to the nerds talking to women without flirting with them specifically. This topic is worth exploring in this part about romantic relationships, because the lack of social skills when it comes to talking to women is connected to the (stereotypical) romantic failure of the nerd.

Raj has the biggest difficulty when it comes to talking to women because he cannot talk to them unless he is drunk. This extreme social anxiety stops him from agreeing to a date with Lalita which shows that a basic set of social skills is needed to have romantic relationships (which he desires). Penny describes Raj’s muteness as “weird”. Leonard also has troubles talking to women and steals Penny’s mail in order to have a reason to talk to her when he gives it back. This harmless attempt to create communicative situations shows his shyness but it works and he gets to talk to Penny. Leonard thus knows how to deal with his weakness (being shy and insecure) and how to overcome it.

Sheldon does not have troubles talking to Penny because he has no romantic interest in her. He oversteps her boundary however when she takes him shopping:

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| **Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect** |
| **Scene 05** |
| Sheldon: No, no. Let me do the math for you. This car weighs, let’s say four thousand pounds. Now add say one-forty for me, one-twenty for you. | Penny drives with Sheldon to the store. Sheldon criticizes her driving skills. |
| Penny: (perturbed) One-twenty? |  |
| Sheldon: Oh, I’m sorry. Did I insult you? Is your body mass somehow tied into yourself worth?  |  |
| Penny: Well, yeah. | Penny looks perplexed. |

Table 5‑XXVIII Transcript Excerpt Episode04 Scene05

This scene (table 5‑XXIX) shows that when it comes to interpersonal communication (also with men talking to women), there are certain rules and boundaries that can be overstepped. Talking to a woman about her weight is one of them. However, by simplifying this rule, the absurdity becomes obvious. This shows that people adhere to rules even if they do not make sense. While the rule is not offset, it is revealed in the series as unhelpful and even wrong. That Sheldon is still unaware of the boundaries with a woman is shown later when he talks to Penny about her usage of tampons. This is thus shown to be a taboo topic, just like her weight, but in contrast to the previous conversation, this rule is not criticized.

Talking to women, who can be a potential love interest, requires a set of social skills and empathy when it comes to sensitive topics. Again, this is the case where the situations in the series display examples of unsuccessful communication, for example when Leonard compliments Penny and she does not realize that it was him making that compliment, not Raj. When Leonard accidentally gets Penny back together with her ex-boyfriend instead of comforting her it is also reflective of his lack of social skills and lack of understanding of Penny’s feelings.

The lesson implied here concerns the characteristic features of the guys which cause these uncomfortable and unsuccessful situations. Qualities such as insecurity, shyness, as well as boldness and rudeness are criticized and shown to be unhelpful. A lesson about how to do it instead is not explicitly voiced which indicates that there should be a basic set of social skills that makes talking to women possible even if it requires more effort. This links back to what has been said about small talk. Small talk among close friends is easier for the people involved whereas small talk with looser relationships requires more effort and tolerance.

#### Being a Wing-Man

When it comes to the topic of flirting or similar situations, it must also be taken into consideration if one does it alone or not. When a friend supports another in these attempts, he is called a “wing-man”. This topic connected to romantic relationships is another example for when the series displays examples of how not to do it.

Leonard forces Sheldon to be his wing-man for Penny’s Halloween party. They first fail when talking to one of her guests because the girl walks away being confused by Sheldon. After that, Leonard confronts Penny’s ex-boyfriend Kurt. Sheldon tries to stop him and it turns out that he was right because Leonard is ridiculed by Kurt. Sheldon is a bad wing-man in the situation when Leonard is facing Kurt because he does not stand by his side. He gave good advice however because he told Leonard not to provoke him.

In other situations Sheldon points out Leonard’s flaws and weaknesses and embarrasses him in front of Penny. Raj and Howard mock each other in front of a love interest instead of being supportive and helping each other. Being a wing-man includes giving advice to a friend but mostly concerns situations in the presence of a love interest. They all fail to be each other’s wing-man. This implies what being a wing-man should be about, namely being supportive of a friend. This support includes not pointing out someone’s weaknesses but his strengths and not embarrassing a friend but hiding embarrassing information thus making the friend seem more attractive and desirable to a woman.

#### Asking a Woman Out

The last sub-category of flirting is concerned with scenes where one of the nerds proposes a date to a female. When Leonard asks Penny out on a date, she confuses it for a group dinner and Leonard is too nervous to clarify the situation. After her success at Halo night, Leonard asks her if she wants to go on tournaments but she declines saying she would rather have a life. When he asks her out for dinner in the last episode, he is still nervous and rambles on about why he asked. Penny interrupts him and agrees. She considers him more of a potential partner than before and Leonard explicitly stated that it was a date he proposed and not just a dinner as friends. What leads to success is being specific and proposing a realistic activity that the woman will like.

Similar to accepting apologies, accepting a proposal for a date not only depends on what is being said, but who is asking. Leonard is stammering when he asks Penny out, but she still agrees. Missy is not interested in dating either Leonard or Howard when they ask her but admits to Penny that she would have said yes to Raj (but he never asked because he lost his med-induced ability to speak to her). Asking someone out also does not necessarily involve a certain tactic which can be seen when Leonard, Howard, and Raj debate how to ask a girl to date Dennis Kim. They look for an easy target while Dennis managed to get an attractive girl on his own in a short time.

Asking a woman out is shown as connected to true feelings, much like flirting or apologizing. This is why Leonard’s businesslike decision to ask Leslie out does not succeed (table 5‑XXX):

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| **Episode 3: The Fuzzy Boots Corollary** |
| **Scene 03** |
| **Leonard:** Anyway, I was thinking more of a bio-social exploration with a neuro-chemical overlay. | Leslie fires the laser as Leonard times the noodle heating on his watch. |
| **Leslie:** Wait, are you asking me out? |  |
| **Leonard:** I was going to characterize it as the modification of our colleague-slash-friendship paradigm, with the addition of a date-like component but, we don’t need to quibble over terminology. |  |
| **Leslie:** What sort of experiment would you propose? |  |
| **Leonard:** (nodding) There is a generally accepted pattern in this area. […] |  |
| **Leslie:** Interesting. And would you agree that the primary way we would evaluate either the success or failure of the date would be based on the bio-chemical reaction during the goodnight kiss? |  |
| **Leonard:** Heart rate, pheromones, etcetera. Yes. |  |
| **Leslie:** Well, why don’t we just stipulate that the date goes well and move to the key variable? | They decide to kiss now. |

Table 5‑XXXI Transcript Excerpt Episode03 Scene03

Instead of being personal and proposing something Leslie might like, Leonard proposes an experiment. When they kiss, Leslie tells Leonard that she was “not aroused”. They both only see it as a matter of biology and not feelings or a romantic mood, Leslie is bold about what they should do. The situation is a failure for both of them indicating that asking someone out should not be a decision based on rational thoughts but on feelings. Asking a woman out is thus presented as depending on the sincerity of someone’s feelings instead of depending on a rational decision or certain tactic.

### Being on a Date

In the previous example, Leslie and Leonard were skipping the date but were unsuccessful to connect with each other emotionally. This shows that going on a date has a purpose, namely drawing two people closer to each other and creating chemistry. This section therefore explores this part of romantic relationships.

On their first date, Leonard and Penny struggle with the small talk. Penny talks about break-up sex and considers Leonard only as a friend, which makes him uncomfortable. This contrasts with the small talk among friends which is easy and effortless for the participants. A date, in contrast to spending time with friends, is more work and requires more energy. A reason why this is so, is that being on a date is something that happens between two people who do not know each other well yet. The rules and norms on an individual level (what someone likes and dislikes) need to be figured out first. Raj neglects to do this on his date with Lalita. He is rude and disrespectful. Lalita is uncomfortable and annoyed and leaves.

In the case of Leonard and Penny’s first date, they agree that they had a “nice time” despite the abrupt ending due to Leonard injuring his head. Leonard denies that this was a date because he is aware that it lacked qualities a date should have. There was no romantic tension or flirting between them and Penny pities Leonard because of his injury. In front of his friends Leonard admits that the date was “awesome”. For him, spending time with Penny was what made him happy. So it is not only about what exactly happened on a date, it is also important to spend time with a person one likes.

Before their second date, they evaluate their chemistry. They kiss and decide to start the date. This shows again that dating is about chemistry and mutual attraction, and not something one can neutrally judge based on biology or genetics. Leonard and Leslie tried to judge their chemistry after kissing as well but approached it as neutral scientists in an experiment. Leonard is pushier and less cautious with Penny for the first time. He grabs her and kisses her. This bolder, yet not rude, behavior is more successful than him being cautious around Penny and she feels attracted to him.

### Chances with a Woman

This topic deals with situations where the romantic chances of someone are dealt with. In order to distinguish it from the previously discussed topic when friends evaluate each other’s chances with a woman, the focus of this category is on situations where no direct evaluation is given but still implied.

After realizing that he does not have a chance with Penny, Leonard decides to go after someone “more realistic” and his “own speed”. The guys reach a consensus that Leslie Winkle is “sexually available” while Penny is “out of reach” for Leonard. When Howard proposes an activity where they can easily meet women, they end up in a dancing class with only much older women. These examples show that there is a hierarchy to dating which determines the chances someone has with another person. So when Leonard talks about going after someone his own speed, he indicates that Penny is further up the hierarchy than he is.

One has thus better chances with a partner if the other person is similar in terms of looks, interests, intelligence etc. The situation of the guys being uncomfortable during the dancing class underlines this because in this scene the nerds are further up the hierarchy (of attractiveness) than the old women. Being available is presented as another prerequisite if someone wants to have a chance with that person. This is why Leonard is depressed every time he sees Penny with another guy.

Both Mary and Penny tell Leonard that he “makes a cute couple” with someone. Mary is referring to him and Penny (indicating they are not such an unrealistic couple after all), Penny is referring to him and Leslie. This indicates again, that the compatibility of a couple can be judged by how they look and appear together. This emphasizes the existence of a hierarchy within people’s heads about which people are a good/possible couple.

The lesson about this hierarchy of attractiveness is modified when Leonard, Howard, and Raj look for a girl that Dennis Kim could have a chance with. They are surprised when he found a girl by himself, an attractive girl that they would have thought to be out of his league. Again, the look of someone is the key component in whether a guy has a chance with a woman or not. But the scene also shows, that the hierarchy is not a fixed rule and a guy can have a chance with a girl even if she appears to be out of his reach on a first glance.

In this category there are mixed messages presented on the series. On the one hand, the stereotype about the sexually undesirable nerd is reinforced by the guys being unsuccessful and Sheldon being portrayed as completely asexual (he has no interest in women at all). On the other hand Denis Kim breaks with this rule and Leonard keeps on trying as well. Within the narrative of the series, he and Penny are set up as the central couple of the series and they go out on a date in the first season’s finale.

There are still rules about (physical) attractiveness within society that are reaffirmed on the series. At the same time these rules can be broken but the breaking of the rule still does not render it invalid.

A last thing that can be observed about the hierarchy and chances with a woman is that the chances can be increased. Leonard tries to do this by comforting Penny in a situation of crisis or unconditionally doing favors for her.

#### Favors

Granting a favor is displayed as something positive, as being social and polite. In front of Sheldon, Leonard claims that he is “just being nice” to Penny while quietly admitting that he is still interested in her (and hopes to increase his chances by doing a favor for her). He agrees to do her a favor without even knowing what it is. He ends up driving to her ex-boyfriend to demand her TV back from him. Kurt is physically superior to Leonard and Leonard does not succeed. This does not increase his chances with Penny however.

Later in the series, he still does favors for her, for example fixing her laptop. In this scene he is less needy of her attention and does the favor for her out of habit and mocks her. This indicates that when it comes to increasing chances with someone by doing favors for them, the favor itself is less effective than people getting to know each other better. In this last example, the tone between Leonard and Penny is easy-going as between friends. This contrasts with the effort they have to make on their first date. Again, it is about sincere feelings instead of tactics or tricks to get someone’s affection. Favors are still presented as something nice to do but they cannot make someone develop romantic feelings for someone.

#### Appealing to a Woman

As it was already hinted at, there are certain qualities that are associated with appealing to women, for example when Leonard lies to Penny about the furniture they carried upstairs not being heavy (despite him and Sheldon struggling with it). He wants to show Penny that he is physically strong which indicates that this is expected from an attractive and masculine male. He covers up his physical weakness, which also belongs to the stereotypical nerd. Sheldon, who does not want to appeal to Penny, willingly admits his weakness and says that the furniture was heavy. The importance of physical strength can also be seen when Leonard dreams about rescuing Penny as a superman sliding down the elevator shaft. In his dreams, he is a strong man, rescuing the “damsel in distress”.

Other things that come with the image of the nerd are also shown to be weaknesses and not appealing to girls, for example when Leonard denies that the superman underpants are his and instead talks about him doing spear fishing. This is connected to the image of the man being the hunter and providing for a family (and not having childish interests). When Leonard, Howard, and Raj pick out a girl for Dennis Kim, they remember their past experiences with girls, for example being mocked or exploited by them (for example by writing essays for them). Dennis Kim, as a nerd, still picking up a girl, shows that smartness is not unattractive as such.

That smartness is also considered to be appealing to women is shown when Leonard admits that he played Sheldon’s idea down for their joint paper in order to impress Penny. When seeing Kurt on Penny’s Halloween party, Leonard decides to confront him:

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| **Episode 6: The Middle Earth Paradigm** |
| **Scene 04** |
| **Leonard:** Yes, but our society has undergone a paradigm shift. In the information age, Sheldon, you and I are the alpha males. We shouldn’t have to back down. | Leonard and Sheldon watch Penny and Kurt from a distance. |
| **Sheldon:** True. Why don’t you text him that and see if he backs down?  |  |
| **Leonard:** No. (summoning courage) I’m going to assert my dominance face to face.  |  |

Table 5‑XXXII Transcript Excerpt Episode06 Scene04

The issue Leonard addresses in this scene (table 5‑XXXIII) is one that was discussed earlier in this chapter when talking about the nerd and how the image of him has positively changed due to computer being more important in society. With society becoming more depended on technology, nerds have a higher position within it as the experts in knowing how to handle technology. This scene deals with the clash of the two essential qualities of males: Physical versus mental strength. While Kurt wins during the confrontation with Leonard (picking him up off the floor and humiliating him), Leonard is the one who earned Penny’s affection and gets a kiss from her. While the lack of physical strength is still not displayed as appealing to women, smartness is displayed as having the potential to successfully compensate that.

### Having Sex

As other parts of human beings living together, this area is influenced by signs and the ability to read them. This shows for example when Sheldon is confused about the tie on Leonard’s door knob. The meaning of it is completely arbitrary and shows that humans have developed a system of signs in order to communicate about a topic without having to talk about it (in this case this silent communication might also be due to the fact that sex is often a taboo topic). Sheldon is unable to decode the meaning of the sign and ends up calling Leonard to tell him that he understood the sign and thus breaking the silence of the communication that the tie was supposed to grant.

The rule that information about sex is something that is not shared with others other than the people involved, can be also seen when Howard transgresses this boundary by leaving a message on his voicemail to brag about him and Christy. He does not adhere to the rules about privacy and decency and violates her trust. Christy, on the other hand, is aware of that rule and lets Howard know this (table 5‑XXXIV):

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| **Episode 7: The Dumpling Paradox** |
| **Scene 05** |
| **Cell Phone Speaker:** (Howard) Hi, this is Howard Wolowitz. | Sheldon calls Howard. |
| **Cell Phone Speaker:** (Christy) And this is Christy Van Derbell.  |  |
| **Cell Phone Speaker:** (Howard) We can’t get to the phone right now because we’re having sex.  |  |
| **Cell Phone Speaker:** (Christy) You’re not going to put that on your message are you?  |  |
| **Cell Phone Speaker:** (Howard) No, I’m just kidding, I’ll re-record it. | The answering machine "leave message" sound plays. |

Table 5‑XXXV Transcript Excerpt Episode07 Scene05

In general, sex is highly valued among the characters. Raj and Howard call Leonard “Doctor Stud” as a form of congratulating him on his sexual success with Leslie. After a first confusion, Leonard proudly admits to what happened with Leslie. In another episode, Howard is willing to eat something which will cause a severe allergic reaction just so Penny will point out her friends to him who are “easy”. This shows the neediness of Howard as well as the importance that sex has.

While Leonard, Howard, and Raj usually struggle to find a partner, as it was discussed in the previous topics, Raj ironically manages to find a woman for one night, without talking to her. They are shown in her bed and she compliments Raj for being a good listener. Raj did not try to find a woman, but she started talking to him on Penny’s Halloween party (being drunk). After the woman compliments Raj, he smiles contently. This shows again, that being true to oneself and not acting out a role, can lead to success with women, even if a person does not seem to be desirable on a first glance.

The romantic relationships discussed here are no stable relationships and mostly deal with situations of flirting, getting to know someone or being interested in someone. Stable romantic relationships are assigned a big value and are portrayed as something desirable and an essential part of life. Flirting, talking to women and asking someone out are steps towards a relationship. Their success is mostly based on sincerity, honesty, and openness. Shyness, insecurity, boldness, and rudeness on the other hand are not desirable characteristic traits. Friends can help someone by being their wing-man but being a wing-man also requires certain knowledge about the rules and norms of romantic relationships and communication with love interests.

When the relationship constellation changes for someone due to the presence of a new love interest, new rules have to be found and compromises have to be made about how to divide one’s time and attention. A new rule can also be defying an existing one about the compatibility of two people (for example concerning their physical appearance).

# Conclusion

## The Lessons about Personal Social Relationships

This thesis examined the question: Which lessons about personal social relationships are taught in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. With the results discussed in the previous chapter about friendships and romantic relationships, four lessons where phrased. These lessons combine the several topics as well as the findings for friendships and romantic relationships.

 The first lesson about personal social relationships is that they are based both on sameness and difference. Common interests in activities and topics to talk about are an important base of a friendships and romantic relationships. Along with common interest, other similarities can form the base of relationships (for example belonging to the same social group (like nerds), having similar values or being equally good-looking). The weaker the connection to someone is (for example looser friendships or when people start dating), the more effort and tolerance the communication requires. This last aspect is closely connected to the following second lesson.

The second lesson about personal social relationships is that they have to be resilient. This was already hinted at, because people need tolerance in order to deal with their differences. Tolerance is an essential aspect when it comes to keeping people together. Tolerating weaknesses and habits of others assures the ongoing of a relationship and helps preventing conflict. Despite this, conflicts among friends and lovers still happen but overcoming those conflicts is possible and strong relationships have to endure moments of crisis. Another aspect where relationships have to be resilient is when it comes to humor on the cost of someone, for example when someone is teased. This is a part of closer relationships and has to be tolerated by the people within a relationship. There is a limit however to things people within a personal social relationship have to bear, for example when it comes to insulting or crossing boundaries of politeness or privacy.

The third lesson about personal social relationship is that they are based on honesty and sincerity. Lying to a friend or loved one does not have a positive outcome, whereas admitting mistakes and apologizing honestly is better for a relationship. Being honest and sincere includes being true to oneself and not acting out a role to appeal to someone. Honesty is limited however by not insulting someone. Encouragement and support for someone are also more important qualities than honesty as such. This does not mean lying however, but for example withholding one’s opinion for the good of a friend or loved one.

The fourth lesson about social relationships is that everyone benefits from it. An example for this is teamwork. In order to have these benefits of a relationship with another person, one must not be too egoistic, be able to compromise, be willing to apologize and accept apologies. Receiving help and encouragement by a friend or lover as well as receiving advice are benefits of a close personal social relationship. For everyone being able to benefit from one’s social environment, one needs to be able to divide one’s attention between different personal social relationships like friendships and romantic relationships.

The lessons about rules and norms of personal social relationships, about what acceptable and expectable behavior is, and what possible consequences are, are never or rarely voiced explicitly. These lessons are implied and can be decoded from the material. *The Big Bang Theory* as a popular and widely consumed product spreads these lessons on a global level. Only when conflict about certain norms and conventions ensues, do the characters explicitly discuss them. Personal social relationships can therefore be regarded as a silent contract between the people within these relationships. By becoming friends or partners, people expect things from each other like helping, offering advice, being supportive, and having a common interest, and offer things in return like favors, advice, and affection. By being portrayed in the media, these lessons about personal social relationships are spread within the society and are thus established or validated.

## Reflection on the Theory

The key assumption of this thesis is that television, and popular fiction as a specific form of it, exists within a cultural context. It both reflects society and has an active part in shaping it as well (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). In order to grasp this assumption and make it feasible for empirical research, several concepts were used that proved to be useful for this research.

The semiotics approach already has a tradition in media research in general and television research specifically (e.g. Fiske, 1987). During the analysis, the semiotics approach proved to be useful for this project as well, because many of the norms and rules discussed or implied in the first season of *The Big Bang Theory*, can be understood within the context of semiotics, for example when common sayings have to be decoded in order to understand their true and not literal meaning or when the characters use other codes (like a tie on a doorknob) to communicate with each other. In the fifth chapter, apologizing to a friend was described as a symbolic act. This shows that it is not only about the content of something but about the interpretation of it. An apology in this context is the sign that is interpreted.

A judgmental distinction between high culture and popular culture proved to be problematic because the analysis showed that *The Big Bang Theory* offers insights into human relationships and society despite falling into the category of popular culture. The easy accessibility of the material (e.g. through laugh tracks and everyday language) makes a popular text not less but more relevant for a scholarly analysis because the codes of television are easy to interpret for the audience. The importance that popular culture is assigned here is thus in line with authors such as Jenkins, McPherson, Shattuc (2002).

The popularity of *The Big Bang Theory* is a global one which is why the aspect of globalization is important. The discussion of globalization of television often focuses on differences of product such as format adaptation. This is an important aspect but what scholars like Havens (2002) and Crane (2002) sometimes neglect is the focus on global similarities, for example widely accepted rules about relationships. Those similarities are of course shaped by processes of globalization but values and norms within society can date further back than what is usually described as the modern process of globalization (e.g. Castells, 2008). Castells (2008) focuses mostly on recent developments of globalization and less on global similarities and values that already existed (for example values spread within societies through religion).

Gerbner (1999) distinguishes between different ways in which stories teach about how things work, what things are, and how to act. The previous chapter illustrated several situations within the series that showed these different kinds. Gerbner’s distinction is not depletive and could be more detailed. This can be seen in the topics lying and apologizing discussed in the previous chapter. Stories about lying taught lessons by showing the outcome of a character’s action, stories about apologizing focused on a characters motivation beforehand. In Gerbner’s distinction both would fit the third category even though how the story teaches differs between the two. One possibility of refining these categories would be to incorporate some of Keppler’s (1995) work about how fictional characters can be used to identify with and also distinguish one’s own character from fictional ones. Elaborating more on how these aspects could be combined would exceed the scope of this thesis.

In order to explore this in more detail, the concepts of moral imagination and mediation could be taken into consideration in more detail than they were in this thesis. Through mediation and moral imagination, people are confronted with things that they are not confronted with in real life. This can be a positive thing for a topic like personal social relationships because those relationships are private. One cannot observe other people’s relationships in private situations as an outsider. In one’s own relationships, one cannot take the role of a neutral observer. Television offers this possibility by portraying situations that could happen in reality. The viewer gets to see other people’s relationships and observe other people in private and personal moments. This is the potential that fictional television has – it represents and relates to reality.

Presenting something and exposing people to certain content on television is a different form of teaching than classical institutions like schools according to Hartley (2008). What he says, that television is about teaching self-hood and that it is a non-purposeful form of teaching, thus proves to be true. The distinction by Hartley (2008) must not be seen as a clear line between what he calls traditional teaching (like schools and churches) and television as a teacher. Despite the openness of a media text for interpretation and the creation of meaning, a text does not offer endless opportunities in the sense that the producers create a product in a certain way (with an intended message).

Despite television being a different form of a teacher, there still is the element that something is presented in a certain way (the message is sent) and will be received (by an audience). Even though this process is an open one, like described with the encoding/decoding model, there is still an aspect of traditional teaching in there. A viewer cannot simultaneously communicate with a television program (at least when it is not live) and thus needs to accept that what is shown on television is what he offered, much like what a teacher says is what he or she offers to the students. How a viewer interprets a program and creates meaning is up to them but the form of presentation is not completely different from a traditional kind of teaching. The question of “what is being taught to whom, with what outcomes” (Hartley, 1999, p.46) needs to be amended by how it is being taught.

The causal effect of television teaching something must not be overestimated. This is what the Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) does; it sees a direct connection between what is shown on television and how attitudes are cultivated. The encoding/decoding model is a better approach when looking at the role of a media text within the relationship of a communication process. Its strength is that it considers the text as a separate unit and not simply a neutral object to be observed and learned from. The encoding/decoding model also has its weakness. It neglects the relationship between the reader, the producer and other media texts. In the case of television series, those can be promotions and advertising for a series as well as reviews and other journalistic texts about a series. These texts about another text can influence the economic success of a series and also influence people’s opinions and expectations of a series. These are important aspects that can influence the media text itself.

The lessons phrased at the beginning of this chapter are general lessons and can be applied to multiple situations and scenarios. This links back to the emphasis that was put on the global reach of a sitcom like *The Big Bang Theory* and the importance of contemporary fiction within society. These lessons do not differ much or in essential parts from the lessons that Argyle and Henderson (1984) found 23 years before the first season of *The Big Bang Theory* aired. The norms of friendships they found were sharing stories of success, showing emotional support, volunteer help, trust in the other, be tolerant, stand up for the other person and respect privacy. The themes about sexuality as found by Ward (1995) can also be found in *The Big Bang Theory*, namely that looking for a woman can lead to competition between men, that men choose women according to their appearance, that masculinity is to be sexual with women, and that women are attracted to specific types of men (for example physically attractive or successful ones). This proves that what Hartley (2008) says is true, that values and norms are developed over time, they can be subject to change when new meaning is added or the relevance of certain norms change, but it is not a short and fluctuating trend. Lessons about personal social relationship can change but in their essence they are a stable factor within a society.

Hartley (2008) also assigns a historical function to television. This was observed on *The Big Bang Theory* as well. The perception of scientists and their value for scientists is discussed among the characters. The issue of computers becoming more important and people needing nerds is visible for example when strangers ask Sheldon for help in a computer store. At the same time familiar stereotypes about nerds are dealt with and often confirmed. There are both constant and changing values addressed on the show which fits Hartley’s (2008) remark about television containing information about society at the time it was produced and consumed in.

The last theoretical aspect that needs to be discussed here is the importance of narrative. Fiske (1987) described television as a system governed by rules. Narrative structures can be regarded as a set of rules that govern fictional content. Looking at narrative is a form of looking at the mechanism of a text, understand its structure and distinguish it from other texts. Fiske emphasizes the importance of a familiar cultural background and conventions (such as narrative conventions). This remark is true but not universally valid.

*The Big Bang Theory* with its focus on the nerds goes beyond a familiar background by including scientific references and details that many viewers probably do not know about. These specific remarks are often followed by a laugh track which indicates that the different knowledge of the characters and the audience does not exclude members from the audience but includes them through humor instead. Meaning can thus also be generated by confronting people with new and unfamiliar patterns that might even baffle them. The nerds living in their “Nerdvana” confronts audiences with one particular social group and life style that many audience members might not know a lot about. This links back to the importance of mediation as a form of how television can teach people about things they do not experience in their immediate environment.

## Reflection on the Method

The method that was used in this thesis was qualitative content analysis based on the principles of Cultural Studies and Grounded Theory. During the collection and analysis of the data, the research design proved to be useful in shedding light onto the aspects that were the focus of the research. This is also due to the characteristics of the Grounded Theory. The openness of the design and the constant process of analysis made an in-depth work with the material possible.

During the data collection (the creation of the analysis tables), one line was reserved for the topic of the scene. For the analysis these topics were grouped together in bigger topics and sub-categories. This is a point where the method could be adjusted by reserving more than one line for the topic, allowing collecting more key words concerning the topic. This would make finding a structure of the material easier, especially for the big amount of data. The data set consisted of the first season of *The Big Bang Theory*. This season proved to be useful especially for the category of friendships. As it was stated before, friendships are a constant aspect of the show’s characters dynamics and it was therefore interesting to see how the characters as friends are established (also Penny’s integration into the group). In terms of romantic relationships, fewer examples were found due to the absence of permanent romantic relationships on the first season. The data set used for this specific research question should thus be extended in order to include romantic relationships to the same extent as friendships. This could be a focus of further research.

## Further Research

Section 6.2 shows that there are interesting theoretical concepts that help define and analyze the role television can have as a teacher. Some of these concepts could be combines, supplemented by other facts and revised with according to new findings. One way of doing this would be to develop a theoretical framework about different kinds of teaching that can be observed on television, for example through characters and their qualities or through narratives and their outcomes.

As it was stated, there were no constant and stable romantic relationships displayed on the first season of *The Big Bang Theory*. In later episodes, more characters are introduced that become permanent girlfriends. Further research could thus focus on other seasons of the sitcom in order to analyze relationship patterns that were not present in the first season. The personal social relationships of this research were friendships and romantic relationships. It would also be possible to look at other forms of personal social relationships, for example between family members.

One of the key assumptions made in this paper is that television is a teacher. This is a general assumption and while *The Big Bang Theory* is an interesting case to look at the lessons of personal social relationships, there are many different series on television with new media products emerging and their popularity changing. The research question used in this thesis could thus also be applied to other fictional material or even different genres on television (for example controversial formats like scripted reality).

Another possibility for future research is comparison. This can concern comparison of findings about the lessons of personal social relationship between different case studies at the same or case studies at different times. The latter example would offer the possibility for example to look at different lessons or values displayed in sitcom in different times. Another form of comparing findings would be to combine qualitative content analysis of television texts with other methods, for example interviews or surveys about norms and values of personal social relationships.

Incorporating other methods into the topic interest of this thesis would also allow including aspects that were mentioned in this thesis, but were not the focus of it. Through interviews or surveys, the sides of audience and producers could be included and researched. Both sides play an important role when it comes to creating a product and deriving meaning from it. Combining results from these sides with the findings of this project would create a more wholesome picture of the potentials of television as a teacher.

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# APPENDIX

**List of Episodes in Season 1:**

Episode 1 "Pilot"

Episode 2 "The Big Bran Hypothesis"

Episode 3 "The Fuzzy Boots Corollary"

Episode 4 "The Luminous Fish Effect"

Episode 5 "The Hamburger Postulate"

Episode 6 "The Middle-Earth Paradigm"

Episode 7 "The Dumpling Paradox"

Episode 8 "The Grasshopper Experiment"

Episode 9 "The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization"

Episode 10 "The Loobenfeld Decay"

Episode 11 "The Pancake Batter Anomaly"

Episode 12 "The Jerusalem Duality"

Episode 13 "The Bat Jar Conjecture"

Episode 14 "The Nerdvana Annihilation"

Episode 15 "The Pork Chop Indeterminacy"

Episode 16 "The Peanut Reaction"

Episode 17 "The Tangerine Factor"

1. The word “text“ is used in a broad sense as it is common among media and communication scholars. It describes various phenomena such as books, music, images, film and also sitcoms. The word “reading” in relation to a text is used accordingly (Larsen, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Studying the influence of television is not a focus of this thesis but it is a relevant topic within the field of media and communication studies. While scholars continue to debate how television can influence people, it can be noted at this point for this thesis, that television has the potential to have an influence whichever that may be (ranging from entertainment to changing of attitudes etc.). This topic will be discussed in more detail in section 3.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. California Institute of Technology [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is important to note that subtitles in another language or full synchronization can also be considered as a form of cultural adaptation, for example when it comes to translating proverbs. This is less relevant for this project though since the series is analyzed in its original language: English. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout this paper “the guys” refers to the four friends Leonard, Sheldon, Howard and Raj who are the main group of friends in the sitcom. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A video game the guys regularly play in teams of two. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. They confronted Penny’s ex-boyfriend about her TV and left his building without their pants. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)