

Political Correctness and Comedy: How Gen Z engages with sitcoms that approach themes of race, gender and sexuality, through the case study of *The Office*

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the audience reception of Generation Z in the case of The Office (Daniel et al., 2005-2013), in relation to the idea of political correctness in scripted comedy texts. The Office (US) was a progressive American mockumentary sitcom with diverse, flawed characters and intense social commentary. Even though the TV series aired between 2005-2013, it has gained new popularity through the streaming platform of Netflix. The show's handling of sensitive issues through blunt humor has started conversations on whether it can be considered politically incorrect according to the current view of things. However, Gen Z, who as a generation can be defined as a notorious supporter of political correctness and social justice issues, seems to be thoroughly engaged with this "controversial" sitcom through Netflix and social media.*

*By interviewing 11 Gen Zers who have watched the Office in recent years, the researcher conducted thematic analysis to detect how this audience cohort has interacted with this mockumentary sitcom. From the eleven interviews that were conducted, four main themes were derived: 1) The main characteristics of Gen Zers and their opinion on political correctness, 2) Understanding Gen Z and the role of social media, 3) Gen Z as viewers of the Office, and 4) Gen Z as fans of streaming and comedy. The results of this study show that Gen Z finds political correctness to be an essential part of current comedies, but is more tolerant when it comes to older TV series, such as The Office. The visibility that social issues have gained through social media often lead to Gen Z feeling overwhelmed as recipients. They report a diminished attention span, which relates to them being finicky about the content they watch. They identify as open minded and sensitive, yet also divided or "too radical" at times. While they find political correctness as something to advocate for, some of them also think there is a fine line between cancel culture and censorship. Discussing the Office, they highlight the virality of the series in social media and note how its uncommon mockumentary direction aided towards a thought - provoking approach when it comes to sensitive topics, such as race, gender and sexuality. Elements of the Office that are also emphasized are the balance between realism of themes and exaggerated characters, and the need for critical thinking by the audience in order to understand the social commentary. Finally, the future of comedy looks more intriguing than ever, as Gen Zers highlight how current TV series are becoming more diverse and inclusive, although the mass production conditions of the streaming era make this decision seem unauthentic to them.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Generation Z, Political Correctness, Comedy, The Office, TV series*

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## Preface

This study is a Master's research thesis titled: "Political Correctness and Comedy: How Gen Z engages with sitcoms that approach themes of race, gender and sexuality, through the case study of *The Office*". This thesis has been written to fulfill the requirements to obtain all ECTS for the course CM5000: Master Thesis, and therefore graduate from the Media Master: Media and Creative Industries. The thesis process started in December of 2022 and ended in June 2023.

As a Master student and researcher of this topic, I hope to have contributed to the academic literature on political correctness in comedy texts, and the audience perception of Generation Z. This research process was very intriguing to me, as I discovered how members of my generation perceive humorous content in an era where social issues and sensitive themes are discussed more than ever before.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Fraser Robinson, for his support and guidance during this entire project. His knowledge, expertise and readiness helped me immensely. I would also like to thank the participants of this study for their willingness, time and great insights. Finally, most of all, I would like to thank my parents, Dionysis and Giouli, for their incredible support throughout my whole academic journey, both in Athens and Rotterdam. Without them, I would have never been able to move to the Netherlands in order to pursue this Master's degree.

I hope you enjoy reading this thesis as much as I enjoyed writing it.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Academic and Societal Relevance

This research aims to examine the audience reception of Generation Z in the case of *The Office* (Daniels et al., 2005-2013), in relation to the idea of political correctness.

Generation Z is known to be sensitive to multiple social issues and their representation in media texts. Members of this age group consider racial and gender equality highly important, while they are also concerned with the freedom of expression in other aspects of identity, such as sexuality. Therefore, the concept of political correctness, especially in the media, is central to the way of thought of many Gen Zers (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). In this research, political correctness is understood as “a concept related to the requirement to respect other minorities, or the “Other”- collectivities that have, in the course of history, been suppressed in a world dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, heterosexual, males” (Popovic, 2012, p.45). Moreover, the researcher of this study has decided to navigate the term in a more linguistic and etymological approach. The Greek origin of the word “political” has to do with citizen behavior, and not solely the choice of a specific political party. With this approach, the researcher and the participants will discuss the concept of political correctness in relation to daily behavior and language in interactions.

While television comedies tend to be very popular among most groups, there is not enough academic research on audience reception of such texts (Kalviknes Bore, 2012), especially in the past decade (Popovic, 2018). The American version of *The Office* has been examined greatly for its format adaptation of the British original version (Beeden & de Bruin, 2010) (Diffrient, 2020), and it is considered to have changed TV with its revolutionary mockumentary style of directing. The show is still very beloved; it ran on NBC from 2005 to 2013 (Westengard & Barlow, 2018) (Savorelli, 2010) and it was later added to Netflix. Since then, it has been one of the most-watched shows, with the Washington Post revealing that *The Office* on its own took up almost 3% of users’ viewership in minutes for all of 2019 in Netflix (Rao, 2019). Hence, the streaming giant has paid hundreds of millions of dollars for the past four years to keep the show on the platform (Stolworthy, 2023).

The researcher has chosen members of Generation Z to be the participants of this study, which is due to many reasons. Generation Z, which is composed of people born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, is now either teenagers or adults and can account approximately for 20% of the total population (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). This generation is by now one of the most important content consumers of the streaming industries (Podara et al., 2021) since more than half of them do not even watch broadcast or cable TV anymore, but are very active on

platforms such as Netflix (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). As a new segment of the audience, it is important to understand their consumption needs in audiovisual content, especially since they are becoming adults, hence it is more likely that they will finance their own choices of streaming services. However, once again, there is little academic attention on Generation Z's audience reception of audiovisual texts, especially comedy. It would also be interesting to examine this generation's relationship with humor in scripted formats since other scholars have supported that humor and irony are important "identity elements" of Gen Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2019) (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021).

Gen Z prioritizes social issues and their representation in media, such as freedom for expression of sexuality, or race and gender equality. Thus, political correctness, as it is understood in this study as a need for respect and mindfulness in language and behavior of daily interactions, is a central aspect of Gen Zers way of thought. Discourse about political correctness, however, often includes the idea that "Generation Z has taken the concept too far" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Especially in relation to comedy, many scholars have been intrigued to study the relationship between humor and political correctness (Bucaria & Barra, 2016), (Wagg, 1998). It has been a decade since the finale of *The Office* and the show's choice of humorous themes is criticized in the emergence of the era of "cancel culture" (Crutcher, 2019), (Westengard & Barlow, 2018). However, the fact is that Generation Z still chooses to engage with this comedy to a great extent (Saraiya, 2019).

Hence, this research question is proposed; How do members of Generation Z perceive political correctness in a scripted comedy text, through the case study of *The Office*?

## 1.2. Thesis Outline

This Master's thesis is conducted for the researcher's Master's degree in Media and Creative Industries by the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. The thesis begins with this introduction where the academic and societal relevance of the study are presented, along with the whole thesis outline. The next chapter refers to the theoretical framework of the study, where all the concepts are analyzed by the researcher. Within the theoretical framework, a) the key elements of *The Office*, b) the relation of political correctness and comedy, c) Generation Z as fans of *The Office*, absurd humor and nostalgia, and d) their perception of political correctness, are all analyzed. In Chapter 3, all decisions and actions related to the methodology of this study are analyzed, such as procedure, sampling, description of the participants chosen, operationalization of the concepts, and quality criteria of the study.

The results of this study, which are analyzed in Chapter 4, are presented in themes and sub-themes, in accordance with the method of this qualitative research. Mainly, the results

indicate that Gen Z as audiovisual content consumers or audience members have been greatly affected by their social media use. When it comes to comedy scripted formats, they value the balance between realism and exaggeration and the coexistence of inclusivity and authenticity. About *The Office*, most of them seem to admire the show for addressing social issues in a very original and thought-provoking way, but they do not hesitate in saying that this approach can be considered “politically incorrect” by some, according to the current view of things. In general, they highlight that their generation is more open-minded, yet also more strongly opinionated and divided than previous generations, due to having grown up daily interacting in digital spaces.

In Chapter 5, conclusions about this study are made, reflecting on the connection between theory and results, while limitations of this research and suggestions for future studies are proposed.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. *The Office*: A progressive American mockumentary with diverse, flawed characters and intense social commentary

The American adaptation of *The Office* is a television series that was broadcast in the USA by NBC from 2005 to 2013 (Westengard & Barlow, 2018). The British critics and fans of the original *Office* all believed that the American adaptation would fail to transmit the comedic elements of the script accordingly (Beeden & de Bruin, 2010). However, the US adaptation is what resonated with global audiences the most, minding the fact that it lasted for nine seasons and is still streamed on many digital platforms (Westengard & Barlow, 2018).

In the series, a regional branch of a paper company called Dunder Mifflin is chosen to be filmed for a documentary on the American workplace. This is the signature directorial element that distinguished *The Office* from any other sitcom and made it the most popular example of the “mockumentary” genre. This style of directing presents scripted content as a “parody documentary”, with talking head sequences and characters “breaking the fourth wall” by looking and speaking directly at the camera (Savorelli, 2010). The TV series did not follow traditional sitcom connotations that were firmly established until then. It did not include laugh tracks, long pauses, or any background music all due to its mockumentary direction, which was relatively innovative at the time, at least for mainstream TV network series (Beeden & de Bruin, 2010). Westengard and Barlow specifically mention that “*The Office* popularized the single camera documentary-style format and therefore shifted the landscape of millennial TV” (2018, p.286).

Evidently, there were previous sitcoms that included similar aesthetics to the mockumentary genre, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* which started in 2000 and is still running, and *Arrested Development* (2003-2019). After the emergence of *The Office*, mockumentary sitcoms became more mainstream, such as *Modern Family* (2009-2020) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) (Dalton, 2016). Westengrad & Barlow (2018) consider *The Office* to have a post-postmodern approach as a sitcom, due to its ironic disengagement and the aim to build an emotional bond between the characters and the audience. *The Office* achieves this goal through being a mockumentary, which is a direction element that creates a sense of intimacy and realism (Westengard & Barlow, 2018).

It is important to set a common understanding of the history of the sitcom genre within this theoretical framework. According to Ciorogar (2019), sitcoms as a genre started out as a means of transmitting traditional family values through TV screens and developed into a metamodern genre that balances irony with sincerity. In the same analysis, the author suggests that metamodern sitcoms, such as *Parks and Recreation*, *Community*, and *Bojack Horseman*

present flawed but also relatable main characters, in order to drive the conversation towards serious social issues (i.e. racism, sexism, mental health issues, homophobia, etc) through humor. This evolution of the sitcom genre demands a stronger level of emotional engagement from the audience, in order to transmit these messages successfully. (Ciorogar, 2019). There have certainly been examples of sitcoms that managed to use their genre as a way to highlight the injustice and prejudice of society in a comical way. *King of the Hill*, which was animated, chose to portray a less realistic American family to challenge cultural norms and values (Thompson, 2009). On the other hand, *The Office*, which aired 8 years later for the first time, has a strong sense of realism in the scenes and episodes, while the element of exaggeration comes when looking in depth at the characters (Westengard & Barlow, 2018). Beeden and de Bruin (2010) supported that the mockumentary genre implemented an important visual component that created a more fertile line for social and national issues to be integrated into the script of *The Office*. The feeling of realism that the genre allows, guides the audience to digest these issues with a more accepting attitude (Beeden & De Bruin, 2010).

*The Office* often uses the class system as a foundation for jokes, as an element to embarrass its characters and hence challenge the view of the audience on class differences (Beeden & De Bruin, 2010). For example, the main character, Michael Scott, is a middle-aged white man, who is the manager of the office but is very obviously not fit for this position. His knowledge and business skills seem to be lacking on many occasions, and his behavior does not comply with his place in the office's hierarchy. This results in the awkwardness of his employees, when he tries to "fit in" in business and social-related activities and discussions. When race, gender, and sexuality come into the equation, these portrayals of the white boss being notoriously oblivious of his racist, sexist, and homophobic comments cause both the other characters and the audience to feel embarrassed and therefore relate (Beeden & De Bruin, 2010). Another interesting case study of an American sitcom that challenged the role of class and gender through its humor was *Roseanne*, which aired in 1988 for 10 seasons on ABC. Senzani (2010) highlighted how the themes that were presented in the episodes of *Roseanne* were often neglected by mainstream media at the time. The element of humor aided the viewers to challenge their prejudice about traditional gender roles and opinions about class in the US (Senzani, 2010).

*The Office* is mostly about the interpersonal relationships between the co-workers and their boss, Michael Scott. It is important to note that the series featured two African American characters, an Indian and a Mexican character who were second-generation immigrants, with the latter also being a homosexual man. Episodes of the show include these characters being treated differently because of their race or sexuality, while also there are evidently multiple scenes that

include jokes in the dispense of all the women characters. The jokes about race, gender, and sexuality are mostly delivered from the character of the white heterosexual male boss, Michael Scott (Westengard & Barlow, 2018). The element of embarrassment is central to *The Office's* humor dissemination since the characters are aware of their “comedified selves”, which allows the audience to get familiar with the characters and accept more willingly the raw social commentary that comes with the series' humorous discourse (Beeden & de Bruin, 2010, p.8). However, as the series ended a decade ago, and is still widely streamed on many platforms, it is important to understand what makes it resonate with audiences today (Westengard & Barlow, 2018).

## 2.2 Political Correctness and Comedy

*The Office* has been heavily debated about its humorous approach to social issues (Westengard & Barlow, 2018), which as a topic has been generally discussed in relation to “political correctness” in academia (Bucaria & Barra, 2016), (Wagg, 1998). A few years ago, the cable TV channel Comedy Central decided to delete Season 1 Episode 2, called “Diversity Day” from its archive of *The Office*. In the episode, Michael Scott is forcing his employees to wear cards with different ethnicities on their foreheads and try to guess each other's ethnicities. In the end, he speaks with a thick Indian accent to an Indian employee which leads to her slapping him. According to Stiernberg (2021), many fans of the series complained, saying that the decision is a “cancel culture outcry” and noting that the episode does not promote racism in the slightest. This decision, along with other similar modifications of streaming platforms in their content, definitely indicates that political correctness is a factor of influence in scripted formats (Stiernberg, 2021).

Popovic (2012) conducted research on audience perception of what she described as “uncivilized humor” of the television comedy “Da Ali G Show”. In her research, she mentions that that show “raised controversy due to its politically incorrect discourse” (p.43). She describes political correctness as a concept that primarily has to do with self-censorship in language, linking modern civility to the idea of “being politically correct”. However, it is true that comedy texts that include social issues are often a matter of debate; “Was it offensive or did it give brilliant social commentary?” (Popovic, 2012, p.44).

Many might believe that the term is relatively new, minding the fact that it became a “trendy” topic after the 80s. However, “political correctness” was first used sometime between 1895-1921 by Lenin, when he was trying to describe the “correct” political direction for the followers of the Communist Party. Afterward, Maoists used the term to underline the “correctness” aspect of ideological conformity and political orthodoxy, which greatly affected

the New Left in the 1980s, leading to "political correctness" being a debatable topic in the Western world ever since (Ellis, 2002) (Hughes, 2009).

The researcher of this study has chosen to portray "political correctness" as a concept in a linguistic, but also in a mere literal and etymological approach. "Political", derives from the Greek word "polis" (πολίτης), which means citizen. In this sense, political correctness in this study is not related to politics, as in political parties of the left or right. Political correctness has to do with our daily behavior and interactions as citizens and is highly related to the language we use.

American sitcoms, such as *The Office*, may have traveled all around the world, but the perception of humor is often tied to one's culture. As a genre, sitcoms are appropriate for creating discussions around race, gender, sexuality, or even religion (Beeden & De Buin, 2010). Black (2021), for example, argues that humor with embedded race stereotypes provides "a license to be offensive" in comedies (p.9). Political correctness is often associated with the notion of causing "offense" to a certain group. According to Crutcher (2019), political correctness has created a "culture of fear" in many people's minds in education, which may also be applicable in the art sector and other creativity-related industries. "Trigger warnings" and the concentration on creating a "safe space" for everyone could possibly divert the focus from engaging in hard yet meaningful discussions about existing problems. Moreover, Crutcher suggests that political correctness has transformed to "cancel culture", a notion that is more related to censorship, rather than re-creating healthy communication standards (2019).

However, when it comes to scripted comedies, the humor that social issues will be dealt with is not always digested in the same way by everyone. According to the prominent theory of Hall (1973) on "encoding and decoding", the audience can actively contribute to the decoding of the messages presented, since everyone uses their own social contexts to disseminate and possibly change the message. Discussing TV programs, Hall (1973) argues that the audience finds a program successful when they can understand and relate to the signs used by the producers for the construction of the program. In more recent studies, empirical evidence suggests that there is a complicated relationship between humor and offense, with the period of time of dissection being also a significant factor of influence (Beard, 2008). Comedies are often considered to be "conversation starters" for the audience. According to a survey by Kalviknes Bore (2012), 76% of people said that they choose to "talk about TV comedy with family, friends or colleagues for multiple reasons". Humorous discourse creates a sense of community between the characters and the audience, which is why the fandom of such texts is often very loyally engaged. Hence, comedies, as a scripted format, not only provide the opportunity to take up

“taboo” topics but they are very effective in doing so (Beeden & De Buin, 2010). Another impressive study by Nabi et al. (2007), supports that humor is a tool of persuasion when it comes to social issues. Memorable and engaging examples can be presented through humor, in order to start discussions about social issues. Moreover, it has been proven that it disables defensiveness, therefore making acceptance of the message more possible. Nevertheless, Nabi et al. (2007) stress that not all humorous discourse is persuasive, and the effectiveness depends greatly on the strategic use of humor and the audience that dissects any social issues that are comedified.

The workplace environment featured in *The Office* functioned as a universally relatable theme, which many believe was the reason for the success of the format adaptation from Britain to the United States (Beeden & de Bruin, 2010). The American version of *The Office*, after the pilot episode, essentially follows its own script, with limited influences from its British predecessor aside from the core visual aesthetic. This is why this version of the show is not considered by many academics as a mere imported format adaptation anymore. This study is going to address the TV series as an individual text, independent of the British original version for all of these reasons (Savorelli, 2010). The choice of *The Office* as a case study mostly comes down to the fact that it reformed the perception of humor in sitcoms and comedy texts in general, while at the same time, it is considered to represent some of the broader cultural changes that came with the emergence of the 21st century, such as an expanding priority of authenticity and emotional connection in scripted formats (Westengard & Barlow, 2018).

### 2.3 Generation Z: Fans of *the Office*, absurd humor, and nostalgia

*The Office* season nine finale aired in 2013. Since then, as mentioned above, the show has not been forgotten; it has actually gained a whole new audience. Vanity Fair recently published an article about the “obsession” of Gen Z with the series, explaining how the actors of the TV series have become “Instagram influencers” because of the “new” popularity that the show has attained through Netflix (Saraiya, 2019). The reasons for the extensive audience engagement of Generation Z with such a text, especially ten years after its finale, are unclear but seem like a fascinating topic to explore.

Scholars have studied the differences in media consumption habits of Gen X, Y (more commonly known as “millennials”), and Z (Safad, 2019) (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). The latter is mostly distinguished by their “technology-dependent nature”. Gen Zers, at least in developed countries, have spent most of their lives with internet access and great use of it (Safad, 2019). As with previous generations, Gen Zers have been influenced by the social systems in which they grew up. Hansen (2019) argues that the fact that their media consumption consists primarily of social media has increased their exposure to global affairs, causing them to simultaneously prioritize individualism but also value diverse perspectives and cultures. As a generation, they

tend to share a lot of information about their personal lives online, and they do not enjoy feeling left out in real or digital life. When it comes to popular culture, statistics state that one in five Gen Zers has posted on social media about a series that they have not even watched (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Further research also highlights the impact of digital technological development on Gen Z's evolution of identity, authenticity and diversity being essential values for them (Törőcsik et al., 2020).

The lifelong relationship that Gen Z has with the internet is a factor that might be relevant to this research. With just the touch of a button, Generation Z has had access to so much content, a fact that builds pressure in deciding what they will spend their time on (Turner, 2015) (Podara et al., 2021). There is one thing that is free from doubt; Generation Z is not easily “intrigued” (Safad, 2019). The colossal amount of content that exists in multiple streaming services is thought to create stress and might even minimize the gratification of audiovisual content consumption. Consequently, this generation is finicky about what they choose to watch, but also prominent in getting disinterested easily (Podara et al., 2021). Many academics in the field believe that since media distribution and consumption have changed for this generation, so has their perception of older TV series that used to be broadcast in the traditional way (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

The disruptive nature of TV as a medium has been widely discussed, but by now this applies to newer forms of content consumption too. Since Netflix or any other streaming platform has a pause button, it is up to the viewer to disrupt the consumption and hence the experience. In that sense, it is only natural that sitcoms could be regaining popularity in new media since as a genre they transfer better to the streaming and “binge-watching” era, that Gen Z resonates with (Diffrient, 2020).

The real question is what is it that grabs Gen Z's attention. According to Seemiller and Grace (2019) and their guide on Gen Z, this generation has its own “identity cohorts” that were formed due to societal developments, just like any other generation before. Research has shown that they value authenticity, as they expect both themselves and others to be honest. Moreover, most people of this generation appreciate humor and use it even in seemingly serious situations. An interesting study highlights that Generation Z enjoys nihilistic and existentialist content online, notions related to absurd humor (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021). Generation Z is also often considered a “throwback” generation since they are very fond of the redevelopment of older TV series, movies, etc (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

## 2.4 The factors that led to Gen Z being mindful of political correctness

Generation Z has experienced multiple unique historical, technological, and societal shifts that have shaped their way of thought and expression. The anonymity and impersonal communication allowed by the daily use of screens have made many of them, especially as minors, offenders, or victims of cyberbullying. These phenomena and their fatal consequences created a more fertile ground for talking openly about social issues as the years passed, leaving Gen Z more culturally sensitive as a generation (Turner, 2015). At the same time, their ability to share their opinions and thoughts on cyberspaces has cultivated a much greater need to form opinions and phrase them. According to McBeth (2022), while Gen Z consists of more educated, diverse, and politically active members than previous generations, they often seem "intolerant" to different opinions. "Political tolerance" as it is presented by the researcher, is closely related to political polarization and is based on the notion that political beliefs mostly have to do with identity and emotions, rather than logical decision-making. The results of this study showed that 30 to 34% of the Gen Z students (n=69) that completed the survey were politically intolerant (McBeth, 2022).

It is a fact that Gen Z has the biggest LGBTQI+ community than ever before since fewer people feel that they need to hide their sexuality. Also, the centralization of families in bigger cities has aided the people of this generation to grow up with multiple cultural influences. Turner (2015) makes a point about American Gen Zers having lived with the thought of war their whole life, meaning the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, unfortunately, this point may also be valid for European Gen Z, for people from the Balkans or former Soviet Union countries. Studies also indicate that while Gen Z is in general more accepting of issues of diversity and inclusivity, they still hold a narrow definition of what diversity is, and they still carry prejudice towards people of specific races (Turner, 2015) (McBeth, 2022).

All these factors may have contributed to Gen Z being mindful of political correctness. On the other hand, some of them reportedly admit that Gen Z has taken political correctness "too far" and is "overly sensitive" to certain issues. However, this derives from the intention to include everyone (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). In this sense, *the Office* could be a TV series that is loved by Gen Z because of the diversity of the cast and themes discussed, which was refreshing for the time it was broadcast. While other past series also have had characters of different races and sexualities, *the Office* is not considered to have used these characters just for the sake of having a diverse cast, but to create a narrative around them, with no tropes or stereotypes about their race or sexuality.

For all the reasons mentioned above, it is considered beneficial to study the perception of Gen Z on the hit TV series *The Office*, as a comedy text and its relationship with political correctness.



### 3. Method

The purpose of this qualitative research was to retrieve insights on how members of Generation Z perceive political correctness in a comedy text, through the case study of *The Office*. In this chapter on methodology, all of the research design and methodological choices that were made by the researcher are explained and justified in detail.

#### 3.1 Research Design

##### *3.1.1 Qualitative Research*

This study used a qualitative methodological approach. The purpose of qualitative research is to describe and understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. This methodological approach seemed appropriate in this study, since it assisted in finding patterns and meaning in the participants' answers that could not be found otherwise. Qualitative research supports the constructionist approach that assumes people actively contribute to the construction of social reality. This methodological approach includes data gathering, structured analysis of data, and interpretations of the results by the researcher, with reliability and validity as quality criteria (Boeije, 2010).

##### *3.1.2 Semi-structured In-Depth Interviews*

In-depth conceptual interviews were conducted since they compose a meaning-making method of qualitative research. The interviews allowed a thorough insight into Generation Z's audience perception of *the Office* and the association of its humor with political correctness (Schreier, 2014). The aim of conducting the interviews was to extract data from what the participants said in order to co-produce meaning for the concept of political correctness, as it is perceived in scripted comedy texts, or more specifically in *The Office*. This way the researcher aided the participants to elaborate on their thoughts and opinions about the subject of the study, in order to understand how each one of them uses specific narratives to talk about the topic. The role of the researcher enforced the responsibility of being attentive to any intervention in the respondents' answers. This method was flexible since it allowed the researcher to pursue a meaning-making process. The interviews were also semi-structured, which permitted the researcher to change the order of the questions or skip some of them if they have already been mentioned organically by the participant (Johnson, 2011).

## 3.2 Data Collection

### 3.2.1 Process of Data Collection

The researcher of this study targeted individuals through social media to participate in this study. The announcement of the search for interviewees was posted on Instagram stories, alongside a very brief survey for the volunteers to answer. The purpose of the survey was to understand whether the participants met the sampling criteria that were set and thus included demographic questions, questions about the viewing experience of the *Office*, and one question about political correctness. The respondents of the survey also had to fill out their name and email, in order to be later tracked down. The brief survey, from which participants were chosen to be contacted and asked for an interview, can be found in Appendix A. The sampling criteria and the decisions regarding the participants are analyzed in more detail in Chapter 3.3.

The researcher chose 15 respondents of the survey that were appropriate to be interviewed, according to the sampling criteria. Hence, these 15 people were targeted through an email call-out. Eleven of them responded that they were willing and available to provide an online interview. The interviews were all scheduled and conducted between the 15th the 28th of April 2023.

The interviews were conducted online for reasons of physical distance constraints, as most participants did not live in the same country as the researcher. They were conducted fully in English, and they lasted 45-60 minutes each. Video elicitation was included during the process, to remind the participants of specific scenes in the TV series, in order to discuss the themes of the study appropriately. This research tool has proven to be useful in triggering memories or discussions during interviews in various qualitative research projects (Henry & Fetters, 2012), (Denzin, 2008). The scenes that were shown to all the participants were the same, they were shown in the same order, and they included themes of race, sexuality, gender, and religion. The participants were provided context for the scenes before their elicitation, in case they did not remember the plot of each episode. The context of the scenes and the links to the videos can be found in Appendix B.

### 3.2.2 Consent Form

Before the conduction of the interviews, the 11 participants had to read and fill out the consent form that complies with the Erasmus School of Culture, Communication, and History rules of ethics in research. In the form they had to consent to their participation in the research, the use of their personal data, and the recording of their interview. It was made clear that by

signing the consent form, they confirmed that they are over 18 years old, they understood that participation in this research is completely voluntary, and that their data would be anonymized for publication, educational purposes, or further research. All of the participants signed by name and signature. The consent form that was edited and used for this research can be found in Appendix C.

### **3.3 Participants**

By the research question proposed in this study, it is obvious that the sample was members of Generation Z who have watched at least part of *The Office*. Additional criteria for the sample were decided and followed in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the results of this study. All of these decisions and regulations in relation to the participants of the study are analyzed below.

#### *3.3.1. Sampling*

Initially, the researcher was aiming for at least 12 interviews with participants who are 18-25 years old (born from 1997 to 2005), meaning that they belong to Generation Z according to the definition of the age spectrum (Seemiller & Grace, 2019), (Safad, 2019). The researcher chose to interview only adult participants, even though that would mean that there is no representation of the whole age spectrum of Generation Z (i.e. even younger individuals, born up until 2010). This decision has been made since adult participants can consent to be interviewed on their own. Thus, there was no need to ask permission from their parents or legal guardian, meaning that the preparation of the interviews was more time efficient. Other demographic criteria were considered for participants to be interviewed. Since political correctness is going to be a topic of discussion, the researcher was aiming for participants that are diverse in race, gender, and sexuality. This way, the observations about political correctness in comedy, and specifically *The Office*, would be richer and more insightful, since some of the people that would be interviewed would be members of minorities. Participants also had to be fluent in English, which was targeted by asking the participants if they consider English to be their primary language and whether they watched *The Office* without any subtitles, or only with English subtitles (and not subtitles of another language). In order to create a rather common understanding of the topics that will be discussed in the interviews, the researcher has decided to select only university students/graduates as participants, but from all kinds of scientific fields.

All of the above criteria for choosing participants were managed to be achieved on a maximum level, except for the diversity factor. The initial plan of the researcher included

finding the participants through purposive sampling (Boije, 2010), with a call out on the researcher's social media networks. To understand if they fill the demographic criteria in order to be interviewed, they had to fill in a small form with their personal information. Afterward, the researcher looked through the candidates and chose the participants, bearing in mind their race, sexuality, and gender to achieve as much of a diverse sample as possible. However, since the researcher comes from Greece, which is a country with most of the population being Caucasian and Christian Orthodox, diversity in race and religion was not achieved in the sample to a great extent. From the Dutch network of the researcher, one Latina and one-half white - half Asian (Indian) person, responded to the sampling survey and were recruited as participants. It is important to note, though, that they both described themselves as being "white-passing", meaning that their facial features and fair complexion might have resulted in them having similar external experiences as Caucasian people. There were also some participants who were part of the LGBTQI+ community, which helped achieve a more diverse sample.

Participants that have watched all nine seasons of *The Office* were also preferred. This set a common ground for the perception of the series as a whole text since they were familiar with all the characters, seasons, and the progress of the storyline in general. However, the participants did not necessarily need to identify as "fans" of *The Office*.

Bearing in mind all the sampling criteria mentioned above, the researcher of this study targeted 15 out of the 35 people who originally responded to the sampling survey. Eleven responded that they would be willing to participate. The 11 participants included: 7 Greek-white people, 1 white person who was half Greek and half Spanish, 1 white German woman, 1 Latina woman, 1 half Portuguese- half Indian man. Out of the 11 participants, 7 were women and 4 were men. Two women and one man identified as bisexual, one woman identified as a lesbian, and another woman described her sexuality as "fluid". The rest of the participants identified as heterosexual. All of the participants have either watched *The Office* with no subtitles at all, or with English subtitles, and they all described English to be one of their primary languages since most of them either study or work using English every day. The participants were between the ages of 21 - 25 years old, thus they were all members of Generation Z. This sample is considered heterogeneous and holds a certain level of diversity that can contribute to valid, reliable, and compelling results. Information about all of the participants can be found in Appendix D.

### 3.4. Operationalization

The themes that were examined during the interviews naturally derived through the theoretical background and the research question, which was about how members of Generation Z perceive political correctness in scripted comedy texts, through the case study of *The Office*.

#### 3.4.1. Explanation of the analysis of the concepts

As previously mentioned, the goal was for at least 10 interviews, or more until saturation of themes analyzed is reached (Boeije, 2010). The questions that were asked at the interviews were included within these four categories; a) *The Office* as the TV series that it was, the reasons it became so popular and so loved by fans in general, b) *the Office* as an example of a comedy and the relation of its humor to political correctness c) the reasons the *Office* resonates/does not resonate with Generation Z, d) Generation Z's opinion on political correctness. An appropriate topic guide/ rapport was constructed with open-ended questions on these four categories (Schreier 2014) (Boeije, 2010), which can be found in Appendix F. The interviews were transcribed fully by the researcher, and then the data analysis followed.

Through these four categories, three concepts occur that are explained within the theoretical framework in detail: Generation Z, political correctness, and *The Office*. These concepts' operationalization is understood as such:

Generation Z, in this study, is the generation of people that were born between 1997 - 2010. The age spectrum of Gen Z varies between academics. Seemiller and Grace (2019) give a loose definition of Gen Z as people who were born between the mid90s and the early 2010s, however, Safad (2019) is more precise, saying that Gen Z starts in 1997.

Political correctness, as previously discussed, is a multifarious concept in this study. The researcher uses the definition by Popovic (2012) for the term, as “a concept related to the requirement to respect other minorities, or the “Other”- collectivities that have, in the course of history, been suppressed in a world dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, heterosexual, males” (Popovic, 2012, p.45). The researcher is also approaching the term in a literal and etymological way, from the origin of the Greek word for citizen = “politiss” (πολίτης).

*The Office*, in this study, is examined as the US TV comedy series that was broadcast by NBC from 2005-2013. The series is not examined in relation to its format adaptation from its British predecessor. The popularity of the show and its streaming through Netflix is also examined in detail during this research.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

#### *3.5.1. Transcription of the interviews*

After each interview was conducted, the researcher tried to transcribe it as soon as possible. This way, each interview was in the recent memory of the researcher and could ameliorate the transcription process by already thinking of potential important parts that could lead to the results of the study (Johnson, 2011).

The researcher transcribed all the interviews in English and verbatim, which means that everything that was said during the recordings was transcribed word for word. The transcriptions also included non-verbal queues, such as laughter, long pauses (that were signaled with "..."), or sighs. All these elements helped in giving a realistic view of the participant's responses to questions, thus ensuring the reliability and validity of the research and its results.

#### *3.5.2. Thematic Analysis*

This research study will use thematic analysis to interpret the data that will derive from the interviews. Thematic analysis will allow for the identification and interpretation of patterns in the large set of data that will be collected since as a method it "consists of segmenting the data and reassembling them with the aim of transforming the data into findings" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). The objective is to find similar themes among the responses of the participants. The thematic analysis serves the three fundamental principles of qualitative analysis, which are: a) constant comparison of the findings within the data, b) analytic induction, which allows for the best theoretical structure of the research material, and c) theoretical sensitivity, meaning that the researcher is capable to analyze the data with the theory in mind, in order to find a connection. Moreover, there will be a great amount of content that will derive from the transcription of the interviews, and thematic analysis allows for more time-efficient research on large sums of data (Boeije, 2010).

### **3.6 Quality Criteria**

The purpose of the research will be to establish the credibility of the results, which will be possible through reliable, transparent, and valid interpretation of the data collected. Though generalizability of the results is not the main goal, it would be interesting if, after the interpretation of data, there are many repeated patterns that could allow the results to be generalized to Generation Z (Silverman, 2011).

In this qualitative study, the credibility of the results is established through Seale's definition as "careful scholarship, commitment to rigorous argument, attending to the links between claims and evidence" (Seale, 2004, p.409-410, in Silverman, 2011, p.359). Credibility is discussed through the two central research concepts of reliability and validity. The notion of reliability refers to the extent that the findings do not depend on coincidental circumstances of their creation. Reliability is assured through transparency both in the theoretical and research process (Kirk & Miller, in Silverman, 2011, p.360). On the other hand, validity describes the level that the social phenomena presented in the research are displayed accurately. To ensure validity, the researcher applies the principles of analytic induction, constant comparison, deviant-case analysis, and comprehensive data treatment (Boeije, 2010).

## 4. Results and Discussion

In the following chapter, the results and discussion of this research will be analyzed. From the eleven interviews that were conducted, four main themes were derived: 1) The main characteristics of Gen Zers and their opinion on Political Correctness, 2) Understanding Gen Z and the role of social media, 3) Gen Z as viewers of *the Office*, and 4) Gen Z as fans of streaming and comedy. All four of these themes and their multiple sub-themes are discussed in detail below, in relation to the theory that was presented in Chapter 2. The coding tree that led to this analysis can be found in Appendix E.

### 4.1. The main characteristics of Gen Zers and their opinion on political correctness

During the interviews, the participants were asked many questions about their understanding and opinion of political correctness, also concerning the generation they belong in. The participants were reminded that in this study, political correctness is discussed with an etymological approach, meaning that the examination is on how citizens behave and use language to respect others in daily interactions.

This topic inevitably brought attention to social media and the visibility that social issues have gained through them (Hansen, 2019). Furthermore, this theme includes how Gen Zers characterize themselves and they think there is an interconnection between censorship, cancel culture, and being afraid not to offend.

#### *4.1.1 The visibility that social media brought to social issues*

Gen Zers acknowledge their intense social media use and they believe it has shaped their views significantly (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). When it comes to political correctness issues, many of them believe that social media is the reason that they are standing up for human rights. The mere visibility that social media inevitably has brought to social injustices (Hansen, 2019), the importance of diversity and inclusion has created a globalized digital sphere, where Gen Z interacts in.

Since we are talking about political correctness, I think we are more open towards people in general or the future of listening to other opinions, but mostly progressive ones. So I think we are the "global generation" in a way- Sofia



### *4.1.2 How Gen Zers characterize themselves*

Through the interviews, many characteristics that Gen Zers use to describe themselves arose.

#### *4.1.2.1 Open-minded*

Most participants of the study described themselves and their generation as “open-minded”, compared to previous generations. An example that many participants brought up was the issue of preferred pronouns of individuals. They all agreed that most Gen Zers would respect a person who asks to be addressed with they/them pronouns, even if they do not have personal experience of gender dysphoria. When analyzing this example and how it related to political correctness, Elisa explained:

Compared to other generations...I don't think a boomer would ever do that (i.e. respect a they/them pronoun). So yeah, political correctness, I think it's a big part of Gen Z's way of thinking and lifestyle, especially when it comes to gender identity, pronouns, sexual orientation and generally being more respectful of each other's cultures, like Black culture, Hispanic culture. I don't think they would make such easy race jokes. And they're (i.e. Gen Z) more likely to kind of stand up for people and minorities when they're being ridiculed- Elisa

One other participant, Monica, when asked about her personal view on issues of diversity on the introductory questions, she immediately spoke about herself as a member of Gen Z, even though that was not required of her. This spontaneous response is very indicative of how Gen Z's respect for diversity is considered a collective identity cohort (Seemiler & Grace, 2016). “I'd say, thankfully, Gen Z has taken big steps compared to previous generations concerning diversity. I'd say we are so much more open-minded”, said Monica.

#### *4.1.2.2 Division/ Judgemental*

However, many participants underlined a paradox of Gen Z: while they are open-minded, they also can be very opinionated, judgemental, or even prone to division. This theme could be related to the research of McBeth (2022), which showed that Gen Z is less tolerant of different opinions than previous generations.

Genevieve said that Gen Z is more inclined to disagree with the content they consume, and described her generation as “reactive”. She attributed this tendency of sticking to their beliefs and voicing them intensely to having grown up in an online space.

Because I think Gen Zers, we don't shut the f\*\*\* up. We have an opinion on everything. And I would attribute that to having grown up in an online space because, in an online space, nobody minds their own business. Not at all. I mean, that's what the whole point of social media is to see what other people are doing - Genevieve

The accessibility that online spaces have could be the reason for such a phenomenon. Grace also described Gen Zers as “very extreme” and “black and white”, something that can be seen through their criticism of pop culture.

I feel like nowadays, everyone has a super strong opinion on almost everything that's public, on every celebrity, on every movie, on every political party. Gen Z either loves or hates, and they're very quick to cancel people or hype people up. And I think it's a bit toxic. - Grace

It is interesting how a generation that seems to respect anyone's right to voice their opinion can be so divided at the same time. Sofia believes that Gen Z becomes “uptight” when it comes to problematic behaviors, and she thinks this is natural. However, Alex provided a more complicated explanation of why Gen Z seems so divided, especially in online spaces.

It is a lot of compartmentalization, putting people in boxes of "Oh, we are this group, so this is how we are. And if you are from the other group", like for example, even not only just left and right or anti-homophobic, even inside of the marginalized groups, there are different groups that “don't see eye to eye”. And also I've seen a lot of people that think they have everything figured out because they are part of a group that thinks the same way they do.- Alex

#### 4.1.2.3 Sensitivity

When talking about political correctness, participants either supported that their generation is “too sensitive” or that this is a misconception. The first group related their statement to their view of comedy, or TV series not being entirely politically correct, as this was also a big theme of the study. Phrases like “I can still take a joke” or “I try to not take all things that seriously” were common among the first group, who claimed that when people, in this case, Gen Zers, are being too sensitive, they lose the point of having a conversation about social issues (Black, 2021).

I would say I try to not offend anybody in general terms, but I will make a self-deprecating joke on something I am identifying as... Something like making, for

example, a racist joke, I will say it to make fun of the person who would say the joke and not the minority in itself. Because for me, racism is a funny thing in this day and age to exist. I find it ridiculous. - Mary

On the other hand, the participants who presented “Gen Z being too sensitive” as a misconception, mostly focused on older generations’ view of political correctness as limiting discourse and free speech. These participants highlighted the importance of phrasing your opinion while bearing in mind to not discriminate against anyone, and they do not feel as if this qualifies as being “too sensitive” (Seemiller & Grace, 2019), (Turner, 2015).

I think people are quick to say that we are very, how do I say it... Very touchy, very touchy-feely that we are... They would say that we are so sensitive. But it's not that. It's just that times have changed and now respect is correlated with language as it should be, like the way you phrase certain opinions. And the previous generations were not used to that. - Monica

If anything, Gen Zers view their sensitivity as a strength, rather than a flaw.

I think there used to be a huge backlash from them of "Oh, your generation is always making up problems. You're always so sensitive". Maybe we're sensitive, but I don't think that's a bad thing. I think people use sensitivity as something to be ashamed of, and then it's not rational when I think it's the most human thing possible to be sensitive. - Jacob

#### 4.1.2.4 Having Radically Online takes

Another thought on the sensitivity and the tendency of division of Gen Zers is that it also derives from being constantly online. Three participants expressed that some opinions of Gen Z when it comes to social issues, political correctness, and diversity are not realistic and they exist just in the digital sphere. They described it as being “chronically online” or having “radically online takes”. Mary’s opinion is that these takes come from people who are trying not to offend anyone in any way possible (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

I'm not the person that will say "Okay, I won't call you these pronouns. There are only two genders, blah, blah, blah". But to me, we have all become a little bit "chronically online. [...] It's a term that is used a lot online about people that... For example, they use neopronouns or they say things like "tanning is racist, exercising is fat-phobic", this sort of thing. I think they overanalyze how nobody will be offended and they don't realize that

being offended by something singular and discrimination are two very different things. -  
Mary

Genevieve underlines how unrealistic this kind of extreme takes seem to her.

I think sometimes a lot of the things that people say in real life are just "radically online takes", things that they don't even hold in the real world. I really think we're too radical. And I just think this is what I mean when I said, sometimes they have really radically online takes. What I'm trying to say is that they're trying to take something that was created in the online media world, apply it to the physical realm, and it doesn't hold up. -  
Genevieve

#### *4.1.3 Censorship, Cancel Culture, and being afraid of offense*

##### *4.1.3.1 Political Correctness and Censorship*

All of these characteristics of Gen Zers lead to political correctness, which was a big topic of discussion in this study. Participants were asked about their own understanding of the term before the researcher explained how we were talking about it in this study. Most of them declared that they find political correctness important, with the exception of Theo, who claimed that it is a "limitation of saying your opinion among other people". Another participant Andrea noted that while she finds political correctness important, she thinks it could be used as a censorship device.

I don't think there's a clear line where political correctness should stop or begin or in a way of how it could be...a form of censorship. I want to say that I'm afraid political correctness will ... censor in a way a bit more than it should. - Andrea

However, the majority of participants disagreed with these statements. Genevieve explained how she thinks political correctness and censorship are entirely different.

But the thing is that people really confuse political correctness with censorship. And I don't think they're the same thing because you can be politically correct by staying away from saying certain words and phrases that are just completely derived from...slurs. And I think censorship is more like maybe staying away from certain topics. - Genevieve

I think it's really extreme to say that political correctness means no free speech because free speech is also... okay, it's a right, but free existence is also a right of other people. [...] So for other people, their right for them to feel comfortable or the right of me, for

example, to feel comfortable as a woman is more important than a man saying a sexist joke.- Mary

Participants explained how their generation has taken this role of fighting for political correctness, due to their familiarity with social media (Hansen, 2019).

I think Gen Z, because of technology and because each generation has issues that they deal with... And I think our generation is really the social issues that we've been handed out. I think it's the most prominent thing, at least in our Western civilization. I think social issues are definitely rising. And I think a lot of our generation took political correctness as a way to try to navigate those differences, to navigate those inconsistencies that we have always been aware of. - Jacob

#### 4.1.3.2 Cancel Culture

Remaining on the topic of political correctness, some participants related the term to the phenomenon of cancel culture. Cancel culture is a very prominent example of how perceptions of political (in)correctness affect people in media and the content they produce (Crutcher, 2019). Especially, when it comes to comedy, Steven had an opinion to share about the fine line between political correctness and cancel culture, which he described as “woke culture”.

I think through the last decade or so, the series and shows have become more and more part of "woke" culture. And we see a lot of shows sometimes doing it subtly or sometimes it's more obvious. I think they have lost the touch that made the sitcom comical in a way that nowadays, I think the sense of humor of a person is getting judged due to some issues that might appear on a show. Nowadays we think "Oh, it must be canceled". - Steven

Steven proceeds by giving an example of a Friends episode from 1995 that was “canceled” on social media. However, when asked how this relates to Gen Z specifically, he gives a very clear and realistic answer: “I think it relates to the fact that streaming services try to mass produce shows that appeal to their audience, which is mostly teenagers and generally people under 30”.

Steven also explained how this mass production of Tv shows with social issues as a priority has lost originality from real creative content.

#### 4.1.3.3 Afraid not to offend

As it has been established already, Gen Z's perception of political correctness can be related to "over-sensitivity", being polarized and generally having a tendency towards "digital ostracism" (McBeth, 2022). Theo believes that there is always an effort not to offend anyone (Wagg, 1998), which can be very limiting: "Everyone is super woke at the moment. So you can say anything and consider that you made a joke. You always try not to offend someone. So it's very limiting even when meeting someone".

This theme can be related to what Clutcher described as a "culture of fear" (2019). As people are constantly worried about insulting someone, this becomes a general practice in daily interactions and it affects the way thoughts, opinions, and feelings are expressed. If the fact that Gen Z is still young adults is taken into account, then this worry of being misunderstood is even more prominent (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). "I feel like that's a thing nowadays. I feel like the fear, the anxiety, and the worry of coming across wrong and then ending up in someone else's social media as a laughingstock", Genevieve mentioned in her interviews

### 4.2 Understanding Gen Z: the role of social media

During the interviews, the participants were asked about what they think mostly distinguishes Gen Z from previous generations. Predictably enough, most of them highlighted how radical digitalization during their upbringing and social media shaped their generation (Safad, 2019). The participants mentioned being overwhelmed by the overload of information that comes with their intense use of social media, how social media can act as echo chambers, and how their attention span has decreased significantly because of them. This theme seems worth exploring at this stage of the analysis, since it explains both Gen Z's opinions on political correctness and their engagement with *The Office*, as a sitcom that aired in a different time from theirs.

#### *4.2.1 The intense use: Being overwhelmed by information*

Almost all of the participants talked about their generation's relationship with the Internet during their interviews. Most of them claimed that social media has given them the accessibility of gaining different perspectives on all kinds of things very fast.

This quick access to information and various opinions can be overwhelming (Turner, 2015) (Hansen, 2019). Another participant, Steven, mentioned that Gen Z is "much more drowned in information at any given moment", something that indicates intense use of social

media. Genevieve noted that Gen Zers wake up and go to bed with their phones, something that is not as common with Millennials, while Monica supported that she is always ahead of her parents when it comes to news: “They will just open their laptop at the end of the day, and browse”. All these insights on Gen Z’s social media use were predictable and agree with the theoretical framework of this research, which suggests that they are the true “digital natives” that have a distinctively higher engagement with social media than previous generations (Safa, 2019), (Hansen, 2019), (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). However, most of the participants in this research seem to worry about how their daily use affects them as a generation.

Because we grew up with technology, I think we became experts at navigating it. And with that, I think it comes with a lot of responsibility and a lot of... I don't think a lot of us signed up for knowing a lot of the things we know. - Jacob

#### *4.2.2 Echo chambers*

One interesting element of Gen Z’s intense use of social media and “digital nativity” is how they seem aware of the groups they belong to in the digital sphere. As Alex mentioned, “Internet culture is very diverse” but people almost always want to be members of a specific group, which in social media seems more possible than ever before. This insight resembles the notion of echo chambers, in which individuals consume content that validates their pre-established beliefs on a topic (Terren & Borge, 2021).

But also, I guess I am part of a group of people that think like me. I like to watch things that I agree with, that people are intolerant of. While some other people like to consume media that is different from what I like. So I am still part of a bias of people- Alex

Undoubtedly, social media work with algorithms that provide their users with content that is based on their previous engagement (Terren & Borge, 2021). Participants in this research seem aware of the fact that social media provides them with what they want to see, whereas with TV/streaming series the decision process for content can be more compelling. In social media users do not have to put in a lot of effort to get the content that gratifies their needs. However, a streaming platform is a different story: users will most probably spend time choosing what they want to watch, and often cannot be sure whether the content will meet their expectations, at least not instantly. This relates to what was said in the theory about Gen Z being very picky about what they want to watch and having less gratification from "traditional" content. (Turner, 2015) (Podara et al., 2021).

#### 4.2.3 Diminished attention span

While talking about the overload of information that Gen Z gets from its excessive social media use, two participants expressed the opinion that their generation has a shorter attention span. Jacob concluded that this attention span deficit has led to some being desensitized when it comes to serious political or social issues around the world.

I think we're overall very empathetic because I think we grew up watching everything on our phones and seeing... Right now, we are following a war through TikTok. That's not usual. That's a new experience that we had to have, which I think that's good. But at the same time, I think it really diminished our attention span. I think it made us desensitized, I think, to certain things.- Jacob

Elisa, on the other hand, commented on how she has the “attention span of a goldfish” due to her increased Tik Tok use. When she compared the content of the platform to watching a full episode of a TV series, she admitted that she has trouble following the plotline.

I'm on TikTok 24/7 (laughs). I feel I have so much information coming from all around me that from now on, it's very hard for me to focus on one thing and like, if you go to TikTok and you scroll for, like, an hour, you'll hear- see.... 20 different topics. Like, 30 seconds, they're talking about cars. The next 30 seconds, they're talking about lizards. The next 10 seconds, they're talking about cats. The next 10 seconds, they're talking about vacationing on a Greek Island. It's too much information, but you never get bored. And then when I start watching a movie or TV series that lasts long, and it's like, 40 minutes straight, talking about a very specific thing, a very specific plotline, I'm lost. - Elisa

#### 4.3 Gen Z as viewers of *the Office*

The US hit sitcom *The Office* was the case study of this research. Discussing the series, the participants, who all watched it after 2018 and through a streaming service, expressed very insightful thoughts about the show's virality in social media, its' characters, its' genre, and its approach to sensitive topics through humor. The participants also shared their thoughts on how their generation is decoding *The Office*, as a series that was broadcast and ended many years before they watched it.



#### 4.3.1 The virality of *The Office*

The reasons a specific audience chooses to watch and engage with a TV series, especially one that is not current, can vary. One compelling reason that Gen Z chooses to watch *The Office* came up during these interviews since many participants reported that the show is still very viral on social media (Saraiya, 2019). Sofia distinctively mentioned: “*The Office*, I think I wanted to watch it because it's so viral, everybody's talking about it. I had watched some of the clips on YouTube and I'm like "Okay, let's just give it a try”.

One participant, Mary, mentioned that she first watched it in 2020 when a friend convinced her, but she did not like it. Then, when short clips of the series kept popping up on her social media, she decided to give it a second try two years later, by first watching some short scenes on Youtube and then committing to watching the full series from the first to the last episode. It is intriguing how two out of the eleven participants admitted that they could not commit to watching the series in the proper order through a streaming platform, and they had to first be “convinced” by social media. This can be attributed to the argument of Podara et.al, about Gen Z being finicky about what they choose to watch, and therefore spend their time and - limited- attention on (2021).

Another participant, Monica, claimed that some people may have chosen to watch *The Office* just to not be excluded from conversations since she described the series as a “trend”.

People who don't get the humor and who don't enjoy it, I think watch it because it's trendy and not having watched *The Office* excludes you from conversations, sometimes, not always, but it could be because it's a pop trend.– Monica.

Lastly, two participants, Sofia and Alex, mentioned that *The Office*'s editing or humor style has been of great influence on social media comedians, especially on Youtube. Having said that, they explained that many youtube comedians were using this exaggerated yet realistic sense of direction to frame their humor and jokes with more sensitive issues discussed. This resemblance between Youtube comedy and *The Office* might be coincidental, but it is something that might have influenced the decision process of Gen Zers to watch the show.

Because I think it's also, even though it's 10 years ago or more (i.e. the end of *The Office*), I think that this chaotic type of editing is much in fashion right now, which is also something admiring. - Sofia

### 4.3.2 *The Office* characters

Before and after the video elicitation part of the interviews, participants felt inclined to speak about the multiple characters of *The Office* in order to explain their thoughts on the show's handling and portrayal of social issues and political correctness.

#### 4.3.2.1 Michael Scott

Michael Scott, the white heterosexual male manager of the Dunder Mifflin Scranton branch, is undoubtedly the main character of *The Office* US. The character was played by Steve Carrel for the first seven out of the nine seasons, before he ended up quitting his role, and the series continued without him for the last two seasons.

Michael Scott is described by participants of this study as being ignorant, inappropriate, ableist, sexist, racist, homophobic, and generally overstepping boundaries constantly with the other characters. Some supported that Michael's intentions were good, but he just "could not let the stereotypes go". As the seasons of the series progressed, the participants thought that Michael became more likable and "humanized" in a sense. The fact that Michael is the boss in *The Office* and he has more authority made it necessary for the writers to unravel Michael's "good side": "If not, the show would be unwatchable with a very unlikable boss", as Mary said.

Nobody likes to see a show that says "Don't be racist". It makes people sad. It is not the way to bring... Because in the end, what we are all afraid of deeply is not being integrated in society, being alone, being an outcast. So, somebody who acts like this, you can see that he does not have many friends. And the more he gets educated about it, and the more he realizes how ignorant he is. And he tries even in his own awkward way to fix things about his belief, the more likable he becomes. So to me, it's crazy that people don't understand that it is very anti-racist, very anti-discrimination. And the way jokes are played, exactly they're like the cautionary tale: "Don't be like Michael, who everybody hates. - Mary

All of these comments on the main character of the show agree with Diffrient's description of Michael Scott (2020), as a clueless manager, who desperately tries to fit in business and social-related conversations in the workspace, often by using stereotypes. These insights indicate that the participants of this study have a thorough engagement and understanding of the TV series.

From these observations, it is evident that Michael is considered to be the character that holds the most “politically incorrect” role. However, participants also had various takes on the other characters and how they are affected by Michael’s behavior. As Grace said in her interview: “I do think the way the cinematography is shot and the other characters are brought in, they do make it clear that it's very much not okay how he's dealing with it.”

#### 4.3.2.2 The other characters

Out of the rest of the characters, three mainly seem as the most important ones: Jim, Pam, and Dwight. Jim and Pam are described as more rational, balancing characters. Dwight is mentioned as a politically incorrect character, who is indirectly portrayed either as being autistic or having Asperger’s. Interestingly enough, some participants mentioned that they found Jim’s pranks on Dwight “problematic”, as he is “visibly dealing with a mental disorder”. Others believed that the level of self-awareness that each character had, made these kinds of jokes at Dwight's expense acceptable (Beeden & De Buin, 2010). In general, the participants described all of the characters as being ordinary, yet “flawed”, exactly as Ciorogar (2019) describes the characters of successful modern sitcoms. “Every character is flawed and every single character will do something that is kind of out of line, out of what a normal person would do”, as Elisa said.

All the workers have a flaw, super exaggerated, just to point out that everyone can be super "damaged". For example, Dwight was raised in a close mind society, so he is super close-minded. Creed was like a criminal who was doing a side job in the office just to earn some extra cash. Meredith was alcoholic and nymphomaniac. - Theo

In general, the participants underline the diversity the show has, both casting-wise and in the themes discussed. This contributes to the characters having a more equal treatment, with a deep and realistic backstory, and not just being background characters for the main one to “shine” (Westengrad & Barlow, 2018).

It is inclusive. We cannot say that it is not. It has people of almost all races in *the Office*. It has different sexualities, of people with different vices, for example, Meredith is an alcoholic. You see stuff like that too. So, I don't think it has excluded something of what society is made of. - Steven

For me, it's the realness of the characters and the depth of the characters. It's from everything, like physical appearance. There are no crazy, hot, model kind of characters. They're average people that you could see in an office. They have their faults, they have

their defects, but they are all very relatable. So to me, you really relate with the characters and it creates a situation in which characters become and un-become main characters of the show.- Mary

#### 4.3.3 *The Office as a Mockumentary*

The genre of *The Office* as a mockumentary has always stood out to both viewers and critics (Savorelli, 2010). Participants of this study were no exception. According to them, the legacy of *The Office* comes down to its genre, as it was quite revolutionary for the time, and it managed to influence other modern sitcoms greatly. Some examples that are mentioned in the interviews are *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation*, and even *Brooklyn 99*.

But like... It's *The Office* way. You can see it even when other sitcoms have even a special episode that is filmed that way and they have the "fourth wall break" or commentary or shoot it in a documentary style. When you see it, you say, "Ah, this is *The Office* style. They're trying to do an *Office* episode.- Elisa

Alex, who does not identify as a fan of *The Office* and has not watched all the seasons, highlighted how he admires the show because of its genre, which allows creative storytelling and building an important subplot, using the "awareness" of the characters (Beeden & De Buin, 2010).

Moreover, Genevieve made a compelling point, when mentioning that the show cannot be considered politically incorrect because of its genre: It is a parody of a documentary, so in a sense, it depicts the real world, and racism, sexism and other social injustices still exist in the real world. This argument is understood as the mockumentary genre acting as a method to give a "voice" to the "discriminated" characters. Grace also makes a similar point, after the video elicitation, when asked about how the series handles sensitive topics.

I think they do target these topics well in that sense that they're first being very incorrect about it, but then they always show the ... Not the victim, but the person who is targeted with this discriminated person, their beliefs, and their answer to that, which I think is helpful. - Grace

#### 4.3.4 *How The Office handled sensitive topics*

The theme of how *the Office* handled sensitive topics and whether it can be considered politically incorrect currently was one of the most critical of this study. The thought-provoking

answers of the participants presented a lot of similarities, which enhance the validity of this study. In general, participants agreed that they do not find the *Office* entirely politically incorrect, or having completely “offensive humor”, with very few exceptions. They all criticize *The Office* as “a product of its time”, claiming that the show visibly challenged stereotypes through humor, about social issues that were not as easily discussed in mainstream entertainment media at the time (Senzani, 2010) (Westengard & Barlow, 2018). However, they all claim that the show “could not air today” as it is.

I think it's very culturally significant. Like, the Renaissance! (laughs). When it comes to pop culture in this genre, *the Office* is definitely going to be remembered, like, as the first step of a sitcom to address issues in this kind of way of having a character that is very obviously politically incorrect and people are disagreeing and have the opportunity to discuss issues in this kind of reversed way.- Elisa

Strangely enough, the participants described the humor of the series as “inappropriate” or “borderline offensive”, in multiple instances, but still supported that the writers managed to get the “correct messages” across. This means that the humor may have operated as a way to persuade the audience about where they should stand (Nabi et al., 2007).

When participants were mentioning examples of how the show used “offensive humor”, they mostly mentioned scenes and episodes that were part of the video elicitation part of the study. Hence, the choice of the scenes was accurate, since the researcher evaluated them as some of the most characteristically politically incorrect scenes of the show.

Steven mentioned the episode that Phyllis gets sexually harassed in the parking lot of the office, and made an interesting comparison to how a more recent Netflix comedy called *Sex Education* handled the issue of a female character getting sexually harassed completely differently.

At the same time, all the participants that do not identify as heterosexual mentioned the episode of Oscar's - forced- coming out as an example of the show's “problematic humorous discourse”. None of these participants knew that a scene from this episode was going to follow in the video elicitation part of the study. In that scene, Michael is seen defending himself for calling Oscar a f\*\*\*\*t, “as a joke”, since he did not know that Oscar was an actual homosexual. During the episode, Michael reveals the sexuality of Oscar to the rest of his colleagues. At the end of the episode, Michael is shown trying to kiss Oscar, in order to seem fine with his homosexuality. Oscar ends up screaming at Michael (his boss), because of this behavior.

The fact that Oscar was gay, but that was in 2005 and the other characters... They were shocked. They were not sure how to deal with it. I don't think this would have happened in a series now... And the people that were the audience, in 2005, I think... For example, Michael's reaction would be easier for them to understand back then. The fact that he was negative about it.-Sofia

Some of the participants mention the example of “Diversity Day”, an episode that has been a prime example in the recent discussion of whether the series uses politically incorrect humor (Diffrient, 2020). Diversity Day was not used as part of the video elicitation of this study, but when participants talked about it they did not seem to agree with the view that the episode has to be “canceled”, or removed from any channel/streaming platform, as it happened with Comedy Central (Stiernberg, 2021).

And another time when they had the cards up in their heads to guess who everyone was, and one was a woman, the other one was Jewish, whatever. So it tackles a lot of sensitive topics, which nowadays could get you very easily canceled. But I think they did it in a smart way- Jacob

The participants expressed the view that the series does not over-analyze the social issues that it touched upon. Monica mentioned that they mainly try to show an “insensitive main character that is just in his own world”, saying that “they are not taking themselves too seriously”. However, everyone agreed that there are a variety of social and sensitive topics addressed in the show.

And also when it comes to inclusivity now, that's kind of a tricky thing because I think that *Office* manages to pull this off so nicely. And generally, I feel like most sitcoms that are considered, like, more recently I'm not talking like *Friends*, I'm talking about *Brooklyn 99* or *Community* are managing to use satire to talk about social justice and make fun of both aspects. Also, like, racist people, but also like characters that are way too "social justice warriors" (laughs).- Elisa

#### 4.3.4.1 The humor

Discussing the show's approach to sensitive topics, inevitably brought back the core topic of the show's humor. As previously mentioned, most of the participants described the humor of *The Office* with adjectives such as: witty, ironic, childish, awkward, uncomfortable, and even “borderline offensive” and “not safe for everybody”. These adjectives are all highly

accurate, similar to how Beeden & De Buin (2010) and Westengrad and Barlow (2018) describe the show's discourse.

I think *The Office* humor is like a car crash that you cannot look away from. It has so many awkward situations, but you really want- you are intrigued to know how this is going to end or how are they going to walk away from this? How bad can things get?- Sofia

Even though none of the participants mentioned the word “absurd” for *The Office*'s humor, all of these adjectives and the fact that they characterize the show's plotlines as often “ridiculous”, can be related to Partlow's and Talarczyk's (2021) research on Gen Z's love for absurd and nihilistic humor. Genevieve made an interesting comment about *the Office* having “dark irony”, saying that in her opinion that was not a popular humorous approach for sitcoms at the time. This could also be a reason for the firm engagement of Gen Z with the sitcom.

I would say the really dark irony because I think that that was not so popular. Of course, I'm from a different generation, but I legitimately think that dark comedy and dark humor started picking up in the 2010s.- Genevieve

#### 4.3.4.2 Realism and exaggeration

The series' discourse of sensitive topics was also highly related to the level of coexistence between realism and exaggeration in the show. The realism derives from the mockumentary genre and the directorial elements that come with it, such as no music and no laugh tracks, but also the relatability of the situations that evolve during the episodes (Savorelli, 2010), as participants noticed.

It captures social awkwardness very well. So I think social awkwardness is something that everyone can relate to. However, it's something that we don't like to acknowledge or talk about very much because it's awkward. And when you see it displayed so well in an office setting, which is the most normal common setting that you can imagine, I think it really sparks this... We're able to relate to it, but it's also exaggerated.- Jacob

Exaggeration is an essential element of any sitcom, in order to remain funny and amusing. Participants mainly believed that the *Office* outlined the flawed characters with a lot of exaggeration, almost like creating “caricatures” of them (Ciorogar, 2019), as one of them distinctively mentioned.

I think that it has achieved the fine line between realism and just surrealism, pure surrealism because it is set in a realistic environment like an office. But the characters are so surreal that it's just funny on its own. - Monica

#### 4.3.4.3 The reasons why Gen Z believes *The Office* could not have aired today

Finally, most of the participants made a distinction on whether *The Office*, as the series it was, could be produced today. Many of them noted that “jokes like that would not pass with today’s audiences”, and one participant, Theo, was so confident that the show would be “canceled” that he said that “no one would produce it” or if someone did, “people would be rioting in the street”. Surely discussing whether the show could air today is purely hypothetical, still, this striking similarity between all of the participants is quite indicative of the power of “cancel culture” (Clutcher, 2016).

It's not a show that preaches moral conclusions. It does not use a certain ethical agenda that it tries to push to the viewers in a very direct way. It has a humor that I don't think would be acceptable today, maybe. It could be really hard and it would take very careful writing and to be honest, a very good marketing team, a very good... Not everyone could produce a show with such humor. - Mary

#### 4.3.5 Gen Z's decoding of *The Office*

All of the themes and sub-themes that were analyzed in chapter 4.3 of the results, come down to Gen Z's critique of *The Office*. Some of the participants of this study identified as fans of *The Office*, while others did not, which ensures the variety and the reliability of perspectives that are presented in relation to how this generation of viewers is decoding the popular sitcom.

##### 4.3.5.1 “I did not like *The Office* at first”

Another similarity in the responses of the participants of this study, is how most of them did not like *The Office* when they first watched it. Elisa mentions that she even felt “annoyed” and “angry” about how the show was humorously approaching the character of Michael in the first season. She later mentioned that she thinks the writers “buffered” Michael in the later seasons, which closely related to what was said earlier about Michael becoming more “likable” as the seasons progressed (Diffrient, 2020).

But it's also, like, the way they address issues. I feel the comedy and the first season is very... (laughs) I felt a bit annoyed. I could relate to how people were mad at Michael for acting the way he was, and I wasn't thinking, " Oh my God, this is so funny. This



scenario is so funny, and I can't believe how clueless he is". I was getting angry with how clueless he was because I was thinking that that was unacceptable behavior. And instead of being entertained with this scenario, I was actually getting mad. - Elisa

Even Theo, one of the participants that seemed to be the most "tolerant" on issues of political incorrectness in entertainment media, recognized that the first season made him very uncomfortable because Michael was very "unfiltered and raw".

The first time that I watched the first season, I really didn't like it. I thought it was too awkward. It was too forced. I didn't enjoy it. And then I watched everything. And then I watched the first season again and it made sense. - Jacob

When asked whether the show's humor evolved over the course of its nine seasons, Steven gives a very intriguing response.

I do think it has evolved. I think it evolved into being more toned down in terms of making jokes about stuff that is not politically correct to joke about. For example, what we see in the first two or three seasons, especially the first season, is completely unhinged. They joke about everything. It almost feels like they know they're going to be canceled and they were like "Okay, let's enjoy it". But through the course of the series, the balance shifts more into seeing how, as a team and as characters, they develop and battle through their own problems. - Steven

#### 4.3.5.2 *The Office* needs the viewer's critical thinking

Some of the participants gave a more nuanced perspective on the decoding of *the Office*. Basically, the participants indicated that *The Office* does have the intention to challenge stereotypes and social perceptions through its humor, since the show attempts to make social issues visible and shed light on discrimination, in a light-hearted manner (Senzani, 2010).

I think the stereotypes are portrayed in a way that ...I think they're more challenged rather than... reinforced. I consider those jokes used in this context to bring more visibility, rather than hatred towards those minorities.- Andrea

Yet, at the same time, the participants thought that the critical thinking of the viewer is essential in decoding the messages conveyed, no matter how firmly established these are presented. This can be connected with Beard's notion that taking offense through humor can be influenced by the amount of time that has passed (2008).

It's a shame when I think about these kinds of shows because I think that for you to really understand them, you do need to have a very high level- or not a very high level, but you need to have some baseline self-awareness to understand that this is a joke. You know what I mean? This is all a joke meant to make you see the problems. Just because you're laughing doesn't mean that it's supposed to be funny. It's supposed to make you think. - Genevieve

On the topic of political correctness, and how Michael and Dwight's behavior is often disrespectful, Jacob mentioned that these are the characters that are actually comedified and "ridiculed" in a way for their behavior (Beeden & De Buin, 2010), but at the same time that requires a level of critical thinking to decode.

I think the point does come across that the joke is on Michael. It is the wrong thing he says. It is on the Dwight. But I think it does take a little bit of critical thinking to connect how they're portraying these issues and what the right thing is.- Jacob

#### 4.4 Gen Zers as fans of streaming and comedy

The last theme that derived from the interviews concerns Gen Zers as fans of streaming content and comedy. The participants shared their thoughts on binge-watching as a viewing habit, the reasons they are fans of sitcoms, their value of inclusivity but also authenticity in series, and the future of comedy.

##### *4.4.1 Binge-watching*

Binge-watching of TV series is obviously a phenomenon that has been facilitated for Gen Zers by the emergence of streaming platforms. The Gen Z participants of this study all watched *The Office* through Netflix, and most of them pointed out that they like binge-watching series in general. The accessibility of the content and the fact that they can watch as much as they want, whenever they want, really influence their viewing experience (Podara et al., 2021). Some participants even reported that they feel more engaged with the content they have binge-watched because the "uninterrupted viewing" allowed them to get more attached to the characters and captivated with the plotline. They mentioned that this is especially significant for sitcoms, since their success is more dependent on character development, compared to other genres (Dalton, 2016).

#### 4.4.2 *The reasons Gen Z loves sitcoms*

This study was also a pursuit to find what attracts Gen Z to the genre of sitcoms. Many responses came up on this topic, with participants describing sitcoms as “comfort shows” that help them “not think as much”.

Elisa, who stressed how she thinks her attention span has decreased due to her social media usage, supported that sitcoms are “much easier to follow”, with shorter episodes and specific archetypes of characters and plotlines that allow predictability. “You don’t have to work a lot for it”, she said characteristically. Monica, on the other hand, had a different explanation about her love for the genre.

They calm me, I enjoy the background noise. I'm the person that has watched *Friends* or *How I Met Your Mother* over 10 times, I'd say. I'm proud of that. I'm not ashamed because I use it as background noise to calm me. - Monica

Another comment was made by Steven, who claims that he enjoys sitcoms since they do not require as much attention as other genres, which is supported by Dalton (2016). This statement can be directly related to the theme that was discussed in Chapter 4.1 about Gen Z admitting to having a shorter attention span.

Usually I like sitcoms, like *Friends*, *Office*, *How I Met Your Mother* because they have a sense that every episode has a story and with the end of the episode, the main plot of that episode ends. So I can watch five or 20 episodes. And most of the time I don't really need to pay that much attention to what I am seeing. -Steven

It is true that all of these elements of sitcoms could be attractive to other generations, besides Gen Z. Nevertheless, these comments of the Gen Zers of this study show that this genre is a “safe choice” for them, that does not require a great level of mental clarity. Furthermore, sitcoms can be digested in shorter segments, which complies with what they have now been used to from social media audiovisual content (Podara et al., 2021). When Genevieve talked about the production of current sitcoms, she said: “I think there used to be more of a plot line before (i.e. pre-streaming sitcoms), but now I think it's just very small skits, very digestible things, content inside”.

#### 4.4.3 *The value of inclusivity and authenticity*

According to the theoretical framework of this study, Gen Z highly values authenticity and honesty in their daily life (Toroczik et al., 2019). The participants of this study really

highlighted the appreciation they have for TV series that manage to be authentic and realistic. At the same time, however, most of them also value series that aim to show diversity and inclusivity through their casting and themes (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). The balance of these two principles seems to be what attracts Gen Z's audience the most, which is also one of the reasons they are fans of sitcoms.

Generally, I love seeing inclusivity in shows. But not in the "trying to force it and sell" way. And I feel like sitcoms kind of manage to use important things like social justice, and inclusivity, but also keep it light. And not forcing it. Like being able to make fun of themselves and the situation. - Elisa

However, Jacob, who is bisexual, seemed to have a different opinion. He specifically said that he “does not care” if the writers of a new TV series are using diversity with an ulterior motive since the mere representation of all kinds of people is a greater priority for him.

And there's always the question of, well, they have become diverse, but is it genuine? Is it genuine diversity just because "we have to have a black character, we have to have a gay character"? At this point in time, I don't think I really care if it's genuine or not, I'm sorry, but in Portugal, for example, which is a very traditional country, I just think it's important for that representation to be out there. I just need people in my country to be aware that this is a reality and that it's normal. -Jacob

In his last comment of the interview, he suggested that diversity should be a priority for creators today, because it reflects real life for Gen Z, being the most diverse generation yet (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). In a certain real-life sense, this means that diversity is also viewed through the lens of authenticity: “Because the demands and the expectation of the public is for that just to be normal, to reflect real life. And if it doesn't reflect our experiences, then it's not worth watching. It's not real enough for us”. - Jacob.

#### *4.4.4 The future of comedy*

The last question of every interview revolved around how writers of comedies today are approaching issues of political correctness, while still remaining humorous and targeting Gen Z as an audience.

Most of the participants portrayed the creation of a TV series as a long process that depends on many professionals, and that inevitably goes through many “filters”. This way, the initial vision of writers could be altered, something that seems quite realistic for show business

(Wagg, 1998). Mainly, participants of this study suggested that entertainment media has significantly changed the way they present issues of political correctness recently. Some of them expressed that certain series attempt to glorify social issues in order to be more attractive and “trendy”, something that for these participants is “even worse than being actively offensive”.

I guess entertainment media in this time of day tries to make you put things in a box that is pretty. Like, oh, yeah, we are saying "let's all be friends". But it doesn't make you think about things seriously. It avoids a lot of things which can be as harmful as being actively offensive.- Alex

Gen Z is certainly an active and engaged audience of current TV shows, mainly in streaming services (Podara et al., 2021). As a generation, they might choose to watch older shows, such as *The Office*, for many reasons, such as its virality, it's “dark ironic” and “awkward” humor or even the fact that they find it progressive for its time (Diffrient, 2020). However, they have different expectations from newer TV series and they think a show such as *The Office* could probably not premiere in 2023.

Gen Z is very quick to tear apart stuff that's not 100 % politically correct, especially if it's being streamed or broadcast. So I think maybe they could not run it as *The Office*, as all of the jokes again, I think they would not. They would think it's stupid because it would turn viewers away. - Grace

To sum up, the Gen Z participants of this study believe that entertainment media, even in fiction, should reflect the current social momentum, in order to be realistic and therefore attractive to them, as an audience.

I do definitely think that media and entertainment media especially have to be aware of these changes in their social environment and these demands that especially young generations have. Because at the end of the day, the ones who are binge-watching these TV shows are Gen Z - Jacob.

## 5. Conclusion

The research question of this study was: How do members of Generation Z perceive political correctness in a scripted comedy text, through the case study of *The Office*?

The answer to the research question, as found by the researcher, is that Gen Zers certainly perceive political correctness as an essential element of current scripted comedies, if not also older ones. Even though most of them do not consider *The Office* to have entirely politically incorrect humor, they can understand how its approach to sensitive topics, such as race, gender, and sexuality, may be viewed with less tolerance currently. However, they highlight and appreciate the fact that *The Office* was one of the first mainstream TV shows that addressed racism, sexism, and homophobia as existing issues and gave a “voice” to discriminated identities through its diverse characters, all while remaining very entertaining and comical.

Gen Z members of this study all acknowledge that they feel overwhelmed by the great amount of information they receive from their intense social media use. While they underline the visibility that sensitive topics have gained through these platforms, they also admit that they often feel powerless and desensitized due to the responsibility that these issues demand. They describe their generation as more open-minded and sensitive than previous ones, noting, however, that social media is driving them towards extremes and making them prone to division and compartmentalization.

The level of tolerance and understanding that the Gen Z participants of this study had for political (in)correctness varied. Some of them believe that there is a very fine line between political correctness and censorship, while others think that it is about time that political correctness becomes a matter of daily habit in physical and digital spaces. At the same time, they mention a “fear of offending anyone” or “being misunderstood” by what they say. When it comes to entertainment media, the participants seem more flexible about the limits of political correctness in scripted formats, even though they discuss the disadvantageous consequences of “cancel culture” and how prominent it is in their generation.

As *Office* viewers and fans, they note the virality of the series, even ten years after its finale, and highlight the impact of the characters and the cutting-edge mockumentary direction on later comedies. This genre allowed *The Office* to approach sensitive topics of race, gender, and sexuality in an unorthodox, comical, yet persuasive manner. Most of the participants admit feeling highly uncomfortable when they first watched *The Office*, and even describe the humor

as “borderline offensive” at times”. However, they emphasize the significance of the viewer’s critical thinking, when it comes to the portrayal and perception of political and social issues. In general, the participants of this study all view and appreciate *The Office* as “a product of its time”, while pointing out that it could not air as it is nowadays.

The Gen Z members of this study are fans of streaming, binge-watching, and sitcoms. Discussing modern sitcoms on streaming platforms, they notice a trend of sitcoms prioritizing social issues in their script and diverse representation in their casting. Generation Z seems pleased with this modern development of the genre but questions the genuineness and the ulterior motives of the creators. In this context, the prioritization of such issues is related to creators trying to avoid “cancel culture” and Gen Z (along with millennials in many cases) being their target audience and hardest critics. The fault-finding tendency and high expectations of Gen Zers when it comes to inclusivity, representation, and political correctness create a challenging environment for creators of comedies nowadays, one that requires awareness of all kinds of identities and authenticity in their portrayal representation.

### 5.1 Limitations

As with any research procedure, this study has limitations. The first and most significant limitation of this study is the insufficient level of diversity of the sample. As mentioned in Chapter 3.3.1 of the methodology, the researcher was aiming towards a quite diverse sample, with participants of different races, genders, and sexualities. These criteria were relatively met, minding the low number of participants that was needed to carry out this research, except for the criterion of race. The majority of the participants were white, except for two of them, who even identified as “white-passing”. Moreover, seven out of the eleven participants were of Greek descent, making this another area where there was not sufficient diversity of the sample. As issues of race, gender, and sexuality were of central interest to this study, it would be beneficial to examine them through the participation of a more diverse sample, something that could not be achieved.

The second limitation of this study comes down to the nature of another concept that was examined during the research. All participants of this study had to have watched *The Office* since it was the case study. However, their viewing experience can not be considered homogeneous. It is hardly possible to identify the circumstances under which each of the participants watched *The Office* or any series for that matter. The main similarities between the participants were that they all watched the series through a streaming platform and that they watched it as adults, which allowed the researcher to discuss both of these factors in the results section.

Another limitation that can be identified concerns the sensitive topics discussed in this study. While all of the participants were informed before and during the interview process that sensitive topics, such as race, gender, and sexuality, would be analyzed, it is always possible that people might feel uncomfortable expressing their honest opinion on these topics, even if their anonymity is guaranteed. Moreover, the interviews were all recorded for research purposes, a fact that might have contributed to participants potentially feeling uncomfortable discussing these topics.

## 5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

The present study enriches the academic literature on Generation Z's viewing habits, as fans of comedies and the streaming industries, with a significant exploration of their views of political correctness and its representation in comedies. Certainly, there are suggestions for further research on this multifarious topic.

Firstly, this study could benefit from a different method of research, such as focus groups. In a focus group setting, such as the one that Kalviknes Bore (2012) created for her research on audience reception of comedies, the interaction and group dynamics could aid the conversation about sensitive topics and political correctness and result in deeper insights into the topic. Another theme of this study that requires further research is Gen Z's viewing habits on streaming platforms and their engagement with sitcoms. By now, their social media habits and intense use has been thoroughly established. On the other hand, as a crucial segment of the audience of streaming services, Generation Z is under-researched from an academic and societal perspective. Some of the elements regarding this theme that could be examined and enriched are the attention span deficit of Gen Z, the need for inclusivity and authenticity, and the multitasking and "background noise" uses of sitcoms in streaming services.



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## **Appendix A: Survey for recruiting participants**

### **Political Correctness in Comedy**

This form is to be filled by potential participants in a MA research thesis by Natalia Klada Tsapatsari. Please fill this form with your personal information and answer the questions related to political correctness and the TV series "*The Office*" (US). Your answers are completely confidential, will be seen only by the MA student for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone else. You can stop filling out this form at any point.

If you complete this form and submit your answers, you are automatically giving your consent to be contacted for an interview with the MA student. You can then accept or decline.

Thank you for your help!

Please fill out your full name

(mandatory field)

Please fill out your email, in order for the MA student to contact you, in case you are selected for an interview

(mandatory field)

How would you describe your gender? (multiple choice)

- Male (including transgender men)
- Female (including transgender women)
- Prefer to self describe as non -binary
- Prefer to self describe as gender-fluid
- Prefer to self describe as agender
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Please choose the sexual orientation category that best represents you (multiple choice)

- Bisexual
- Gay man
- Gay Woman / Lesbian

- Pansexual
- Prefer to self-describe
- Prefer not to say
- Straight Man
- Straight Woman
- Other

Choose the year you were born in (multiple choice)

- 1997
- 1998
- 1999
- 2000
- 2001
- 2002
- 2003
- 2004

Please fill out your country of origin

Is English your primary language? (multiple choice)

- Yes
- No
- No, but I am fluent in English

Which race or ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Arab
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Latinx
- White / Caucasian
- Middle Eastern
- Multiple ethnicity/ Other (please specify)
- Other

General questions

All of these questions concern the US version of *The Office* (2005-2013)

Are you familiar with the term "political correctness"?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know/ I do not remember

How many seasons of the TV series *The Office* (US version) have you watched?

- I have watched until the first season
- I have watched until the second season
- I have watched until the third season
- I have watched until the fourth season
- I have watched until the fifth season
- I have watched until the sixth season
- I have watched until the seventh season
- I have watched until the eighth season
- I have watched all of the TV series
- I have watched all of the TV series more than once
- I have watched all of the TV series more than twice
- Other...

Please choose the option that best describes your viewing of the *Office*

- I watch *The Office* in English (not dubbed), without any subtitles
- I watch *The Office* in English (not dubbed), with English subtitles
- I watch *The Office* in English (not dubbed), with subtitles of another language
- I watch *The Office* dubbed in another language, besides English

Do you consider yourself to be a fan of *The Office* (US)?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

## Appendix B: Video elicitation: Analysis of each scene that was shown

1. Season 3 Episode 22 - "Women's Appreciation": Phyllis gets flashed in the parking lot of the company. That leads to a series of sexist jokes during the episode. The video is shown until minute 3:37. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ap7aEaPics>
2. Season 3 Episode 9 - "The Convict": Michael discovers that a Black employee that was transferred to the branch has been imprisoned in the past. Afterwards, Michael impersonates a person in prison, indirectly implying that he is impersonating a Black person in prison. He makes a homophobic joke in the middle of his impersonation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7RoP1LKMeM>
3. Season 2 Episode 22 - "Casino Night": Michael has an argument with Darryl (Black character), and he is implying that he is a "thief" and/or "dangerous". I show this video only for the first minute). In his talking head scene, Darryl says the "N" word. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZ6S9FKmm0E>
4. Season 2 Episode 9 - "Email Surveillance": In this cold open scene, Michael thinks the new IT guy is a terrorist, just because he wears a turban on his head. The IT guy is Sikh, but Michael mistakes him for a Muslim. (From 4:06 to 4:53): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKtJkY5w8s0>
5. Season 3 Episode 1 - "Gay Witch Hunt": Michael calls Oscar the "f" word (slur for homosexual men) as a joke, which then leads to Oscar complaining to HR. Then, Michael basically makes Oscar come out to his colleagues, without his consent. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa0EHfr4sOE>. Before I show this video, I have a description of what happens in the rest of the episode, if they do not recall how Oscar came out.



## **Appendix C: Consent form**

### **Information and consent form**

Political Correctness in comedy texts – The case study of Gen Z as viewers of *The Office*

#### **Introduction**

Hello. My name is Natalia Klada Tsapatsari, and I am doing my Master research thesis for Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am conducting research on political correctness, comedy, Gen Z and the Tv series *The Office*

I will explain the study below. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear to you.

If you want to participate in the study, you can indicate this at the end of this form.

#### **What is the research about?**

This research is about Gen Z being viewers and fans of the hit US sitcom *The Office*. The study aims to explore how Gen Z views political correctness in comedy texts.

#### **Why are we asking you to participate?**

I ask you to participate because you are a member of Gen Z and you indicated that you have watched at least the first five seasons of *The Office*

#### **What can you expect?**

The study lasts 3 months.

If you participate in this study, you will take part in:

#### An interview:

The interview will last between 45 minutes to 1 hour. If you do not want to answer a question during the interview, you are not required to do so. The interview has to be recorded.

#### **You decide whether to participate**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Not participating will not affect your work or work-related assessments or reports. You can stop at any time and would not need to provide any explanation.

#### **What are the potential risks and discomforts?**

We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts while participating in this study.

#### **What data will I ask you to provide?**

I will store your data so that I can be in contact with you.

During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, audio recordings, nationality, information about your viewing of *The Office*, opinions about political correctness and Gen Z. I also need your email address by email.

#### **Who can see your data?**

- I store all your data securely.

- Only people involved in the research can see (some of) the data.
- Recordings are transcribed. Your name is replaced with a made-up name.
- Data such as your direct personal data will be stored separately from the transcription.

### **How long will your personal data be stored?**

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years. We retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

### **Using your data for new research**

(Part of) the data we collect may be useful in anonymized form, for example for educational purposes and future research, including in very different research areas. We will make the data publicly available after proper anonymization. We ensure that the data cannot be traced back to you/we do not disclose anything that identifies you.

### **What happens with the results of the study?**

You may indicate if you would like to receive the results.

### **Do you have questions about the study?**

If you have any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data, please contact me.

Name: Natalia Klada Tsapatsari

Phone number: +306981114270

Email: 658500nk@eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the Data Protection Officer (fg@eur.nl) or visit [www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl](http://www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl). (T: 088 - 1805250)

### **Do you regret your participation?**

You may regret your participation. Even after participating, you can still stop. Please indicate this by contacting me. I will delete your data.

### **Ethics approval**

This research has been reviewed and approved by an internal review committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This committee ensures that research participants are protected. If you would like to know more about this RERC/IRB, look here <https://www.eur.nl/en/research/research-services/research-quality-integrity/ethical-review>

## Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered. I know that I am allowed to stop at any time.

By signing this form, I

1. consent to participate in this research.
2. consent to the use of my personal data;
3. confirm that I am at least 18 years old[1].
4. understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time; and
5. understand that my data will be anonymised for publication, educational purposes and further research.

**Check the boxes below if you consent to this.**

*Required for research participation,*

**Data**

I consent to the researcher's collection, use and retention of the following data: nationality, gender, age, viewing habits

**Audio recording**

I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

**Use for educational purposes and further research**

I hereby consent to having my personal data, namely: nationality, gender, age, viewing habits stored and used for educational purposes and for future research, also in other areas of research than this research.

**New research**

I give permission to be contacted again for new research.

**Name of participant:**

**Participant's signature:**

**Date: 14/4/2023**

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[1] GDPR permits 16 years old in the EEA to consent. From an ethics perspective, holding on to the age people become an adult may be preferable. Different countries may handle a different age for becoming an adult.

## **Appendix D: Information about the participants**

“Andrea”: The first participant was Antigoni Stavridi, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Antigoni is a white Greek bisexual woman. She is a BA graduate from the University of Athens.

“Elisa”: The second participant was Eirini Mavroeidi, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Eirini is a white Greek bisexual woman. She is a BA graduate from the University of Athens.

“Sofia”: The third participant was Stavrianna Orfanou, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Sofia is a white Greek lesbian woman. She is a BA graduate from the Athens University of Economics and Business.

“Mary”: The fourth participant was Myrto Zara, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Myrto is a white Greek woman who does not want to define her sexuality. She is a BA student at the University of Patras.

“Alex”: The fifth participant was Telemacus Gongalez - Santiago Maratos, born in 1999 in Madrid Spain. Telemacus is a white straight half Greek half Spanish man. He is a BA student of the Athens School of Fine Arts.

“Monica”: The sixth participant was Marina Mouzaki, born in 2001 in Athens Greece. Marina is a white Greek straight woman. She is a BA student at the University of Athens.

“Theo”: The seventh participant was Thodoris Zouras, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Thodoris is a white straight Greek man. He is a BA graduate of the University of Piraeus.

“Genevieve”: The eighth participant was Maria Gabriela Ordaz Freites, born in 1999 in Caracas Venezuela. Maria Gabriela is a latina straight Venezuelan woman. She is a BA graduate from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam and she is an expat in the Netherlands.

“Jacob”: The ninth participant was Pedro Joao Silva, born in 1999 in Lisbon Portugal. Pedro Joao is a half white - half Indian Portuguese man. He is an international MA student of Psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

“Steven”: The tenth participant was Simos Koressis, born in 1999 in Athens Greece. Simos is a white straight Greek man. He is a BA student at the Technical University of Chania in Crete.

“Grace”: The eleventh participant was Eva Hanisch, born in 1997 in Munich, Germany. Eva is a white straight German woman. She is an international MA student of Psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

## Appendix E: Coding Tree

THEME	Sub - Themes	Examples of Open Codes	Examples of Quotes
The main characteristics of Gen Zers and their opinion on Political Correctness	The visibility that social media brought to social issues		"Since we are talking about political correctness, I think we are more open towards people in general or the future of listening to other opinions, but mostly progressive ones. So I think we are the "global generation" in a way."
	How Gen Zers characterize themselves	Open-minded	"I'd say, thankfully, Gen Z has taken big steps compared to previous generations concerning diversity. I'd say we are so much more open-minded." - Monica
		Division/ Judgemental	"I feel like nowadays, everyone has a super strong opinion on almost everything that's public, on every celebrity, on every movie, on every political party. Gen Z either loves or hates, and they're very quick to cancel people or hype people up. And I think it's a bit toxic." - Grace
		Sensitivity	"I think there used to be a huge backlash from them of "Oh, your generation is always making up problems. You're always so sensitive". Maybe we're sensitive, but I don't think that's a bad thing. I think people use sensitivity as something to be ashamed of, and then it's not rational when I think it's the most human thing possible to be sensitive." - Jacob
		Having Radically Online take	"I'm not the person that will say "Okay, I won't call you these pronouns. There are only two genders, blah, blah, blah". But to me, we have all become a little bit "chronically online. [...] It's a term that is used a lot online about people that... For example, they use neopronouns or they say things like "tanning is racist, exercising is fat-phobic", this sort of thing. I think they overanalyze how nobody will be offended and they don't realize that being offended by something singular and discrimination are two very different things." - Mary
	Censorship, Cancel Culture, and being afraid of offense	Political Correctness and Censorship	"I don't think there's a clear line where political correctness should stop or begin or in a way of how it could be...a form of censorship. I want to say that I'm afraid political correctness will ... censor in a way a bit more than it should". - Andrea
		Cancel Culture	"I think through the last decade or so, the series and shows have become more and more part of "woke" culture. And we see a lot of shows sometimes doing it subtly or sometimes it's more obvious. I think they have lost the touch that made the sitcom comical in a way that nowadays, I think the sense of humor of a person is getting judged due to some issues that might appear on a show. Nowadays we think "Oh, it must be canceled". - Steven

Understanding Gen Z and the role of social media	The intense use: Being overwhelmed by information	Afraid not to offend	<p>"I feel like that's a thing nowadays. I feel like the fear, the anxiety, and the worry of coming across wrong and then ending up in someone else's social media as a laughingstock." - Genevieve</p> <p>"Because we grew up with technology, I think we became experts at navigating it. And with that, I think it comes with a lot of responsibility and a lot of... I don't think a lot of us signed up for knowing a lot of the things we know." - Jacob</p> <p>"But also, I guess I am part of a group of people that think like me. I like to watch things that I agree with, that people are intolerant of. While some other people like to consume media that is different from what I like. So I am still part of a bias of people." - Alex</p>
	Echo chambers		<p>"I think we're overall very empathetic because I think we grew up watching everything on our phones and seeing... Right now, we are following a war through TikTok. That's not usual. That's a new experience that we had to have, which I think that's good. But at the same time, I think it really diminished our attention span. I think it made us desensitized, I think, to certain things." - Jacob</p>
Gen Z as viewers of the Office	Diminished attention span <i>The virality of The Office</i>		<p>"But the Office, I think I wanted to watch it because it's so viral, everybody's talking about it. I had watched some of the clips on YouTube and I'm like "Okay, let's just give it a try". - Sofia</p>
	<i>The Office</i> characters	Michael Scott	<p>"Nobody likes to see a show that says "Don't be racist". It makes people sad. It is not the way to bring... Because in the end, what we are all afraid of deeply is not being integrated in society, being alone, being an outcast. So, somebody who acts like this, you can see that he does not have many friends. And the more he gets educated about it, and the more he realizes how ignorant he is. And he tries even in his own awkward way to fix things about his belief, the more likable he becomes. So to me, it's crazy that people don't understand that it is very anti-racist, very anti-discrimination. And the way jokes are played, exactly they're like the cautionary tale: "Don't be like Michael, who everybody hates". - Mary</p>
		The other characters	<p>For me, it's the realness of the characters and the depth of the characters. It's from everything, like physical appearance. There are no crazy, hot, model kind of characters. They're average people that you could see in an office. They have their faults, they have their defects, but they are all very relatable. So to me, you really relate with the characters and it creates a situation in which characters become and un-become main characters of the show." - Mary</p>

The Office as a Mockumentary		<p>"But like... It's The Office way. You can see it even when other sitcoms have even a special episode that is filmed that way and they have the "fourth wall break" or commentary or shoot it in a documentary style. When you see it, you say, "Ah, this is The Office style. They're trying to do an Office episode". - Elisa</p>
How The Office handled sensitive topics		<p>"The fact that Oscar was gay, but that was in 2005 and the other characters... They were shocked. They were not sure how to deal with it. I don't think this would have happened in a series now... And the people that were the audience, in 2005, I think... For example, Michael's reaction would be easier for them to understand back then. The fact that he was negative about it". - Sofia</p>
	The humor	<p>"I would say the really dark irony because I think that that wasn't so popular. Of course, I'm from a different generation, but I legitimately think that dark comedy and dark humor started picking up in the 2010s". - Genevieve</p>
	Realism and exaggeration	<p>"I think that it has achieved the fine line between realism and just surrealism, pure surrealism because it is set in a realistic environment like an office. But the characters are so surreal that it's just funny on its own". - Monica</p>
	The reasons why Gen Z believes The Office could not have aired today	<p>"It's not a show that preaches moral conclusions. It does not use a certain ethical agenda that it tries to push to the viewers in a very direct way. It has a humor that I don't think would be acceptable today, maybe. It could be really hard and it would take very careful writing and to be honest, a very good marketing team, a very good... Not everyone could produce a show with such humor." - Mary</p>
<i>Gen Z's decoding of The Office</i>	"I did not like The Office at fi	<p>"The first time that I watched the first season, I really didn't like it. I thought it was too awkward. It was too forced. I didn't enjoy it. And then I watched everything. And then I watched the first season again and it made sense." - Jacob</p>
The Office needs the viewer's critical thinking		<p>"It's a shame when I think about these kinds of shows because I think that for you to really understand them, you do need to have a very high level- or not a very high level, but you need to have some baseline self-awareness to understand that this is a joke. You know what I mean? This is all a joke meant to make you see the problems. Just because you're laughing doesn't mean that it's supposed to be funny. It's supposed to make you think". - Genevieve</p>



<i>Gen Z as fans of streaming and comedy</i>	Binge-watching		
	The reasons Gen Z loves sitcoms		<p>"Usually I like sitcoms, like Friends, Office, How I Met Your Mother because they have a sense that every episode has a story and with the end of the episode, the main plot of that episode ends. So I can watch five or 20 episodes. And most of the time I don't really need to pay that much attention to what I am seeing". -Steven</p>
	The value of inclusivity and authenticity		<p>"Generally, I love seeing inclusivity in shows. But not in the "trying to force it and sell" way. And I feel like sitcoms kind of manage to use important things like social justice, and inclusivity, but also keep it light. And not forcing it. Like being able to make fun of themselves and the situation." - Elisa</p>
	The future of comedy		<p>"I do definitely think that media and entertainment media especially have to be aware of these changes in their social environment and these demands that especially young generations have. Because at the end of the day, the ones who are binge-watching these TV shows are Gen Z" - Jacob.</p>

## **Appendix F: Topic Guide**

### Introduction:

“Hello (name). Thank you for participating in the study. This is a study about Gen Z and political correctness through the case study of *The Office* as a TV comedy series that was an American sitcom broadcasted by the NBC from 2005 to 2013. This interview is going to last 45 minutes to an hour. This interview is done for my Master Research Thesis at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. In this interview, we're going to discuss themes of race, sexuality, gender and religion. If at any moment you don't feel comfortable participating anymore, you can abandon the study at any time and your recording of the interview can be deleted at any time if you ask so. However, you have given your written consent, so what you will say in this interview will be used for the purposes of this study. If you don't have any questions at this point, we can begin.”

### Warm up questions, that incline the participant to talk about their identity:

- Tell me a bit about yourself? What do you do, what are your interests, and a few info about your upbringing? (looking for identity and personality self-description)
- How would you describe your cultural or ethnic identity, and how has this influenced your life experiences?
- How do you think your gender or sexual identity has shaped your personal and professional journey, and how do you approach issues of diversity?
- How do you see your identity evolving over time, and what are some of the factors that might influence that evolution?
- Extra question (if not enough information has been given): Can you share a story or experience that was particularly formative in shaping your sense of identity?

### Topic 1: Questions about TV series, sitcoms, streaming services:

- Do you enjoy watching Tv shows? How, which ones and how often?
- Do you like sitcoms? Have you watched many of them?
- Extra question: How do you think streaming services have changed the way people watch and consume TV comedies?

*Segway into next topic: “You are a participant of this study because you have watched the Office. Can you talk to me a bit more about when/ how did you watch this TV series?”*

## Topic 2: Questions about the *Office*

### a) Questions about the show's humor

- What are some of the key comedic elements used in *The Office*, and how do they contribute to the show's overall humor?
- How does the show balance more absurd, slapstick humor with more nuanced, character-driven comedy?
- What role does irony and satire play in *The Office's* humor?
- How do the different characters in *The Office* contribute to the show's overall comedic tone?
- How does the show use awkward or uncomfortable humor to generate laughs, and why do you think this approach is effective?
- Do you think that the show's mockumentary-style cinematography and editing contribute to its overall comedic tone?
- Do you think that the show's humor has evolved over the course of its nine seasons?

### b) Questions about the show's legacy and sensitive themes

- What are some of the ways in which *The Office* has influenced the style of modern TV comedy?
- How does the show navigate sensitive or taboo topics with humor, and what are some examples of this?
- Do you think that *the Office* could be considered politically incorrect according to the current view of things?
- What is the legacy of *The Office* in terms of its impact on American TV comedy, and why do you think the show continues to be popular with viewers today?

## Topic 3: Political Correctness

- *Segway Question: "This study also examines the topic of political correctness. How do you define/understand political correctness?"*

Explanation of how Political Correctness is defined in this research: *"I will have to inform you that in this research I am going to use a more etymological approach in defining political correctness. For me, as the researcher of this study, political correctness comes down to the literal word "politis" which means "citizen". So, in this context political correctness is not related with politics, but mostly with us being citizens of the same town, country, continent, with equal rights and how we navigate our behavior around that".*

- Do you think that political correctness is important in the era we are living in?

- Do you personally try to be politically correct in your daily life? Do you expect the same from the people you interact with?
- Do you think that the media, and more specifically entertainment media, have the responsibility of being politically correct? If yes, More/ Less than individuals?
- Do you think that Tv shows should bear in mind being politically correct?
- How do you think political correctness relates to issues of free speech and censorship?

#### Topic 4: Generation Z

- How do you define Generation Z, and what are some characteristics that distinguish them from other generations?
- Undoubtedly, Gen Z is a generation that has an important relationship with technology and social media. How do you think that this has affected their POV on certain topics?
- In your opinion, how does political correctness affect the way Generation Z communicates and interacts with others?
- How do members of Generation Z approach discussions about sensitive topics such as race, gender, and sexuality?
- Do you think that Generation Z is more accepting of diversity and difference than previous generations? Why or why not?
- In what ways do you think Generation Z's attitudes towards political correctness differ from those of Millennials or Baby Boomers?

#### Questions about Gen Z and their relationship with the media

- How do you think the entertainment media's perception and representation of political correctness has influenced Generation Z's attitudes and beliefs?
- What are some of the biggest challenges that Generation Z faces when it comes to navigating conversations about political correctness?
- Do you think that Generation Z is more likely to call out instances of political incorrectness than previous generations? Why or why not?
- How do you think Generation Z's attitudes towards political correctness differ between different regions of the world?
- What do you think are some of the biggest misconceptions that people have about Generation Z and political correctness?

**[VIDEO ELICITATION PART LASTING APPROXIMATELY FOR 8 MINUTES]**

Topic 5: Final questions about *The Office*, political correctness in sitcoms and Gen Z as an audience, in accordance with the videos from the elicitation

Segway question: “Now that you watched these scenes, are there any thoughts you want to share?”

- *The Office* has been criticized for its use of racially insensitive humor. How do you think the show's handling of these issues has evolved over time?
- In your opinion, does *The Office* reinforce or challenge stereotypes about different social groups? Why?
- How does the show use humor to comment on issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, and what impact do you think this has on viewers?
- How do you think the show's humor relates to issues of political correctness, and has this changed over time?
- How does the show address issues of gender and sexuality, and does it do so in a way that is respectful and inclusive?
- How do the different characters in *The Office* reflect different attitudes towards issues of political correctness, and what effect does this have on the show's humor?
- How do you think *The Office* will be remembered in the context of the current cultural moment, particularly with regards to issues of diversity, inclusion, and political correctness?
- Let's imagine some creative writers of a new TV/ streaming comedy in Hollywood right now. Do you think they are bearing in mind all of what we discussed today?

