

## Jews on TV: A Snapshot of Modern Television's Representation of Jewish Characters

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### Abstract

*While Jews represent only two percent of Americans, they are widely shown in modern television. These Jewish characters often represent outdated stereotypes that affect public perception. Cultivation theory and social identity theory suggest that audiences tend to believe characters on television to be accurate representations of real life. This paper researched common stereotypes and investigated to what extent these stereotypes were present in modern television. Based on a qualitative content analysis of three different shows, results indicated that stereotypes were present and not questioned. Representations of Jews were largely similar across the three series; characters were open about their Jewish identity and were naturally integrated into American culture, though frequently subject to negative assumptions because of their religious cultures.*

### I. Introduction

Most people can easily think of a show that features a Jewish character. While this seems positive, many Jewish characters are inaccurately represented, using outdated and unrealistic stereotypes. Throughout history, Jews have been portrayed in different ways on the screen. The most famous characters have filled the roles of three main stereotypes: the Jewish American Princess, the overbearing Jewish mother, and the cheap Jew.

Television has represented Jewish characters in varying degrees; in programs such as *Seinfeld*, the Jewish characters display their religion rather obviously. In the sitcom *Friends*, however, three of the six main characters are Jewish, but Judaism is rarely introduced as a topic throughout the course of the ten seasons. This paper analyzed current seasons of television to discover the ways in which Jewish characters are portrayed.

## II. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on two main theories, cultivation theory and social identity theory. It also identifies two pressing issues relevant to the topic: Jewish stereotypes in television and the idea of “otherness” in religion and culture.

### ***Cultivation Theory***

Cultivation theory is frequently cited in mass communications. It proposes that the more people who view television, the more they are affected by and truly believe the images and stereotypes portrayed on television; and with increased viewership comes increased belief that events on the screen accurately portray reality (Gerbner, 1998). This means that, even if actors on the screen do not represent realistic issues or attributes, viewers may still take their actions on screen to be the truth. This is especially important when considering religious and cultural groups. “For some people with limited direct contact with other ethnic groups in social settings, television becomes a tool with which to observe minority groups and form subsequent opinions” (Lee et al., 2009, p. 98). This is problematic because if these groups are absent from the screen, it suggests they are unimportant, yet a narrow view may interpret characters as representatives of a large group of people. (Graves, 1999; Lee et al., 2009). For example, Fujioka (1999) found that when viewers see groups on TV they do not regularly see in their own lives, they are more likely to believe the stereotypes on the shows.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory suggests that a key factor in individual identity and self-concept is group membership (Lee et al., 2009). According to social identity theory, “Individuals strive for positive self-regard; when group membership is internalized as an aspect of their self-concept, individuals may favor their ingroup over outgroups to produce positive self-regard” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1987).

Based on this theory, the sheer number of media representations is important, as the rate of minority occurrences represents the “group’s strength in the intergroup context and reflects the social value and status of the group” (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 112). Like other groups without these representations, Jewish people could believe their group is not significant because of its lack of appearances on television. Tajfel (1978) explains that people try to compare the most favorable characteristics of their own people (in group) with the least favorable characteristics of the outgroup (Lee et al., 2009). This means that, if programs only represent the least favorable characteristics of Jewish people, then outgroup members will automatically latch onto these stereotypes, without even being given the opportunity to see the positive characteristics of those different from themselves.

### ***Jewish Stereotypes in Television***

Researchers of popular television have identified three dominant stereotypes of Jews in television: the overbearing Jewish mother, the cheap Jew, and the Jewish-American Princess. Dozens of examples in television history have portrayed characters with these characteristics.

The idea of the overbearing Jewish mother has been analyzed in numerous texts, including Antler (2007). Even the title of the book, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother*, demonstrates the idea of a mother who is so concerned about her children’s lives that she constantly nags them about anything from their dating lives to their diet. According to Gasztold (2013), the qualities of the Jewish mother can be boiled down to “unrelenting emphasis on food and a fear of ever feeling hungry, a myriad of ‘be carefuls,’ which are to protect a child from the dangers of everyday life, and the insistence on constant contact with grown-up children.”

A second stereotype is that of the cheap Jew. One of the most popular Jewish characters on the sitcom *Friends* is Ross Geller, a Jew from Long Island. While Ross makes a good wage as a paleontologist at a museum, he still displays moments of the stereotypical cheap Jew. While on a vacation at a nice hotel, Ross proceeds to steal anything that he can get away with. He fills his suitcases with dozens of shampoos, conditioners, and even toilet paper and tissues. Ross is also known to get his hair cut at the most inexpensive locations and refuses to leave a tip. While Jews have a stereotype for being in the business of making money, they are also subject to the assumption that they are stingy with their money. Topic (2014) analyzed *Friends*

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use of stereotypes and argued that in modern day television shows, “Jewish representation still remains based on questioning [the Jewish characters] distinctive identities and showing them as assimilated into Christian culture, or showing how a minority complain to the majority that accepts Christian tradition” (p. 4).

Topic’s research also explored the idea of the Jewish American Princess. After examining the show *The Princesses of Long Island* as background research, Topic found that “Jewish tradition and culture are largely presented through hedonism, and as if Jewish girls are only interested in fashion and luxury goods” (2014, p. 8). This show, which aired in 2013, reflects “the historical stereotyping of the American Jews, and girls who cast in the show resemble all stereotypes of typical Jewish women” (2014, p. 8). Female characters in both *Friends* and *The Princesses of Long Island* represent characteristics associated with the Jewish American Princess. These three main stereotypes are present in varying degrees in television programs and are important to understand when analyzing Jewish television characters.

### ***The Idea of Otherness in Religion***

The identity of Jewish characters on TV often comes to light as a contrast to other religious faiths. Instead of saying “I’m Jewish,” the characters seem to be saying “I’m not Christian.” This small detail can make a big difference and can be captured in the term “otherness.” In many television shows, “Jewishness is only expressible as the opposite of Christianity; that it is only ever in a negative relation to the dominant culture” (Pateman, 2007, p. 66). In most shows, if religion isn’t introduced as a topic, the viewer assumes that the characters are Christian. With Jewish characters, religion needs to be worked into the plot. This is not necessarily surprising, since Jews only represent 2.2 percent of the American population (“Jews in America: By The Numbers,” 2017), but the ways they are introduced is crucial to the successful portrayal of the Jewish religion. Baskind (2007) argued that otherness is portrayed in three ways: “by the discrimination [that the character] experienced, through flagrant stereotypes, or by concealing or merely implying their Jewishness” (p. 2). In Topic’s study of *Friends*, she found the characters “are largely presented in a stereotyped way and as embracing Christianity not only as a part of their Jewish identity but also as a prevailing religious identity in some aspects” (2014, p. 6). The idea of “otherness,” as well as its risks and benefits to the Jewish people, is further examined in this paper.

## **III. Methods**

A content analysis was used in order to gain information from the selected television programs. A content analysis is an “objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2017).

The research analyzed the shows *New Girl* (2011- present), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), and *Transparent* (2014-present.) These programs were chosen because each of them features at least one Jewish character, all in varying roles, and each of them is currently on air.

*Curb Your Enthusiasm* is a comedy that focuses on Larry David, a wealthy, semi-retired television writer and producer, who plays himself. David plays his role alongside his ex-wife, Cheryl; his partner-in-crime, Leon; his best friend, Jeff and Jeff’s wife, Susie, who David constantly fights with. David is known for pushing boundaries, refusing to be politically correct, and getting himself into trouble because of his tendency to obsess over nothing. David is often disliked because he doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut and always tells it like it is. He is open about being Jewish and has mostly Jewish friends. The show went on a hiatus for seven years, from 2011 until 2018, when it returned for its ninth season.

*New Girl* is a comedy that portrays the life of Jess, a quirky, upbeat schoolteacher who lives in a Los Angeles loft with her three male roommates: Schmidt, Nick, and Winston. Schmidt is a self-made Jewish man in marketing who loves to dress well and show off his style. He has a slight obsession with his body because he grew up obese, but recently lost all the weight, so he has sculpted muscles that he enjoys showing off. Nick is a law-school dropout who works at a bar and barely makes enough money to pay his rent. Nick often gets into situations where he needs Schmidt to take care of him, both physically and financially. Nick and Schmidt have been best friends since they became college roommates, and have lived together ever since. Winston is a police officer who often plays along with the shenanigans of his roommates.

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*Transparent* is a comedy-drama that focuses on the Pfeffermans, a Jewish family with three children. The main character of the show is Maura Pfefferman (born Mort,) a transgender woman who revealed her gender identity to her family after living her life as a man. Maura was previously married to Shelly Pfefferman, who is accepting of her ex's identity. Maura and Shelly have three Jewish children, Sarah, Josh and Ali, one of which has children of her own. The show contains themes about transgender individuals and the struggles they endure. It also highlights the family's experience with Judaism.

The analysis aimed to qualitatively examine the current state of Jews on television. The content analysis focused on three main themes. The first theme was what type of role the characters played, whether that be a main role, supporting role, villain, or hero. The second theme was the ways in which the characters portray their Judaism, in regards to their vocalization and pride in their religion. The third and most important theme was how the characters played into traditional stereotypes of Jewish people. To do this, the author selected one of the most recent seasons from each of the shows, in which the character was well established in the role (meaning it wasn't their first or last episode.) By selecting one season from each, the author was able to thoroughly examine the content in each of the shows, and compare and contrast the various characters.

The characters were initially coded for three main stereotypes – the overbearing Jewish mother, the Jewish American Princess, and the cheap Jew – although additional stereotypes emerged through the coding process. The author chose three stereotypes because each has been established as a recognized stereotype of Jewish people in the United States. The author examined these television characters based on external descriptions of these specific stereotypes found in previous research. A coding sheet was used to categorize each of the actions portrayed by these characters into one of three main categories (role, expression of Judaism, and stereotypes), and then three sub-categories (the overbearing Jewish mother, the Jewish American Princess, and the cheap Jew.)

The first step of this process was to categorize the content. Clear and functional categories lead to manageable overall systems (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2017). For the first main category, the units of analysis were the number of episodes a character was featured in the season, and then how many scenes within an episode focused on that specific character. This was done to identify the importance of the role of the specific Jewish character. For the second main category, the unit of analysis were how many times a character discussed being Jewish within the season. For the third main category, the unit of analysis were how many times the character exhibited an action that related directly to one of the three sub-category stereotypes. Specific phrases from previous research that described these stereotypes were used to establish the scale.

**RQ1:** Do the characters in these shows represent traditional stereotypes of Jews?

**RQ2:** Do the characters in these shows openly discuss the fact that they are Jewish?

**RQ3:** Do the three shows represent Jews in a similar manner?

**RQ4:** What roles do these Jewish characters play in these shows?

## IV. Findings

First, the Jewish characters in the show were categorized into main characters or supporting characters. Larry David (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*) and Schmidt (*New Girl*) are both main characters. In *Transparent*, Maura is a main character and the rest of the members of the Pfefferman family are supporting characters. None of these characters played roles such as the villain or hero. For the purpose of coding, three main themes were identified: the cheap Jew, the overbearing Jewish mother, and the Jewish American Princess. After coding three full seasons, two new themes emerged: the ideas of Jewish appearance and the casual use of Jewish expressions. The Jewish American Princess, however, was not represented in any of the shows. For this reason, the main Jewish themes coded were revised to: the cheap Jew, the overbearing Jewish mother, Jewish appearance, and the casual use of Jewish expressions. Important scenes and lines were quoted for their significance.

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### ***The Cheap Jew***

These storylines revealed a generational difference in terms of willingness to spend. In *New Girl*, Schmidt makes his own money and enjoys spending it freely. He spends thousands of dollars on suits and even offers to pay for his roommates' expenses to alleviate their stress. When searching for a wedding venue, Schmidt is willing to spend his entire life savings on the one event.

However, in *Transparent*, 68-year-old Shelly Pfefferman is notoriously stingy with her money. She never wants to spend more money than she has to and even creates a chart to track her spending. When Shelly says that she doesn't want to waste money on a hotel, one of her children responds: "Mom, you don't have to be so stingy with yourself." This raises the possibility that there is a generational difference when it comes to Jews and spending.

But this observation is challenged in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where 70-year-old Larry David uses his money freely. After believing that he is under attack, David is willing to move to a fancy hotel indefinitely, and even considers buying another house where he can hide out. David is known for having extravagant things; he lives in a mansion and even has private security living in his house. Part of this willingness to spend could be related to the fact that Larry David is a television celebrity, not just a wealthy Jew out of the spotlight.

### ***The Jewish Mother***

In an unconventional way, Schmidt fills the role of the overbearing mother in the way he takes care of Nick, his best friend. Nick's life is in shambles, and he struggles to find his path. Schmidt plays perfectly into the stereotypical behaviors associated with the overbearing Jewish mother, such as worrying about Nick's dating life, wanting to build up Nick's confidence by telling him he can go back to law school to have a career again, and making sure that he is eating well. The stereotypical mother even worries that the children aren't eating enough. In one scene, Schmidt says to Nick: "I'm happy you're eating breakfast, Nick, good to see you're taking care of yourself now."

In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David is friends with the nasally Susie, who is annoying, overbearing, and always wants to know everyone's personal business. Susie is also fiercely protective of the people she loves, just like a Jewish mother. When David offends Susie's future son-in-law, Susie kicks him out of the house and demands an apology if David wishes to be friends with the family again. This extreme measure to protect her family demonstrates how Susie falls into the stereotype of the overprotective mother.

In *Transparent*, Shelly Pfefferman is so concerned about her son's poor diet that she constantly tries to make him a meal, get him to go to the Kosher deli, or pour his refreshments to make sure he's feeling satisfied and healthy. Shelly often goes too far, overstepping her boundaries because she is so obsessed with taking care of her children.

### ***Jewish Appearance***

In the show *New Girl*, Schmidt receives an overwhelming number of comments about his Jewish appearance, including:

*"Has anyone ever told you that you look like a Jewish Kennedy?"*

*"You're really sexy for a Jew."*

*"How do I look? How Jewish? I mean like good Jewish or bad Jewish?"*

*"I'm having my teeth shaved by a 25th of an inch. Fawn thinks that I have the teeth of an immigrant. She says every time she looks at me, all she can see is Fievel Mousekevitz singing 'There Are No Cats in America.' Those little mice Jews."*

All of these statements give Schmidt's appearance a negative connotation.

In *Transparent*, it is difficult to identify Jewish themes in regards to appearance because looks are a central element of the show itself. Since so many of the characters are either transgender or gender non-conforming, their appearance isn't related to their faith nearly as much as it is related to the gender they identify with.

In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the characters make many jabs at Larry David's appearance. At one point, David wears a wig and mustache as a disguise in order to hide. When he bumps into a very attractive female

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friend, she says: "I like the wig. It hides the Jew." When Larry rides in an Uber and discusses his heritage, his driver tells him: "On a scale of one to five, looks-wise, you're a two."

In all of these examples, the subject of the Jewish comment does not outwardly express any anger towards the derogatory comments. Instead, the subject continues on with the conversation, acting as if the statement was never even said.

### ***Casual Use of Jewish Expressions***

In each of the shows, there were instances in which both Jewish and non-Jewish characters used traditional Jewish expressions in a very casual manner.

Larry David constantly uses Jewish expressions and casually indicates his Jewish heritage:

When David sets up a friend with a hooker, he says: "I did a hooker mitzvah."

When yelling at a friend, he screams, "You're just a Jew from the Bronx!"

When explaining a wedding, David talks about the "rabbi or minister or whoever."

When talking about mail carriers, he mentions women wearing "shmatas," which is Yiddish for an ugly housedress.

David also has a close friend, Leon, who is black and often talks about his skin color. When Leon discusses issues he encounters because of his race, David frequently makes comparisons to situations he encounters because he's Jewish. In one scene, David and Leon discuss when they're on the phone, they can identify the respective race or religion of the person on the other end of the line. David says: "Jews I can tell within a minute. Man or woman. Two minutes and I could tell you if they're reform or conservative." As David walks into his home one afternoon, he hears two people having sex, one of which has a thick New York accent. Within a split second, David says: "Do I hear a Jew?" David and his friends often throw dinner parties, which include both Jews and non-Jews. During one of those parties, Susie casually uses the Yiddish word "beshert" to describe David's destiny.

In *Transparent*, Shelly is constantly saying "oy" or "mazels" (which is short for mazel tov) and other characters say phrases such as "living like a Malibu Jew," indicating that the person lives a wealthy lifestyle. When one of the young children goes to a deli and asks for a potato pancake, his mother casually says, "No, I think those are only for Hanukah." These anecdotes are all small and seemingly insignificant. What's important about them is that they were seamlessly integrated into the dialogue of the show, without mentioning the actual Jewish religion or culture.

Throughout these shows, each of the characters is very open about the fact that they are Jewish. None of the episodes contain moments in which Jewish characters try to hide their faith and background. Instead, the Jewish characters remain open about their religion, despite the fact that it often results in receiving negative comments.

Of the three series coded, *Transparent* is the only one in which Judaism is a key element to the storyline. In the Pfefferman family, Judaism is an important yet sometimes frustrating part of the characters' lives. In some scenes, the characters take pride in their Jewish heritage, and openly discuss their experiences with their religion and cultures. In other scenes, the family members resent the way that Judaism has negatively affected their lives and made them different than the typical American. Judaism is likely an important element of the plot because each of the main characters is Jewish. In the other two shows, the main characters are a mix of Jews and non-Jews, and Judaism is mainly expressed in regards to expressions and appearances.

## **V. Conclusion**

This paper sought to examine the current state of Judaism on television and the portrayal of Jewish characters. The characters in these shows represented traditional Jewish stereotypes, as opposed to questioning them. While the research sample is limited to three television shows, each of the shows represents a different type of Jew, ranging from characters who closely identify with their faith, to characters who do not believe it to be an important part of their identity. The roles of these characters ranged from leading actor to supporting-role. The three shows also represent a range in the number of Jewish characters

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in a typical scene. *New Girl* has the fewest number of important Jewish characters, then *Curb Your Enthusiasm* with a few important ones, and finally *Transparent* with the greatest number of Jewish main characters.

The analysis found four dominant themes: The cheap Jew, the overbearing Jewish mother, Jewish appearance, and the casual use of Jewish expressions. Mentions of Judaism were often used as a way to perpetuate stereotypes. In terms of Jewish appearance, none of the comments were positive. Instead, all referred to undesirable Jewish features that made the character stick out from the norm. Each show featured moments in which the Jewish characters received these negative comments about their appearance. A clear pattern exists in these moments; the characters never respond to the comments, but instead act like they never even happened. This raises the question of why they don't respond to the comments, and what effect this may have on both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences of these shows. According to cultivation theory, audiences may believe that this type of behavior is both common and acceptable.

Many Americans hold a racial connection that is not affected by religion, but Jews differ in this way. This issue is unique to Jewish people, because of their strong geographic connection, which leads to the frequent use of "gene talk." In her work on Native Americans and DNA, Kim Tallbear uses the expression "gene talk" to refer to "the idea that essential truths about identity inhere in sequences of DNA," (Imhoff & Kaell, 2017, p. 96). This is one possible explanation for why the issue of appearance in religion is such a prominent theme throughout these three shows.

These findings come at a time when religious relations are a highly contested topic, according to the Pew Research Center. In the center's research entitled "Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups," Jews were found to be among the groups that receive the warmest ratings (2017). This indicates that, while Jewish stereotypes are persistent, they do not result in overall negative attitudes toward Jewish people. Another interesting finding is that, in all of the negative comments made about appearance, none of them were made from Jew to Jew. This may be because "religious groups tend to rate their own group most positively" ("Americans Express," 2017). While the use of these stereotypes might not be negatively affecting the perception of Jewish people, it still means that these Jewish characters are defined by these stereotypes.

This research is interesting in contrast to Grell's (2017) "The Fight for Equality: The Role of Latino Stereotypes in *Jane the Virgin*," who found that *Jane the Virgin* contained many stereotypes, but these stereotypes were "presented to be questioned and challenged" (p. 42). The television shows in this paper found quite the opposite, with stereotypes being reinforced rather than questioned. While *Jane the Virgin* was able to benefit from the positive impacts of cultivation theory, these three shows were not. This research adds to previous knowledge by demonstrating that, while some progressive shows shape the plot of the series to challenge stereotypes, many others still give in to these negative beliefs.

Research regarding Jews on television is meaningful for a wide range of audiences, even for television producers. In general, the most accurate and meaningful representations of Jews were found when multiple Jewish characters appeared in a scene. On the flip side, the most negative comments about Judaism were made when a character was the only Jew in the scene. In future series, producers may keep this in mind, and consider including multiple Jewish characters. Doing this may result in more accurate representations of Jewish life and will demonstrate how the everyday lives of Jews are quite similar to other American people. As discussed in the literature review, Judaism was often portrayed in regards to "otherness," meaning that Judaism was only brought up for its differences from other religious groups. When multiple Jewish characters are seen on the screen, the idea of "otherness" isn't relevant because the characters aren't being compared to non-Jews. This results in more positive representations of Jewish characters. Cultivation theory forged many of the paths for this research paper, and should also affect the decisions of television producers, who have the ability to shape public perception. Research like this is important because it affects not only the people playing these roles, but also the audiences who view these shows.

Based on the analysis of these shows, the representation of Jews was rather similar across the board. No single show represented Jews in a markedly different manner, nor were any Jews depicted as heroes, outcasts, or villains. Instead, the Jewish characters blended in naturally with the other characters. Additionally, each of these people maintained relationships (both friendly and romantic) with non-Jews. These characters did not hide the fact that they were Jewish, but instead were vocal about their religion, even if that meant receiving criticism. Overall, the Jewish characters in these three series all appeared proud to represent

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their religious cultures but nonetheless reinforced traditional stereotypes.

The research contains limitations because of its narrow scope. To delve deeper into the findings, further research could include coding more seasons per shows, as well as coding other shows that include a wide range of Jewish characters. Based on the comedic nature of two out of the three shows, coding more sitcoms would provide a more thorough view of Jews in comedy.

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