

DECODING WILL AND GRACE: MASS AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF A POPULAR NETWORK SITUATION COMEDY

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ABSTRACT: *The television situation comedy Will and Grace is notable as the first successful network prime-time series to feature gay characters in a gay milieu. The show's considerable popularity begs the question of how the show's gay sensibility and humor, particularly the gay trickster character, Jack, is received by a heterosexual audience. This article discusses the notion of gay humor, considers the show's history, analyzes several episodes, and scrutinizes the responses of 136 college students who watched the show. Viewers do not identify with Jack and regard him as the most frequent butt of humor on the show, but they also consider him the funniest character and, by a very slight margin, their favorite. Contrary to my original hypotheses, respondent characterizations of Jack tend to reflect appreciation for all aspects of his trickster personality, though his ostentatious sexuality tends to be ignored.*

In his 1956 work, *The Public Arts*, Gilbert Seldes asserts "comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves" (p. 133). Although they are not as dominant on the television landscape as they once were, situation comedies remain an important part of network prime-time programming and are ubiquitous in syndication as reruns. Despite their widespread popularity, they and other comedic mass media forms have received little attention from either sociologists or cultural studies theorists (Davis 1995). In particular, audience reception of situation comedies and other comedic forms has been sorely neglected.

This article considers the popular network television situation comedy *Will and Grace*. Other network television programs in recent years that have featured homosexual characters are typically predicated on their lighthearted travails in a heterosexual world. Notably, *Will and Grace* is the first television series that focuses on the intimacies of an urban gay male culture and the first (at this writing, still only) to achieve significant critical and ratings success with a lead character who is openly homosexual.

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Using Thompson's (1990) tripartite method for analyzing cultural forms, I first explore the notion of a gay humor. After sketching the *Will and Grace's* origins, I consider the qualities that distinguish the series from other urban "singlecoms." Last, I examine the findings from questionnaires distributed to several classes of college students after they viewed episodes of *Will and Grace* in order to assess its reception by a heterosexual audience.

GAY HUMOR AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor has been an essential weapon for outsider groups in dealing with discrimination and prejudice. As the historian George Chauncey argues, "When gay men were being assaulted (in the '30s and '40s), having a sharp wit could often diffuse dangerous encounters" (quoted in Stearns 1994:D1). Conversely, others object to comic representations of outsider groups on the grounds that it perpetuates negative stereotypes. It is therefore useful to consider the different types of humor created by individuals in outsider groups, as opposed to humor that targets them and is created by others.

First, there is the self-denigrating humor aimed at one's own culture and its members. Second, there is protest humor that prods, mocks, and satirizes mainstream culture, particularly prevailing stereotypes and prejudices about the outsider group in question. Third, there is assimilationist humor, in which any mention of one's cultural background is elided and the use of one's group's vernacular is avoided. Fourth, and most prominently in the case of Jewish and gay humorists, individuals may attempt to "pass" as mainstream humorists by doing material that betrays no trace of their background. Fifth, there is what I refer to as "culturally intimate humor." Whereas protest humor typically leaves out its own culture in its critique of the dominant society, culturally intimate humor draws on the folkways and lore of a particular culture for its comic inspiration. As it relies on the everyday foibles of individuals within a culture, it both affirms and mocks cultural stereotypes.

The above categories should not be considered discrete, as it is not always possible to demarcate the different modes of outsider group humor. Comic forms typically employ more than one type of humor, or they exist on a continuum between two or more modes of humor. Further, distinguishing self-denigrating humor from culturally intimate humor is often a matter of personal interpretation.

In the rare instances when sociologists or cultural studies theorists have examined humorous mass media forms, often they fail to consider substantively the comic elements therein. Interestingly, an exception to this tendency is academic work on "gay humor," which focuses primarily on the aesthetics and politics of camp. The 1990s produced several edited volumes devoted solely to examinations of camp (Bergman 1993; Cleto 1999; Meyer 1994).

In its illumination of "those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight, and in particular women" (Babuscio 1984:48), camp is often celebrated by theorists such as Butler (1990) for its transgressive potential. As it "relies for its effect on casual excess, deviant decorum, and libidinal obviousness" (Kleinhans 1994:189), camp contests dominant notions of taste and challenges

prevailing notions of conventional “gendered” behavior. Much like the cakewalk dance performed by African Americans parodied the style and manner of whites in the late nineteenth century, the camp performances of drag queens can be seen as highly elaborated satires of “straight society.” Drag queens may have a genuine affinity for the flamboyant clothing they don, but their act can also be interpreted as ridiculing America’s bad taste and mocking normative heterosexuality. Likewise, Meyer (1994:5) claims camp as queer parody—“[a] total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility.” Finally, camp allusions can serve as an important means for communicating forbidden desires (Harris 1997).

In contrast to Meyer’s (1994) vision of camp as critique, others, echoing Sontag’s (1964) claim that camp is failed seriousness, see its emphasis on aestheticism as an ultimately limited and even trivial political strategy (Britton 1999). Because of its emphasis on “exaggeration, parody, and juxtaposition,” Bergman (1993:12) argues, camp can be mobilized only in a very privileged setting. And though Dyer (1999:110) asserts that “camp is one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man,” he warns about its potentially negative impact: “We can keep mocking ourselves to the point where we really do think we’re a rather pathetic, inferior lot” (111). As it may be easily misunderstood or unrecognized by those unfamiliar with it, camp is perhaps best understood as a covert protest humor, though it may contain elements of culturally intimate humor.

Others point to a more vague and broadly defined “gay sensibility” when describing gay humor. As Dyer (1986:154) avers, the gay sensibility “holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity[,] . . . intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity.” Whereas Dyer’s conception hews closer to a camp position, others posit a gay sensibility predicated on quick-paced witty repartee and an irreverent preoccupation with sexual folkways. The following dialogue between two gay situation comedy writers in Ehrenstein’s 1999 article illuminates the sometimes blurred distinction between humor predicated on camp and humor predicated on a gay sensibility.

“I can understand camp as something that’s a little nailed down as specifically gay,” says Keenan, “but none of the shows right now really traffic in camp. All sitcom characters have to taken be seriously on some level, and camp isn’t serious.”

“When you talk about a gay sensibility,” suggests Lee, “you’re talking to describe a very urban, very educated—”

“—ironic, detached, iconoclastic attitude,” adds Keenan. (P. 337)

This gay sensibility is perhaps most prominently evinced in contemporary situation comedies featuring groups of white, urban, upper-middle-class friends. Even though these singlecoms typically feature homosexual characters in only minor roles, they nonetheless have a high percentage of gays on their writing staff (Ehrenstein 1999; Kirby 2001).¹ As Ehrenstein (1999:336) argues, “Since current comedies are positively obsessed with the intimate sex lives of straight young singles, who better to write them than members of a minority famed for its sexual

candor." James Burrows, a prominent producer and director of situation comedies, similarly claims in an interview, "Funny is funny, you've got to be born with humor. . . . But I think the gay writers on our show see the world a little more skewed than others see it, and that's reflected in the jokes. I think it would hurt us if we didn't have gays on staff" (Kirby 2001:33). "Gay sensibility" sitcoms without gay characters veer closer to an assimilationist brand of humor, albeit with a "gay" aesthetic, much like the Marx Brothers or Charlie Chaplin could be said to incorporate a Jewish aesthetic in their otherwise "desemitized" humor.

Though outsider group humor, whether it is conveyed in literary works, standup performances, or situation comedies, often provokes internal controversy, especially when it crosses over to a larger audience, the key question of how mass audiences actually receive the humor of outsider groups and its effects on their perceptions of those groups has not been substantively addressed, apart from some impressionistic theorizing. *Will and Grace* is an intriguing case to study.

WILL AND GRACE

In 1997 Max Mutchnick and David Kohan, who had worked together on the short-lived situation comedy *Boston Common* in 1995, proposed a show about two heterosexual couples and one platonic gay man-straight woman couple to the NBC network. NBC's president at the time, Warren Littlefield, had unsuccessfully pitched a "he's gay, she's straight" show fifteen years earlier, yet he recommended to Mutchnick and Kohan that they drop the two straight couples (Jacobs 1998). However, they sent network executives a script and continued to lobby for their show, sending Littlefield faxes of the grosses of recent gay-themed movies such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Birdcage*. After four months of deliberation, NBC executives decided to put the show on the fall 1998 schedule (Jacobs 1998).

Will and Grace debuted on Monday, September 21, 1998, in the 9:30 P.M. slot. Much to the surprise of many in the television business, it did not provoke advertiser boycotts or denunciations from right-wing Christian groups (Jacobs 1998). Instead, it received strong critical praise and also immediately did well in the ratings, prompting a move to Tuesday nights in early December 1998, and ultimately became one of the twenty highest rated shows of the 1998-99 television season. After it again finished among the top twenty rated shows in its second season, *Will and Grace* was moved to the prestigious 9:00 P.M. Thursday night slot on the NBC network for the 2000-2001 season, a slot previously inhabited by the extremely popular situation comedies *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Frasier*. As the most watched slate of programming on any one night of prime-time television, this move clearly represented network faith in the commercial viability of *Will and Grace*, given the substantial advertiser dollars at stake on NBC's "must see TV" night. The show has maintained its considerable popularity, finishing eleventh and twelfth, respectively, among all shows for the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 television seasons. Moreover, the show does even better among the highly desired eighteen to forty-nine demographic.

The show revolves around the lives of its four main characters: Will, Grace, Jack, and Karen. The homosexual Will Truman and the heterosexual Grace Adler have been soul mates and best friends since college.² Will is a handsome, well-

dressed, but uptight corporate lawyer living in a tastefully appointed, spacious Manhattan apartment, and Grace is a stylish and attractive interior decorator with a well-defined neurotic streak. Will's other close friend is the "unconditionally self-involved," flighty, and "very gay" Jack McFarland ("My dog knew you were gay," replies Grace when Jack claims that she didn't know he was gay when they first met). Karen Walker is Grace's assistant; she is a rich, shallow socialite who devotes most of her time to drinking, shopping, and other self-indulgences, often with Jack in tow.

In the show's pilot episode, Grace is planning, despite Will's objections, to get married to Danny, her "very hetero" boyfriend of two years (among his other flaws, he high-fives her after sex). She ultimately reconsiders and leaves Danny at the altar, appearing at Will's office in her wedding gown. In the next week's episode she becomes Will's roommate, providing the basic framework for the show's first four seasons. In the middle of the fifth season (which ended in May 2003), Grace gets married and moves to Brooklyn.

While the relationship between Will and Grace remains the foundation of the program, Jack and Karen have been granted increasingly larger roles, and since the second season they have been accorded nearly equal screen time. Also, after the first season the plots have been more likely to focus on the respective love lives of Will and, especially, Grace, though the program has yet to show, despite the preponderance of double entendres and *talk* about sex, either Will or Jack in bed with a man or even kissing another man romantically.³ Moreover, there is an almost complete lack of physical affection between Will and his boyfriends.

In its plot lines, pacing, stylistic conventions, character "types," insular upper-middle-class environs and, of course, gay sensibility, *Will and Grace* has much in common with NBC's other urban singlecoms such as *Just Shoot Me*, *Frasier*, and *Friends*, as well as the HBO series *Sex and the City* (Ehrenstein 1999; Kirby 2001). Like those shows, *Will and Grace's* audience skews heavily toward a female audience (Kissel 2001). *Will and Grace* is distinguished from those series in featuring gay men in two lead roles and in other important ways.

Other situation comedies with one or two supporting gay characters or even previous failed entries with a gay lead character, for example, *Normal, Ohio*, *Ellen*, and *Daddy's Girls*, typically embrace a fish-out-of-water concept centering on a gay individual's comic struggles with predominantly straight society. In contrast, Grace and Karen are better understood as enthusiastic residents of Will and Jack's "gay world," albeit a sitcom gay world with barely a trace of homophobia and little concern about larger gay political issues. On other shows with gay characters, heterosexuals typically learn to love and understand homosexuals as people "just like them." In contrast, Karen married her husband (who is never actually seen on the show) for his wealth and much prefers to cavort with Jack. Similarly, Grace enjoys going to gay male bars and watching gay porn. Thus her desire to be married often seems the only reason she spends time with a heterosexual man during the first four seasons. Unlike straight singlecoms with a gay sensibility, *Will and Grace* is much closer to a culturally intimate style of humor in its scenes in gay bars and stores known for their gay male clientele, its frequent use of "gay vernacular," and its references to gay movies and other markers of gay male culture. Thus

when Grace makes a reference to the marriage announcements in the *New York Times*, Jack responds, "I don't really follow straight society."

Like many other recent shows about upper-middle-class singles, great care is given to the fashionable attire of the main characters. Reflecting a gay sensibility predicated on aesthetics, surface, and appearance (Harris 1997), the preoccupation with clothing and style, albeit often with a campy wink, is even more overt on *Will and Grace* than on the other shows, with the notable exception of *Sex and the City*. Random judgments about the outfits of guest characters or celebrities are proffered, and Grace is frequently the subject of fashion criticisms from Will, Jack, and especially Karen.

The show's gay humor is also evinced in its numerous allusions to celebrities and celebrity culture. Jack often prefaces an outburst by exclaiming the name of a female celebrity with three names (Jennifer Jason Leigh, Sarah Jessica Parker), and there is the occasional sly remark about a celebrity who is purported to be gay but has yet to publicly disclose his or her sexual orientation. And though the worship of pop culture divas is not as prevalent as one might expect, Jack reveres the performer Cher, who appeared as herself in two episodes.

Another significant indicator of the show's intimacy with gay culture is the characters' occasional use of terms such as "queer," "fruit," and "fag." Even more frequently, Will and Jack are referred to as women or given women's names. Will greets Jack by saying "Hey lady," Grace informs Will that she "needs more women in [her] life . . . besides [him]," and Will is called Wilma by Karen.

In many situation comedies, the humor is predicated on what Taylor (1989) refers to as a "comedy of embarrassment" that derives from characters' confrontations with "new or uncertain situations" without "clear rules for action." On contemporary singlecoms discomfiture or some sort of punishment also ensues when characters are vain, selfish, excessively priggish, or place career above friendship. In addition, unrealistic or excessive romantic longings are also reliable producers of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. On *Will and Grace*, Grace's desperate desire for a husband, jealousy of Will's friendship with other women, and other assorted neuroses produce this same comedy of embarrassment, as does Will's controlling personality, vanity, and occasional failure to appreciate Jack's friendship. A significant amount of the humor on the show also results from Will's and Grace's confrontations with untenable situations such as disastrous dates or intractable family members and work colleagues.

The humor that derives from Jack's and Karen's presence is, however, where *Will and Grace* most clearly differentiates itself as an arena for gay humor. Though their self-centeredness and shallowness are often subject to derision by Will and Grace, the only transgression that they are usually punished for is not being a good friend. Instead, the show tends to celebrate their preoccupation with appearance, willful ignorance of pedestrian social graces, and unconstrained ids. If the themes, plots, and witticisms in segments involving Will and Grace could be found on other singlecoms, Karen's campy disposition and Jack's uninhibited, ostentatious tricksteresque displays distinguish *Will and Grace*.

Described by the show's co-creator Kohan as "the gayest thing on television" (Kirby 2001:33),⁴ Karen is supremely comfortable with her narcissism, and her

blissful disdain for conventional morality provides a majority of the show's camp moments. When Grace attempts to explain the concept of guilt to her, Karen interrupts her: "I know what guilt is. It's one of those words like 'maternal' or 'addiction' that doesn't really mean anything." Likewise, after espousing a trite piety with a straight face, she and Jack burst out laughing at the concept of something like civic-mindedness. Indeed, she and Jack seem to share an implicit understanding that money, taste, and looks are the only things that matter; the rest is just laughable sentiment. Though the show occasionally reveals a softer side, Karen, in contrast to Will and Grace, is embarrassed when she "feels something."

Alternating between patronizing patience and withering contemptuousness, Karen regards herself as a fount of wisdom on the cardinal issue of taste, particularly fashion. Surveying the crowd at a meeting of gay men and lesbians who are trying to "go straight," she declaims, "Good lord, look at these people. Just because they stopped being gay doesn't mean they have to stop having taste." Utterly tactless and invariably critical of Grace's clothing, she believes with a campy genuineness that the greatest charity she can give is to prevent Grace from committing fashion faux pas. Her unabashed self-love and penchant for "casual excess" also permit her to enthusiastically quaff martinis and pop pills at work, or pour liquor into the goody bags of young trick or treaters on Halloween. Attesting to Kohan's claim, Karen is cited by respondents at Out.com as their favorite character on *Will and Grace* and their favorite female character on television in 2002 (Musto 2003).

Karen's transgressive campiness is also manifest in her flagrant sexuality. Exhibiting both a smirky, gleeful coyness and brazen aplomb, she brandishes her large bosom with a bravura reminiscent of the camp legend Mae West. Denying any fixed sexual identity, she and Jack are sexually playful with each other and Karen welcomes, though she may feign disdain, sexual attention from both men and women. Indeed, she and Grace have engaged in two long kisses on the show.

If Will is "a really nice guy" who, as the actor (Eric McCormack) who plays Will puts it, "could be your son or brother" (Natale 1998), Jack, played by the actor Sean Hayes, embraces the role of the gay trickster. Rejecting the stoic mien of the traditional hero of American lore and the detached pose of the unlettered philosopher-comic, Jack is a veritable "one-man floor show; perpetually animated, always ready with a quip or about to burst into song or dance (Rochlin 1999:38). While Jack is subject to jibes from Will and, to a lesser extent, Grace about his "excessive gayness," he is, in turn, the perpetrator of a great deal of humor and often targets Will for his "lack of gayness." As Davies (1990) points out in his comparative study of ethnic humor, this is a common dichotomy in the humor of many cultures.

Like other outsider group tricksters, Jack combines both "bad" and comic stereotypes. With his always rotating cast of boyfriends and unreserved ogling and flirting, regardless of whether the objects of his desire are gay or straight, he represents wanton promiscuity. On the other hand, his irresponsibility, occasional bouts of shrieking, fleeting crushes, and childlike behaviors mark him as a stereotypically "silly" gay figure. Jack is also habitually and blithely dependent on the kindness of others—the antithesis of the self-sufficient male provider. Jack's duality

is nicely captured by Apte's description of the trickster in North American Indian folklore.

The overall personality that emerges from the trickster tales incorporates opposites of all kinds. The trickster is both foolish and clever. He tricks others but is himself often tricked. He is infantile and readily yields to his desires. His physical and psychological traits lead him to acts that are ludicrous and of a contrary nature. Furthermore, the trickster ridicules sacred customs, breaks taboos, and is the world's greatest clown, who can laugh at himself. (1985:216)

Hence, Jack is ridiculed for his persistence in performing one-man cabaret shows, despite his obvious lack of talent. However, unlike Will and Grace, his self-confidence is rarely shaken. And though Will is older and supposedly wiser, Jack can expertly target his every vulnerability. Jack's forthrightness and willingness to pursue the objects of his desire also tend to be favorably contrasted to Will's fastidiousness and romantic diffidence. Jack is as quick-witted, if not more, than the other characters and, along with Karen, mocks Will and Grace for their codependent relationship. Indeed, in my view Grace is the most frequent butt of humor on the show. While the inordinate and infantile side of Jack is given significant exposure, I contend that Grace is more consistently made fun of by the other main characters for her taste in clothing, repeated romantic attraction to gay men (and concomitant inability to realize their sexual orientation), and lack of physical grace. And the neurotic Grace is much more likely than Jack to end up embarrassed or shamed by the show's end because of her insecurities or moral lapses.

Will and Grace is watched by as many as fifteen million households a week. Although its gay sensibility and camp elements are packaged in a fairly conventional situation comedy format, its popularity raises several intriguing questions about the reception of outsider comic forms by heterosexuals. Do they appreciate the show's camp elements and gay sensibility? In particular, how is a gay trickster character like Jack perceived by a heterosexual audience? In Klapp's (1962) formulation, the fool is someone who fails to recognize the dominant norms of a society and therefore to enforce the propriety they violate, since other individuals are compelled to conform to prevailing norms of conduct so as to avoid being subjected to the same mockery. Though Jack may be hailed as a subversive presence for his uninhibited sexuality, a key question is whether heterosexual audiences merely regard him as a slightly different version of the standard fool on many situation comedies.

HYPOTHESES

The proclaimed intent of the producers of the 1970s situation comedy *All in the Family* was to ridicule the bigotry of its central character, Archie Bunker. Vidmar and Rokeach's (1974) research reveals, however, that viewers, particularly those who exhibited more prejudiced attitudes, are more likely to admire Archie than his son-in-law, Mike, the purported liberal voice of reason on the show. Further, viewers are more likely to see the other characters on the show as the most frequent figures of ridicule, though it is usually Archie who suffers some sort of sanction by episode's end.

The audience reception of *Will and Grace* presents a different set of issues because viewers are responding to the representation of an outsider group. Like other outsider groups in America, gays suffer from a paucity of multidimensional images in the U.S. mass media. One may speak of five archetypal gay figures in American popular culture: the noble figure whose primary function is to teach a heterosexual about tolerance; the villain or deviant; the tragic, often suicidal case; the excessively flamboyant comic relief; and, more recently, the beneficent best friend to a heterosexual woman (Russo 1987). Though less "swishy" and more sympathetic than his historical counterparts, the gay man as comic figure is still pervasive in contemporary popular culture.⁵

Correspondingly, I hypothesize that Jack will be deemed the funniest character and, to a significantly lesser extent, the favorite character by a majority of respondents. However, respondents will generally fail to appreciate Jack's duality. Because he does not fit the other prominent stereotype of the normalized and compassionate albeit often desexualized gay male best friend, as Will does, he is likely to be seen merely as a fatuous fool and the most frequent butt of humor by a majority of respondents. In contrast to other types of fictional heroes, there will be a lack of identification with Jack, and viewers, especially heterosexual men, will prefer Will, rather than Jack, as a friend. Respondents are also more apt to see Jack as an embarrassment to gay men than they are to see Karen as an embarrassment to women. Last, when asked to describe Jack, individuals are much more likely to see him as a "silly" and even "stupid" fool than as a purposive transgressor. And though his overt displays of physical sexuality are practically nonexistent, his incessant flirting and references to his sex life are likely to result in criticisms of his sexuality by a significant number of respondents.

Though audiences may appreciate the show's "gay sensibility," I expect that there will be considerably less fondness for its camp elements. Hence, a minority of respondents will cite Karen as their favorite character and the majority will cite her as their least favorite character. Also, when asked to name their favorite particular routine or segment from the episode just viewed, scenes involving Karen, or particular lines of dialogue from Karen, will be cited by a small minority of respondents.

Given the show's large female national audience, I foresee gender differences in reception. Heterosexual men will generally not be avid viewers of the show, will be more likely to perceive Jack as the most frequent butt of humor, and will be less likely than their female counterparts to choose Jack as their favorite and, to a lesser extent, funniest character. Last, male respondents will be significantly more critical than female respondents of his sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

Five groups of students were used to test audience reception of *Will and Grace*. One class of twenty-five respondents was shown a double (one-hour) episode. Four classes of seven, twenty-nine, thirty-four, and forty-one students, respectively, were shown a single episode.

I selected college students primarily because of their availability. They cannot

be said to constitute a representative mass audience because of their age and because they are more likely to be liberal about matters of gender and sexual orientation. However, as they are primarily East Coast middle- and upper-middle-class white students, they are the targeted audience for *Will and Grace* and other urban singlecoms. Questions about the students' political orientation and socioeconomic status were included to determine if they have any discernible effect on respondents' answers.

The questionnaires consisted of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions in order to maximize respondent participation and to avoid an overly impressionistic account and yet capture the richness found in research based on smaller ethnographic samples. Because the respondents were contacted over a two-year period, there were several, mostly minor changes in the questionnaire. Specifically, the multiple-choice questions "How much do you identify with your favorite character?" and "Do you think Jack/Karen's behaviors and attitudes are embarrassing to gay men/women?" were added after the first class of forty-one students completed the questionnaire because I believe they are essential to understanding the reception of *Will and Grace*. In addition, after the first class of forty-one students responded, I eliminated the multiple-choice question on rating how funny the show was, and I changed the wording of the open-ended question "What is the funniest aspect of the show" to "What was the funniest particular routine or segment of the show you just watched?" The latter question was altered because I felt the initial phrasing of the question was unclear. Because the changes are minor, I do not believe that they had a significant effect on how respondents answered the other questions.

Choosing representative texts for the content analysis of situation comedies can be especially problematic. Although the show's basic construction and conceits remain the same, the story lines vary considerably from week to week. Moreover, characters' personality traits may be emphasized or deemphasized depending on the requirements of a given show's plot. Hence, I believe it is best to use a variety of episodes for the different groups of respondents and then determine if there are significant differences based on which episode is shown. Season finales were used twice because they tend to be most representative in terms of the characters and plot lines. The the group of seven students witnessed the season finale from the first year, "Object of My Rejection," wherein Jack gets married to Karen's maid, Rosario (so she can obtain her green card) and *Will and Grace*, after bickering throughout the show, agree that Grace should move out of Will's apartment so that they can get on with their lives. "Ben? Her?" the double episode viewed by the class of twenty-five students, is the season finale for the show's second year and revolves around Jack's divorce from Rosario and the complications that ensue when Grace begins dating Will's boss. "Jingle Balls," the Christmas episode from the show's fourth season, was shown to the classes of thirty-four and twenty-nine students; it revolves around Will's relation with a new dancer boyfriend whose incessant "prancing" is a source of considerable discomfort to Will, though he is loath to admit it. In the other story line, Jack gets the plum job of designing a Christmas window for the famed clothing retailer Barney's, much to the chagrin of Grace, who is a professional interior decorator. Jack is unable to

complete the project, but Grace, unbeknown to Jack, does the job and saves him. Ingenuously, Jack attributes the "miracle" to Santa, whom he "prayed" to the night before. This episode was chosen for two reasons: it wrings humor from Will's embarrassment about having a boyfriend who is "too gay"; and, though slightly more time is devoted to the Will and dancer boyfriend plot and Karen is not really the focal point of her and Jack's story line, her camp spirit is on full display, particularly in the scene where she dresses up as a dominatrix-minded Santa for Jack's Barney's window display. "Girl, Interrupted," from the second season, was shown to the class of forty-one students. In that episode Grace reconciles with a former female rival for Will's platonic affections, only to have the woman subsequently steal her cherished music box. Meanwhile, Jack is infatuated with a man who runs an organization, Welcome Home, that attempts to "make gay people straight." Undeterred, Jack convinces Karen to go to one of the organization's meetings, where they impersonate a heterosexual couple so that Jack can pursue him. After the man learns that Jack and everyone else is there to meet other homosexuals, he relents and agrees to take a shower with Jack. I chose this last episode because it gives full vent to Jack's tricksterism, and because in it he is the perpetrator, rather than the butt, of humor. Though Jack is depicted as naive when he initially fails to realize the organization's true intentions, in true trickster style, he cleverly changes "form" in order to sate his sexual appetites. Thus it served as an especially good test of whether Jack is deemed the butt of humor simply because of his ostentatious sexuality.

FINDINGS

All the student respondents marked "heterosexual" when asked to define their sexual orientation. As expected, the women were much more likely to watch *Will and Grace*. Three of 47 (6%) men versus 35 of 89 (39%) women claimed to be avid or very frequent viewers. Likewise, when asked how funny they think the show is, 19 of 27 (70%) women said it is extremely or very funny, but only 4 of 14 (29%) men did so. (As noted above, this question was only asked of the first group of students.) The only significant finding with respect to political orientation is that self-identified radicals and conservatives are much less likely to have seen the show previously. Also, none of the 9 lower-middle-class respondents was a frequent or avid viewer, versus 38 of 122 (31%) middle-class and upper-middle-class respondents.

To my surprise, respondents were nearly equally split about their favorite character; Jack, Karen, and Grace are cited approximately the same number of times. As expected, men were less likely than women to name Jack as their favorite character, especially if one includes "Karen and Jack" answers, and much more likely than women to name Grace as their favorite character (see Table 1). I attribute this in large part to Grace's physical appeal, as manifested in the significant number of comments about her pulchritude when male respondents were asked to describe the respective characters. Karen was cited as least favorite character by 36 percent of the respondents, while none of the other three was named by more than 20 percent of the respondents. There are, however, significant differences in terms of the

TABLE 1
Favorite Character by Gender

<i>Favorite Character</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
Will	5 (11.6%)	16 (18.2%)	21 (16.0%)
Grace	19 (44.2%)	17 (19.3%)	36 (27.5%)
Karen	9 (20.9%)	22 (25.0%)	31 (23.7%)
Jack	9 (20.9%)	25 (28.4%)	34 (26.0%)
Karen and Jack		6 (6.8%)	6 (4.6%)
Grace and Jack	1 (2.3%)	1 (1.1%)	2 (1.5%)
None of the above		1 (1.1%)	1 (.8%)
Total	43 (100.0%)	88 (100.0%)	131 (100.0%)

Pearson chi-square = 11.787(a), df = 6, asymptotic significance (2-sided) = .067.

episode the respondents viewed: Karen was named least favorite by 56 percent of those who saw "Ben? Her?" but by only 26 percent of "Girl, Interrupted" respondents. Conversely, none of the "Ben? Her?" viewers cited Grace as their least favorite character, but 36 percent of "Girl, Interrupted" viewers did. As expected, Jack was named the funniest character by the largest number of respondents, although with smaller gender differences than originally posited. While women and men were equally likely to specifically cite Jack, an additional 13 percent of women, but no men, named "Jack and Karen" as the funniest characters (see Table 2).

In general, respondents evinced considerably more affection for Karen than anticipated. Furthermore, avid and frequent viewers were considerably more likely to cite her as their favorite character and less likely to cite her as their least favorite. Whereas 37 of 131 (28%) respondents cited Karen (or Karen and Jack) as their favorite character(s), 20 of 38 (53%) avid or frequent viewers did so. Likewise, 36 percent of all respondents cited her as their least favorite character, but

TABLE 2
Funniest Character by Gender

<i>Funniest Character</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
Will	2 (4.4%)	7 (8.2%)	9 (6.9%)
Grace	6 (13.3%)	1 (1.2%)	7 (5.4%)
Karen	15 (33.3%)	24 (28.2%)	39 (30.0%)
Jack	22 (48.9%)	42 (49.4%)	64 (49.2%)
Karen and Jack		11 (12.9%)	11 (8.5%)
Total	45 (100.0%)	85 (100.0%)	130 (100.0%)

Pearson chi-square = 14.766(a), df = 4, asymptotic significance (2-sided) = .005.

only 21 percent of avid or frequent viewers did so. When respondents were asked to name their favorite routine or segment, Karen's exploits were named more frequently than expected. Looking only at the "Jingle Balls" episode, 13 of the 58 total mentions (22%) cite some aspect of Karen's performance. Eight of these specify her appearance as a campy Santa, and two others more broadly asserted, "Karen—she is funny" and "any of the scenes with Karen in them." Four individuals (7%) mentioned Jack and Karen's interactions, 13 (22%) cited Jack or some aspect of his performance, and nearly half (48%) named scenes with either Will or Grace or with both characters.

As expected, Jack was deemed the most frequent butt of humor by almost half of all respondents (61 of 129, or 47%); this includes four respondents who cited Jack and another character. There are, however, no significant differences with respect to the episode shown. Even in "Girl, Interrupted," wherein Jack visits the "go straight club" and Grace desperately seeks female companionship, 19 of 36 (53%) respondents see Jack as the most frequent butt of humor. This figure includes two people who named "Jack and Will" and two who named "Jack and Grace."

A significant difference arises when viewership is considered. Whereas 20 of 38 (53%) of avid or frequent viewers cited Grace (including two who named both Will and Grace), Jack is named by only 12 of 38 (31%) avid or frequent viewers (including one person who cited both Will and Jack). Conversely, 36 of 62 (58%) infrequent and nonviewers cited Jack (including two who chose both Jack and Grace and one who chose Jack and Will), whereas Grace was cited by only 9 of 62 (15%) of these viewers, including the aforementioned two who chose both Jack and Grace (Table 3). I did not predict this, but it nonetheless conforms to my general thesis that people tend to see the gay man as an innately comic figure; those unfamiliar with the show instinctively perceived Jack as the most frequent butt of the humor. Contrary to my original hypothesis, men were only slightly more likely than women (52% vs. 46%) to name Jack (or Jack and another character) as the most frequent butt of humor. However, men were more than twice as likely as women (27% vs. 12%) to regard Will (or Will and another character) as the most frequent butt of humor, a finding that similarly suggests a greater predisposition among heterosexual men to see gay men as innately comic figures. The only potentially intriguing finding with respect to either class or political orientation is that five of the six self-identified radicals believed Jack is the most frequent butt of humor. Perhaps radical skepticism about the mass media leads to the assumption that the "silly" gay must be the butt of the humor, though the numbers are still too small to make any kind of substantive claim.

As predicted, viewers are much more likely to favor Will over Jack as a friend. Of the 139 replies, 98 (70%) respondents chose Will, 36 (26%) chose Jack, and 5 (4%) (all of them men) said neither. The differences between men and women are not as large as expected: 31 percent of women versus 19 percent of men prefer Jack to Will. When respondents were asked how much they identify with their favorite character, there was slightly less identification with Jack than with other characters, though the differences, contrary to my expectations, are not substantive (see Table 4). Also, contrary to my hypotheses, respondents were only slightly

TABLE 3
Butt of Humor by Viewership

<i>Most Frequent Butt of Humor</i>	<i>Viewership</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Avid Viewer</i>	<i>Frequent Viewer</i>	<i>Occasional Viewer</i>	<i>Infrequent Viewer</i>	<i>Never Previously Watched Episode</i>	
Will	3 (17.6%)	1 (4.8%)	3 (10.7%)	1 (4.8%)	9 (21.4%)	17 (13.2%)
Grace	7 (41.2%)	11 (52.4%)	8 (28.6%)	4 (19.0%)	2 (4.8%)	32 (24.8%)
Karen		2 (9.5%)	3 (10.7%)	3 (14.3%)	6 (14.3%)	14 (10.9%)
Jack	6 (35.3%)	5 (23.8%)	14 (50.0%)	9 (42.9%)	23 (54.8%)	57 (44.2%)
Karen and Jack				1 (4.8%)		1 (.8%)
Will and Grace	1 (5.9%)	1 (4.8%)			1 (2.4%)	3 (2.3%)
Work off each other				1 (4.8%)		1 (.8%)
Jack and Grace				1 (4.8%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (1.6%)
Jack and Will		1 (4.8%)		1 (4.8%)		2 (1.6%)
Total	17 (100.0%)	21 (100.0%)	28 (100.0%)	21 (100.0%)	42 (100.0%)	129 (100.0%)

Pearson chi-square = 46.094(a), df = 32, asymptotic significance (2-sided) = .051.

more likely to see Jack as an embarrassment to gay men than they were to see Karen as an embarrassment to women. Whereas 15 of 90 (17%) respondents believed Jack's attitudes and behaviors are extremely or very embarrassing to gay men, only 8 of 91 (9%) of respondents thought Karen's attitudes and behaviors are embarrassing to women. Though gender differences with respect to whether Karen's attitudes and behaviors are embarrassing were slight, they were larger when it came to Jack's behaviors and attitudes. Nine of 29 (31%) men found Jack's attitudes and behavior "extremely embarrassing" or "very embarrassing" to gay men, versus only 6 of 61 (10%) women. It should also be noted that given Jack's immoderate behavior in "Girl, Interrupted," the number may have been higher if the first group of forty-one students had been asked the question.

Perhaps most significantly, the range of answers to the question of how Jack is depicted evinces a more complex process of audience reception than I hypothesized.⁶ Ten respondents, all but one of them a woman, characterized him in various ways as fun and happy—"fun," "a fun time," "a nice man looking to have fun," "pure entertainment," and so on—and another two said that Jack is "endearing"

TABLE 4
Favorite Character by Identify with Character by Gender

Gender	Favorite Character	Identify with Character				Total	
		Identify Completely	Very Strongly Identify	Moderately Identify	Identify a Little		Do Not Identify At All
Males	Will	1 (33.3%)			1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (100.0%)
	Grace			5 (33.3%)	3 (20.0%)	7 (46.7%)	15 (100.0%)
	Karen				3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	5 (100.0%)
	Jack			1 (14.3%)		6 (85.7%)	7 (100.0%)
	Grace and Jack				1 (100.0%)		1 (100.0%)
	Total		1 (3.2%)		6 (19.4%)	8 (25.8%)	16 (51.6%)
Females	Will		1 (8.3%)	2 (16.7%)	5 (41.7%)	4 (33.3%)	12 (100.0%)
	Grace		3 (20.0%)	5 (33.3%)	5 (33.3%)	2 (13.3%)	15 (100.0%)
	Karen		1 (6.7%)	5 (33.3%)	6 (40.0%)	3 (20.0%)	15 (100.0%)
	Jack		1 (6.3%)	2 (12.5%)	5 (31.3%)	8 (50.0%)	16 (100.0%)
	Karen and Jack				3 (100.0%)		3 (100.0%)
	Total			6 (9.8%)	14 (23.0%)	24 (39.3%)	17 (27.9%)

Male Pearson chi-square = 21.638(a), *df* = 12, asymptotic significance (2-sided) = .042. Female Pearson chi-square = 13.801(b), *df* = 12, asymptotic significance (2-sided) = .314.

and "someone you want to be friends with." One positively gushed, "Oh my God, there aren't words to describe . . . I love him, I think he is the best." Moreover, twenty-five respondents describe him as variously "funny," "humorous," or "hysterical."

Fourteen respondents depicted him as "outgoing," "animated," "busy," "enthusiastic," or "passionate." An additional fourteen respondents described him in other essentially positive terms: six characterized him as "self-confident," "proud," and someone who "goes after what he wants"; seven saw him as "not caring what anyone else thinks," "oblivious to stereotypes," and someone who "knows himself"; and one characterized him as ambitious.

A substantial number of responses focus primarily on his "gayness" rather than on specific personality traits. Eleven described him as the "stereotypical homosexual male," "flagrantly stereotypical," a "portrayal of how people think all gays are like," "typically gay really—funny, feminine, and sweet." Six people characterized him as "flaming" or "extremely flaming," and eight used terms such as "openly gay," "super gay," "obviously gay," "very gay," "gay and proud," and "an obvious homosexual." Furthermore, five respondents described Jack as "feminine," "very feminine," and "the woman of the relationship," and four believed he is "emotional" or "dramatic."

Contrary to my expectations, only ten respondents commented specifically on Jack's sexual behaviors and attitudes. Of these ten, four characterized him as "full of raging hormones" and "on the make" and two simply noted that he "loves men." All these responses came from women who were shown the episode in which Jack visits the "go straight" club. One male respondent characterized him as a player and another man said he is "quick to become emotionally attached." Even more surprising, only two of the ten comments, both from male respondents, reflected negatively on Jack's sexuality; one respondent stated that he is "too outgoing with his sexuality—not very realistic," and another remarked that Jack is "not his own person (I don't let any aspect of my personality control my whole life)." Thus, instead of being critical of Jack's sexuality, it seems that viewers simply chose to ignore it.

Thirteen responses described him as "extreme and overwhelming," "exhausting to be with," "wild," and "over the edge," and specifically label him as flamboyant. "Wacky," "crazy," and "eccentric" are terms that were mentioned six times. Two respondents thought he was "funny, but obnoxious or annoying."

There were less ambiguously negative descriptives also but substantially fewer than I expected. Jack was deemed "self-centered" and selfish by fifteen respondents, irresponsible and immature by six, and characterized as "lazy and [a] leech" and "mooch[ing] off Will" by two. Nine saw him as "silly" or "ditzy," seven regarded him as "delusional," "naïve," and "out of touch with reality," and one thought he is a "disgrace." Three respondents characterized him, respectively, as "mildly annoying," "excessively annoying," and a "jackass." Last, men were not significantly more likely than women to use denigrating terms to describe Jack.

INTERPRETATION

In a 2000 interview David Kohan, the co-creator of *Will and Grace*, claims:

We never really set out to make a gay show. . . . [W]e were just trying to come up with something original, to mine a dynamic that hadn't already been mined on TV. And we came up with the idea of a gay man and his relationship with a straight woman. It was something we hadn't seen on TV before, a fresh approach to romantic comedy. (Svetkey 2000:28)

Clearly, the dynamic is a commercially and critically popular one. The ability of *Will and Grace* to meld camp elements, gay sensibility, and gay characters into a mainstream success is a significant achievement.

While the characters Will and Grace and the relationship between them resonate with a substantial number of the respondents, Karen's camp stylings and Jack's trickster turns had even greater appeal, particularly to the show's ardent fans. Although Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that the show's infantilization of Jack negates any potential subversiveness, the responses to the question of how Jack is portrayed indicate audience willingness to view Jack as a multi-dimensional figure. That avid and frequent viewers are considerably less inclined to see Jack as the most frequent butt of humor may similarly be interpreted as the capacity to see both sides of Jack's trickster personality.

On the other hand, there is still the tendency to view Jack through the lens of dominant cultural stereotypes. Respondents see him as the most frequent butt of humor and identify less with him than with other characters. Thirty-one percent of males regard him as "extremely embarrassing" or "very embarrassing" to gay men. Moreover, viewers frequently refer to his "gayness" and the fact that he is "stereotypically gay" but tend to ignore his sexual persona. The fact that one respondent who watched the episode in which Jack goes to the club for "ex-gays" thought he is "too quick to become emotionally attached" suggests willful determination not to see Jack as a sexual being. This is understandable in the Christmas episode and the first season's finale, but Jack's sexual appetites are clearly on display in "Ben? Her?" and "Girl, Interrupted." Also, it should be noted that my respondents were college students; an older, presumably less culturally liberal audience might be even more likely to downplay Jack's sexuality or critique it.

Despite Jack's and Karen's popularity, *Will and Grace* requires the relationship between the title characters to maintain its mainstream appeal and to balance the naughty outrageousness of Karen and Jack. The show can be appreciated by those who do not like Karen but enjoy the "lite" gay sensibility of Will and Grace's interactions, as well as by the "campaholics" who love Karen (and Jack) but have little interest in Will and Grace's relationship. Hence, it would lose a considerable part of its audience if it was solely about Will and Grace or solely about Karen and Jack. In particular, the series requires the Will character in order to avoid the inevitable criticisms of stereotyping if Jack were the only gay male lead. As McCormack, the actor who plays Will, phrased it, "By having Will, we earned the right to have Jack" (Jacobs 1998). The show must similarly avoid any serious mention of homophobia or discrimination against gays. Criticizing the mild activist bent of the television series *Ellen*, Kohan asserts, "If anything, that's the last thing you want to be, if you're writing a show about people as opposed to issues. You want to learn about characters; you don't want to write about issues" (Jacobs 1998). And, as noted above, the show's lack of man-on-man physical contact makes it friendly to a heterosexual audience.

In addition to *Will and Grace's* careful construction, its success is a result of the increased visibility of gays in society and the attendant familiarity of the larger culture, however circumscribed, with gay men's culture, as well as the prevalence of a gay sensibility on many situation comedies. Hence, *Will and Grace* is much more familiar terrain to a heterosexual audience than it would have been ten or even five years earlier. A useful parallel is the increased mainstream appeal of a Jewish culturally intimate humor in the late 1960s and 1970s following what

Goldman (1987) refers to as the Jewish decade of the 1960s. Finally, the ability of *Will and Grace* to attract a large heterosexual audience may be attributed to the show's producers and writers and to the talents of its actors, particularly Sean Hayes as Jack. While the time was clearly ripe for *Will and Grace* in 1998, it did not necessarily mean that just any show featuring a gay culturally intimate humor would be successful.

CONCLUSION

In his 1951 article, "Jokes Negroes Tell on Themselves," Langston Hughes observes, "Certain aspects of the humor of minority groups are often so inbred that they are not palatable for outside consumption" (p. 25). Thus he posits that many black jokes would embarrass both blacks and nonblacks if they were heard outside the black community. Although the United States has arguably become more pluralistic since then, Hughes's claim still speaks to the question of mass perception of the humor of outsider groups. In a recent edition of *Out*, a general circulation gay magazine, a writer asserts her appreciation for *Will and Grace* and the resultant increased visibility of gays.

[I]t is through Will and Jack that many of our family and friends see what gay life and gay people are like. *Will & Grace* has shown them that we're just as flawed, silly, loving and crazy as everyone else out there. Maybe by seeing a three-dimensional depiction, some of our families have come to a better understanding of us. Gay people aren't "the other" anymore: We're in your living room on Thursday nights. (Champagne 2003:39)

Later in the same piece, Champagne applauds the fact that the show does not focus on gay political issues because gays do not want to constantly deal with topics like gay bashing and AIDS. She also cites the significance of *Will and Grace* in the lives of many gay and lesbian teenagers: it presents the vision of a better life after adolescence and may result in greater parental tolerance.

On the other hand, Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) critique the idea that visibility necessarily means greater acceptance. Instead, they argue that the series reinforces heterosexism by feminizing both Will and Jack and that the infantilization of Jack and Karen negates their critique of heteronormativity. Furthermore, the near-exclusive focus on interpersonal relationships may cause heterosexual audiences to believe that discrimination against gays is largely a thing of the past.

Media effects on viewers are, of course, notoriously difficult to ascertain. Moreover, this study is concerned with perceptions of the show rather than with its effects. Battles and Hilton-Morrow may be right about the impact of *Will and Grace* on viewers, but the real problem is the overall lack of multidimensional representations of gays in the mass media. Whether or not they feature outsider groups, situation comedies cannot be expected to offer a radical critique of society or even to present multidimensional characters given their structural constraints, particularly the obvious but essential need to be funny.

Instead, I see three potentially positive functions for situation comedies such as *Will and Grace* that feature outsider groups. First, they provide some degree of

validation to the outsider group represented. The popularity of *Will and Grace* signifies a degree of acceptance from the larger culture, even if, as Battles and Hilton-Morrow assert, it does not necessarily lead to greater acceptance. Second, while regarding gays as merely "outrageous, fun characters" is not unproblematic and raises Battles and Hilton-Morrow's (2002) concerns about a lack of awareness of discrimination against gays, the findings presented in this article suggest that a show like *Will and Grace*, despite its limitations, may be useful in making gays more familiar and less the Other to a heterosexual audience. Third, though a heterosexual audience may reject a Jack who engages in overt sexual activities, perhaps *Will and Grace* makes the idea of a gay man with a real sexual life more palatable for future network series (or even on future seasons of *Will and Grace*). One could argue that, just as the success of *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Object of My Affection* paved the way for *Will and Grace*, the appearance of the sexually explicit *Queer as Folk* on the pay cable network Showtime was made possible, in part, by the popularity of *Will and Grace*. Still, one wonders if or when a campy gay sensibility situation comedy will be developed that grants gay men (and women) the same kind of sexual prerogatives that heterosexual men and women on situation comedies currently enjoy.

This article is part of a larger project on culturally intimate humor. In the future, I plan to analyze the reception of *Will and Grace* by a gay male audience. Given the paucity of research on the reception of comic forms, it is the hope that this study spurs further research on a wide variety of comic forms by both sociologists and those engaged in cultural studies work.

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NOTES

1. Surveying the high percentage gays on the writing staffs of situation comedies, one gay writer declared that "gays were the new Jews" (Kirby 2001).
2. According to Mutchnick, the relationship between Will and Grace mirrors his real-life relationship with a heterosexual woman.
3. In an episode from the second season, Will kisses Jack on the "Today" show to protest NBC's decision to censor a gay kiss, and in the fifth season's finale, they wake up shocked to discover themselves in bed together, though it is unclear exactly what has transpired.
4. During the fourth season, NBC reran the series pilot episode, and Megan Mullally, the actress who plays Karen, provided a short "real-life" introduction. Joking about her and the cast members' initial feelings toward their respective roles, Mullally quipped, "As for me, I wasn't interested in playing a gay man. But I like it better now."
5. The view of gays as comic relief is pervasive in the entertainment industry. A gay writer observes, "There's a pattern within the industry of self-identified liberals who love you when you're a funny queen. But when you have a serious point to make or are upset

about something—which happens with AIDS—they have a lot of trouble shifting gears because they're not used to taking gay people seriously" (Ehrenstein 1999:340).

6. For this open-ended question, respondents frequently use more than one adjective or phrase. Because I think it is the best method for illuminating the aggregate opinion of respondents, I count all descriptives. Thus there are more mentions than total respondents.

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