**“He’s Adorable”: Representations of People with Dwarfism in Family Guy**

Erin Pritchard**(pritche@hope.ac.uk)**

**Liverpool Hope University**

**“He’s Adorable”: Representations of People with Dwarfism in Family Guy**

Erin Pritchard

School of Social Sciences

Liverpool Hope University

pritche@hope.ac.uk

**Abstract**

This paper examines how people with dwarfism[1] are represented in the American animated sitcom *Family Guy*. Using autocritical discourse analysis this paper reflects on my own response, as a person with dwarfism, to scenes featuring characters with dwarfism. Whilst the show has been criticised for its controversial humour, this paper argues that the show actually exposes negative social attitudes that people with dwarfism encounter from other members of the public, whilst refraining from encouraging stereotypes of dwarfism. The paper builds upon Fink’s (2013) suggestion that animated comedies are a source of both humour and social commentary. This paper suggests that Family Guy has the potential to challenge social attitudes towards people with dwarfism and the way they are perceived in society, through directing the humour towards those who mock them as opposed to those with dwarfism. However, how the scenes are interpreted depends on the audience, which relates to Hall’s (1993) reception theory.

**Keywords:** Dwarfism, Family Guy, Disability humour, Social attitudes, Autocritical discourse analysis, Reception theory.

**Introduction**

Throughout history, and within the current media, people with dwarfism have been a popular form of entertainment, not so much for any talents but due to their distinctive appearance, in particular, their small stature, which is often associated with humour. As Kruse (2003: 496) states, ‘Among other ‘disabilities’ dwarfism, as a discursive identity, has a unique and ambiguous history with roots in mythology and the commodification of anomalous bodies through enfreakment’. As dwarfism is popular within the entertainment industry, it is important to understand how they are represented in different shows and what the implications may be for people with dwarfism in society.

Adult animated comedies have grown in popularity since *The Simpsons* first aired in 1989. Since then shows such as *South Park* (1997-present), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Family Guy* (1999-present) and *American Dad* (2005-present), to name a few, have begun to dominate television screens alongside regular sitcoms. Evolved from situation comedy, these popular animated shows reflect on contemporary American life and prompt the audience to think about social issues through comedy (Alberti, 2003; Turner, 2004; Gray 2005; Mills, 2005). Family Guy is an American animated sitcom. The show first aired in 1999 and is broadcasted in numerous countries including the USA, Canada, UK and Australia. In the UK alone, Family Guy received over 1 million viewers when it was aired on BBC3 (Deans, 2010). With reference to the reception theory, due to Family Guy’s popularity, it has the unintentional possibility of challenging negative stereotypes towards people with dwarfism. However, how the scenes from Family Guy are interpreted can differ depending on the identity of the audiences (Hall, 1993). This paper argues that the intended purpose of the media can be interpreted differently by the audience, depending on their familiarity with experiences of dwarfism.

The show revolves around the Griffin family and some of their neighbours and close friends. Peter Griffin is the patriarch of the family and the show’s protagonist. Peter is constructed as a person who has learning difficulties and thus can be considered a disabled character. In episode 6 season 4 (*Petarded*) Peter is declared “mentally retarded” after taking the MacArthur’s Fellow Programme. Of course, ‘retard’ or the ‘r word’ is an example of disability hate speech. Sherry et al. (2019) point out that retard is used as an insult and reinforces stigma towards people with learning difficulties. Peter’s learning difficulty is used as a narrative crutch to provoke humour throughout the show. The title of the episode is a play on words and further reinforces stigma towards people with learning difficulties. But as this chapter will demonstrate, problematic terminology associated with different impairments is still used within the media.

Peter has several close friends, including Joe Swanson, a Policeman who is a paraplegic. The show also includes another notable disabled minor character Greased up Deaf Guy who makes nine recurring appearances over 5 seasons (season 3 -15). McKeown and Darke (2013: 157) suggest that the show is ‘seemingly obsessed with disability’. A lot of the comedy in the show revolves around issues of disability. Although there is no regular character with dwarfism there are many scenes that feature them in minor roles, in particular within cutaway gags.

The show is often criticized for its humour as it is often deemed offensive to various minority groups. Most notably is the controversy the show caused in 2010, when it featured a character with Down syndrome. Sarah Palin, the former US vice president, and who has a son with Down syndrome publicly criticised the Episode “*Extra Medium Large*” due to its portrayal of a character with Down Syndrome. Walters (2013) argues that Palin failed to get the joke, which was directed at her as opposed to her son. McKeown and Darke (2013) provide an analysis of the episode and argue that the show challenges common disability stereotypes, such as dependent and pitiful, and undermines social presumptions about disability, which challenges the audience to perceive disability differently. The episode, which focuses on the Griffins’ son Chris dating a girl with Down syndrome, McKeown and Darke (2013) argue, refrains from using any derogatory language towards people with learning difficulties and does not encourage the audience to laugh at the character with Downs syndrome. Thus, the comedy they use in this situation can be considered disability humour rather than disabling humour. Including disabled characters and using disability humour helps to discourage the audience from laughing at disability whilst still including disabled people in everyday situations.

This paper aims to show how not all humour concerning dwarfism is negative, but can actually promote awareness depending on how it is interpreted. Wilde (2018) suggests that comedy can challenge problematic stereotypes of dwarfism. It is argued that using humour in the show exposes negative social attitudes that people with dwarfism encounter from other members of the public, whilst refraining from encouraging stereotypes associated with dwarfism. This paper shows how Family Guy presents people with dwarfism as ordinary members of society and exposes some of the social encounters they experience. This corresponds to Fink’s (2013) suggestion that animated comedies are a source of both humour and social commentary. It is argued that Family Guy exposes social attitudes towards people with dwarfism and the way they are perceived in society, by directing the humour towards those who mock them as opposed to those with dwarfism. This can challenge common stereotypes of dwarfism and how people perceive them.

I have dwarfism and have experienced the unwanted consequences of representations of dwarfism in the media. For example, it is not unusual for me to be asked ‘where my six little friends are’ or to be called names relating to characters with dwarfism, such as ‘Mini-me’ and ‘Oompa Loompa’. This makes me critical of representations of dwarfism in the media. However, when watching Family Guy I have noticed a difference in how people with dwarfism are represented in comparison to other shows and can actually relate to the characters and their situation. For example, I have been asked intrusive questions by strangers, something Family Guy picks up on and demonstrates. I find the humour quite refreshing as it does not rely on existing stereotypes of dwarfism. However, how I interpret the scenes will differ from how other people do. This relates to the reception theory of humour.

The paper starts with an overview of the cultural history of representations of people with dwarfism concluding with a summary of recent influential representations that have come to dominate the Western cultural imagery. It then moves on to outline key theories of humour discussed concerning disability and humour (especially about adult animated sitcoms) and explores their usefulness for analysing representations of people with dwarfism in Family Guy. The section then summarises previous analytical frameworks employed to analyse Family Guy to acknowledge the recognised complexity of this text. I then focus on the methodology used to demonstrate the benefits of autocritical discourse analysis, which combines autoethnography and critical discourse analysis to analyse media texts using personal experiences of disability. Drawing across sections two and three, the fourth section offers an analysis of the representations of people with dwarfism in Family Guy. Section six then reflects upon the argument presented and suggests future avenues for research.

**Section I - The complex relation between humour and disability.**

Humour about disability is complex. Laughing at disabled people can seem cruel as disabled people are often culturally constructed as tragic and pitiful. According to Noonan (2010: 54), ‘jokes about disabled people are often seen as mean spirited and denigrating, they flaunt a callous insensitivity to human tragedy and suffering’. Yet, disability is not immune from humour, and humour can expose problematic socio-cultural messages about people with impairments. This depends on the type of humour used.

Reid, Hammond-Stoughton and Smith (2006) suggest that there are two forms of humour related to disability: disability humour and disabling humour. Disabling humour is criticised for promoting disablism within society as the purpose is to mock disabled people. Hammond-Stoughton and Smith (2006) argue that disabling humour reinforces stereotypes and negative representations of disability, including the use of derogatory language.

Disability humour on the other hand challenges cultural assumptions towards disabled people. Shakespeare (1994) points out that in relation to comedy, disabled people are moving on from being laughed at to laughing at their situations and at non-disabled people, which challenges prejudices aimed towards disabled people. Although often performed by disabled comedians, disability humour can also be used in other forms of entertainment, including animated sitcoms. Whilst disabled comedians mostly perform the latter, it can be argued that the use of disability humour is also apparent in animated comedies. Haller (2010) argues that disability humour can be considered a new phase of humour and is found in shows such as Family Guy where disabled characters are not pitied or scorned but are incorporated into the show on an equal basis as other characters. The inclusion of disabled characters demonstrates to the audience that disabled people are a part of society and that the audience is permitted to laugh at their experiences as opposed to directly at their impairment. Haller (2003) points out that humour can be used as a way to communicate disability issues with audiences. However, this is dependent on how the joke is interpreted by the audience. It is the response that is important to consider as it can shape how the audience then responds to the person who is the subject of the humour. Reid-Hresko and Reid (2005) argue that whilst disability humour can challenge stereotypes, if the audience fails to recognise the joke, it may promote disabling humour. This can be dependent on the audience’s background as well as the influence of other representations upon them. For example, stereotypes associated with dwarfism are very prominent in the media and have been for centuries. This can make them highly influential in people's conceptions of dwarfism. To counteract these stereotypes, other representations may need to be more obvious in their meaning.

There is growing attention in regards to how adult animated sitcoms challenge disability stereotypes and the way disabled people are perceived within society (See, Mallett, 2010; McKeown and Darke, 2013; Fink, 2013; Reid-Hresko and Reid, 2005). Fink (2013) argues that *The Simpsons*, a popular American animated sitcom, provides social criticism about disability and engages the audience in questioning political correctness about disability and humour. The Simpsons, in this example, shows how popular typical American primetime shows often ridicule disabled people in a way that is deemed acceptable in society. Thus, the show provides a gateway to understanding how disability is represented within the media. How the characters are represented and used within the show determines how they are perceived and whether or not the humour encourages people to laugh at them and thus reinforces negative stereotypes.

Similarly, Reid-Hresko and Reid (2005) examine three episodes of *South Park* to demonstrate how the show problematizes stigmatizing representations and disabling attitudes towards disabled people. Whilst some of the stereotypes are predominantly negative, such as South Park’s depiction of two characters with mobility and learning difficulties, the humour does not focus on them. The episodes they focus on revolve around how the non-disabled characters interact with the various disabled characters, such as through acts of pity and not being able to see beyond a person’s disability. Thus whilst the characters may be depicted stereotypically the actual comedy focuses on how non-disabled people perceive and subsequently treat them. They argue that the episodes encourage audiences to question and rethink how society engages with disabled people. This resonates with the reception theory.

Reception theory was devised by Hall (1993) and is based on the belief that media representations are encoded by the producer and then decoded by the audience. The crux of the theory is that representations can be decoded with different meanings depending on the audience and their background. Hall (1993) argues that the audience's interpretation of a text is highly influenced by socio-cultural structures. According to Hall (1993), there are three different positions of decoding; the ‘*dominant hegemonic position*’, ‘*negotiated position*’ and ‘*oppositional view*’. Each demonstrates a degree of understanding of the original message but can be misinterpreted. The dominant hegemonic position is when the audience decodes the representation with the same belief as the producer (Hall, 1993). The negotiated position is based on the belief that the message is decoded based on particular socio-cultural beliefs held by the audience, which misinterprets the text. In this instance, representations of dwarfism in Family Guy will be decoded by the audience using long held beliefs about dwarfism abundant in mass media. Lastly, the oppositional view is where the audience is capable of decoding the message in the intended way, but it is based on their own societal beliefs and often sees their unintended message within the text. In this instance, it is when I use theories within Disability Studies to demonstrate that Family Guy has the potential to challenge dominant stereotypes, even if this is not the intention.

**Section II - Representations of dwarfism and their social impact**

It is often pointed out that dwarfism is one of the few impairments that has been used as a form of entertainment for others throughout history, including within royal courts, freak shows and circuses (Adelson, 2005). Adelson (2005) points out that in the 17th century European courts people with dwarfism were often traded and used to amuse others. In circuses, people are encouraged to humour and mock performers including people with dwarfism, but pity is always absent (Bogdan, 1996). The Victorian Freak is a classic example that demonstrates how people with visible and often rare impairments, including people with dwarfism, were used for entertainment purposes. Shakespeare (1994: 287) argues that freak shows are a ‘cross between a zoo and a museum’. The purpose of the freak show was to expose those whose body deviated from the norm in a way that their physical traits dominated the entire person on exhibit (Thomson, 1997). The height of someone with dwarfism was their only reason for being on display. Despite the demise of the freak show, people who were exhibited in them still arouse public fascination (Grosz, 1991). Films and television shows are examples of an alternative way of exhibiting people with dwarfism. Table 1, shows some common stereotypes associated with dwarfism and some of the films/televisions these depictions have featured in.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Common stereotypes of dwarfism in the media** | **Examples** |
| Humourous | Austin Powers (1999, 2002), Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Wizard of Oz (1939), The Terror of Tiny Town (1938), Life’s too Short (2012) |
| Mythical / Fantasy | Time Bandits (1981), Willow (1988), The Wizard of Oz (1939) |
| Oddity | Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971), Tod Browning’s Freaks (1932). |
| Evil | Rumplestiltskin (1812), Twin Peaks (1990-1991) |
| Childlike | Austin Powers (1999, 2002) |

*Table 1- Common stereotypes of dwarfism in the media.*

People with dwarfism are prominent in numerous films where their dwarfism is their main feature and is played upon in a humorous or fantasy way. Haberer (2010:10) points out that within various forms of media, people with dwarfism are often ‘depicted based on the novelty factor of their stature rather than any other personal attributes’. In most of these films, the characters with dwarfism are dressed in fancy costumes, as opposed to any ordinary clothes, and are often segregated from the other characters. For example in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the actors with dwarfism play the role of Oompa Loompas who work for Willy Wonka but are rarely seen with him or the other characters unless called upon. It is apparent that in numerous roles people with dwarfism are rarely depicted as ordinary human beings, but instead constructed as mischievous beings, happy to be ridiculed and often to be laughed at rather than with.

The special issue of representations of dwarfism (2020), in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, explores an array of representations of dwarfism, demonstrating that rarely do the representations of dwarfism reflect the lived experiences of people with dwarfism. It can be argued that most representations of dwarfism encourage them to be laughed at. This is a form of disabling humour. Disabling humour according to Barnes (1991) helps perpetuate the pre-conceived attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people in the minds of non-disabled people - thus reinforcing the foundations on which discrimination rests. Dwarfism is considered an uncommon disability (1 in 10,000 births) and thus encounters with people with dwarfism in society can be considered rare. What is not uncommon is their appearance in mass media that is often exploitative of their height. Therefore, how they are perceived within the media can influence how other members of society interact with them. Thus, providing a representation, even if humorous, can provide a social commentary of dwarfism that enables the audience to understand their lived experiences.

How dwarfism is portrayed in the media can influence people’s perceptions of people with dwarfism and subsequently how they interact with them. Pritchard (2021) suggests that it is not uncommon for people with dwarfism to experience name calling that relates to popular characters with dwarfism in films, such as “Mini-me”, which are always humorous. This demonstrates the power representations of dwarfism have on wider society. Television programmes and films bring in a large audience and thus any negative representation of dwarfism is likely to perpetuate existing stereotypes within society, resonating with the negotiated position.

Adelson (2005) argues that people with dwarfism are trying to adopt a more positive identity and move away from representations of dwarfism as a form of entertainment that is often laughed at. Another way to challenge them is to increase more positive representations of dwarfism in various forms of media, including animation, that have the potential to challenge stereotypes. Pritchard (2021) points out that other members of the public who ridicule people with dwarfism in society do not use those characters with dwarfism in television shows and films that do not encourage the audiences to laugh at them and challenge stereotypes associated with dwarfism. What I find interesting is that despite Family Guy’s popularity I have never experienced any of the jokes involving characters with dwarfism being aimed at me, but this is only my interpretation. Due to dwarfism’s strong connection to humour, and the effect it can have on people with dwarfism in society, it is important to explore how humour concerning dwarfism plays out in animated shows.

**Section III - Methodology**

To understand how dwarfism is represented within Family Guy analysed several episodes which all featured people with dwarfism in them. I used an Autocritical discourse analysis created by David Bolt (2021) to analyse several representations which were influenced by my positionality. Autocritical discourse analysis is a combination of autoethnography and critical discourse analysis. Bolt (2021) suggests that autocritical discourse analysis values personal narratives which can help to challenge dominant cultural representations and their impact. It recognises that how I interpret the media texts will be influenced by my own experiences of dwarfism. In this paper, I use autoethnography to reflect on my own positionality / social experiences as a person with dwarfism and they influence my interpretation of the scenes featuring dwarfs. ‘Autoethnography is a method that allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture’ (Mendez, 2013, p. 280). Whether I laugh or take offence to these scenes is influenced by my experiences as a woman with dwarfism.

Whilst I am interpreting these scenes based on my own experiences as someone with dwarfism, I am also assuming that other people may interpret them differently based on their experiences or exposure to dwarfism, which are likely to be shaped by dominant cultural representations. Whilst I can argue that representations of dwarfism in Family Guy offer important social commentary, dominant cultural representations of dwarfism are still likely to influence societal beliefs about dwarfism, which could impact how people interpret particular scenes.

**Section IV- Representations of dwarfism in Family Guy**

An important part of representation is the use of language used towards people with dwarfism. Haller, Dorries and Rahn (2006) point out that language can reinforce dominant views towards disabled people. When referring to people with dwarfism, terms often switch between ‘midget’ and ‘dwarf’. Whilst dwarf is deemed an acceptable term by a majority of people with dwarfism, midget is deemed unacceptable. According to LPA, over 90% of their members deem the word inappropriate (LPA, 2015). Pritchard (2019) argues that midget should be considered a form of hate speech as it is often used to demean people with dwarfism in society. Pritchard (2019) points out that the word midget is derived from the word ‘midge’ meaning sandfly, which is dehumanising. The term was popularised within the freak shows, a place where people with dwarfism were exploited for the amusement of others. Despite the demise of freak shows, the term is still used within the media, including within Family Guy.

Episode 10, season 5 (Peter’s two dads), contains a cutaway gag entitled, ‘*Dwarf amongst midgets’*, that leads to a supermarket scene where we see three supposed midgets asking a person with dwarfism, whose body size and shape differ slightly, to reach an item off a shelf. The name of the cutaways gag demonstrates that the creators of family Guy associate the term midget with people with proportionate dwarfism. This is a common error, as people with proportionate dwarfism were popular freak show exhibits. In the freak shows, they were often referred to as midgets to distinguish them from people with proportionate dwarfism (Bogdan, 1988).

In the cutaway gag, despite the shelf being low down and in easy reach for the character with dwarfism, it is out of reach for the others. Of course, the humour is directed at the fact that people with dwarfism cannot usually complete this task and rely on average sized people to reach items off shelves for them. It could reinforce needing assistance as humorous, but for me, the humour comes from the incongruous situation. I could relate because I suppose I would feel good if I was not the one asking for assistance but instead giving it. After all, dependency is often stigmatised within society. Whilst the scene demonstrates a usually disabling task for people with dwarfism, it implies that the person with dwarfism feels good for being able to complete a task that he would usually need help with from someone of average stature. When they ask for help, the dwarf replies ‘Yes, I can’ affirmatively and confidently. The scene creates a hierarchy and places the dwarf character in the position usually held by an average sized person. The scene subtly exposes the way non-disabled people usually feel good when assisting disabled people. Although the scene uses derogatory language, the characters are portrayed ordinarily and do not display any of the usual stereotypes associated with dwarfism, such as being humorous or mythical. Representations of people with dwarfism that differ from stereotypical representations of them have the potential to change people’s perceptions of them. However, the terminology also needs to be appropriate.

In Family Guy, there is no main character or reoccurring character with dwarfism. All of the characters with dwarfism, to date, feature in the show’s cutaway gags. The purpose of the cutaway gags is to add humour to the main plotline (McKeown and Darke, 2013). Whilst they are there to add humour it is how the humour is directed and used which is important to consider. Reid Hammond-Stoughton and Smith (2006) argue disability humour encourages the reconceptualization of disability. It is used to promote an understanding of the lived experiences of disabled people. In several scenes, people with dwarfism in Family Guy are shown to be ordinary people with ordinary lives. This challenges usual representations of people with dwarfism, which Haberer (2010) suggests equates dwarfism as either abnormal or fantasy like.

It is apparent from this scene that people with dwarfism are thought to be people slightly taller than ‘midgets’ and with different body proportions. There are over 200 different types of dwarfism, with Achondroplasia being the most common and results in a disproportionate body size. Other forms of dwarfism can result in a proportionate body size. Little people of America (2015) note that there is confusion between the word midget and dwarf with many people in society believing that the term midget is an acceptable term to use towards people with proportionate dwarfism. The confusion of believing that there exist both people with dwarfism and midgets, as opposed to recognising the word midget as an offensive term, even towards those with proportionate dwarfism, indicates a lack of awareness. The term midget is still used within society and within the media, despite protests from various organisations for people with dwarfism, such as Little People of America (LPA) and the Restricted Growth Association (RGA) in the UK. Although these organisations are well known amongst people with dwarfism, they do not have the same awareness raising platform as Family Guy. Thus, Family Guy has the potential to popularise derogatory terms associated with dwarfism. Therefore, the use of the word midget in the show can be considered part of disabling humour, which perpetuates negative stereotypes of people with dwarfism in society.

In numerous scenes, Family Guy exposes how other members of the public respond to people with dwarfism in an infantilising or humorous manner. In episode 9 season 4 (*Breaking out is hard to do*), Joe Swanson is called to a domestic dispute. Peter and Quagmire (another close friend and neighbour of Peter’s) accompany Joe to the scene where we see a couple, who both have dwarfism, arguing. Despite a situation that would not normally be found humorous, Peter and Quagmire respond by laughing at the situation. Immediately the scene exposes a common social encounter experienced by people with dwarfism. People with dwarfism are considered figures of fun by wider society. This response questions how people perceive people with dwarfism in any given situation. Quagmire then begins to record the incident on his phone whilst continuing to laugh. Ellis (2018) points out that being photographed or recorded on a camera phone by strangers is not an uncommon experience for people with dwarfism. A person watching Quagmire recording the characters on his phone may find that funny in a different way to someone like me. I can relate to the scene whereas someone else may be encouraged to behave in the same way as Quagmire.

Joe then begins chasing the couple around their living room before they all appear from behind the sofa in a Punch and Judy style show. During this part, the comedy relates to all three disabled characters; Joe and the married couple with dwarfism. In this scene, the use of people with dwarfism as comedic props that resemble puppets may promote disabling humour, depending on how the audience interprets the scene. Walters (2013) asserts that getting the joke about disability is often not as simple as it seems. Depending on how it is done it can either be damaging or used to challenge negative perceptions of disability. Mallett (2010) argues that there is a tendency to assume that any negativity in relation to disability humour reinforces negative attitudes within society. Whilst a lot of humour concerning dwarfism can perpetuate negative stereotypes and subsequently affect how people with dwarfism are perceived in society, it does not mean that all humour concerning dwarfism is negative.

During the whole scene, Peter and Quagmire watch the couple fighting whilst Joe tries to intervene. Peter and Quagmire observe the situation in a humorous manner. In the end, when Joe picks them both up, Quagmire responds, “Ahh, they got tuckered out”. This end scene, in particular Quagmire’s response, can be considered infantilizing due to his patronizing attitude towards them that is usually reserved for children. Grosz (1991) argues that people with dwarfism occupy a binary middle ground between children and adults. Despite the characters being both adults and in an adult relationship Quagmire fails to see this and instead cannot see past their height and its similarity to a child’s. Ablon (1984) suggests that due to their height it is common for other members of the public to perceive people with dwarfism as children and treat them accordingly. The characters with dwarfism do not act like children instead the show demonstrates how other members of the public often perceive and subsequently treat them as such. In fact, the show challenges a common myth that disabled people are asexual (Shakespeare, 2000). Furthermore, the couple seems to live in a nice house, which would suggest a middle class lifestyle, but most of all an ordinary home amongst other people. Wilde (2018) suggests that people with dwarfism are often depicted as living as a separate race (e.g. *The Wizard of Oz*) away from the rest of society. Yet, in Family Guy, they live in suburbia. In this case, the show exposes society’s attitude towards dwarfism, as opposed to infantilising the characters with dwarfism in the same way previous shows have, e.g. Austin Powers.

In episode 10, season 7 (*FOX-y Lady*), a man with dwarfism, wearing a suit and tie, indicating a professional and respectable look, announces the bombing of Pearl Harbour. He announces the bombing from behind a standing lectern whilst standing on a chair. This situation highlights how the built environment is not size suitable for people with dwarfism. This is a common theme within the show as it regularly demonstrates how Joe is unable to access different places due to a lack of accessible spaces. The scene shows a person with dwarfism working as a government representative, which juxtaposes the stereotypical professions associated with people with dwarfism, such as circus performers. Adelson (2005) points out that people with dwarfism are now employed in various occupations. Despite his professionalism, the creators show how other members of society cannot see past a person's dwarfism. As he begins to talk we hear a member of the audience, who we do not see, interrupt and shout, “He’s adorable”. Whilst the voice of the man with dwarfism indicates an intelligent persona, the man in the audience speaks in a comedic tone. The man in the audience commenting on the appearance of the person with dwarfism signifies how others infantilize them. This indicates that the joke is not aimed towards the person with dwarfism, but rather at society’s inability to see past a person’s dwarfism and some of the stereotypes associated with them. The scene contains what Bolt (2014) terms *‘disablist infantilisation*, which is how other people sometimes treat disabled people like children. The scene does not portray the person with dwarfism in any negative way, such as humorous or childlike, and thus does not play on any cultural stereotypes often associated with dwarfism. Rather the scene emphasises how other members of the public often perceive people with dwarfism and the attitudes they encounter. What is also apparent is the tone of voice from the audience member, which is rather childlike. The character with dwarfism is not constructed as childlike, but instead, the member of the audience, who we can perceive to be of average stature, is. Lockyer (2015) suggests that taking the focus from a person’s impairment and instead focusing the comedy on the disabling stereotypes held by other people and the problematic encounters disabled people experience can aid in producing comedy that does not reinforce negative stereotypes.

In another cutaway gag, entitled, ‘*The old man and the midget’* (episode 8, season 5, *Barely legal*), we see two people sitting at a bus stop. One is an older man and the other is a person with dwarfism, although inappropriately referred to in the episode as a midget. The person with dwarfism is seen wearing regular clothing and is carrying out an everyday activity. There is no indication that the person with dwarfism is anything other than an ordinary member of society. The older man is seen staring at the person with dwarfism who after a brief silence asks, “Sir, will please stop staring at me” to which the older man replies, “Where’s the rest of you?” in a rather angry tone. Thomson (2009) suggests that due to their ‘novel appearance and rarity the sight of someone with dwarfism can call up predetermined reactions’. The creators of Family Guy demonstrate a common encounter for people with dwarfism. According to Lockyer (2015), disability humour can aid in demonstrating to non-disabled people the issues disabled people experience daily. Whilst a joke is made towards the height of the person with dwarfism the scene exposes social ignorance towards dwarfism and highlights some of the social issues they encounter, including being stared at and being asked intrusive questions (Pritchard, 2021). Furthermore, Shakespeare et al. (2010) found that 96% of their respondents, who all had dwarfism, had reported being stared at by other members of the public. The scene emphasises social ignorance towards dwarfism but again does not portray the character with dwarfism in any stereotypical way. This according to Lockyer (2015) is a form of disability humour that helps to switch the direction of the humour from the disabled person to the disabling attitudes prominent within society. However, Haller (2003) points out that humour has both a stimulus (joke) and a response to it (laughter). Whilst the intended purpose of the joke may be to demonstrate the unwanted interactions people with dwarfism encounter, the response to it may differ. For example, I can only presume that the intended purpose of the scene is to highlight how people with dwarfism are stared at and asked intrusive questions. However, someone else may think what the old man says is funny and think it is acceptable to repeat the joke to a person with dwarfism in the street. This of course is dependent on how the joke is interpreted based on the audience's societal beliefs. As a woman with dwarfism, I can relate to the scene based on my own past experiences and laugh at the old man’s ignorance. However, someone else whose knowledge of dwarfism is based on problematic representations of dwarfism may laugh at the old man’s comment assuming that a person with dwarfism is not fully human.

**Section V - Are they laughing with us or at us?**

Unlike in stereotypical depictions of people with dwarfism, in Family Guy people with dwarfism depicted in ordinary, everyday roles. However, how these depictions are interpreted is dependent on the audience’s cultural beliefs. Although the show is often criticised for its controversial humour it can be argued that the show uses humour to expose disabling attitudes towards dwarfism. As Lockyer (2015) points out, disability humour is used to draw attention to how disability stereotypes demean disabled people. Whilst the scenes involving people with dwarfism are humorous, the humour is often associated with other people’s reactions towards them as opposed to their appearance or their actions. McKeown and Darke (2013) argue that the creators of Family Guy demonstrate an awareness of issues surrounding disability and offer a dissection of contemporary social perceptions of disability. The scenes often revolve around disabling social encounters that people with dwarfism experience and thus exposing their audiences to these experiences, such as being stared at or being found amusing by other members of the public. The writers of the show also demonstrate an awareness of disablist infantilisation concerning dwarfism and expose this in some of their scenes. Despite this, Reid Hammond-Stoughton and Smith (2006) argue that disability humour not only depends on the joke but also on the audience's responses. We cannot be sure how the audience responds to the scenes in Family Guy featuring people with dwarfism. What can be argued though is that the representations differ from the usual stereotypes of people with dwarfism. Family Guy shows people with dwarfism in an ordinary manner, such as working and having a family. This is a far cry from the usual stereotypes associated with dwarfism. If these scenes are interpreted differently from usual representations of dwarfism, which they are likely to be given that they do not adhere to the usual stereotypes, then they may influence how other people perceive people with dwarfism.

Wilde (2018) argues that stereotypical representations of dwarfism reinforce them as having limited personality traits and social expectations. However, Family Guy has shown characters with dwarfism with a range of personalities and social expectations, including the ability to be employed in esteemed government roles. The show has also challenged the dominant ‘gang stereotype’ associated with dwarfism (Wilde, 2018), as numerous characters with dwarfism are featured by themselves. Haller and Ralph (2003) suggest that disability humour that challenges ableist assumptions and disability stereotypes helps to challenge attitudes towards disability. In all of the scenes, the characters with dwarfism were portrayed in an ordinary manner, dressed in everyday clothes, often partaking in everyday activities, such as shopping, and thus were part of society. They were not portrayed in any stereotypical manner akin to dwarfism, such as being humorous or mythical. The characters with dwarfism were not perceived as childlike or humorous, but rather other characters perceived them as such, indicating that how society perceives and interacts with people with dwarfism was the main form of humour.

Mallett (2010) highlights the belief that only disabled people should only carry out disability humour. Whilst there is a movement regarding actors with dwarfism turning down roles that perpetuate negative stereotypes of dwarfism, there are still people with dwarfism who partake in these roles, including lowbrow entertainment. Thus, humour that features people with dwarfism and that is created by non-disabled people should be welcomed providing the humour is disability humour.

To further challenge stereotypes the writers of the show should refrain from using derogatory language when referring to people with dwarfism, as they already do towards other minority groups. The use of disablist language is common within comedy shows (Martin, 2010). Whilst it may be unintentional using the word ‘midget’ can be considered disabling humour. To fully achieve equal status with all the other characters the use of the word midget must not be used in future episodes. The use of the word midget shows how negative representations influence modern day representations of people with dwarfism.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown how humour can be used as a form of social commentary to highlight the unwanted attention people with dwarfism experience. Humour about disability, including towards people with dwarfism, is not necessarily negative but can have unwanted social implications, which are dependent on how the audience interprets the joke. Humour has the potential to expose common social attitudes experienced by people with dwarfism in society. This can help to educate people about dwarfism, especially as encounters are rare. Scenes that indicate social ignorance towards dwarfism, such as scenes where other characters stare or make comments, emphasising social perceptions of dwarfism, can help to challenge attitudes towards dwarfism. Family Guy can challenge disabling stereotypes and attitudes by changing the direction of humour, however, this is still dependent on how the audience interprets the humour. Using reception theory this paper has argued that even jokes which supposedly use disability humour and challenge problematic stereotypes can still be misinterpreted depending on the audience’s socio-cultural background. For example as an academic with dwarfism, how I interpret the scenes will differ to a non-disabled person and even to another academic. Thus, further research which explores how different audiences interpret different scenes needs consideration.

**References:**

1. Ablon, J. (1984) *Little People in America: The Social Dimensions of Dwarfism*. New York: Praeger.
2. Alderson, B. (2005) The Changing Lives of Archetypal ‘Curiosities’ – and Echoes of the Past.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (3), 1-13.
3. Barnes, C. (1991) Disabling Comedy and Anti-Discrimination Legislation” *Coalition,* pp. 26-28.
4. Bogdan, R. (1988) *Freak show: presenting human oddities for humour and profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Bogdan, R. (1996) The Social Construction of Freaks, In: Thomson, R. (Ed) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body.* London: New York University Press, 23-37.
6. Bolt, D. (2014) Epilogue: attitudes and actions, In David Bolt (Ed) *Changing Social Attitudes Towards Disability* Abingdon: Routledge, 172-175.
7. Bolt, D. (ed) (2021) *The Metanarratives of Disability: A Re-Reading of Twentieth Century Anglophone Writing*. Abingdon: Routledge.
8. Deans, J. (2010) TV ratings: Family Guy pulls in more than 1m viewers, *The Guardian [online]* Available from:<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/may/10/family-guy-tv-ratings> (accessed 02/09/2019).
9. Ellis, L. (2018) Through a filtered lens: unauthorized picture-taking of people with dwarfism in public spaces. *Disability and Society*, 33 (2), 218-237.
10. Fink, M. (2013) ‘People who look like things’ Representations of Disability in The Simpsons. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies,* 7 (3), 255-279.
11. Grosz, E. (1991) Freaks. *Social Semiotics,* 1 (2), 22-38.
12. Haberer, J. (2010) *The little difference: dwarfism and the media.* Norderstedt: Grin.
13. Hall, S. (1993) Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. In During, S. (Ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
14. Haller, B. (2010). *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media.* Louisville: Advocado Press.
15. Haller, B., Dorries, B. and Rahn, J. (2006) Media labelling versus the US disability community identity: a study of shifting cultural language. *Disability & Society*, 21:1, 61-75.
16. Haller, B. and Ralph, S. (2003) John Callahan's Pelswick cartoon and a new phase of disability humor. *Disability Studies Quarterly,* 23 (3).
17. Kruse, R. (2003) Narrating Intersections of gender and dwarfism in everyday spaces, *The Canadian Geographer* 47 (4), 494-508.
18. Little People of America. (2015) *LPA issues statement to abolish the "m" word,* *Little People of America [online]* Available from:<https://www.lpaonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=198:the_m_word&catid=19:site-content&Itemid=176> (accessed 12/06/2019).
19. Lockyer, S. (2015) From Comedy Targets to Comedy-Makers: Disability and Comedy in Live Performance, *Disability and Society*, 30 (9), 1397-1412.
20. Mallett, R. (2010) ‘Claiming Comedic Immunity’: Or, What Do You Get When You Cross Contemporary British Comedy With Disability? *Review of Disability Studies* 6 (3), 5-13.
21. Martin, N. (2010) A preliminary study of broad disability related themes within the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. *Disability and Society* 25 (5), 539-548.
22. McKeown, S. and Darke, P. (2013) ‘Are they laughing at us or with us?’ Disability is Fox’s animated series Family Guy. In Mogk, M. E. (Ed) *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* Jefferson: Mcfarland and Company, pp. 155-164.
23. Mendez, M. (2013) Autoethnography as a research method: advantages, limitations and criticisms. *Colombian applied linguistics journal*, 15 (2) 279-287.
24. Noonan, M. (2010) Laughing and Disability: Comedy, Collaborative Authorship and *Down Under Mystery Tour*. Unpublished PhD, Queensland University of Technology.
25. Pritchard, E. (2019) Hate speech and dwarfism: the influence of cultural representations, In Sherry, M., Olsen, T., Vedeler, J. and Eriksen, J. (Eds) *Disability Hate Speech: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.116-128.
26. Pritchard, E. (2021) Dwarfism, Spatialities and Disabling Differences. Abingdon: Routledge.
27. Reid, D. K., Hammond-Stoughton, E. and Smith, M. R. (2006) The humorous construction of disability: ‘stand-up’ comedies in the United States”, *Disability and Society* 21 (6), 629-643.
28. Reid-Hresko, J. and Reid, D. K. (2005) Deconstructing Disability: Three Episodes of South Park, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (4).
29. Shakespeare, T. (1994) Cultural Representations of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal. *Disability and Society* 9 (3), 283-299.
30. Shakespeare, T. (1999) Joking a Part. *Body and Society* 5 (4), 47-52.
31. Shakespeare, T. (2000) Disabled sexuality: towards rights and recognition. *Sexuality and Disability* 18(3), 159-166.
32. Sherry, M., Olsen, T., Vedeler, J. and Eriksen, J. (Eds) *Disability Hate Speech: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts*, Abingdon: Routledge.
33. Thomson, R. (1997) *Extraordinary Bodies. New York*: Columbia University Press.
34. Thomson, R. (2009) *Staring: How We Look.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
35. Walters, S. (2013) Cool Aspire Humor. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7 (3), 271-288.
36. Wilde, A. (2018) *Film, comedy, and disability: understanding humour and genre in cinematic constructions of impairment and disability*. London, Routledge.

[1] The correct term to use to refer to someone with dwarfism is often contested. Terms include: dwarf, person with restricted growth, person of short stature, person with dwarfism and little person (Little People of America, 2015). The term dwarfism is the most common term used both medically and socially, particularly within the UK, and thus is the term I have chosen to use as well as the term person with dwarfism.