

“What if you take your important stuff and hide it in some[thing] juicy (...)?”
– Postmodern Sitcoms: Searching for Meaning and Agency.

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JUICY (...)?” – POSTMODERN SITCOMS: SEARCHING FOR MEANING AND
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Abstract:

This thesis aims to answer the research question on how do 21st-century British and American sitcoms explore agency and the search for meaning in postmodern societies by conducting a qualitative, thematic content analysis of three programmes: 1) season three of “*Community*”, created by Dan Harmon in 2011; 2) season four of “*BoJack Horseman*”, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg in 2017; and 3) “*Fleabag*”, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge in 2016.

The research is grounded in theories by Lyotard (1979) and Veit (2018) on postmodernity and its characterization of senses of meaninglessness, utilizing Royce’s (1959), Thompson and Janigian’s (1988), Schnell’s (2012), and Längle’s (2004) definitions of meaning and the search for it. Moreover, it is informed as well by notions of Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001), Gubrium and Holstein (1995), Hitlin and Elder (2007), and (most importantly) Bandura (2001) on the concept of human agency as well as its position within postmodern societies. This paper, furthermore, combines these approaches with Mills’ (2005) Sociology of Humor, marrying it to the medium of television by utilizing papers by Juckel et al. (2016), Detweiler (2012), and McRobbie (1994), as well as being grounded in many other theories.

The analyzed portrayal of building human agency and searching for life’s meaning was concluded to be showcased within the studied sitcoms with found subthemes of: characters’ construction of identities, their relationships and resolving conflicts, existential nihilism and losing, searching, and assigning newly found meaning of life, all embedded and grounded in three main types of humor: absurdity, irony, and parody.

KEYWORDS: postmodernity, agency, meaning of life, sitcoms, humour

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1. Introduction

Since the dawn of time, people have struggled to find inner harmony and reassurance that what they dedicate their lives and days to matters. Whether their actions are done in agreement with inner values and goals, or if their existence signifies something bigger in a more cosmic, religious-like way. Searching for that higher purpose but also for the confidence in the fact that life does not simply happen to us, rather we are active participants in its formation are one of the most distinctly human qualities. However, in the current political climate characterized by turmoil and instability, watching or reading the news can be an overwhelming task for many individuals – being constantly bombarded with new reports on the horrors of war in Ukraine, the atrocities happening to civilians in the Gaza strip, or even reading one’s local headlines, etc., it is almost impossible to not give in to the feelings of overarching pessimism and fall into that darkness. That is precisely why people need laughter and comedy – to ease our tensions and release stress, to create a safe space to escape the bleakness of our world but also to securely examine and analyze the important and often weighty events and experiences that we, as the human race, face every day, i.e. finding comfort in the humorous and playful (McRobbie, 1994, p. 5).

As Jameson (1983, p. 113) explains in his essay on the postmodern consumer society, after the 1960s’ transitional period of the new international order, characterized by neocolonialism, globalization, digitalization, or the Green Revolution, was rattled and disturbed by its internal discrepancies; a new social order of late capitalism emerged. In art, this new period tends to blur the boundaries between high and popular art opening up new avenues of studies, focusing on genres never before taken as seriously, such as television series, kitsch, advertising, or ‘para-literature’, i.e. romance, gothic, murder mysteries, or biographical books (Jameson, 1983, p. 112). Consequently, after the transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution, as well as by the Information and Atomic Ages of the later 20th century, to the ways in which our society operates, it is increasingly more difficult for people to find the time and energy to consume complex and attention-demanding products. Thus, the search for entertainment and an escape from the troubles of our everyday lives often turns to culture, specifically to film and television formats. Television shows, particularly situational comedies, are quite favored as they can be easily digested and captivate their audience with humour rooted in mundane life (Wells-Lassagne, 2015, p. 1; Berman, 1987, p. 6). Having episodes usually only twenty to thirty minutes long, they do not require much time nor attention from the viewers but can, at the same

time, confront the audience with their deepest and darkest fears characterizing postmodern times – is our existence deprived of meaning? Who even are we if our lives serve no purpose?

1.1. Academic and societal relevance

Sitcoms, i.e. situational comedies, are a particularly interesting format to analyze. As authors such as Juckel et al. (2016, p. 583-584) or Mills (2006, p. 19) note in their research, this genre of television shows is often overlooked by the world of academia as many do not see it as serious or complex enough to study or argue that since humour is such a subjective matter, it is very difficult to examine. Moreover, analyses combining the study of humour and postmodernist views on the absurd and ironic used to deal with the pessimism and perceived purposelessness of life are even more scarce. One could argue that such a connection is an important one to study, as humour can be utilized as a tool to deal with postmodern nihilism, while television programmes (here: sitcoms) in contemporary times serve as reference points for people to construct and understand their reality (Veit, 2018, p. 2014; McRobbie, 1994, p. 5). Therefore, analyzing productions watched by so many people on a daily that provide them with navigation points to experience the postmodern world and its issues, is a crucial endeavor.

Even when such studies can be found, the scholars examining this link usually focus on a singular show. For example, Detweiler (2012) in his paper examines the role of irony in one of the most famous sitcoms – “*The Office*” (the American version), while Sharma (2019) focuses on the postmodern nature of “*Community*” and its references to other popular media, creating pastiche-like postmodern genres; Saura (2019), on the other hand, in his paper on “*BoJack Horsman*” notes the programme’s postmodern blending of genres, characters (humans and human-like animals), and cultural references. However, not much comparison is done between such programmes nor do such analyses give enough thought to the search for meaning and the state of agency characterizing postmodernity and its condition. Therefore, I believe this research holds academic relevance as it could contribute to bridging the mentioned gap on the lack of attention given to the study of sitcoms and their complex nature through a comparison analysis of different programmes. Moreover, it can provide a deeper understanding of how are postmodern issues portrayed in situational comedy television programmes since it is crucial in informing discussions and examinations on how people deal with their struggles of finding agency and meaning in life and its representation in contemporary media.

Furthermore, this study can be argued to be socially relevant as it focuses on cultural products so beloved by the majority and consumed daily as well as dealing with the mundane lives and struggles of everyday people. As, the comedy genre of television series is the second

most watched and demanded, after dramas, in both the United Kingdom (around 38.1% of viewership in 2023) and United States of America (around 39.1% of viewership in 2024) (Parrot Analytics, 2024; Parrot Analytics, 2024). Consequently, analyzing situational comedy programmes could be of aid in gaining a deeper understanding of why audiences are drawn to these specific types of comedies as well as in creating more nuanced and valuable insights for television producers, writers, researchers, and others exploring the complex nature of postmodern culture and mass media cultural products. As television comedy programmes differ heavily based on the country they are produced in, they can provide insights into nations' mass consciousness and reveal invaluable information about their cultures (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13; Juckel et al., 2016, p. 584). Therefore, research on sitcoms can be of help in analyzing what parts of the world or life various nations find appropriate to laugh at, i.e. uncovering and understanding cultural beliefs, values, and collective identities of different groups or cultures.

1.2. Summary of research design and structure

Grounded in previous research and the theoretical framework discussed below (see: Chapter 2), this thesis examines the phenomena of agency and search for meaning in postmodernity illustrated by situational-comedy television programmes and aims to answer the research question of:

How do 21st-century British and American sitcoms explore agency and the search for meaning in postmodern societies?

The initially studied concepts, therefore, were: postmodernity, measured by its various markers, agency, and the search for meaning, all portrayed in situational-comedy television shows, however, some interesting findings emerged and the found themes differed slightly at the end (a full overview and definitions are discussed in Chapter 2 and 3). This research was conducted via qualitative thematic content analysis of three situational comedy television shows and the data sample consisted of: 1) season three of “*Community*”, a show created by Dan Harmon in 2009; 2) season four of “*BoJack Horseman*”, a show created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg in 2014; and 3) two seasons of “*Fleabag*”, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge in 2016.

These three shows were chosen as they fit the data sampling criteria of sitcoms but mostly due to their interesting nature: they are not often examined in an academic context but each of them proves to be unique and appreciated by audiences for various reasons. “*Community*”, studied also by Sharma (2013, p. 185-190) in her paper on collaboration between the series' producers and its viewers, is seen by the author as the perfect example of postmodern media,

filled with absurdity, irony, and meta-references to characters' fictionality. The show follows the lives of the seven members of a study group attending the Greendale Community College – Jeff, Britta, Annie, Troy, Abed, Shirley, and Pierce, who get themselves into all sorts of trouble and situations at their school. Their very different life paths brought them into community college, where they bonded over shared classes and became an inseparable group of best friends. The examined in this paper season three showcases the study group's third year at Greendale. "*BoJack Horseman*", on the other hand, follows the life of a wash-up star of a once famous 1990s sitcom "*Horsin' Around*" – the titular horse-actor, struggles with depression and alcoholism while trying to navigate his life in Hollywood and maintain his friendships, that are falling apart. The examined in this paper season, i.e. season four, picks up on BoJack's life right after the death of his very close friend and child actor in the "*Horsin' Around*" sitcom, Sarah-Lynn, who overdoses after going on a substance-induced two-month-long bender with BoJack. Filled with guilt, he leaves Los Angeles and cuts contact with all of his friends. This programme focuses primarily on the agency of its human-like animal characters while commenting on the postmodern society and its shortcomings, all encapsulated through the medium of animation, as Saura (2019, p. 292) discusses in their paper. "*BoJack Horseman*", moreover, portrays its protagonist dealing with the overarching sense of meaninglessness in his life, a notion analyzed by scholars such as Veit (2018, p. 214) in his examination of how existential nihilism is explored by popular media. Lastly, "*Fleabag*" depicts a life of a woman in her thirties living in London and trying to sort out her life after the death of her best friend, Boo. Fleabag's portrayal is often argued to be a post-feminist one, as she is outspoken and liberated, indulging in many hedonic pleasures, such as drinking, smoking, and sleeping with various men; often talking directly to the viewer, breaking the fourth wall, about her thoughts and feelings (Grady, 2024; NYFA, 2023). It is quite difficult to pinpoint the number of the shows' viewership as some came out on streaming platforms as well, such as Netflix and Apple TV, where such statistics are unavailable, but they are discussed in both academic, specifically in the context of postmodernity, and popular media texts, as mentioned before.

Informed by the literature as well as aiming to create new theories based on the collected data, this thesis adopts a mixed approach of deduction and induction – the studied theories provided the building foundations for observing the concepts, while the essential space for new themes and dimensions to emerge was left. Therefore, the identified themes here are: 1) agency, explored through three indicators: construction of identities, relationships and resolving conflicts, and breaking the fourth wall; 2) the journey to find meaning of life and its three stages:

existential nihilism and feelings of meaninglessness, searching for one's purpose and order in life, and finding and assigning meaning of life; and, the final theme, 3) humour, indicated by three main types: absurdity, irony, and parody.

This paper is further structured as follows: Chapter 2, provides an overview of the theory grounding this study as well as exploring definitions and comprehensive explanations of examined concepts; Chapter 3, consists of an overview of the methodology, an explanation of the data collection and analysis processes, as well as discussion on the justification of chosen methods and ethics of the research; Chapter 4, presents the findings and discussions organized by the identified themes and showcases the link between the results and theory; and Chapter 5, concludes the main findings of the research and provides an answer to the posed research question, as well as highlights any limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

The framework explored below was chosen as it provides the necessary academic background informing the research as well as clear and relevant definitions of studied concepts. The topic chosen is not an easy one to operationalize or systematically pinpoint, thus, a theoretical framework is crucial and necessary to fully grasp and answer the research question. The previous research and academic literature explored below were divided into themes about postmodernity as well as (sociology of) humour explored in television.

2.1. Postmodernity

2.1.1. The Postmodern Condition – Lyotard

The postmodern condition, i.e. the first theme within postmodernity, is a concept introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard in the 1970s and further built upon by scholars such as Brügger (2001), defining it as the state of culture after the transformations of the late 19th century that revolutionized science, literature, and the arts, causing a crisis of the narratives, i.e. philosophical legitimization and stories explaining all discourses (Lyotard, 1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355). Lyotard (1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355) argues that science and technology live in a conflict with the narratives, producing discourses of (de)legitimation and causing catastrophes of metaphysical philosophy, thus presenting the ‘postmodern’ as the “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 356).

Brügger (2001, p. 80), furthermore, examines science and the social, as well as their legitimating potential through language games. The narratives, as mentioned by Lyotard (1979, p. 356), are here explained to be attempting to unite two viewpoints: the speculative narrative, i.e. the scientific, social, and existential practices can be united, as well as the emancipation narrative, i.e. individuals’ need for development is seen as the foundation, and understood as the fact that “science and education should emancipate individuals from everything that oppresses them” (Brügger, 2001, p. 80). However, Brügger (2001, p. 80-81) notes the Lyotardian view of these narratives as being no longer trustworthy, which causes the de-legitimation characterizing post-industrial societies and postmodern culture. The scholar cites Lyotard’s notions on postmodern art defining it as critically interacting with modern avant-grade culture and artworks, that search for their limits and confines and create something new (Brügger, 2001, p. 87).

Lyotard's (1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355) and Brügger's (2001, p. 80-87) notions provide the necessary background to understand what one means when studying postmodernity – why it is unique and separated from the concept of modernity. The scholars explain the existential condition of humans living in contemporary times, providing philosophical and social context to postmodernity, which is exactly the period studied in this paper (Lyotard, 1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355; Brügger, 2001, p. 80-89). One needs to comprehend what shaped this way of thinking to analyze further the state of post-industrial culture and its relation to human agency and the (search for) meaning of life.

2.1.2. Existential nihilism and searching for meaning

Since the (meta)narratives are no longer trustworthy and sciences caused a crisis in the metaphysical philosophy, how does one respond to a life deprived of meaning? Some scholars, such as Veit (2018) turn to existential nihilism, while others, e.g. Royce (1959), view the problem of meaninglessness as a defining characteristic of the 20th century as overexaggerated. Other authors, on the other hand, turn to defining and conceptualizing meaning and the search for it, as Schnell (2012), Thompson and Janigian (1988), or Längle (2004) do in their papers.

Veit (2018, p. 211) poses the question above as 'the only really serious philosophical problem' in their article and turns to the notions of (existential) nihilism. Nihilism is often defined as "the negative and eliminativist thesis of denying objective values" (Veit, 2018, p. 214). Existential nihilism, on the other hand, is explained as the denial of meaning or purpose within life or the universe and is argued by the scholar to be taken as a fact or a widespread view present in the modern world and a driver for existential philosophy (Veit, 2018, p. 214). Moreover, in their paper, Veit (2018, p. 218) turns to Camus' (1942) notion of the Absurd, posing it as the only answer to existential nihilism, which "is born of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1942, p. 20 as cited in Veit, 2018, p. 218). The author explains that it is created from two realizations that individuals need to come to: 1) life is meaningless and the universe has no purpose, but 2) people still desire that meaning and purpose, it is thus a futile search for meaning in a meaningless world (Veit, 2018, p. 218-219). The author's notion is an important one to understand as it provides the foundation and definition of a problem wide-spread in postmodern societies – a perceived sense of purposelessness and lack of order in human lives, while proposing an interesting answer to that issue: the absurd and playful (Veit, 2018, p. 211-218).

Consequently, this argument points towards comedy and humour, two characteristics of postmodern culture, of which television shows (and specifically: sitcoms) are an example.

However, contrasting Veit's (2018) notion on the hopeless nature of searching for meaning, Royce (1959, p. 515) argues that this quest is exactly what makes us so distinctively human. The author approaches nihilistic philosophy and literature with a rather critical view and characterizes the 20th century as dealing with the problem of meaninglessness (Royce, 1959, p. 515, 523). He makes a claim that people have always struggled with finding meaning behind their actions or existence, but the modern (20th century) times are particularly concerned – in his view, this is most likely due to rapid advancements in science and technology, more specifically the invention of the atomic bomb, which circles back to the postmodern condition (Royce, 1959, p. 523). Royce (1959, p. 533-534) explains that this creates a deep concern for our values and sense of belonging in the world, turning into a religious-like quest for purpose and place in the hierarchy of the universe.

But what exactly is meaning? Why would a person search for it and how do they go about doing so? Previous studies done by Schnell (2012), alongside Thompson and Janigian (1988) and Längle (2004), have defined meaning as “importance and significance attributed to an experience or matter” (Schischkoff, 1991, p. 667 as cited in Schnell, 2012, p. 6).

However, Schnell (2012, p. 6) explains that meaning is not inherent to a matter – something that is meaningful to one person, does not have to be relevant to another; or something could have meaning to an individual in a specific time of their life but lose that meaning over time. This author further notes that there is a crucial difference between the meaning of and in life – the first one relates to the significance of life on a cosmic scale, while the second refers to how people experience and generate meaning in their lives (Schnell, 2012, p. 7-8). The scholar describes that the sources of meaning are the basic orientations at the root of human cognition, behaviors, and emotions motivating commitment and direction of action, which most often lie in the subconscious and enable a meaningful structuring of life (Schnell, 2012, p. 7-8).

Aligning itself with Royce's (1959) and Schnell's (2012) notions, Thompson and Janigian (1988, p. 268) in their paper explain that when one experiences a crisis of meaning, it is followed by a search for it to restore a sense of coherence. The authors further demonstrate that “meaning consists of seeing the world as orderly, despite its obvious chaos at times, and of searching for a purpose or task with which to define one's life” (Thompson & Janigian, 1988, p. 263). The authors explain that when an individual experiences a traumatic event, i.e. loses a

sense of order and purpose of their life, they feel a sense of meaninglessness and begin a quest to restore their equilibrium (Thompson & Janigian, 1988, p. 268). Thompson and Janigian (1988, p. 265-271) note that this usually happens through changing one's perception of the world or self-assumptions, or changing one's goals.

Consequently, one can argue that life's purpose comes from within, as Schnell (2012) or Thompson and Janigian (1988) claim, which is a view also shared by Längle (2004). The scholar explains that to find meaning, one requires an open attitude towards the world and inner consent with our actions or behaviors (Längle, 2004, p. 28-30). This further illustrates that existential analysis is a requirement to finding a way of life that agrees with an individual's inner consent, creating a two-sided dialogue: one directed towards the outside, e.g. what appeals to or challenges me?; as well as directed toward the inside, e.g. do I agree with the decision I made? (Längle, 2004, p. 28-30). This agreement between one's actions and their deepest feelings is crucial, Längle (2004, p. 28-30) notes, as it creates a harmony between inner experiences and outer actions.

2.1.3. Postmodernity and agency

Postmodernity, moreover, is often posed in the context of one's agency. Some studies argue that not much agency is left for humans in postmodern times, as Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001) do in their work, giving a necessary background to the concept and the space it takes up in the 20th and 21st-centuries societies. Other scholars focus more on defining agency, such as Gubrium and Holstein (1995) do in their paper, or concentrate on its various types and aspects, as Hitlin and Elder (2007) do, building on notions by Bandura (2001).

Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001, p. 60) propose in their paper the notion that there is little to no human agency allowed in postmodernity. The scholars make a claim that postmodernism utilizes the Foucauldian view of knowledge as an attitude that analyzing who we are as humans consists of historical examining of the limitations put on us and experimenting with their boundaries (Fitzhugh & Leckie, 2001, p. 59-60). They critique cultural historians for downplaying the role of agency or interconnecting it with causation, which further denies and ignores the explanations of sociocultural change, seeing people as static subjects of history rather than active agents of change (Fitzhugh & Leckie, 2001, p. 61-62).

Illustrating Fitzhugh and Leckie's (2001, p. 59-62) ideas on agency in postmodernity, Gubrium and Holstein (1995) in their paper position it as a reflexive product of the centered source actions, which "serves to accountably describe and explain what is said and done by

those concerned” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 556). The scholars note the postmodern view of the ‘Self’ as a liquid image that is changed and decentered by consumerism and media, while also being a centre for individual agency (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 555). Gubrium and Holstein (1995, p. 555-556), similarly to Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001), view postmodernity as preoccupying itself with the ‘demise of the self’ while being oblivious to the fact that various selves are not conveyed or received in a social vacuum, but are rather the resources for the production of agency.

Furthermore, Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 171), in their article position the people as a source of social actions in Western cultures that are particularly focused on individual freedoms. Depicting Gubrium and Holstein’s (1995) notion of the postmodern view of the Self, the authors argue that it is an individual innovation acting outside of social rules, but still mediated by society – i.e., being an organized and active system of various thoughts, feelings, or identities, etc. that are born from self-reflexivity, attributed by and to specific people, proving its liquid form in a constant flux (Owens 2003, p. 206, as cited in Hitlin and Elder 2007, p. 173). The scholars provide distinctions between various types of agency, differentiating between existential agency, i.e. the fundamental element of ‘free will’ and a “pre-reflective capacity to defy social dictates”, which are inherent in self-directed action; pragmatic agency, i.e. the “ability to innovate when routines break down”; identity agency, i.e. the “capacity to act within socially prescribed role expectations”; and the life course, which is a broad term for “retrospective analysis of decisions made at turning points and transitions (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 176). Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 185) conclude that while agency is a complex and abstract concept, it centers around situated action – resolving issues and constructing identities are actively done by people through making choices, analyzing, and reflecting on their behaviors, positioning themselves in line with theories proposed by previously mentioned scholars such as Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001), as well as Gubrium and Holstein (1995).

Hitlin and Elder’s (2007) paper is built on the theory proposed by Bandura (2001, p. 8-10), highlighting four aspects of human agency: 1) intentionality – a proactive commitment to act in a certain way; 2) forethought – planning ahead and setting goals which regulate behaviors based on outcome expectations; 3) self-reactiveness understood as self-regulation – individuals as their own motivators and regulators governing their own actions based on their goals, values, and personal identities; and the most influential for this thesis, 4) self-reactiveness seen as beliefs of agency, i.e. evaluating one’s motivations, values, and meanings behind their actions

and being one's own self-examiner. These four aspects grouped together, as Bandura (2001, p. 6) explains, are the core of what it means to be human.

2.1.4. Postmodernity and culture

But why is postmodernity and its concerns with one's agency and perceived meaninglessness important? In contemporary and postmodern times, characterized by fragmentations of identity, nihilism, and the over-arching need to find the meaning of life, the arts and culture often find themselves turning to humour and playfulness, as explained by McRobbie (1994, p. 3-5, 36-37, 172-173), Jameson's (1983, p. 112-114), and Veit (2018, p. 214).

McRobbie (1994, p. 5) poses the importance of television as central – the images seen on the news and other programmes are the reference points for experiencing and constructing reality, one of Baudrillard's notions. The author explains that with the evolution of technology and its many advancements, more and more texts, images, and ways of depicting various people have broadened to a global scale, specifically focusing on the format of television (McRobbie, 1994, p. 36). For postmodern societies, culture tends to be condensed into consumption objects – leisure here is at the centre, as workers seek an escape from labour and class constraints (McRobbie, 1994, p. 36-37). McRobbie (1994, p. 172-173) raises several critiques on the postmodern, late-capitalist society, arguing that since television and other visual images became the main ways in which the 'mass communications industry works', the international companies switched their production strategies towards culture and information, i.e. that late capital logic.

This is further illustrated by Jameson's (1983, p. 112) notion of postmodernity being characterized by the blurring of distinctions between popular and high culture – scholars and other cultural institutions now concern themselves with in-between forms as well, as mentioned in the introduction chapter. However, the author points out that one of the most significant features of postmodern culture is the focus on pastiche and parody – while quite similar to each other, parody utilizes the uniqueness of each style and eccentricities them to create a mockery of the original through its imitation, while the pastiche lacks that humour, creating a new 'normal' or 'original' (Jameson, 1983, p. 113-114). Television, here, can be argued to be the perfect example of those ideas – blurring the distinctions between art forms, utilizing a collage-like collection of various images, to create something new: sometimes as a mockery, while other times, as something original.

McRobbie's (1994) book and Jameson's (1983) text provide the necessary foundation for the link between postmodernity and culture, showcasing the rising importance of television shows, while Veit (2018, p. 214) broadens that connection by portraying how popular media deals with the postmodern concern for lack of purpose and order in the universe, i.e. existential nihilism. The author uses the example of 21st-century television shows: "[t]he popularity and critical acclaim of contemporary works such as *BoJack Horseman*, *True Detective* and *Rick and Morty* exploring existential nihilism makes it one of the most popular philosophical views in folk philosophy" (Veit, 2018, p. 214). Veit (2018, p. 214) argues that such series explore dark themes in searching for meaning, and characters, such as BoJack, try to fill in the hole in their lives that cannot be filled, proving that nothing matters and happiness cannot be found – a notion that lies in people's lack of ability to recognize that their desires and goals will not give their lives meaning.

These three authors perfectly illustrate the complex link between postmodernity and culture, emphasizing its focus on the popular media form of television shows. Nowadays, they serve as reference points for constructing and understanding the reality of human lives, as McRobbie (1994, p. 5) explains, and explore the dark and philosophical themes characterizing nihilistic world-views of postmodern thinkers, as noted by Veit (2018, p. 214), often times portraying a pastiche-like collection of various image texts, as Jameson (1983, p. 112-114) demonstrates. But why consider oneself with comedy shows specifically? What makes humorous programmes that interesting and relevant in the context of postmodernity?

2.2. (Sociology of) Humor and television

As the postmodern culture tends to turn to the playful and amusing, analyzing the connection between humour and society is crucial. The leading study used here is a book by Mills (2005) on television sitcoms. It introduces the Humour Theory, aiming to pinpoint exactly what and why makes people laugh, illustrated further with Jiang's et al. (2019, p. 2) arguments on cultural differences on perceiving humour; and providing necessary definitions of three key concepts: joke, humor, and comedy (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13). However, there are several humour techniques and types, thus, one needs to turn to Juckel et al. (2016, p. 588) defining three types of jokes most important for this thesis: absurdity, irony, and parody. The second type, i.e. irony, being especially prevalent in television shows, as explained and studied by Detweiler (2012, p. 728-729).

Firstly, one needs to understand what is meant by humor, jokes, and comedy. In his book, Mills (2005, p. 14-18) provides definitions of these three crucial for this thesis concepts – a joke, seen as “a single construction intended to have a comic effect”; humor, i.e. the “sequential reiteration of jokes”; and comedy, which differs from humour due to its intentionality. However, that humour and playfulness characterizing postmodern culture, as explained by Mills (2005), can take many forms, of which an example are absurdity, irony, and parody. Juckel et al. (2016, p. 588) in their article on the humour typology used in modern media, provide definitions for twenty-two new types of humour techniques. The authors argue for the importance of studying comedy, specifically situational-comedy, and devise a typology for coding humour techniques used in television programmes (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 584). The ones most relevant to this study, however, are: absurdity, i.e. “nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules”, irony, i.e. “saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you’re saying”, and parody, i.e. “imitating a style of the genre of literature or other media” (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 588).

Furthermore, Mills (2005, p. 8-13) notes that humour relies on the relationship and interaction between the teller of the joke and the audience as well as argues that studying what people find funny provides us with more comprehensive and broad information about them and their culture, thus it has to be analyzed as a social and cultural phenomenon (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13). The scholar argues that television humour is organized around national boundaries, meaning that much can be said about a nation’s mass consciousness and which parts of the world they deem appropriate to laugh at based on the studied jokes in programmes, such as situational-comedies, even reflecting more broad changes in modern societies (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13). This link between comedy and cultural mass consciousness can be further illustrated with Jiang’s et al. (2019, p. 2) claim that humor and its use or approaches to it can differ based on cultures. For example, the author notes that many Western cultures perceive it as a positive defense mechanism to release stress and cope with fear, while also being a desirable trait in individuals and an indicator of creativity and capability (Jiang et al., 2019, p. 2). In Eastern cultures, such as Chinese Confucianism, on the other hand, the focus lies on seriousness and restriction – humour is seen as a talent only achieved by the professionals and is not a trait that is much desired by regular people (Jiang et al., 2019, p. 2).

However, even within the more broad clusters of cultures, various nations differentiate themselves through their humour. This is a notion discussed by Mills (2005, p. 8-13), who, focusing on Western cultures, explains that comedy is a way for cultures to delineate and

construct themselves by providing an example of British and European comedy that often utilizes satire and irony, juxtaposing American productions focusing rather on examination of more serious events in a comedic way. Moreover, programmes acknowledging the distinctions between groups can lead to their success with specific target audiences, e.g. some animated sitcoms such as “*South Park*” are pleasurable to young people exactly because they offend older generations (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13).

But humor can do more than reveal differences between cultures or nations, it can be a way of coping with negative experiences and traumatic events, as Mills (2008, p.8-13) illustrates with British and American humour. For example, Detweiler (2012, p. 728-729), in their paper on irony and paradoxes present in television shows, such as “*The Office*”, explains that irony is “exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant” (Wallace, 1990, p. 65, as cited in Detweiler, 2012, p. 728). The author, aligning himself with Veit’s (2018) notion of the absurd, poses it as a nihilistic tool – not looking for a system to make sense of the world, but to discover if there is a system that works at all and “thus engaging in a self-reflexive critique of the sitcom itself that simply offers «TV’s vision of ... TV»” (Wallace 1990, p. 33, as cited in Detweiler, 2012, p. 729). Irony in contemporary media can play the role of a character, i.e. the main connection between the audience and the in-jokes, or even challenge hegemony – various characters are often overcome with the inability to deal with their economic, social, or other positions becoming frustrated but “irony allows them to cope [with that] without politicizing” (Detweiler, 2012, p. 742).

2.2.1. Situational comedy in television

As explained by Mills (2005, p. 14-18), comedy differs from humour due to its intentionality in production. Television programmes offer a variety of genres centered around jokes, but Wells-Lassagne (2015, p. 1) defines a more specific type of comedy, i.e. situation comedy, arguing for its distinction through “humour rooted in the mundane nature of the everyday” (Wells-Lassagne, 2015, p. 1). The author explains that it is usually done in a television show format with a short run-time, around twenty to thirty minutes, and very often showcases conformity in the subjects portraying an idealized world with no gender roles nor race discrimination, built on middle-class social expectations (Wells-Lassagne, 2015, p. 1-3).

However, some authors even argue for an advocating role of sitcoms, as Berman (1987, p. 6) does in their paper. The scholar, further explains that sitcoms base their humour and appeal on reliability, portraying ‘real’ and ‘actual’ problems of the ‘average’ characters resembling the

audience and providing solutions to their issues (Berman, 1987, p. 6). The author argues that because of that, they border on advocacy and can be used as tools for social change and promote ‘modern social themes’ (Berman, 1987, p. 6).

Nevertheless, not much extensive research has been conducted on sitcoms, which is noted by various scholars, such as Juckel et al. (2016) or Mills (2005). Juckel et al. (2016, p. 583-584) explain that oftentimes academia overlooks them due to comedy being seen as not complex enough for serious analysis as well as an overarching argument that examining why something is funny kills the joke. Moreover, the authors bring up the notion that humor is an extremely personal and subjective matter but argue that analyzing sitcoms can illuminate “psychological and sociological aspects of individuals and groups” (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 584). In their article, they highlight the relevance of sitcom studies as they can illustrate various aspects of different nations or cultures they represent, as well as can benefit film professionals, such as screenwriters, directors, producers, and others, through investigating which types of humour appeal to (specific) audiences, in targeting and production of programs (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 584).

This view advocating for researching sitcoms is further shared by Mills (2005), who dedicates his book to the study of situational comedy programmes, claiming that analyzing why these shows still have their popular cultural position can reveal some insights into “the machinations of the broadcasting industry” as well as explore national cultures, thus having a broad cultural, social, and industrial relevance (Mills, 2005, p. 4-7). The author argues that sitcoms can also shed some light on representation of individuals or groups presented to mass audiences – they can reinforce their appropriateness, but often portray clichés or stereotypes to make characters recognizable and immediately funny to the viewers (Mills, 2005, p. 4-7). Lastly, Mills (2005, p. 19-24) criticizes the scarce academic works on sitcoms, making the argument that this overlook is due to the fact that such programmes are mostly enjoyed by the working class but aims to convince academics that they are truly worth examining.

2.3. Theoretical background and its relevance

To conclude, as mentioned before, this theoretical framework was chosen to ground and inform the study on the portrayal of human agency and the search for meaning in postmodern sitcoms.

Each paper and section is crucial in comprehending and marrying the studied concepts in a broader context. Lyotard’s (1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355) and Brügger’s (2001, p. 80-

87) theories on the state of culture after the Industrial Revolution and its effect on humans' world-view and the de-legitimation of science and technology, can aid in understanding what defines postmodernity and characterizing the existential and philosophical condition of the period analyzed in this thesis.

Building on these notions of meaninglessness and arbitrary truths, Veit's (2018, p. 211-219) definition of existential nihilism and the absurd nature of human beings simultaneously understanding that the world has no purpose or order, yet searching for it; as well as Royce's (1959, p. 515-534) critique of historians and scholars characterizing the 20th century as being unique in this existential issue, are crucial in comprehending the complex nature of the postmodern condition and its effects on the human experience. Noting such debates can be helpful in further understanding the multitude of ways in which one can portray, especially through popular media, what it means to be human.

Moreover, definitions of meaning provided by Schnell (2012, p. 6-8) explain the difference between the meaning of life, that is: the importance of human existence on a cosmic scale, and meaning in life, i.e. people attributing value and significance to everyday experiences. Thompson and Janigian (1988, p. 268-271), on the other hand, demonstrate how people can lose and, consequently, search for that purpose and order in life after experiencing a traumatic event, which is similar to Längle's (2004, p. 28-30) work, which notes that finding inner harmony between one's experiences and actions, equates to finding one's life meaning. These notions are crucial to study, as they (altogether) provide one with an overview of a journey of restoring the sense of purposefulness of one's life after its loss, a concept oftentimes explored by popular culture in postmodern societies.

Postmodernity, furthermore, concerns itself with human agency – scholars, such as Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001, p. 59-62), argue that its role in the sociocultural changes and people's lives, overall, is often downplayed by cultural historians. Their paper provides one with the necessary background on the space this abstract concept takes up in contemporary times and explains its perceived condition. Gubrium and Holstein (1995, p. 555-556), on the other hand, define agency and additionally ground it in the postmodern idea of the Self as a liquid image, changed and decentered by media, which further illustrates the link between popular culture and postmodernity, here in the context of agency. Similarly, Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 171) as well as Bandura (2001, p. 8-10), further define agency and highlight the intentionality and active choices done by people to construct their identities and examine their motivations, values, and

meanings behind their various conducts. These works are essential to study, as they deepen one's understanding of human agency, providing a fundamental description of it.

However, the complex link between postmodernity and culture is best analyzed by McRobbie (1994, p. 3-5, 36-37, 172-173), Jameson (1983, p. 112-114), and Veit (2018, p. 214). McRobbie's (1994, p. 3-5, 36-37, 172-173) work explains the role television and mass media play, serving as reference points to aid in constructing one's reality, while Jameson (1983, p. 112-114) demonstrates the characteristics of postmodern culture, specifically newly emerging art formats blurring the old boundaries between high and low culture. Veit (2018, p. 214), lastly, illustrates how popular media, such as television comedy series, can explore and portray nihilistic themes of postmodern times.

Furthermore, the sociology of humor explored in this chapter is centered around the key study by Mills (2005, p. 8-18). The author's definitions of jokes, humor, and comedy are utilized in this thesis to help in comprehending the studied concepts, while the importance of researching humor and comedy is highlighted as well, specifically the view of humour as a social and cultural phenomenon is emphasized (Mills, 2005, p. 8-13). The scholar's arguments on comedy as an indicator of cultural identity and mass consciousness, furthermore, are illustrated by Jiang's et al. (2019, p. 2) work on cultural differences in humor. Juckel's et al. (2016, p. 588) descriptions of humour typology are examined here as well, to broaden the scope of analysis. Moreover, Mills' (2005, p. 8-18) arguments on the significance of humour as a tool for coping with traumas are further illustrated with Detweiler's (2012, p. 728-729, 742) paper on irony and paradoxes present in situational comedy television series.

Lastly, this theoretical framework explores studies done specifically on the genre of sitcoms. The paper utilizes definitions of such productions provided by Wells-Lassagne (2015, p. 1) and Berman (1987, p. 6) in their research, to create a comprehensive description of the studied data. Here, the works by Mills (2005, p. 8-18) and Juckel et al. (2016, p. 583-584) are mentioned as well, as their focus is on the importance of examination of sitcom programmes, laying out the foundation for this research.

3. Methodology and ethics

The data analysis in this thesis, as mentioned before, was conducted via qualitative thematic content analysis of (forty-six) episodes of three television shows, i.e. a visual cultural medium. It adopts a mixed approach of deduction and induction – some themes based on the theory and provided definitions were anticipated to be observed but the needed space for new ones to be identified was left as well. Written notes on each episode were made, marking anything related to the concepts or that could be of significance, such as important quotes or descriptions of scenes, plots, as well as behaviors of the characters. Afterward, all of the notes were put into the Atlas.ti programme, a tool used for organization and data analysis, and coded openly, i.e. anything that the researcher deemed relevant and that related to the concepts mentioned in the research question: agency, the search for meaning, and markers of postmodernity (for definition and operationalization of codes, see: Section 3.1.), as explained by Elo and Kyngäs (2007, p. 109) in their paper on conducting an (mostly) inductive analysis. Following Clarke and Braun's (2017, p. 297) instructions on performing a thematic analysis and their emphasis on the organic approach to pattern development as well as the researcher's active role in its creation, the coding was done intuitively and most of the codes were then grouped, creating indicators for the themes. For example, any mentions of characters' feelings of emptiness or depression, e.g. dialogue or internal monologues, were grouped to portray the theme of losing meaning. All of the episodes from one sitcom were coded together but the decision to not group all of the forty-six documents was made to ensure clarity of analysis. After the coding, a preliminary document on findings was created where the themes could be explained and illustrated with specific examples. Moreover, the application of previously studied literature was made as well as an analysis of the results was written to see how they are linked to preceding studies – whether they confirm or contradict them.

The main aim here was to look for patterns across the codes to later on create themes, as Clarke and Braun (2017, p. 297) explain, which is why this design was chosen. Most of the codes were then grouped, based on the found patterns, into three themes: 1) agency, indicated through characters' construction of identities, relationships and resolving conflicts, and breaking the fourth wall; 2) the meaning of life, explored by the portrayal of three steps: existential nihilism and losing the meaning of life, searching for the meaning of life, and found and assigned meaning of life; and, lastly, 3) humour, indicated by three specific types: absurdity, irony, and parody (for a full overview see: Chapter 4; for the code book see: Appendix A). To ensure clarity and visibility of the evidence and analysis, the results are illustrated by quotes –

each starting in a new line (ones of forty or more words are treated as ‘block citations’, i.e. they are also indented) as the speakers are indicated, determined by quotation marks (“,”), in *italics*, while the emphasis on certain ideas or words is further highlighted in **bold**; as well as various images and pictures of specific scenes.

As Forman and Damschroder (2008, p. 40) explain, qualitative content analysis is used for examining textual data, of which television shows are an example. This method, moreover, is usually “concerned with meanings, intentions, consequences and context” (Downe-Wamboldt 1992, as cited by Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 109), as well as allows the researcher to create replicable and valid interpretations, while offering flexibility in the research design (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 108). Furthermore, this research design, grounded in Bryman’s (2012, p. 304) explanation and instructions, offers great transparency through its open coding scheme and clearly defined sampling procedure, thus proving to possess high levels of replicability. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis very often go hand in hand as they both aim to reveal and observe abstract and complex phenomena, which is exactly the intent of this thesis (Neuendorf, 2019, p. 212). Since the main aim here is to examine and comprehend the portrayal of agency and searching for meaning in sitcoms, through identifying reoccurring patterns emerging from the data, thematic content analysis is the perfect choice for it as it provides a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon while relying on a more inductive approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297; Forman & Damschroder, 2008, p. 41).

As this research was conducted on textual data, i.e. television programmes, it is an example of a non-reactive method, i.e. it does not rely on participants and their input for the analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 304). Thus, the usual ethical concerns pertaining to participants’ harm and consent are not applicable here. However, what is important to take into account is the researcher’s bias – as this thesis adopts qualitative methods, the research cannot be free from the applied values and beliefs of the person conducting it and the bias can infiltrate every step of this process: from the design, sampling and coding of data, to the (thematic) analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 39). Moreover, as the examination is done on situational-comedy programmes, humour and comedy are one of the concepts measured – while their operationalization is justified and grounded in academic literature, analyzing and observing jokes is a subjective endeavor in its nature (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 584). Nevertheless, the bias is noted and embraced as the aim of this thesis, as well as qualitative social research, is not to generalize or simplify studied concepts, but rather to gain a deeper understanding and comprehension of the complex nature of examined phenomena.

3.1. Data collection – sample

The qualitative thematic content analysis was done on three situational-comedy television programmes: 1) one season (three) “*Community*”, created by Dan Harmon in 2009; 2) one season (four) “*BoJack Horseman*”, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg in 2014; and 3) two seasons “*Fleabag*”, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge in 2016, together equaling to forty-six episodes, i.e. around nineteen hours of run-time, to ensure validity. The sampling was done based on three criteria: 1) produced in the 21st century; 2) either an American or British production; and 3) classified as a ‘sitcom’ based on definitions by Wells-Lassagne (2015) and Berman (1987), i.e. having a twenty to thirty-minute episode format with humour rooted in everyday lives, while making some events or situations overly dramatic to move the plot forward (Well-Lassagne, 2015, p. 1; Berman, 1987 p. 6). The focus here is on British and American, i.e. Western, productions as they dominate the film and television industry through their concentration of talent and economic resources that contributes to the widespread distribution system (Crane, 2014, p. 366-368; Hoskins & Mirus, 1988, p. 499-500; Carollo, 2024). Moreover, as Crane (2014, p. 374-376) explains, Western productions are more transnational, i.e. they incorporate (and simplify) themes and subjects from various cultures and are, thus, not culturally specific – portraying cultures that are in reality non-place-specific, they cross national boundaries and can be easily understood by different (non-Western) audiences.

The television programmes were chosen based on the criteria mentioned above, however, also due to their interesting natures. The plot of “*Community*” follows seven main characters: Jeff, Britta, Annie, Troy, Abed, Shirley, and Pierce; all from various backgrounds (different genders, age groups, socio-economic positions, ethnicities, etc.), whose struggles in lives brought them to a community college – Greendale (Harmon, 2009-2015). The school is filled with whacky and distinct characters that often interact with the protagonists, such as the Greendale Dean – Craig Pelton, and an ex-Spanish teacher, turned security guard – Ben Chang (Harmon, 2009-2015). The show is considered a prime example of postmodern television, featuring lots of irony, and having characters alluding to their fictionality (Sharma, 2013, p. 185-190). The third season, i.e. twenty-two episodes (nine hours of run-time), as mentioned in the introduction, follows their lives in their third year of attending Greendale, and was chosen to be analyzed in this thesis, as it was the best-received season of the show and many fans believed it best represented its character (IMDb, n.d.; Rotten Tomatoes, 2020).

“*BoJack Horseman*”, on the other hand, portrays the life of a ‘washed-up’ television star of a famous sitcom from the late 1980s and 1990s with a pessimistic view of life (Bob-Waksberg,

2014-2020). It graces its viewers with interesting character arcs and developments while offering a commentary on the (post)modern society's faults, however, its interesting nature lies in the central focus it shines on the agency of its protagonists, i.e. human-like conscious animals (Saura, 2019, p. 292). Here, the fourth season was analyzed, i.e. twelve episodes (five hours of run-time), picking up on BoJack's life after the death of his good friend Sarah-Lynn for which he partially blames himself, as explained in the introduction (Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020). This season explores the man's relationship with a young teenage horse, claiming to be his daughter – Hollyhock (Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020). The reasoning for choosing this particular season is the same as for season three of "*Community*", i.e. it has one of the highest ratings and many reckon it captures the character of the series best (IMDb, n.d.).

Lastly, the British sitcom "*Fleabag*" was chosen as it follows the life of a young woman living alone in London who struggles emotionally with what life has brought onto her after the death of her best friend, Boo (Waller-Bridge, 2016-2019). There are several important characters with whom the protagonist interacts and shares her life – her sister, Claire and Claire's husband, Martin; her father and his partner, referred to in the show as Godmother, several of Fleabag's love interests, and in the second season, one of the most influential characters, referred to only as the Priest (Waller-Bridge, 2016-2019). The show is entirely from Fleabag's point of view to a point where she breaks the fourth wall and talks directly into the camera to let the audience know about her thoughts (NYFA, 2023). The character is viewed as a very outspoken woman, indulging in hedonistic pleasures, and celebrating a liberated lifestyle – a very post-feminist portrayal (Grady, 2024). Here, the entire show was analyzed, as it only ran for two seasons, i.e. twelve episodes in total (five hours of run-time).

3.2. Operationalization of concepts

As mentioned before, the main studied concepts here initially were: postmodernity markers, such as existential nihilism; (and) humour, most likely in the form of absurdity, irony, and parody; agency; and searching for meaning. These were chosen as they are directly referencing the research question stated before.

The first theme was measured by the mentions of existential nihilism, as defined by Veit (2018, p. 218), i.e. the denial of meaning or purpose within life or universe. Moreover, a postmodernity marker and at the same time the theme of humour, was measured by noting jokes of three (main) humour types: absurdity – nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules; irony – saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what is

said; and parody – imitating a style of a specific genre various media; all based on the paper by Juckel et al. (2016, p. 588). As mentioned by Juckel et al. (2016, p. 584), humour is a highly subjective matter, thus, the researcher’s perspective had an impact on the analysis. However, as qualitative methods rely on the analyst’s subjective interpretation, that individuality was embraced.

The theme of the agency, based on Hitlin and Elder’s (2007, p. 176) notion of existential agency, is operationalized into two main subthemes – self-reactiveness as beliefs of agency, based on Bandura’s (2001, p. 8-10) notion, as well as the phenomenon of ‘breaking the fourth wall’. Bandura (2001, p. 8-10) in her paper defines agency as self-reactiveness understood as one’s beliefs of agency, thus, themes of characters evaluating their motivations, values, and meaning behind their actions were noted, as well as them addressing conflicts in motivational incentives and choosing to act in favor of one over another. Moreover, the subtheme of ‘breaking the fourth wall’, characterized by Semeijn (2024, p. 647) as “statements through which a fictional character somehow acknowledges the fictionality of their world”, was measured by observing characters looking directly into the camera and acknowledging the audience, as well as the referencing or addressing the fact that they are fictional.

Searching for meaning, on the other hand, was measured based on Thomson and Janigian’s (1988, p. 267-271) and Schnell’s (2012, p. 6-8) definitions – when a person experiences a crisis of meaning, i.e. losing feelings of order and purpose in life, they are inclined to search for it through changing their assumptions on the world or themselves as well as changing goals. Thus, the whole process of losing, searching, and (possibly) finding meaning by characters was noted and observed – their lack of sense of coherence and continuity in life, changes in assumptions and goals, and finding that order and purpose in life that shapes one’s perception, actions, and goal striving (Thomson & Janigian, 1988, p. 267-271; Schnell’s, 2012, p. 6-8).

4. Findings and discussions

After the open coding of all forty-six episodes and creating over a thousand codes (1093 codes across all episodes), some interesting patterns could be noticed, which were then grouped into three main themes, with (overall) seven subthemes. Thus, in line with the reviewed previous studies and literature, as well as constructed from the examination of common motifs, it can be said that 21st-century British and American sitcoms explore human agency through: characters' construction of identities, their relationships and resolving conflicts, and breaking the fourth wall, while their search for meaning in life in postmodern societies is portrayed through: protagonists experiencing existential nihilism and losing of meaning, searching to restore the purpose and order to their lives, and assigning or finding new meaning to their lives, all encapsulated and highlighted with the use of various types of humour (for a full overview and examples see: Appendix A).

The found themes, while expected and grounded in analyzed literature, proved to be unique compared to previous studies. Firstly, the indicator of the agency theme centered around the characters' resolution of conflicts, is positioned in the context of relationships, mostly between friends and family members – the agency is focused around situated actions, as Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 185) argue, but the issues settled by the protagonists were usually external. In the theme search for meaning, on the other hand, what is quite important to note is that the decision to combine existential nihilism and losing of meaning into just one theme was made, as they were often linked and meant similar things – while analyzed literature, as well as the examined television programmes, do distinguish between the two, the consequence for both is quite similar, i.e. prompting the characters to begin their journeys (often subconsciously) for the search of the purpose of their lives, thus, the difference between losing a sense of meaning or denying it ever existing in the first place, could be argued here to not be as significant. Lastly, what was a striking finding as well, was the theme of humour – it was not necessarily used as an indicator specifically showcasing characters' agency or searching for meaning, but more as a frame and background for the other themes. This, one could argue, is the most unique aspect of the study as it proves the importance of analyzing comedy (or as it is utilized in popular media) for reasons other than discussed by scholars, such as Mills (2005, p. 8-13) or Juckel et al. (2016, p. 583-584), as well, i.e. its role in coping with the struggles of postmodern societies in finding meaning in a meaningless world as well as providing a background for such complex concepts to shine through and become more digestible for their viewers.

4.1. Agency

The first theme is the identified and analyzed in this thesis is the broader concept of human agency explored and portrayed in the studied sitcoms through their characters': 1) intentional construction of identity, through evaluation of motivations and values, self-acceptance, facing one's fears, and self-confidence seen as standing up for oneself and others; 2) their relationships and resolving conflicts within them through active evaluation of their behaviors and actions, as well as finding common ground, and accepting others' flaws and virtues, and 3) breaking the fourth wall, through alluding to their fictionality or addressing the cameras and viewers directly. Below, the sections will further review the findings and propose some discussions and analyses on how these subthemes relate to the concept of agency. What is important to note, however, is the combining of two first subthemes, i.e. construction of identities and resolving conflicts, into one subsection, as the analysis for them is overlapping – the emphasis and context of these indicators lay, as mentioned before, on relationships. Moreover, as they are often talked about in previous studies collectively and center on characters' communications, their examination and connection to other literature is quite similar.

4.1.1. Construction of identities and resolving conflicts

The first explored theme within agency was the construction of identities by various characters, noticed in all three productions. This was done through evaluation of values, self-acceptance, admitting and facing one's fears, and standing up for oneself and others.

The protagonists of the sitcom "*Community*" showcased the most prominent examples within this theme. For example, a very important motif was the character of Britta, a psychology student once proud of her anti-systematic political opinions and beliefs, questioning the strength of her values and wondering if her current path of community college is in fact for her (Bobrow & Russo, 2011).

*"Yes, it's terrible! She's imprisoned by an oppressive regime, half-way across the world and I'm, what, in college?! **Where are my values?**"* – Britta (Bobrow & Russo, 2011, 00:01:02)

Britta is very out-spoken about her morality and always aims to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves, but when she learns that a friend of hers with whom she used to go to various protests was captured by the Syrian authorities, she suffers from an identity crisis (Bobrow & Russo, 2011). She starts to compare herself to the imprisoned friend, evaluating

whether her principles are strong enough to call herself an activist, as in her mind, people with unshaken beliefs and resilient character become the enemies of oppressive systems exploiting the weak and not college students, joyful about the newly purchased backpack or highlighters in fun colors (Bobrow & Russo, 2011).

In this sitcom, moreover, other characters also construct their identities through self-acceptance, such as Annie – a highly competitive and almost neurotic student, who decides to move in with her two friends Troy and Abed, a quirky duo always in their own world making up new ways to play and have fun (Countee & Shapeero, 2011). At first, following advice from others, Annie tries to keep up with Troy and Abed's, often dangerous, games but realizes that they put their want for entertainment over her needs, for example, they build a blanket fort for her as her bedroom instead of offering her their spare one that serves as a play area (Countee, 2011).

*“This doesn't work for me. From the minute I joined the study group, I've been worried about how uptight I am and how I'm no fun. And I was worried I wouldn't fit in here or be able to hang with you guys. But you know what? Why don't you ever ask yourselves whether you can hang with me? **Why am I always the one that has to adapt? I'm sick of this crap!**”* – Annie (Countee & Shapeero, 2011, 00:17:07).

After fighting her nature, Annie acknowledges that she is not as easy-going and relaxed as her friends, but that does not mean she needs to change who she is to fit their needs and wants (Countee & Shapeero, 2011). The young woman decides to accept her qualities and shift the assumption that she is the one always needing to adapt to others, allowing herself to be who she is, and act in ways according to her character (Countee & Shapeero, 2011).

Furthermore, “*Community*” explores human agency by portraying characters admitting and even facing their fears. For example, Jeff, an ex-criminal defense lawyer in his mid-30s with narcissistic tendencies, goes to great lengths to ensure he is in the same class as his friends, often even acting delirious and frantic (Donovan et al., 2011). He convinces himself that he was removed from biology class, the one attended by his friend group, so that another member, Pierce, could join instead, causing him to become demented and suspicious (Donovan et al., 2011). Jeff later realizes he is, in fact, simply scared of getting abandoned by his friend group and after doing his best to villainize Pierce, recognizes his other fear of being perceived as the bad guy (Donovan et al., 2011). Here self-acceptance can also be seen – Jeff realizes he has

been behaving irrationally and hurting his friends because of that fear and decides to apologize, taking ownership of his actions (Donovan et al., 2011).

In “*BoJack Horseman*”, similarly, the titular character also faces his fear throughout the season – once meeting Hollyhock, a young teenager who claims to be his daughter, BoJack, the horse self-loathing alcoholic who was once a successful star of a sitcom in the 1990s, is terrified of hurting her similarly as he hurt in the past those who loved and trusted him (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017). He does not think he would make a good father nor does he see himself as even deserving of love in any way:

“I don’t want to [make her hate me], but every time she looks at me with those big, innocent eyes, all I can think about is every shitty thing I’ve ever done and I think ‘I don’t deserve that kind of love’.” – BoJack (Tafel & Walker Farrel, 2017, 00:19:36).

BoJack blames himself for hurting and pushing away those who loved him. Now, having met this strange, teenage girl who sees him as a father figure but still does not know him very well, he is afraid of ‘BoJacking things up’ – saying or doing the wrong thing, causing her to leave his life (Tafel & Walker Farrel, 2017). Even though BoJack does not see himself as a father nor does he want Hollyhock in his life at first, he grows to care for her and is prompt to face what he is scared of the most – allowing someone to know him; because for BoJack to get to know him, means loving him less (Tafel & Walker Farrel, 2017).

On the other hand, the main way in which the titular character of “*Fleabag*”, a strong-opinioned young woman trying to find herself in London, constructs her identity is by establishing her self-confidence and values through standing up for herself and others, especially her sister Claire. This can be illustrated by her angry and physical reactions to Godmother, Fleabag’s godmother dating the character’s father after her mother passed, or her brother-in-law, Martin, often disrespecting Fleabag or Claire (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016; Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). The character’s heated responses are usually because of the contempt they show to Fleabag’s family members, e.g. Godmother saying rude things about Fleabag’s dead mother or Martin (unknowingly) speaking cruelly about Claire’s miscarriage (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Fleabag chooses to not react as strongly to a lot of the harsh things the two say to attack her personally, but she draws the line at them speaking poorly of her sister or mother (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer; Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019).

The second theme revolving around agency is the characters' relationships and resolving conflicts. In all three shows, they face difficulties in their friendships or in communication with other family members but they evaluate their behaviors or choose acceptance of others' actions or flaws and, at the end, become much stronger people because of it.

For example, in “*Community*”, two best friends are caught up in a huge fight: Abed, a Polish-Palestinian film student, and Troy, a carefree ex-football player, begin an argument, innocent at first – whether to create a pillow or a blankets fort on Greendale campus, that grows into a school-wide pillow fight when the dean announces that he entered their creation into a Guinness World Record competition (Bobrow & Shapeero, 2012).



Fig 1. Troy and Abed’s school-wide pillow fight. [Series Episode]. From “*Community*”, Season 3, Episode 14, by A. Bobrow (writer) and J. Russo (director), 2011, (00:16:59).

However, their conflict turns into much more than that, with Troy feeling as if his friend (and others) do not see him as his equal, but rather as someone beneath him, and Abed not understanding why he should compromise his plans of building a pillow fort to cater to Troy’s wishes who would like to win the world record by creating a blanket fort (Bobrow & Shapeero, 2012). Once all of the other students get tired of fighting and decide to go home, Troy and Abed stand alone at the site of the battle – neither of them wants to stop their war, knowing that they will have to go their separate ways once it ends (Bobrow & Shapeero, 2012). Proposing a truce and advocating for peace, Jeff suggests giving them magical, invisible friendship hats that automatically make them like and forgive each other – Troy and Abed agree, deep down realizing the absurdity of that notion, but deciding to find common ground and put their

differences behind (Bobrow & Shapeero, 2012). They both accept where the other one is coming from but realize their fight is not worth sacrificing the friendship they had been nurturing for years (Bobrow & Shapeero, 2012).

On the other hand, the main conflict-driven relationship explored in “*BoJack Horseman*” is the relationship with his mother, Beatrice. The two face many difficulties throughout the years in communicating with one another, due to Beatrice’s lack of motherly love for BoJack and him blaming her for ruining his relationship with Hollyhock (Knight & Walker Farrel, 2017). Unfortunately, Beatrice in season four of the show struggles with dementia and does not even recognize her son, calling him by her maid’s name, Henrietta – this upsets BoJack as he realizes he cannot tell her how much she hurt him:

*“I keep thinking about all the things I never said because I was so sure there'd be other days to say them. (...) I should have done it back when she knew who I was, back when it would mean something. But now, **she's gonna die and she's never gonna know just how much I hate her.**”*– BoJack (Adams & Winfrey, 2017, 00:24:08).

His relationship with Beatrice is tarnished by the cold and unfair treatment his mother put him through. When BoJack learns about her dementia, he is not saddened by her lack of recognition of him, all he can think of is the fact that all of his anger and hurt has nowhere to go – screaming at and confessing his pain to Beatrice will not provide him with the needed release, as the mother he blames is no longer there (Adams & Winfrey, 2017). He tries his best to hate her but never summons up the courage to tell her how much the things she said and did affected him and, now, BoJack faces the fact that his chance is gone along with Beatrice’s mind (Adams & Winfrey, 2017).

However, at the end of the season, Beatrice mentally returns to the present: she finds herself in a run-down elder-care facility, sitting in a wheelchair, and sees BoJack in front of her – she calls his name and becomes upset, not understanding where she is (Purdy & Long, 2017). BoJack, instead of telling her off and screaming how much he hates her, decides to comfort and help her calm down – he lies about the two of them sitting on the porch of her old summer house and watching the fireworks while eating ice cream, something Beatrice was never allowed to do as a child (Purdy & Long, 2017).

“You’re... in Michigan. Yeah. At the lake house. It’s a—It’s a warm summer night, and the fireflies are dancing in the sky, and... your whole family is here. And they’re telling

you everything is gonna be alright. (...) The crickets are—are chirping and the lake is still. And the night is full of stars. (...) We're sitting on the back porch and we're listening to your brother play the piano, and we're eating ice cream. Vanilla ice cream. (...) Can you taste the ice cream, Mom?" – BoJack (Purdy & Long, 2017, 00:23:53).



Fig 2. BoJack explaining to Beatrice she is in Michigan, at the family lake house, instead of telling her the truth about putting her in the elder-care facility. [Series Episode]. From “*BoJack Horseman*”, Season 4, Episode 11, by K. Purdy (writer) and A. Long (director), 2017, (00:26:20).

The character accepts his mother’s state and evaluates his wishes and behaviors, coming to the conclusion that the Beatrice he is mad at, no longer exists, thus choosing compassion and forgiveness (Purdy & Long, 2017). He lets go of the grudges he held against his mother, realizing how far gone her mind is, deciding to soothe her nerves instead and truly face the horrifying fact that it is no longer the same Beatrice (Purdy & Long, 2017).

Another production that focuses on relationships between family members is “*Fleabag*” and the fights and resolutions between Fleabag and Claire. The two start quite rocky, bickering constantly and being rather distant or distrusting, e.g. Claire does not believe that her husband, Martin, tried to kiss her sister, thinking it was the other way around, which causes her to avoid Fleabag for months (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016; Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Finally, the two start working on their relationship and end up becoming very close friends as well as sisters. Fleabag evaluates her behaviors and actions towards Claire, best illustrated by her telling her best friend, Boo, how mad she is at herself for annoying her sister or in the season

one finale, where her fight with Claire serves as a wake-up call during which she realizes she no longer wants to live her life as she does and have the type of a relationship with her family as she does (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). However, her change happens off-screen, i.e. between seasons one and two, although she does come back to some of her wonderings later in the show: about sex and using it as a distraction and still not being sure if the way she lives her life is the ‘correct’ one (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019; Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019).

Consequently, the findings on the subthemes of identity construction and resolving conflicts of sitcoms characters do fall in line with the previous studies and literature. Aligning themselves with the notion explained by Gubrium and Holstein (1995, p. 555-556) that agency is the reflexive product of centered source actions and is made up of various selves, the analyzed productions showcase their protagonists structuring their identities and different versions of themselves by actively evaluating their behaviors and values or earnestly standing up to those who frighten them or wish them harm. It can be argued as well to be an illustration of the arguments made by Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 185) in their paper on agency and Bandura’s (2001, p. 8-10) idea explaining that agency is built from: intentionality to act in a certain way, planning ahead and setting goals, regulating and motivating people’s own actions based on the set goals, values, identities and evaluating them. However, this examination goes beyond the studied literature as well, as the television programmes showcase agency being created in the juxtaposition and context of relationships – behaving in a certain way or evaluating one’s values very often is posed in these productions as a comparison to others’ beliefs or actions or they are the driving force for protagonists’ analysis of their own conducts and goals. Thus, the thesis can be argued to be extending the academic scope on how popular media, specifically situational comedy television series, explores human agency by positioning identity construction and conflict resolution in the context of various relationships.

4.1.2. Breaking the fourth wall

Characters in some sitcoms, such as “*Community*” and (most importantly) “*Fleabag*” seem to be aware they are fictional or that someone is watching them. They showcase this in two ways: either by alluding to their fictionality or by addressing the viewers directly, i.e. talking or looking into the camera.

In “*Community*”, this allusion to fictionality is done by Abed – he often acts as if he is a character in a TV show and says things that allude to it, e.g. explaining that he paired his friends

for a biology project by coupling those who are most popular with those who are least popular ‘to maximize audience appeal’ or being excited to be invited to Shirley’s, another member of the study group, second-time wedding to her long-term partner Andre, as ‘there is a whole generation of viewers who did not get to see the original’ (Harmon & Shapeero, 2011; Santamaria & Newacheck, 2012). The character sometimes even goes behind the ‘fourth wall’, i.e. the camera – e.g. the episode “*Documentary Filmmaking – Redux*” is shot by Abed, as he is the person making a documentary film about how the school advertisement for Greendale Community College was created and often talks directly to the camera or is heard behind the scenes, directing his classmates (Ganz & Russo, 2011).

On the other hand, the main character of “*Fleabag*” breaks the fourth wall and addresses or looks into the camera directly multiple times in each episode. She glances at the viewers whenever something makes her laugh, or when she is sad or angry, as well as explains to them who different people are or how she feels about them.



Fig 3. Fleabag looking into the camera and talking about her sister, Claire, who is sat right next to her. [Series Episode]. From “*Fleabag*”, Season 1, Episode 1, by P. Waller-Bridge (writer) and T. Kirkby (director), 2016, (00:09:05).

This subtheme of human agency might be the most interesting finding of this thesis within this theme, as it goes beyond the previously analyzed studies expanding their scope, as it is not often discussed in previous literature in the context of agency. What is fascinating about how these sitcoms utilize the breaking of the fourth wall is that they contradict the statement made by Semeijn (2024, p. 650) defining the phenomenon as “a fictional character acknowledging that there is such an ontological divide—namely, that there is an actual world ‘out there’ containing an audience, and that their world is merely fictional”. Here, the characters do not seem to believe that their world is a fake one and the ‘actual’ one is beyond the cameras,

in a “*Truman Show*” style, but rather they deal with their lives and look for companionship within the viewers.

For Abed, this notion can be said to be a portrayal of his dealings with being on the spectrum (most likely autism, but it is never specified) – he uses TV shows as a way to understand reality and interactions with or between other people. For example, in one episode he and Annie play in the Dreamatorium, a room Troy and him created to play out various situations, and he shows her a simulation he believes she would like, i.e. Abed gone, Britta and Troy together, Annie and Jeff in love, but basing it on a romance, medical drama TV programme (Murray & Shapeero, 2012). This aligns itself with McRobbie’s (1994, p. 5) notion of the importance of television in human lives in postmodern societies. The author argues that the images seen on television, whether that is on the news or in fictional programmes, serve people as points of reference to aid them in constructing reality, which can be argued to be exactly what Abed does (McRobbie, 1994, p. 5). It is not as if Abed actually thinks that he is a fictional character and there is another world ‘out there’, although he does not exclude that possibility, it is more as if that world ‘out there’ is one he himself does not have access to, i.e. the world of neurotypical people. For him, TV shows and films follow a pattern, they are predictable and, thus, he can understand them easier than the real world, which is also what he tries to get his friends to appreciate: predictability in a universe dominated by chaos (McKenna & Melman, 2011). Moreover, he often includes himself in the notion of viewers or talks about the audience as if he were familiar with them because he himself watches huge amounts of television and is a viewer of sorts, as he does when talking about Shirley’s first wedding being missed by a whole generation of viewers, i.e. him as well (Santamaria & Newacheck, 2012).

Fleabag, however, can be argued to be looking directly into the camera and communicating with the viewers in all sorts of situations, as it helps her deal with the loneliness she feels after losing her best friend, Boo – the audience is for her a friendly shoulder she can cry on or talk to about anything she would like and she sees them as such. However, sometimes the cameras are too much for Fleabag – there are some situations where she does not want the viewers to see certain things, e.g. in the final episode of season one, when it is revealed Fleabag was the person Boo’s boyfriend slept with and the reason Boo decided to walk into traffic, causing her death, Fleabag wants to hide from the guilt but the cameras are there to remind her of what she has done (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). This notion changes for Fleabag when the Priest comes into the picture – she meets him at an engagement celebration for Father and Godmother and the two instantly hit it off, falling for each other eventually (Waller-Bridge &

Bradbeer, 2019). The Priest is the only person who sees Fleabag exactly as she is – he notices everything about her, even catching a glimpse of the audience: on multiple occasions, he observes Fleabag talking into the camera and even though he does not know that he is witnessing, he does note her ‘disappearances’:

“What is that? (...) That thing that you're doing. It's like you disappear.” – The Priest (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019, 00:05:53)



Fig 4. Fleabag and the Priest looking into the camera. [Series Episode]. From “*Fleabag*”, Season 2, Episode 4, by P. Waller-Bridge (writer) and H. Bradbeer (director), 2019, (00:06:05).

The Priest is the only other character who notices the camera and looks directly into it. This can be happening due of his fascination and affection for Fleabag, for whom the world ‘out there’ is a safe space to evaluate her emotions or actions – the man becomes a part of that mental haven. While not let in by Fleabag herself, as in the scene mentioned above (see: Fig. 4), she voices her annoyance with the Priest trying to get to know her better, he does enter her (sub)consciousness – he lets himself in, but is also, reluctantly, permitted by the woman to enter her mind and heart (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Once, in the finale, Fleabag confesses

her love to the Priest and the two part ways, she also leaves behind the cameras (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). The woman stands up from the bus stop bench and starts leaving, but looks behind herself and shakes her head, telling the audience not to follow her – she makes her goodbyes and leaves the viewers behind, which also ends the show (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019).

Thus, one can argue that postmodern sitcoms, such as “*Fleabag*” and “*Community*”, explore human agency by portraying their characters breaking the fourth wall as well. While this is not a commonly made argument by scholars analyzed in Chapter 2, the practice of breaking the fourth wall as a tool to convey characters’ agency can be applied and explained by previous studies. For *Fleabag*, addressing the audience directly showcases the intentionality of her actions and serves as a tool for the examination of her behaviors, motivations, and values – she sees the world behind the camera as a safe space for her inner analysis and reflection, which serves as an illustration to the agency examined by Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 185) as well as Bandura (2001, p. 8-10). Moreover, the character makes active and intentional choices on what to reveal to the viewers and what to leave for herself, proving she has agency even in this context. For *Abed*, on the other hand, the allusion to the fictionality of his world or existence is about building and constructing his identity, as he establishes himself as a huge fan of films and TV shows, which falls in line with Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 185) as well. However, it also revolves around the intentionality to mask himself and act in ways that he believes others would like him to, but sourcing and referencing his actions using a medium he understands, i.e. it is his way ‘in’ to the ‘real’ world of neurotypical people, which, as Bandura (2001, p. 8-10) explains, is exactly what builds the character’s agency.

To conclude the entire section on the first theme, i.e. human agency, one can make the argument that postmodern sitcoms explore this notion through the portrayal of their characters amidst identity construction through actively evaluating their values, such as Britta does; arriving at self-acceptance, illustrated with Annie’s arc; admitting and facing their fears, showcased by Jeff’s and BoJack’s revelations and challenging of their various anxieties; as well as standing up for oneself and others, as *Fleabag* does to those who disrespect her or her loved ones. What can be said about the uniqueness of this study is the fact that the exploration of human agency by postmodern sitcoms is done first and foremost through their protagonists’ relationships. While constructing their identities, characters of these programmes face various difficulties in their relationships: either in their friendships, as it is showcased in the example of Troy and *Abed*’s fight, or between family members, illustrated by BoJack and his relationship

with Beatrice or the communication between Fleabag and Claire. These connections can serve as reference points or be the actual driving forces causing the characters to evaluate their behaviors as well as their values and beliefs, which could be argued to broaden the academic scope of the portrayal and exploration of human agency in popular media. Moreover, these television series often utilize the practice of breaking the fourth wall by portraying their protagonists' allusions to their fictionality, as Abed does many times throughout the show, or by showcasing characters speaking and addressing the cameras directly, as Fleabag does regularly. This is a truly fascinating notion and finding, as it speaks to the characters' complex natures and relationships with the world in which they live – it provides them with tools to analyze their inner workings and deal with the difficulties of everyday lives, while also proving their agency built upon their intentionality to act in certain ways as well as evaluation of those individual and innate beliefs and conducts.

4.2. Meaning of life

The second theme analyzed in this paper is the meaning of and in life, indicated by three subthemes: 1) existential nihilism and losing of meaning, 2) searching for meaning, and 3) assigned or found meaning. As previously mentioned, Schnell (2012, p. 7-8) highlights a difference between meaning *of* life, i.e. the significance of it on a cosmic scale, and meaning *in* life, i.e. how people generate meaning in their lives. What is interesting to note is that, based on the findings, one can argue that the analyzed sitcoms focus rather on the meaning of life explored by various characters.

4.2.1. Existential nihilism and losing meaning

All three programmes portray characters that lose their sense of order and purpose in life or deny it ever existed, which is why the decision to combine existential nihilism and loss of meaning into one theme was made, as the two are fairly similar.

Firstly, as Thomas and Janigian (1988, p. 268) argue when an individual experiences a traumatic event, i.e. loses a sense of order and purpose in their life, they feel a sense of meaninglessness, which is precisely portrayed in all studied shows. It can be illustrated by the “*Community*” plot of the Darkest Timeline, introduced in episode four, i.e. “*Remedial Chaos Theory*” – the study group meets at Troy and Abed’s new apartment for a housewarming party and Jeff decides that they will draw who goes downstairs to pick up the ordered pizza by throwing a die, which opens up seven various timelines all explored in the episode (McKenna

& Melman, 2011). In each timeline, someone else goes downstairs and that causes a chain of events that have various consequences but in one timeline, the Darkest Timeline, everything goes wrong and it results in Pierce, the oldest, richest, and most ignorant member of the study group, dying from a gun wound, Jeff losing an arm in a fire, Troy suffering from a larynx injury, Annie being locked in a mental institution, Shirley, the kind-hearted Christian and mother-like figure to the group, becoming an alcoholic to escape her misery, and Britta getting a blue streak in her hair, i.e. all of the characters giving up on life and losing their sense of purpose or order (McKenna& Melman, 2011).



Fig 5. Abed putting on a felt goatee to signify his commitment to evil, thus becoming Evil Abed. [Series Episode]. From “Community”, Season 3, Episode 4, by C. McKenna (writer) and J. Melman (director), 2011, (00:20:21).

In “*BoJack Horseman*”, on the other hand, at the beginning of season four, we find the main character broken and depressed after the death of his good friend, Sarah Lynn, for which he partially blames himself (Purdy & Walker Farrel, 2017). BoJack, miserable, escapes his life in Los Angeles and drives down to Michigan, where he starts living in the run-down summer house that belongs to his family – in the winter, with the house having no isolation and broken doors and windows, he accepts his fate and hopes to freeze to death, fully giving up on life (Purdy & Walker Farrel, 2017). He truly believes he does not deserve to live or be loved because of the terrible things he did or said to those he once loved, thus avoiding any contact with his current and old friends, staying in Michigan for over a year (Purdy & Walker Farrel, 2017).

The second character in this show that experiences a loss of meaning after a traumatic event occurs is Princess Carolyn – a pink feline agent and ex-girlfriend of BoJack, who suffers her fifth miscarriage and ends up breaking with her mouse partner, Ralph, which causes her to lose her sense of purpose or order in the world (Calo & Winfrey, 2017). She begins to drink heavily, being under the influence at work or when driving, i.e. fully giving up on her life, which depresses her even more, as she believes the only thing she has in her life is her career and when that gets threatened, Princess Carolyn gives into her misery even more:

*“Is there [more to life than just my career]? **I have nothing!** Do you know how hard it is to start a family, at my age? To find a guy at my age?”* – Princess Carolyn (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017, 00:06:49).

She confines in Todd the misery and hopelessness she feels, believing her life is empty and she is unable to find her purpose (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017). Princess Carolyn truly wants to have a family and a great career, but after losing yet another pregnancy and breaking up with her boyfriend, she does not think it is possible for her – she believes she is too late to have the life she wants (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017).

Lastly, the plot of “*Fleabag*” revolves around a young woman struggling to find herself and organize her life after the death of her best friend Boo, who walked into traffic to punish her boyfriend after he cheated on her but instead of getting a few scratches and going to the hospital as she planned, died after being run over by various vehicles (Waller-Bridge & Kirkby, 2016). Fleabag feels completely alone after losing her mom and then Boo, and she is filled with guilt, as she is the one who Boo’s boyfriend cheated on his girlfriend with (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). She breaks down in the last episode of the first season and admits that she feels like a failure and believes the only thing left is her body and the attraction one might feel for her:

*“I also fucked [the café] into liquidation. And I fucked up my family. And I fucked my friend by fucking her boyfriend. And sometimes, I wish I didn’t even know that fucking existed and I know that **my body**, as it is now, **really is the only thing I have left and when that gets old and unfuckable I might as well just kill it**. And somehow there isn’t anything worse than someone who doesn’t want to fuck me. I fuck everything. (...) Either everyone feels like this a little bit and they’re just not talking about it or I am completely,*

fucking alone. Which isn't fucking funny." – Fleabag (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016, 00:21:36).

Fleabag confesses all of the ways in which she believes she failed: bankrupting the café, driving her family away, and hurting Boo by sleeping with her boyfriend (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). She feels as if the only good thing left in her life, not ruined by her, is her physical attractiveness – romantic attention gives her hope and boosts her self-esteem, but it also terrifies Fleabag to think about what would happen if she got old or lost her beauty (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). The woman truly believes her physicality and sex are the only purpose she has on this Earth and the idea that she might not be perceived as attractive at some point, causes her crisis of meaning (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). This can be argued to be a further illustration of Thomas and Janigian's (1988, p. 268) claim that people experience a sense of purposelessness, often caused by traumatic experiences – here, the death of Boo shook Fleabag so and generated a domino effect in the young woman's life, causing her to give up on other parts of her existence as well (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016).

However, sometimes sitcoms also portray characters who believe there is no greater meaning or purpose to their lives on a cosmic scale, which Veit (2018, p. 214) classifies as the notion of existential nihilism. For example, the protagonist of "*BoJack Horseman*" along with his good friend, Diane, an intelligent writer and journalist, do not believe their lives have a higher purpose and often feel empty and even depressed (Galuska & Long, 2017). In an episode titled "*Underground*", BoJack and Diane go on an alcoholic bender and do not sober up for days straight – this makes Diane come to the conclusion that no matter what her life looks like, she is never satisfied with it, which causes her to spiral even more and blame herself for not being able to achieve happiness (Galuska & Long, 2017). This existential void the two of them experience causes them to never truly feel contented with their lives, which could also be illustrated by BoJack's conversation with Hollyhock:

*"I know I just met you, but if you do have any of the old Horseman gunk bouncing around in that brain of yours, I gotta tell you know: **you should give up on looking for 'enough' because it will never be enough.**"* – BoJack (Calo & Winfrey, 2017, 00:21:28).

BoJack wants to spare Hollyhock from any suffering she might endure if she tries to find her purpose because he truly believes that there will always be something missing in their lives (Calo & Winfrey, 2017). He warns her not to look for a way to fill in the hole within her

soul because nothing he has ever done has achieved that – alcohol, money, fame, sex, etc. (Calo & Winfrey, 2017). BoJack sees life as a sequence of events and experiences, deprived of any deeper significance or importance and he wants to show this teenage girl who still believes there could be something more out there, that she is of his blood and their family can never nor will ever be satisfied with their existence (Calo & Winfrey, 2017).

Veit's (2018, p. 214) notion is also prevalent in "*Community*" – Abed believes that the universe has no order and is dominated by chaos (McKenna & Melman, 2011). He reckons that there could be various timelines and they will never know which one they belong to, thus every choice they make is random but it also opens up multiple avenues and outcomes, some good and some bad (McKenna & Melman, 2011).

"Chaos already dominates enough of our lives. The universe is an endless raging sea of randomness." – Abed (McKenna & Melman, 2011, 00:16:53).

The "*Community*" protagonist, Abed, truly believes that the universe is not an orderly place – everything that happens to them is random and there is no higher purpose to the experiences they face (McKenna & Melman, 2011). He is not particularly saddened or depressed by this notion, however, rather taking it as a fact at face value – human existence does not matter on a cosmic scale, it is merely a coincidence that they were born, that they met in Greendale, and that they became friends (McKenna & Melman, 2011).

As mentioned before, the decision to combine existential nihilism with the loss of meaning of life after a traumatic event into just one subtheme was made, as they both serve a similar role in sitcoms' exploration of meaning of life: that lack of purpose or order in characters' lives serves as a breaking point for them to begin their journey of searching for that meaning. Thus, even though the programmes do illustrate and can be argued to differentiate between Thomas and Janigian's (1988, p. 268) ideas on humans experiencing a crisis of meaning caused by a frightening or daunting experience and Veit's (2018, p. 214) perception of existential nihilism, i.e. the denial of life's meaning ever existing; they similarly use these ideas – affecting the characters and pushing them to explore and analyze their place and importance in the universe.

4.2.2. Searching for meaning

The most important theme connected to the concept of meaning is the search for it by the characters. Built upon existing literature, one can argue that most characters from the

productions search for meaning of life mostly through changing their goals and/or self-assumptions, or through altering their perception of the world, which falls in line with the notion by Thompson and Janigian (1988, p. 268).

Firstly, the alteration of one's goals to find new meaning of life can be noticed in actions of BoJack – he decides to switch his focus from self-pity and guilt, to his relationship with Hollyhock and becoming the best father, or later on: brother, he can be. He chooses to change how he treats people in order not to drive her away, even though at the beginning he admits to not being ready for new, consuming relationships in his life (Aron et al., 2017). Moreover, this change can also be noticed in the decisions made by Fleabag – she gives up habits that no longer serve her, such as sleeping with men she does not truly care about, and puts her energy into growing her business as well as decenters her need to be attractive to others (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Their new goals, thus, are ones of happiness and peace while changing their self-assumption to believing that they deserve good things and love in life.

On the other hand, characters such as Princess Carolyn, search for new meaning by changing their perception of the world. After her miscarriage and slow descent into depression, the agent is approached by a writer wanting to produce a new television show titled “*Philbert*”. i.e. the same name she had picked out for her child before she lost the pregnancy (Knight & Walker Farrel, 2017).

*“I don't know how else to describe it other than this feeling of supreme warmth came over me, like this is what I've been waiting for my whole life. Todd, the world is dark and scary (...) but **when I hold this script in my hands, I have hope.** (...) **This script is a sign!**”* – Princess Carolyn (Knight & Walker Farrel, 2017, 00:11:54)

Princess Carolyn believes that it is the world or universe giving her a sign that things will start to look up for her – she will be able to have a family and a successful career, which are the two most important things for her (Knight & Walker Farrel, 2017; Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017). She decides to produce the series herself, which provides her with hope and a new life path that she can follow (Knight & Walker Farrel, 2017; Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017).

4.2.3. Found or assigned meaning

The last theme connected to the concept of meaning, and the search for it, is one of found or assigned meaning of life. Here, all three productions portray their characters finding new meaning of their lives or explore what they assign meaning to.

In “*Community*”, firstly, the plotline of the Darkest Timeline arises in this context again – the characters resolve their search and find new meaning in life, i.e. turning to evil to reclaim purpose and order in their lives:

*“Of all the timelines, this is clearly the darkest, which is why **I propose we commit to being evil.** (...) From now on, I am Evil Abed. We’re the Evil Study Group and **we have but one evil goal: return somehow to the Prime Timeline, the one where I stopped you from rolling the die, then, we destroy the good versions of ourselves and reclaim our proper lives.**”* – (Evil) Abed (McKenna & Melman, 2011, 00:20:05).

This is an intriguing resolution to assigning new meaning after its loss due to a traumatic event, as these characters decide to use their evilness, or rather find it first and then use it, as a way of coping with fear (McKenna & Melman, 2011). In this timeline, the awful accident that happened during the housewarming party shook the study group to their core – losing one of their friends and suffering multiple injuries, Abed and the others take another turn to deal with the overwhelming fright that ends up consuming them (McKenna & Melman, 2011).

However, the show explores assigned meaning in its Prime Timeline, i.e. the actual timeline of the sitcom, but not necessarily newly found meaning. For example, Jeff, in his speech to Pierce’s father who treated his son awfully, reveals what he considers the epitome of life – fatherhood (Murray & Russo, 2011). Jeff believes that a life spent on anything but raising children, or a son in this instance, is only half a life – parenthood is a gift for him, it provides the human life with a purpose, i.e. meaning (Murray & Russo, 2011). Another character proclaiming and assigning meaning to the universe and life on a cosmic scale is Abed, who in his speech on the domination of chaos provides a resolution:

*“Our job isn’t to fight [the chaos], but to weather it—together. On the raft of life. A raft held together by those few **rare, beautiful things that we know to be predictable.** (...) **Us. It won’t matter what happens to us as long as we stay honest and accepting of each other’s flaws and virtues.**”* – Abed (McKenna & Melman, 2011, 00:17:01).

For him, the meaning of life lies in honesty and acceptance of others – both their good and bad sides, but most importantly: in the predictability of their actions and values (McKenna & Melman, 2011). This can be tied to Abed’s way of understanding the world, i.e. through logic and patterns, but he provides a very good reason for why that is – the universe has no order and the only way to restore it is through embracing that predictability of human behaviors (McKenna & Melman, 2011).

Moving onto the protagonists of “*BoJack Horseman*”, one can argue that the portrayal of assigning new meaning to one’s life can be noticed in BoJack’s relationship with Hollyhock. At first, he believes the role he has to play in the young teenager’s life is one of a fatherly figure, which terrifies BoJack to his core, even though she emphasizes having eight dads already, as she was adopted by a polyamorous gay relationship of eight men, and not really needing that care from him (Calo & Garofalo, 2017). However, he eventually comes to the realization that he does want to have a relationship with her, whatever that would look like, and after learning he is in fact Hollyhock’s half-brother and not father, they both are filled with joy and decide to work on their relationship more (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017). BoJack truly is happy about having Hollyhock in his life, even though he struggles immensely with it at first, and calls it ‘the only good thing in his life’ (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017).



Fig 6. BoJack comforting Hollyhock and the two bonding. [Series Episode]. From “*BoJack Horseman*”, Season 4, Episode 6, by A. Tafel (writer) and A. Walker Farrel (director), 2017, (00:24:25).

Lastly, another character who finds new meaning in her life is Fleabag and her love for the Priest. She deems him to be interesting and intriguing, but most importantly – he sees her in ways no one else in her life does, with two exceptions: (presumably) her mother and Boo. Not much is known about the relationship between Fleabag and her mom, but there are glimpses into how much she loved her parent and how lost she felt after her passing. This is best illustrated with a conversation Fleabag has with Boo when she confides in her friend that she does not know what to do with the love she has for her mom, now that she died, and Boo says this:

*“I’ll take it. No, I’m serious. It sounds lovely. I’ll have it. You have to give it to me. **It’s got to go somewhere.**”* – Boo (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019, 00:14:40).

In this conversation, Boo helps Fleabag realize two very important things. Firstly, Fleabag’s love is something one should want to have – with her warm and gentle embrace, Boo shows her best friend that her affection and feelings are appreciated and sought after, which is not something Fleabag was always aware of (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Secondly, although much later, Fleabag recognizes that her love for Boo, who is now gone just like her mother, has to go somewhere as well – she decides to gift it to the Priest. He reminds her of Boo mostly through his gentle and kind treatment of Fleabag who does not truly get that from the other people in her life – he sees her when no one else does, he listens to her when no one else will, and offers comfort and advice. She finds her inner peace in her love for him and confesses it out loud, even when she does not believe it to be reciprocated but it is of no consequence to her – she needs to tell him how she feels for herself (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). When the Priest leaves her life and the two part ways, she does not break down – she leaves the cameras behind and starts her life anew, finding meaning and harmony between her inner desires and external behaviors (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). For Fleabag, her love for the Priest is what gives her purpose as she regains the hope that there are still people in the world who understand her and will love her for who she is, as her mother, Boo, and the Priest did.

However, one could argue that Fleabag’s love for her sister is the true meaning found by the protagonist. At the beginning of the second season of the show, the character announces to the audience that this story is one of love – it could be claimed that she is referring to her relationship with the Priest, but the case could also be made that it hints rather at Claire (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Yes, the priest as mentioned above is an extremely important and

influential person in Fleabag's life, however, he ends up leaving and choosing God instead (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Claire, on the other hand, chooses Fleabag over her husband and decides to follow her passions only after the protagonist convinces her to do so (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). In the finale, Fleabag tries to persuade her sister to run after her colleague, Klare, with whom Claire is in love, but the character deems the idea as mad:

*“I can't go and 'get him' (...) He's called 'Klare' for God's sake and he's already at the airport anyway. I'm not going to the airport, he'd think I was insane. The airport? How would I even find him? (...) **The only person I'd run through an airport for is you.**”* – Claire (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019, 00:16:20).

Claire admits to her sister that she is in love with Klare but her love is not strong enough to run through the airport and chase him, as she would have to do many things he might see as insane, such as buying a dummy ticket or finding out his flight information, and she would never risk being seen as crazy, except for Fleabag (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). She loves her younger sibling so much that she does not care about being perceived as mad or demented, rather would do anything to be with her (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019). Therefore, the story of Fleabag is one of love: romantic and erotic love, familial love, friendship love, and (most importantly) self-love – love is the true meaning of Fleabag's life, coming from various people as well as from herself.

As various studies, such as the one by Längle (2004, p. 28-30) suggest, one finds meaning when a harmony between their actions and deepest feelings is restored. In all three studied shows, the characters find or assign said meaning, i.e. as Schischkoff (1991, p. 667 as cited in Schnell, 2012, p. 6) defines it – the significance attributed to an experience or matter; usually through or to their relationships. These relationships are often posed as the main purpose of life, as it is in the example of Jeff or BoJack, while for others they aid in finding that inner peace and harmony, as it is for Fleabag.

In conclusion, the second theme pertaining to sitcom characters and their journey to find meaning and purpose to their lives is explored in such series through the portrayal of three stages: 1) lack of meaning, whether that is due to a loss caused by a traumatic event or inherent denial of the importance of one's life; 2) the search for it, and 3) finding or simply assigning meaning. Protagonists of “*Community*”, “*BoJack Horseman*”, and “*Fleabag*” begin their quests for a sense of purpose and order to their lives on a cosmic scale, driven by their feelings of

meaninglessness, whether that is due to experiences of death of a loved one, as it is in the example of *Fleabag* or *BoJack*, or due to other traumatic events, such as Princess Carolyn's miscarriage. This finding falls in line with Thomas and Janigian's (1988, p. 268) argument that humans always aim to restore their sense of coherence, which is further illustrated with the second subtheme focusing on the search for it. The studied productions explore their characters' seeking for their equilibrium by changing their goals or the ways in which they view themselves, such as *BoJack* or *Fleabag* do by deciding to focus on the relationships that make them the happiest and believing they do, in fact, deserve to be loved; as well as by changing the perception of the world, as Princess Carolyn begins to believe that she is receiving a sign from the universe which restores her hope of a happy life filled with children. Lastly, comedy television shows portray the final stage of the quest – assigning or finding new meaning to one's life. Here, what is interesting to note is the fact that they revolve around relationships and love – for *BoJack* and *Fleabag*, the relationships with their siblings provide them with a sense of coherence and aid in finding that new purpose and order, which their lives were lacking before. In “*Community*”, on the other hand, the emphasis lies on assigning meaning through focusing on restoring order to the world – the relationships here as still just as important as in the other productions, but centering rather around friendships.

4.3. Postmodernity marker – humour

The last concept as well as a theme is one of humour, here of three types: 1) absurdity, 2) irony, and 3) parody. As mentioned before, this theme diverges from the anticipated structure as it can be argued to provide a background on which the other themes revolving studied concepts reside. Humour in these sitcoms does not convey agency or the search of meaning by the characters, rather highlights and grounds the themes to make them shine even more.

Firstly, the absurdity, whether that is of characters or plots, is rarely realized by the characters – in their minds and beliefs, what they say or do is fully justified and normal, while in reality, the viewer would deem the behaviors as nonsense. For example, in “*Community*” there are two main characters whose main purpose is to convey their absurdity to the audience – Ben Chang, an ex-Spanish teacher at Greendale who after getting fired collapses into madness and insanity but gets re-hired as a security guard, as well as the Greendale Dean Craig Pelton, a queer lover of dress-ups who tries his best to make the school more like a real university but often fails miserably. In season three one of the more elaborate plots is Chang's scheme to become a dictator of Greendale through abducting Dean Pelton and replacing him with an

impostor and running the school using an army of preteens he enlists at a birthday party (Saccardo & Shapeero, 2012).



Fig 7. Ben Chang replacing Dean Pelton with an impostor. [Series Episode]. From “Community”, Season 3, Episode 18, by T. Saccardo (writer) and T. Shapeero (director), 2012, (00:15:30).

This absurdity of plots and characters is also prevalent in “*BoJack Horseman*”, mostly in the context of Todd and his various business ventures. In the fourth season of the show, his ideas for businesses revolve around dentists who are also clowns – firstly, he believes it is a way to make children less scared of going to the dentist, but realizes people are terrified of both so he creates a running business where he uses his scary, rabies-infected from living in the woods ‘clentists’ (clown-dentists) to chase people to scare them into jogging (Bob-Waksberg & Rauch, 2017).

The notion of absurdity portrayed in sitcoms such as “*Community*” or “*BoJack Horseman*” fits within their fictional world, behaviors that would be deemed absurd or ridiculous by the audience are seen as normal in those fictional worlds, which is not the case for “*Fleabag*”. One of the more absurd plots in this programme is the ‘Better Man Seminar’ – while attending her silent retreat, Fleabag stumbles across a seminar for men during which they learn how to talk and respect women through exercises such as: screaming at inflatable dolls various profanities they would like to tell real women and being corrected by their host on what to actually say or how to view women as real human beings, not simply sex objects (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). Fleabag finds this seminar ridiculous, although she never voices her

opinion, as she is at a silent retreat, but she indicates it by smiling and snickering into the camera (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016).



Fig 8. The Better Man seminar. [Series Episode]. From “*Fleabag*”, Season 1, Episode 4, by P. Waller-Bridge (writer) and H. Bradbeer (director), 2016, (00:09:13).

Irony, on the other hand, is a type of humour utilized in these television shows not really as dialogue of characters, but rather revolves around their existence, i.e. mostly characters saying something they see as serious, but the audience understands and knows it is the opposite. This is mostly prominent in “*Community*”, for example in the first episode of season three, Jeff is asked by the biology professor to leave the room as his phone keeps ringing and interrupting the class, which prompts the character nicknamed by the student body as ‘Star-burns’ to say to Jeff ‘to learn how to blend in’, while himself having star-shaped side-burns (hence, the nickname) and a lizard on his shoulder – two of the most unique and stand-out features one could have, causing him to (ironically) not blend into the group of class attendees at all (Donovan et al., 2011).

That irony of characters’ existence can also be noticed in “*BoJack Horseman*” – in episode five titled “*Thoughts and Prayers*”, a Hollywood film studio discusses the promotion of their new movie “*Ms. Taken*” where a young woman gets revenge and, in a very violent manner, murders a lot of people (Adams & Winfrey, 2017). Unfortunately, during one of the meetings discussing the release and promotional campaign, the producers get a news alert about a real life mass-shooting, which annoys the executive producer, Lenny Turteltaub:

“I am sick and tired of real-life gun violence getting in the way of us telling stories that glamorize gun violence.” – Lenny Turteltaub (Adams & Winfrey, 2017, 00:00:46).

This entire episode revolves around the studio needing to cut down their shooting scenes as to not be insensible, but more and more mass-shootings happen, which causes the film to be cut down so significantly, it practically becomes a H&M commercial (Adams & Winfrey, 2017). This can be argued to illustrate Mills' (2005, p. 8-13) notion on humour being used as a way to cope with negative experiences as well as giving insights into American culture – jokes about mass-shootings as a way of enduring and confronting the awful gun violence present in United States (Adams & Winfrey, 2017). Moreover, it aligns itself with Detweiler's (2012, p. 729) argument that humour, mostly in the form of irony, can be utilized as a tool for characters to overcome their various instabilities to deal with certain issues, here: gun related crimes.

Lastly, the use of parody as a type of humour was only observed in "*Community*" – the sitcom imitated thirteen various styles and programmes throughout the third season, such as: mystery films, anime style, musicals, as well as specific shows, e.g. "*Glee*" or "*Law and Order*". One could argue that this extensive use of parody further grounds this sitcom in the postmodern media and aligns itself with Detweiler's (2012, p. 728) idea on humour used in sitcoms as a tool for self-critique and analysis of television formats as a whole, thus offering "«TV's vision of ... TV»" (Wallace 1990, p. 33, as cited in Detweiler, 2012, p. 729).



Fig 9. Jeff and Shirley playing foosball, portrayed in an anime-like style. [Series Episode]. From "*Community*", Season 3, Episode 9, by C. Kula (writer) and A. Russo (director), 2011, (00:17:08).

Previous studies, such as Veit's (2018, p. 218) work, posed the Absurd as the only answer to a world devoted of meaning or purpose – the absurd here being both recognition of

the universe's lack of order and intention, as well as humans' futile need of searching for meaning in a world deprived of it. The studied sitcoms utilize the Absurd a bit differently – it is not the answer to characters' loss or denial of meaning, but rather the background and grounding for their exploration of agency and their search for purpose and order to their lives. It can be illustrated by Todd's explanation and advice to Diane on how to make people care more about important things in the world – he uses a metaphor on how he tricks Mr. Peanut Butter, a golden retriever and a huge optimist who was once the star of a successful sitcom from the 1990s, to take his medication:

*“When I need Mr. Peanut Butter to take his heartworm pills, I always hide it in cheese so he doesn't know he's doing something he hates. **What if you take your important stuff and hide it in some[thing] juicy (...)?”**– Todd (Aron et al., 2017, 00:15:30).*

This quote demonstrates how humour is used by these television programmes – as a way to deliver and highlight the more ‘raw’ and serious themes portrayed, but also as a way to make them easier to digest. Thus, to conclude on the last theme, one can argue that the studied sitcoms utilize absurdity, irony, and parody to not necessarily convey other themes but to ground them within postmodernity, which employs the playful and notions of pastiche to create new art genres (Jamson, 1983, p. 112-114; McRobbie, 1994, p. 5, 36-37). Programmes such as “*Community*” or “*BoJack Horseman*” introduce many absurd plots and ironic characters, but their behaviors or statements are not seen as such by themselves, it is rather left to the viewer to discover and judge. Series such as “*Fleabag*”, on the other hand, portray their protagonist as aware of the nonsensical events happening around her. Lastly, the subtheme of parody, even though utilized only by “*Community*”, can be argued to be the most postmodern type of humour – it blends and imitates various genres as well as references specific productions, to create something new, as explained by Jameson (1983, p. 112-114).

5. Conclusions

To conclude as well as answer the posed research question, one can argue that the examination of three 21st-century American and British programmes, “*Community*”, “*BoJack Horseman*”, and “*Fleabag*”, reveals that sitcoms explore agency and the search for meaning by people in postmodern societies through their characters’ construction of identities, their relationships and resolving conflicts, existential nihilism and losing, searching, and assigning newly found meaning of life, all embedded and grounded in three main types of humor: absurdity, irony, and parody.

In the theme of human agency, the first subtheme of identity construction by the protagonists depicts them evaluating their inner motivations and values, as it is in the case of Britta’s character arc; accepting who they are and what they stand for, such as Annie does through realizing she does not need to change to fit her friends’ wishes; admitting and facing their fears, as Jeff does in the first episode of the studied season; as well as utilizing their self-confidence to stand up to those who disrespect them or their loved ones, illustrated by Fleabag’s reactions to Godmother or Martin being rude and coarse towards her and her mother or sister. Secondly, sitcoms’ characters build their agency through resolving various conflicts present in their relationships, doing so mostly through finding common ground and choosing to move on with their issues, as Troy and Abed choose to do after their school-wide pillow fight; accepting others’ behaviors, flaws, and virtues, as well as, most importantly, evaluating their own actions and matching them up with their values and beliefs, demonstrated by, for example, BoJack’s relationship with his mother or Fleabag’s with her sister. Moreover, some protagonists allude to their own fictionality, illustrated by Abed’s statements and wonderings about the existence of his reality, while others break the fourth wall by looking and addressing the cameras directly, as Fleabag regularly does throughout the whole show, as a way to further construct their identities and find a safe space to explore and analyze their inner motivations, values, and thoughts. This theme is, furthermore, grounded in Gubrium and Holstein’s (1995, p. 555-556), Hitlin and Elder’s (2007, p. 185), and Bandura’s (2001, p. 8-10) ideas on agency seen as the reflexive product of centered source actions, built by intentionality of actions, planning ahead, and evaluation of one’s behaviors and motivations based on inner goals and values. What can be argued to be unique about this finding, however, is its contradiction of Semeijn’s (2024, p. 650) notion of breaking the fourth wall as inherently believing there is another ‘real’ world ‘out there’.

These productions, furthermore, showcase their characters exploring and searching for meaning to their lives, portraying three stages. Firstly, the loss or denial of purpose and order of life or universe is often depicted in the sitcoms – protagonists feel a sense of meaninglessness either as a result of a traumatic experience or simply having an existentially nihilistic worldview. The latter one being an example of BoJack’s or Abed’s worldview, believing that life has no greater purpose and the universe is ruled by randomness, while the former is illustrated by Princess Carolyn’s arc of her issues with pregnancies and miscarriages. However, once that purpose is lost, the protagonists are portrayed amidst the search for it, whether that is through changing their goals or the way they view or assume things about themselves, as BoJack or Fleabag do by focusing on relationships with people who love them and beginning to believe they deserve that affection; or through altering how they perceive the world and universe as a whole, as Princess Carolyn does after finding a script named the same way as her child was supposed to be. What is again unique here, is the fact that sitcom characters find new meaning in life or simply assign one without the experience of meaninglessness, mostly through relationships – for some they are the end goal, their purpose in life, while for others they serve as a path to achieve the inner harmony and restore their peace. This is true for all three studied productions, for example, in “*Community*”, Abed believes that the only way to survive the universe’s chaos is by being amongst friends and embracing human predictability; BoJack, moreover, finds his purpose through his relationship with his half-sister, Hollyhock, believing it is the only good thing in his life; lastly, Fleabag’s meaning can be found in love – romantic one she shares with the Priest, familial one with her sister, and self-love. The second theme, furthermore, falls in line with notions by Veit (2018, p. 214-218) on existential nihilism as well as Thomas and Janigian’s (1988, p. 268) argument that humans seek to restore their equilibrium and search for greater meaning in life after experiencing a sense of meaninglessness.

Lastly, a truly unique aspect of 21st-century Western sitcoms is their use of absurdity, irony, and parody. All examined productions rely heavily on humour in the portrayal of stories of their characters – all humour types, explored mostly in “*Community*” and “*BoJack Horseman*”, are not realized by the characters in the shows, fitting within their fictional worlds as ‘normal’. The utilized humour grounds the productions in postmodernity and its problem regarding diminishing human agency or loss of meaning, falling in line with works by Jameson (1983, p. 112-114), McRobbie (1994, p. 5, 36-37), Veit (2018, p. 214-218), and Detweiler (2012, p. 729). Furthermore, it illustrates arguments made by Mills (2005, p. 8-13) and Detweiler (2012, p. 729) on humour as a tool for coping with traumatic experiences. However, most importantly, it

serves as a background for these concepts and the more raw or serious moments explored in these productions to truly make them shine.

5.1. Implications and limitations

This study finds its roots in theories by Lyotard (1979, as cited in Lyotard, 2004, p. 355) and Brügger (2001, p. 80-87) on the condition of culture after the rapid changes of the industrial revolution and its effect on humans' world-view and the de-legitimation of science and technology. Moreover, it utilizes Veit's (2018, p. 214-218) definition of existential nihilism as well as Royce's (1959, p. 515-534) critique of the perceived 'uniqueness' of the 20th century's problem with meaninglessness. Schnell's (2012, p. 6-8) noted differences in meaning of and in life provide the needed background, while Thompson and Janigian (1988, p. 268-271) as well as Längle (2004, p. 28-30), demonstrate the stages of humans' journey to finding that purpose and order in life. Furthermore, this research is informed by Fitzhugh and Leckie's (2001, p. 59-62), Gubrium and Holstein's (1995, p. 555-556), Hitlin and Elder's (2007, p. 185), and Bandura's (2001, p. 8-10) arguments on human agency having its foundations in intentionality of actions, planning ahead, and evaluation of one's behaviors and motivations based on inner goals and values. The complex link between postmodernity and culture, on the other hand, is explored utilizing theories by McRobbie (1994, p. 3-5, 36-37, 172-173), Jameson (1983, p. 112-114), and Veit (2018, p. 214) on the role television and mass media play in human's lives, creating reference points to construct and understand reality. Lastly, Mills (2005, p. 8-18), Jiang et al. (2019, p. 2), and Juckel et al. (2016, p. 588) provided the necessary background on the sociology of humor, while Wells-Lassagne (2015, p. 1) and Berman (1987, p. 6) introduced comprehensive descriptions of situational comedy television shows, further informing this thesis.

Although, the works by various scholars, mentioned above, have illustrated and gave meaning to how these concepts can be understood in a more abstract way and positioned in postmodernity and its unique culture, the findings of this thesis further explored how they are portrayed in the modern medium of situational comedy television programmes. What can be argued to be unique about this study is the focus on a comparison analysis between productions that are often overlooked by the world of academia, as mentioned by Juckel et al. (2016, p. 583-584) or Mills (2006, p. 19), while being so beloved by the majority and consumed by viewers almost daily, as well as its connection the postmodernist views of existential nihilism, perceived purposelessness of human lives, and diminishing agency of people, which is a rare one to find.

Moreover, this analysis holds a societal relevance as well, as it can help in informing why audiences could be attracted to such programmes and reveal some insights into the cultures they are a part of by examining which parts of the human existence or lives, the nations find appropriate to laugh at – uncovering cultural values and collective identities.

Nevertheless, this research does have its limitations: firstly, the studied sitcoms, i.e. “*Community*”, “*BoJack Horseman*”, and “*Fleabag*”, are all of Western productions – even though the overwhelming majority of film and television content does come from the United States or Kingdom, it thus skews and limits the analysis to a western-point-of view. Moreover, in most of the cases, with the exception of “*Fleabag*”, the analysis is limited to only one season of each show, i.e. between twelve and twenty-two episodes, thus, a bigger number of episodes or even an examination of the entirety of the productions could potentially bring about more nuanced and well-rounded findings on how sitcoms portray their characters’ building of agency and searching for meaning.

5.2. Recommendations for future research

Based on the outlined limitations above, one could suggest that further research be done on non-Western situational comedy programmes to provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the complex ways in which human agency and the search for meaning in life might be showcased in the television format. Exploring various productions could be of aid in revealing further insights into various countries’ and cultures’ humor, which again, might uncover parts of their collective values and identities. Furthermore, a truly fascinating endeavor would be conducting of a longitudinal study with the focus on sitcoms from the 1970s, as those are the times during which the postmodern condition and rounding out the notion of existential nihilism were created. Analyzing how these popular and majorly beloved productions evolve in their portrayal of human agency and the search for meaning in life, could be of help in identifying the shifts and trends in television and comedy narratives, as well as how they bleed into the collective consciousness and zeitgeist of average audience members. Similarly, researching programmes that are still running now, as those analyzed in this thesis series all ended a couple of years ago, would be an interesting undertaking to see how these shows explore such complex concepts and themes, and whether or not these notions evolve from season to season. Lastly, one could recommend the impact of such productions be examined on their audiences – whether that is through conducting interviews or focus groups, studying how sitcoms are perceived by the viewers is crucial to fully understand and implement in the future

the exploration of human agency and meaning of life into popular culture. It could prove itself to be an invaluable feedback for researchers and production companies, writers, directors, and others working in the television industry. Moreover, such audience examination could reveal interesting insights into the cultural differences between viewers and (potentially) the series as well – analyzing whether people from various cultural backgrounds find similar things humorous, could bring about more information about their collective values and identities.

Given the critical importance and reflections on human agency and searching for meaning in life in postmodern societies, this thesis aimed to investigate how 21st-century American and British sitcoms explore those mentioned themes, marrying them to humour and comedy. This chapter concluded the study by emphasizing and highlighting the key findings in relation to the posed research question. It further critically reviewed this paper's implications and limitations, consequently suggesting further research ideas to broaden the scope of the studied phenomena.

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Appendix A: Code Book

Theme	Subtheme	Indicator (code)	Definition	Example	Examples of notes:	Example of codes:
Agency	Construction of identity	Evaluation of values	Characters evaluating and questioning their values, motivations, or life paths	E.g. Britta questioning her life path of community college	01:02 - Britta: "Yes, it's terrible! She's imprisoned by an oppressive regime, half way across the world and I'm, what, in college?! Where are my values?"	Britta questions her values and their strength
		Self-acceptance	Characters accepting themselves for who they are	E.g. Annie accepting she is how she is and deciding not to change herself for other	17:24 – Annie is done with always worrying if she's cool or fun enough and adapting to be able to hang out with them. Upset, she leaves.	Annie is done with changing herself to be cool and adapting to her friends
		Facing and admitting one's fears	Characters admitting their fears and taking steps to get over them	E.g. Jeff facing his fear of being alone and a bad guy and admitting it; BoJack being scared of hurting Hollyhock how he hurt others but still trying his best to have a relationship with her	19:20 – Jeff: "As someone who's been on the other side, I can tell you, it is a scary, lonely, Chang-filled world out there. And sure, this group has sprouted some legs, but why are we in such a rush to leave the tide pool when the only things waiting for us on shore are the sands of time and the hungry seagulls of slowly growing apart?"	Jeff tells the study group being alone is scary; Jeff doesn't want to grow apart from his friends
		Confidence and standing up for oneself or other	Characters speaking up or taking actions in defense of their values, loved ones, or opinions	E.g. Fleabag standing up to Godmother or Martin mistreating her or being disrespectful to her or Claire	22:43 – Fleabag punches Martin in the face	Fleabag stands up to Martin
	Relationships and resolving conflicts	Evaluation of behaviors and actions	Characters evaluating and analyzing whether their own behaviors match up with their values and beliefs	E.g. Fleabag realizing that she often mistreats Claire or her Dad and wanting to improve by being more supportive and polite to them	15:13 – She goes to the bathroom and thinks about the time Boo tried to make her feel better about annoying Claire, but Fleabag says she is annoyed with herself and wishes she could meet herself and tell herself off. Boo dresses up in her coat and hat and pretends to be Fleabag, and she goes with it.	Fleabag doesn't like that she keeps provoking and annoying Claire
		Finding common ground	Both sides find something they care about and use it as an anchor to resolve their issue	E.g. Troy and Abed realizing the only reason they want to keep fighting each other is because this would be the last thing they do together, which helps them realize how much they care for each other	17:55 – Jeff explains to them that this sentiment means that they actually like each other so much they would fight forever. They disagree and say that is not enough, but Jeff proposes they wear their imaginary friendship hats. (...) Once he comes back, he puts them on and they make up.	Troy and Abed make up
		Acceptance of others	Characters accepting others for who they are	E.g. BoJack realizing the mother he hated is now gone because of dementia and accepting her in her vulnerable state	23:27 – Beatrice is now old again. She sees the room of the facility and hears BoJack. She calls out for him and he turns around. She is scared and asks him where they are, but he tells her she's in Michigan at the lake house. He tells her it's a warm summer night and the fireflies are dancing, and her family is	BoJack gives up on tormenting his mom and comforts her; BoJack's agency to act kind towards his mother

					here telling her everything will be alright. She smiles and agrees.	
	Breaking the fourth wall	Alluding to one's fictionality	Characters referencing their fictionality, being aware they are fictional	E.g. Abed saying that he did something 'to maximize audience appeal'	11:07 – Abed: "I figured it would maximize audience appeal."	Abed says he wants to maximize the audience appeal; Breaking the fourth wall
		Addressing the viewers directly	Characters looking into the camera or speaking directly to their audience	E.g. Fleabag looking into the camera and asking the viewer a question	00:03 – Fleabag goes running through a cemetery. She runs up to us and tells us she's jogging.	Breaking the fourth wall
Meaning of Life	Existential nihilism	No meaning or purpose of life	Denial of meaning or purpose within life	E.g. BoJack or Diane feeling as if their lives are empty, they have no purpose	12:39 – BoJack brings food for Diane, who lies drunk on the floor and wonders about her life. She realizes she was never satisfied with her life and admits she might be the problem, she starts sobbing. BoJack tries to comfort her and they start talking about him leaving for a year and a half.	Diane is worried that she has never been satisfied with her life
		No order in the universe or life	Denial of order in the universe	E.g. Abed believing the universe and their lives are dominated by chaos and randomness	16:53 – Abed: "I don't think you should. Chaos already dominates enough of our lives. The universe is an endless raging sea of randomness"	Universe dominated by chaos
	Losing of meaning	Loss of sense of purpose or order due to a traumatic event	Characters feeling a sense of meaninglessness triggered by a traumatic experience	E.g. BoJack feeling empty and broken, even indirectly trying to end his life after the death of his close friend Sarah Lynn, for which he also blames himself	10:35 – covered in snow and almost freezing to death, BoJack is wakes up as someone knocks on his door. He goes outside and notices his door is fixed. He screams at Eddie, hiding in his house, and breaks the door down	BoJack is giving up on life and might even want to kill himself
	Searching for meaning	Changing of goals or self-assumptions	Characters changing their goals or assumptions about themselves to find meaning	E.g. Fleabag giving up unhealthy habits, such as sex, and putting her energy into growing her business and decentering her need to feel attractive to others	15:34 – they chat a bit about her family and Fleabag admits she doesn't have time for friends. She explains that sex didn't bring anything good in her life, she has a flashback to sobbing Boo walking into traffic, so she's abstinent now, but she still has an impulse for it, she thinks of the Priest during mass, but it's just not a right person	Fleabag admits that sex didn't bring anything good for her so she stopped
		Changing the perception of the world	Characters changing the way they view the world to find new meanings	E.g. Princess Carolyn seeing the "Philbert" script and believing that the universe is sending her a sign that everything will be well	11:56 – back at her apartment, Princess Carolyn tells Todd how much hope the script gives her and she decides to produce the show herself. Then she falls asleep from all of the wine.	Princess Carolyn is filled with hope and wants to produce the tv show
	Found or assigned meaning	Assigned meaning of life	Characters assigning meaning to life, not necessarily after they lost it due to a traumatic experience	E.g. Jeff seeing becoming a parent as the epitome of life or Abed viewing humans' predictability as the only way to surviving the chaos of the universe	16:02 – Jeff stands up to Pierce's dad: "Listen up, Colonel Cryptkeeper. I could live a million years and could spend every minute doing important things, but at the end of it all, I would've only lived half a life if I had not raised a son. This was a gift that was handed to you. You squandered it. (...)"	Being a father is the true meaning of life for Jeff

		Finding meaning after loss	Characters finding new meaning after their feelings of loss of purpose or order of life	E.g. BoJack finding his new meaning as his relationship with Hollyhock or Fleabag finding meaning in her love for the Priest	23:32 – BoJack: “This whole time. Of course it was you! No! All this ‘I don’t know where I am or who my son is’ stuff, is officially not cute anymore. You ruined the one good thing I had. The one thing, I didn’t ruin myself, but of course I did! (...)”	BoJack’s relationship with Hollyhock was the only good thing in his life
Humor	Absurdity	Nonsense situation or saying nonsense things	Characters saying or doing absurd things or plots being absurd, i.e. complete nonsense or a situation that goes against all logical rules	E.g. Chang’s plot of becoming the dictator of Greendale and abducting Dean Pelton, or Todd’s business ideas revolving clown-dentists	14:51 – Dean comes into his office, but Chang is already waiting there for him. (...) He opens Dean’s costume wardrobe and inside there is a guy who looks very similar to Dean, i.e. the bald DJ from the bar mitzva. Chang shoots Dean Pelton with his tranquilizer gun .	Chang switches the Dean with a fake one; Absurd plot; Chang being absurd
	Irony	Saying one thing and meaning the opposite	Characters’ ironic existence, i.e. them saying or doing something they deem serious, but the audience knows it is not	E.g. Star-burns telling Jeff ‘to learn how to blend in’ while having star-shaped side-burns and a lizard on his shoulder	06:14 – Star-burns: “Dude, learn to blend in”, says while having star-shaped side-burns and a lizard on his shoulder .	Star-burns being absurd; irony of the character
	Parody	Imitating a style of the genre of various media	Imitating a style of the genre of literature or other media	E.g. “Community” episode “Basic Lupine Urology” being a direct parody of the TV show “Law and Order”, imitating it’s unique features such as, an introduction through a voiceover or using the same theme song	00:01 – voice-over introduction parodying ‘Law and Order’: “Greendale Community College is represented by two separate, yet equally important types of people: the goofballs that run around stirring up trouble and the eggheads that make a big deal out of it. These are their stories.” (kung-kung, i.e. the Law and Order sound)	Parody of the tv show ‘Law and Order’