Gender and Conversational Humor in a Televised Situational Comedy: Implications for EFL Contexts

YU Yating
Department of English
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong
yating.yu@connect.polyu.hk

Abstract

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This study is the first phase of a project exploring the use of popular media as a pedagogical tool in teaching culture and language in an EFL classroom. It argues that the explicit identification of discourse features in multi-media resources through linguistic description will maximise classroom input. The specific aim of this preliminary study is to focus on one situational comedy as a case study and to examine the discursive construction of conversational humor and the gendered identities enacted in the performance of humor. Transcripts of Season 4 of an American televised comedy, *Friends,* were analysed using the techniques of discourse analysis. The findings indicate that the different styles of conversational humor reflect those identified by previous studies for everyday conversations. In addition, male and female characters use politeness and impoliteness strategies differently to enact humor. While men generally use impolite strategies and contestive humor to argue and negotiate values, female characters mainly use politeness strategies and supportive humor to bond around common values and to downplay their differences. These findings have implication for studies on humor and gender, the relationship between television and society and the use of popular media in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: conversational humor, gender variation, impoliteness, politeness theory, popular culture

Author's bionote

YU Yating holds a B.A. degree in English from The Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai Campus and an M.A in English Language Arts from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). She has been a research assistant at the Department of English of PolyU, working on projects on conceptual metaphor in psychotherapeutic discourse. Currently, she teaches at Modern Bachelor Education in Hong Kong. In general, her research interests include conversational humor, gender studies, healthcare communication, and metaphor studies.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This study is the first phase of a project exploring the use of popular media as a pedagogical tool in teaching culture and language in EFL classrooms. It argues that the explicit identification of discourse features in multi-media resources through linguistic description will maximize classroom input. The specific aim of this preliminary study is to focus on one situational comedy as a case study and to examine the discursive construction of conversational humor and the gendered identities enacted in the performance of humor. Transcripts of Season 4 of an American televised comedy, *Friends,* were analyzed using the techniques of discourse analysis. The findings indicate that the different styles of conversational humor reflect those identified by previous studies for everyday conversations. In addition, male and female characters use politeness and impoliteness strategies differently to enact humor. While men generally use impolite strategies and contestive humor to argue and negotiate values, female characters mainly use politeness strategies and supportive humor to bond around common values and to downplay their differences. These findings have implication for studies on humor and gender, the relationship between television and society and the use of popular media in EFL classrooms.

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1   Introduction

The relationship between conversational humor and gender has been researched for a few decades (Crawford, 2003). Masculinity and femininity are not traits that men and women possess from birth, but rather these qualities need to be performed and displayed by constant practice and repetition, in accordance with cultural norms and social expectations, for a long period in order for them to become natural (Cameron, 1999). Humor as a 'mode' of discourse is a useful resource for gender construction (Crawford, 2003). Research has shown that humor functions in social relationships to subvert power relations (Ziv, 2009) and also to establish bonds among friends (Knight, 2010, 2013). Some gender scholars also claim that, in American culture, women as a group tend to be supportive, caring and over-polite to other participants, whereas men may

be confrontational and impolite in their humor (Crawford& Gressley, 1991; Hay, 1994; Lampert & Ervin-Tirpp 1998; Lampert, 1996; Litosseliti, 2006; Mickes, Walker, Parris, Mankoff, & Christenfeld, 2011). These stereotypes of men and women have tended to be normalized in the American social life (Crawford, 1995).

The objective of the present study is to investigate how this stereotypic construction of gender and humor is enacted and reproduced in American popular culture, by focusing on conversational humor in a televised situational comedy, *Friends*. The study is intended to be the first phase of a project aimed at exploring the use of pop culture media as a pedagogic tool in an EFL classroom in Hong Kong. Although cultural awareness of the target language is important in EFL contexts, most ESL/EFL learners do not have the opportunity to live in English-speaking countries. Traditionally, cross-cultural education has largely relied on textbooks and teachers' knowledge and experiences (Bloom & Johnston, 2009). However, none of these inputs are authentic and teachers might have limited cross-cultural experiences and knowledge. In order to compensate for the lack of an English-speaking environment, pop culture media, such as TV shows, are good pedagogic resource for cultivating cross-cultural exchange and understanding (Bloom & Johnston, 2009). In this light, one of the aims of Hong Kong Education Bureau (2007) is to provide English learners with experience of English-speaking culture through multimodal texts.

The specific aim of this preliminary study is to focus on one situational comedy as a case study and to examine the discursive construction of conversational humor and the gendered identities enacted in the performance of humor. This linguistic exploration will provide useful information for scaffolding lessons and developing the content of culture-oriented EFL lessons. Generally, the study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the types of conversational humor that men and women use in same-gender settings?
2. What are the similarities and differences between men's and women's conversational humor in same-gender settings?
3. What is the relationship between gender construction and conversational humor?

These questions will be addressed in light of the sociolinguistics concepts of politeness and impoliteness. Before they are examined, however, I first provide a conceptual background for the study and proceed to describe the study context and the research procedures used for the study.

2   Conceptual Background

This section proceeds to discuss the conceptual background of the study. It first discusses the concepts of conversational humor and gender, highlighting the relationship between them. It then proceeds to discuss the notions of politeness and impoliteness, which are employed as the theoretical framework for the study.

2.1   *Conversational humor and gender construction*

Conversational humor is defined as "spontaneous or pre-constructed interactional" verbal humor, which can be as short as a witty word or as long as the whole humorous integrative conversation and which requires a play frame created by the participants for the sake of amusement (Dynel, 2009, p.1285). Conversational humor can be classified into different categories (Dynel, 2009, pp.1288-1295), some of which tend to overlap and merge, depending on the situations. As a distinct mode of language, it is a useful recourse for studying gender construction. While formal modes of discourse are used to resolve problems, avoid ambiguity, and minimize misinterpretation in communication, humor relies on the interpretation of ambiguity and incongruity by flouting Grice's *Cooperative Principle* (1975). This metaphorical nature of humor poses a challenge to low proficiency speakers of English.

Humor is one mode of language for "doing gender" (Crawford, 2003, p.1417). Based on the "two-culture model" of gender differences in communication, women's humor tends to "create solidarity" and "build intimacy", while men's humor works to build status and tends to be competitive (Crawford, 1995; Crawford, 2003, p.1421). In same-gender situations, women prefer to share personal funny anecdotes and enact self-denigrating humor (Crawford & Gressley, 1991). Female participants tend to laugh at each other's misfortune and find common grounds to build solidarity and intimacy (Coates, 1996; Hay, 2001). Kotthoff (2000) points out that to laugh 'at' another's expense only remains on the surface for the female interlocutors. The real intention is to empathetically laugh 'with' the speaker rather than to laugh 'at' her. Men in contrast seldom

enact self-denigrating humor and they tend to use confrontational "verbal challenges and put-downs" (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997, p.290).

Based on a corpus of workplace discourse, Holmes (2006) defines two conversational styles of humor as "supportive humor" and "constestive humor" (p.33). *Supportive humor* is constructed by the participants collaboratively in order to strengthen a claim or to elaborate a point by. On the other hand, in *contestive humor*, participants might challenge or disagree with one another's ideas with "loosely semantically linked" conversational structures (Holmes, 2009, p.638). In some situations, *contestive humor* can be seen as *subversive humor* (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p.65). *Contestive humor* is widely used by superiors to maintain power relations and by subordinates to subvert power and authority, whereas *supportive humor* is used among colleagues to construct and maintain good bonds (see Knight, 2010, 2013 on humor and bonding).

The concepts of *supportive humor* and *contestive humor* might help distinguish gendered differences in conversational styles. *Supportive humor* appears more frequently among female group members, while *contestive humor*, associated with confrontation and competitive forms of humor, tends to occur among male group members (Holmes, 2006, p.41). While Crawford (1995) argued that it is superiors who direct humor at their subordinates in the staff hierarchy of rank, Homes and Marra (2002) found that humor is also used by subordinates to subvert authority. Displaying humor involves "taking momentary control of the situation" (Kotthoff, 2006, p.8). Men in a higher position might feel less constrained in directing confrontational humor at people in a lower position. On the other hand, Kotthoff (2006) indicates that female superiors seldom apply their wit during formal meetings due to the expectation of being feminine and polite. He, however, notes that women in a powerful position, such as politicians, tend to change the way they talk in order to avoid being perceived as weak.

Gender stereotypes have long been a part of American culture and changed over time (Crawford, 1995; Crawford& Gressley, 1991; Holmes, 2005; Kotthoff, 2006). According to Kotthoff (2006), in the past, women were often targeted as the object of a sexual joke and described as lacking a sense of humor especially in public, whereas men were noted to be actively jocular and to possess a good sense of humor. Evidence from recent studies, however, shows that the gender

stereotypes in humor suggest that women are "value cooperative" and "intimacy-enhancing" in their humor; whereas men are more likely to tell controversial, competitive and sex related jokes (Crawford (2003, p.1416).

However, most of these studies treat men and women as two homogenous groups, in which gender is considered as the most essential factor across different situations. Gender is portrayed as "a fixed, static attribute of individuals and the importance of situation and context on communication strategies are minimized or overlooked" (Crawford, 2003, pp.1415-1416). The distinctive gender stereotypes are mainly based on educated, white, middle-class speakers rather than a more representative or diverse group (Crawford, 2003).

Although it is not the purpose of the present study to address these issues, it does contribute to previous studies on conversation humor, in general, and in the American context, in particular, by examining gender and humor in popular culture, specifically in a televised comedy. It considers how these gender differences in everyday interaction are enacted and replayed in American popular culture. The variation in context could contribute to our understanding of the functions of humor as well as its relationship with gender.

2.2   Politeness and impoliteness in conversational humor

Men's and women's conversational humor tend to reflect politeness and impoliteness. Conversational humor is considered a distinct sub-category under *politeness strategies* (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and *impoliteness strategies* (Culpeper, 1995). Conversational humor can be a useful strategy for a speaker to be polite and to maintain the *face* of the listener while enacting a *face-threatening act*. On the other hand, conversational humor such as sarcasm can be aggressive and impolite to a recipient when it is used purposely to cause loss of *face* in another person. Men and women might use different kinds of conversational humor in same-gender settings to maintain or to damage another participant's *face*.

Conversational humor can function within different levels of *politeness strategies* for different purposes in a conversation. For instance, it can be used to make indirect requests, suggest disagreement and criticism as well as to save *face* (Crawford, 1995). *Face* can be understood as a self-image or self-presentation that is connected with emotion (Yule, 1996). *Face* can be

constantly enhanced and maintained, while it can also be lost and threatened in social encounters. *Face* can be divided into two categories: "negative face" and "positive face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). *Negative face* is the desire to claim freedom within personal boundaries, while *positive face* is the desire to be appreciated and wanted by others. In different circumstances, participants depend on each other to maintain and enhance *face*. Once a person's *face* is damaged, there is great potential that he or she will threaten another person's *face* in defending his or her own. A *face-threatening act* (henceforth FTA) refers to verbal or nonverbal acts that might threaten a speaker's or an addressee's *face*. In general situations, it is in the participants' interest to minimize the degree of FTAs, unless it is more important to "do the FTAs with maximum efficiency" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 95) than to support the addressee's *face*, such as in the cases of emergency and power relations.

Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize five *politeness strategies* that participants use in daily interaction to avoid or minimize the degree of FTAs. These strategies comprise bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record and avoiding the FTA. The five strategies suggest how to minimize the risk of threatening the addressee's face. The higher the risk of an FTA is, the more polite the strategy the speaker will choose. In some circumstances, if the FTA is too risky, the speaker will choose to give up on enacting the FTA. Bald on record might be used whenever it is necessary to enact the FTAs 'with maximum efficiency' (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.98) rather than to support the addressee's face. Bald on record is consistent with Grice's (1975) four conversational maxims. In applying the concept of politeness to humor, Zajdman (1995) indicate that a humorous bald on record strategy means producing a derogatory humor whose threat to the addressee's face is very small or when the discourse reproduces unequal power relations.

The second strategy, *positive politeness* is a strategy to boost solidarity by showing the speaker's desire for the addressee's *positive face*. Joking is one strategy for enacting *positive politeness*. Since a joke is based on mutually shared background knowledge and values (Fine & Soucey, 2005), it increases solidarity and intimacy among participants. Conversational humor can also serve to mitigate the potential threat of a request, a complaint or a criticism. *Positive politeness,* thus, tends to be associated with *supportive humor* (Holmes, 2006).

The third strategy, *negative politeness*, involves redressing the FTA by respecting the addressee's *negative face*, which refers to his or her freedom or personal space. Zajdman (1995) suggests that humor that is used to create psychological distance is produced at the level of *negative politeness*. Therefore, *contestive humor* which does not threaten the addressee's face is often associated with *negative politeness* (Holmes, 2006).

Off record strategy involves the use of indirect language to alert the addressee about what the speaker wants. Being ironic is a significant strategy under off record strategy. Irony is to say something opposite the intended meaning. Although it depends on the addressee to get the intended meaning, if the addressee gets offended, the speaker can cancel the intended meaning by indicating that s/he is only joking.

Bald on record strategy is a debatable issue since Brown and Levinson (1987) do not explicitly describe it in its different manifestations. As Bousfield (2008) notes, Brown and Levinson (1987) do not provide a detailed discussion on the different sub-categories under each strategy; they simply describe *bald on record strategy* as consistent with Grice's (1975) four conversational maxims. Bousfield (2008) found in his study that bald on record does not adequately explain various impolite and confrontational or disharmonious communication situations. Homes (2000, 2009) similarly observe that while *politeness theory* could apply to *supportive humor* and some *contestestive humor,* it does not explain confrontational humor that aims to threaten other participants' *face*.

In light of this inadequacy, I integrate politeness theory with Culpeper's (1995) notion of impoliteness in studying humor in the present study. Impoliteness strategies are useful resources to study impolite conversational humor at the interactional level. Culpeper (1995) observed that there are circumstances when participants' intentions are to attack each other's *face* purposely to cause disharmony instead of supporting and maintaining *face*, and this indicates impoliteness in conversations. He suggests two examples. One is about the situation in which participants are in different positions of power. The person in a higher position might have the power to be impolite to subordinate. Such circumstances often happen in courtroom discourse.

The other example is about demonstrating short-term impoliteness in order to attain long-term

benefit when participants' interests are in conflict. In both cases, participants aim to threaten and attack each other's face by employing different impoliteness strategies. Culpeper (1995) develops a framework of impoliteness strategies in parallel with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. There are five impoliteness strategies in total: bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness.

The first strategy, bald on record impoliteness, is about enacting the FTAs in the most direct and unambiguous manner. Positive impoliteness is threatening participant's positive face, while negative impoliteness is damaging negative face. Sarcasm or mock politeness is to give a statement which is literally polite or positive but is intended to convey the opposite meaning. Withholding politeness means deliberately not expressing any gratitude or appreciation when it is expected. It is useful to combine politeness and impoliteness strategies as the framework of this research in order to provide a relatively comprehensive view of the relationship among politeness, gender and humor.

3   Data and Analysis

In this section, I give a preview of *Friends* in order to contextualize the study, and then describe the data source and procedures used in analysing the text.

3.1   *Study context: A preview of 'Friends'*

Friends is an American situational comedy premiered in 1994 and ended in 2004. It consists of ten seasons in total, each of which has about 24 episodes. Each episode lasts for about thirty minutes. The show recounts the lives of six best friends (3 men and 3 women) who live in Manhattan, New York. Rachel was Monica's high school classmate. Chandler and Ross also went to the same high school. Joey is Chandler's roommate and they have been best friends. Phoebe used to be Monica's roommate.

These six main characters always get together either at Monica's apartment or the Central Perk Café. As Quaglio (2009) notes, the frequent themes of their conversation are relationships, love and sex. This situational comedy reflects American culture, including social and moral issues of the 1990s and 2000s, such as surrogate mothers, adoption, single parenthood and same-sex

marriage.

3.2   *Data source*

The data for the study are transcripts of Season four (episodes 1-9) of *Friends* downloaded from an online fan club, *Crazy for Friends* (http://www.livesinabox.com/friends/). The transcripts are relatively more detail than the original play script (Quaglio, 2009). They include features such as scene description, pause, hedging and hesitation, making them close to the natural spoken interaction.

Friends was particularly relevant to the purpose of the present study because research has shown that the dialogue in it demonstrates linguistic features characterizing natural conversation which are similar to the American English conversation portion of the Longman Grammar Corpus (Quaglio, 2009). This naturalness in its conversation style makes it a useful input in EFL pedagogy. That is, it will offer learners an exposure to authentic spoken English material. This study particularly aims at making explicit the strategies deployed in enacting humor in the text. Table 1 summarises the quantitative characteristics of the data set.

Table 1. Summary of data characteristics

Token	Frequency
Male conversations	18
Female conversations	18
Words in the transcript of male conversations	3,838
Words in the transcript of female conversations	3,128
Total number of words in the transcript	6,966

Following Homes and Marra (2002), humorous utterances were identified in the transcripts by considering the context of situation, and paralinguistic features such as voice modulation and intonation, some of which were graphologically foregrounded in the transcript. I also relied on Dynel (2009) definitions of different types of conversational humor (see appendix).

A multi-layered approach was adopted in coding the data, generally using conventional content

analysis. The first step was to identify phases of conversational humor in the transcripts and categorise them according to same-sex interaction. Differrent types of conversational humor were then identified in both categories and classified. The transcripts were then recoded for politeness and impoliteness strategies and contestive (or subversive) and supportive humor (Holmes, 2006; 2009). The final step was to compare the male and female participants' overall conversational styles of humor in the different categories. The findings are discussed below.

4 Conversational Humor in Friends

In this section, I present and discuss the findings of the study. I first outline the general strategies of humor found in the text and then proceed, in Section 4.2, to discuss these strategies in relation to the politeness and impoliteness models outlined earlier, highlighting gender variations. Section 4.3 examines the general relationship between gender and humor in *Friends*.

4.1 Overview of strategies of conversational humor

The general strategies of humor in the data set and their frequency distribution are presented in Table 2. The four most frequent types of conversational humor used in the male-group conversations are irony, hyperbole, sarcasm and retort whereas in the female-group they are self-denigration, irony and hyperbole and simile.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of strategies of conversational humor across gender

Humor strategies	male		female	
	n	%	n	%
Irony	13	39.4	9	26.5
Sarcasm	4	12.1	1	2.9
Hyperbole	6	18.1	3	8.8
Simile	0	0.0	3	8.8
Retort	4	12.1	0	0
Self-denigrating	0	0.0	9	26.5
Metaphor	2	6.1	1	2.9
Allusion	1	3.0	2	5.9
Teasing	2	6.1	2	5.9
Others	1	3.1	4	11.8
Total	33	100	34	100

Irony is the most frequent type of humor used both in the male and female conversations. It is often used to mitigate the potential threat of a request, disagreement or criticism to a recipient's *face*, given the indirectness in its meaning. Excerpts 1 and 2 illustrate its use in *Friends:*

Excerpt 1

[Scene: Chandler's gym, He and Ross are there to cancel his membership.]

1) Ross: Whoa-whoa-whoa, hey! Now remember what we talked about, you gotta be strong.

2) Chandler: Yes. (In a stronger voice) Yes!

3) Ross: One more time, "Hey, don't you want a washboard stomach and rock hard pecs?"

4) Chandler: ***No! I want a flabby gut and saggy man breasts!***

Excerpt 2

1) Rachel: (to Monica) So, how was your date?

2) Monica: Well, y'know how I always wanted to go out with Chip Matthews in high school?

3) Rachel: Um-hmm.

4) Monica: Well, tonight, ***I actually went out with Chip Matthews in high school.***

5) Rachel: Oh honey, I'm sorry.

6) Monica: No, it's okay, not only did I get to go out with Chip Matthews, I got to dump Chip Matthews.

In excerpt 1, Chandler needs Ross's company and motivation to cancel his gym membership because he is easily persuaded by the staff against his terminating his membership. Before they go to the counter, Ross encourages Chandler to be resilient and they rehearse what he would say. In line 4, Chandler is being ironic. His use of the epithets 'flabby' and 'saggy' to describe his body parts and the contrast they establish with Ross's choice of 'washboard' and 'rock hard' enact contestive humor.

In excerpt 2, Rachel is asking about Monica's date with their high school mate, Chip Mathews. It was Monica's dream to date Chip Mathews, one of the most popular boys in high school. In line 4, Monica conveys her disappointment of her date ironically. Monica is suggesting that she does not like dating a grown-up man who acts like a high school boy.

Sarcasm tends to be associated with contestive or subversive humor. While it appears four times (12.1%) in male conversations (see excerpt 3), it only occurs once (2.9%) in female conversations (see excerpt 4).

Excerpt 3

1) Joey: Yeah. Why are you getting so upset?

2) Chandler: Well, I'm upset—for you. **I mean, having sex with an endless line of beautiful women must be very unfulfilling for you.**

3) Joey: What is the big deal? It's not like we're exclusive.

Excerpt 4

1) Monica: Now? Is it okay if I go out with Chip Matthews?

2) Rachel: Nooo! It's not okay! I can't believe you would want to after what he did to me!

3) Monica: What, that little thing at the prom?

4) Rachel: Monica! I couldn't find him for two hours! He was having sex with Amy Welch!

5) Monica: Come on, that was back in high school! How could that still bother you?

6) Rachel: **Oh, yeah, you're right, Moni-cow**

7) Monica: Ok, I hear you.

In excerpt 3, Joey is going on a date with Casey, intending to cheat on his girlfriend, Kathy, whom Chandler has a crush on. Chandler is upset by this behavior. In line 6, Chandler conveys his disapproval in a sarcastic tone.

In excerpt 4, Rachel is upset by the fact that Monica is going on a date with Chip Mathews who disgraced her (Rachel) at prom back in high school. Monica considers this incidence a trivial matter. Rachel conveys her disagreement with Monica by the use of sarcasm. In line 6, although She replies Monica: "you are right", she indicates that old memories could still hurt by mentioning Monica's offensive nick name back in high school: "Moni-cow", which connotes her obesity those days.

While self-denigrating humor does not appear in the male conversation, it appears to be the most frequent (9, 26.5%) type of conversational humor in the female conversation (see excerpt 5):

Excerpt 5

1) Rachel: Thank you! Hey, how'd the catering go?

2) Monica: Oh, it was great! The widow wouldn't pay, so Phoebe yelled at her 'til she did.

3) Phoebe: Yeah. **I'm a hard ass.**

4) Monica: **And I'm a wuss**. And we should be partners.

5) Phoebe: Yeah. Hard Ass and Wuss. We could fight crime!

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Excerpt 5 is an instance of a collaborative self-denigrading humor. Phoebe refers to herself as "hard ass" (i.e. stubborn) because she yelled at their clients, who did not pay for their services. In return, Monica calls herself a "wuss" (i.e. a coward or a timid person), since she did not have the courage to ask for the money. They use these contrastive negative values to bond and establish solidarity.

Hyperbole appears 6 times (18.1%) in male conversations (see excerpt 6) and 3 times (8.8%). in female conversations (see excerpt 7):

Excerpt 6

[Scene: Chandler and Joey's flat, Joey is eating breakfast as Chandler comes out of his bedroom, ripping his coat in the process.]

1) Chandler: Wow! That ripped! That ripped real nice!

2) Joey: How many times do I have to tell you! Ya, turn and slide! Y'know, turn and slide.

3) Chandler: You don't turn and slide, you throw it out! **I'm tired of having to get a tetanus shot every time I get dressed!**

Excerpt 7

[Scene: Central Perk, Ross is playing his music. Monica, Phoebe, and Rachel are sitting on the couch.]

Phoebe: Oh my God, he's lost it. He's totally lost it.

Monica: (removing ear plugs) What?

Rachel: Phoebe, his music could not get any worse. **There are rats in the basement that are hanging themselves.**

In excerpt 6, Chandler is upset because his coat is ripped by a big entertainment center built by Joey, which stands in his way every time he passes by. In line 3, Chandler is exaggerating the trouble that the entertainment center has caused him. In excerpt 7, Rachel disagrees with Phoebe that Ross has lost his talent. From Rachel's point of view, Ross's music is so terrible that even rats in the basement would rather die than listening to it.

Retort is inherently confrontational. Thus, it is often associated with subversive or contestive humor. Table 2 shows that it occurs 4 times (12.1%) in male conversations but none occurs in female conversations. Excerpt 8 illustrated retort in the dataset:

Excerpt 8
1) Chandler: Look, I'm sorry! But there's nothing I can do, I think I'm in love with her!
2) Joey: Who cares?! You went behind my back! I would never do that to you!
3) Chandler: You're right, I have no excuses! I was totally over the line.
4) Joey: **Over the line?! You-you're-you're so far past the line, that you-you can't even see the line! The line is a dot to you!**

Here, Joey is upset because Chandler snatched his girlfriend. In line 3, Chandler apologizes, referring to his behavior as "over the line". In line 4, Joey does not accept Chandler's apology and plays with the phrase. He exploits the metaphoric meaning of the phrase, by objectifying 'line' and even giving it a size.

Simile occurs three (8.8%) times in female conversations (see excerpt 9), but does not occur in male conversations:

Excerpt 9
Monica: (to Phoebe) Hey, aren't you up next?
Phoebe: Oh no, I'm not playing tonight.
Rachel: Why not?
Phoebe: I can't follow Ross! **It'd be like those bicycle ridding chimps that followed The Beatles. No.**

In t excerpt 9, Ross finished performing his music on stage, and Monica is asking why Phoebe

would not perform next. Phoebe thinks highly of Ross's music and does not want to compete with her. Therefore, she compares herself to 'those bicycle ridding chimps' while Ross is like 'the Beatles'. She, thus, enacts a self-denigrating humor.

Having discussed the general strategies employed by characters in the comedy to enact humor. I proceed to examine these strategies within the context of politeness and impoliteness. I then discuss the relationship between gender and humor in the comedy.

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4.2   Humorous politeness vs. impoliteness strategies

As Table 3 shows, the male and female groups use similar amounts of humorous politeness strategies, among which positive politeness strategies are most frequent among both males (24) and females (30). The female characters use slightly more positive politeness (16, 53.3%) and off record strategies (11, 36.7%) than the male characters (14, 58.3%; 7, 29.2% respectively).

Table 3. Distribution of politeness and impoliteness humor strategies across gender

Polite strategies	Male		Female		Impolite strategies	Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%		n	%	n	%
Positive politeness	14	58.3	16	53.3	Bald on record impl.	2	25	0	0
Negative politeness	3	12.5	3	10	Positive impoliteness	1	12.5	0	0
Off record	7	29.2	11	36.7	Mock politeness	5	62.5	1	100
Total	24	100	30	100	Total	8	100	1	100

On the other hand, humorous impoliteness strategies tend to appear more in male conversations (8) than in female conversations (1) (see table 5). These politeness and impoliteness strategies used in the comedy are discussed below.

4.2.1   Humorous politeness strategies

Humorous positive politeness strategy is used to respect an addressee's positive face, which refers to the desire to be wanted and appreciated by others. As Table 3 shows, it is used

frequently by both the male (see excerpt 10) and female (see excerpt 5) characters (14, 58.3%; 16, 53.3% respectively).

Excerpt 10

1) Ross: How sad are we?

2) Joey: Yeah, I know.

3) Chandler: Y'know what? We're not sad, we're not sad, we're just not 21 anymore. Y'know? I'm 29 years old, damnit! And I want to sit in a comfortable chair, and watch television and go to bed at a reasonable hour!

4) Joey and Ross: Yeah!

5) Joey: Yeah! And I like to hang out in a quiet place where I can talk to my friends.

6) Chandler and Ross: Yeah!

7) Ross: And so what if I like to go home, throw on some Kenny G, and take a bath!

8) Joey: **We're 29, we're not women.**

In excerpt 10, Joey, Ross and Chandler are just returning from a club. All three agree that they are not young anymore and do not have to attend clubs. They all use positive politeness to share and bound around this common value (see Knight, 2010, 2013 for discussion on conversational humor and bounding). In line 8, Joey's utterance is humorous, owing to the semantic clash between age and gender. The use of the personal pronoun 'we' and the exclusion of women create group solidarity and intimacy.

Another example of positive politeness is excerpt 5 given earlier above, in which Rachel inquires about Monica and Phoebe's catering business. Phoebe directs the joke at herself and calls herself "hard ass" and Monica calls herself "a wuss". Both of them use self-denigrating humor to share the intimacy and build in-group solidarity. The personal pronoun "we" and the cooperative humor are used to negotiate and downplay their differences in order to bond together.

Humorous negative politeness strategy is less often used by the characters, and it is used equally in both male (see excerpt 11) and female (excerpt 12) conversations. Negative politeness is used to respect an addressee's negative face, which involves his or her freedom and personal space. The use of jocular negative politeness can create distance between a speaker and an addressee

and show respect. This tendency to create distance may explain why it is not frequent in *Friends*. Its occurrence is illustrated in excerpts 11 and 12 below:

Excerpt 11

1) Joey: Sure, it's hard to forget! But that doesn't mean you have to talk about it! A lot of things happened on that trip that we should never, (to Chandler) ever talk about.

2) Ross: What the hell happened on that beach?!

3) Joey: **It's between us and the sea, Ross!**

Excerpt 12

Phoebe: I'll have one, please. Plus my money.

Monica: Oh. Well, I didn't realize that you needed it back right away. I mean, you told me to go and be a caterer. So I went. I mean, I... I used it to buy all this stuff. But look—I've got another job tomorrow, so I'll pay you back with the money I make from that.

Phoebe: Oh. Okay. Oo, **sorry I acted like a bank.**

In excerpt 11, Ross is inquiring about what happened to Joey, Monica and Chandler when they went for a walk on the beach, thereby threating Joey's negative face. However, Joey does not want to tell Ross about it. He threatens Ross's positive face (*it's between us and the sea*), which refers to the wish to be wanted and appreciated (line 3).

In excerpt 12, Phoebe is asking Monica to pay back her money. Having learnt that Monica will not pay her back as soon as possible, Phoebe sarcastically apologizes for acting like bank to Monica. Apology is a sub-category of Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategy.

Table 3 indicates that off record strategy is the second most frequent strategy for both male (see excerpt 13) and female (see excerpt 2) characters. Off record strategy involves the indirect use of language to make requests and put forward disagreement and criticism. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), irony belongs to off record strategy, since it involves indirectness.

An example of off record strategy is given earlier in excerpt 2 above, where Rachel asks Monica about her date with Chip Matthews. In line 4, Monica conveys her disapproval of her date in an ironic way. Monica's indirectly indicates that Chip Matthews has not grown up mentally after

high school:

    1) Rachel: (to Monica) So, how was your date?

    2) Monica: Well, y'know how I always wanted to go out with Chip Matthews in high school?

    3) Rachel: Um-hmm.

    4) Monica: Well, tonight, ***I actually went out with Chip Matthews in high school***.

4.2.2 *Humorous impoliteness strategies*

Humorous *bald on record impoliteness strategy* is enacting the FTAs in the most direct, albeit in a humorous, manner. It is recorded twice (25%) in the male-group data but does not occur among females, given that the female characters use humor to mainly to bond and create very intimate relationship. This strategy is mostly associated with arguments (see excerpt 13 below).

Excerpt 13

1) Chandler: (lets him out) What happened?!!

2) Joey: (getting out) Awww, man! He promised he wouldn't take the chairs!!

3) Chandler: What the hell happened?!! How were you locked in?!! And where the hell is all of our stuff?!!

4) Joey: Well, this guy came by to look at the unit and-and he said he didn't think big enough to fit a grown man!

5) Chandler: So—You got in voluntarily?!

6) Joey**: I was tryin' to make a sale!! Oh, man, if I ever run into that guy again, do you know what I'm gonna do?**

7) Chandler: **BEND OVER!**

In excerpt13, Chandler is furious at the fact that their (Joey and his) apartment was robbed due to Joey's fault. In line 7, Chandler reacts to Joey's behavior by using sexual imagery (i.e. bend over) to complement Joey's utterance, and, thereby, abusing him.

Humorous positive impoliteness strategy only appears once in the data, in male conversation (see excerpt 14):

Excerpt 14

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[Scene: Central Perk, Ross is telling Joey and Chandler about the letter.]

1) Ross: She wants me to take responsibility for everything that went wrong in our relationship. I mean she goes on for five pages about, about how I was unfaithful to her! (Both Joey and Chandler shrug their shoulders as to say "Well...") (yelling) WE WERE ON A BREAK!!!!!

2) Chandler: Oh my God! **If you say that one more time, I'm gonna break up with you!**

In excerpt 14, Ross is complaining to Chandler and Joey about a letter Rachel has written, attacking him for his unfaithfulness. Chandler is fed up of Ross's grumble, and, in line 2, he blatantly threatens Ross's positive face and simultaneously mitigates this threat by using metaphor.

Table 3 shows that mock politeness or sarcasm is used by the male characters several times (5, 62.5%) (see excerpt 3 above), whereas it is used only once by the female characters (see excerpt 4). Sarcasm is best illustrated by excerpt 3 and 4 in Section 4.1 above. In excerpt 3, Chandler uses sarcasm to convey his disapproval of Joey's behavior (Chandler: Well, I'm upset—for you. I mean, having sex with an endless line of beautiful women must be very unfulfilling for you).

Similarly, in excerpt 4, Rachel reenacts Monica's sentiments towards her offensive nickname in high school (i.e. Moni-cow) to convey her disagreement with Monica's opinion.

4.3   Male impoliteness vs. female politeness

This section proceeds to discuss the general relationship between gender and the humor strategies deployed in *Friends*.

Gender can be constructed by conversational humor at the interactional level by the use of politeness and impoliteness strategies as well as the overall conversational styles of humor. Figure 1 shows that male characters use different politeness strategies and impoliteness strategies in contestive humor, depending on the potential face threat of the situations and the intention of the speaker. Especially in arguments, male characters mostly use impoliteness to threaten another person's face. The target of the humorous impoliteness strategies is normally the addressee. The more confrontational and face-threatening a joke is, the higher the degree of impoliteness the joke enacts.

On the other hand, in contestive humor, the female characters seldom employ impoliteness strategies, not even in the rarely argumentative situations in the data. They rarely threaten each other's face by the use of impoliteness strategies. Instead they tend to use off record strategy, which is associated with the use of indirectness. Politeness strategies are used to mitigate the potential threat to the addressee's face. The use of humorous impoliteness and politeness strategies respectively constructs the image of men as confrontational and impolite in their humor, and women as more polite and indirect in their humor.
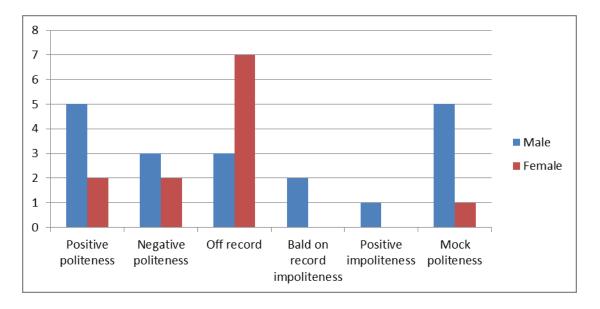
Figure 1. Distribution of contestive humor enacted at different levels of politeness and impoliteness strategies across gender

This gender dichotomy in the use of humor strategies corresponds to two styles of bonding in the comedy. Whereas impoliteness strategies are often used by characters to argue, reject and negotiate conflicting values in order to maintain solidarity, politeness strategies are used by characters to share and bond around common values or downplay differences in order to bond successfully. Male characters argue and negotiate group values more often than the female characters, who tend to bond around common values and downplay their differences.

Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of supportive humor enacted at the categories of politeness and impoliteness strategies across gender. In enacting supportive humor, both men and women like to use humorous positive politeness to create intimacy and solidarity.
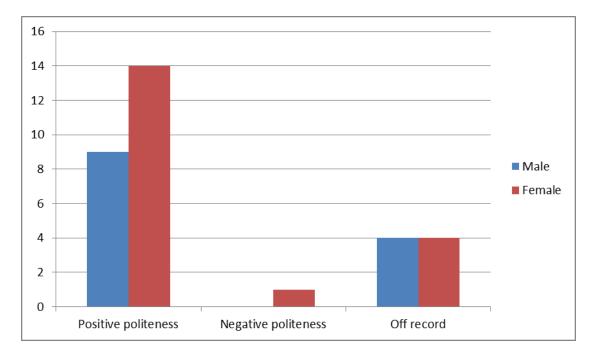
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YU Yating

Figure 2. distribution of supportive humor enacted at different levels of politeness and impoliteness strategies across gender

Off record strategy is the second most frequent politeness strategy used in supportive humor. With this strategy, both men and women can indirectly indicate their intended meanings, wants and opinions.

Generally, however, whereas male characters use impoliteness in enacting contestive humor more often than female characters, female characters tend to enact supportive humor more often than male characters.

5   Conclusion

This study has made a preliminary comparison between the male-group and female-group humor on *Friends* in terms of the use of different types of conversational humor, humorous politeness and impoliteness strategies, and conversational styles of humor for the purpose of gender construction. In the data, men use confrontational and impolite types of humor such as sarcasm and retort, whereas women prefer to use self-denigrating humor. Male characters use more

contestive humor than supportive humor. Women's conversations, on the other hand, balance contestive humor with supportive humor. With contestive humor, men enact humor at different semantic regions of politeness and impoliteness, depending on the degree of confrontation involved in the interaction, whereas women prefer to use off record strategy to convey indirect meanings. Therefore, the male-group's humor is associated with impoliteness and confrontation, whereas the female-group's humor is related to politeness and indirectness.

This study contributes to studies on conversational humor. While many previous studies have engaged in real life conversation, the present study extends their finding by exploring popular culture. The study shows that the enactment of humor in the comedy and the social functions it plays are similar to those found in everyday live conversations. The relationship between TV discourse and real-life discourse is likely to be cyclical whereby one draws from another and one informs another. Gender construction on *Friends* is the reflection of the gender stereotypes in American society in a sense. TV producers draw on real situations and cultural values and ideologies in order to meet audience preferences. The study also corroborates Knight's (2010, 2013) recent theorization that humor is deployed among friends to affiliate and to share and negotiate values and identities.

As mentioned earlier, this study is meant to provide a scaffold for the teaching of cultural knowledge and humor in an EFL classroom, using popular media as a pedagogical tool. Humor, culture and language are intrinsically related. One challenge non-native speakers and learners of a language face is the ability to understand and participate in jokes and bond around conversational humor in discourse. In a multi-national and multilingual community like Hong Kong, where the use of English among local students is mainly limited to their interactions with English speaking foreigners, this skill is crucial for EFL learners to successfully bond with English speakers and improve their English proficiency and communicative competence.

The particular argument of this study is that the teaching and learning of a target skill such as humor and culture through multi-media resources should be preceded by an explicit identification of the strategies involved in this skill in through discourse analysis. This approach would maximize the usefulness of the teaching resource and help focus lessons. The description on *Friends* provided here would be useful in scaffolding lessons and in explicitly teaching

learners the conversational styles the comedy enacts.

The analysis presented here has implications for further research. Some conversational features such as paralanguage (Norrick, 1994) and non-verbal language (Norrick, 2004) are also important components for humor production, but these conversational features are not marked in the transcripts. Future work on these conversational features can be conducted to complement the present study. In addition, other conversational features such as interruptions, overlaps, hedging and hesitation are typical in real-life conversation. However, these conversational features do not appear frequently in the scripted television dialogue *Friends*, as has already been noted by Quaglio (2009). These features are important conversational styles and they deserve to be researched in everyday conversations.

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Appendix

General Strategies of Conversation Humor and Their Definitions

#	Strategies	Brief Definition
1	Irony	The literal meaning is the opposite of the implicit meaning.
2	Sarcasm	It is a bitter form of irony which carries offensive or negative meaning. It should not be equated to irony. The difference between irony and sarcasm can be distinguished from the speaker's real intention and the addressee's response to it.
3	Hyperbole	Exaggeration of a statement.
4	Simile	Comparison between different elements by using words such as 'as' or 'like'.
5	Metaphor	Comparison between different elements without using words, such as 'as' or 'like'
6	paradox	Indication of apparent contradiction within a statement.
7	Allusion	Quotations or distortions of popular or famous sentences.
8	Pun	Consisting of two interpretations of an ambiguous utterance. It is also referred to as 'play on words'.
9	Register clash	Using words or phrases from different registers together.
10	Retort	A quick or witty utterance used to challenge the preceding turn.
11	Teasing	Making fun of the addressee in a playful manner, and not intending to hurt her/him.
12	Banter	A rapid exchange of humorous utterances towards a shared theme for the sake of amusement.
13	Putdown	An abusive or derogatory witty utterance which is intended to ridicule the sddressee.
14	Self-denigrating	The speaker directs a witty expression at himself/herself by admitting a mistake or failure.
15	Anecdote	A humorous narrative about personal experiences.
16	Lexemes/ Phrasemes	Invention of new words or phrases