



REVIEW

Reviewed book: *Women Scientists in American Television Comedy – Beakers, Big Bangs and Broken Hearts*

Reviewed Book

Judd, K., Gaul, B. and Jürgens, A.-S. (2025).

Women Scientists in American Television Comedy – Beakers, Big Bangs and Broken Hearts. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81525-6>

Reviewed by

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Abstract

In their book *Women Scientists in American Television Comedy*, the three authors Karina Judd, Bridget Gaul, and Anna-Sophie Jürgens, present their study on how humor is used to portray women scientists in American television comedies such as *The Big Bang Theory*. The underlying theory and results are interesting to the wider science communication community, but this book might not be the best way to present them.

Keywords

Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in science communication; Women in science; Science and media

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Comedy and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are both fields where women have traditionally been underrepresented and marginalised. What happens when these two worlds meet? The book *Women Scientists in American Television Comedy* poses (and answers) the following research question: ‘What types of humor characterise portrayals of women scientists in mainstream American comedy television and how is this humor used to shape cultural ideas of (the reality of) women in STEM?’

This book is part of a series that publishes research on how science intersects with popular culture, and especially hopes to make room for contributions from the humanities. The three authors, Karina Judd, Bridget Gaul and Anna-Sophie Jürgens, are all connected to The Australian National University and bring together expertise from science communication and cultural studies. With amongst others backgrounds in: inclusive science communication, representations of gender in STEM contexts and (this must be the most amazing subfield I have ever seen) the history of (violent) clowns and mad scientists.

The book has six sections: introduction, research context, theoretical framework and methods, findings, results and discussion. This structure makes the book feel more like a research article than a monograph. Each of the sections has a title that is a quote from one of the studied television comedies. For instance, the result section is called: “It Is So Annoying How No One Knows How Nerdy You Are Because You’re So Hot”.

The book starts with an overview of theory on underrepresentation and stereotyping of women in the field of STEM, on ideologies of gender and STEM in the media and on women and humor. Some concepts are introduced very briefly, usually with a long list of references. I would have loved more background in many places. For instance, the *Matilda effect* is introduced as an effect ‘where the scientific achievements of women have been ignored, downplayed or miscredited to male colleagues or partners — even non-existent men’. I was wondering if this effect, in a cultural reference, was named after Roald Dahl’s famous Matilda and if so, who stole her achievements. But, when I looked it up in one of the references, it turned out the effect was named after suffragist and abolitionist Matilda Joselyn Gage, who was the first to describe it in 1870 [Rossiter, 1993].

The analysis in the study is, amongst others, based on existing frameworks for women scientist stereotypes in film and a typology of humor, which are explained clearly and well. The authors show that there are few comedy programs with a women scientist in a lead or supporting role (and they were already including women working in STEM outside academia). Their purposive sample consists of 47 episodes from comedies *Never Have I Ever*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist*, American shows — but with a worldwide audience. Perhaps one of the most disheartening findings from this work is the scarcity of female STEM characters in comedy to analyse.

The results section shows that irony and satire are the most used humor types, for instance, by having women scientists humorously ridicule male characters or patriarchal structures. Ironically, previous research has shown that these are the humor types male audiences prefer [Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004]. Furthermore, humor is used to confirm existing women scientist stereotypes like the *old maid* and *gruff women’s libber*. The discussion describes the many subtle implications of ironic sexism and other aspects of how women scientists are portrayed in comedies. There are also reflections on the effects of canned laughter, which are interesting, but canned laughter has not been introduced before as a topic in either the theory or methods.

Women Scientists in American Television Comedy counts 110 pages, with almost 40 of them for abstracts and references per chapter. Some references occur in all six sections. However, since the book is so clearly one coherent study and not six stand-alone chapters, I would have preferred to have all the references together in the end. But the main problem is that this book reads like a really, really long research article that briefly references many concepts instead of a book that delves deeper into them. A shorter version of this study could have been a great research article, a longer version with more background could have made a great book. All in all, *Women Scientists in American Television Comedy* is an interesting and wellset-up study, but the current form does not do it justice.

References

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About the author

Ionica Smeets is a professor of science communication at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She enjoys working in interdisciplinary research projects that focus on effective science communication. Her main current interest is in communicating uncertainties. Smeets chairs the board of the Dutch National Centre of Expertise for Science and Society. In the past, she hosted various science television shows, using many different types of humor.

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