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Seinfeld's Effect on Television and Society

Mass media and the entertainment revolutions continue to affect society even years after they first began. This is possible due to the large amounts of distribution and consumption of movies, television, videos, etcetera. Due to this, television shows often mimic what is occurring in society to send a message, but *Seinfeld* did this in a very different way, without a message. This allowed it to reach a larger audience without the push of strict messages on the audience, it was written so people were allowed to just enjoy the entertainment of everyday life, and dialogue between a group of self-centered friends based in New York City. *Seinfeld* released in 1989 is a sit-com about a group of friends in New York City and their comical everyday experiences. As many shows have points of intertextuality *Seinfeld* was affected by many events going on not only in the world of television but in the society of the 90s. Not only has *Seinfeld* been affected by a lot but it is also one of the most influential sit-coms, or television shows in history. This show broke all the conventional rules of television and sit-coms. It has had such an effect on society as a whole, along with the world of television, that some sayings that were used throughout the show made it into the vocabulary of people who have not even seen the show before.

Seinfeld was first released under the name of *The Seinfeld Chronicles* in 1989 and came back with very low ratings, but NBC decided to take a chance and keep it on the air and it became one of the most influential sit-coms in the history of television. At this time sit-coms

such as *Cheers* set the basis for what NBC already had on air for sit-coms and the addition of *Seinfeld* to the primetime lineup allowed for NBC to be the prime network of it's time. This became even more true as while *Seinfeld* was airing, more shows like *Friends* and *Frasier* with the slogan "Must See TV" added to this success. The addition of *Seinfeld* to NBC's network allowed for the transformation of the network into the leading group. This only changed after the Thursday night "Must See TV" lineup changed to dramas instead of sit-coms. Before this change NBC, came out as the network on top with other shows joining it after such as *ER* and *Friends*. In an interview with NBC executives during this time, Warren Littlefield and Preston Beckman, and entertainment news outlet Vulture, they spoke on the success of the network's airings due to scheduling that continued the success of *Seinfeld* and other shows on the network. During this interview they also spoke about the ratings of shows, including *Seinfeld*. It was a show that had very poor ratings when first introduced, as most people did not know what to make from it. But, the executives of NBC kept it in the lineup and it was one of the most influential shows in the history of sit-coms. The co-creators Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld both had little previous experience in television but had knowledge of the entertainment industry as Jerry Seinfeld was a stand up comedian and Larry David had previous experience in late night comedy shows and film. This allowed them to have enough knowledge of what people wanted from television at this time and they were able to make a sit-com that could appeal to anyone. The concept of the show not revolving around a specific event opened it up to a larger audience than many other shows of it's time as this was not seen before.

Seinfeld was also released in the late 80s and became popular in the 90s until it's demise and the outlook of television at this time had a large effect on this. When it first aired the audience had to wait for the next episode from week to week, then after a season ended the audience would have to wait months for the next season to come out. This helped to allow *Seinfeld* to keep a steady audience and their ratings up because those who were dedicated to viewing the show continued to come back to see it. *Seinfeld* also continues to play reruns on television more than 30 years after it was first released and this also speaks to the influence and audience the show has. Enough people are still viewing the reruns on television that networks

still show it. It is available for streaming on Hulu currently which allows for audiences to binge-watch it and it was just recently bought by Netflix as Sony's six year deal with Hulu is soon going to expire. With the entirety of the series available for viewing on streaming services it opens the audience to more people able to view it in different ways which also helps to grow it's audience.

Seinfeld was a very original show but there were concepts that have heavily influenced its creation. One influence of the intertextuality that can be seen is through the television show *Cheers*. While the influence can be seen how it revolved heavily around being in a large city and aspects of that are often used to benefit and accelerate the plot. *Cheers* is set in Boston and revolves around a bar, and *Seinfeld* is set in New York City and the setting tends to revolve around Seinfeld's apartment, which is very similar. While *Cheers* is seen to have affected the content of *Seinfeld* slightly, what had the largest influence on the creation of *Seinfeld* was the comedy duo- Abbott and Costello. In an interview with the New York Times, Jerry Seinfeld says that the short-run television show from the 50s had a large amount of influence on the creation of the hit show from the 90s. There are many subtle hints to this past show including George Costanza's middle name being referred to as Louis for Lou Costello and many other slight influences. The most obvious, being the likeliness of Jerry Seinfeld's character attempting to "get it straight" in many situations. Although he works as a stand-up comic more like Costello, within this show, he attempts to do this to like himself to the character of Abbott. Within this play back and forth, even within one character of *Seinfeld* you can see how the complicated relationships began to form although they were being strongly influenced by outside forces. *Abbott and Costello* was the television show that introduced Jerry Seinfeld to comedy when he was a child and although it is seen as slapstick comedy and *Seinfeld* is viewed as contemporary there is much intertextuality that can be seen between these two shows. These direct parallels can be drawn to help the viewer understand where influence was drawn from.

There is also direct influence from films such as *Superman* seen in many episodes. These references can be anything from the dialect of the superhero show to the Superman magnet on Seinfeld's refrigerator. A writer for the show in an interview with Parade said that this was

because the characters seemed to be polar opposites and this added to the comedic effect of this story. In *Seinfeld* the characters are seen to be self-centered they want things to benefit them, without many regards on what the effect may be to others, while in *Superman*, he wants to help everyone and just wants things to work for others. Therefore, adding in these aspects of another well-known character, show, and movie can see what influenced its creation and it start to be inferred how *Seinfeld* affected the creation of other shows.

While many shows have tried to do what *Seinfeld* did, it was never quite recreated, but instead, the intertextuality can be seen in many shows. One of the strongest ways it affected the content of other shows were helping in the rising of the anti-hero. People rooting and liking someone who may not have been a good character was virtually unheard of at this point in television history. Tony Soprano, from HBO's *Sopranos* that began it's airing in 1999 is mostly credited for the rise of the anti-hero, although *Seinfeld* also helped this new concept arise. The self-centered characters seen in *Seinfeld* are often not depicted as good people, they have little regard for what happens to others, just want things to go their way, and very unlikeable. Even though this was the attitude of the main characters, and many of the supporting characters or guests, the audience still rooted for these characters, and that they would get what they were hoping for. While these characters had more subtle influences of not being entitled, compared to Tony Soprano who was seen on-screen killing and harming others, *Seinfeld*, still had a strong influence on preparing audiences to see a more aggressive anti-hero like Tony Soprano, and allowing his character and show grow to the level of fame it did.

With the world of television not seeing this type of self-centered group of people on television before many shows began to mimic this trope. *Seinfeld* also had a large effect on the television show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. This airs on FX and follows a group of self-centered friends as they own a bar in Philadelphia. It can be inferred that *Seinfeld* had an influence on the creators of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, as it has a very similar set up. This continues to show how *Seinfeld* has had a large effect on the creation of other popular shows. Or, in the show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the main character, Larry David, often only cares about the situation he is put in, and how to help himself get out of it without much regard for

how others characters in the show feel about it. He gets into these situations by his character being self-centered and not putting much thought into what he does, similar to the whole group of friends in *Seinfeld*.

Seinfeld also was seen to change how sit-coms were written. Before this show came to air it wasn't common for a show to not have a message. *Seinfeld* is built by having a storyline, but there not being a central message that the reader was supposed to infer from the episode. Much of the television from it's time also only had few plots for the audience to follow, as society was still getting used to the concept of entertainment television. *Seinfeld* is seen to have four or more running stories within an episode, the other popular shows of it's time typically only had two. The effect of this type of television sit-com writing can still be seen in today's television scene. While now in syndication, one of the most popular shows that did this well is *Arrested Development*. They typically carried the same event where each main character had their own story and they all came together at the end with a resolution to the action. There have been other shows that have tried to copy not only the concept of this type of writing but the to copy the show itself and set it in modern times. A comedian John Mulaney made a *Seinfeld* like sit-com called *Mulaney* which aired on FOX network from 2014 to 2015. This attempted to take the same concepts that *Seinfeld* does just the everyday life of a stand-up comedian, without an underlying message, the show did not make it past the first season. As confirmed in an article by Lisa de Mores, of [Deadline](#), many critics cited it's likeliness to *Seinfeld* for the reason it failed, as it was almost a copy of the whole concept, even opening with each episode with a stand-up comedy act. Many other sit-coms have also attempted to pay homage, or recreate scenes of *Seinfeld* within episodes of their own series.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia recreated a whole scene of *Seinfeld* in one of their episodes, down to the same color and positioning of what the characters were wearing, on the episode titled "The Gang Does a Clip Show". *Curb Your Enthusiasm* also had an episode titled "Seinfeld", as this show was created by the co-creator of *Seinfeld*, Larry David. Although during this episode Larry David had relationships with the original cast of *Seinfeld* which allowed him to have the original main cast come for this show. Both of these experiences, and many more

within modern television are just some examples of how there are direct influences on other television shows.

Seinfeld also had an influence on how television shows went through production. While Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld wanted the show to be done completely through single-camera work, the network vetoed this creative decision and began production on the multi-camera show, according to Vox entertainment news outlet. This is seen to be similar to the other network hit *Cheers* that aired at this time that was also shot by using multiple cameras. At this time there were not many sit-coms that were shot with only one camera. Some that came with success were *Gomer Pyle*, *U.S.M.C.*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *M*A*S*H**. The showrunners saw the effect of this and wanted to copy what it showed to the audience but with the network wanting it to be filmed with multiple cameras they decided to have select scenes, such as the group walking down the streets of New York City, to be shot with single camera sequences. These became more frequent as the series went on, and this influence can be seen in many different shows. While many shows can be seen to be shot mostly in multicam, but with single-cam sequences, also shows such as *Arrested Development* have executed single camera sit-coms. The show that may have had the most influence from this is the show co-creator went on to create, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* which is still running, and is done completely in single cam. This show is inferred to be the most similar to what *Seinfeld* did and had much success with.

Seinfeld has also had a large effect on not only the world of television, film, and media, but it has also seen to have an effect on everyday life of the average person. Many of the terms said in the show, as a joke or just within the dialogue of everyday occurrences which the show played off of, have made it into peoples vocabulary without even the knowledge of them or the people around them. It is not known many terms that are used in everyday conversation actually come from *Seinfeld*. These terms include “yada yada” and the “double dip”. These terms did not exist before they were used in *Seinfeld* and they caught on throughout society. “Festivus” is also a holiday that was formed by the popularity of an episode of *Seinfeld*. The purpose is not to get together with family or friends, like most other holidays, but instead, to air grievances with others. As the New York Post says in their article about what *Seinfeld* has contributed to the

English language, they say “not every TV show that can claim to have invented a holiday” and it is true! Not many other television shows have had such an influence as *Seinfeld* in which they can make a holiday that many people in society celebrate each year.

Seinfeld, the show that almost got taken off-air before it was even given a fair chance by NBC, and that wasn't given a chance by many other networks, changed the direction of television situational comedies. While the show influenced many other television sit-coms that came succeeded it such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Arrested Development* through many different functions. It helped to change the way everything was done from context, content, and form. This included how stories were written and how many stories were functioning at once, the use of multiple cameras and single cameras in one television show while bending the use of the multi-cam in ways never seen before on television, and more. The creation of *Seinfeld* was also influenced by many shows that came before it, including *Abbott and Costello* and the movie and comic *Superman*. But not only did this show have a large effect on the world on television it also affected people in society as a whole. Words and phrases were added to common language and a widely celebrated holiday was invented through a television show. Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld were able to create a television show like had never been seen before during that time in the history of television. While television is mainly seen as a form of entertainment, in today's society it was seen that one show's creation has such an influence that it was able to change the outlook for comedy, television, and add to society.

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