

Visual Prostitution of Women in Sitcoms of the Philippines: A Political Economic Analysis

JOEVEN R. CASTRO

Abstract

Sexualized portrayals of women are staples of two situational comedies because they reflect the patriarchal society's gender hierarchy and dichotomy as experienced by the target audience in reality. The author found that the vulgarity in sitcoms is unwelcome in reality but the audiences still find it pleasurable within what the author calls their 'virtual structure'. Television peddles this vulgarity as a phenomenon in sitcoms: commodifying actresses as sex objects, which limits their character roles, and creating a consciousness that it is okay to use women as 'bait' for the target audience as long as it is for the purpose of entertainment only.

Keywords: Sexualized portrayals, commodification, structuration, virtual structuration, visual prostitution

Introduction

Television situational comedies, or sitcoms, are produced within the interplay of market, social and ideological factors and interests. A television network that produces sitcoms has a foremost interest: to provide entertainment to target audiences so that it can rake in the highest ratings, which is the benchmark of advertisers before any placement of advertisement is decided. To do this, television network managers such as executive producers and directors promote a market philosophy that conditions the consciousness of all production staff, from scriptwriters and actors and actresses, to production assistants, among others: glue the attention of target audiences who must be given a pleasurable viewing experience.

This paper describes the strategy of two sitcoms¹ of the GMA Network, Inc., or GMA 7, in providing entertainment to the masses or the lower class (assuming such a hierarchy should exist). It focuses on the use of women as 'bait' for male and female audiences. The paper argues that

GMA 7 panders to the gender relation/tension similar to the social milieu of the masses where women have a subordinate position to men. It delves into how the network peddles pedestrianism by developing or purveying pleasure out of the commodification or 'visual prostitution' of female characters. The paper also answers the question of what is pleasurable about the 'vulgarity' of sexualized women using psychoanalysis and the concepts of structuration and commodification in Mosco's (1996) political economy of communication. To do this, the author extrapolated² the 'gendered' relationship between sexes from the results of content and textual analysis of sitcoms and separate focus interviews with scriptwriters,³ advertisers,⁴ audiences,⁵ a sexy comedienne⁶ and sociologists.⁷

GMA Channel 7 is central to the discussion because it is the biggest television network in the Philippines and highest in ratings, posting sales of about P11.2 billion in the first half of 2003, which is P1.4 billion ahead of archrival ABS-CBN² (Maslog 2007). This implies that viewers prefer the programs of GMA 7, making it more worthy of scrutiny. Its competitors are equally important, but the author believes the phenomenon of GMA 7 more likely applies to other stations because sitcom as a genre has constant elements: 'specific time format, basis in humor, static characters, and a new plot with problem-solution per week' (Feuer 1992).

Sexualized Portrayals in Sitcoms

Treating women as sex objects is common in the Philippines, spanning decades of broadcast. This seemed trendy for an industry that heavily relies on mass-based programming where 'gory if not sexy video' had to go on air to nail high television ratings (Rimban 1999). In the post-Marcos dictatorial rule, television sitcoms were replete with portrayals of women as 'giggly dumb blondes', 'predatory vamps and mistresses', and 'shrieking domestic or a confused assortment of all types' where 'female models lounge around in short shorts, plunging necklines, and high heels' (Dela Cruz 1988). In *Eh, Kasi Babae* and *Chicks to Chicks*, two famous sitcoms of this decade for example, women – characterizing the role of mistresses or women who would trade their virginity for materialist pursuits – uttered sexually implicit lines (Cruz 1990). In the 1990s, chauvinism seemed legitimized with the popularity of *Palibhasa Lalake*, aired for over a decade, where men were exalted as helpful, loving, caring, resourceful, protective, principled, intelligent and honest while women were depicted negatively as weak, dependent, materialistic and sexual objects (Diego 1997).

TABLE 1. Frequency Distribution of Indicators of Sexualized Portrayals (in %)

	<i>Idol</i>	<i>Lagot Ka</i>
Gaze upon breasts	46.15	47.06
Sexual advances	61.54	52.94
Sexualized jokes	61.53	47.06
Passive reply	84.62	70.58

TABLE 2. Frequency Distribution of Contexts/Factors that Contributed to Gazes and Sexual Advances (in %)

	<i>Idol</i>	<i>Lagot Ka</i>
Body-hugging outfit and plunging necklines of actresses	16.67	62.50
Bumping	25.00	11.11
Actors comfort or console a depressed actress while hugging or embracing her	25.00	22.22
Actors' use of superior social status	0.00	22.22
Aggressiveness and naughtiness	25.00	11.11

Idol Ko si Kap and Lagot Ka... Isusumbong Kita!

Sexualized portrayals of women were studied using four indicators: (1) actors' gaze upon the breasts of actresses, (2) sexual advances made by actors on actresses, (3) sexualized jokes, and (4) passive reply of actresses. These are constructed by the author as an elaboration of Richard Dyer's (2002) definition of a sex object as 'a passive person just there to be looked at'.

Content analysis revealed that a majority of the episodes contained all indicators (Table 1). The passiveness of actresses was found to be very glaring. Table 2 shows the scaffold of contexts, factors and role-plays that situated and eased the consummation of gazes and sexual advances.

Jokes in *Idol* compared breasts to a *pader* (wall), fruits such as a pineapple, and used colloquial terms for breasts such as *dodo*, *soso* and *Booby*, the name of a female guest. Sexual innuendoes of *sasabog dibdib* (burst into tears) and *tibayan ang dibdib* (strong will) were made while the actress expanded her chest area or while the smiling actor gazed upon her breasts. A more daring conversation occurred when the word *kalikot* (fix) was used. It literally means 'fix the appliance' in its context but it took on the sexual innuendo of foreplay when the actor smiled maliciously and gazed upon the actress' breast while saying, '*Kaya kong kalikutin 'yan* (I can fix that...).'

Probably because the two main actors of *Lagot Ka* were from the same cast of the defunct *Palibhasa Lalake*, a sitcom notorious for chauvinism,

TABLE 3. Frequency Distribution of the Passive Responses of Actresses to Sexualized Portrayals (in %)

	Idol	Lagot Ka
Keep silent	54.54	35.0
Smile	9.09	50.0
Describe the action	36.36	0.0
Oppose verbally or non-verbally	18.19	25.0

the sitcom was full of sexual innuendoes: *ibuka* (open up) while actresses posed as models in front of a male photographer, increase in salary reframed as bust-size augmentation, *tusukin* (spear) to connote penile penetration, *itlog* (egg) to refer to testicles, *kating-kati* (itchy/lust), kind-hearted to mean the soft mass of breast felt by an actor while embracing an actress, *naglalaway* (salivating) uttered by the actor while looking at her girlfriend wearing a two-piece bikini, *sumabog* (explode) to mean breasts that seemed to burst out from the tight and plunging neckline, among others.

Table 3 clearly shows the majority of the very weak replies (keeping silent and smiling) of actresses. In *Idol*, 36.36 percent of the episodes enabled a reply but only described the act. For example, instead of questioning the males who bumped her, the actress only said, 'You bumped me!' When the actors repeated the bump, she seemed helpless and her response was just a smile. One episode (*Idol*: August 7) allowed the sexy guest starlet to reply powerfully when she warned the main antagonist to stop holding her and slapped his face. The purported powerful reply was, however, downplayed by the male antagonist's ensuing act: a push-pull hip movement behind the chair. In another instance, the main actress moved away from a supporting actor who was trying to touch her arms to initiate a conversation. The nonverbal response exemplified resistance, which the actress was allowed because the actor's role was subordinate to her role.

In *Lagot Ka*, 25 percent of the episodes allowed the actresses to respond, but only to contribute to their sexualization. For instance, the actress opposed the massage requested by an actor despite the 'increase' in pay but misinterpreted the 'increase' as bust-size augmentation, which according to her was unnecessary, while proudly expanding her chest area. The other episode showed how the actress, the actor's girlfriend in the sitcom, reciprocated sexual advances. The third instance displayed the female guest's irritation by folding her arms to

cover her breasts and by crossing her eyebrows when the actors tried to huddle around her. That guest (Ara Mina) has already won a Best Actress Award so probably she wields some 'authority' to express her opposition. But the nonverbal response is probably less noticeable to an uncritical audience.

Portrayals of the gendered relationship of actors and actresses in both sitcoms reflect the dominance of men. Men's aggressiveness, playfulness and greater sexual freedom (Medina 1991) have justified their naughtiness (i.e. bumping, jokes) toward actresses who are expected to be 'passive, feminine, and submissive.' Unfortunately, men take advantage of these privileges in the sitcoms. Man's role as protector of women (Aguiling-Dalisay et al. 2000), for example, was misused when the actors carried out sexual advances while the unsuspecting actresses were depressed, akin to Susan Griffin's 'male protection racket' (Eisenstein 1983: 31) or safety net against male offenders. It can also be gleaned that sexualized portrayals conveniently progressed because the passive actresses did not punish the actors.

In terms of sexualized jokes, it is easily observable that whoever ends the conversation is more powerful, which the actors brandished. Despite the reply of some actresses – as in the case of the actress who slapped the male villain, mentioned above – the male villain made a gesture that possibly focused the attention away from the female's strong stance to the male's 'comic' antic.

The fast-paced delivery of punch lines in order to create an impact is probably another reason for the lack of reply. Stretching the duration of a conversation can drag out the punch line and reduce its desired impact, not to mention the need to insert commercial gaps that reduce the program's actual airtime.

Moreover, it was observed that the 'bad character' of male antagonists (such as Leo Martinez in *Idol*) was used to predicate disrespect of women. Simply put, he could afford to make sexual advances because he was bad after all, having violated the laws of the local government as well.

Female jokers, pejoratively labeled as nagggers or gossips, are discouraged (Purdie 1992). Women are supposed to be the 'strip-teasers', the counterpart or object of male jokers (Horowitz 1997). Some female jokers in the sitcoms portrayed 'villainous' characters, which diverted from the role of a feminine, sexy woman. For example, Madam Tusha (Vangie), the sex-starved mother of the sexy actresses in *Lagot Ka*, tended to 'pimp' fellow actresses to provide visual pleasure to the actors. She pointed at a female guest's breasts and said that Ric, main actor, would like them

(*Lagot Ka's* April 19). In *Idol* (August 7 episode), guest Melanie Marquez, the antihero, also beefed up the ego of Bong Revilla, the main actor, when she described with amazement that she held something 'big' inside his pocket, connoting his genitalia. In summary, jokes by actresses were not condescending but appreciative or supportive of actors, compared to males' jokes that tended to blame the woman for her big breasts.

'Women should listen to and follow the decision of men' (Aguiling-Dalisay et al. 2000) is an idea that mirrors a social expectation for women that was clearly portrayed by female jokers. As inherently 'interpersonal, interdependent, and affiliative' (Wetzel et al. 1993), women tend to speak with caution to avoid hurting men's egos. Passive women in sitcoms therefore will likely stay because the inherent psychology of women is biased to affiliate with male authority. In effect, the stereotype of women as 'eye candies' in sitcoms will be repeated, which ricochets the attention of viewers back to women's physical attributes associated with their traditional role of 'biological reproduction' (Eisenstein 1983: 17).

Pleasurable Sexualized Portrayals (Virtual and Real)

What is pleasurable about seeing naughty actors making sexualized advances toward sexy actresses?

Table 4 shows that the majority of male viewers found the sexualized portrayals funny. Female viewers have similar perceptions except that a majority of them dislike it when men gaze upon breasts. Interestingly, the female viewers have a slight difference in their perceptions on the indicators, which goes to show that there is an unclear notion of whether sexualized portrayals provide pleasure or not.

TABLE 4. Frequency Distribution of the Perception of Viewers on Sexualized Portrayals (in %)

Indicators	Male		Female	
	Funny	Not Funny	Funny	Not Funny
Gaze upon breasts	63.63	36.37	46.67	53.33
Sexual advances	54.54	45.46	53.33	46.67
Sexualized jokes	68.19	31.81	60.00	40.00

Gazing upon Breasts

Male viewers found the act of gazing upon breasts funny because that is a normal reaction of men who immediately notice 'protruding' breasts. According to them, the gaze is more of an 'admiration'. They expressed

envy for the actor's opportunity to gaze upon what seemed as a 'well-taken-care-of' asset.

The majority also liked this because they know that the actors and actresses are 'buddies'. Being scripted, some female viewers also found the gaze funny. They believed the actors simply appreciated the breasts but would refrain from doing so in real life.

Male and female viewers who decried the gaze emphasized its vulgarity due to the actor's malicious smile. That would be a disrespectful act of maniacs or the 'itchy' (sexually active). They advised, however, that the actress should not have sported a plunging neckline.

Sexual Advances

For the majority of male viewers, the unexpected kiss or hug and the actress caught unguarded was a funny combination. The actress' reaction seemed to be her 'first-time' (impliedly a virgin), which titillated them. It also showed how a man was unable to control himself in expressing his *paghanga* (admiration). They clarified that sitcoms are like this: men are inclined to make sexual advances because of the 'accessible' deep cleavage right before them. But according to them, everything is scripted or work-related, thus acceptable. For them, this contact is normal because women also look at sexy men.

The majority of female viewers follow the same reasoning: sexual advances are part of the talents' paid job. They recognized naughty men's instinct to admire sexy women. They believed that because the talents know each other, the jokes are not malicious and vulgar. Today's more permissive society, according to them, makes sexual advances ordinary. However, they were disappointed by the lack of reaction from the actresses.

Male and female viewers who disliked the sexual advances said that these are offensive, bordering on sexual harassment. Both recognized that these are scripted but can still embarrass the actresses because no permission was sought. Some female viewers believed these are unimportant to the story, largely unscripted and only beneficial to actors. They cautioned that the vulgarity is bad for the young, who also watch sitcoms.

Sexualized Jokes

Male and female viewers opined that fun rests on the element of surprise, exaggerated or unusual comparison (i.e. with fruits, hunchback, etc.), the joker's flair in dropping the punch line and the fact that the show is comedy. However, female viewers stressed that these jokes should be

TABLE 5. Frequency Distribution of Male Viewers' Perception on Passive Actresses (Multiple Responses, in %)

Must have liked it	27.73
It is just work/ scripted	22.73
Can't understand her lack of reply	13.64
Feels disrespected	9.09
Hurt	9.09
Should have gotten mad or reacted	9.09
Pitiful (I think of my wife and children)	9.09
Natural reaction of women	4.55
Bad	4.55
Not nice to see	4.55
Negligible	4.55
Loss of Filipino womanhood	4.55
Mad	4.55
Sad	4.55

TABLE 6. Frequency Distribution of Female Viewers' Perception on Passive Actresses (Multiple Responses, in %)

Likes it/Happy with it	33.33
Dislikes it	13.33
No reaction as a result of shock	13.33
Offended	13.33
Flirt	13.33
Scripted	6.67
Actor is insensitive to emotions	6.67
Not a big deal	6.67
Dressed sexy so no right to be mad	6.67
The camera has muted her	6.67

catered to adults only. While funny, they acknowledged that the jokes could offend women.

Male and female viewers who disliked the jokes said these are vulgar and improper for young viewers. It is not funny because the role sometimes 'treats actresses like pigs', is disrespectful of women, and makes them look scared or uncomfortable.

Passive Actresses

Almost all male and female viewers disliked the lack of a strong reply from actresses. Tables 5 and 6 show the different reactions of the viewers toward a passive actress.

It can be gleaned that passiveness can engender a misconception that the actresses enjoyed the sexualized portrayals (27.73 percent among male viewers; 33.33 percent among female viewers). One female viewer even called a passive actress a 'flirt' because otherwise she would have reacted vehemently. A majority believed that the passive reply is prejudicial (i.e. disrespected, pitiful, hurt, loss of womanhood, etc.) because it tolerates the assault on self-respect or dignity. On the other hand, many believed that the scripted passiveness was not a big deal.

When asked about their perceptions of an actress who actively replies to sexual advances, 36.36 percent of male viewers said it was the right thing to do because the actress was offended (18.18 percent). All female viewers, on the other hand, believed that the actress denounced sexual advances and the strong reply would discourage the actor from repeating the offense. Moreover, they said this actress had self-respect. They pointed out, though, that the actress should refrain from wearing sexy outfits to avoid trouble.

A significant number of male viewers (22.72 percent) still expressed that an active actress is not okay because it destroys her feminine image and it disrespects men. One even said that if the actress had not lured the actor, the latter would not have done the sexualized portrayals.

Different opinions surfaced in the focus interviews. The pleasure derived from sexualized portrayals can be traced to the strong influence of patriarchy that has normalized these gender dynamics. However, the significant number of viewers offended by the sexualized portrayals is a positive development. It shows the brewing 'tension' among males and among females. Inconsistent answers denote lack of a common perspective, which locates the value of individual preferences. Oppositional reading of television texts (Fiske 1987) is thus upheld to prop up a feminist reading of sitcoms and television texts as a site of negotiation and resistance.

Interestingly, a majority of the target audiences censured sexual advances actualized in real life. Among male viewers, 40.9 percent and 60.01 percent of female viewers (multiple responses) said these are disrespectful, vulgar and a sign of sex mania. Of males, 31.81 percent and 20 percent of females said it is second nature for men to be *malibog* (sexually active and aggressive) and part of men's social roles.

The Psychoanalytic Perspective

If sexualized portrayals primarily provide visual pleasure within the realm of television scripts, as proven by the target audiences' negative perceptions of sexualized portrayals in real life, then what is pleasurable about female sex objects?

Through sexual fantasy male viewers can identify with the actors. As proof, some envied the actors, denounced sexual advances in real life and believed that everything is part of on-cam work. Men freely launch sexual fantasies because in this mental activity, there is no punishment or 'castration anxiety' (Minsky 1996) compared to sexual advances in real life where they can be possibly charged with sexual harassment and unjust vexation or 'any human conduct which, although not productive of some physical or material harm, would unjustly annoy or vex an innocent person' (Reyes 2001: 599).

Sigmund Freud, in Forrester's (1992) *What Do Men Want?*, expressed that the 'domain of sexuality is full of contradictions...between moral ideals on the one hand and nasty shameful desires on the other' (p.106). Forrester further says that this is called hysteric identification where the person 'abdicates responsibility for her (his) desires by becoming someone else...in a world of the desires of other people, in which the subject is submerged and lost in the theatre of other people's demands, desires, and reproofs' (pp.107-108). The identification of male viewers with someone else's desires is convenient, as punitive measures grounded in moral ideals are born by the actor. Seeing passive actresses who do not castigate actors also reinforces the acceptability of sexual freedom/aggressiveness in their minds.

The 'catch-chase' relationship between the actors and actresses titillates male viewers and feeds their fantasies. Cowann and Kinder (1987) in *Women Men Love; Women Men Leave* said, 'As long as she is distant, he will pursue: his desire to secure their bond is what motivates his chase...she believes that her commitment and reassurance it conveys will free him to even greater heights of passion and desire' (p. 213). In every episode a male viewer anticipates or chases a 'distant' woman in the person of sexy actresses whom they only see through television. Scriptwriters reassure the presence of these objects of fantasy in order to secure the bond of male viewers.

The sexual desire of male viewers is stimulated through implicit sexualized roles, not through graphic sex videos or obscene chauvinist language; not to mention, obscenity would be censored on national television. Cowann and Kinder (1987: 209) said,

Nothing shuts down romantic and sexual desire in a man more quickly or dramatically than performance anxieties. The woman who is overly graphic and explicit in describing what she wants sexually or who too aggressively initiates sexual contact with a man may run the risk of arousing anxiety, not passion.

This is the reason why actors are the aggressors in the sitcoms. They control the outcome of sexualized portrayals. The dominance of men on sex-related matters is a reinforcement of gender dichotomies (i.e. masculine-feminine, passive-active, protector-protected, strong-weak), which the male viewers also enjoy. Sexy comedienne Rufa Mae Quinto attests to this dichotomy as well: 'Usually, men are the *bida* (main character) of sitcoms and they need a not-so-powerful woman because men give the punch line, the women receive it.'

'Theatre of seduction' that allows 'aggression, hostility, and all that is socially subversive and existentially defiant' (Forrester 1992: 113) can make male viewers attentive. It provides them with a chance to inflate the idea of seduction conducive to their 'virtual world'. These are like experiments (similar to sex experiments), which are probably chastised by conservatives.

Aggression as a form of seduction occurred in *Idol* when the male villain (Leo Martinez) reflected on what could be considered harassment due to his use of force (August 7 episode). Acts defiant to social norms transpired when Rufa Mae Quinto moved away from Jimmy Santos who was trying to touch her arms (August 14 episode); and when K. Brosas, supporting female character, tried to seduce Albert Martinez instead of the reverse (September 18 episode). In *Lagot Ka*, the actors portrayed as poor in the sitcom disregarded the higher social status (position or wealth) of their female boss by executing a sexual advance (May 17 episode).

However, the seductive aggression is still favourable to men. In effect, the sites of resistance were tokenistic for the actresses because, according to Naomi Segal (in Porter 1992: 35), 'desire is never simply a private experience: feminist or not, we live in relation to the socially constructed masculinity that has its base in men's relative public power.' Media is part of public space, considered as men's territory (Griffin 2000); as such, media content still depends on men. This benefits male viewers because the comfort of their private mind and their privileged status in the public arena converge to sustain visual desires. What comes about as a result is 'aesthetic play' (Segal in Porter 1992: 38), an element of desire where there is an aim but no end. Seduction or catch-chase is the aim,

an endless one, in the sense that it perpetuates the already entrenched 'gendered' relationship.

Another element of desire is called 'political or the pleasure in having power over the powerful' (Segal in Porter 1992: 39). Men please themselves by showing dominance in the 'politics of the home and the bed'. This was reflected in the sitcoms through the aggressive actors, the jokers who control the punch line and the gazers who wield the power to look instead of being looked at (Dyer 2002). Interviewed sociologists elevated the analysis by stating, 'Frustrated men (in work, sex, etc.) tend to look for a "weaker" person like women and children to divert their frustration.' They gain pleasure out of another's weakness because it is through them that they can prove they are in control. The passive, sexy actress permits the dominance as they receive the jokes and sexual advances. As Cowann and Kinder (1987: 209) put it, 'Men are drawn to women who express interest and receptivity, yet men still feel some need to be in control.'

Pleasure among female viewers takes another form. The majority found the sexualized portrayals funny but largely due to good acting – the *kalog* (easy to get along with) nature of sexy comediennees and the sexy role tailored-fit to the physical appearance of actresses. Rufa Mae Quinto confirmed the importance of acting: 'There are so many sexy actresses, but talent is more important to stay in the business.'

The ideal beauty epitomized by the actresses also pleases female viewers. The ideal permeates their way of thinking. As proof, female viewers said that a sexy woman has fair and smooth skin, thin but Coca-Cola figure, big boobs, long hair and wears a mini-skirt. These are characteristics of the sexy actresses in sitcoms. Probably if given the chance, they would like to emulate these characteristics.

Surprisingly, the definition of an ideal beauty is not the same as the qualifications of an ideal woman. For them, an ideal woman is simple, family-oriented and one who does not wear a short skirt. Rolando Tolentino (2000) dubs this the 'virgin and whore' continuum which composes the Filipino audience's outlook of women when watching films, also probably applicable to television viewing. The whore represented by sexy actresses should be maintained, not as an ideal, but as men's object of fantasy in a conservative society that still extols 'virgins' or 'simple' women. Among female viewers, the paradox is important to delineate themselves as the ideal women from these sexy actresses or women for the purpose of men's fantasy. Based on focus interviews with male viewers (multiple responses), their ideal wife or girlfriend

is one who wears the 'appropriate' or 'un-sexy' dress, has self-respect, is simple, supports the dual earner setup but must go home on time, behaves properly, is kind, industrious, thoughtful, respects others, is loving, God-fearing, responsible and not a nagger.

The Television Network's 'Sales' Strategy

Scriptwriters noted the evolution of the audiences who are choosier nowadays. Accordingly, viewers despise overly chauvinistic sitcoms. However, scriptwriters chose to insert sexualized portrayals where 'brusque men horse around with sexy women' because male viewers of sitcoms expect this. Interviewed advertisers and sociologists also provided a confirmation: both male and female viewers love to see sexy women. As such, it seems wiser to include sexualized portrayals even if mere snippets and tangential to the overall theme of the story. At least the snippets tried to target a particular desire.

Because of the nature of audiences today, the best strategy is to drop several bombs of gags. A typical poor Filipino family has one television set only, which implies different preferences to a certain degree due to some factors like age and gender. Necessarily, one sitcom must try to target these different preferences. This is the reason why actresses are more affluent than the actors in *Lagot Ka*. They own the grocery store where the actors frequently loaned, which reflects the growing economic independence of women. According to Tan (2008), the Philippines is sixth among all countries in terms of gender equity in labour and the only Asian country in the top ten according to the World Economic Forum. This does not alienate male viewers, according to the scriptwriters, because their visual desires are still sufficed and they also relate to the story on the angst of the actors beset with financial challenges. Moreover, both sitcoms displayed respect for mothers. Mothers, considered the *ilaw ng tahanan* (light/wisdom of the home) (Medina 1991), scolded their erring children (actors), which reflects the venerated position of mothers in Philippine society. As housekeepers and mothers themselves, female viewers could definitely relate to this portrayal. According to the scriptwriters, the same portrayal of 'mothers' makes sexualized portrayals acceptable because it tends to 'balance' or 'neutralize' the sexualization of female bodies. The mother represents the moral aspect of the sitcoms, the 'virgin' in Tolentino's (2000) whore-virgin continuum.

The target audiences also enjoy the ad-libs where actors poked personal jokes. The spontaneous exchanges of lines make the sitcom more

natural. It is also during these ad-libs that unscripted sexual advances occur. These are left unedited to depict the 'innate' playfulness of actors vis-à-vis the natural reaction of actresses. Denoy Punio, a scriptwriter, said that Richard Gomez is used to kissing or hugging the actresses, so even if unscripted, he does it as regular fare. Further, because of the plunging necklines, the actors cannot help but gaze upon the half-covered breasts.

The same ad-libs prevent actresses from replying. As Rufa Mae Quinto said, actresses are included in sitcoms to receive the punch lines of actors who outnumber the actresses and who overpower them based on social construction. A reply is thus impossible because it will only lengthen the conversation and hinder the fast-paced nature of sitcoms. Sitcoms are fast-paced because the choosy audience dislikes lulls and very long-establishing scenes. According to the scriptwriters, the audience favours continuous gags, a string of funny situations and a cliff-hanger before commercial breaks. There is a belief that the audience, tired after a day's work, dislikes critical thinking. Their primary motivations for watching television are relaxation and entertainment. The fast pace and string of gags provide this. In effect, they do not focus on the subtexts of sexualized portrayals. After all, they are not there to analyze. Primetime television viewing is a time to enjoy.

The way of life in television sitcom production is difficult to change, especially that of executive producers and directors, the so-called 'network managers' (Mosco 1996), who do 'quality control'. It means that scripts must translate to high ratings, the ultimate and collective goal of the production team. Tested formulae are repeated upon the discretion of directors who execute scripts and are backed up by ratings. Thus, scriptwriters follow what they call a 'bible' that characterizes the roles of actors and actresses. Playing the role of a sexy comedienne, the actress must sport a sexy outfit all the time and allow herself to be the object of jokes and sexual advances. Denoy Punio, one of the scriptwriters, even admitted there was one time she asked Maureen Larrabal, a sexy comedienne, to change the jeans she was wearing and wear shorts instead.

Moreover, Dimanlanta, a scriptwriter, mentioned that fresh college graduates could hardly penetrate the world of scriptwriting. He said, 'Writers in the industry are good friends and we share rackets or work opportunities among ourselves.' This implies that the introduction of fresher ideas is a remote possibility because seasoned scriptwriters have already 'sealed' the door of opportunities. Even if they could penetrate,

however, the quality control set by network managers would still be the rule. After all, they represent the network owners who fund the production costs.

Structuration and Commodification of Women as Visual Prostitutes

Mosco's (1996) structuration, in his analysis of the political economy of communication, denotes that a structure shapes human action; human action reproduces the structure. Consent of humans through compliance supports the 'hegemony' the structure promotes. The hegemony is unnoticed as the workings of the structure create a 'taken-for-granted, common-sense, naturalized way of thinking about the world' (p. 216). Or better yet, humans avoid questioning the embedded structure because disobedience to the structure's 'set of rules' and 'operating resources' entails punishment (Downing and Mohammadi 1995).

The author has spotted three closely interlinked tiers of structuration: (1) within the television network, (2) within the society or location of the network, and (3) the 'virtual' world within the minds of target audiences.

First, the GMA 7 Network imposes its own rules upon the production team, actors and actresses, advertisers and other stakeholders. For self-preservation, paid labourers such as scriptwriters and actresses observe these rules. Thus, sexy comedienne of sitcoms must portray sexy or sexualized roles and scriptwriters must craft messages with mass appeal because these are believed to be in the best interest of the television industry. Angst may sometimes develop out of their required obedience (the actresses feel vulgarized or the scriptwriters lose their creative freedom) but these are necessary tradeoffs to stay in the business.

Second, the patriarchal society adheres to a hierarchy and dichotomy that affect the production of sitcoms. This entails that the rules of GMA 7 come from the general social structure. For example, sitcoms incorporate the gender hierarchy that affords men more privileges. The hierarchy is sustained by perpetuating dichotomies (masculine-feminine, dominant-submissive, strong-weak, among others) that tend to subordinate women. The hierarchy is euphemized as 'roles' that uphold social order (Lindsey 1990). On the other hand, GMA 7 sustains the manager-labourer relationship where scriptwriters consult directors and executive producers before finalizing any output. This is euphemized as 'collaborative work' intended to ensure high ratings.

GMA 7 will continuously produce sitcoms marked by sexualized portrayals and gender hierarchy as long as audience patronage is consistently high. More likely, audiences will support these sitcoms not only because these are the frequent program offerings of GMA 7 but also because the audiences can relate to the interaction between the actors and actresses. The man is the captor, the woman the allurer. The man is sexually aggressive, the woman passive. These are some binary examples that patriarchy has successfully institutionalized as hegemony. Male and female viewers find pleasure in watching these sexualized roles because their limited education and priority on meeting basic biological needs have relegated sexualized portrayals as less important, if not totally negligible.

However, it is naive to argue that the social structure is immovable. Producing and watching sitcoms involves the interplay of market and ideological factors. After all, each individual is still self-reflexive regardless of overarching contexts. The culture of watching and producing television texts can still be a site of negotiation and opposition (Fiske 1987). Resistance to the structure can happen. The majority of viewers' responses that avert sexualized portrayals in real life exemplify their resistance to the sitcoms. This is where the third tier of structuration comes to the fore.

This tier is situated within a 'virtual world' in the minds of viewers. It tends to co-opt the other tiers of structuration and 'resist' the same to a certain degree. The mind co-opts reality by reading sexualized portrayals as normal phenomena in sitcoms in a male-dominated society. Sitcoms, as a reflection of social reality, encapsulate the point. But sitcoms can also be a construction of reality, perhaps a fantasy or pseudo-reality that is tolerable in television, an entertainment medium that can also be a tool of escapism (Chandler 1994) from the problems of the masses.

So male viewers can fantasize about sexy comediennes without fear of punishment such as sexual harassment. Sitcoms defy rules or laws on sexual harassment. The mind has its own set of rules that facilitate the derivation of pleasure from seeing actors who carry out the sexual advances for them. That is why some male viewers said they envied the actors. Scriptwriters have also created fantasy through creative situations: female bosses sitting on the laps of their male bodyguards and female doctors in bikinis circumcising the actors, examples that resist the society's class hierarchy such as respect for bosses or the educated.

While female viewers may not experience the same level of 'eroticized' entertainment as males, they still enjoy seeing sexy comediennes. They

see the ideal physical beauty, their object of fantasy, despite the fact that they can hardly afford beauty products or cosmetic surgery. It is in the character of the actresses that they find empowerment because the actress is able to use her body as capital to reach the stardom that guarantees more material rewards. The actress becomes an epitome of economic independence, a stature that women from the masses can hardly assume because usually the man functions as the breadwinner.

However, the value of transgression in this 'virtual structuration' is less recognizable as the influential power of patriarchy still manages to intervene. The co-optation process is responsible for this. After all, the viewer still thrives within a patriarchal social structure. Thus, male viewers are pleased by the 'acts of defiance' because the acts are still favourable to their eroticized desires, a consummation of their socialized behaviour as sexually aggressive. The co-optation unfortunately precludes women from the practice of resistance, clearly a double standard. The female joker, for example, was unsuccessful in her attempt to harass an actor who ran away and showed his grimace of displeasure.

The sexualized portrayals – part of the virtual world in the viewers' minds and in the showbiz industry's notoriety for normalizing 'role-plays' – are acceptable and funny because these are just jokes and part of work. But when reality dawns on the viewers, the 'virtual acceptability' of sexual advances, gazing upon breasts or any public discussion of sex-related matters become taboo (Montenegro 1996). The Filipino culture is still generally conservative in communicating about sex after all (Padilla-Maggay 2002).

'It is based on what the audience wants. What we think the audience wants actually', is an incriminating insight from one of the scriptwriters. It confirms the primacy of interpretation instead of reflection of reality. The interpretation is most likely hinged on the insufficiently demystified belief that 'sex sells' and the result of high ratings whenever sexualized portrayals are inserted.

This interplay of market and ideological factors when producing sitcoms sadly treats women like commodities on three levels: (1) product, (2) service and (3) consciousness (Mosco 1996).

As a product, a woman is an attractive package. In the words of Rufa Mae Quinto, she must be sexy in order to 'fulfill her responsibility for men and to inspire women to take care of themselves'. This entrusted responsibility is actually a social construction dictated by the merger of patriarchy and capitalism to perpetuate a social role and an ideal beauty. It recreates what Stockhard (1992) calls the 'false object'. Most actresses

today follow the footsteps of stars who started out with sexualized roles, a trend the target audience also believes in. It does not matter if the way to stardom entails the application of cosmetic surgery, as sexy comedienne Maurene Larrazabal has openly admitted. It does not matter if the breasts of actresses are described as fruits or commodities that can be bought. It does not matter if the jokes zero in on body parts and make the audience remember them as the actress with big boobs as long as this can lead to the attainment of the much-coveted stardom and material rewards.

This can limit the service of actresses. A significant number of viewers think an actress would be unpopular if she were un-sexy because her primary capital is her sexy body. An actress cannot complain about her sexualized portrayals, evidenced by her passive replies in sitcoms, because she is paid to provide pleasure to viewers. Even Rufa Mae Quinto confessed, 'As an artist, the director should tell you what to do because I would do the role.' The only consolation the actress can get is the belief of female viewers that a sexy comedienne can be effective only when she has acting talent. Rufa Mae Quinto has attested to this: 'There are so many sexy actresses, but talent is more important to stay in the business.' While acting talent is important, what is the context of this talent? Sexy comediennes are remembered as talented because they have used their bodies to be funny. The dismal angle of this type of humour is its vulgarity in approach, which means that a sexy actress has to be vulgar in order to be talented. The vulgarity is not something to be proud of. This is probably the reason why Rufa Mae Quinto said, 'I do not use my body anymore to crack jokes.' It seems that the public scoff at puns on the body. That is why even the target audience said, 'It is funny, but offensive, especially to children.'

The same plight afflicts scriptwriters whose creative freedom is also nominal until they post high ratings for their programs. But even if television ratings soar, they prefer to abide by the quality control imposed by network managers because it is less strenuous to comply than to assert their supposed creative freedom. The danger lies when scriptwriters are already unwilling to craft 'fresher' concepts since the sitcom genre has boxed their creativity and carved their comfort zones, limiting as well the quality of entertainment viewers get. As advertising expert Ray Ganayon succinctly stated, 'Sexualized portrayals were successful in the past. So those are repeated over and over again, a little variation but still the same nonetheless.' What has changed in the sitcoms are the situations of sexualized portrayals. But the bottom line is still unchanged: the sex object is the butt of jokes.

As long as portraying women as sex objects can gain high ratings and can lead to the stardom of the actress, the consciousness about sexualization of the female body will persist. Viewers may be aware of the vulgarity of sexualized portrayals in real life but they know less about the workings of the television industry. They find the text funny but they seldom realize the subtexts of bouncing breasts or unwelcome hugs because these are for entertainment purposes only.

Lack of concern or awareness of the implications of the subtexts is carried on by the tunnel vision of those who control entertainment. When all that the production staff wants to provide is something that succeeds, the tendency is to preserve that success or produce its cheaper copy. The cycle thus continues: the actress is sexualized with the promise of a better career only to find out that the role is a pitfall that is difficult to move out of. She must wear sexy outfits, for example, for the fulfilment of visual desires of actors and male viewers. The actress loses her dignity as the audience relegates her to the position of a 'whore' who has to expose her cleavage en route to popularity. The audience's appreciation of sexy comediennes is actually nonexistent because it only resides in their fantasies. In reality, the ideal is still the conservative Filipina — 'simple, has self-respect, wears appropriate clothing, is a caring mother, etc.' According to the viewers, an ideal woman is not that sexy woman who transcends the private sphere to prostitute herself in the public sphere called television.

The sexy actress is thus at the losing end. She is used to bait viewers but her value only stays in the realm of the viewers' fantasies. In reality, the sexy comedienne is just for fun, someone who is not to be taken seriously, someone who exists in the virtual world of the mind, in the brothel of sitcom production where pimps or scriptwriters characterize the actress as the desirable prostitute. When the television set is switched off, the audience is back to reality with the consciousness that everything was just for entertainment.

Joeven Rosario Castro is Associate Professor and head of the Research Cluster Department of Communication at the Far Eastern University of Manila, Philippines(jorocast@yahoo.com).

NOTES

- ¹ *Idol Ko Si Kap*, a defunct TV sitcom, starred Senator Ramon 'Bong' Revilla and Rufa Mae Quinto as his love interest. It is the story of a barangay captain who settles disputes every episode. *Lagot Ka...Isusumbong Kita!* is also a defunct TV sitcom about the problems encountered by male siblings (Richard Gomez, Joey Marquez, Raymart

- Santiago and Benjie Paras) and their relationships with their female counterparts (Maureen Larrazabal and Alicia Mayer). For brevity, they are referred to here as *Idol* and *Lagot Ka* respectively. Peppered with sexualized portrayals, both sitcoms are worthy of scrutiny despite being off-air already given the tendencies of sitcom as a genre. Content and textual analyses of 13 episodes of *Idol* and 17 episodes of *Lagot Ka* were conducted.
- ² Extrapolation is 'estimating cases that lie beyond the range of observation' (Babbie 1998: 414). This paper used the political economic approach of Mosco (1996) as the basis of analysis.
 - ³ Denoy Punio is the head writer of *Lagot Ka* and Wynstan Dimalanta is a scriptwriter of *Idol*. Their insights are important in understanding GMA 7's structuration or rules in creating sexualized portrayals.
 - ⁴ Advertising expert Rey Ganayon (VP Accounts of J. Walter Thompson, Philippines) and advertiser Vinchi Cuyegkeng (Brand Manager of Smart Buddy of Smart Communications) were interviewed. Smart Buddy is one of the advertisers of *Lagot Ka*.
 - ⁵ These key informants were chosen through convenient and purposive sampling. They must be viewers of *Idol* and *Lagot Ka* and must belong in class D and E or the masses/ commoner in the Philippines. Fifteen female viewers (ages 31 to 50) and 22 male viewers (ages 27 to 49) were interviewed. The interviews were done with the help of the author's students at Far Eastern University, Manila.
 - ⁶ Rufa Mae Quinto, main female character of *Idol*, was interviewed 22 September 2008 with the help of Kristalyn Engle.
 - ⁷ Sociologists Gerry Marcelo and Jerry Apolonio, both professors in sociology and anthropology at Far Eastern University, were interviewed.

REFERENCES

- Aguiling-Dalisay, G. et al. 2000. *Pagkalahake: Men in control? Filipino male views on love, sex, & women*. Quezon City: National Association of Filipino Psychology.
- Babbie, E. 1998. *The practice of social research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Castro, J. (2007). 'Tear the box: Deconstructing sexualized portrayals in *Idol Ko si Kap* and *Lagot Ka*...Isusumbong Kita!' *FEU Communication Journal*, 3. Manila: FEU Publications.
- Chandler, D. 1994. *Why do people watch television?* Retrieved 20 September 2008 from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/usegrat/html>.
- Cowan, C. and M. Kinder 1987. *Women men love; women men leave*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter.
- Cruz, M. M. 1990. *Comparative study of the role and image of the Filipino woman as portrayed in our local television sitcoms and the Filipina's perception of her role and image in Philippine society*. Unpublished thesis, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.
- Dela Cruz, P. S. 1988. *Images of women in Philippine media: From virgin to vamp*. Malate: Asia Social Institute.
- Diego, C. 1997. *Palibhasa lalake: A close textual analysis*. Unpublished thesis, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.
- Downing, J. and A. Mohammadi (eds.) 1995. *Questioning the media: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dyer, R. 2002. *Only entertainment* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Eisenstein, H. 1983. *Contemporary feminist thought*. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- Feuer, J. 1992. 'Genre study and television'. In R. C. Allen (ed) *Channels of discourse*,

- reassembled* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge 1992: 146-48.
- Fiske, J. 1987. *Television culture*. London: Routledge.
- Forrester, J. 1992. 'What do men want?' In D. Porter (ed) *Between men and feminism*. London: Routledge.
- GMA Network, Inc. 2004. 'About GMA Network.' Retrieved 20 August 2005 from http://www.igma.tv.corp_about.php.
- Horowitz, S. 1997. *Queens of comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the new generation of funny women*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Lindsey, L. 1990. *Gender roles: A sociological perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Maslog, C. C. (ed) 2007. *Philippine communication today*. Quezon City, Philippines: New Day.
- Medina, B. 1991. *The Filipino family*. Quezon City: UP Press.
- Minsky, R. (ed) 1996. *Psychoanalysis and gender: An introductory reader*. London: Routledge.
- Montenegro, C. F. 1996. 'An exploratory study of male and female language in Pilipino'. In M. L. S. Bautista (ed) *Readings in Philippine sociolinguistics*. Manila: DLSU Press 1996: 178-200.
- Mosco, V. 1996. *The political economy of communication*. London: Sage.
- Neale, S. and F. Krutnik 1990. *Popular film and television comedy*. London: Routledge.
- Padilla-Maggay, M. 2002. *Pahiwatig: Kagawiang pangkomunikasyon ng Filipino*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Purdie, S. 1993. *Comedy: The mastery of discourse*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Reyes, L. 2001. *The revised penal code*. Manila: Rex Book Store.
- Rimban, L. 1999. 'The empire strikes back'. In S. Coronel (ed) *From Loren to Marimar: The Philippine media in the 1990s*. Quezon City: PCIJ 1999: 44-53.
- Segal, N. 1992. 'Why can't a good man be sexy? Why can't a sexy man be good?' In D. Porter (ed) *Between men and feminism*. London: Routledge 1992: 35-47.
- Stockhard, J. 1992. *Sex and gender in society* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Tan, M. 2008. 'The other side of macho'. *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 2, 13 January 2008.
- Tolentino, R. 2000. *Richard Gomez at ang mito ng pagkalalake, Sharon Cuneta at perpetwal na birhen at iba pang sanaysay ukol sa bida sa pelikula bilang kulturalna teksto*. Pasig City: Anvil.
- Wetzal, J. et al. 1993. *Women's Studies: Thinking women*. Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.