Research Article

# Laughter Track as a Marker of Distinctions in Media Consumption Patterns Within Diverse Sociocultural Contexts

## Nadezhda E. Zheleznyak[a1]

zheleznyak_ne@pfur.ru

ORCID: 0009-0002-4292-7288

## Gleb S. Aleshin[b]

1132222916@pfur.ru

ORCID: 0009-0000-3060-8197

[ab]RUDN University, Miklukho-Maklaya str., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia

## Abstract:

The article is dedicated to the complex comparative analysis of the use of the laugh track in situation comedies (sitcoms) of the USA and Russia, which is considered from historical, cultural, sociological and psychological perspectives. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of this film device: from its institutionalization within the American television industry in the mid-20th century to the adaptation and critical reception in the Russian media space. It is shown that, in American sitcoms, the laugh track traditionally performs the functions of emotional regulation, social validation, and the formation of a collective viewing effect.

In the Russian television tradition, the laugh track is used with less stability and is more often subjected to criticism as an intrusive and excessive device, disrupting the perception of humor, which is characteristic for a high-context culture and based on understatement and implicit forms of the comic. Based on the material from a number of domestic and foreign TV series, cultural attitudes, which determine the viewer`s attitude to laughter accompaniment, are analyzed, and psychological mechanisms of perception are also revealed.

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[1] Corresponding author
 E-mail address: zheleznyak_ne@pfur.ru

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The conclusion is made that the laugh track can be regarded as an indicator of profound differences between models of media consumption in various socio-cultural systems, which reflect the specifics of values, methods of communication, and forms of collective experience. The results allow us to refine the understanding of the transformation of the sitcom genre within the Russian context and indicate the significance of further interdisciplinary research of the phenomenon of laughter in mass culture.

**Keywords:** sitcom, laugh track, television comedy, mass culture, media, perception psychology, psychology of cinema, filmotherapy

## Introduction

In the era of global socio-cultural transformations, aggravated by information oversaturation, political instability, and the growth of mass anxiety, the mechanisms regulating the emotional state of the audience are becoming increasingly significant in the media environment. One of such mechanisms is laughter – as a form of psycho-emotional response, a means of relieving tension, and, simultaneously, an instrument of influence. In this context, V. Frankl's words about the nature of humor acquire particular significance: "Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds" (Frankl, 1990:120).

The history of laughter in mass communications has deep roots. Already in the newspaper satirical journalism of the 19th – early 20th centuries, humor performed not only an entertaining, but also a socio-critical function, acting as a distinctive way of discussing social problems. "Satirical essay" and "feuilleton" in print laid the foundation for a mass laughter discourse, which was later transferred to electronic media. With the advent of radio in the 1920s–1930s, new forms of laughter communication emerged – humorous programs, sound parodies, radio feuilletons. Radio for the first time made laughter a "collective experience", uniting listeners in a single temporal flow.

Laughter in mass culture has always been not only a means of entertainment but also a mechanism of socialization. Thus, L. S. Likhatcheva and K. A. Fadeeva note: "The educational function of laughter is a way to transmit knowledge about values, norms, rules accepted in a particular society. That, what is laughed at, helps new members or young members of the society to understand, what is permissible

and impermissible, possible and due, acceptable or unacceptable, morally justified or reprehensible in certain conditions for this group."

Laughter acts as an important indicator of cultural differences and collective attitudes, since it expresses the value orientations of society and sets the forms of communication. As M. Bakhtin notes, laughter frees from fear (Bakhtin, 1965), gives the opportunity for articulation. In the context of the modern media environment, this thought acquires a new sound: the laughter principle not only accompanies the television product but also structures its perception, directing the interpretation of the viewer.

No less significant is also the psychoanalytic perspective. S. Freud, in the work *Der Witz und seine Beziehungzum Unbewussten* (Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, 1905), considered laughter as a form of psychic "discharge" and a mechanism for saving psychic energy. In his opinion, humor allows a person to express repressed impulses in a socially acceptable form, becoming, thus, not only an aesthetic phenomenon but also a deep psychological tool for adaptation.

Thus, the study of laughter allows us to identify hidden cultural mechanisms of media consumption, reflecting the differences between socio-cultural systems. A comparative analysis of the practices of its use in the USA and Russia opens a perspective for a deeper understanding of how mass communication shapes emotional and cognitive models of perception among the audience.

**The relevance of the research** is conditioned by the necessity for deep analysis of the mechanisms, through which media shape the emotional and cognitive reaction of the audience. The scientific novelty of this research lies in the fact that the laugh track is considered not only as an element of television production but as an indicator of cultural differences in media psychology and socio-cognitive strategies. For the first time, a comparative analysis of the function of the laugh track is carried out on the material of Russian and American sitcoms (situation comedies) in dynamics, including empirical measurements of the volume of sound tracks. This makes it possible to draw conclusions about socio-cultural transformations in the preferences of viewers and about the evolution of genre formats in accordance with local expectations of the audience. The purpose of this research is the identification and interpretation of socio-cultural differences in the use of the laugh track as a means of genre and emotional organization of the television media text on the example of Russian and American traditions.

Research methods: a review and analysis of research on the stated topic, a descriptive method, and a method of categorization.

Analyzing the nature of laughter, A. D. Koshelev focuses attention on the necessity of distinguishing between the comic itself as a phenomenon (verbal, visual and other in its representation) and laughter as a reaction of the perceiving subject, manifesting involuntarily in response to the perception of comic material (Koshelev, 2007: 311). Within the framework of this research, we also adhere to the dichotomy between "the funny" and "laughter" (as a totality of physiological (muscle tension, articulation of characteristic sounds), psychological (emotional discharge) and cognitive (interpretation of comic material) processes, caused by the perception of a humorous stimulus).

According to N. E. Zheleznyak, "cinema is a means of communicative art, which forms multi-level processes of identification and projection through messages diverse in semantics, causing affective, cognitive and behavioral reactions in the viewer" (Zheleznyak, 2024: 35-49). Consequently, a film, in particular a sitcom, can act as a powerful tool of suggestive influence.

Visual media texts, which form mass consciousness in modern conditions, demonstrate not only codified genre features but also complex mechanisms of cultural interaction. One of such markers, bearing on itself both aesthetic and psychological, as well as anthropological burden, is the laugh track. Its use in television sitcoms serves as a key to understanding differences in cognitive attitudes and communicative models, entrenched in various socio-cultural systems. Thus, the laugh track in sitcoms is an audio-visual component, artificially integrated into the structure of the television product, representing a pre-recorded (or imitated) reaction of viewers to the comic elements of the plot, used for the purpose of marking humorous moments, regulating perception, and enhancing the emotional involvement of the audience.

The laugh track can be considered as a structural and functional element of television discourse, possessing the potential of affective modality, regulating the viewer's reception. This social mediation of laughter is the basis for attempts at influence using pre-recorded or "canned" laughter. In this case, laughter acts as "social proof" (Chaldini, 2014: 75) that potentially humorous material is amusing.

**History of Genre Development in Russia and the USA**

The sitcom as a genre originated in the early 20th century and was initially a part of the radio format. Radio programs of the 1920s were short humorous scenes, built on recurring characters and recognizable plot situations. With the transition to television in the middle 20th century, sitcoms evolved into an independent genre, combining elements of theater, situation comedy, and social satire.

The first television sitcom is considered the British series "Pinwright's Progress" (1946–1947), broadcast live on the BBC. In the USA, primacy belongs to the show "Mary Kay and Johnny" (1947), first shown on the DuMont Network. However, a real breakthrough occurred in 1951 with the advent of "I Love Lucy", where key genre features were standardized: multi-camera shooting, laugh track, closed structure of scenic space, and recurring cast of characters. It was this series that cemented the sitcom's status as a leading form of television comedy. This form codified the idea of the viewer as an accomplice, included in the communicative situation.

Since the 1960s, sitcoms in the USA have become a mass phenomenon in the English-speaking world. "The Andy Griffith Show" and "The Dick Van Dyke Show" become cultural and rating benchmarks. In the 1970s, the genre undergoes diversification: sitcoms with a political and social subtext appear, and also new production studios (MTM Enterprises) create female images of a new type ("The Mary Tyler Moore Show").

From the 1980s to the 2000s, sitcoms experience a "golden era": "Cheers," "Seinfeld," "Friends," "The Big Bang Theory," etc., demonstrate the flexibility of the genre, combining traditional elements with new themes: urbanization, multiculturalism, changing gender roles. The laugh track remains an important element of most of these projects.

Today, by sitcom is usually meant a genre of comedic television programs, based on a stable cast of characters and a constant situation. Each episode represents a completed comic episode, while maintaining the plot and thematic continuity between releases.

The formation of the sitcom genre in Russian television did not occur in a cultural vacuum, but, on the contrary, relied on stable genre and ideological traditions, laid down already in the Soviet period. The peculiarities of media consumption in Russia, as well as the perception of humor as a form of social and

cultural expression, are inextricably linked to the typology of domestic television and cinematographic heritage.

Soviet television culture formed a special model of the comic, based primarily on satirical forms. The central place was occupied by the genres of variety monologue, satirical review, and stage miniature, widely represented in programs like "Around Laughter," "The Tavern of 13 Chairs." The aesthetics of these programs set a specific intonation: humor, as a rule, was allegorical, contained allusions, corresponding to the cultural tradition and political context.

Cinema satire of the Soviet period, represented by such works as "The Diamond Arm" (1969), "Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession" (1973), "The Most Charming and Attractive" (1985), etc., relied on characterological humor, built on typification, social observation, and subtle grotesque. This formed in viewers an expectation of intellectual, non-aggressive humor, often based on playing with reality, and not on absurdity or eccentricity.

Performances of humorists on television – (such as Arkady Raikin, etc.) formed a special canon of presenting the comic, in which an important role was played by the rhythm of speech, intonational play, and direct contact with the audience. This tradition also influenced the domestic sitcom: often in it, one can observe monologic insertions, bringing the actors closer to the viewer, as well as slowed-down scenic climaxes, reminiscent of a variety show number.

In Russia, the sitcom genre received active distribution in the post-Soviet period. The first attempt is considered "Strawberry" (1997), but only in the 2000s do sitcoms begin to gain mass popularity: "My Fair Nanny," "Univer," "Voronins." In the 2010s, a number of successful projects are released: "The Kitchen," "The Physical Education Teacher," "Sasha Tanya," and others. Thus, when adapting the sitcom genre for the Russian television space, producers faced the need to take into account the inertia of cultural perception. Structural features of the sitcom – the presence of a laugh track, studio shooting, a three-part composition, and repeating patterns – were perceived by the audience as not entirely authentic. In this context, it is important to note that Russian sitcoms often sought to integrate into themselves elements of the Soviet tradition: typification of characters, morally instructive motives.

Thus, the domestic comic tradition in television and cinema, formed in the

Soviet period, has a significant influence on the perception and development of the sitcom genre in the domestic media space. The laugh track as an element of the genre convention of the sitcom in the Russian context is perceived ambiguously precisely because it violates the developed cultural distance between the comic utterance and the recipient. In contrast to the American model, which assumes directive involvement of the viewer in the comic reaction through the laugh track, the Russian tradition assumes a more reflexive and autonomous form of response.

Anthropologist and culturologist Edward T. Hall, in his fundamental work "Beyond Culture" (1976), introduced the concept of high-context and low-context cultures as a way to distinguish communication styles in different socio-cultural systems. In low-context cultures, to which the USA can be attributed, the meaning of the message must be explicitly expressed verbally. Everything significant must be said "aloud": it is not assumed that the interlocutor will guess the subtext. The basis of communication is a rational, logical, and explicit presentation of information. The context of the situation (past relationships, hierarchy, hints) almost does not affect the meaning of the message:

"A low-context (LC) communication is one in which the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1989: 78). This explains why the laugh track is actively used in American sitcoms: it plays the role of an explicit emotional signal, which accurately indicates where the humor is embedded. For the American viewer, this is not perceived as manipulation and pressure; rather, it is a socially approved instruction for emotional reaction.

According to Edward Hall's theory of contextuality, Russia can be classified as a culture with a high level of contextuality (high-context cultures). This means that in the Russian socio-cultural system, great importance is attached to nonverbal signals, intonations, gestures, cultural subtext; an important role is played by historical memory, traditions, and common cultural codes, which are not always explicitly articulated: "In high-context communication, most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1989: 298).

Let us compare the prevalence of the use of the laugh track in sitcoms. To do this, we will make a sample from the "Kinopoisk" rating, called "Sitcoms for All Time," which includes the best Russian and foreign sitcoms. For a more

accurate analysis, we will select series from this list that aired from 2000 to 2020.

| **Russia** | |
|---|---|
| Kitchen(Kukhnya) (2012–2016) | No |
| PETeacher(Fizruk)(2014–2017) | No |
| Interns(Interny)(2010–2016) | No |
| University (Univer) (2008–2011) | Yes |
| TheVoronins(Voroniny)(2009–2019) | Yes |
| **The USA and the West** | |
| Friends(1994–2004) | Yes |
| TheBigBangTheory(2007–2019) | Yes |
| HowIMetYourMother(2005–2014) | Yes |
| TwoandaHalfMen(2003–2015) | Yes |
| Scrubs(2001–2010) | No |

*Tab. 1 Results.*

In the American television tradition, the laugh track is not only a stable and widespread audiovisual technique but also an important structure-forming element of the comedic narrative, rooted in the cultural logic of mass media consumption. American mass culture is historically oriented toward a different emotional representation, in which expressed affects are not only permissible but also desirable. The laugh track here acts as an instrument of empathic accompaniment — the viewer does not remain one-on-one with the screen; he is included in an implicit audience, where the laughter of others confirms his own reaction. The tool of empathic accompaniment helps to achieve the main effect – to make a show, a spectacle, out of a series. The laugh track accompanies funny moments similarly to how a commentator accompanies a football match, attracting even more attention to the joke.

From the table, it is visible that in Russian practice, the use of the laugh track is much less stable than in the Western one. Moreover, adaptations of Western sitcoms ("Two and a Half Men" → "Dva otsa i dva sina") often get rid of the laugh track, despite its presence in the original. From this, it can be concluded that in Russian media consumption, a reduction of "affective signals" occurs, which is associated with an attitude toward autonomous, non-directive perception.

Russian television humor longer retained theatricality and orientation towards the dialogical form. Even modern comedy projects, such as "Univer,"

often exploit a sketch or serial form with elements of drama and social criticism, where a laughter track could dissonate with the complex intonational structure of the statement. At the same time, in Russian projects borrowing Western sitcom formats (for example, adaptations of American shows), a laughter track is more often used, but at the same time, it is precisely such projects that are subjected to the most severe criticism from viewers and specialists. This is due to the perception of laughter as an externally imposed form of emotional reaction, which deprives the viewer of freedom of interpretation.

In addition, the laugh track in the Russian audience may be associated with mass, "simplified" culture and low-quality products, which reduces its legitimacy in the eyes of a more demanding viewer. In the context of domestic television criticism, this is often viewed as a form of "imposed fun," creating the effect of a false affect.

Let us consider the dynamics of the loudness of the laugh track in the domestic television product – the television series "Sasha Tanya." Let us pay attention; the loudness of the laugh track demonstrates a distinct tendency to reduce the acoustic presence of this audiovisual component: from 78 dB in the first season to 66–67 dB in seasons three through nine. This observed reduction can be interpreted as a reflection of deeper changes in media consumption paradigms occurring within the Russian cultural environment.

| Season 1, Episode 5 | 78 decibels |
|---|---|
| Season 2, Episode 5 | 70 decibels |
| Season3, Episode 5 | 67decibels |
| Season4, Episode 5 | 67 decibels |
| Season5, Episode 5 | 67 decibels |
| Season6, Episode 5 | 67 decibels |
| Season7, Episode 5 | 66 decibels |
| Season8, Episode 5 | 67 decibels |
| Season9, Episode 5 | 67 decibels |

*Tab. 2 "SashaTanya".*

## Discussion

At the initial stage, the series "SashaTanya" maintained direct continuity with the comedic model of a Western-style sitcom (in particular, such shows as "Friends" or "How I Met Your Mother"), where the laugh track is an integral component. However, as the series develops, the accents shift towards a more realistic narrative, with a focus on family dramedy, everyday irony, and psychological nuances. In such conditions, loud laugh track begins to dissonate with the intonational structure of the text, and its intensity is consistently weakened.

It can be assumed that at this stage, there is an evolution of viewer expectations and a growth of media literacy of the Russian audience. The modern Russian television viewer demonstrates an increasing level of critical perception of the media text. The laugh track, as a "prompt" of emotional response, is increasingly perceived as an excessive and even annoying element, violating the authenticity of the artistic space. As a result, the production teams of the series, adapting to the changed attitudes of the audience, reduce the loudness of laughter, making it less intrusive and more "background" in function.

Also, let us note, with the transition of the audience from linear television broadcasting to platform viewing (RuTube, VK, etc.), the need for "content for oneself" increases. Users are increasingly choosing formats with a minimal level of external manifestation of emotions, giving preference to hidden forms of humor. The producers of the series could take these preferences into account, modifying the audio design in accordance with the dominant habits of their target audience.

The reduction in the volume of the laugh track can also be considered as a part of a broader trend of desacralization of humor in the modern cultural model. In the post-ironic era, the viewer ceases to need explicit signals of "the funny," and the laugh track loses its sacred (ritual) function as a marker of humor, turning into a facultative element. Its loudness decreases because there is a process of internalization of the perception of the humor, where the meaning of the joke does not require acoustic support.

Thus, the loudness of the laugh track in television series is not only an element of sound design but also an important marker of the cultural adaptation of the media product to the changing type of perception, navigation, and interpretation of the text by the viewer. In the Russian media environment, the reduction in the volume of laughter in sitcoms can be interpreted as a transition

from a patronage model of laughter (where the audience is "indicated" when to laugh) to an egalitarian model (where the viewer interprets the humor independently). This corresponds to the general direction of the development of media culture towards individualization of perception, criticality of the audience, and formal flexibility of media formats.

The question of the perception of the laugh track in the Russian media environment acquires particular relevance in the context of historical and cultural continuity. Soviet laughter culture was formed as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon, closely related to the social, ethical, and artistic representations of its time. Laughter, arising as a reaction to satirical, variety, and cinematographic forms, assumed active interpretation by the viewer, and not a reaction to external audiovisual signals.

In this regard, the laugh track, widespread in the Western tradition of situation comedies, is perceived by the Russian viewer as an element of a different media culture, oriented towards different mechanisms of perception and emotional response. The laugh track in the American television model is used for affective navigation; it marks places intended for laughter, facilitating the process of perception and enhancing the collective effect of involvement.

For a viewer formed within the framework of the Soviet cultural paradigm, such a technique may be perceived as excessive or inorganic. Russian media consumers demonstrate high sensitivity to imposed emotional reactions, preferring emotional autonomy and a subjective position in the perception of humorous content. The laugh track, as a replica of the Western television standard, comes into contradiction with the habitual model of perception of the comic as an act of individual (and not programmable) perception. In this context, laughter acts not only as an emotional reaction but also as a form of cultural self-expression and media subjectivity.

**The Psychology of the Laugh Track: Mechanisms of Perception and Emotional Impact on the Viewer**

According to Owren and Bachorowski (2003), laughter is a form of communication aimed at the induction of affect. That is, it is used not for the passive transmission of information about the emotional state of the laughing person, but for influencing the emotional state of listeners (Owren & Bachorowski, 2003:185-188).

Neurocognitive studies of recent decades show that laughter has the effect

of emotional contagion, activating mirror neurons. The laugh track functions as external cognitive reinforcement, directing the interpretation of the text.

From the point of view of psychology and neurocognitive science, the laugh track performs several functions:

1. **Means of Communication:** People often laugh after spoken words to show friendliness, belonging, and agreement with others, to convey the meaning of what has been said, and to regulate the course of the conversation (Scott et al., 2014: 618-620).

2. **Emotional Contagion**: The phenomenon of mirror neurons explains why laughter, even artificial, causes a response. Thus, according to studies, people are 30 times more likely to laugh in company than alone (Provine, 2004: 215-218).

3. **Simplification of Perception**: Studies show that viewers better remember and understand jokes accompanied by laughter (Wise, 2004: 483-494).

4. **Inclusiveness**: People with autism or perceptual impairments find it easier to navigate in a humorous context (Reddy et al., 2002: 225).

However, there is also critical data regarding the use of the laugh track in cinema and its connection with the phenomenon of interpassivity. Thus, N. E. Zheleznyak notes: "Over time, the viewer may atrophy the ability to gain the experience of their own reflection and subsequent enjoyment. After all, with the help of the laugh track, humor is evaluated for us, emotions are expressed instead of us" (Zheleznyak, 2018:231). Some viewers also consider the laugh track intrusive. Also, his concern about the use of "canned laughter" is expressed by Professor K. E. Marling, in connection with the fact that he considers it a symptom of a decrease in social criticality, which includes both political and commercial messages. "It's a kind of decline of the American ability to think for themselves," he remarks. As B. Mills notes (2009), the rejection of the laugh track has come to be perceived as an indicator of quality in itself (Mills, 2009: 63).

### Conclusion

The laugh track, as a media technology, represents profound differences in the structures of media consumption. In the American tradition, it functions as an invitation to participation, as a form of collective ritual. In Russian culture, it is often marked as an external directive signal, violating the privacy of perception. The

rejection of it in modern Russian projects speaks to a desire for a new media paradigm. The laugh track is increasingly perceived as a metaironic signal: that is, as an object of irony, and not its means. This paradoxical perception undermines its original function and makes it vulnerable to criticism as a relic of an alien television aesthetic.

Although the laugh track is still used in foreign sitcoms, today there is also its gradual disappearance from new comedic formats, especially in streaming services (Netflix, HBO), where preference is given to a more naturalistic and cinematographic style. However, in the mass consciousness, the laugh track remains a part of the cultural code of the "classic sitcom" — a genre deeply inscribed in the everyday rhythm of modern television life.

Thus, the laugh track can be viewed as an indicator not only of genre but also of civilizational differences, recording tectonic shifts in the paradigms of cultural consciousness.

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### Bio Note:

*Nadezhda E. Zheleznyak*, Assistant Professor, Mass Communications Department, RUDN University named after Patrice Lumumba, Miklukho-Maklaya str., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia. ORCID: 0009-0002-4292-7288. E-mail: zheleznyak_ne@pfur.ru.

*Gleb S. Aleshin,* Bachelor student, Department of Advertising and Public Relations, RUDN University named after Patrice Lumumba, Miklukho-Maklaya str., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia. ORCID: 0009-0000-3060-8197. E-mail: 132222916@pfur.ru.