

“I Like the Metamorphosis of the Characters”: Dynamics of Transnational Television Comedy Engagement

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This article contributes to debates on transnational television comedy audiences through analysis of Eastern European audiences' engagement with British television comedy. Using questionnaire and focus group data, it examines the extent and nature of British television comedy engagement by Romanian audiences and the limits of broadcasting British television comedy to Romanian audiences. The research reveals Romanian audiences' high involvement with television comedy. More than half of the participants watch British television comedy. Three themes regarding Romanian audiences' engagement with British television comedy are identified: (1) transnational television comedy aesthetics; (2) transnational television comedy as intellectual comedy; and (3) ethical limits of transnational television comedy. These themes highlight the complex contours of transnational television comedy engagement.

Keywords: transnational television comedy, Romania, audiences, British television comedy

Introduction

Transnationalism refers to “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” and a “condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders . . . certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common—however virtual—arena of activity” (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447; see also Castells, 1996; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1992). Examining the significance of transnational television in facilitating these ties, interactions, and relationships (Chalaby,

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2005; Straubhaar, 2007) has been a key feature of the "analytical turn towards transnational modes of media analysis" (Athique, 2014, p. 7).

Despite this interest in transnationalism, little research focuses on audience engagement with television *comedy* (Bore, 2012; Mills, 2001), and "our knowledge of transnational audiences remains highly fragmented" (Athique, 2014, p. 4). Much of the literature that does exist on television comedy audiences examines U.S. and international audience responses to U.S. television comedy (Alters, 2003; Chitnis, Thombre, Rogers, Singhal, & Sengupta, 2006; Fuller, 1992; Gray, 2006; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Lewis, 1991; Vidmar-Horvat, 2005). However, increasing numbers of studies examine audience engagement with British television comedy. Some of these examine British audience responses to British television comedy (Medhurst, 2007; Mills, 2010), others focus on the understanding of British television comedy by non-British European audiences (Chiaro, 2010), and some focus on both British and other Western European audiences (Bore, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). This article provides a unique contribution to the understanding of transnational television comedy flows by examining *Eastern European* audiences' engagement with British television comedy—more specifically, *Romanian* audiences' engagement.

In applying this approach, this article redresses the recognized imbalance in Eastern European media research. Imre (2009) argues that research on Eastern European media—particularly television—has privileged policy-oriented approaches to the detriment of addressing questions related to program content, ideology, and audiences. Similarly, Bardan (2012) maintains that existing research "read[s] the national public in an abstract, homogeneous way, privileging questions of media regulation and neglecting to address issues of audience engagement" (p. 146). Further, Lemon (2008) recommends that new research on Eastern Europe should "examine 'everyday' life without dismissing its minutiae" (p. 12). In light of such criticisms and recommendations, three important research aims frame this article: (1) to examine the extent of the appeal of transnational British television comedy for Romanian audiences; (2) to analyze the nature of the engagement with transnational British television comedy by Romanian audiences; and (3) to explore the limitations of broadcasting transnational British television comedy to Romania audiences. These aims are addressed via a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis.

Transnational Television Comedy Audience Engagement

Academic and industry debates regarding transnational flows of television comedy are often characterized by assertions that the cultural specificity of many television comedies makes them difficult to export, or that comedy is more difficult to export than other serious genres, such as drama and factual entertainment (see Chiaro, 2010; Humberstone, 2014). The defining principles of comedy may lend themselves to such charges. Consensus exists in comedy and humor studies literature that comic discourse is based on functional principles that are directly opposite to those governing serious discourse (Mulkey, 1988). Features that would be removed from, ignored, or simply not seen in serious television programming—namely, ambiguity, contradictions, and interpretive diversity—are fundamental features in television comedy. Unlike the singularity of interpretation, which is often facilitated by serious television programs, television comedy "depends on the discursive display of opposing interpretive possibilities"

(Mulkay, 1988, p. 26), where everyday commonsense assumptions about the world are turned upside-down or "inside-out" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11), and where the world becomes topsy-turvy—thus making it a more complex discourse to engage with.

Despite these potential difficulties in the transnational flow of television comedy, international trade in television comedy continues (Bore, 2011b), and recently there have been strategic *increases* in the transnational flow of specifically British television comedy into new markets in Eastern Europe (BBC, 2012). Examining the dynamics of audience engagement with transnational television comedy in these newer markets can offer fresh insights into the continuities and differences evident across varying transnational television comedy contexts and deepen our understanding of how comedic discourses operate across divergent contexts. Existing research suggests that it is possible for audiences to appreciate transnational television comedy. This is, however, not a straightforward process, but a process that is complex and intricate. In his review of transnational audience scholarship, Athique (2014) identifies two main theoretical approaches to understanding the features of transnational media engagement literature. The first draws on the importance of the collective identity of individuals, where human differences "operate at the level of language, spiritual belief systems, socializing rituals, kinship structures, moral regulation, cultural performance and formal political organization" (Athique, 2014, p. 7; see also Anderson, 1991) and influence transnational media engagement. The second relates to broader social environmental factors "defined by mutual investments in particular forms of language, faith and customs" (Athique, 2014, p. 11). Audience engagement with transnational television comedy draws across this theoretical spectrum of viewer positionings.

In their comparative analysis of American and Indian viewers' interpretations of the U.S. situation comedy *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004), Chitnis et al. (2006) identified how different cultural positionings of viewers resulted in diverse readings as viewers brought into play their own values, beliefs, and myths when interpreting television comedy. Whereas American viewers regarded *Friends* as presenting overexaggerated moral messages via the comedy (e.g., about safe sex), these messages were deemed acceptable due to their perceived cultural proximity (see Straubhaar, 2007). However, Indian audiences questioned the truth value of the narratives and rejected some of the moral messages circulated in the comedy—these made for uncomfortable viewing due to different cultural norms surrounding sex and sexuality. Yet Indian viewers were more able to relate to the type of friendship group represented in *Friends*, which was regarded as reflecting their own friendship experiences, and they more readily participated in the plot lines than American viewers.

Such findings resonate with Berger's (2010) personal analysis of how his American cultural positioning affected his engagement with the British sketch show *Little Britain* (BBC, 2003–2006). While Berger (2010) regards *Little Britain* as "brilliant and extremely clever" (p. 179), its culturally specific references to British life (e.g., grammar schools) and the comic construction of sexuality (e.g., overt representation of homosexual characters) simultaneously made it a problematic, and tedious, comedy for Berger. In her analysis of how Italian audiences engage with *Little Britain*, Chiaro (2010) illustrates the multiplicity of responses to television comedy, including "negative but funny," "negative but not funny," and "realistic and funny" (pp. 202–204) and highlights the fact that a lack of understanding of the language does not necessarily detract from the amusement experienced. For example, although particular

speech patterns of some of the *Little Britain* characters were difficult to understand by some Italian audience members, they were regarded as funny, with some respondents reporting the characters were "funny even though I couldn't understand" and they enjoyed the "funny speech" (p. 203).

As noted, much of the small body of literature on television comedy engagement has focused on U.S. television comedy. This is perhaps unsurprising given the dominance of U.S. television in transnational television comedy flows (Humberstone, 2014). Such dominance may be partly explained by the generic conventions in British television comedy production in terms of the small number of episodes and series produced per title. As Sarah Tong, sales chief of production company Hat Trick International, argues, "American comedies have 20+ episodes . . . so pitching a six-part British comedy can be hard" (quoted in Humberstone, 2014, para. 21). This means there are fewer opportunities to research British television comedy exports compared to their U.S. counterparts (Chiaro, 2010). This article extends the existing literature by examining how audiences in an underresearched country in media and communication studies—postsocialist Romania—engage with transnational British television comedy. Before we consider the specifics of the data collected, it is useful to outline Romania's broadcasting context.

Transnational Television Comedy in Postsocialist Romania

Toward the end of the 1980s, 22% of Romanians watched television, 43% were regular newspaper readers, and 69% preferred to listen to the radio (Nicolau, 2009). By the mid-2000s, television had become the dominant media in Romania (BBC Monitoring World Media, 2005), with each household in urban Romania owning an average of two televisions (see Popa, 2007). Recent research has found that, of the 7,396 households in Romania, 96% (7,100) are television households, 50% have cable services, and 30% subscribe to satellite services (European Union and European Audiovisual Observatory, 2012).

British television series were first imported to Romania in 1964, when the first agreement between the BBC and the Romanian Committee for Radio and Television was signed (see Mustata, 2012). After the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, which marked the end of the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, public as well as commercial channels began importing British television comedy.² In 2007, for instance, on TVR 1, the most easily accessible public channel, British productions represented 8.82% of programming, whereas on the two competing commercial channels they represented 19.29% on PRO TV and 2.08% on Antena 1 (Popa, 2007, p. 445). Although these are smaller percentages than U.S. productions (which accounted for 73.52% of programming on the public channel, 75.43% on PRO TV, and 89.58% on Antena 1 [Popa, 2007, p. 445]), today British television comedy is more easily available in Romania given that, in addition to public and commercial channels, it is broadcast on newly available cable and satellite channels and on Internet Protocol television (IPTV). Romania is regarded as a new "dynamic and important market" (BBC, 2012, para. 3) for some television comedy broadcasters. BBC Entertainment launched in Romania in 2012, offering "the very best of British comedy and drama from the BBC and

² During Ceaușescu's regime (1965–1989), Romanian television was "part of a powerful propaganda machine" (Jäckel, 2001, p. 131) that restricted the number of television stations in operation and the type and amount of programming available.

leading UK independents" (BBC, 2012, para. 7). This includes *Come Fly With Me*, *Keeping Up Appearances*, *Friday Night Dinner*, and *'Allo, 'Allo!*. Other channels broadcasting British television comedy include HBO (Romania) (e.g., *The Catherine Tate Show*, *Miranda*, and *The Office*) and Comedy Central Extra (Europe) (e.g., *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow*). Further, the wide range of broadcasting platforms providing access to British television comedy offer round-the-clock transmission due to their differing broadcasting schedules.

The authentic flavor of the original television program is retained in the case of imports on Romanian television and cable channels, because subtitling is the audiovisual translation method used in Romania (see Dwyer & Uricaru, 2009; Imre, 2009). Therefore, the actor's individual speech patterns, voice quality, and diction as well as nonverbal aspects (such as tone of voice) and emotive elements (such as cries or laughter) can facilitate audience engagement. This is especially important with television comedy, because the "quality of translation can either make or break a comedy" (Chiaro, 2006, p. 205). Subtitling may be the favored technique in Romania for two distinct yet equally relevant reasons. First, some contemporary Romanian audiences are well versed, and skilled, in reading subtitles while watching events on the television screen so that their attention is not distracted by the reading process. Second, due to the increasing knowledge of English among the Romanian population, some viewers will at least partly grasp the meaning of the original text.³ Subtitles function to guide comprehension rather than depriving the viewer of the opportunity to understand the dialogue independently.

Method

Data Collection

To examine Romanian audiences' engagement with British television comedy, we adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994). A questionnaire was combined with a series of focus groups. A range of attitudinal, behavioral, and experiential questions were included in the questionnaire and focus groups. The questionnaire included open and closed questions about the amount of television comedy watched, the type of British television comedy programs watched and the reasons for doing so (or not), the appeal of British television comedy (or not), and the potential impact of British television comedy on audiences. The questionnaire was administered using a two-pronged approach. The questionnaire was circulated to English-speaking Romanian undergraduate and master's students in the Faculty of Letters at a large university in southeast Romania. An online version of the questionnaire was also administered using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool. Details of the online questionnaire and requests for completion were circulated via social networking sites and discussion lists available to the researchers.

The focus groups sought to examine the appeal, or otherwise, of British television comedy for Romanian audiences, audiences' engagement with British television comedy, and their television comedy preferences. Focus group participants were recruited via their completion of the questionnaire;

³ English is the most widely learned foreign language in Romania. In 2007–2008, 96.5% of upper-secondary students learned English (Eurostat, 2011).

participants indicated upon completion of the questionnaire whether they were willing to participate in a focus group about their (non)engagement with British television comedy.⁴ Three short clips of British television comedies were shown at the beginning of the focus groups to introduce participants to the topic and to facilitate initial discussions.⁵ Questionnaire and focus group data were collected between October 2012 and January 2013.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was administered to gain a broad overview of the trends in British television comedy engagement in Romania. The questionnaire data were analyzed via descriptive statistics, because they are "about the best way to describe or summarise data" (Procter, 2008, p. 369). Focus groups were professionally transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription to facilitate analysis (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003), and they were analyzed via qualitative thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998), which "focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior" (Aronson, 1994, p. 1).⁶

Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire Data

A total of 230 Romanians completed the survey during the data collection period. Respondents included both men and women and spanned a range of age groups, occupations, and places of birth. However, most respondents were women, were between ages 18 and 25, were students, and were born in cities (see Table 1).

⁴ Focus groups were conducted in teaching rooms in the same faculty in which the questionnaire was distributed. Rooms were arranged in an informal manner to counteract the formality of the institutional setting (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998; Kitzinger, 1995).

⁵ Selected clips were from *Mr Bean* (ITV, 1990–1995), *Little Britain*, and *Miranda* (BBC 2009–2013). These programs were selected because questionnaire data indicated that over half of respondents like *Mr Bean*, with fewer citing *Little Britain* and *Miranda* as favorites (see analysis section), and these comedies vary in terms of format and comic techniques.

⁶ Following Fielding and Thomas' (2008) advice, focus groups were digitally recorded (with participant consent). Participants were given pseudonyms during the transcription process to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Category	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Women	154	67
Men	60	26
Not given	16	7
Occupation		
Student	169	73
Information technology	17	7
Nurse	7	3
Teacher	6	3
Financial services	3	1
Manual worker	3	1
Translator	2	1
Academic	2	1
Other	5	2
Not given	16	7
Age group		
18–25	170	74
26–30	16	7
31–40	22	10
41–50	3	1
51–60	2	1
61–70	1	0
Not given	16	7
Place of birth		
City (not capital)	149	65
Town	35	15
Village	24	10
Capital city	6	3
Not given	16	7

A total of 227 participants responded to the question that inquired about the number of hours of television watched per day. Forty-one percent ($n = 92$) watch television for less than 1 hour per day, 49% ($n = 112$) watch between 1 and 3 hours per day, and 8% ($n = 18$) watch television for more than 3 hours per day. One percent of participants ($n = 3$) stated that they did not watch television, and 1% ($n = 2$) reported that they rarely watch television. As shown in Table 2, when asked what types of television programs they usually watch, most viewers (66%) reported watching comedy—thus attesting to the popularity of television comedy among participants. Comedy is closely followed by documentaries (65% of those who answered the question) and news (60%). Given the prevalence of comedy viewing among participants, the findings suggest that the observation made in relation to Romanian television audiences

more than 20 years ago—that "entertainment per se is not yet the greatest importance to the viewing public" (Kligman, 1990, p. 413)—is not wholly applicable to some of the Romanian television audiences who participated in the research.

Table 2. Television Genres Usually Watched by Participants.

Television program type	%	N
Comedy	66	148
Documentaries	65	146
News	60	133
Talk shows	36	80
Reality TV	19	43
Sports	19	42
Game shows	11	25
Soap operas	9	21
Cartoons	5	12
Films	2	5
Music	2	5
Other	3	7
Total number of respondents		223

Note. Multiple answers were permitted.

A total of 216 participants responded to the question that asked about the types of television comedy programs they watch in terms of the program's country of origin. Seventy-four percent ($n = 160$) reported that they watch U.S. television comedy, 63% ($n = 137$) reported that they watch Romanian comedy, 57% ($n = 123$) reported that they watch British comedy, and 8% ($n = 18$) reported that they watch French television comedy. Such findings counter the view that is often held by television industry personnel that locally produced programming "will generally have 50% more viewers than similar foreign fare" (Gubernick, 1997, in Mollison, 1998, p. 136). Further, although such findings demonstrate the dominance of U.S. programs in the global television marketplace (Steemers, 2004), we found that British television comedy has an important role to play in the Romanian television market, given that over half of the participants expressed that they watch British television comedy.

Additional evidence for the importance of British television comedy is manifest in the responses to the question that asked participants to rank Romanian, American, British, and French television comedy in their order of *preference*, where 1 is most preferred and 4 the least preferred. The rating averages for each type of comedy were: British 1.90; American 1.95; Romanian 2.40; and French 3.74. Although there is only a slight difference in the British and American averages, these findings do reveal a preference for British television comedy. Even though such observations would require a larger comparative study to fully substantiate them, they do call into question the view that audiences prefer local over imported programming (Steemers, 2004; Turner, 2009).

Since 1989, Romania's television viewing options have increased (Gross, 1996). This is especially the case in Romania, because the nation does not impose quotas on foreign programming (Downey, 1998). As the figures provided by Popa (2007) cited earlier suggest, U.S. programming has dominated imported television broadcasting in Romania. It may be the case that, as the Romanian mediascape and, inherently, the Romanian audience has been saturated with U.S. programming, some audiences are deliberately moving away from U.S.-produced programming to series produced in different countries, including Britain.

Straubhaar's (2007) "cultural proximity" theory draws attention to the importance of "cultural shareability," which "refers to common values, images, archetypes and themes across cultures that permit programs to flow across cultural boundaries" (p. 201). Cultural proximity is not simply based on "true cultural familiarity but desire or aspiration" (p. 201). Some Romanian audiences' preferences for British television may be explained by the affinity of shared themes and aspirations. For example, British comedy's "obsession" (Medhurst, 2007) with social class, social mobility, and clashes between different social classes may be more relevant to, and connect with, the aspirations and concerns of some audiences living in postsocialist Romania than class representations in U.S. television comedy. Similar relationships were evident in explanations of the appeal of Latin American telenovelas in Eastern Europe. Telenovela themes of family, relationships, and social class mobility linked to the aspirations of Eastern European audiences (Straubhaar, 2007).

Some 222 participants responded to the question that asked how often British television comedy is watched. It was determined that 27% ($n = 61$) watch British television comedy once a week, 8% ($n = 18$) watch occasionally, 7% ($n = 15$) watch twice a week, 2% ($n = 5$) watch daily, and 3% ($n = 7$) watch every other day. Taken together (including "once a month" and "other" responses), 59% of respondents who answered this question watch British television comedy at some point ($n = 132$).⁷ The 41% of the viewers who responded to this question ($n = 90$) never watch British television comedy (see Table 3).

⁷ A 2% discrepancy exists between the numbers of participants reporting that they watch British television comedy when asked in two different questions. When asked about the country of origin of the comedy programs they watch, 57% ($n = 123$) report that they watch British television comedy. When asked about their frequency of viewing British television comedy, 59% ($n = 132$) report that they watch British television comedy at some point. This difference may be explained by the different numbers of participants who skipped each question (14 and 8, respectively).

Table 3. How Often Participants Watch British Television Comedy.

How often British television comedy is watched	%	N
Once a week	27	61
Occasionally	8	18
Twice a week	7	15
Once a month	5	12
Every other day	3	7
Daily	2	5
Never	41	90
Other	6	14
Total number of respondents		222

Of the 123 participants who said they watch British television comedy, 89% answered the question asking them to identify their favorite British television comedy program. Table 4 lists the British television comedy programs that participants said were their favorites. *Mr Bean* is identified as the favorite British television comedy program by over half (54%) of the viewers who responded to this question. This is perhaps unsurprising given that *Mr Bean* "makes little or no use of verbal language" and therefore is "easily exportable and cost-effective" (Chiaro, 2010, p. 185)—these dynamics of transnational television comedy engagement are explored in more detail below. Other British comedies identified as favorites were *Little Britain* and *Benny Hill* (6%) and *My Family* and *Miranda* (2–3%). "Other" responses that were identified by one participant each included *How Not to Live Your Life*, *Monty Python*, and *The IT Crowd*.

Table 4. Participants' Favorite British Television Comedy Programs.

Program	%	N
<i>Mr Bean</i>	54	59
<i>Little Britain</i>	6	7
<i>Benny Hill</i>	6	6
<i>My Family</i>	3	3
<i>Miranda</i>	2	2
Don't have a favorite	5	5
Other	25	27
Total number of respondents		109

The open question that asked participants to justify their choice of favorite British television comedy program yielded a range of reasons. Some of these made reference to the program's emotional and psychological impact on the viewer—for example, "because I want to relax" and "you forget about your everyday routine." Other explanations referred to the quality of the comic performances, such as "Rowan Atkinson is one of England's greatest comedy actors" and "the creativity of the characters." For other respondents, ideological factors framed their preference for particular British television comedy programs. For example, "*Miranda* gives to every comedy-lover a great look into the British women's life, along with the insecurities or problems that she faces." The open question that sought the reasons for

nonengagement with British television comedy equally generated a range of responses, ranging from a lack of time available to watch television to a dislike of British television comedy to a dislike of the British accent. The focus group analysis expands on these qualitative responses. It is to the focus groups that we now turn.

Focus Group Data

Four focus groups were conducted, with a total of 28 participants taking part across the four groups.⁸ The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 5 to 10.⁹ The transcriptions were analyzed thematically, and three main themes were identified across the focus group data: (1) transnational television comedy aesthetics; (2) transnational television comedy as intellectual comedy; and (3) ethical limits of transnational television comedy.

Transnational Television Comedy Aesthetics

Several focus group participants who watch British television comedy expressed its appeal in terms of performance aesthetics. The questionnaire data identified the popularity of British television comedy programs, such as *Mr Bean*, *Little Britain*, *Miranda*, and *Benny Hill*. Some viewers explained the appeal of these comedies due to the particular situations in which the comedy characters are placed and their use of physical comedy. For example, Focus Group 4 (composed of employed 33- to 36-year-olds) described the appeal of *Mr Bean* as follows:

Mihai: How he does everything simple but actually this is the attractiveness, that from an absurd situation when any normal person would have told him to shut up, indulging himself in this absurd situation, absolutely everything that happened after that, had no sense anymore and absolutely all the gestures were hilarious, and in the end that is the climax.

Alexandru: Yes, funny because of the lines and through the situations in which the characters are put.

Alin: With *Mr Bean* for example. You will always remember it, and also others, like when he ruins the painting.

Alexandru: When he ruins the painting, that one is in the movie, yes.

Alin: So this one, you will never forget.

⁸ Twenty-one participants (75%) were women, and seven (25%) were men. Twelve (43%) were aged 18–25 years, 11 (39%) were 31–40, and two (7%) were 51–60. The remaining 3 participants (11%) were equally spread across the 26–30, 41–50, and 61–70 age groups. Fourteen participants (50%) were students (10 undergraduate and 4 master's), and 14 were employed (as legal and health professionals, academics, and government representatives).

⁹ This falls within the recommended number of participants per group—a minimum of 3 (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999) and a maximum of 12 (Krueger, 1994)—and within the recommended number of focus groups per study, which O'Sullivan (2003) argues is three to five.

Alexandru: When he parks the car and how he puts the locker to the car, and throws the wheel inside.

Other focus groups similarly articulated their preference for particular types of British television comedy. When referring to *Miranda*, Simona stated that "the whole situation was pretty funny" (Focus Group 3, composed of five master's students and one academic, ranging in age from 23 to 54). It is precisely the situations that are the most memorable features of the British comedy programs. Participants in Focus Group 4, as evidenced in the exchange above, were clearly able to recall situations in *Mr Bean*, and this was the same for other focus groups. This suggests that some Romanian audiences interpret British television comedy "under an overarching comedy schema" (Snell, 2010, p. 68) that conceptually organizes new television comedy viewing experiences by comparing them to similar prior viewing experiences held in memory. None of the focus group participants had seen the particular *Mr Bean* clip screened at the beginning of the focus group. It is clear that the clip shown and the situation in which *Mr Bean* was placed were compared and related to situations participants could remember from prior viewings.

Given the popularity of *Mr Bean* in Romania, as highlighted in the questionnaire data, and the manner in which focus group participants discuss their responses to *Mr Bean*, we argue that, instead of referring to a general comedy schema with some Romanian audiences, it is more appropriate to refer to a specific *Mr Bean* comedy schema. Such schema may provide the foundations of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) of transnational television comedy audiences. This is facilitated by a collective symbolic imagination based on collective comedy interests and shared comedy memories, which Carrell (1997) refers to as a "humour community."

Similar sentiments were expressed in other focus groups as they discussed the ease with which physical comedy can be interpreted compared to comedy generated from the cultural specificities of language. For example, Focus Group 1 (composed of employed 36- to 61-year-olds) discussed this topic as follows:

Bogdan: I would say *Mr Bean* appeals more to foreign audiences because there's a lot of body language and less dialogue. So through his body language he speaks to everyone. So everyone can understand. While with the other sketches sometimes there are puns that you can't understand on the spot you need some time to process the pun and then it's so quick.

Iulia: And especially if they are culturally marked. And you are not aware of that culture. It makes it difficult to take the gist.

Cristina: Physical appearances are very important so of course it counts as body language but honestly you talk through body language and physical appearance.

Such comments lend support to Sinclair's (1999) analysis of the geography of global television, which highlights the importance of linguistics in setting the parameters in which transnational television can operate. However, it is not English language use per se that hinders engagement for the focus group

participants, but the culturally specific use of puns that require culturally specific knowledge, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), to fully understand the discourses' comic elements (see Schlesinger, 1987).

Participants also described their British television comedy viewing in terms of the sophisticated comic skills of the performers. Marta, in Focus Group 1, explained her preference for *Little Britain*:

I like the metamorphosis of the characters. They manage to completely change physically and to be characters, guys, both of them. And so the villagers, the little things from a region, they manage to completely change, the Indians, they do everything.

Such praise for the characterizations in *Little Britain* sits in opposition to Berger's (2010) interpretation of the *Little Britain* characters as "one-dimensional and hollow" (p. 179). Similar reports of comic pleasure being generated from the comic actors' abilities and skills were made in other focus groups. For example, Focus Group 2 (composed of undergraduate students ranging in age from 19 to 32) included the following discussion:

Ana: I liked very much the attitude of *Mr Bean*, he's a very talented actor. His face is also very funny, his expression and I think that's the first thing that made me prefer that clip.

Dana: I was in a place like that, and I read the book and I wanted to laugh, but someone else was reading other books and studying so I didn't like to, but it was just funny, it was funny and I liked it because I remembered that situation.

Dana explains that she liked the *Mr Bean* clip because she had experienced a similar situation, and this had prompted her memory of the humorous situation. Dana may be interpreted as laughing *with Mr Bean* (rather than *at him*) due to their shared experience and knowledge of similar situations. Comic pleasure derives from the manner in which *Mr Bean* approaches embarrassing or uncomfortable everyday situations, exposes their ridiculousness, and highlights their incongruous characteristics.

This brings to the fore the importance of shared personal experience in determining the engagement of audiences with television comedy. Although focusing on audience engagement with locally produced television comedy (British audiences and *Little Britain*), Mills (2010) also identified how audience readings of television comedy are inflected through individual experiences and ideologies. Further, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) refer to the interpretative frames that are derived largely from personal experience to make sense of the television mediated event. Similarly, Bore's (2009) examination of how British viewers watch the British comedy, *The Office* (BBC, 2001–2003), highlights the importance of verisimilitude and proximity between the situation represented in the comedy and the viewer's own experiences in facilitating comic pleasure. As Double (2005) notes, comedy is "about sharing: shared feelings, shared experiences, creating a sense of community with the audience" (p. 116; see also Bergson, 1911/1999).

Such observations suggest that transnational television comedy significantly intensifies the importance of *symbolic* (as opposed to physical or geographic) markers of belonging and thus blurs the

distinctions between "resident" and "nonresident" audiences (Athique, 2014). As the focus group discussions suggest, although geographically nonresident, some of the Romanian viewers in our study may be considered symbolically resident when engaging with British television comedy as "viewers perceive what is on-screen as showhow [*sic*] coterminous with the society in which they live" (Athique, 2014, p. 10).

Transnational Television Comedy as Intellectual Comedy

A second interesting theme to emerge from the focus group data refers to the way in which British television comedy is perceived as intelligent comedy, which can either facilitate or hinder comic appreciation. This theme was particularly evident when participants made voluntary distinctions between Romanian and British television comedy. For example, in Focus Group 3, this idea was expressed as follows:

Anca: I would describe part of it as being educational, for me.

Facilitator: In what sense educational?

Anca: Well apart from . . . I would like to compare it to a Romanian comedy about, it's sometimes kind of vulgar Romanian comedy. And you don't really hear that when it comes to the British comedy.

Facilitator: You've just heard someone else calling the other person a "fat cow."

Anca: That's not that bad. That's not that bad [laughs]. Yeah.

Valentina: I guess that it's more moderate, I mean compared to ours, which tends to be, we tend to overreact, and to exaggerate some things just to point them out, and sometimes it's too much.

Simona: To me it's complex, very complex. And it seems that it usually is, it has a social or political target. So it's deep, I would say complex and deep. Not very superficial. This is my impression from what I watch. More intellectual.

Anca: More deep.

Similarly, Focus Group 1 described British television comedy as follows:

Dan: Not everybody enjoys this kind of comedy, sometimes there is something intellectual about British comedy. So we have to process it in order to understand it.

Cristina: It's subtler maybe.

Dan: Yes there's something subtle very subtle about, well not all the British comedy. Sometimes the actor produces it without smiling. You have to be quick to catch it.

For some focus group participants there is a clear distinction between the defining features of British and Romanian television comedy. British comedy is perceived as highbrow comedy, characterized by subtlety, complexity, and depth, whereas Romanian comedy is regarded as lowbrow and characterized by vulgarity. This perception of British television comedy as highbrow is applied despite the questionnaire data revealing the different types of British comedy programming watched in Romania, from slapstick sketch comedy (involving props, costumes, and canned laughter) to satirical game shows. Kuipers (2006)

conceptualizes the former as lowbrow comedy and the latter as highbrow. Such comparisons between British and Romanian television comedy made, for example, by Anca, support Mollison's (1998) observation that international television programming in Romania "provide[s] a measuring stick the population can use to critique Romanian-produced news and programming" (p. 139). Regarding British television comedy as highbrow is evident in other European countries. When Italian audiences were asked to describe British comedy, *subtle* and *difficult* were high consensus words (Chiaro, 2010). Further, in her analysis of broadcasting imports in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland from the television buyers' perspective, Kuipers (2011) observes that television production in the United Kingdom is perceived as "typically innovative and highbrow" (p. 551).

Multiple levels of interest in and engagement with transnational television comedy are evident in the focus group data. The above discussions related to humor communities and shared experiences suggest that transnational television comedy choices and involvement are based on proximity. However, the theme of transnational television comedy as intellectual comedy suggests that, for some audiences, diversity, difference, and distance are relevant and appealing (while simultaneously unattractive for other audience members). British comedy that has different production values and joke targets than Romanian television comedy may thus represent a "source of novelty and new ideas" (Straubhaar, 2007, p. 27) for some audience members.

Ethical Limits of Transnational Television Comedy

The first two themes focus on the dominant dimension in television comedy—the comic dimension; the third theme, however, attends to comic displeasure and the potential serious implications of comic representations. The third theme identified in the focus group data involved the notion that participants' enjoyment of British television comedy was tempered by ethical considerations—particularly concerns regarding comic targets and representations that would offend some audiences. For example, when referring to one of the British television comedy clips shown during the focus group—*Little Britain's* "Fat Fighters" sketch—Focus Group 2 discussed the limits of representation as follows:

Marius: It was actually related to, it was more a mockery. People who were fatter wouldn't like this joke.

Facilitator: So who bothered you more, the orange lady or the other lady at the end who made a comment on the fact that the orange lady was fat?

Dalia: The comments.

Agnes: The one at the end bothered us.

Marius: It's not so nice because it's a big insult for fat people and this is not working for all people who watch, maybe there are some fat people who don't like the sketch. I criticize because it wasn't a good joke, they were really criticizing fat people, like you need to give respect to all people, not to be ignorant with them.

Dora: It was the attitude that I didn't like.

Similar comic displeasure was discussed in Focus Group 3 when referring to the same *Little Britain* sketch:

Carina: I think it's a bit awkward to make fun of fat people. It's not always funny. I mean I'm not saying that was not funny, but it's not funny for everyone. That's my opinion.

Gabriela: OK, offensive, it's offensive right? Fat people. I think that she somehow crossed the line, it was just too much to shout at someone "you fat cow!" I mean it was a bit too much I guess.

The discussion surrounding the uncomfortable and problematic representation and treatment of overweight people in *Little Britain* resonates with Mills' (2010) findings related to comic displeasure. Mills acknowledged how comic displeasure is related to questions surrounding the politics of representation. Similarly, for some focus group participants, *Little Britain's* "Fat Fighters" sketch engaged in "mockery" and was "criticizing fat people," which was interpreted as problematic due to the "need to give respect to all people, not to be ignorant with them." Such comic displeasure may be explained by both collective identity and broader social environment factors (Athique, 2014). This reaffirms and illustrates Douglas' (1968) argument that the meaning of a joke depends on several important factors, including the specific text of the joke, the context in which the joke is told, and the joke-telling process.

Straubhaar (2007) highlights the importance of experiencing media encounters through a sense of values shared within a community. Although the primary level of identity for making sense of television is fluid—sometimes it will be gender, other times it will be class, and others ethnicity—it is "most often expressed in terms of religious group identification" (p. 227). Romania is a nonsecular Orthodox country; 86% of focus group participants ($n = 24$) identified themselves as Orthodox. Laughing at someone else's physical appearance or personal characteristics is unlikely to be considered Orthodox or Christian-like. Furthermore, Romania is a normative cultural community that has social rules and agreements about what can be joked about, and laughter about physical appearance is not permitted.

In addition to these broader social environmental, or macro social and cultural, influences on comic dis/pleasure, concerns regarding the potential negative consequences of some British television comedy may be understood at the collective identity, or micro, level. Gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at, is of "relevance in Romania" (Ruch, Proyer, & Popa, 2008, p. 53). In their analysis of the prevalence of gelotophobia in Romania, Ruch et al. found that 13% of Romanian participants expressed gelotophobic tendencies. Further, the statement "controlling oneself strongly not to attract negative attention from others and making a ridiculous impression" achieved the highest number of "strongly agree" responses out of 15 statements that tested for a gelotophobic symptomatology. In light of the popular Romanian saying "Ce ție nu-ți place, altuia nu-i face" ("Don't do to others what you don't want others do to you"), some Romanian audiences may subscribe to the view that they will be laughed at in the future if they laugh at an individual's characteristics, behavior, or misfortune; therefore, by not laughing at others, they are preventing future laughter at themselves. Thus, the (comic) reality demonstrated in transnational television comedies, such as *Little Britain*, is distant from, and uncharacteristic of, their own lived realities.

Conclusion

The research described in this article demonstrates that British television comedy exports are important contributors to the increasingly transnational contemporary televisual landscape, and it illustrates the mobility of television comedy beyond a strictly national framework. The research addresses the lack of research on the international flow of British television comedy and the lack of transnational television audience research in Eastern Europe by revealing the multiple and complex ways in which Romanian viewers engage with British television comedy. Romanian viewers in this study have high involvement with television comedy, and we found a complex combination of personal and social factors that influence—and sometimes hinder—Romanian audiences' engagement with British television comedy. Complex and multiple levels of interest and identification characterize transnational television comedy engagement. Social and cultural proximities and distances are key resources in transnational comedy engagement, as are multiple frames of references linked to shared community values, sensibilities, and identities. Although the transnational flow of television comedy is a complex process, the findings here refute the often-cited claim that comedy does not travel.

The observations of and discussions involving Romanian viewers' engagement with British television comedy have practical application for television industry professionals working in an increasingly globalized television market. They provide a nuanced understanding of which new comedies might sell well to Romanian (and other) television markets in terms of format, style of comedy, and narrative topics, and they provide explanations about why existing transnational television comedies are particularly un/successful. The findings are also valuable for international television executives who are responsible for the transnational flow of entertainment formats more generally—and particularly formats that span genres, such as comedy-drama (or dramedy)—in terms of how transnational audiences may engage with, and make sense of, new series. The findings may encourage television industry personnel to become less cautious and more ambitious in their buying/selling of television series due to television comedy's ability to cross borders and the multiple ways in which global audiences can engage with transnational television comedy.

In the future it will be important to study the experiences of a diverse group of Romanian audiences to provide a more detailed appreciation of transnational television comedy audiences in Romania and Eastern Europe. All participants were proficient in English, and most of the participants, especially those who participated in the focus groups, resided in southeastern Romania. In addition, nearly three-quarters of the questionnaire respondents were students, thus representing well-educated Romanian audiences who may have stronger tastes, dispositions, and opportunities to engage with transnational television. Further, it can be argued that watching television comedy clips during focus groups is an artificial way of viewing television, which can limit the study's significance (see Bore, 2011b). The focus group data do, however, provide initial observations that can stimulate further discussion on this culturally and geographically remote topic. Despite its limitations, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how some Romanian audiences engage with, and perceive, British television comedy. It provides an interesting foundation for future research on how audiences engage with transnational television comedy, in particular, and globally produced television programming in general.

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