



## America's Funniest Home Videos: Family Unity Through Laughter and Bliss

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### Abstract

Since its debut in 1989, the television show *America's Funniest Home Videos (AFHV)*, featuring humorous home video footage of domestic activities submitted by viewers, has demonstrated enormous popularity across the United States and continues to enjoy widespread popularity today. It turned out to be a phenomenal TV program that fostered Americans' passion for watching and producing home videos. However, what is known about the cultural influence of the *AFHV* on family relationships is still in its early stages of investigation. By examining the form and content of the *AFHV* series from 1989 to 1990 through the qualitative lens, this study identifies that the family scenes in the show generate physical togetherness and emotional resonance amongst the viewers' family members. The study also reveals that the show encourages the materialization of authentic familial memory amongst its viewer-producers through the home videomaking process. In addition, the findings demonstrate that the *AFHV* builds intergenerational familial cohesion and satisfaction through collaborative pre-arranged production. As a result, the television show contributes to strengthening relationships among family members and promotes a culture of family unity through laughter and bliss.

**Keywords:** family relationship; home videomaking; media culture; television show; television studies



## 1. Introduction

In 1989, *America's Funniest Home Videos (AFHV)*, a family-oriented television show featuring humorous home video clips of domestic activities submitted by viewers, aired as a special on ABC. It attracted 32.8 million viewers, which encouraged ABC to develop the show into a primetime series in 1990 (McLean, 1989). This turned out to be a phenomenal TV program that fostered Americans' passion for watching and producing home videos. The *AFHV* presented harmonious scenes of a family co-watching the show, amusing video clips of authentic domestic interactions of children, and creative videos co-produced by all family members.

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, a cohort of scholars directed their attention toward this TV program. Through an analysis of the program history, themes, and humor, Steve Fore's (1993) examination of the show's history, themes, and humor contends that it serves as a reflection of broader societal trends and values, such as the ascent of reality television and the democratization of media production. Fore also notes that the show perpetuates certain stereotypes and narratives, particularly concerning gender and family dynamics, which can have negative implications for the viewers. Moreover, Moran (2002) explores how the emergence of VCRs and camcorders transformed the American populace's relationship with media and technology, offering novel prospects for self-expression, community building, and domestic entertainment. Subsequently, Jagodzinski (2003) drew on theoretical frameworks from psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and cultural studies to elucidate the ways in which reality TV reinforces particular cultural values, including consumerism, narcissism, and hyper-individualism. Jagodzinski also argues that reality TV's emphasis on spectacle and the blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres is symptomatic of a larger cultural fascination with the grotesque, the perverse, and the transgressive. Further, a more recent study traces the influence that cultural intermediaries exert on the cultural meanings of nascent technology (Dawson, 2007). For a number of these critics, home video represented a potential technological solution to the aesthetic and moral shortcomings of American commercial television. In 2009, Nicholson's research maps out that the program serves as a form of community-building, connecting spectators across geographic and cultural boundaries through shared experiences of humor and entertainment.



Despite existing research on home videomaking and the TV show as a mirror and a shaper of society in general, what is known about the cultural influence of the *AFHV* specifically on family relationships is still in its early stages of investigation. By examining the form and content of the *AFHV* series from 1989 to 1990 through the qualitative lens, this study identifies that the family scenes in the show generate physical togetherness and emotional resonance amongst the viewers' family members. The study also reveals that the show encourages the materialization of authentic familial memory amongst its viewer-producers through the home videomaking process. In addition, the findings of the study demonstrate that the *AFHV* builds intergenerational familial cohesion and satisfaction through collaborative pre-arranged production. As a result, the television show strengthens the relationships among family members and promotes a culture of family unity through laughter and bliss.

## 2. Methods, Results, and Discussion

Each *AFHV* episode from 1989 to 1990 included a scene of a family watching the show. For instance, in the first episode aired in 1989, right after the trailer, the show presented a family in a place that resembled a living room (see fig. 1) but was, in fact, the show's studio. In this episode, a woman is holding her daughter in her arms and sitting on a rocking chair. The man and his son are sitting side by side on a sofa. While they are all staring at the TV and waiting for the show to continue, the father distributes a plate of snacks to other family members (Bona, 1989). With the rise in popularity of cellphones and personal computers in the late twentieth century, solitary media consumption began to supplant family media consumption, disconnecting family members and leading to a decline in collaborative engagement (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). The scene of a family watching the *AFHV* together indicates a sense of family togetherness and reveals the value of traditional family life emphasized by Ronald Reagan in the 1990s (Spaulding, 2018). According to Albert Bandura's (1977) book *Social Learning Theory*, people observe and imitate other people's behaviors in their environment, including the behaviors shown on television. Hence, the scene of watching the *AFHV* as a family implies that the viewers should bring the whole family together to co-watch the show. It fosters physical togetherness amongst family members. Moreover, as the show reveals universal humor, co-watching the show generates laughter and boosts the sense of happiness for family members of any age. The shared joy turns into a positive emotional resonance, reinforcing relationships and increasing family unity (Fedele, 1994).



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Therefore, by generating physical togetherness and emotional resonance amongst family members, the *AFHV* provided a bonding experience, unifying the whole family.

*Figure 1: Screenshot of a Family Watching America's Funniest Home Videos. The family is watching AFHV in a place that resembles a living room, but they are in the AFHV studio. This scene was documented and aired as part of the AFHV show.*



*Source: America's Funniest Home Videos First Episode (Pilot)*

The *AFHV* featured video clips of reality-based family activities. For example, the first show in 1989 featured a video of a young child playing in a park. In this video clip, the child is climbing off a railing. After getting on the ground, he sees his elder sister and toddles over to her excitedly. However, he does not realize that his sister is on a swing. When he is approaching, she is swinging forward, and her feet become so close that the boy gets a head kick. He falls to the ground, but it is innocuous. The video ends with the sister holding the young child in her arms and patting his back to console him with a smile on her face (see fig. 2), implying harmonious yet affiliative family relationships (Bona, 1989). As the *AFHV* narrator indicates, “Every parent likes to take his child to the park,” it is highly possible that the video maker was the children’s parent (Bona, 1989). The parent adopted the form of a home video to visually document the children’s interactions. The siblings’ common memory of the unexpected, resolvable incident in their childhood was materialized in the home video and can be retrieved in the future. According to José van Dijck (2005), home movies are “objects of memory” that record real domestic events that do not always align with the ideal family portraiture; this constructs “family life as-it-was” moments and thereby connects the family members (p. 27). The “head kick” video reminds the family of the natural humor in the



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siblings' childhoods, just like the big smile on the sister's face. It is also an authentic record of the humorous, caring relationships in family life. As the *AFHV* encouraged viewers to document their everyday activities in their family and send in the clips, it popularized the materialization and preservation of collective familial memory, which keeps the remembrance alive into the future and enhances long-term family relationships.

*Figure 2: Screenshot of Elder Sister Consoling the Young Child. The elder sister is consoling the young child after he fell on the ground.*



*Source: America's Funniest Home Videos First Episode (Pilot)*

The *AFHV* featured not only authentic quotidian family activities, but also familial collaborative performances. For instance, season 1, episode 7 presented a thrilling story. In the video, while an infant is standing alone in the sea, people of all ages are rushing toward the shore. A middle-aged woman onshore who seems to be the infant's mother is beckoning and crying for the infant to come. The repetitive, suspenseful background music suggests that danger is approaching. However, after a few toddling steps toward the shore, the infant stops and seems bewildered. As the music becomes intense, the video reveals that the "danger" is produced by a man playing suspenseful music with a violin (see fig. 3) — there are no real threats (Bona, 1990). The infant seems confused because he is shocked by the man's wetsuit. Given the plot twist and people's coordinated actions, this home video is not a documentary of authentic family life, but rather the family's collaborative creation with pre-arranged plots and deliberate performances. Nicole Matthews' (2002) review of a similar TV show called *You've been framed!* suggested that despite the absence of media professionals in video clip



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production, the clips are far from the “authentic, unmediated voice of ordinary people” (p. 271).

This mirrors the pre-arranged homemade videos in the *AFHV*, in which family members from different generations co-acted and co-produced the plots, especially the scene of people of all ages rushing toward the shore when there is no real threat at all. According to Hannah Spaulding (2018), home video production is a method to close generational gaps and protect domestic life from disconnection. Home videomaking engages the whole family in one activity and boosts family communication, which generates familial cohesion. Furthermore, having their work presented on ABC in front of millions of viewers generates a sense of familial accomplishment and satisfaction. It mediates generational divides by making family members feel positive and fulfilled in their relationships with one another (Wang et al., 2018). Therefore, as the *AFHV* prompted viewer participation in home video creations, it encouraged the whole family to engage in home moviemaking, whether reality-based or creatively pre-arranged, thus strengthening intergenerational family ties.

*Figure 3: Screenshot of a Wetsuit Man Playing the Violin and Following the Infant. The wetsuit man is playing uncanny music with the violin and following the infant.*

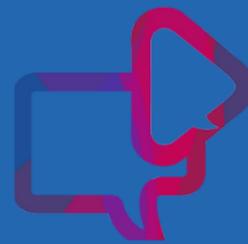


*Source: America's Funniest Home Videos - Episode #AF107 (The Lady Who Falls for a Loop)*



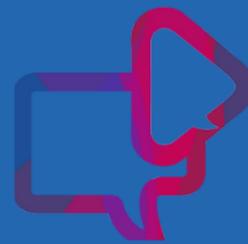
### 3. Conclusion

By examining the form and content of the family scene shown in each episode of the *AFHV*, the video of the siblings' incident featured in the 1989 special, and the collaborative family video production with a plot twist featured in the first episode in 1990, it is evident that the show adopted a humorous, family-driven perspective, easing the issue of families divided by solitary media consumption. Through laughter and pleasure, the *AFHV* promoted family closeness, encouraged preserving familial memories, and simultaneously enhanced family engagement and connections. This offers a unique solution to the issue of solitary media consumption and reinforces the importance of familial bonds within the broader individualist culture of the United States. Therefore, the show prompted stronger familial relationships and facilitated family cohesion as part of the collective culture in the United States. Overall, this study underscores the significant role that popular media can play in shaping social and cultural values. The *AFHV* is not a mere source of entertainment, but also functions as a crucial reflection of broader societal trends and values, particularly around the importance of familial relationships in American culture. As such, this show represents an important cultural artifact that has contributed to shaping the collective consciousness of American communities.



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