

DUNDER MIFFLIN AS THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD: A BECKETTIAN READING OF *THE OFFICE* (US)

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Abstract

This paper examines The Office (US) as a contemporary expression of theatre of the absurd through the lens of Beckett's dramaturgy. It identifies recurring patterns of circular dialogue, purposeless tasks and suspended agency at Dunder Mifflin's Scranton branch as analogous to structural features found in Beckett's stage plays. The study positions the office workplace not merely as sitcom setting but as theatrical site where characters enact repetitive routines that expose the tension between desire for meaning and persistent banality. The theoretical framework draws on principles associated with Samuel Beckett's dramatic practice, emphasizing the breakdown of conventional narrative progression, the performance of existential stasis and the use of humour to unsettle expectations of resolution. Methodologically, the paper conducts close readings of selected episodes across the series' nine seasons, focusing on key interactions that reflect Beckettian features i.e. loops of dialogue that yield little development, tasks that mirror cyclical futility and character dynamics that foreground absence of teleological purpose. Attention is given to character arcs of Michael Scott, Dwight Schrute, Jim Halpert, and Pam Beesly to illustrate how their actions and stasis function as performative gestures rather than progressive growth. The analysis demonstrates that the series consistently foregrounds repetition and deferral of fulfilment, aligning its aesthetic with the characteristics of absurdist theatre without diminishing its genre as television comedy. Principal findings suggest that The Office stages everyday office life in ways that echo Beckett's strategies for dramatizing human efforts to create meaning under conditions of structural indeterminacy. By interpreting the sitcom through Beckettian criteria, the paper reveals how humour and frustration intertwine to produce a form of narrative that invites viewers to recognise familiar patterns of labour, expectation and containment as performances on a broader social stage.

Introduction

This study addresses two closely related questions i.e. How does *The Office* (US) reproduce Beckettian strategies of repetition, stasis and deferred resolution? and How do character performances in *The Office* enact Beckettian modes of subjectivity marked by waiting, failed authority and diminished agency? By placing the long-running American mockumentary sitcom *The Office* (Daniels) within a theatre-of-the-absurd framework, the project proposes a formal and performative reading of the series that moves beyond its usual classification as workplace satire or character comedy. The argument advanced here is not that *The Office* consciously imitates Samuel Beckett, nor that it belongs historically to absurdist theatre, but that its narrative structures and character dynamics resonate in productive ways with Beckettian dramaturgy. Reading the series through Beckett allows for a sharper understanding of how contemporary television comedy stages meaninglessness, routine and endurance within late-capitalist institutional life.

Samuel Beckett's theatre occupies a central position in critical accounts of the theatre of the absurd. As Martin Esslin famously argues, absurd drama emerges from a rejection of linear plot, psychological motivation and coherent resolution, replacing these with repetition, suspension and a pervasive sense of purposelessness (Esslin). Beckett's major plays, particularly *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett) and *Endgame* (Beckett, Endgame), have become touchstones for these formal qualities. In both works, narrative movement is minimal, action is circular and characters persist within conditions they neither control nor fully comprehend. Rather than progressing toward resolution, Beckett's plays repeatedly return to the same

gestures, exchanges and impasses, thereby unsettling the expectation that drama must advance or conclude.

Subsequent Beckett scholarship has refined this understanding by attending closely to form and performance. Mark Nixon's *Samuel Beckett's Library* demonstrates how Beckett systematically dismantles realist dramaturgy through techniques of repetition, spatial confinement and narrative delay, foregrounding theatrical structure over story (Nixon). Ruby Cohn's work, particularly *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, highlights the centrality of humour in this process, showing how Beckett's comedy arises from routine, miscommunication and the persistence of characters who continue speaking and acting despite the absence of progress. For Cohn, Beckett's comedy is not incidental but structural: laughter emerges from recognition of patterns that go nowhere (Cohn). These insights are further supported by S. E. Gontarski's studies of Beckett's performance aesthetics, which emphasize how gesture, timing, and repetition shape meaning on stage independently of plot (Gontarski). Together, these scholars establish Beckettian theatre as a practice defined less by theme than by formal discipline.

Despite the richness of this scholarship, Beckettian absurdism has not been brought into sustained dialogue with television studies. Sitcom criticism has traditionally emphasized genre conventions, audience reception and cultural context. Jason Mittell's work on television genre stresses the importance of repetition and stability in serial forms, noting that television narratives often rely on limited change in order to sustain long-term viewership (Mittell). Similarly, Brett Mills has shown that sitcoms depend upon recurring situations, fixed character traits and spatial containment, all of which resist traditional narrative development (Mills). These insights, while hardly framed in terms of absurdism, point toward formal affinities between sitcom structure and Beckettian dramaturgy.

The Office (US) offers a particularly compelling case for such a reading. Set almost entirely within the enclosed space of the Dunder Mifflin Scranton branch, the series repeatedly stages meetings, tasks and conflicts that lead to minimal consequence. Managerial authority is asserted and undermined in the same gesture, productivity is endlessly discussed yet rarely achieved and character relationships oscillate without clear resolution. Over nine seasons, the series accumulates episodes rather than advancing a coherent narrative arc relying instead on repetition and variation. While scholarship has addressed *The Office* in terms of mockumentary aesthetics and corporate satire, there remains a critical gap concerning its formal logic. Beckettian theatre provides a vocabulary for analysing this logic without reducing it to realism or social commentary alone.

Key terms in this study are used with precision, 'Beckettian strategies' refers to formal techniques identified in Beckett scholarship, including cyclical structure, deferred resolution and the negation of teleological action (Nixon) (Esslin). 'Modes of subjectivity' designates the ways in which characters are shaped by waiting, limited agency and ineffective authority i.e. conditions repeatedly dramatized in Beckett's plays and central to their performative force (Gontarski). These terms are not applied metaphorically to *The Office* but are used to identify specific structural and performative patterns within the series.

Literature Review

The focus of literature will two fold here. It will focus first on academic work on *The Office* (US) as a cultural and media text, and secondly the extensive critical study of Samuel Beckett's theatre and the theatre of the absurd. While at first glance these domains might seem distinct as one rooted in early twentieth-century avant-garde theatre and the other in twenty-first-century American sitcom yet each domain has generated rich commentary that reveals recurring concerns with routine, repetition and human comportment in structurally constrained environments.

The Office (US) has attracted scholarly attention primarily within media studies, organizational communication and cultural critique, often focusing on how the show portrays work, workplace relationships and power dynamics. One of the few rigorous empirical studies on the series situates the show within broader social discourses about workplace behaviour and organizational culture. Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett's "Drama at Dunder Mifflin: Workplace Bullying Discourses on *The Office*" presents a systematic content analysis of 54 episodes, revealing 331 instances of behaviour the authors classify as workplace bullying, ranging from public humiliation to misuse of authority (Erin M. Sumner). They find that these behaviours are scripted for humour and generally lack negative consequences within the narrative framework, thereby normalizing such conduct in fictional portrayal. This research is crucial because it highlights how *The Office* participates in cultural negotiations around aggression and power in workplace settings.

Their study also underscores the ambivalent lens through which *The Office* depicts everyday interactions. By framing bullying as comedic, the show participates in what Sumner calls "mainstream media" patterns that can shape audience perceptions of aggressive behaviour and organizational norms (Erin M. Sumner). This invites reflection on the gap between narrative comedy and social consequence, the series generates laughter out of interactions that, in real workplaces, would be deeply injurious. While this research does not invoke Beckett or absurdist theory, it lays a foundation for considering how comedy and structural constraint intersect in representations of work.

Other academic work on *The Office* explores its pedagogical and cultural implications. A graduate study titled "Representing Work: What *The Office* Teaches us about Creativity and the Organization" examines how the series constructs meanings about labour and organisational life, suggesting that the show offers viewers a conceptual toolkit for understanding contemporary work beyond its narrative humour (Craft). It indicates an interpretive focus on representation, cultural expectations and the implicit lessons embedded in the series. Such work aligns with media studies perspectives that view sitcoms as not merely entertainment but sites where cultural ideals and anxieties about work, identity and authority are performed (Mittell). These critical engagements with *The Office* emphasise its layered representation of workplace life but none explicitly compare its formal strategies to theatrical practices associated with modernist or avant-garde traditions. This absence highlights a gap that a Beckettian framework can productively address while sociological and organisational lenses illuminate power and behaviour, a formal theatre-oriented analysis foregrounds how the series uses structure, repetition and performance to shape meaning.

Parallel to television studies, the body of scholarship on Samuel Beckett and the theatre of the absurd is substantial and deeply theoretical. Martin Esslin's foundational study *The Theatre of the Absurd* situates Beckett alongside continental dramatists such as Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet, arguing that these playwrights reject conventional narrative and resolution in favour of structures that mirror existential questions about meaning and communication. According to Esslin, absurdist drama embodies a reaction to a world that seems devoid of purpose, traditional plot logic gives way to cyclical actions, circular dialogue and situations where "nothing happens" in the conventional sense (Esslin). Beckett's own plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* exemplify these tendencies. His characters often engage in repetitive routines, waiting, speaking and gesturing without clear progression. Beckett's dramaturgy collapses teleological movement in favour of suspended action, making the process of theatre itself a representation of human endurance and contingency (Esslin). Beckett's minimalist stage directions, his reliance on repetition and the stripping away of conventional character psychology foreground the mechanics of performance over narrative causality.

Subsequent scholarship refines Esslin's initial framing. Mark Nixon's *Samuel Beckett: Library* examines how Beckett meticulously restructures dramatic form, undermining realist conventions by emphasising spatial stasis, surface repetition and cadence over developmental drive (Nixon). Nixon shows how Beckett's theatre complicates expectations of progress even as it uses repetition as a compositional principle. Ruby Cohn's work, especially *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, underscores the role of comedy in Beckett's theatrical approach, for Cohn, humour arises not as relief but as an integral form through which repetition and futility are enacted on stage (Cohn). Rather than merely provoking laughter, these moments expose the precariousness of human aspiration. S. E. Gontarski's *The Theatrical Universe of Samuel Beckett* situates these dramaturgical strategies within a broader performance aesthetic, showing how gesture, voice and spatial articulation collaborate to produce a theatre of suspension and recurrence (Gontarski). These elements of repetition, stasis, suspended resolution and fragmented communication constitute what scholars understand as Beckettian strategies i.e. formal devices that mirror existential structures rather than narrative progression.

Critical theory on absurdism also considers language and meaning. Although Esslin's initial work remains influential, later theorists argue that absurdism's disturbance of language and narrative reflects a broader skepticism about communicative coherence and metaphysical purpose. Absurdist characters often collapse into cliché or non-communication, underscoring a disjunction between language and meaning which is a thematic and formal motif central to Beckett's dramatic method. Beckettian theatre's influence has extended into studies of performance and media beyond the stage. For instance, Beckett's minimalist aesthetics have informed analyses of screen adaptations and experimental performances, suggesting that his formal principles resonate beyond traditional theatre contexts. While this research does not directly engage with sitcoms, it underscores the adaptability of Beckett's dramaturgical concerns across media.

The existing literature on *The Office* and Beckettian theatre occupies distinct intellectual territories. One anchored in sociocultural media analysis, the other in theatrical form and existential dramaturgy. Yet both traditions converge in their attention to repetition, routine and the conditions of performance. *The Office* portrays office life as an endless cycle of meetings, tasks and social interactions, while Beckett's characters engage in loops of dialogue and action that resist resolution. Sumner's work illuminates how *The Office* normalises specific workplace behaviours and frames them as humorous rather than consequential (Erin M. Sumner). This normalisation can be read alongside Beckett's disruption of teleological narrative as two different modes of repetition, the former rooted in comedic social representation and the latter in dramatic form. In both cases, repetition structures experience rather than resolves it. While *The Office* uses repetition to generate situational comedy, Beckett uses it to expose the absence of meaning within human action.

Moreover, the mockumentary format of *The Office* acknowledges the camera within the diegesis, creating an ongoing sense of observation and suspension that resembles Beckett's spatial containment. Dunder Mifflin's Scranton branch is a confined environment where character behaviours are endlessly rehearsed and observed, not unlike Beckett's bare stages where action recycles itself and characters remain in place rather than travel toward any narrative destination. This similarity suggests that *The Office* while firmly rooted in sitcom conventions, shares formal affinities with the theatre of the absurd that merit sustained analysis. In this sense, Beckettian strategies can serve as an alternative interpretive lens for *The Office*, complementing sociological and workplace studies approaches. Rather than dismissing the sitcom as mere corporate satire, a Beckettian reading brings into focus how the series' structure embodies its own logic of repetition, suspension and cyclical action. It shifts

critical attention from what the series says about workplace bullying or culture to how it stages these concerns in a way that mirrors broader questions about repetition, agency and the performative limits of narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a Beckettian dramaturgical framework, drawing primarily on critical theories of the theatre of the absurd and performance aesthetics associated with Samuel Beckett. Rather than treating absurdism as a historical movement confined to postwar European theatre, the framework employed here understands Beckettian theatre as a formal and performative logic that is defined by repetition, stasis, deferred resolution and diminished agency. These concepts provide the analytical tools through which *The Office* (US) is examined as a contemporary televisual text that organises meaning through routine rather than progression.

The theoretical foundation of this study begins with Martin Esslin's formulation of the theatre of the absurd. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin defines absurd drama as a response to a perceived collapse of coherent meaning in modern life, characterised by the rejection of linear narrative, causal logic and psychological motivation (Esslin). Rather than presenting conflicts that move toward resolution, absurdist plays often stage situations in which characters persist within repetitive conditions, unable to effect meaningful change. Beckett's theatre occupies a central place in Esslin's account, not because it illustrates absurdity thematically but because it embodies it formally. Esslin's work is essential for understanding how repetition and narrative suspension operate as deliberate aesthetic strategies rather than as failures of dramatic craft. However, later scholarship has cautioned against reducing Beckett's theatre to philosophical allegory alone. This study therefore draws on critics who emphasise form, performance, and structure over existential abstraction.

Mark Nixon's *Samuel Beckett: Library* provides a crucial refinement of Esslin's framework by demonstrating how Beckett systematically dismantles realist dramaturgy through repetition and spatial confinement. Nixon argues that Beckett's plays resist teleological movement not by accident but through careful formal design i.e. scenes repeat with variation, dialogue circles back on itself and time appears suspended rather than linear (Nixon). These strategies produce a theatre in which 'nothing happens' yet performance persists. Repetition, in this sense, is not merely thematic but structural. Actions are repeated precisely because they fail to produce resolution. This insight is central to the present study's reading of *The Office*, where meetings, managerial initiatives and interpersonal conflicts recur without cumulative consequence. By adopting Nixon's emphasis on dramaturgical structure, the analysis treats repetition as a formal principle that organises narrative experience rather than as an indicator of stagnation or lack of creativity.

Spatial stasis further reinforces this logic. Beckett's characters are often confined to enclosed or minimal spaces roadsides, rooms or bare stages that limit movement and reinforce circular action. Nixon notes that such spatial restriction intensifies the sense of suspension, as characters remain physically and narratively contained (Nixon 52). This spatial logic becomes particularly relevant when applied to the fixed setting of the Dunder Mifflin office which functions as a televisual enclosure within which routine is endlessly rehearsed. Ruby Cohn's work provides an essential corrective to readings of Beckett that foreground despair at the expense of humour. In *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, Cohn argues that comedy is not incidental to Beckett's theatre but fundamental to its operation. Beckett's humour emerges from routine, failed communication and the persistence of characters who continue speaking and acting despite the absence of progress (Cohn 10). Laughter arises from recognition rather than resolution.

Cohn's conception of the Beckettian comic is particularly useful for analysing *The Office*, a series that relies heavily on awkward repetition, social discomfort and failed authority for its humour. Rather than positioning comedy as a release from absurdity, Cohn shows that humour often intensifies it. This insight allows the present study to approach *The Office* not as a sitcom that occasionally brushes against absurdity but as a text whose comedy is structurally dependent on the repetition of failure. Cohn's later work, *Back to Beckett*, further emphasises Beckett's commitment to routine as an aesthetic discipline. Beckett's characters do not seek escape from repetition, they endure it. This endurance, rather than rebellion or transformation, defines Beckettian subjectivity (Cohn, *Back to Beckett*). While Esslin and Nixon provide structural frameworks, S. E. Gontarski's work shifts attention toward performance and subjectivity. In *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Gontarski argues that Beckett's characters are defined less by interior psychology than by their position within systems of constraint (Gontarski 30). Authority figures issue commands that fail, tasks are performed without purpose and agency is radically limited. Subjectivity, in this context, is shaped by waiting, endurance and accommodation rather than by decision or action.

This conception of subjectivity is central to the present study's second research question. Characters in *The Office* particularly managerial figures, frequently enact authority that collapses into routine or ridicule. Employees wait for direction that leads nowhere, perform tasks that repeat without accumulation and articulate frustrations that do not alter institutional structures. Gontarski's performance-based model allows these behaviours to be analysed not as individual character flaws but as expressions of structurally diminished agency. Importantly, this framework resists psychological realism. Rather than interpreting characters' actions as expressions of inner motivation, the analysis focuses on what characters do repeatedly and how these repetitions structure meaning over time. This aligns with Beckettian performance aesthetics, where gesture and repetition take precedence over narrative development.

Applying Beckettian theatre theory to a sitcom requires careful justification. This study draws on television genre theory to establish formal compatibility rather than historical equivalence. Jason Mittell argues that television genres are defined by repetition and continuity rather than narrative closure particularly in long-running series (Mittell 19). Brett Mills similarly notes that sitcoms depend on character stability and spatial containment, allowing humour to emerge from variation within repetition (Mills).

These insights support the extension of Beckettian theory to television by demonstrating that repetition and stasis are not anomalies but constitutive features of the medium. What distinguishes *The Office* is the visibility of these features. The mockumentary format foregrounds routine and failure, making repetition explicit rather than concealed within episodic formula. This study therefore adopts Beckettian dramaturgy not as a metaphor but as a formal analytical framework. It does not claim direct influence or intentional borrowing. Instead, it argues that Beckett's theatre provides a precise vocabulary for understanding how *The Office* organises repetition, authority and suspended resolution as aesthetic principles. The theoretical position guiding this analysis is thus interdisciplinary but coherent. It combines absurdist theatre theory (Esslin), Beckettian dramaturgy (Nixon), performance aesthetics (Gontarski) and television genre theory (Mills). Together, these frameworks allow *The Office* to be read as a televisual staging of absurdity where repetition replaces progression and subjectivity is shaped by institutional routine. By grounding the analysis in formal structure rather than thematic analogy, this framework ensures analytical rigour and avoids reductive comparisons. Beckettian theatre is used not to elevate the sitcom but to clarify how its narrative and performative strategies operate.

Analysis and Discussion

This analysis integrates Beckettian dramaturgical theory with close textual analysis of *The Office* (US), focusing primarily on the figure of Michael Scott while situating his performance within a broader ensemble of characters. The analysis proceeds from the premise that *The Office* organises its narrative world through repetition, stasis and suspended authority and formal strategies that closely resemble those identified in Beckett's theatre by Esslin, Nixon, Cohn and Gontarski. Rather than treating these features as shortcomings of sitcom narrative or mere conventions of television comedy, this discussion argues that they function as an aesthetic system through which the series stages modern corporate life as an ongoing performance of absurdity.

Michael Scott occupies a structurally paradoxical position within *The Office*. As regional manager of the Scranton branch, he is formally endowed with authority yet that authority is repeatedly undermined, deferred or rendered ineffective. Beckettian theatre offers a useful vocabulary for understanding this contradiction. In Beckett's plays, figures of authority, Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame* issue commands that fail to produce meaningful change. Their authority persists rhetorically but collapses performatively (Esslin)& (Gontarski). Michael's managerial persona functions in a similar manner. He convenes meetings, announces initiatives and articulates motivational slogans yet these acts rarely result in sustained transformation. Meetings recur with minor variations but outcomes are negligible. From a Beckettian perspective, these repetitions are not narrative filler, they constitute the dramatic logic of the series. As Nixon argues, repetition in Beckett is a formal device that replaces teleological action, creating a theatre in which "doing" substitutes for progress (Nixon 42). Michael's repeated attempts to assert leadership perform authority without securing it.

Crucially, Michael's authority is not negated outright. Like Beckett's figures, he continues to occupy his position despite failure. His persistence mirrors what Cohn identifies as the comic endurance of Beckettian characters, who continue speaking and acting because cessation offers no alternative (Cohn, Samuel Beckett: *The Comic Gamut*). Michael's insistence on being liked, admired and recognised sustains his authority as a performance even when it collapses institutionally. One of the most visible manifestations of Beckettian repetition in *The Office* is the recurrence of meetings. Meetings in the series function less as sites of decision-making than as ritualised performances. They begin, unfold and end with minimal consequence, often returning the office to its initial state. This pattern aligns closely with Beckett's dramaturgy, where scenes often end exactly where they began, reinforcing stasis rather than change (Esslin).

From a television studies perspective, repetition is a constitutive feature of sitcom form. Mills notes that sitcoms depend on stable settings and recurring situations, allowing humour to emerge through variation rather than development (Mills). However, *The Office* foregrounds this repetition by making meetings themselves the object of humour. Michael's insistence on holding meetings despite employee resistance and institutional inefficiency, renders repetition visible rather than invisible. Beckettian theory sharpens this observation. In Beckett's theatre, repetition exposes the futility of action while insisting on its necessity. Characters repeat gestures because stopping would acknowledge the absence of purpose. Similarly, Michael's meetings persist because they are necessary to sustain the illusion of managerial control. This aligns with Gontarski's observation that Beckettian authority survives through repetition rather than efficacy (Gontarski 29).

Language in *The Office* frequently fails to achieve its intended effects. Michael's speeches, jokes and motivational remarks often misfire, producing discomfort rather than cohesion. This pattern resonates with Beckett's systematic disruption of communicative

clarity. Beckett's dialogue, as Cohn notes, often collapses into cliché, redundancy or misunderstanding, foregrounding the limits of language as a vehicle of meaning (Cohn, Back to Beckett). Michael's verbal performances operate in a similar register. He speaks excessively, yet meaning is rarely stabilised. His attempts at humour often alienate rather than connect, his motivational rhetoric produces embarrassment rather than inspiration. Importantly, these communicative failures do not lead to correction. They are repeated, refined and re-performed across episodes. This repetition reinforces Beckett's insight that language in absurd drama does not resolve confusion but perpetuates it.

The mockumentary format intensifies this dynamic. Michael frequently addresses the camera, offering explanations that fail to clarify his actions. These moments resemble Beckett's monologues in which characters speak at length without producing insight or change. As Nixon observes, Beckettian speech often exists to fill time rather than convey information (Nixon 54). Michael's talking head segments function in this way, sustaining performance rather than advancing narrative (Daniels). Waiting is a defining condition of Beckettian theatre. In *Waiting for Godot*, anticipation replaces event, characters wait for something that never arrives (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*). In *The Office*, waiting operates at multiple levels. Employees wait for promotions, raises, recognition or managerial clarity that rarely materialise. Michael himself waits for validation—from his superiors, his employees and the imagined audience of the documentary.

This logic of waiting produces deferred resolution across the series. Narrative arcs are prolonged, delayed or resolved only partially. While some characters experience limited change over time, the core structure of the office remains intact. Mittell notes that television seriality often privileges continuity over closure, allowing narratives to extend indefinitely (Mittell 18). *The Office* amplifies this tendency by embedding waiting into its thematic and formal core. From a Beckettian perspective, waiting is not a passive state but an active form of endurance. Characters fill time through speech, routine and ritual. Michael's constant activity organising parties, inventing games, announcing initiatives serves precisely this function. These acts fill the void created by deferred resolution, sustaining the performance of managerial life without resolving its contradictions.

Michael Scott as Beckettian Subject

Michael's character exemplifies what Gontarski describes as Beckettian subjectivity, a mode of being shaped by constraint rather than autonomy (Gontarski 30). Michael's identity is inseparable from his institutional role, yet he lacks the capacity to transform that role meaningfully. His authority is continually challenged by subordinates, peers, and corporate structures, yet he remains in place. This persistence without progress distinguishes Michael from conventional sitcom protagonists, who often learn lessons or achieve growth. While *The Office* allows for moments of apparent development, Michael's core patterns of behaviour remain remarkably consistent. This consistency is not a failure of character writing; it is a formal choice aligned with the logic of repetition. Cohn's analysis of Beckett's characters is instructive here. She argues that Beckett's figures do not seek escape from repetition but inhabit it, finding comic energy in persistence itself (Cohn, Samuel Beckett: *The Comic Gamut*). Michael's repeated failures are not obstacles to his role; they are the means by which his role is sustained.

Other Characters and Collective Stasis

While Michael is central, the Beckettian logic of *The Office* extends to other characters. Dwight Schrute embodies exaggerated rule-following and rigid adherence to hierarchy, yet his efforts to secure authority repeatedly fail. Like Beckett's subordinate figures, Dwight oscillates between obedience and rebellion without achieving autonomy. Jim Halpert's ironic detachment offers a different mode of Beckettian endurance. His frequent

glances at the camera acknowledge the absurdity of the situation without resolving it. This self-awareness does not enable escape, it merely reframes repetition. Beckett's characters often display a similar awareness of their condition without the capacity to change it (Esslin 47). Pam Beesly's trajectory introduces limited transformation, yet even her development is structured by waiting and delay. Career aspirations are postponed, relationships unfold slowly and moments of agency are constrained by institutional routines. This reinforces the series' broader commitment to deferred resolution.

Workplace Bullying, Normalisation and Repetition

Sumner, Scarduzio, and Daggett's study of workplace bullying in *The Office* provides an empirical lens through which to understand repetition and consequence. Their analysis shows that aggressive behaviours recur frequently and are rarely punished, reinforcing patterns of normalisation (Erin M. Sumner). This absence of consequence aligns with Beckettian dramaturgy, where actions do not accumulate toward moral or narrative resolution. Michael's behaviour often exemplifies this pattern. Insensitive remarks, inappropriate jokes and managerial missteps are repeated without lasting penalty. From a Beckettian perspective, this lack of consequence is not merely comic but structural. It sustains a world in which repetition replaces progression, and endurance substitutes for ethical closure.

Space, Containment and the Office as Stage

Spatial containment is central to Beckett's theatre, where minimal settings intensify repetition and stasis. The Dunder Mifflin office functions in a similar way. Its limited spaces conference room, desks, break room are revisited endlessly, reinforcing a sense of enclosure. As Nixon notes, Beckett's spatial minimalism focuses attention on repetition and gesture rather than movement (Nixon 50). The office thus becomes a stage on which routines are rehearsed rather than resolved. Movement outside the office is rare and narratively marginal. This containment reinforces the Beckettian logic of suspended action. Taken together, these elements position *The Office* as a televisual analogue to Beckettian absurd theatre. Michael Scott's performance of authority, the repetition of meetings and routines, the failure of language and the persistence of waiting all contribute to a dramatic system organised around stasis rather than transformation. This reading does not deny the series' engagement with realism or social commentary. Rather, it argues that Beckettian dramaturgy provides a formal framework for understanding how *The Office* sustains its narrative world across time. By integrating absurdist theatre theory with television studies, this analysis demonstrates that Beckett's insights into repetition, authority, and endurance remain relevant within contemporary media forms.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine *The Office* (US) through a Beckettian dramaturgical framework, guided by two central questions, how the series reproduces Beckettian strategies of repetition, stasis and deferred resolution, and how character performances particularly that of Michael Scott enact modes of subjectivity marked by waiting, failed authority and diminished agency. By integrating absurdist theatre theory with television genre studies and close textual analysis, the research has demonstrated that *The Office* is not simply a workplace comedy that happens to include moments of absurdity, but a sustained televisual structure organised around formal principles long associated with Beckett's theatre.

The analysis has shown that repetition in *The Office* functions as an organising aesthetic rather than a narrative weakness. Meetings that lead nowhere, managerial initiatives that collapse into routine and interpersonal conflicts that reappear with minor variation collectively produce a dramatic system in which continuity replaces progression. This finding aligns closely with Beckettian dramaturgy as theorised by Esslin, Nixon and Cohn where



repetition is not accidental but constitutive of meaning (Esslin). In *The Office*, repetition structures both narrative time and character identity, allowing the series to sustain itself across nine seasons without relying on conventional plot resolution. Michael Scott emerges as the clearest embodiment of this logic. As the analysis has shown, Michael's authority is persistently enacted and persistently undermined. Like Beckett's figures of command Pozzo or Hamm, Michael issues directives, performs leadership and seeks recognition yet his authority rarely produces durable outcomes. Beckettian theory clarifies this paradox by distinguishing between formal authority and performative authority. Michael remains a manager not because his authority is effective but because it is continually rehearsed. This pattern supports Gontarski's argument that Beckettian subjectivity is shaped by endurance rather than agency, by persistence within constraint rather than decisive action (Gontarski 27).

Language plays a crucial role in sustaining this system. Michael's speech, excessive, awkward and frequently inappropriate rarely stabilises meaning. Instead, it produces discomfort, misunderstanding or comic breakdown. As Cohn observes in her analysis of Beckett, language in absurd drama often functions to fill time rather than communicate purpose (Cohn, Back to Beckett). This insight proves especially useful for understanding *The Office* where talking-head interviews, motivational speeches and casual remarks multiply without clarifying intent or resolving conflict. Speech circulates but meaning remains provisional. The study has also demonstrated that waiting operates as a central condition of life within the series. Employees wait for promotions, clarity, recognition or escape while Michael himself waits for validation and affection. This pervasive anticipation mirrors the logic of *Waiting for Godot*, where expectation substitutes for event and endurance becomes the primary mode of being (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*). In *The Office*, waiting is not merely thematic but structural, reinforced by the serial nature of television and the stability of the workplace setting. Mittell's account of television seriality supports this reading by showing how long-running series privilege continuity over closure (Mittell 17).

One of the study's key contributions lies in its rethinking of sitcom form. Building on Mills's argument that sitcoms rely on character stasis and spatial containment (Mills), this research has shown that *The Office* makes these features unusually visible. The mockumentary format foregrounds repetition and failure rather than smoothing them into formula. Characters acknowledge the camera, articulate frustration and yet remain bound to the same institutional routines. Beckettian theory allows these patterns to be read not as narrative inertia but as a coherent aesthetic choice. The ensemble cast further reinforces this logic. Dwight Schrute's exaggerated obedience and repeated failures, Jim Halpert's ironic detachment and Pam Beesly's delayed and partial development all contribute to a collective condition of stasis. While some characters experience limited change, the structural conditions of the office remain intact. This reinforces Esslin's claim that absurd drama does not resolve conflict but sustains it through repetition (Esslin 52). The office itself functions as a Beckettian enclosure, a space in which movement is restricted, action circulates, and escape remains provisional.

The study's engagement with existing scholarship on *The Office* also yields important implications. Research on workplace bullying demonstrates that aggressive and inappropriate behaviours recur without lasting consequence, reinforcing cycles of normalisation (Erin M. Sumner). Beckettian dramaturgy helps explain why such behaviours persist narratively as consequence would introduce progression while repetition sustains the absurd structure. This does not excuse the behaviours but situates them within a formal system that privileges endurance over resolution. The theoretical implications of this study extend beyond *The Office*. By treating Beckettian theatre as a transferable formal logic rather than a historically

fixed movement, the research demonstrates how absurdist dramaturgy can illuminate contemporary media forms. Beckett's theatre, as Nixon and Gontarski have shown, is less concerned with philosophical doctrine than with structure, rhythm and performance (Nixon 52). These concerns remain relevant in an era of serial television, where repetition and suspension are not anomalies but norms.

At the same time, the study recognises its methodological limits. Applying theatre theory to a televisual corpus requires caution. This research has avoided claims of direct influence or authorial intention, focusing instead on formal comparability. Nevertheless, differences between stage and screen remain significant. Television's industrial conditions, audience expectations and serial rhythms introduce variables that Beckettian theatre theory cannot fully account for. Moreover, the analysis has relied on close reading rather than audience reception or production studies, leaving questions about viewer interpretation and creative intention open. These limitations point toward productive avenues for further research. Comparative studies may examine other workplace comedies or mockumentary series through similar frameworks, testing the reach of Beckettian dramaturgy across television genres. Audience studies might explore whether viewers experience *The Office's* repetition as comfort, frustration or both. Finally, transnational comparisons between the US and UK versions of *The Office*, for example may reveal how cultural context reshapes the performance of absurdity.

In conclusion, this study has argued that *The Office* (US) operates through a Beckettian logic of repetition, stasis and diminished agency, with Michael Scott functioning as the central figure through whom this logic is most clearly staged. By integrating absurdist theatre theory with television studies, the research has shown that Beckett's insights into repetition, authority, and endurance remain vital for understanding contemporary narrative forms. *The Office* emerges not as a narrative of progress or reform, but as a sustained performance of corporate absurdity, where routine replaces resolution and persistence becomes the dominant mode of survival.

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