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Ilaria DeAngelis

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Communication Studies: Advertising and PR

Professor Bindig

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Friends

TV shows, especially nowadays, have an incredible way of bringing people together and often times is used as an amazing escape from a viewer's own real world to spend a half hour or an hour invested in someone else's world. The text that I decided to choose was a TV show that I, as well as many others, often use as my escape to just relax and laugh at, and that TV show is the hit series, *Friends*.

For 10 straight years, *Friends* brought thousands of Americans together with its hilarious and relatable characters, Rachel, Ross, Monica, Chandler, Joey, and Phoebe. The show ended 13 years ago and still remains timeless with its humorous situations that the characters found themselves in, and even though each episode ended with some sort of resolution, it still left the viewers wanting more. This is something that can be confidently said to be true about the viewer audience, which has caused it to be a fan favorite TV show for years now.

Friends first premiered on September 22, 1994 and went on until May 6, 2004, getting in a full 10 seasons (Wikipedia). The show aired on NBC and was produced by Bright/Kauffman/Crane production companies under executive producers David Crane, Martha Kauffman, and Kevin Bright. The show began after Crane and Kauffman's show *Family Album*

was cancelled in 1993 by CBS (Wikipedia). At this point, they were concerned for their future and were hitting a low point in their careers. It was here where they decided to pitch a pilot about six, 20-something year olds making their way in 1990's Manhattan. From there, they pitched the idea to Kevin Bright, who began working on the project with Crane and Kauffman.

The uniqueness and notability of *Friends* has to do a lot with the characters themselves. Each character has a very different personality that is evident in all 10 seasons, and the characters are portrayed in a way that truly connects with members of the audience. Each character goes through long lists of relatable scenarios, such as love interests, heart break, career stress, and family conflicts. The aspect of this show that I love the most is that although it is very much a comedy, there are points where the viewer feels emotional connections to the characters when they are going through something difficult or if something that they have been working towards finally pays off. It has a very real-life feel where it's not happy-go-lucky all the time for these characters, and that is what sustains the show and makes you want to watch it over and over.

Friends ranked incredibly well during its 10-year run. From season 2 on, the show was ranked number 5 or below, taking the number 1 spot at season 8 (Wikipedia). With great rankings came many nominations and awards to follow. *Friends* was nominated for a total of 62 Emmy Awards and they won six of them (Wikipedia). The lead characters were all nominated for Emmy's as well with the exception of Courtney Cox, who played Monica. Jennifer Aniston, who played Rachel, and Lisa Kudrow, who played Phoebe, were the two to actually win Emmy's for their characters. Other notable award wins for *Friends* were the American Comedy Award, GLAAD Media Award, Golden Globe Award, Satellite Award, Screen Actors Guild Award, three Logie Awards, and six People's Choice Awards (IMDb).

Soon after *Friends* ended in 2004, a spin-off show called *Joey* began. This show was meant to be a continuation of the life of the *Friends* character Joey Tribbiani, but the show only ran for two seasons due to poor ratings (Wikipedia). Despite the failure of this show, *Friends* carried on to be an incredibly popular show even today, and will be for years to come.

What goes into creating a television show takes a great amount of work from producers as well as the effects of the media industry. The show *Friends* took a large team to put together, and the show wouldn't have been the same continued success that it was if it hadn't been for the efforts on the production side of the show.

Friends' production company, Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions, did not go on to create many more series besides *Friends* and the spin-off *Joey*. The only other notable series that this particular production team created were *Veronica's Closet* and *Jesse* (Friends Wiki), with *Friends* being the only true hit from this production company. However, Bright/Kauffman/Crane is owned by Warner Brother Studios, which is owned by the media giant Time Warner, showing a perfect example of vertical integration, which is done "by owning different stages of production and distribution" (Croteau and Hoynes).

In terms of horizontal integration, Warner Brothers owns the rights to several subdivisions, including Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment, Television, Animation, Home Video, Digital Networks, Consumer Products, Theatre Ventures, Studio Facilities, and WaterTower Music (Warner Brothers Wikipedia). Also with the fact that Warner Brothers is a "global leader in the creation, production, distribution, licensing and marketing of all forms of entertainment and their related businesses" (Warner Brothers), the company has immersed itself in globalization to market itself worldwide. This idea of globalization can also be connected with the network that aired *Friends*, which is NBC, which is also a global entity (Friends Wikipedia).

In terms of *Friends* itself on the global map, the show aired in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and India (Friends Wikipedia).

Warner Brothers went through several mergers since its founding in 1923. “The 1990s was a seminal decade for the Studio, starting with the 1990 merger of Warner Communications Inc. and Time Inc. to form Time Warner Inc., one of the world’s largest communications and entertainment companies” (Warner Brothers). This was also the decade where *Friends* was created, so this was pivotal for both Warner Brothers and the production of *Friends*, which began in 1994.

The most recent merger news involving Warner Brothers has to do with the AT&T/Time Warner merger, which reached its deal on October 22, 2016 (Warner Brothers Wikipedia). “The merger would bring Time Warner's properties, including Warner Bros., under the same umbrella as AT&T's telecommunication holdings, including satellite provider DirecTV” (Warner Brothers Wikipedia).

Both of these mergers are an example of growth, which is where “mergers and buyouts have made media corporations bigger than ever” (Croteau and Hoynes). The combination of Warner Communications Inc. and Time Inc. was the cause that created one of the biggest media giants in the world. From this, Time Warner was able to become even greater when merging all of their properties to AT&T’s. Mergers like these combine the separate company’s assets and allows the companies to grow and become something greater and more powerful than they already were.

Friends’ three executive producers, Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman, and David Crane, would be considered the key players in *Friends*’ success and development. The three of them then brought the idea to Warren Littlefield, the then-president of NBC Entertainment (Friends

Wikipedia). The idea for their show, originally titled *Insomnia Café*, was picked up and they began to write a pilot. “Littlefield wanted the series to represent Generation X and explore a new kind of tribal bonding, but the trio did not share his vision. Crane argued that it was not a series for one generation, and wanted to produce a series that everyone would enjoy watching” (Friends Wikipedia). Other titles for the show included *Six of One* and *Friends Like Us*, before they decided to settle on a simple title, which was *Friends*.

Friends is known to many as your typical television sitcom, so it plays in well to genre conventions that we commonly see. It should also be noted that *Friends* falls under a designation described by author John Ellis as a serial, as opposed to a series. “One of the key differences, it seemed then, was the series’ use of the self-contained episodes with relatively autonomous plotlines as against the serial’s use of the continuing storylines with characters who learned from episode to episode. Today, there are elements of the serial in many of what the industry would regard as series: US sitcoms such as *Friends*....” (Creeber).

Along the same lines as genre, Kellner explains how *Friends* can also be distinguished by semiotics. “Situation comedies, for instance, classically follow a conflict/resolution model that demonstrates how to solve certain social problems with correct actions and values, and they thus provide morality tales of proper and improper behavior” (Kellner). *Friends* follows this manner exactly, with each episode presenting some sort of conflict that is more often than not solved by the end of the episode, all done in a very comedic way that doesn’t seriously concern the audience, in the way that a soap opera or serious drama would. *Friends* was cut out and produced to be a comedy about six twenty-something year olds living in New York City, and the result was to build on that premise to create a show that was not only relatable to the audience, but also kept them laughing the whole time, and that is exactly what *Friends* delivered in its 10 years on

the air.

One of the greatest things about the TV show *Friends* is that every character is important to the show in one way or another. So many central aspects of each character are relatable in some way to the audience watching, which even allowed for the characters to become inspirational figures to those who watched them. This is clear to understand and break down with an explanation of each character, and why each are so important to this text.

With every one of the main characters of *Friends* being central to the plot of the show, it is nearly impossible to figure out who the “central” character is to the show. That being said, a large part of the show revolved around the relationship between characters Rachel and Ross. Rachel ran out on her wedding day in the first episode and from there decides to begin her own, independent lifestyle without any assistance from a husband or her wealthy parents. As the show progressed, we see Rachel grow from a spoiled girl who barely got by as a waitress at a coffee house to a career-driven, Ralph Lauren marketing executive. She had an on-again, off-again relationship with Ross throughout the seasons, but the trajectory of how Rachel grew as a person was very prevalent throughout the whole show. Ross, on the other hand, started out as a paleontologist at the Museum of Natural History and later moved on to work as a paleontology professor at NYU. Ross was truly someone who knew what he wanted from his career. He comically got married and divorced three times throughout the ten seasons, but was seen as a sweet, caring man who had feelings for Rachel ever since they were in high school together. The audience was taken on a roller coaster ride with their relationship, as they date and breakup several times throughout the course of the show until they finally end up back together again in the show’s finale.

The other main characters are just as crucial to the text, however. Monica, whom Rachel

moves in with, is a chef at several different restaurants in Manhattan during the ten years, who is seen as a little up-tight and a compulsive cleaner, but very caring and a great friend at the same time. Chandler, a business professional, started out by living across the hall but later in the show dates, moves in with, and marries Monica. He is viewed as the jokester of the group who had issues for years with successfully holding a relationship until he dates Monica and truly grows as a person once he gets into a relationship with her. Joey, a struggling actor, lived with Chandler for about half of the show before Chandler moved in with Monica, and was always viewed as the ladies' man but when it came to his friends, he would take a bullet for any one of them. Phoebe was Monica's old roommate who came from a rough family background and had to fend for herself at a young age. In the show, she is represented as the free spirited, guitar-playing, hippie-like personality of the group that cares a great deal for each one of them.

In accordance with each character's personality and characteristics, a lot of typical 1990's style was apparent in *Friends*, and can specifically be related to the sexualization of the female leads. "For almost a decade between the mid-1990's and the mid-2000's, revealing the midriff was central to young women's fashion in the West, with low hung hipster jeans and cropped or belly top..." (Gill 256). When taking notice of the fashion of *Friends*, especially in the earlier seasons, we see a good deal of this sort of 90's sexualization in Rachel mostly. She was always known to audience members for the whole duration of the show as the "fashionista" and someone everyone aspired to be looks-wise, and although none of the characters were ever inappropriately exposed with their clothing, they tended to have Rachel wear shorter, skimpier clothes in the early seasons of *Friends* when she worked at the coffee shop.

Although each of the characters are different in their own way, they all support historical trends in representation in one way or another. In the show itself, we see six, white, straight,

twenty-something year olds living considerably well in New York City, and this would be seen as the “respect” stage of representation, where “members of the social group are presented in the complete range of roles, both positive and negative, that their members actually occupy in real life” (Hart 598). However, Phoebe spoke several times in the show about how she came from a difficult background and barely had parents while she was growing up and was living by herself by the time she was fourteen, but there were never any flashbacks or representations of the time where she was barely getting by as a teenager, so this scenario could be represented as the “non-recognition” stage, which simply “does not appear at all in media offerings” (Hart 598). Both Joey and Phoebe could be labeled under the “ridicule” stage as well, as they are both seen sometimes as slow or not all there at times, as Hart describes this stage as “its members are frequently presented as being ‘buffoons’” (Hart 598).

In addition to this matter of non-recognition, it is important to realize that with *Friends* featuring an all-white, straight cast, there was no representation of any lead characters of color or members of the LGBTQ community. Although there is no representation of these kinds of characters in the lead cast, Ross’ ex-wife Carol and her lesbian lover Susan are featured several times throughout the series, mostly appearing in seasons 1 through 3. Both Joey and Ross also briefly date a black female character named Charlie in seasons 9 and 10, but this was really one of the only times where the viewer actually saw a character of color represented in *Friends*. “The character of Charlie was created in part to counter criticism the *Friends* production staff had received for featuring too few characters played by ethnic minority actors. Aisha Tyler (Charlie) was only the second major supporting character to be portrayed by a black actress,” (List of Friends Characters Wikipedia). This aspect of the show is rather ironic considering *Friends* is set in New York City, which is known to be one of the most diverse places in the world.

One particular episode of *Friends* portrays the notion of ideologies of class very well. As said before, for a good part of the show, the six friends lived comfortably in terms of having enough money. But this wasn't always the case at the start of the show. An episode from season 2, titled "The One With Five Steaks And An Eggplant" is about the friends becoming slightly divided by the issue of money. Monica, Chandler, and Ross all had well-paying, steady jobs, while Phoebe's, Rachel's, and Joey's jobs didn't pay as much and weren't as steady income-wise at the time. The ideologies of class "celebrate upper-class life and denigrate the working class" (Kellner 9), and this is seen when the friends get into a fight in this episode because Monica, Chandler, and Ross don't want to feel held back because their other friends can't afford things that they can afford, such as going out to nice dinners or paying for expensive concert tickets. The consequence of this ideology in this episode causes a divide between the six friends, as they talk about each other behind each other's backs before confronting each other about their problems and how to solve them. The issue resolve itself by the end of the episode when they all maturely talk out their issues, and come together to console Monica, who ends up actually getting fired at the end of the episode.

Semiotics of situation comedies also applies to this particular *Friends* episode. In this episode, although the friends reach an impasse in their friendship in realizing that they all make different amounts of money which may limit some of their spending habits, they come up with a resolution at the end of the episode, realize where they went wrong, and display the proper actions in dealing with friendship issues.

The manner in which an audience reacts to a show is truly a testament as to how successful the show will be. When discussing *Friends* with a group of peers, it was clear to see how a show which ended 13 years ago can still have such an effect on today's viewer audience.

The participants that I chose for this interview were three girls, Andrea, Kim, and Taylor, all of which are Sacred Heart students between the ages of 18 and 20, and all three of them are members of my sorority, Alpha Delta Pi. I chose a female demographic from the Sacred Heart community because I am well aware that *Friends* is still a very popular show amongst this young age group, especially among women, and that these students would have a great amount of insight on the show if it were to be discussed. This focus group was conducted in a private study room in the Sacred Heart library. All three of the girls met up with me at the same time and we had a discussion that lasted a little over 20 minutes where they answered all of the face-to-face analysis questions prompted for this assignment.

With so much being discussed about *Friends*, several important key themes from the show emerged within our conversation. It was evident from each participants' responses that *Friends* is a relatable show to most if not everyone who watches it, especially in terms of the participants' own friend groups. One of the participants, Kim, described her own friend group's dynamic as "quirky and crazy" in a very similar way to the characters on *Friends*, and that she and her two other friends possess similar qualities to the three female leads, Phoebe, Monica, and Rachel. It should also be noted that the theme of the strong, friend group dynamic was very prevalent in both the show and the participants' responses. Andrea said that she really admired the strength of the *Friends* characters and that she wished that her own friend group was a cohesive in the way that the characters were. Taylor added to this by pointing out how all of the characters have each other's backs through everything, and that they truly model what a strong friend group should look like.

This discussion of the dynamic of the show brought to light the connection of situation comedy genre analysis, which was something that was unveiled by this discussion as to why

Friends is such a relatable show. “*Friends* could be said to participate in the genres ‘television programme’, ‘television series’, ‘fictional narrative’, ‘comedy’, ‘situation comedy’, and so on....” (Creeber 5). With *Friends* primarily being known as a sitcom, there are many ways to interpret the genre of situation comedy in relation to understanding this form of media. As said by Creeber, “this attempt to offer a more complex form of genre interpretation has recently been continued by critics like Jason Mittell, whose work on television aims to take the study of genre beyond the limits of the text (Creeber 2).

All three of the subjects agreed on almost everything that was discussed in this focus group. They all said, at one point or another, that the appeal of *Friends* stems from the fact that it is so easy to watch, in the sense that it’s not a show where you have to watch each episode in chronological order to be able to understand everything that is going on. Kim brought up how she has tried watching other series of shows in the past, such as *The Fosters*, but shows like these aren’t as easy to keep up with in terms of their complex plots. Taylor agreed with this as she added that *Friends* is truly the “go-to” TV show, one that you can never get bored from. Each of the participants admitted to watching the show on an almost daily basis, enough for each of them to be able to spontaneously quote the show if something in their lives was relatable to a specific situation from *Friends*. This idea of what it means to be a true TV show or movie “fan” connects to the Jenkins reading, where he states, “one becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity” (Jenkins 70-71). By not only viewing the show on their own, but sharing their love for the show with others that they are close with, these participants truly embodied the role of being sincere fans of *Friends*.

As it was clear from the participants’ responses that *Friends* is a show that can be

watched at ease, the sense of relaxation and escape brought about from *Friends* relates closely to the Radway reading. This reading specifically discussed romance novels as a sense of “escape and relaxation as their (the Smithtown women’s) goal” (Radway 59). Although *Friends* is not a romance novel, romance does play a large factor in the show in accordance to the characters’ relationships, which adds to the appeal and interest in the show. The participants also touched on the romance factor of *Friends* several times during this discussion, primarily concerning the Ross and Rachel on-again, off-again romance.

Although there were many areas of similar views on the show, the participants had a few differing viewpoints on the show as a whole. These differing views from each of the participants can also be considered criticism on certain areas of the show. For example, the question asking the participants what they liked the least about *Friends* and what they would change about the show ranged from saying that they wouldn’t change anything to specific examples of instances within the show that could have been left out. Andrea said she wished that the show never ended and although she wouldn’t change anything about the show itself, she continues to hope for some sort of a reunion that would answer lingering post-finale questions. Questions such as, “do Ross and Rachel actually end up working out?” “Do they have more kids?” are just mere examples of many questions that Andrea and many other fans still have post-finale. Although Taylor wondered similar questions about how the world of *Friends* would be after the finale, she added in saying she wished that Ross and Rachel got back together a little sooner than the very last episode of the series. She believed that them getting back together so late in the show left so many unanswered questions like the ones that Andrea mentioned prior. As for Kim, she explained how she wasn’t a fan of some of the pointless, poor decisions made by some of the characters. As an example, she brought up a situation in the show where there was an exchange

between Monica and Rachel about what to name Rachel's baby, which Kim felt was very predictable. She also did not like the incessant, petty fights between Ross and Rachel immediately following their break-up, where they purposefully tried to make the other jealous.

As a show that is not currently on the air and hasn't been for a number of years, it was clearly demonstrated through this focus group that *Friends* is still a very prevalent show which still remains popular amongst various age groups. All three of these girls who participated in this discussion weren't alive when the show premiered and were very young children when the show ended. Even still, all of the participants agreed that *Friends* is definitely considered one of their favorite shows and love the fact that *Friends* is an easy watch, where it's not essential for the viewer to watch every episode from season 1 to season 10 in order. This feedback serves as a strong testament that *Friends* is and will always be a timeless show, from the comedy to the loveable group dynamic. The fact that the show has continued to hold the interest of a younger generation who can't even really reminisce on when *Friends* was actually on the air is a major achievement by the producers, writers, and actors of the show. *Friends* continues to be the show that makes its audience members burst out laughing and draw people of all ages together, which has allowed audience members to appreciate it years after its end.

When looking at every angle of *Friends*, it is clear to see how every aspect of political, textual, and audience analyses contribute to the production and success of *Friends* as a whole. The analysis of political economy showed how important Time Warner and Warner Brothers were in terms of being a vertical integration point for Bright/Kauffman/Crane to be able to successfully pull off the production of *Friends*. Having such large media giants be the owners of one's production company gives the production team incredible benefits when producing a show. The growth of Time Warner and Warner Brothers in terms of mergers throughout the years,

especially the Warner Communications Inc. and Time Inc. merger in 1990, has been proven to be important prior to the creation of *Friends*. In terms of representation, although a very small portion of diversity was represented in *Friends*, it allowed for extensive analysis on all of the groups that were not represented, such as characters of color or members of the LGBTQ community. *Friends* even received open criticism on the fact that there were few to no black cast members in the show at all, which was something that they should have realized when initially casting the show. Even with this lack of diversity that should have been addressed in a better way, *Friends* still received rave reviews from both TV critics as well as audience members.

In connection to reviews from the audience, the audience analysis I conducted myself seemed to have accurate reviews to how a larger population of audience members viewed the show. The girls that were interviewed actively still watched the show and could speak in a broad manner on many aspects about the show, from the characters' personalities to the situations that occurred within the show. This is an extremely positive thing that the audience members feel this way and have such a strong love for the show. After all, it is the hope for every production team that the audience feels connected to the show in one way or another to maintain a strong viewer audience, especially one that will continue to reminisce on the show for years after the show's finale, which is exactly what happened with *Friends*.

Understanding every area of the TV show *Friends* represents the larger connection to what it means to study and understand media theory. Every aspect discussed in terms of analyses of *Friends* can be true and relevant for any form of media work, be it a TV show, movie, or even an advertisement. By going in depth and truly understanding why a form of media such as a TV show is developed the way that it is helps us as viewers to become more knowledgeable on a show on a level that exceeds simply understanding the plot. By learning how to deconstruct a

particular media work gives us the ability to analyze anything media-related that we see in our everyday lives and gives us a greater understanding of everything media in the world around us.

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