RESEARCH ARTICLE

Could it *be* any better? - Why F.R.I.E.N.D.S never loses its charm

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ABSTRACT

Friends is perhaps one of the most popular TV shows ever aired. Spanning from 1995 to 2004, the series ran on NBC for ten seasons. The show portrayed the lives of six friends (Monica, Phoebe, Rachel, Ross, Chandler, and Joey) in New York City, and the different issues they faced while growing from their early twenties to their early thirties: life, love and relationships, work, and so on made part of the different episodes throughout these ten seasons. This paper is an attempt to study the reasons why the series still have an influence on a wide spectrum of audience.

Various aspects can be attributed to the success and the vast amount of viewers claimed by the show. The life of major characters of the sitcom can be seen as a cross-section of a working class society. The viewers could easily associate themselves with one of the characters, and such an identification with on-screen characters takes place in various aspects- with respect to gender, occupation, personal traits, cultural backgrounds and so on. The multiple aspects with which such a viewer-character association is made itself can be seen as a reason of immediate success of *Friends*.

Keywords: Cultural studies, character identification, popular culture, media and television

It is not so common for a television series to be appraised and binge-watched again and again over decades, but *Friends* proved it was possible. The show, created by Marta Kauffman and David Crane, aired from 1994-2004 on NBC. As the series progressed, reviews became more positive, and Friends became one of the most popular sitcoms of its time. It is now often ranked among the all-time best TV shows.

Although the producers thought of *Friends* as only a typical TV show, psychologists has investigated the cultural impact of *Friends* during the series's run and found that the series has created an impact far from that of a 'typical' show. Aniston's hairstyle was nicknamed "The Rachel" after the character that she represented in the show and was copied around the world. Joey's catchphrase, "How you doin'?", became a popular English slang, to be re-quoted by generations. The series also influenced the English language, according to a study by the University of Toronto that found that the characters used the emphasized word "so" to modify adjectives more often than any other intensifier. This was derived from the character of

Chandler, who used it convincingly in his dialogues. Chandler's habit of ending a sentence unfinished for sarcasm also influenced viewers' speech.

Friends follows a group of six people in their late twenties living in New York City working, dating and growing up. What is more special about the show is the fact that though there is no texting, 'googling', tweeting, mobile phones or overly complicated plot-lines and themes, the show creates a spontaneous vibe in the viewers, whoever they may be. This paper is an attempt to study the reasons for the impressive popularity enjoyed by the show, by studying how various aspects of character identification have contributed to the same.

Taking on a character's perspective allows us to see the world through his or her eyes, feeling their feelings and adopting the character's goals, thus leading to identification with the character itself. This allows audiences to produce emotional and empathic responses that create a more meaningful media experience. This is referred to as "identifying with a character," which means taking on a character's identity and vicariously experiencing events from within that identity.

The first and foremost reason that made *Friends* an instant hit is the unique portrayals of the major characters, who represents six entirely different personalities. This made character identification easier among the audience. Rather than concentrating on a single central character, *Friends* presents the audience with a greater sample set of central characters to choose from and identify with.

When it comes to character identification, the process of identification holds manifold significance and meaning, as Kenneth Burke quotes: "you persuade a man insofar as you talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his." Identification thus can include a person's physical characteristics, talents, occupation, background, personality, beliefs, and values. Identification encourages the audience to share experiences and emotions with the characters. Identification thus requires an understanding of the viewer as a unified individual and the character's representation of a unified individual. In the present paper, an attempt is made to understand they ways through which character identification is established between the viewers and characters in *Friends*.

1. Identification with character stereotypes:

As mentioned earlier, the show develops on the life experiences of six major characters, who presents the audience with six specific character stereotypes- spoiled yet naive Rachel Green, who progresses to become a pretty amazing and independent career woman and single mother; Monica Geller, who is notorious for her obsessive cleanliness, but is also kind, caring and friendly; Phoebe Buffay, best known for her bohemian lifestyle and silly wit; the not-so-bright Joey Tribbiani, who is presented as a dim-witted character who rises to fame through his acting career; Chandler Bing, who is known for his wise-cracks and his sardonic attitude; and Ross Geller, who is often clumsy and socially awkward - taking the characteristics of the stereotypical 'loser nerd' academic.

What is common to all these stereotypes is the fact that they are characters that share many features with oneself and the people whom we see every day. That is, both personal and peer identification takes place in the case of *Friends*. Peer identification helps one in associating the characters with the real-life personalities they know and associate with. The show provides a wide variety of such characters to choose from, as the background setting of the show includes common places in New York, like the hangout cafes, small apartments, office-rooms, and even busy streets, where an average man spends most of his time.

On a personal level, character identification occurs with respect to the basic character traits. It gives the audience a prototype for identification. In various surveys conducted regarding the series' wide viewership, the most repeated reason for the same was this identification factor, which made the viewer felt that it is his/her own life, or even parts of it, that is shown on-screen.

The show also projected gender roles and various aspects of the same. While the main male characters highlighted masculine characters expected from them, the show also incorporated unexpected and

MINU ELIZABETH GEORGE

new dimensions of masculinity- we see a male nanny, transgendered and gay characters, and single-fathers. When it comes to feminine identity, *Friends* presented the audience with a new level of character identification by portraying characters who enjoy various aspects of motherhood- single mother as in Rachel, surrogate mother as in the case of Phoebe, Monica as a step-mother, and even the motherhood enjoyed by the lesbian couple Susan and Carol.

Hence, the sitcom ensures various kinds of character identification, and this feature itself has a great role in the show.

2. Identification based on relationships portrayed:

Friends portrayed many aspects of inter-personal relationship, ranging from one-night dates to lesbian and gay relations. The 90s period during which the show was aired mostly concentrated on the theme of family, except maybe *Seinfeld*, but *Friends* highlighted friendship and personal relationships. The show concentrated on six different individuals, thus exploring the multiple faces of personal relationships experienced by each one of them.

Basically, *Friends* is about the idea of being on one's own, having a job and being in relationships; and the latter is often given more importance. This feature too, helps in character identification, as everyone goes through various kinds and phases of relationships in one's life. As the title suggests, the show stresses on the value of alternative kinship networks, which can provide one with comfort and solutions regarding abysmal love lives, boring jobs, and neurotic and dysfunctional families.

Though friendship is the main form of relationship treated by the show, it is not confined to just that. *Friends* also depicts alternative personal and family relationships (like straight and lesbian ones) which provide real emotional and social support for the members engaged in the same. Along with that, the show also studies the changes that happen in relationships with time and generations. For instance, while Mr. And Mrs. Geller are shown as an ideal couple who enjoy a pretty long married life, while their son, Ross Geller, is a three-time divorcee. Many such instances can be pointed out of the show, which compares the changes that happens in inter-personal relationships with time. This generosity with which the show treated this subject too contributed to its acceptance among the audience. For the older generation, they could see their own past in the show, and for the younger ones, their own possible future.

3. Character identification based on family backgrounds:

Family backgrounds are quite important when it comes to character identification, as it points to the cultural elements and grooms the character in significant manner. As Newcomb and Hirsch have suggested, television does not only examine culture, it is a form of uniting culture. While concentrating on the friendship element of characters, the show was careful enough to add family elements as in the Thanksgiving episodes and through flashback narratives. Thus, the show enables character identification through the lens of cultural background too.

The influence of family on one's personal life is also explored in *Friends*. Rachel's family wanted her to marry the "right guy" in the first episode and Monica's parents always fiddled with her relationships and choices, and compare her with her more established sibling, Ross. When it comes to Phoebe and Chandler, their family backgrounds are more troubled and problematic, and they resort to friendship as a replacement for the absent family figures in their lives.

4. Character identification through emotions:

The emotions experienced by the viewer and portrayed by the character plays a major role in character identification, as emotions are universal, relatable and humanizing. Jovial males easy associate themselves with the character of Chandler or Joey; whereas the stern serious types may identify with the character of Ross. In the case of female characters, it becomes more complicated as the temperament of characters, as intended by the directors, changes with age and marital status. The ignorant and ambitious character of Rachel in season 1 of the series is a far childish representation of her character, as we see her in

season 10. Here, she puts her family before her job and is even ready to give away her passion and career opportunities for her daughter. Also, the emotions associated with various kinds of motherhood, as discussed earlier, makes character association more strong.

5. The element of humour:

The humorous nature of this sitcom played a major role in making this series an instant hit among its viewers. Most of the character takes a humorous viewpoint regarding most of the events that happen in their life, and this simplification of real life instances makes the viewer identify and feel a connection with their on-screen counterparts. Also, *Friends* steered clear of politics and current events making it easy for all kinds of viewers to identify with and understand.

Also, identifying oneself with an on-screen character can be enjoyable as association creates bonding in human minds. With respect to the relationship between identification with characters and enjoyment, Cohen has suggested that given that empathy is a central component of identification with characters, greater identification is likely to lead to greater enjoyment. That is, it is easy to come in terms with reality, once you identify yourself with a character who has underwent such same situation.

Character identification itself is a broad field of study, and in this paper, it is appropriated to character stereotypes, relationships and family backgrounds, so as to understand the reasons why the sitcom *Friends* became a classic in the history of sitcoms. *Friends* teaches us that the most important things in the world are to have a sense of humour and some good friends. The process of character identification with respect to the character of the series made the audience feel that it is possible to face a world of crisis and confusions with such humour and ever-cherished friendships. Thus, character identification that happens in various levels can be attributed as the major reason for the success of this sitcom.

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MINU ELIZABETH GEORGE