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No Matter What, *Friends* Will Always Be There For You

Situational comedy, known more informally as the ‘sitcom’ genre, is incredibly popular and is commonly found in American television. The very first American sitcom, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, was introduced in 1947 and ran for three years with a total of 300 episodes. Since then, sitcoms have been considered a key aspect in U.S. television, with a wide array of shows being produced on a regular basis. As a result, sitcom fan bases have been

increasing exponentially. Although, when the debate of the most successful sitcom presents itself, people tend to target a select few such as *Friends*, *The Office (U.S.)*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and more. However, the choice is quite simple: *Friends* is, indeed, the

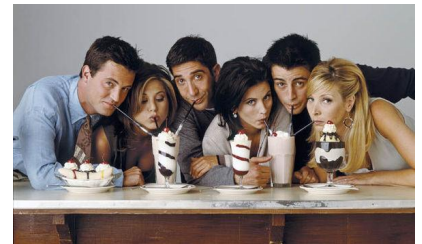


Figure 1: The cast of the iconic 90's sitcom, *Friends*. From left to right, Chandler, Rachel, Ross, Monica, Joey and Phoebe.

best sitcom ever made. 25 years ago, we were welcomed into the lives of six friends, Monica, Rachel, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler and Ross (Figure 1), and over 10 years, we grew from their experiences in love, friendship and careers. Created by Kevin S. Bright, Martha Kauffman, and David Crane, the very first *Friends* episode aired on September 22, 1994 on NBC, officially titled “The Pilot,” which received around 22 million views in America alone. The finale aired 10 years later, on May 6, 2004, which was watched by around 52.5 million U.S. viewers. Earlier this year, fans from all around the world celebrated the show’s 25th anniversary, which was a highly anticipated event. Not only has *Friends* redefined the sitcom genre over its 10-year run time, but it has also made an impact on millions of fans worldwide. For this reason, *Friends* is considered to be more superior and is more favored by the public, as opposed to other well-known sitcoms.

The show's success is dependent on its growing viewership, the overall increase in popularity through social media, as well as its positive emotional impact on its audience. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the aforementioned topics, which will be supported by statistics and research, further arguing and proving that *Friends* is the most successful sitcom in the history of American television.

The backbone of a television show is its viewers, as they predominantly determine its success. In this case, one of *Friends*' most commendable aspects is its ever growing viewership. For example, the show is considered to be "one of the most watched shows on Netflix, with viewers around the world spending 54.3 million hours (the equivalent of 62,000 years) watching it in 2018," (Pennacchia). Additionally, according to Nielsen, a research firm that supports Netflix, "*Friends* was the second-most watched programme among American subscribers in 2018, with an average of more than 20 episodes per account," (The Economist). This demonstrates the fact that people continue to stream the show religiously on multiple different platforms to this day. With the help of Netflix, *Friends*' viewership is demonstrating an upward trend year after year, which, in turn, increases its popularity as a whole. Moreover, in 2018, an announcement was made by Netflix stating that *Friends* was going to be removed from the service at the end of the year. Evidently, this did not resonate with the fans, and, as a result, caused a ruckus, specifically on social media. To elaborate, thousands of petitions and Instagram posts were created in order to stop Netflix from discontinuing *Friends*. One of the most impactful one, however, was a Change.org petition



Figure 2: Jennifer Aniston's first post on Instagram. Pictured: the cast of *Friends*.

started by Claudie Oshry, a dedicated fan, who described the act as “unfair, unacceptable and downright inhumane.” Her passion and commitment to the sitcom gave rise to the trending hashtag #Justice4Friends. Eventually, her petition was persuasive enough to compel Netflix to pay WarnerMedia “\$80 million to keep it throughout 2019,” (Pennacchia). This clearly exhibits the show’s growing viewership, as well as the fact that it is regaining its popularity and relevance among the new generation, seeing as it continues to impact millions worldwide.

It is a fact that vintage trends are making a comeback. From fashion to music to television, it seems that people are becoming more inclined towards all things vintage. Nowadays, with social media, it has become significantly easier to relive yesteryears. Hence, if anything, *Friends* is only becoming more prevalent among the young generation due to the existence of social media. Through Instagram, for instance, not only can fans follow their favorite celebrities, but can also share and promote certain posts. Instagram has certainly helped *Friends* regain its popularity. It all began when the official Instagram account for the show was created a few years ago (Instagram). Currently, the page has 8.3 million followers, and is dedicated to posting short clips of the series, as well as reminiscent pictures of the cast. Additionally, the cast members also have accounts, through which they share pictures and videos of their day to day lives. Recently, however, Jennifer Aniston, who played the role of ‘Rachel’, joined Instagram. In the span of five hours and 16 minutes of creating her account, she gained one million followers, which broke the Guinness World Record for the fastest time to reach one million followers on Instagram (Stephenson). She has now reached 20.5 million followers and counting, showing that her fans have wholeheartedly welcomed her on the social media platform.

As a matter of fact, her very first post was a picture of herself and her fellow castmates from *Friends* (Figure 2), insinuating a potential reunion in the near future. Fan bases have grown substantially due to social media, seeing as it is a much more accessible way for fans to follow their favorite celebrities and gain insight into their daily lives. Evidently, fans are more inclined towards *Friends* due to the cast's social media presence, which, as a result, increases the show's popularity as a whole.

Generally speaking, viewers prefer sitcoms over television shows with full-length, 40 to 50-minute episodes. Not only is this because they are shorter and less complicated, but also because they are lighthearted for the most part. While many sitcoms involve drama, their most valuable aspect is that they are capable of making people laugh, especially through the iconic sitcom laugh tracks. Although some may find the idea of a



Figure 3: Rachel buys Joey a shoulder bag for his audition.

laugh track phony and oftentimes irritating, the psychology behind it confirms that “[it is] meant to make the audience at home feel like they’re part of a bigger crowd sitting in a movie theater or at a comedy club,” (Nierenberg). Furthermore, according to Bill Kelley, a professor of psychology at Dartmouth College in Hanover,



Figure 4: “Fat Monica.”

New Hampshire, “we’re much

more likely to laugh at something

funny in the presence of other people.” As a result, watching

a sitcom regularly can be recognized as a technique to feel



Figure 5: Ross finds out his son, Ben, is playing with a Barbie Doll.

more content and uplifted in general. *Friends*, in particular, is known as “the archetypal feel-good ‘90s sitcom” (Godwin) for a very specific reason, being that it contains the traditional elements of a sitcom, further indulging viewers into the show. Moreover, Marc Hekster, a clinical psychologist, confirmed that *Friends* defeats emotions such as anxiety and stress based on his study. Hekster reveals that “it is the repetitive and relational nature of programs such as *Friends* and *Big Bang Theory* that will be doing the trick,” (Pearce). Additionally, he claims that the perfect escape from anxiety is “whacking on a 20-minute show about six besties living in New York,” (Pearce). This is because “[Watching *Friends*] is about an experience of repair, of watching the characters in the show repeatedly having worries, which then get repaired and soothed, usually in the context of other relationships in their lives,” (Pearce). Therefore, *Friends* is considered to be a common stress reliever, transporting viewers into the ideal lives of fictitious characters in search of a getaway from real-world problems. Another aspect of the show that engages viewers’ emotions is the importance of the characters and how they carry out their respective roles. Over the course of 10 seasons, all six characters have undoubtedly grown closer, allowing the audience to feel included in their journey of adulthood. According to David Brooks, a columnist at the New York Times, “these friendship families turn into real families,” (Barkhorn). From Chandler’s memorable sarcasm to Joey’s childish and immature humor to the group’s daily catch-ups at Central Perk, viewers can relate to every single moment regardless of their age. As a consequence, it can be claimed that *Friends* instills a feeling of familiarity and togetherness in the audience, which positively impacts their level of happiness, as it makes them feel as if they are a part of the group’s day to day lives.

Despite the overpowering reasons as to why *Friends* is the best show ever made, some still believe otherwise. Believe it or not, the show has been described as “problematic” and “simply awful” due to its lack of awareness of social issues. There have been moments on the show that highlight the characters’ primitive behavior and narrow mindset, which may have been considered traditional at the time, but would have been completely unacceptable if the show was made today. Furthermore, Ilina Kaplan, a writer at The Independent, notes that “storylines laced with homophobia, sexism, borderline emotional abuse and sexual harassment are portrayed as punchlines.” She has also noted a few instances showing the writers’ and the cast’s discrimination and intolerance towards social issues. For example, Joey was a victim of sexism when he openly admitted to liking makeup and certain accessories. In season 5, episode 13, Rachel buys Joey a shoulder bag for an audition (Figure 3), which he ends up loving. However, his friends give him a hard time for carrying a rather “feminine” bag or a “woman’s purse.” The joke is topped off with one of Chandler’s iconic sarcastic one-liners, where he says, “Yeah, pulling flowers out of it makes the bag look a lot more masculine.” Hence, the writers turned the issue of sexism into a laughing matter, further encouraging the fans to mock Joey’s unique fashion sense. Another issue that the show failed to address well is body-shaming. At one point in the show, Monica was obese. This is clearly one of her insecurities, seeing as her friends refer to her past self as “Fat Monica,” almost as if it is disgraceful to have a different body type (Figure 4). As the series progresses, several jokes about Fat Monica are made in a casual manner, which makes the audience think that it is acceptable to poke fun at people’s differences. This exhibits that the writers were somewhat ignorant, as they failed to recognize fat-shaming as a serious issue. Lastly, homophobia is a recurring problem on the show, specifically in Season 3,

Episode 4, when Ross did not support his son, Ben, playing with a Barbie doll, as opposed to a dinosaur figurine or a toy car (Figure 5). Ross reacts poorly in this situation and unknowingly offends many people, as he exclaims, “Why is my boy playing with a Barbie?” It is obvious that Ross is shallow and sexist towards his own son, as he expects him to conform to gender roles and stereotypes. Although this is an unpopular opinion, *Friends* has demonstrated unprogressive behavior multiple times, which people find it rather unappealing.

In essence, this essay proves that, through its strong viewership, growing popularity on social media, and its positive impact on one’s emotional health, *Friends* surpasses any other American sitcom. Firstly, its viewers have increased ever since, and it helps older generations reminisce about their early adulthood, the younger generation watches it to gain insight into what the early ’20s could potentially look like. Additionally, through social media platforms like Instagram, the show has become more prevalent by way of fan pages and the cast’s respective accounts. Lastly, viewers treat *Friends* as the perfect escape from reality due to its comedic and lighthearted nature, which makes them feel more content, and consequently persuades them to continue watching the show. In conclusion, the show has achieved a lot over time and has impacted the lives of many, as stated previously. Therefore, it can be claimed that, after a quarter-century, *Friends* still holds the title of the most successful sitcom ever made.

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