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Saying goodbye to Friends: Situation comedy as lived experience

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Saying Goodbye to *Friends*: Fan Culture as Lived Experience.

By

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Abstract

The series finale for NBC's sitcom *Friends* was a media event, a two-hour broadcast promoted for months, and immediately followed by cast appearances on late night comedy shows and the next morning's news shows. The show's popularity demonstrated by fan response to the last episode positions the online and broadcast media discourse surrounding the finale as a rich cultural text for examining the influence of the modern sitcom on fans' cultural identities and social communities. The *Friends* broadcast finale taken together with the online discussion of the show creates a site for the production and consumption of fan culture in three ways. First, the self-referential series finale was a significant media event, which framed the finale as part of fans' real life experience. Second, fan accoutrement articulates a sense of place that is not just projected into viewers' living rooms, but into their broader lives. Third, the show's fictional characters, are portrayed as real friends, and become important personae in fans' social discourse. The *Friends* finale is fan text, one that conflates the distinction between real life and the small screen in ways that have implications for broader television criticism.

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Saying Goodbye to *Friends*: Fan Culture as Lived Experience

“First we’ll watch the final episode... then we’ll watch interviews with the cast... then we’ll watch interviews with fans about the interviews with the cast... then we’ll re-watch the final episode... then we’ll watch re-runs!...”

“No wonder we don’t have any actual friends...”

—*Editorial Cartoon*¹

Called the most “overwrought and prolonged farewell since Violetta’s death scene in ‘La Traviata’” (Stanley, pg. B1), NBC’s series finale for the sitcom *Friends* extended over several weeks of reruns, retrospective television specials and media hype leading up to a two-hour series finale broadcast on May 6, 2004. *Friends* was a primetime darling, holding a spot on NBC’s coveted “Must See TV” Thursday lineup for ten years, and attracting millions of viewers each week. The show featured six friends in their twenties (Rachel, Ross, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe and Joey) whose lives centered around two neighboring apartments in Manhattan. While critics noted “the incongruities of a New York setting with few ethnic minorities and struggling 20-somethings who could afford huge apartments” (Lemire, Para 16), the show’s culminating episode garnered intense media attention and sparked collective mourning among its fans (Stanley). One of the most prolific examples of fan discourse is the online message boards devoted to the show. The broadcast and online media surrounding the end of the *Friends* era positions the finale as an intertextual media event, which illustrates the influence of television on fans’ social perspectives and cultural identities.

Television’s influence as a powerful cultural forum is well documented.²

Television plays a predominant role in the lives of most Americans: families organize

¹ W Handelsman, *Newsday*.

their living rooms around the television set; people arrange their schedules around favorite shows; and fans discuss and dissect what happened on last night's episode. Helping to shape beliefs, attitudes and values, television "has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience" (Postman, p. 87). Television offers a narrative (both fictional and non-fictional) that represents viewers' socio-cultural experiences. From what they wear, to whom they emulate, viewers' lifestyle choices are influenced by what they see on television. Television is a "metaphorical real world" that "reflects, symbolically, the structure of values and relationships beneath the surface" (Fiske and Hart, p. 24). When fans identify with characters or relate to plots, they are responding to what Ang (1985) refers to as a television program's *social image*. Television reflects social experience: it mirrors reality in a way that explains and categorizes audiences' experiences (Cunliffe). Audiences recognize their own lives in the experiences of familiar television personalities. In this way, television affirms, authenticates and reflects fans' social experience.

For fans who actively participate in television culture, such as those that participate in online discussion forms, their social experience is more profoundly influenced by television programming. Furthermore, through their creation of fan discourse, viewers create social spaces that "refine and enhance [a program's] social image while, as fans, claiming it as symbolic of their identity" (Brower, p. 163). Fan discourse contributes to the social image of a television program through viewers' reaction to a show's narrative events. Whether discussing plotlines or communicating empathy for a character, audiences generate meaning that depends on and comments on

² Raymond Williams, Television, Technology and Cultural Form (London: Fontana, 1974)..

their social position and related experiences (Morley). Fans construct meaning; as they respond to a television show, they reproduce the original text (Fiske, p. 40). As fans engage television texts, they reproduce the original broadcast: applying their own perspectives to enhance a program's social image and making meaning of their own experience.

Fandom is a community activity. Reception of television culture is “shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community” (Jenkins, p. 76). Fan discourse “provides a cultural space for types of knowledge and attachment” (Hills, p. xi) Viewers engage television programs by talking with other fans about the show. Fan talk is a form of “textual production that can circulate among—and thus help to define—the fan community” (Fiske, p. 30).

Today, online fan communities are ubiquitous.³ Once the domain for fans of cult favorites such as Star Trek or animatophiles,⁴ the Internet has supplanted the fan letter as the primary mode of fan correspondence about the show. Online message boards and specialty Internet sites allow fans to be more responsive to their chosen shows and in their prevalence and interactivity, these online communities alter fan social practices (Hills). This article examines how online message boards interpret the social significance of the *Friends* finale broadcast and in doing so enhance and embellish fans' lived experience. After discussing the general importance of the finale as fan text, this essay articulates the specific aspects of the finale's influence on fan's lived experience: First,

³ Fan discourse occurs in many forms, from letters (See Sabal), to fan fiction writing (See Jenkins), to online newsgroups (See Hills).

⁴ Much has been written on animation fan discourse (See e.g. Langer), as well as Star Trek fan communities (See e.g. Smith).

the self-referential series finale was a media event, which portrayed the end of the series as the end of an era in the lives of fans. Second, the scenes and set decorations in the series finale articulate a sense of place that is not just projected into viewers' living rooms, but into their broader lives. Third, the *Friends*,⁵ the show's fictional characters, are portrayed as real friends, both to each other and to the audience so that the characters and cast members become important personae in fans' social circles. This analysis concludes with the implications of online fan discourse for television studies.

***Friends* Finale as Fan Text**

As a show about relationships, *Friends* was a narrative about friendship, about the ideas and social conventions in the life of twenty-somethings living in Manhattan. Generation X came of age with *Friends*, which quickly became more than a show: "it was an explanation and exploration of what it meant to come of age in the 1990s" (Ryan 2004, Para 3). As a successful sitcom, *Friends* shaped the conversations and perspectives of its viewers. A recent study found that the language used by the show's characters has influenced contemporary English, particularly the use of the adjective "so" as in "so cool" (Tagliamonte). The report concluded that the language used by television characters not only mirrors language used in the real world, but actually pushes it forward (Tagliamonte). While the scholarly literature surrounding it is limited,⁶ *Friends*' imprint

⁵ In this essay, I use "Friends" to refer to the characters on the show, and "friends" to refer to audience members and their companions.

⁶ Critical works exist about the show's homoeroticism (See Iglebæk), and normalized portrayal of sexual and racial difference (See Sandell).

on American and global culture is undeniable.⁷ Because of the show's popularity, the media of the *Friends* finale extended beyond the final episode itself. To understand the full extent of the finale media event, one must consider—in addition to the one hour final episode itself—the one hour retrospective program with cast interviews and behind the scenes footage, numerous television talk show appearances by the cast, official websites devoted to the show's finale and heavy web traffic on fan message boards and chat rooms.

What makes the finale so significant is that when seemingly disparate media surrounding the show are experienced en masse, the last episode of *Friends* became an intertextual media event, which contributes to our understanding of television's production of cultural meaning. The series finale offers a glimpse at the infiltration of television broadcasts into other aspects of mediated life. After the show's finale, message boards and chat rooms buzzed as fans mourned the end of their favorite sitcom. To explicate how fan discourse interprets and enhances the finale as a cultural moment, this article analyzes both the finale's broadcast and online media. The finale's broadcast media analyzed includes: a one-hour retrospective, a one-hour final episode and promotional programming. The finale's online media analyzed includes: NBC's and Warner Brothers' official websites for the show, and the show's official online chat room, *Friends* Forum. Specifically, I analyzed the messages posted in the two months before and two months after the finale broadcast. This multi-media analysis reveals the *Friends* finale as a significant site of fan discourse. Initially it is important to note its status as a media event.

⁷ While this analysis focuses on the discourse surrounding the American series finale (it aired later in the rest of the world), analysis of fan message boards demonstrates the show's global appeal: fans write from five continents: North America, South America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

The End of an Era: *Friends* Finale as Media Event

Television broadcasts modern rituals, providing narrative and visual gloss to public events in the nature of Hollywood spectacles (Dayan and Katz, p. 118).⁸ Media events are scripted, negotiated, performed, celebrated and reviewed in ways that turn television into an icon. These events give television real power: to declare celebrations that shape collective memory and to integrate and organize social meaning (Dayan and Katz). Series finales have become media events: they rituals of farewell that are accompanied by much fanfare and related programming (See e.g. Morreale). Popular press articles and television appearances by the show's stars expose audiences to an event that is represented as one to be experienced and remembered (Dayan and Katz, p. 210). In online discussions fans participate in the ceremony of the finale: remembering the show's appeal, and recognizing the show's impact in their real lives, fans participate in the series finale. Last episodes typically include "self-referential stylistic devices in their last scenes ... [to] highlight the relationship between text and viewer by enabling the viewer to read multiple levels of meaning" (Morreale, p. 276). In this way, finales become spectacles intended to demonstrate a show's place in television history and viewers' lives. Indeed, the end of a series has become cause for celebration and spectacle as seen by *Seinfeld's* much heralded 1998 departure. As promotional opportunities, series finales mean ratings for the networks. As media events, they provide an intertextual site for television criticism.

The *Friends* finale was an extended ritual of farewell as fans watched the characters say goodbye to each other and the viewers for weeks. Indeed, the finale was a

⁸ Dayan and Katz refer to media event as a live broadcast and outside broadcasting studio; this paper demonstrates how finales have become media events.

major event of the television season: nearly 52 million viewers watched according to Nielson Ratings (CNN). In New York, 3,000 people sat on blankets and watched the final episode projected onto a huge screen in Times Square (Lemire, Para 9). A special edition of NBC's Dateline offered a two-hour retrospective of *Friends*, and the cast appeared on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno on the night the final broadcast aired. The media blitz surrounding the impending finale illustrates the show's longstanding prominence. In its promotional programming, NBC helps viewers say goodbye to *Friends*.⁹ In addition to NBC sponsored programming, advertisers used the event of the finale as a selling point.¹⁰

The *Friends* finale is a media event, one that exhibits an awareness of the end of an era. The self-referential plot of the finale comments on itself and provides closure for viewers. For ten years, *Friends* was the "comfort-food show of network television" (McFadden, Para 1). In this spirit, the finale tried to give audiences everything they might be expecting, rushing to give audiences satisfying last moments with the characters. This was evident not only in NBC's promotional and broadcasting strategy for the show, but also in the plot lines. *The Seattle Times* succinctly described the whirlwind of dramatic scenes:

The last episode began at 8:55 p.m., just early enough to steal some viewers from the last five minutes of "Survivor: All-Stars" on rival CBS. The extra time also helped turn a half-hour series into an hour-plus cirque de so-long. Monica and Chandler became parents; Joey's new chick and duck were trapped in the foosball table; and Ross, with Phoebe's help, madly pursued Rachel en route to Paris. It was a sign of how determined the writers were to

⁹ Other television stations paid homage to the finale. For example, during the final episode of *Friends*, the cable channel TVLand did not broadcast its regular programming, but broadcast several young adults on a couch watching television, who repeatedly turned to the camera and said, "We're watching *Friends* and so should you!"

¹⁰ Several such advertisements aired during the finale broadcast. For example, an All-State Insurance ad referred to the changes in the show's plot: "If life were like a sitcom, you could marry your best friend, finally move out of that apartment, have a baby, and all you'd have to worry about were the ratings" (NBC).

hit us with their best shots that the birth of babies, usually a whole episode in TV tradition, took just five minutes. (McFadden, Para 3)

The scenes and dialogue of the finale episode all had a sense of culmination. The characters say their separate goodbyes to each other throughout the final episode. At the end of the series, the Friends gather in Monica and Chandler's empty apartment for the final scene. As Monica looks around and comments on how weird the empty apartment looks (NBC), she echoes the thoughts of viewers also seeing the apartment for the last time. This self-referential dialogue provides closure for fans as they see the characters enacting the finality that viewers feel.

As the characters look around the apartment, Monica brings up yet one more embarrassing thing about her brother Ross. He replies, "we almost made it ten years without that coming up" (NBC). The dialogue reflects the life of the series rather than the fictional lives of the Friends: while the characters' lives continue in a television afterworld, Ross' comment refers to the viewers who won't be present. For ten years, *Friends* "successfully captured a slice of life" (Levs, Para 19).

Friends provided a look at life in New York for millions of Americans: a thirty-minute window into a comforting and stable world each week. In many ways the finale of *Friends* does represent the end of an era. "The best sitcoms echo the larger mood of the nation" (Stanley, p. B1). Fans tuned in each week to catch up with Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Joey and Phoebe, and were part of a nationwide audience that identified with the characters, their apartments and their (often funny) challenges. The self-referential plot framed the finale as part of life experience: fans were not just watching the end of a show, they were saying goodbye to *Friends* along with millions of other viewers: experiencing the sadness that the characters expressed.

Your Place or Mine? Fan Accoutrement and Fictional Place

Television is our culture's "principal mode of knowing about itself...how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged" (Postman, p. 87). Television provides a lens with which viewers understand their own experience. This lens offers a vision of the world, which is staged in a way that resonates with audiences' lives while establishing an ideal or conventional way of understanding their experience. Television is "the communication of the familiar...Both within and between its texts, such television seeks to construct a life-world which, in its icons, images and values, [an] audience can recognize as its own, as familiar" (Wilson, p. 22). Television programs connect with fans through their sets: establishing recurring settings for the characters and recreating recognizable scenes from fans' lives. "It is the 'arrangements' (both 'outside' and 'inside' the viewer) set up by the television institution through which a desire to watch television is roused and sustained" (Ang, p. 22). The realm of public and private is merged as television occupies viewers' living rooms, as viewers enter the home of television characters.

Through lovable characters and familiar settings, sitcoms promise "to transport viewers to the homes of fictional friends" (Spigel, p. 136). One way this occurs is through accoutrement of fandom. "The accumulation of both popular and official cultural capital is signaled materially by collections of objects-artworks, books, records, memorabilia, ephemera" (Fiske, p. 43). Fans accumulate cultural capital of television programs in ways that affect the physicality of their own lived experience. Typical fan accoutrement is a

logo object, such as mug or mouse pad with the characters' likenesses.¹¹ In the case of *Friends*, fans also seek more sophisticated accoutrement: they copy Jennifer Aniston's hair style (Stanley), they buy Pottery Barn furniture because of product placement with plot congruence (Russell). Online message boards reveal that fans covet props from the show's sets, which allow them to live like the *Friends* did in their New York apartment.

In the finale dialogue, the characters reflect on their apartment "as a place of love and laughter" (NBC). Familiar to audiences, the *Friends* sets were a distinct way many viewers identified with the show. The show featured several locations regularly, but the most prominent set in both screen time and plot significance was the apartment, which Monica inherited from her grandmother. At the series' end it belonged to Monica and Chandler, but for most of the ten years, Monica and Rachel lived in it except when they lost it in a bet to Joey and Chandler for a few episodes. Much of the series' plot unfolded in the apartment. In the finale the *Friends* are leaving the apartment because Monica and Chandler are moving to their new house in the suburbs. "Home in the sitcom is where the producer makes it" (Marc, p. 22). For fans of *Friends*, home is the apartment where most of the *Friends* reside at some point during the series, home is the Central Perk, a coffee shop that serves as a gathering place for the characters. These settings became familiar to viewers, and like the characters, become a part of the show's image and appeal.

Perhaps the most symbolic of transference of the television set to viewer living rooms, NBC marks the finale with another way for fans to hold on to the show. A *Friends* website offers a frame for a door peephole in the style of the famous television

¹¹ Toward this end, NBC offered a "Party Pack" including: a CD-Rom with an customizeable invitation to a *Friends* viewing party, a CD with music from the show, a commemorative serving tray and coaster set, a party recipe booklet, and a bag of the house blend coffee from the Central Perk, the fictional coffee shop on the show.

show. The frame featured in many an episode as characters entered and exited the apartment. The frame's familiarity becomes symbolic of the empty apartment in the last episode. The last shot of the series zooms in on this frame on the door of Monica and Chandler's apartments for the last time. The peephole frame is a physical reminder of the show, but also it transforms fans living rooms into trendy *Friends* chic. This familiar icon of the show is a different type of television kitsch than *The Simpsons* Monopoly® game or posable figures: the peephole frame extends the setting for the characters' lives to a fan's own living room who lives in the style of *Friends*. As viewers appropriate physical objects featured in the show, their living rooms become extensions of the *Friends* set, even when the television is off.

Warner Brothers' official online forum dedicated to *Friends* demonstrates fans do seek and acquire fan accoutrement from the show. On message boards, fans seek tangible artifacts (or look-alikes) from the show's sets. Numerous messages showed that fans were buying "stuff that looks like the set decorations they have on the show" (Friends Fan).¹² Other fans are more specific: "Does anyone know how to obtain or know the names of all the different posters they used on the show? [Specifically] the one that Rachel has in her bedroom in Monica's apartment, and ... the one in Joey and Chandler's apartment on the wall next to the bedroom" (Friends Fan). Fans refer each other to websites that sell home furnishings like those featured in the show, including pillows, furniture and clothing. Fans decorate their apartments with objects recognizable from the show and in doing so create lasting "memories" of the show while their homes become part of popular culture. In this way, fans recreate the *Friends* experience and live like

¹² This reference does not have clear page numbers or paragraphs: it includes many different fan comments, which can be found through a text search on this website.

Rachel and Monica or Chandler and Joey. Accumulating objects from the Friends' apartment is a way for fans to appropriate the show for their own experience. Décor from the Friends' apartment such as posters or peephole frames has a more pronounced affect on the lived experience of the fan by than a logo emblazoned t-shirt because helps the show become part of their reality. Through the accumulation of official and unofficial memorabilia, *Friends* becomes more than a television program, it is the fans' lived experience.

Finally, in the portrayal of the New York community, the impact of the *Friends* setting extends beyond viewers' living rooms. The Friends' antics revealed a softer side of New York. *Friends* "tapped into the country's rediscovery of New York at the dawn of the Giuliani shape-up-or-ship-out era. Suddenly, and in large part because of "Friends," Manhattan once again looked like a safe, fun and romantic place to be. The six stars of the show became the non-nuclear family that everybody really wanted" (Stanley, p. B1). Their apartment showed audiences a side of New York as a friendly, city that they would want to be a part of. Seen through the romantic lens of *Friends*, Manhattan is clean, safe and trendy. And viewers' New York was very small: the show was largely staged in two apartments and a coffee shop, while occasionally featuring other generic locations: a restaurant, an office, another apartment. While there is no Central Perk in Manhattan,¹³ the coffee shop represented an ideal New York: a community who lived in New York with the Friends during their ten-year stay. As one fan noted: "I'm a New Yorker, so I understand the whole lifestyle...I find it funny. I love how they all have different personalities, but they all come together" (Lemire, Para 10). Fans identify with the New

¹³ The Independent Movie Database (www.imdb.com) notes that Central Perk is based on the "Manhattan Café" in New York's West Village, but this is not verified.

York of *Friends*: their neighborhood coffee shops take on characteristics of the Central Perk and *Friends* becomes more than a show: it is a lifestyle.

Through set design and scenery, the show's fictional spaces are transferred from the small screen to the Big Apple to fans' living rooms worldwide. *Friends* offers a vision of ideal community: six friends living happily in New York, resolving issues and conflicts within thirty minute episodes, and enduring life with much hilarity. This becomes the New York that viewers in Kansas, England and Russia know and love. The show's broader setting of New York provides a backdrop that fans identify with: the *Friends*' city is their city, as a place they live or visit. The finale's setting articulates a sense of place that is not just projects a vision of New York into viewers' living rooms, but into their broader lives. The show's New York scenes have a whole new nostalgia as the city is played out in reruns.

Knowing Your *Friends*: Fictional Characters as Real Friends

The influence of television on reality extends beyond physical space and place. Television is a cultural forum where fans identify with favorite characters. Bourdieu (1980) describes the popular aesthetic as the "desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters' joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and ideals, living their lives" (Bourdieu, p. 237). As viewers, fans follow the plot developments each week and thus become intimately involved in characters' fictional lives. Celebrities are role models for fans who engage in "artificial social relations" with them (Caughey). The actors who play these characters become as familiar as the characters themselves. The *Friends* message boards are filled with triumphant phrases such as: "I saw Joey!" or "I met Monica!" (Friends Fan). Fans delight in participating in

the lives of characters and conflate the actors with the characters they play. Audiences relate to main characters as they would to real friends, discussing the characters' problems, good news and antics over the water cooler as well as the dinner table. For audiences of *Friends*, actor and character are blurred as fans relate to both as real friends. The discourse of the finale portrays the *Friends* as part of fans' lived experience in three ways: NBC's tribute to the characters, behind the actors' experiences, and the virtual relationships created online.

The *Friends* finale included a tribute to the six characters (and actors) of the show. Aired before the show's final episode, "10 Years of Friends" included interviews with the casts, spotlights on each character and segments on the characters' relationships. Heralding the finale as the "end of an era" (NBC), the retrospective reminded audience members of the ten years they had shared with the characters. Advertisements for the finale asked viewers to "join us" as "we say goodbye to our best friends"(NBC). Audiences watched the characters say goodbye to each other while saying goodbye themselves as viewers. NBC's website goes into more detail of what the series finale should mean to audiences:

After ten years the friends prepare to say goodbye—Filled with humor and bittersweet emotion, the series finale of "Friends" finds Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler and Ross embarking on the next chapters in their lives. The six of them have been there for each other through all the ups and downs of becoming adults. Now it's their last day together, and it's one of momentous events and last-minute surprises. Even as the friends make major decisions on their futures, there is a bond between them that will last forever - no matter where their paths lead. (NBC.com)

This promo intimates that the characters will remain friends even after the show. No matter where their paths lead, off the show, the characters will remain close. The fictional

bond between the characters becomes reality as fans watch the Friends say goodbye and experience a real loss in their own lives. While the show will be broadcast in countless reruns, the end of the series indicates the end of audiences' ongoing relationship with the Friends because there are no more new plot developments. *Friends* "encapsulated the Gen-X experience;" viewers' attraction "was based on who reminded you most of the people you knew... but that was why it succeeded. In a narcissistic age when viewers often find themselves the most entrancing thing to watch on TV, likeability has been replaced by relatability" (McFadden, Para 12).

Audiences relate to the characters because they have shared the Friends' experiences for ten years. Having lived through the dramatic highs and lows of the show, fans were particularly invested. During the final episode, when Ross and Rachel declare their love for the countless and final time, the studio audience (and surely the living room audiences) cheered as they would at a friend's wedding. In the same episode, Monica and Chandler's surrogate mother gives birth to twins. The first born is a boy, and when Monica learns that her second child is a girl, the studio audience roared, having long been privy to her secret hope that she would have a girl. "From the moment "Friends" first appeared on our screens in 1994, it stood out. The six characters were friends of mine from college, friends from high school, peers from just being a middle-class, white American entering the post-college world" (Levs, Para 19). *Friends* appealed to viewers who identified (or thought they would) with the characters' post college lives.

The media publicity of the finale included actor's reactions to the show's end, which enhanced fans' perceptions that the Friends are real. Underscoring the importance of the characters in viewers' relationship with the show, Lisa Kudrow, (the actress who

plays Phoebe) noted, “I’m going to miss these people, I’m really going to miss these characters a lot” (NBC). The actors’ emotional ties to the characters means the Friends are real. And as actors talk about and identify with the characters that people talk about and identify with, the line between actors and characters is blurred. Before the filming of the first episode *Friends* “producers took each of the actors aside to learn about them, Matthew Perry said, ‘in order to steal from our lives’... As [Matt] LeBlanc was explaining that he was nothing like his bumbling character, his microphone fell from his shirt, rendering him nearly inaudible because of the soundstage's acoustics. Perry filled the silence. "You were just saying you weren't like Joey?" (Lawrence, Para 11). The actors talk about the characters as if they were real people. That the actors’ personalities influence their characters makes it easy for audiences to transfer their love of the characters to the actors. The actors embody the characters, giving them life as real friends that audiences join for half an hour of their lives every week.

“10 Years of Friends,” the retrospective that aired before the final broadcast, includes behind-the-scenes and behind-the-characters spots that further blur the lines between fictional characters and real people. Viewers get an inside perspective into the making of the show and see how the actors have embodied their favorite characters. For the week leading up to the show, “Today” NBC’s morning show flashed pictures of the stars embracing tearfully between takes. Tabloids that hawked “Jen’s Real Tears” validated audiences’ own sadness at the show’s end as fans empathized with a tearful Jennifer Aniston on the set of the final episode. The actors’ sense of loss validates the fans’ remorse.

Indeed, the show has had a significant impact on the lives of the actors. Matthew Perry (who plays Chandler) expressed “It’s hard to sum up the last 10 years, but it’s basically like being involved in some magical thing that’s bigger than you are” (NBC). Matt LeBlanc noted the multi-faceted significance of being part of the cast: “it’s been an education, it’s been a love affair, it’s been a friendship, it’s been amazing.” And the fan is part of the friendship. Jennifer Aniston (Rachel) offered her thank yous to “everybody, all of the crew, all of the fans, everybody”(NBC). Courtney Cox noted the importance of the fans: “Thank you so much to all the people that watched the show for all these years and kept it going, I love you all” (NBC). David Schwimmer declared, “We’ve loved doing it, I’ve loved doing it, and we hope you guys have enjoyed it as much as we have” (NBC). Attributing the show’s success to the fans, the actors acknowledge the fans’ impact on their lives and so as viewers see the cast hugging each other and crying on the final set, they know they have been a part of this meaningful experience. Fans participate in the finale by watching and sharing the experience with the actors. All of these characters are loveable because the actors who inhabit them are endearing. The characters are more than just ideas, they are people that viewers relate to, identify with; the Friends embody what audiences wish they could be: beautiful, sexy, icons of Generation X.

Online fan discourse surrounding the finale contributes to the glamorization of the Friends, as audiences incorporate their relationship with the characters into their own lives. Fans use message boards “to remember some of the most unforgettable and special people in our life, those friends who always gonna be in our heart... to keep alive the magic of the serie[s]”(Friends Fan). Fans reminisce and talk about buying DVDs as a way to preserve their “dear 'funny' memories” of the characters, who one fan proclaims

“will always be in my heart for all time!” (Friends Fan). These messages reveal the emotional connections fans feel toward the characters. Living through their experiences each week, fans want to sustain their virtual relationships with the characters. Message board posts explicitly point to the realness of the characters for fans. One fan asserts: “I just want to say that Friends is a show about real and true friends that I admire” (Friends Fan). These examples of fan discourse reveal how characters become “real friends” for fans and their lives become part of fans’ memories. The characters become role models for fans and exert another level of influence. Furthermore, fans talk about *being* the friends: “I’d love to be Chandler, because I’d be married to Monica. Now that would be awesome” (Friends Fan). Another fan dreams, “I would like to live with them. Have a chat at central Perk, taste the food cooked by Monica, spend holidays with them and so on” (Friends Fan). Whether about inhabiting Chandler or simply being another Friend, these fantasies enhance the fan experience.

As fans share their fantasies about sharing the lives of Friends, this discourse becomes reality: fellow fans read this discourse and imagine the Friends as their friends. And they are: the phrase “remember when...” is used throughout the message boards revealing that the episodes in the life of Friends are implanted in the memories of viewers so that they become references to events that are indistinct from real occurrences. “Friends became a part of my life for all time... it teaches me how to learn life maturely and thinking rationally in a new world” (Friends Fan). While seemingly extreme, this fan’s allegiance to the show illustrates how audiences make connections between the events on the show and events in their own lives and apply the lessons learned by the characters to their own experiences. The Friends, the show’s fictional characters, are

portrayed as real friends, both to each other and to the audience so that the characters and cast members become important personae in fans' social circles. *Friends* fans engage the show as their own experience: they do experience it by watching it, and they extend that experience by living out these relationships by commiserating with the actors, fantasizing about their lives with friends and using the characters as models for their own lives. In this way, *Friends* becomes lived experience.

Conclusions

This analysis reveals the cultural impact of *Friends* as a media event, through its cultural capital and the characters. However, the finale discourse demonstrates the intertextuality of popular culture: television broadcasting implicates Internet discourse, which in turns reproduces the popular culture text. The intersection of the *Friends* finale and the online message boards reveals the impact on fan identity and fan community.

As a media event, the finale established its impact on of the larger popular mediascape: advertisements use the sitcom experience to persuade viewers and self-referential plot lines comment on the medium of television itself. The fan accoutrement of the show's finale create a palpable experience for fans as they collect objects from the show's sets and therefore incorporate the Friends' living room into their own. *Friends* New York offers a romantic view of social community in Manhattan, and by extension, America. The show's fictional characters become socially accessible: tributes to the characters reinforce their familiar identities, the actors' experience brings the characters alive, and fans construct fantasy relationships with the Friends online.

The *Friends* finale reveals that television affects fan discourse in a profound way: television creates events of historical importance, infiltrates fan's physical space, and fosters social relationships. It shapes fan experience through its various cultural capital that circulates through fan communities and establishes real and virtual relationships among the *Friends* and their fans. Television texts construct identities for those who participate in them and analysis of shows like *Friends* illustrates the importance of considering multiple texts the textual analysis of television. This analysis demonstrates *Friends* is a media artifact that links to larger cultural narratives at play in society. The perspectives and experiences of *Friends* fans offer insight into how television influences the larger social world. The discourse of *Friends* creates a relationship with the viewer that forms the basis for community. The multimedia fan experience changes the nature of television viewing. Fans' virtual participation in the *Friends* finale through online message boards establishes social relationships centered on the show. In this way, television fosters relationships between fictional characters become the grounds for actual social interaction.

Furthermore, through online communication, fans participate in the media event and thus become producers of meaning. The experience of *Friends* fans points to the need to acknowledge the intertextuality of fan experiences and to include multimedia analysis of television shows. Significantly, fans have become active architects of meaning in television discourse. Fan experience is embellished by online discourse, which is an extension of the show into other aspects of fan's experience. Online fan discourse shapes the television experience by constructing social relationships with characters and fellow fans, establishing the physicality of the *Friends* experience through

accoutrement and savor the finale in such a way that the television experience is lived experience. The *Friends* finale illustrates how television has become a multimedia experience as fans consume and produce television intertextually. Fans do not watch television; they experience it.

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