

The One About Gender and Sexuality:

An examination of the television series *Friends*

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Abstract

This study of the 1990s television show *Friends* analyzes the representations and portrayals of gender and sexuality presented throughout the series. Episodes containing the word “Wedding” in the title were examined for issues of gender and sexuality. This examination specifies particular attention to the lesbian and transgender community in regards to *Friends*’ representation of sexuality. While an examination of gender in *Friends* focuses more on ideas of hegemonic masculinity and adverse ideas of feminism and postfeminism. Through the application and acceptance of media influence being derived through a process of negotiated meaning, a motley of possible influences and effects can be extracted from *Friends*. The identification of *Friends* as a negotiated text prevents a solitary identification of *Friends* as either a positive or negative text in terms of sexual and gendered representations/expectations and allays the plausibility of identifying all possible influences *Friends* has on viewers’ perceptions. However, it is still vital to examine and identify a number of these representations and possible influences, so that a greater level of understanding, consciousness, and cultural significance can be derived about the influence *Friends* had and has on viewer’s beliefs, attitudes, and expectations particularly in regards to gender and sexuality.

Introduction

Substantial research has proven and continues to prove that media exposure and consumption affects consumers and thus has cultural implications. Exactly how the media influence audiences and to what significance this influence has is still debated and discussed, however there is a general consensus that the media do in fact have some effect on viewers (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). While, it is “unlikely the media has a direct and straight forward effect on its audiences,” influence is still suspected to be derived from a negotiation of meaning between the viewer and the media product (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 1; Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Krijnen & VanBauwel, 2015). However, this negotiation of meaning does not necessarily delegitimize or lessen the influence the media has. As Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) explain,

Research examining the effects of media exposure demonstrates that media consumption has a measurable influence on people’s perceptions of the real world, and, regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, they are used to help guide subsequent attitudes, judgments, and actions. (p.1)

Such influenced perceptions include attitudes about identity, particularly gender. Research has shown “watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on individuals’ real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p.1). And though these portrayals may draw on previously circulated ideas, discourses must be reinforced and given consent in order to remain relevant (Albrecht, 2016; Allen, 2011). Thus, the need to examine how texts that appeal to mass audiences shape dominant discourses through spontaneous consent or defiance is created (Albrecht, 2016).

Even pop culture texts, such as the 1990s television sitcom *Friends*, are “absolutely crucial to how people understand and live in the world” and play a significant role in the circulation and understanding of dominant discourses (Zeisler, 2008, p. 3). Though many tend to dismiss pop culture texts due to their epithet as low culture, their appeal to mass audiences and their centrality in daily experience corroborates their cultural significance and power (Zeisler, 2008). The 1994 – 2004 pop culture television series *Friends* follows the journey of Monica Geller, Ross Geller, Chandler Bing, Rachel Green, Phoebe Buffay, and Joey Tribbiani; six friends who are navigating the ups and downs of being 20 to 30-something year olds living in New York City. We watch through 10 seasons, a total of 236 episodes, as the friends fall in and out of love, face career challenges, become parents, get married, get divorced and encounter many other challenges and joys typically faced in early adulthood. *Friends* portrayal of the fun times typically had and the problems typically faced by 20 to 30-something year olds, seems to have resonated and appealed to many people with the series repeatedly ranked one of the best television sitcoms of all times by viewers (Driscoll, 2013; Ranker, 2017). A reader’s poll conducted by Rolling Stone declared *Friends* the second-best television show of the 1990s (Greene, 2015). The series was nominated for over 200 awards during its time on the air and *Friends* final episode is still one of the most watched television finales ever with over 52 million people tuning in (IMDb, 2017; Kalin, 2015). *Friends* relevance and viewership is still growing after more than 10 years of being off the air according to Sternbergh (2016). With *Friends* arrival to Netflix the series is reaching a whole new generation of 20 to 30-something year olds (Sternbergh, 2016).

With such vast appeal and viewership in the past and arguably today, one has to wonder how *Friends* may have affected and be affecting the perceptions and beliefs of its consumers,

particularly in regards to gender and sexuality. To understand the possible influence *Friends*' presentation of gender and sexuality may have on viewers, this study examined the episodes, "The One with the Lesbian Wedding," "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding," "The One with All the Wedding Dresses," "The One with Ross's Wedding: Part One," "The One with Ross's Wedding: Part Two," "The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress," "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part One," "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part Two," and "The One with Phoebe's Wedding." Weddings tend to be highly gendered, setting different expectations for its male and female participants, and weddings also relate to and revolve around issues of sexuality. Thus, selecting episodes with the word "Wedding" in the title provided a certain level of assurance that issues of gender and sexuality would be addressed. Through the analyzation of these episodes, the visibility and representation *Friends* renders sexuality will be presented, with particular scrutinization of the representation *Friends* provides the lesbian and transgender community. *Friends*' performance of gender will also be reviewed by examining this television series' presentation of hegemonic masculinity as well as its confliction of feminist and postfeminist ideals. Previous ideals and circulating discourses will be presented preceding each discussion of sexuality and gender, in order to garner a greater understanding of the possible cultural significance *Friends*' representations had/have and the influence these representations had/have on viewer perceptions.

The succeeding examination shows that *Friends* presents gender and sexuality in ways that both defy and support hegemonic ideals and discourses of the time. *Friends* simultaneous defiance of and consent to hegemonic ideals presents the possibility of a multitude of varying effects on the beliefs, expectations, and attitudes one has for others and themselves in regards to the performance of sexuality and gender (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Behm-Morawitz &

Mastro, 2008). It is not as simple as stating that overall *Friends*, as media text, provides an either “good” or “bad” representation of gender and sexuality. This text’s representations can be viewed through various perspectives and subsequently be identified as both “good” and “bad” simultaneously. These at times conflicting multitudes of representations substantiate *Friends* as a negotiated text. The previous explained influence of the media being a negotiation of meaning between the media product and the viewer further vindicates *Friends*’ multiplicity of influence and impact on viewers’ perceptions (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Every viewer has different beliefs, attitudes, and personal experiences already influencing their perceptions prior to viewing *Friends* or any other media product. Through the process or negotiation, these previously held ideals will influence how *Friends*’ representations effects each individual viewer (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). However, even though the process of negotiated meaning makes it impossible to know the exact influence *Friends*’ presentation of gender and sexuality has on every individual viewer, it is still important to recognize the possible influence *Friends* may have and acknowledge the various impact these representations have on viewer perceptions so that at least a certain level of understanding, consciousness, and cultural significance of these portrayals is retained.

The One About Sexuality

The One with the Lesbians

To begin, for a television sitcom of the 1990s, *Friends* presents a novel level of representation and visibility for certain groups in regards to sexuality. Media visibility and representation for the LGBTQ community has been a historical struggle and ongoing process. While today one can turn on the television and see representations of gays and lesbians and even bisexuals and transgender individuals, it was once possible to examine any form of media and

not see any non-heterosexual representations (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Media visibility is viewed as an “important form of social and political recognition” and is often a “vital source for self-recognition and identity formation” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 77). *Friends* does provide a level of recognition for a certain sector of the LGBTQ community, through the characters Carol Willick and Susan Bunch. Carol is Ross’s first ex-wife who left him shortly before the beginning of the series after coming out as a lesbian. Carol is in a serious relationship with Susan, who she eventually marries in season two. The visibility of the lesbian community in *Friends* is certainly noteworthy, when visibility of lesbians was not and is still not always present in meaningful ways (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, Crane & Kauffman, 1996b).

However, what is more progressive and important is *Friends*’ representation of these two characters, particularly in the episode “The One with the Lesbian Wedding” (Crane & Kauffman, 1996b). When members of the LGBTQ community are represented in media they are usually subjected to oversimplified ideals and images or stereotypes (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Two stereotypes frequently seen in media representations of lesbians include the “bull dyke” and the “lipstick lesbian” (O’Brien, 2009). Masculine or butch lesbians often receive the derogatory label of “bull dyke.” The “bull dyke” stereotype perpetuates the idea that lesbians are objectively unattractive, man-hating, unfeminine, stoic, and aggressive. On the other end of the spectrum, the media also presents extremely hypersexualized representations of lesbians, representations that often serve to appeal to the heterosexual male. Such hypersexualized portrayals are known as “lipstick lesbians” (O’Brien, 2009). Media representations and the use of stereotypes of lesbians and other members of the LGBTQ community are even more influential, and in regards to stereotypes often more detrimental, than representations of other groups given the fact many people might not know any members of this community in their everyday life. The presented

media images thus have a greater effect in shaping the ideas and expectations individuals have of this group with whom they have no direct interaction or experience (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Therefore, though these stereotypical representations do offer the lesbian community a certain degree of visibility, this visibility is still problematic due to the quality and narrowness of these representations.

In “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” *Friends* defies these stereotypes through their presentation of Carol and Susan. To begin, the appearance of Susan and Carol resemble nothing of the “bull dyke” stereotype. The two attractive women both embrace femininity as evidenced by their long hair and their choice to both wear dresses on their wedding day. Carol and Susan are also not hypersexualized or portrayed as promiscuous. Their authentic love and commitment for each other is accentuated in the episode through their wedding ceremony and the discussion that occurs about their relationship. Ross, Carol’s ex-husband, has a hard time accepting Carol will be marrying a woman telling his friends, “I’m really not going. I mean, I don’t get it. They already live together, why do they need to get married?” In a moment of sincerity Monica tells Ross, “Because, they love each other. And they want to celebrate that love with the people that are close with them” (Crane & Kauffman, 1996b). Through the defiance of stereotypes, *Friends* validates the fluidity of gender expression and the legitimacy of same sex love and consequently same sex marriage. For an episode that aired in 1996 the year the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which “denied the federal recognition of same-sex marriages” was signed into law and before same sex marriage was legalized in any U.S. state, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding” displays a progressive level of acceptance of the LGBTQ community and same sex marriage (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 3).

However, this is not to say the *Friends*' representation of the LGBTQ community should not be questioned or is without faults. *Friends*' acceptance of the LGBTQ community specifically all members of the lesbian community in the "The One with the Lesbian Wedding" is contentious (Crane & Kauffman, 1996b). In terms of sexuality and sexual relationships that have been dubbed socially acceptable, the relationship between Carol and Susan contains a number of sexual values that are part of the charmed circle and are considered "good, normal, natural, and blessed" (Rubin, 1999, p. 153 as cited in Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Gayle Rubin, a cultural anthropologist and a sex and gender political activist, developed the charmed circle of sexual behaviors to account for the sex hierarchy that exists in American culture. Traits or values in regards to sex that are considered charmed and widely accepted by society include, sex that is heterosexual, monogamous, private, vanilla, non-pornographic, procreative, same generation, non-commercial, only involves bodies, occurs in marriage, in pairs, or in a relationship. Sex traits on the outer limits of Rubin's circle that are considered "bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned" are homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic (Rubin, 1993, p. 13, as cited in Hilton-Marrow and Battles, 2015).

The fact that Carol and Susan are of the same sex places their love and sexual behaviors on the outer limits. However, several other aspects of their relationship portray a love and relationship that is "good," "natural," and more widely accepted in American culture. For one, Susan and Carol are in a serious monogamous relationship and, by the end of "The One with the Lesbian Wedding," are also married. Susan and Carol also appear to be the same age and of the same generation. The couple is only shown kissing and in friendly embraces nothing overtly sexual and certainly nothing pornographic (Crane & Kauffman, 1996b). As previously

contended, *Friends* celebrates and validates the same sex love and relationship of Carol and Susan, but this acceptance of the LGBTQ community and same sex relationships may be diluted by Carol and Susan's relationship having to contain so many charmed and "good" traits in order to gain this acceptance.

The One with the Transgender Father

The extent of acceptance of the LGBTQ community in *Friends* is also questioned through the visibility of another sector of this community, the transgender community. Visibility is given to this sector of the community through Chandler's father, Charles Bing. The visibility of a transwoman is certainly laudable when visibility of this community is frequently absent especially 10 – 20 years ago, when *Friends* was on the air (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Yet visibility does not guarantee accurate or good representation as evidenced in "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part One" and "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part Two." The first visibility and representation issue that arises with Charles Bing is the actress selected to play the role, Kathleen Turner (Crane & Kauffman, 2001b; Crane & Kauffman, 2001c). The fact that Turner was a woman from birth certainly negates visibility for the trans community by representing a transgender character through a non-trans person. This representation also frequently leads to other issues and other stereotypical representations since a transgender view and voice is absent from the portrayal and creation of a trans character (Sneed, 2014; Allen, 2011).

Though the portrayal of Charles by a transgender actress could have provided more accurate and authentic visibility of the trans community, the casting of an actress rather than an actor for the part does assist in defying certain trans stereotypes. The casting of a woman for role rather than a man defies the stereotype that transwomen are overtly masculine. This stereotype is

also linked to the idea and stereotype that one can identify a member of the trans community just by looking at them (Kreitler, 2012). This stereotype is mocked not only by the casting of a woman for the role but also by the actions and dialogue of Monica and Rachel in “The One with Monica and Chandler’s Wedding: Part One.” As Chandler and Monica socialize at their rehearsal dinner, Monica asks Rachel to talk to Chandler’s dad in an attempt to keep Chandler’s quarreling parents away from each other. Rachel says, “Yeah, but I don’t know what he looks like.” Monica then replies, “He is the man in the black dress.” Rachel then begins her search for Chandler’s dad or “the man in the black dress.” She soon locates a random woman in a black dress who she assumes is Chandler’s dad (Crane & Kauffman, 2001b). The portrayal of Charles as an attractive and more feminine woman and Rachel’s failure to identify Charles by Monica’s naïve description, defies and derides ideas and stereotypes of transgender appearances.

Though Charles may defy stereotypes surrounding the expectations of what a trans person is supposed to look like she is still othered and frequently used as a ploy for laughs. One moment of otherness and mockery is illustrated as Chandler and Monica prepare to leave for their rehearsal dinner. Monica tells Chandler, “Here’s a question you never want to have to ask. My dad just called and wants to know if he can borrow one of your pearl necklaces.” This is followed by the laughter from the studio audience who were present when *Friends* was being filmed. Monica then asks Chandler what kind of neckline his father will be wearing. They agree that “he” would be the type to wear a plunging neckline, with Chandler stating, “Yeah, he is a more of ‘if you got it flaunt it’ type of father.” This statement is also followed by the laughter from the studio audience (Crane & Kauffman, 2001b).

The employment of laughter, such as laughter recorded from a live studio audience or a laugh track convention, does not tell an audience why something is funny, but does make a clear

statement to the audience about what is supposed to be funny (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). *Friends* plea to elicit laughs from the live audience while discussing a woman wanting to borrow a necklace elucidates Charles as a ploy for laughter. Chandler and Monica's continued use of the pronoun "he" to refer to Charles also seems to delegitimize her as a woman (Allen, 2011). Referring to Charles by the wrong pronoun and using her as a source of laughter, as emphasized by the utilization of the laughter from the live audience, seems to promote an ideology that members of the transgender community are illegitimate, exists only for the amusement of others, and should not be taken seriously.

Friends certainly provides certain degree of visibility for the LGBTQ community not typically seen in a plethora media productions of late 1990s and even in some media products of today (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Some of the representations of the LGBTQ community in this late 1990s television show could even be described as progressive, especially for the time in which they were produced. However, even these seemingly progressive representations are not without faults, as evidenced by appeals to certain heteronormative and hegemonic ideals in order for these characters of the LGBTQ community to be accepted and represented. Also, many sectors of the LGBTQ community do not appear to be represented at all with members of the bisexual community noticeably absent. Plus, members of the LGBTQ community who are represented are regulated to minor roles, with the six main characters of the series presented as heterosexual.

The One About Gender

The One with Hegemonic Masculinity

Though *Friends*' main characters may all represent a strictly heteronormative view in terms of sexuality, the main characters also offer a more fluid expression and view of gender,

especially in regards to the masculinity portrayed and accepted by the three male friends: Ross, Chandler, and Joey. Hegemonic masculinity or “the dominant understanding of what ‘normal’ masculinity is in a certain society” is constantly changing and has historically been proven to be unstable (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 179; Albrecht, 2016). According to Wooden and Gillam (2014), discourses and ideas of masculinity “have always resulted from complex social tensions – economic, domestic, and cultural, as well as historical” (p. 5). As a result, slight variations in ideas of hegemonic masculinity have been presented and circulated throughout the years.

After the Great Depression and WWII, for example, television and film presented two slightly conflicting ideas of masculinity, the homesteader and the celebrity. Homesteader masculinity promotes the idea that male fulfillment can only be achieved through nurturing others and placing community before thyself. This model “privileges self-effacement, obedience, and emotional stoicism” (Wooden & Gillam, 2014, p. 15). A celebrity masculine discourse, however values a man who controls his environment and who can “prove himself not by being a part of society but by being untouched by it.” This masculine discourse believes one “can always survive walking alone down whatever mean streets” (Wooden & Gillam, 2014, p. 7).

The more recent rise of feminism and women’s “entry into the economic, political, and cultural spaces” has also lead to a change or more diversity in television and film’s portrayal of hegemonic masculinity (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015, p. 304). For example, we see an acceptance of the metrosexual, an adolescent adult who is “more ‘chill’” and less competitive than early forms of masculinity (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015, p. 304). The identification of alpha and beta males has also emerged. Alpha males represent “all things stereotypically patriarchal: unquestioned authority, physical power, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, lack of visible or

shared emotion, social isolation.” Beta males, however, are identified as men with a “kinder, gentler version of masculinity” (Albrecht, 2016, p. 33-34). Most recently a form of masculinity has emerged that values and emphasizes “deep close relationship[s] between two heterosexual men” or bromances (Albrecht, 2016, p. 30).

Consistent with the negotiated framework already discussed in this analysis, *Friends* both challenges and supports a variety and variation of discourses previously circulated about masculinity. One previous idea of hegemonic masculinity *Friends* perpetuates is the homesteader, specifically this masculinity’s value on men protecting others (Wooden & Gillam, 2014). We see Ross enact this type of masculinity in “The One with Monica and Chandler’s Wedding: Part One.” Ross delivers his “older brother talk” to Chandler stating, “If you ever hurt my little sister, if you ever cause her any unhappiness of any kind, I will hunt you down and kick your ass” (Crane & Kauffman, 2001b). Joey also behaves in accordance with ideas bestowed by homesteader masculinity in “The One with Phoebe’s Wedding.” After Phoebe asks Joey to walk her down the aisle and give her away, Joey begins to harass Mike, Phoebe’s fiancé, about his intentions for marrying Phoebe and how he plans to provide for her (Crane & Kauffman, 2004). While, *Friends*’ reinforcement of homesteader masculinity may be lessened by the comedic nature of these interactions and by the fact that male fulfillment is not portrayed as being achieved through such actions, *Friends* still succumbs to and enforces ideas that men are responsible for protecting others (Wooden & Gillam, 2014).

However, while *Friends* may support homesteader ideas of protection, the series certainly seems to contradict this hegemonic masculinity’s ideals about emotional stoicism particularly through the relationship of the three male friends (Wooden & Gillam, 2014). A certain affection, closeness, and care exists between Ross, Chandler, and Joey that arguably transcends the

boundaries of preconceived and accepted ideas of male friendship. The relationship between Chandler and Joey in particular, embraces an emotionality atypical of the intimacy and closeness reserved and regulated for male friendships (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). The series accentuates the bromance between Chandler and Joey through the continued ploy of issues, actions, and conversations between the two that are typically reserved for couples. For example, in “The One with All the Wedding Dresses,” Chandler complains how Joey’s snoring keeps him up all night. A partner’s snoring keeping one awake as an issue of those in a sexual relationship is highlighted by Monica sharing a story how she used to go out with a man who was a really light sleeper and he would just roll her over to stop her snoring (Crane & Kauffman, 1998c). Placing Joey and Chandler, two heterosexual men, in intimate roles reserved for those in a sexual relationship continually challenges ideas of traditional masculinity.

Their possession of issues reserved for intimate couples is again seen in “The One with Ross’s Wedding: Part One.” While touring London, Joey and Chandler get into an argument with the two eventually deciding to go their separate ways. However, Chandler soon returns to the hotel room he and Joey shares, and waits for Joey to return. When Joey does return, Chandler shares a sincere apology and tells what a lousy day he has had without Joey (Crane & Kauffman, 1998a). Chandler’s sincere apology and emphasis on how bad his day was without Joey showcases the special bond these two friends share. Also, shortly after Joey and Chandler make up, Monica and Ross get into a heated debate about Monica telling Emily, Ross’s fiancé, to postpone their wedding. Chandler and Joey escape into their hotel room bathroom to avoid getting involved in the controversy. When Monica and Ross leave, Joey and Chandler emerge from the bathroom. Joey then says, “I hope Ross didn’t think we just went in there because we

were uncomfortable being out here.” As the laughter from the studio audience plays, a disturbed looking Chandler responds, “I hope he did” (Crane & Kauffman, 1998a).

The idea of the other friends thinking there might have been something sexual between the two as eluded to by Chandler’s comment underlines the depth of intimacy these two heterosexual men share. Chandler’s response and the comedic nature of the situation, as substantiated by the employment of the laughter from the studio audience, also broaches a reoccurring restriction of Joey and Chandler’s relationship. Whenever their intimacy and affection for each other seems to leave the sphere reserved for heterosexuality, their actions and behavior have to be regulated as comedic. This comedic regulation preserves Joey and Chandler’s relationship as heterosexual and prevents their relationship from being labeled as “gay.” This constant regulation to prevent Joey and Chandler’s relationship from entering the sphere of homosexuality again questions *Friends’* acceptance of the LGBTQ community (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).

However, while the intimacy between Chandler and Joey is frequently used as a stratagem for laughter, *Friends* still seems to embrace and encourage an emotionality and intimacy between heterosexual men unprecedented for its time (Wooden & Gillam, 2014; Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). Evidence for this embrace and encouragement can be presented through the fact that even though Joey and Chandler’s intimate relationship is at times a source of laughter for the audience and the other friends, their love and friendship for each other never derails or lessens but arguable grows throughout the series. Plus, as affirmed by preceding interactions between the two characters, there are sincere moments the pair share discussing their authentic feelings for each other. Through the intimate friendship of Ross, Joey, and Chandler, but especially Joey and

Chandler, *Friends* presents men as emotional beings capable of and allowed to form meaningful relationships with other men.

Further evidence for *Friends* corroborating and encouraging a more emotional idea of masculinity is presented through the presentation and persona of Joey. Of the three male friends, Joey is the one most accepting and embracing of his own expression of femininity, emotionality, and intimacy. His acceptance and performance of male intimacy is illustrated in “The One with Barry and Mindy’s Wedding,” where Joey is auditioning for a role that requires him to kiss the main male lead. However, after the auditioned kissed Joey is told by the director he is a good actor, but a bad kisser. Joey then enlists the help of his friends to determine why he is a bad kisser. A kiss with Phoebe leads Monica to conclude that Joey is not a bad kisser, but is probably just not used to kissing men. Joey then turns to his male friends for help, who appear appalled by the idea. Ross declares, “Over my dead body!” and Chandler continues “And I’ll be using his dead body as a shield.” Though in the end Ross does kiss Joey to prove he is a “good friend,” it is Joey who is never phased by the idea of kissing his male friends illustrating his greater acceptance and embracement of heterosexual male intimacy compared to the others (Crane & Kauffman, 1996a).

Joey’s refutation of the gender binary and previous ideas of hegemonic masculinity, such as the celebrity and homesteader, is showcased throughout the series (Wooden & Gillam, 2014). In “The One with All the Wedding Dresses,” Joey’s femininity appears to be directly eluded to when Ross tells the friends he is getting married in four weeks. Joey flips through a calendar to see his current plans for that day and blurts out, “That’s the day after I start menstruating!” before realizing the calendar is not his own (Crane & Kauffman, 1998c). His sensitivity is illustrated in “The One with Ross’s Wedding: Part One” where after a short time in London,

Joey becomes homesick and emotional about Phoebe and his pet chicken and duck who are back home in New York City (Crane & Kauffman, 1998a).

What makes Joey's appeal to femininity and emotion so significant is that his performance of masculinity is envied and admired by many in the show even though he seems to fit the definition of a beta male with his "kinder, gentler version of masculinity," a masculinity that is frequently portrayed as lesser (Albrecht, 2016, p. 34). In "The One with Ross's Wedding: Part Two," Joey delivers a toast about his love for New York and the people there while fighting back tears. When his toast is finished, Joey cries to Chandler, "Can we please go home now?" A bridesmaid then turns to Joey to express her sadness that he wants to leave, since she was hoping to get to know him better (Crane & Kauffman, 1998b). Though this is only one example, Joey's appeal to women is played upon throughout the series. His appeal to women is also envied by the other male friends. When Joey and Ross unknowingly start dating the same girl in "The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress," an oblivious Ross tells Joey, "I'd hate to be the guy that's up against you," after Joey says the girl he is dating is seeing other guys. Joey's response that he is not worried about the other men also illustrates Joey's comfortability and confidence in his own masculinity (Crane & Kauffman, 2001a). In certain ways, *Friends* seems to encourage gender fluidity while, propagating the idea that beta males and the performance of masculinity that appeals to femininity is in no way lesser.

However, much like *Friends* more limited acceptance of the lesbian community, the series' promotion and acceptance of masculinity that appeals to femininity and values intimacy can also be questioned. While, Joey may be portrayed as having a version of masculinity that appeals to many women and is envied by many men, he is also portrayed as the "fool". The "fool" is a stock character frequently used in sitcoms and comedy. The actions and dialogue of

these fool characters are often able to “fundamentally challenge dominant ideological power structures or dominant norms” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 216). However, because these characters portrayal as the fool often associates them as being unintelligent and simpleminded “audience members can more easily dismiss their pointed critiques,” such as Joey’s repudiation of previous ideas of the hegemonic masculinity and the gender binary (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 216).

Friends’ acceptance of a hegemonic masculinity that appeals to femininity is also questioned through the mockery the male friends’ femininity receives from others, their attempts to conceal their femininity, and their periodic appeals and performance of stereotypical masculinity to compensate for their femininity. This is illustrated in “The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress.” At the end of this episode, Monica returns to her apartment to find Ross, Chandler, and Joey with clay beauty masks applied to their facial t-zones. A distressed Chandler says, “I thought you were gonna be gone all day.” Monica then replies, “I’m sorry. I should probably leave you girls alone.” The men try to defend their beauty regime before returning to scream and holler at the basketball game playing on the television, a performance that could be viewed as an attempt to reclaim their masculinity (Crane & Kauffman, 2001a).

Friends’ framing of masculinity certainly offers a way of thinking beyond the gender binary that challenges previous hegemonic ideals and expectations. However, having Ross, Chandler, and Joey try to conceal their femininity at times contradicts the previous defended acceptance the series’ circulates about male emotionality and femininity. It seems to state that men are allowed to embrace an expression of gender that has been dubbed feminine, yet this male performance of femininity should be regulated to the private sphere. Also, male acts of femininity should be compensated by an appeal to hyperbolic masculinity and are viewed as

more acceptable if such compensation is performed. Through these at times contradicting masculine performances and ideas, *Friends* is again validated as a negotiated text relying to a certain degree on each individual audience member's own beliefs, attitudes, and personal experiences to draw conclusions about hegemonic and acceptable performances of masculinity.

The One with Feminist and Postfeminist Ideals

Ideals and expectations regarding male performance of masculinity are not the only discourses set and circulated by *Friends*. The series also presents and negotiates specific discourses about women and the performance of femininity. These discourses appeal to a variety and variation of feminist and postfeminist principles. Feminism can be defined as a movement to end sexist oppression through a collective struggle against patriarchy (hooks, 2000). Feminism views choice as collective, questions femininity, relies on political action, supports female bonding and aims to assist in unlearning female self-hatred (Ferriss & Young, 2008; hooks, 2000). Postfeminism can be summarized as "a development in society in which women are thought to enjoy the benefits of feminist activists' hard-won freedoms, but are not willing to carry the burdens of positioning oneself as a feminist" (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 181). Postfeminists embrace consumerism, the power of sexuality, and femininity (Ferriss & Young, 2008; Gill, 2007a).

To begin, feminist notions can be detected in the make-up of the main cast, which consists of three men and three women. This equal sex representation is significant and to certain degree even revolutionary since men have historically outnumbered women in terms of representation on television and film (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). This equality in representation is even more subversive considering that while the series was/is enjoyed by women, the series is not specifically regarded as a chick flick, a genre that is frequently degraded

and viewed as insignificant (Ferriss & Young, 2008). This statement is not meant to support the low culture description of chick flicks, but to accentuate the greater cultural significance and importance society places on non-chick flick productions and thus on *Friends* (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Ferriss & Young, 2008). Through the presence of strong female leads and rejection of the chick flick genre, *Friends* defies a number of the traditionally gendered spaces created and reserved for woman on television and film.

Other feminist notions are also present in the relationship these three women share. In an industry that has repeatedly portrayed females as catty women who cannot get along with one another *Friends* offers a disparate and arguable more realistic view on female relationships (Douglas, 2010; Ferriss & Young, 2008). The relationship of Phoebe, Monica, and Rachel showcases the value and benefits of female friendship. We see the three support and comfort one another as well as derive enjoyment from each other's company throughout the series. Their relationship is certainly not free from conflict as evidenced in "The One with Phoebe's Wedding," where Phoebe becomes upset with her controlling wedding planner Monica and eventually fires her (Crane & Kauffman, 2004). However, the female friends are able to resolve their issues in civilized ways that do not involve flipping tables, pulling hair, or stabbing each other in the back (Douglas, 2010). Through such representations, *Friends* challenges past and present discourse that presents women as catty and incapable of same sex friendship (Douglas, 2010). Instead, the show presents female bonding as realistic, enjoyable, and beneficial (Ferriss & Young, 2008).

However, *Friends* also repeatedly draws on the principles and beliefs of postfeminism. The circulation of at times conflicting postfeminist and feminist ideas throughout the series, again emphasizes *Friends* as a negotiated text and highlights the multiplicity of understanding

and illations that can be drawn through various perspectives, including a postfeminist positioning. Postfeminism is seen most blatantly in the appearance and clothing choices of the three female friends: Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe. These three characters openly embrace femininity, donning clothing and looks stereotypical defined as feminine. This embrace and projection of femininity is also tied to the postfeminist discourse of “femininity as a bodily property” (Gill, 2007a, p. 149). The idea of femininity as a bodily property makes it important to note that the three female friends are all slim and largely adhere to socially constructed norms of femininity and ideas of attractiveness. The purpose of these observances is not to argue for or against *Friends* postfeminist embrace of femininity, only to bring a consciousness to the narrow view and expectation the series sets for what feminine is and what femininity looks like. Such a narrow view of feminine appearance may other and degrade the femininity of women who do not fit this expectation and projection of femininity.

Postfeminism can also be seen in the openness of sexual practices and desires performed by the female leads. To clarify, feminism is not to be regarded as anti-sex, however, women positioning themselves as desiring sexual subjects speaks more to the beliefs of postfeminism than the collective thinking of feminists (Ferriss & Young, 2008). This stated sexual desire of women is seen throughout the series. In the “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” Rachel’s mom asks, “So, what’s new in sex?” She then explains to a mortified Rachel that the only man she had ever been with was Rachel’s father and she was hoping “there might be more” (Crane & Kauffman, 1996b). Women’s sexual desires and preferences are also referenced in “The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress” when Monica and another bride-to-be discuss a wedding photographer’s work of a nude wedding. Monica exclaims, “Best man... Wow!” and the other bride-to-be states she almost called off her own wedding after seeing the photos (Crane &

Kauffman, 2001a). *Friends* also presents the female leads as not only having sexual desires, but fulfilling these desires. As evidenced in “The One with Ross’s Wedding: Part Two” where a single Monica and a single Chandler end up in bed together (Crane & Kauffman, 1998b). In an industry and culture that has frequently presented women as sexual objects rather than subjects, *Friends* offers an alternative view that defends the sexual desires and acts of women without shame or remorse (Krinjnen & Van Bauwel, 2016).

The show also succumbs to and circulates a significant number of stereotypes typically regarded as negative by feminists and more aligned with the postfeminist rejection of feminist advancements. These stereotypes largely revolve around the idea that women can only be fulfilled and find happiness through marriage and having children (Friedan, 1963; Douglas, 2010; Krinjnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). The idea all women want to get married and can only find happiness through marriage is referenced most blatantly in “The One with All the Wedding Dresses.” In an episode that would surely make feminist cringe, Monica decides to play bride after she is mistakenly identified as the bride when she picks up Ross’s fiancé’s wedding dress. Phoebe too decides to partake in the bridal fantasy renting her own bridal gown. The two take turns tossing a tissue paper bouquet back and forth in Monica’s apartment, before identifying themselves “as really sad” and deciding they need to change out of the dresses. Meanwhile, Rachel has been thrust so deep in the depths of despair by Ross’s pending nuptials that she asks Joshua, the man she has been on a total of four dates with, to marry her. When a terrified Joshua runs away from Rachel’s marriage suggestion, Monica and Phoebe tell Rachel they know just the thing that will cheer her up. The three women are then all shown sitting on the couch in bridal dresses (Crane & Kauffman, 1998c). The significance placed on the happiness from wearing the bridal gown and playing bride and Rachel’s reliance on a marriage proposal to solve her

problems certainly seems to yield to a more postfeminist ideal that all women ultimately want to get married and must get married to achieve happiness (Friedan, 1963; Douglas, 2010; Krinjen & Van Bauwel, 2015). While, women choosing to get married does not contradict with ideas of feminist choice, *Friends*' portrayal of marital status as the ultimately natural and normal desire or want for all women certainly follows a more postfeminist way of thinking (Ferris & Young, 2008).

As previously stated, *Friends* also circulates the notion women must have children in order to find fulfillment and happiness as well. This is directly referenced in "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding." In this episode, Monica is in a serious relationship with a much older man. When the two begin to discuss their future together, it is discovered that their wants and plans for children do not exactly align. Monica tries to alleviate the situation and difference between them, deciding maybe she does not need to have children that it is just something society and her mom have always convinced her she wanted. However, Monica soon changes her tone stating, "I do. I have to have children. I'm sorry I just do" (Crane & Kauffman, 1996a). Monica's personal want for children is certainly not deplorable by any means, but her emphasis on "have to have" and her preoccupation about having children throughout the series presents the idea that Monica and consequently other woman cannot be fully fulfilled until they achieve motherhood. While this discourse may be attenuated with Rachel and Phoebe not openly placing the same level of importance on having children as Monica, it is still circulated and substantiated throughout the series.

Friends' presentation of three women who support and love each other, is a refreshing depiction of this sex which is so often subjected to depictions of cattiness and hatred for one another (Douglas, 2010). The way these women embrace and discuss their sexuality in a way

that is not seen as taboo or reprehensible also defies past representations that have only presented women as sexual subjects and derogatorily labeled those who embraced their sexual desires (Ferriss & Young, 2008, Gill, 2007b). However, *Friends* may give rise for concern through its very narrow representation of what femininity is and looks like for women, especially in regards to physical appearance (Gill, 2007a). The show may also be questioned by some for its emphasis on ideas of a woman's happiness and fulfillment only being achieved through marriage and child bearing (Friedan, 1963; Douglas, 2010; Krinjen & Van Bauwel, 2015). Thus, it can be concluded that through these representations, the negotiability of postfeminism, and the process of negotiated meaning itself, *Friends* still presents women with a particular way to think about their gendered selves, as well as influences the expectations others have for this sex and their performance of gender within a postfeminist culture.

Conclusion

By no means does the previously discussed portrayals of gender and sexuality cover all presented depictions expressed in the examined episodes or the entire series of *Friends*. Also, through the negotiation of meaning, it not possible to know the exact effect such representations have or had on viewers (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). However, the formerly addressed and analyzed depictions still provide significant insight into the norms, beliefs, and expectations set and condoned by *Friends* as well as the possible implications such representations have. The examination and subsequent analysis of "The One with the Lesbian Wedding," "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding," "The One with All the Wedding Dresses," "The One with Ross's Wedding: Part One," "The One with Ross's Wedding: Part Two" "The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress," "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part One," "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding: Part Two," and "The One with Phoebe's Wedding" illustrated

that *Friends* presents gender and sexuality in defiance and accordance of many hegemonic ideals and discourses of the 1990s and early 2000s. Through the negotiation of meaning these media representations undoubtedly influenced viewers in multifarious ways with significant cultural implications (Gauntlett, 2002; Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Krijnen & VanBauwel, 2015). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the representations of gender and sexuality presented in this television series, regardless if one feels they are influenced by such representations, because *Friends* still serves as critical forum for circulating and creating dominant societal discourses (Albrecht, 2016).

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