

FRIENDS

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1994)

Factsheet 1 - Media Language & Representation

The logo for the TV show Friends, featuring the word "FRIENDS" in a stylized font where each letter has a colored dot: F (red), R (blue), I (yellow), E (red), N (yellow), D (blue), O (yellow), and S (blue).

Acknowledgements

All quotes from dialogue: *Friends* Season 1, Episode 1 (1994), NBC/ Channel 4.

Images	Acknowledgement
Friends logo	© Warner Bros
Rachel in wedding dress with friends on sofa	Warner Bros TV/Bright/Kauffman/Crane Pro/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock
Joey, Ross, and Chandler	Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

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FRIENDS

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1994)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:

Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The set historical product is a ten-minute extract from Series 1, Episode 1 of *Friends*, first released in September 1994 in the US and April 1995 in the UK. It ran for 10 series.
- It was produced and distributed by Warner Brothers and broadcast on NBC in America becoming one of its most successful programmes ever.
- It was created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman and included an ensemble cast of relatively new actors.
- The sitcom revolves around the lives of six 20-30 year olds who live in an apartment block in Manhattan, New York City.
- Friends* has a global reach in several countries and is one of the most popular television shows of all time.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Language

The codes and conventions of media language, how they become established as genres.

Sitcoms have a recognisable set of conventions. These have evolved over time and developed to reflect social and cultural change and the needs of audiences. There are some differences between British and American sitcoms, largely with regard to filming models and production values; however, they share similarities which place them in the genre including:

Narrative: American sitcoms usually employ the **circular narrative** model whereby an initial equilibrium is established then disrupted, the episode focuses on this ‘problem/situation’ which creates the comedy and is then resolved by the end of the programme (Todorov) where the characters return to their original situation, for example the living room in Monica’s apartment or The Central Perk cafe. In this sense, sitcoms offer reassurance, audiences can expect that the problem introduced will be solved by the end of the episode.

There may also be narrative strands that continue from one episode to another, typically concerned with relationships between characters.

Some of the narrative comedy may come from repeated motifs including reoccurring comic situations and misunderstandings. An essential part of the narrative is visual and verbal humour, for example slapstick comedy, comic timing, and one-liners.

Characters: American sitcoms often include a collection of characters who fulfil particular stereotypical comic roles. They become familiar to audiences and are common to more than one example of the genre.

Settings and locations: American sitcoms are usually studio based and filmed in front of a live audience. The narrative is usually based in communal places where the key characters interact. These locations are limited due to the studio model, become familiar to audiences, and become iconic and part of the programme’s brand identity, for example the two apartments and Central Perk in *Friends*.

Iconography: this often relates to the setting, for example the home or meeting place of the

characters and props can function as part of the comic business. Iconography can also be closely related to character, for example clothing or objects that communicate messages about their character and potential role in the narrative.

Theoretical perspectives on genre, including principles of repetition and variation; the dynamic nature of genre; hybridity and intertextuality. Consider:

Television sitcoms, like other popular genres, have a repertoire of elements that places them within the genre. These are recognisable to audiences fulfilling their expectations and are useful in the marketing of the product.

However, although sitcoms rely on repetition of common conventions, they also vary and introduce different elements (Neale).

Genres are dynamic, developing over time to reflect social and cultural change (Neale). The *Friends* model of the 'single-com' focusing on young people living and working together, rather than a family unit, was relatively new and appealed to the Generation X audience through the creation of the pseudo family.

Genres also use intertextuality to engage with audiences. *Friends* includes references to examples from popular culture that would resonate with audiences.

How choice of elements of media language influences meaning, including to create narratives, to portray aspects of reality, to construct points of view and to represent the world in ways that convey values and messages.
Semiotic analysis, including denotation and connotation can be used to analyse aspects of media language. Consider:

Visual codes:

Codes of expression and gesture: Expressions and gestures create visual humour in *Friends*. For example when Phoebe mimes clearing Ross's aura and the expressions on all the character's faces when they line up to meet 'the wine man'. Rachel's anxious expressions and dramatic gestures on her first appearance create comedy and expose character traits.

Codes of clothing: The connotations of characters' clothing and appearance create comedy and construct meanings. Rachel spends much of the episode in her wedding dress creating visual humour and helping to construct her character. Joey's jeans and leather jacket have an intertextual reference to James Dean, establishing him as the alpha male and womaniser of the group.



Setting and Iconography: the narrative revolves essentially around three studio settings; the two apartments and Central Perk. The settings create a constructed reality encouraging the audience to believe in the world of the characters. The coffee bar is a communal meeting place where the characters come together outside of their homes and also becomes Rachel's workplace. The living room in Monica's apartment serves a similar purpose and since this is a studio set, other rooms in the apartments are rarely seen. The difference between the two apartments connotes aspects of their inhabitants. Joey and Chandler's apartment is sparsely furnished and lacks home comforts, while Monica's is homely and filled with props reinforcing her maternal, caring character. The version of reality created suspends disbelief that Monica could afford such an apartment in that New York location on her salary.

Technical and Audio codes:

The programme is a multi-camera production filmed in a studio. The framing is consistent and regularly features a medium shot of all the characters interacting, for example on the sofa at the Central Perk, or a two shot which is used to create meaning, for example Rachel and Ross, establishing their relationship and foreshadowing a later narrative.

Establishing shots are also a narrative shortcut used regularly in the programme, for example the front of the café and the apartment block and the hallway between the apartments.

The soundtrack to *Friends* has been important to the branding of the show and establishes the ‘feelgood’ focus of the narrative. The studio laughter is a common convention of the genre and it is noticeable that the actors often wait for the laughter. Non-diegetic music is also used between scenes to reflect the mood.

Dialogue is also important in creating and developing characters. The well written script uses puns, one-liners, and comic timing to create verbal humour. Phoebe singing ‘*raindrops on roses*’ to Rachel punctuated by ‘*I helped!*’ reinforces her childlike eccentricity and Chandler’s ironic comments establish his use of sarcasm and self-deprecation, ‘*If I don’t add up the figuresnothing will happen*’.

Narrative:

As this was an opening episode the structure does not follow the model of other episodes in that narrative arcs are established which will have some longevity e.g. the breakup of Ross’s marriage, the arrival of Rachel having left her prospective husband at the altar and Monica’s quest to find the right man.

However, the episode does adhere to aspects of Todorov’s narrative structure – the equilibrium of the friends sharing a coffee in the café is disrupted by both the arrival of a distraught and dishevelled Rachel and an emotional Ross. Both of these characters achieve some sort of equilibrium by the end of the episode, Rachel has a job in the café and Ross asks Rachel on a future date.

The soundtrack encapsulates the narrative, ‘*I’ll be there for you*’, reinforcing the focus on ‘Twixters’, the pseudo family unit whose narratives revolve around romance and relationships.

This episode introduces the narrative trope of class in the shape of Rachel who has been supported by her father and her credit cards and has never had a job, this makes her different from the others who are trying to succeed largely by

their own means. As Monica says to Rachel: ‘*We all have jobs, that’s how we buy stuff*’.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representations

The ways in which the media re-present (rather than simply present) the world, and construct representations of reality. Consider:

All representations are constructed and are not ‘windows on the world’. Producers of media products construct representations and an alternative universe, in the case of sitcoms to create comedic opportunities, through the use of:

- **Technical codes.** Camera shots, framing and editing combine to construct representations. Consider how the audience is introduced to characters in this first episode of *Friends* and how the camera constructs the representation and positions audiences in relation to the characters. For example, the framing and close-ups of Rachel when she appears in the café.
- **Audio codes:** diegetic and non-diegetic sound including a soundtrack and dialogue contribute to the construction of representations. For example, the catchphrases and lexis used by the characters including Joey’s extended metaphor likening women to ice cream flavours.
- **Settings and Iconography:** clothing and props in *Friends* contribute to the construction of representations and will have been a key consideration of the producers in creating the characters and their roles. The setting of the apartment and the situation of the friends living together as a family unit constructs a virtual reality.

The social and cultural significance of particular representations in terms of the themes and issues that they address. Consider:

Representations of masculinity:

Friends saw the introduction of the new, metrosexual man into sitcoms providing a contrast with previous examples of the genre. The men were more emotional and less dominant regarding women. For example, Ross is seen to be emotionally hurt by his marriage break up, he is a serious character and has a close relationship with his sister Monica. He challenges the male

stereotype and displays qualities which may be considered stereotypically feminine, this is the focus of some of the comedy.



Chandler is a more reticent, less confident character. He has a 'proper job' and a lot of the humour comes from his sarcastic comments and one-liners. His clothing often represents the different aspects of his character, a hybridity of casual and smart.

Joey conforms more to the masculine stereotype of the alpha male. He is confident in his appearance (black leather jacket) and body language and is more concerned with how many women he can date rather than having a serious relationship. He tends to objectify women. In this episode this is demonstrated when he says to Rachel, "*Me and Chandler live right across the hall and he's away a lot.*" Monica then tells him off for 'hitting on' Rachel on her wedding day and Joey replies with "*What, like there's a rule or something?*". Joey also embodies traits of the 'joker' stereotype, providing much of the comedy.

All of the male characters challenge typical representations of masculinity through their inability to construct furniture.

Representations of femininity:

In comparison to the male characters, some of the women in *Friends* could be said to demonstrate more typical representations of gender, however they may be more complex than at first seems, both reinforcing and subverting stereotypical roles and reflecting gender issues of the time.

Rachel is a good example. We are introduced to her in her white wedding dress suggesting

innocence. She is represented as naïve and vulnerable, but also indulged. She has no awareness of real life in terms for example of getting a job. However, her '*You're a shoe*' conversation with her father, whilst creating comedy through clever timing, illustrates the fact that she can't marry a man she doesn't love and asserts her independence. This representation is then challenged by her reticence to cut up her credit cards.

Monica is a more matriarchal character illustrated in this episode by her confident, relaxed gesture in the opening scenes and her clothing of trousers and braces. She is also independent and lives in an apartment in NYC away from home. She is maternal towards Rachel, comforting her and the apartment is homely with domestic iconography, she could be said to display more adult characteristics than some of the other characters. However, she is also looking for a relationship and her caring, trusting nature allows her to be taken in by Paul. The gesture of stamping on his watch creates comedy and reasserts her control.

Phoebe is the free spirit who is much less grounded than the other characters. This representation is constructed through her choice of clothing and appearance, her hair in bunches, the dangling earrings and frayed denim jacket. At times she exhibits a childlike innocence and her tale of her back story creates black humour. Her eccentricity provides comic moments. Like Monica, she is an independent female who lives away from home.

Representations of age:

The *Friends* characters are 'Twixters', seemingly trapped between adolescence and adulthood. They are from Generation X enjoying their freedom before settling down.

A version of reality is constructed whereby they live a carefree life seemingly free of worries about bills and other everyday mundanities. The opening sequence in particular and the song reinforce the idea of the friends as a supportive family unit. This reflects a 1990s attitude of greater freedom and social mobility.

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Their main concerns are their friendship, romance, and relationships. Some characters, for example, Joey embody the carefree existence of Generation X more than others.

Representations of ethnicity:

New York in the 1990s was ethnically diverse, but this was not necessarily represented in television programmes of the time which under and misrepresented ethnic groups.

There is a lack of diversity in *Friends* and New York is not represented as multi-cultural city.