

Brand lessons from the *Friends* sitcom's timeless appeal

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The *Friends Reunion* has a lot of people talking. The show was broadcast on Sunday, 30 May 2021, 17 years after the series ended, and I'm amongst those who felt it was somewhat random.



Firstly, why are we revisiting this show almost two decades after it last aired? Secondly, if you watched it, you might have found yourself scratching your head, wondering what it was all really about?

Regardless of my views, *Friends* is a classic example of an influential brand. New Republic writer, Jo Livingstone, explained it perfectly, “Globally, *Friends* is as impossible to avoid as Coca Cola.” Many things resonated with the world's population just two short years ago that have little to no impact or influence on us today. So, what is it that makes the *Friends* brand remain timeless and iconic?

***Friends* are people we can relate to**

This is true of both the people we choose to spend our time with and those we came to identify within the *Friends* sitcom series. At one point or another, the *Friends* cast experienced real-life situations and relationship issues that resonated with its audience. The show's ability to bring strong and emotive stories to life connected with audiences and created a loyal bond.

What's more, the characters are distinctive and stereotyped, creating a space for viewers to identify with the cast's personality traits. Even celebrities interviewed in the Reunion episode, like David Beckham, shared how they see parts of themselves in these characters. David shared how he saw himself in Monica; energetic, hyper, obsessive-compulsive, level-headed, practical, loyal and caring. No matter who you are, these characters encompass traits that most of us can relate to.

Influencing culture and trends – and spend

Friends tapped into the zeitgeist of society, influencing culture and trends. The Rachel Haircut became one of the most famous haircuts in pop culture history after it was first revealed in 1995. And this month, following the hype of the *Friends' Reunion*, Glamour magazine reported that “demand for the Rachel hairstyle has skyrocketed by 179%.”

“Nostalgia serves to increase feelings of social connectedness” – The Decision Lab.

The Decision Lab published an article that outlined how successful marketing campaigns have leveraged the power of “combining something old with something new. Taking something that makes people nostalgic and adding a new, exciting twist to it seems to be the perfect combination for getting people to pull out their wallets.”

This is evident in the fact that branded *Friends*' paraphernalia has found a home in pop-culture retail stores for some time now. Items including t-shirts, mugs, monopoly games, Lego collectables, puzzles, photo frames and even Funko POP! Vinyl figurines have been available for sale – and in some cases at a premium price – long after the show finale.

Yearning for retro

According to the BBC, *Friends* was the most popular show among under-16's in the U.K. in 2019, and it's also widely publicised that *Friends* has remained one of the most popular shows on Netflix. New Republic's Livingstone outlined, "Young people are the lifeblood of the *Friends* audience. For those between the ages of 13 and 25, friendship is everything. It's an all-consuming drama that crowds out all other concerns, including the political."

In 2020, psychologist and nostalgia researcher Professor Krystine Batcho explained that society, and especially millennials, experience a "sentimental yearning for the past, [which] is particularly likely during times of transition." She added, "Given millennials' permanent state of instability, it's only natural that we are reaching for familiar sources of comfort and reassurance."

Jessica Lee, a UCSB Contributor, put it simply, "*Friends* portray a much simpler time of being there for one another, and is devoid of the anxieties that seem to intoxicate our society today."

Ultimately, *Friends* reveals insights for those working to build an iconic and timeless brand. There are known elements that can be shaped and controlled to create this result, but – without taking any credit away from the creators, cast and crew – there's always a touch of magic and luck that helps it live on, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Cave is the managing director of Brandfundi.

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