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Rhetorical Strategies of Visual Pleasure in Situation Comedies: ‘Friends’ and Female Body Image

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ABSTRACT

The visual messages conveyed by and about the female characters on Friends reinforce hegemonic ideals of femininity and an ideal female body image that is excessively thin. Messages of narcissism, voyeurism, and fetishism draw adolescent female viewers to identify with the images, characteristics, and behaviors of Rachel and Monica as models and to distance themselves from the images, characteristics, and behaviors of Phoebe and “Fat Monica” as anti-models. The messages sometimes overtly and often covertly perpetuate hegemonic stereotypes about women. Messages advocate that the ideal female body image is a sex object, and the most desirable sex objects are excessively thin. Implications from this analysis include: (1) Happiness and success for women are defined and restricted by hegemony. (2) “Beauty” is crucial to a young woman’s happiness and success. (3) “Beautiful women” are excessively thin at all costs, even costs related to physical health and professional achievement.

Dieting has been part of American culture for decades, particularly for women. This ideology manifests itself, for example, in a plethora of weekly magazines targeted toward women and adolescent girls. In fact, studies suggest that as many as 65 percent of adult women are concerned about being or becoming overweight (Anderson, Eyler, Galuska, Brown, & Brownson, 2002). More alarming is the fact that by age 13, 80 percent of young girls report both dissatisfaction with their bodies and having been on a diet (Natenshon, 1999). These statistics are particularly disconcerting in light of the surgeon general warning that “35 percent of normal dieters will become obsessive, unhealthy dieters” (“Overweight and Obesity,” 2002, pp. 8-9). Unhealthy dieting, also known as disordered eating, includes participating in unsafe diet programs, taking unproven diet products, and pursuing unreasonable weight standards, as well as the more commonly understood disorders of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Dorotik, 2006).

Disordered eating is especially pervasive among young women. Studies report that 40 – 50 percent of college women are disordered eaters and that the number one preoccupation of high school girls is weight (Natenshon, 1999). Moreover, although males also diet, the practice
of disordered eating is significantly more prevalent among females (Harrison, Taylor, & Marske, 2006). Most of these young women are not overweight, but actually believe they are “being more health conscious” (Neumark-Sztainer & Story, 1998, p. 446). Interestingly, “women’s fitness” as practiced today is being touted as the “newest patriarchal religion,” with anorexics filling fitness classes “like worshippers in a church” (Valdes, 2001, p. 31). At a time when young women could be seizing the opportunity to “create a world in our image,” too many are concentrating instead on “recreating the shape of our thighs” (Chernik, 2001, p. 110).

An essential predisposition to disordered eating is a distorted perception of body image as it relates to “personal beliefs about the social benefits and consequences of ‘thinness’” (Thombs, Mahoney, & McLaughlin, 1998, p. 107). Many women have come to believe that success and empowerment are reserved for the very thin (Hendricks, 2002). Consequently, one out of every two women claims to be dissatisfied with her body (p. 109).

This trend of disordered eating can have serious consequences on young women. Lack of sufficient nutrients (such as carbohydrates, fats, and lipids) can lead to serious complications, including delay in puberty, osteoporosis, infertility, hair loss, anemia, and organic brain syndromes (Becker, Grinspoon, Klibanski, & Herzog, 1999), as well as numerous psychological difficulties (e.g., Cash & Ancis, 1997; Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Wiseman, Sunday, & Becker, 2005).

Although many cultural influences contribute to body image perceptions (including peers, families, schools, and religious beliefs), media play an important role (e.g., Becker, 2004; Camarena, Sarigiani, & Petersen, 1997; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2001; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Wiseman, Sunday, & Becker, 2005). Mediated messages perpetuate a “cultural ‘pressure to be thin’ [and set] the stage for the dieting and body disparagement that often precede an eating disorder” (Becker & Hamburg, 1996, p. 163). The influential role of the media is particularly alarming for young girls. Schlenker, Caron, and Halterman (1998) point out that “adolescence is marked by a girl’s loss in confidence of herself” and, consequently, she is particularly vulnerable to the mediated messages to “be attractive at all costs” (p. 147). The female images portrayed as attractive essentially become role models for these young women (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2001).

Females portrayed in the media as “attractive role models” are usually very thin. In fact, since the birth of television, “more than half [of the female television personalities] meets the criteria for anorexia nervosa” (Harrison, 2000, p. 143). Moreover, women’s body types as portrayed on television are less diversified than men’s body types and are “not reflective of the general population” (White, Ginsburg, & Brown, 1999, p. 391). Television presents as standard a female body image that’s “nearly impossible to achieve” (Olson, 1996, p. 11). This thin ideal is also communicated compellingly “by portrayals of fatness as an undesirable trait” (Harrison, 2000, p. 121). Since these images of ideal female beauty are so clearly and narrowly defined, it follows that ramifications for young female viewers might include loss of self-esteem and lowered perceptions of self-worth, as well as disordered eating habits (Harrison & Hefner, 2006).
Interestingly, Becker et al. (1999) examined the effects of satellite television on adolescent girls in Fiji. Prior to the introduction of satellite television, about 3 percent of these girls reported to have dieted. Less than three years later, two-thirds reported to have dieted and 15 percent of them admitted vomiting to control their weight. Although television programs do not act in isolation, they do play a role in “body image processing” by encouraging adolescent girls to “endorse a thin ideal” (Botta, 1999, p. 35) and are “positively related to eating disorder symptomology” (Harrison, 2000, p. 143).

If this is so, then we concur with Hendricks (2002) who argues that it is crucial to both deepen and broaden our understanding of the relationship between televised messages and body image. She contends further that such research must extend beyond existing studies that rely “almost solely on empirical evidence to explain the influences of television on body image and satisfaction” to offer theoretically grounded interpretations as to why and how television programs do so (p. 111). This study seeks to answer her call via a rhetorical analysis of messages about female body image portrayed in the popular television program Friends. In other words, we seek to deepen intellectual understanding regarding how rhetorical strategies employed in television sitcoms like Friends communicate messages about female body image.

During the duration of the series, Friends and its actors won more than 20 Emmys, a People’s Choice Award for Best Comedy Series in 2001, and a Screen Actor’s Guild Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in 1996. Moreover, its primary target audience is adolescent girls and young women (Olson, 1996). Although some sources argue that its target audience is 18 to 35 year-old women, Neilson ratings data report that nearly 2 million viewers are between the ages of 2 and 17 (Parents Television Council, 2004). Finally, two of the female leads, Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston, lost noticeable amounts of weight by the time the series ended.

Bandura (1994) contends that social learning occurs vicariously by observing the behaviors and consequences of others. Adolescent girls use media as an important source for such social learning (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998). They do so by comparing themselves to and identifying with model characters. Model and anti-model characters are established by observing each character’s image and behaviors, as well as the apparent consequences of them (Hendricks, 2002). As viewers begin to identify with the characters, they are more likely to accept the messages conveyed as social reality (Rubin, 1993). Since the average American watches at least three hours of television per day and millions of adolescent girls watch Friends (now rerunning in syndication on many stations at all hours of the day), the potential implications of the program’s messages about thinness become more compelling. Hence, we sought to answer the question:

RQ: What rhetorical strategies are employed to convey messages about female body image in the show Friends and how? More specifically, we examine the messages expressed by and about the primary female characters using visual pleasure theory grounded in a feminist perspective.
Rhetorical Perspective and Method

We ground our analysis in a feminist perspective because it allows us to deconstruct the taken-for-granted ways in which society perceives the world. These taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors are rooted in hegemony, which is perpetuated through any processes that “support the dominant ideology” by “reproduc[ing] that ideology in cultural institutions and products” (Dow, 1990, p. 261). Typically, these processes operate on “‘common sense’ and conventional morality . . . secur[ing] the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system” (Hanke, 1990, p. 232). Essentially, a feminist perspective helps reveal the ways “gender has been constructed to degenerate women” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1991, p. 276). Doing so provides a foundation to incite change.

One of the ways in which women continue to be oppressed by our social system is through television. More specifically, television continues to perpetuate hegemony by limiting our perceptions of both women and men by presenting them in stereotypical ways (e.g., Davis, 2003; Dow, 1996; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002; Stern & Mastro, 2004).

We examine the messages about female body image conveyed in Friends through the portrayal of “model” and “anti-model” female characters (Bandura, 1994). Model characters are rewarded based on their image, characteristics, or behaviors and anti-model characters are chastised, laughed at, or punished based on their image, characteristics, or behaviors (Barrett, 1986). As such, viewers are encouraged to learn how they “ought to” look and act (Bandura, 1994).

We rely on visual pleasure theory to examine the messages about female body image employed in Friends because the notion of body image is related directly to visual perception. Visual pleasure theory suggests that visual symbols function rhetorically as they communicate messages of narcissism, voyeurism, and fetishism (Mulvey, 1989). Visual pleasure theory is useful for this analysis because it isolates specific messages expressed through visual symbols with regard to female body image. Each of the four main female characters (Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, and “Fat Monica”) is examined initially as she perpetuates or challenges hegemony via narcissism, voyeurism, and fetishism and then the ramifications of doing so.1 By determining the images, characteristics, and behaviors portrayed as “model” and “anti-model,” the analysis reveals how visual pleasure theory may function in situation comedies like Friends to reproduce hegemony and “ideal” female body image.

Narcissism is when an image (or character) draws the viewer to “mirror” him or her. Essentially, narcissists “portray an image of what the average person would like to be” (Fromm, 1980, p. 47). Voyeurism is when a character’s behavior is illicit or improper (according to cultural norms) for public display. Voyeurism occurs when models in advertisements “caress each other in passionate embraces to sell perfume, provocatively zip and unzip their designer jeans, and jog across beaches in bathing suits to sell beer” (Seeger, 1997, p. 155). Fetishism is when an image (e.g., a character or her body part) is portrayed as a “spectacle” to be gazed at as
an object (Brummett, 1994, p. 181). Finally, it is important to note that instances of narcissism, voyeurism, and fetishism do not occur in a vacuum. That is, an image or behavior discussed under the realm of one category may also be coded within one or both of the other categories. What is important rhetorically is the holistic analysis as narcissism, voyeurism, and fetishism work together to convey perceptions of each character (and her image, characteristics, and behaviors) as “model” or “anti-model” (based on consequences) to viewers.

Analysis

The Best of Friends video collection serves as a representative sample for this analysis. The titles of the episodes are: “The Pilot,” “The One with All the Poker,” “The One Where Ross Finds Out,” “The One with the Prom Video,” “The One Where No One’s Ready,” “The One with the Embryos,” and “The One with All the Thanksgivings.”

“The Pilot”

Since situation comedies rely almost invariably on a reiteration of stock character types and storylines (Dow, 1996, p. 37), “The Pilot” serves to establish the characters. Most of the action takes place in the “Central Perk” coffee shop. Rachel is portrayed as “perpetuating the values of the status quo,” which is typical of mainstream media (Jaggar, 1983, p. 197). Monica is portrayed as striving to do so, although not always successfully. Phoebe, on the other hand, is characterized as embracing an oppositional ideology. Viewers are encouraged to laugh at her oppositional behavior. Because the consequences of her choices are almost always negative, she serves as an “anti-model” for young female viewers (Bandura, 1994). Ultimately, her characterization reinforces hegemony by placing it “within the safe confines of the joke” that is inherent in situation comedy (Taylor, 1989, p. 27).

Rachel’s behavior initially challenges hegemony when viewers learn she just left her fiancé at the altar. This behavior is not what “ideal women” (i.e., who embrace hegemony) would do. Likewise, her attire in the opening coffee shop scene (a wedding gown) is gawked at as inappropriate. By the end of the program, however, she is clearly portrayed as a model that reinforces hegemonic ideals of femininity. Even the oppositional behavior of leaving her fiancé at the altar is eventually excused. While watching the wedding episode of Joni Loves Chachi, she exclaims “Oh . . . see . . . but Joni loved Chachi! That’s the difference!” Viewers learn that Rachel does want to marry, but she wants to do so for love. Leaving her fiancé is excused because “ideal women” would only marry for love.

The messages Rachel’s character sends with regard to attire are also noteworthy. After the opening wedding gown scene, she changes clothes five times during the 30-minute program. Each outfit consists of tight jeans or a short skirt with a low-cut, tight-fitting blouse, perpetuating the hegemonic ideal of model women as objects inviting viewers to gaze at them as beautiful
Rachel is ultimately rewarded for doing so as both Joey and Ross find her so desirable that each one asks her to go on a date.

Similar to Rachel, Monica is shown wearing three different trendy outfits, which seem to invite viewers to gaze at her as a beautiful sex object. Moreover, she is portrayed as empathetic and caring as she attempts to comfort both Rachel (her good friend) and Ross (her brother). This behavior also seems to establish her as a model. What is perhaps most interesting about Monica, however, is her illicit behaviors. During the short duration of the program, Monica spits on her date, participates in a one-night stand, and talks about sex at work. These behaviors clearly do not reinforce hegemony. She suffers negative consequences for her behavior. She is portrayed as unhappy because she is not involved in a romantic relationship. Hence, her behavior and consequences reinforce the status quo by demonstrating what not to do. Viewers learn that even young women who strive to embrace feminine ideals with regard to appearance and empathy, but who act like Monica regarding men, will be miserable because they will not be able to maintain a long-term romantic relationship.

Phoebe’s appearance and behavior throughout “The Pilot” challenge hegemony. For example, she talks openly about her mother’s suicide and the suicide of her albino roommate. Because both discussions make the other characters visibly uncomfortable, viewers learn that doing so is inappropriate. Moreover, she consistently behaves in ways that are perceived as “odd” by the others, cultivating a stronger impression of her as anti-model (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994, pp. 17-41). For example, she pulls out her own eyelashes, “cleanses” Ross’s “aura,” colors with crayons in the coffee shop, and sings lewd songs about “love” as a “giant pigeon crapping on my heart” at the top of her lungs in the subway station. Unlike Rachel and Monica, Phoebe’s attire also challenges hegemony. She wears only one dress throughout the episode. She also wears her hair in two braids or ponytails, and wears a bulky necklace and bulky earrings. Her attire looks nothing like the models in the fashion magazines adolescent girls peruse or, for that matter, nothing like Rachel or Monica.

The threefold punishment for Phoebe’s appearance and behavior confirms her as a “feminist buffoon” and anti-model for young female viewers (Dow, 1996, p. 149). First, Rachel and Monica are not as intimate with her as they are with each other. Second, Phoebe is not portrayed as desirable by the male characters in the show. Third, both her male and female friends dismiss her and her behavior as odd. Hence, Phoebe functions as the comic relief and sacrificed scapegoat who helps preserve the social order through laughter, humiliation, and embarrassment (Duncan, 1962, pp. 378–89).²

“The One with All the Poker”

This episode focuses on Rachel’s unsuccessful attempts to secure professional employment and, ultimately, on helping her cope with rejection. Ross lusts after Rachel throughout the episode. Hence, she is portrayed as desirable to men (model). It is not clear whether her desirability is in spite of, because of, or regardless of her apparent inability to get a
“real” job. As in “The Pilot,” Rachel wears five different tight-fitting outfits with low-cut blouses during this episode. Moreover, she bends over several times to pour coffee or to take orders, enticing the viewer to gaze at some body part as a sexy spectacle. Ross ogles her throughout, further emphasizing her as an object to be gazed at. After Rachel interviews for a position at Saks Fifth Avenue—a position she fails to get—she exclaims the interview was “great” because the interviewer said she had “great taste in clothes.” The message is clear—how women look and dress is important, even if they can’t get a job (Projansky & VandesBerg, 2000).

Monica is again portrayed as the caretaker, reinforcing hegemony. She wears three different outfits, each of them tight fitting and sexy. As in “The Pilot,” she is punished when she engages in behavior that opposes hegemony. This time, the others taunt her when she becomes competitive while playing Pictionary. Viewers learn from Monica that model women do not act in aggressive or competitive ways (Dow, 1996, pp. 146-148).

Phoebe is again depicted doing things the other characters perceive as odd. For example, she throws away jacks because “they weren’t happy” and “curse” the money she loses in the poker game. Because her friends perceive her as odd, (e.g., socially rejected), her appearance and behaviors are portrayed as ones to be avoided.

“The One Where Ross Finds Out”

In “The One Where Ross Finds Out,” Ross chooses Rachel to be his girlfriend and drops his current girlfriend in the process. Rachel is depicted as caring, loving, and wanting “her man” more than anything else. She is rewarded by winning Ross’s heart and even a kiss from him at the end. She does get drunk at one point during the episode, which might appear to oppose hegemony. However, she is punished for doing so. First, she embarrasses herself while drunk by taking a stranger’s cell phone to call Ross; then by leaving an embarrassing message on Ross’s answering machine; and, finally, by regretting her actions and sporting a hangover the next morning. These sanctions serve to reinforce hegemony by purporting that ideal women do not get intoxicated. Interestingly, viewers also learn that Rachel essentially got drunk because she loves Ross and did not have the courage to tell him so when she was sober. Even though the behavior itself is anti-model, Rachel’s motive (love) perpetuates hegemony and essentially excuses the behavior under the circumstances.

Monica is not romantically involved with a man and is depressed about it. As a result, she becomes obsessed with her appearance and engages in an excessive diet and exercise plan. Her desire to be in a relationship with a man and to look good by dieting and exercising perpetuates the hegemonic model for women to be attractive and desirable to men in order to be happy. Moreover, this marks the first blatant message that desirable women are thin. Although her behavior does not immediately result in achieving her romantic desires, eventually she is rewarded with Chandler as her intimate partner.

Phoebe continues to engage in behaviors perceived as odd by the others. When Joey tells her she has a “nice rack” and a “great butt,” for example, she replies, “Really? That’s so sweet.”
Her reaction visibly stuns Joey and sets off the laugh track. Phoebe’s indifference to Joey’s reaction opposes hegemony and the laugh track encourages viewers who don’t want to be laughed at to interpret her behavior as anti-model. She also makes references about attempting to get her date to “put out” throughout the show. She comments, “Look, y’know, I don’t mind taking it slow. I like him a lot. Y’know he’s really interesting and he’s really sweet and why won’t he give it up?” These comments that oppose hegemony shock her friends and set off the laugh track, which sends a message that they are not appropriate for young women who want to be popular. Although patriarchy dictates that women should be viewed as sex objects, they should not openly thank someone for commenting on their nice butt or breasts nor should they talk about their dates as unwilling to engage in sexual activity.

The attire trends of the first two episodes continue. As in previous episodes, Rachel and Monica each wear five different tight-fitting, sexy outfits portraying them as sex objects. Phoebe wears an oversized shirt with a tropical pattern on it, a sweater with oversized buttons, and a silk shirt with an embroidered dragon on it, none of them portrayed as feminine or sexy.

Most important, however, is the fact that weight becomes a central issue in this episode. Although Monica is not overweight, she engages in an obsessive diet and exercise program in an attempt to get a boyfriend. At one point, Phoebe actually comments, “Every time I put on a little weight, I start to question everything.” Toward the end of the program, Monica boasts about how “in shape” she is. Monica is noticeably thinner than she was in “The One with All the Poker.” Making weight a topic of the narrative serves to expand on the work of Mulvey (1989) and Pribram (1988), among others, who claim that female images as spectacles tend to slow down the narrative rather than advance it. The notion of excessively thin women as beautiful is made poignant not only in the images, but also in the narrative of the script itself.

“The One with the Prom Video”

Many men pursue Rachel throughout this episode, again promoting her as a model with which adolescent female viewers are lead to identify. Likewise, Monica continues to be depicted as responsible and caring. Moreover, when Monica tries to be financially independent, she ends up relying on Ross (a man) to pay her rent for her, reinforcing that even independent women need men to take care of them financially (Dow, 1996, p. 213). Phoebe rarely appears. When she does, her image and behaviors continue to oppose hegemony and result in negative consequences in terms of how others perceive her. She describes how “lobsters fall in love and mate for life,” again establishing herself as disconnected from “reality,” based on the others’ reactions. In another scene, she imitates a male as she sings to Joey “Dude, 11 o’clock, totally hot babe checkin’ you out. That was really good, I think I’m ready for my penis now.” Joey is visibly stunned and uncomfortable. Viewers learn that desirable women are sex objects for men to enjoy, but desirable women do not reduce men to the same status.

Perhaps the most interesting development with regard to messages about female body image is the introduction of “Fat Monica.” “Fat Monica” is actually a flashback of Monica when
she was a teenager. Viewers are introduced to her via a high school prom video. “Fat Monica,” who is much larger than Monica, is portrayed as insecure, clumsy, and constantly hungry. She is also portrayed as a sloppy eater when she gets mayonnaise on Rachel’s prom dress. She is clearly portrayed as unattractive and undesirable by her friends as they watch the video. Several of them make jokes about “Fat Monica” as they view the videotape. Joey remarks, for example, “Who ate Monica?” We even hear Monica’s father say “How do I zoom out?” as he attempts to get all of “Fat Monica” into the viewfinder. Moreover, “Fat Monica’s” prom date is portrayed as an “undesirable” nerd. Viewers learn that fat girls only attract undesirable boys if they attract any at all. Her anti-model status is further strengthened when contrasted with Monica who is now visibly thinner than in previous episodes and is now also happy (Dow, 1996, p. 147).

Attire also sends some interesting messages in this episode. Rachel wears three sexy and revealing outfits. Thus, she continues to be portrayed as a sex object. Monica also wears mostly tight-fitting tops and jeans, accentuating her thinner look. Moreover, “Fat Monica” wears a huge prom dress that looks like it was made from living room draperies. This contrasting anti-model image further reinforces Monica’s new, thinner look as ideal. Phoebe continues to wear clothes that oppose hegemony as they are neither sexy nor feminine. Viewers are led to disassociate from “Fat Monica” and to identify with the “new” Monica as the “real” Monica (Rubin, 1993, pp. 98-105).

“The One Where No One’s Ready”

This episode focuses on the characters as they dress for a banquet. Since the program is about getting dressed, the most compelling messages revolve around attire.

Rachel is depicted as blissfully in love with Ross and wants to “look good for her boyfriend.” She actually models seven different outfits as she attempts to find the “right look,” thus establishing her as the “fashion queen” and perpetuating hegemony.

Monica also tries on four different outfits. First, she wears a short skirt and blouse. Then, she is shown wearing only a slip. Next, she is shown wearing a different slip. Finally, she is shown in a very revealing and sexy red dress. As such, this thinner Monica is portrayed much like Rachel—as a sex object to be gazed at (Mulvey, 1989). Monica is also obsessed with a past love. Throughout the episode, she obsesses about leaving a message on her ex-boyfriend’s answering machine after agreeing not to call him. These actions reinforce the hegemonic ideal that a woman needs a man to be fulfilled.

Phoebe is the only female character dressed and ready for the banquet from the start of the show. She waits in the living room with the men while Rachel and Monica rush around trying to “get beautiful.” Phoebe actually wears a form-fitting dress, which the others take note of as attractive. Just when it seems her attire could be coded as model, however, hummus is spilled on her. Rather than change clothes, Phoebe covers the spot with a Christmas ribbon. The fact that she doesn’t change clothes several times coupled with the fact that she doesn’t change clothes when spilled on clearly opposes hegemony. The fact that the others perceive this as
unusual and that the laugh track encourages viewers to laugh at her portrays Phoebe’s image and behavior as an anti-model.

Although weight issues are not central to this episode, little comments about weight are mentioned throughout it. For example, Rachel complains that certain outfits make her ankles “look fat.” Hence, the notion of weight and desirable women worrying about looking fat is perpetuated via little asides throughout the episode, comments that may go unnoticed by viewers who are not “attuned to the subtleties” of them (Dow, 1996, p. 272).

“The One with the Embryos”

This episode continues to portray Rachel and Monica as models in terms of attire and behavior. Moreover, both Rachel and Monica talk about their apartment as a “girl’s apartment” because it is “clean and purple.” Viewers learn that model women are not only desirable to men, but also are good housekeepers. “Fat Monica” is mentioned once as a “big fat goalie,” again reinforcing that fat women are undesirable.

The most interesting aspect of this episode, however, is Phoebe as an anti-model. Phoebe has agreed to implant her brother and sister-in-law’s embryos in her uterus. Although the others say Phoebe is very kind, they also say they would never do so themselves. This act, combined with what the other characters view as an odd behavior of sitting upside down to “let gravity do its job,” adds to what is portrayed as undesirable behavior for young women. At one point, Phoebe actually engages in a conversation with the embryos in the Petri dish. She tells them to “really grab on” once they get inside. Although Phoebe’s decision is lauded as altruistic, it is also dismissed by the others as abnormal. Hence, this instance of valuing Phoebe for her independent, anti-hegemonic decision is ultimately placed within the “system’s overall hegemonic design” (Cloud, 1992, p. 313). As for attire, Phoebe wears a juvenile-looking dress at the outset, then a hospital gown and cartoon-print socks and, finally, the juvenile-looking dress again. Again, Phoebe’s attire, which opposes hegemony, is portrayed as both odd and funny, reinforces her as an anti-model.

Although weight is not central to the narrative of this episode, Rachel has lost a noticeable amount of weight compared to “The One Where No One’s Ready.” Now, both she and Monica portray messages that ideal women (e.g., desirable and popular) are also excessively thin. Because both model female characters are noticeably thinner, the cultivation effect potential becomes more compelling as well (Gerbner et al., 1994). Further, the groceries Rachel buys during this episode consist of diet soda, yogurt, and apples. Model women, it seems, are also very careful about what they eat in terms of the number of calories they ingest.

“The One with All the Thanksgivings”

“The One with All the Thanksgivings” adds unintelligent to Rachel’s characteristics. In flashback scenes, she is portrayed as both lacking common sense and being very popular. She
mentions, for instance, that she changed her major because there was “never any good parking by those buildings.”

In the videotape flashback, “Fat Monica” is portrayed as clumsy and lacking self-esteem. Chandler (who eventually becomes thin Monica’s boyfriend) is heard on the videotape referring to her as Ross’s “fat sister” and exclaiming that he would never date her. We also hear “Fat Monica’s” parents make demeaning remarks about her appearance and eating habits. In the next flashback scene one year later, she has lost weight and wears a tight and elegant, low-cut dress. Chandler finds her attractive and desirable, and tells her he loves her. She is now a “good girlfriend” to the same man who said he would never date Ross’s “fat sister” just one year earlier. This shift from “Fat Monica” to “sexy Monica” underscores the importance of weight for attractive, desirable, and happy women.

Phoebe continues to say and do things that are perceived as bizarre by the others, reinforcing her as an anti-model. She wears a purple lacey dress that has not been in style since the early 1980s. She also sits on the floor, which is not considered ladylike, particularly when wearing a dress. At one point, Ross even chastises her for being “different” when he says “In this life Phoebe.” To which she responds “Oh, this life! Oh, ok.”

Weight is again a central issue in this episode. Although Rachel’s weight loss is noticeable, Monica’s weight loss is even more pronounced. While wearing a low-cut, sleeveless blouse, viewers’ eyes are drawn to her pronounced sternum and very thin arms. The contrast between “Fat Monica” and this new, excessively thin Monica is blatant. Thin Monica as ideal is reinforced when Chandler finds her desirable. The message conveyed is that overweight girls can somehow achieve this very thin look if they try hard enough, a look that is not only unhealthy, but “nearly impossible” to attain (Olson, 1996, p. 11).

**Conclusions**

The messages conveyed by and about the female characters in *Friends* perpetuate hegemonic stereotypes about women, including the notion that the ideal female body image is excessively thin. The messages of narcissism, voyeurism and fetishism establish model and anti-model female characters that reinforce or challenge hegemony based on the consequences of doing so. Essentially, viewers learn how they “ought to” look and act based on the perceived rewards and punishments of the characters. Ultimately, ideal women perpetuate hegemonic stereotypes in terms of both image and behavior. Ideal women are sex objects, and sex objects are excessively thin.

Rachel and Monica, who typically embody characteristics and behaviors that perpetuate hegemony and are rewarded accordingly, are essentially the models with whom young woman are led to identify. They are more likely than either Phoebe or “Fat Monica” to be portrayed as attractive and desirable to men; as engaged in long-term romantic relationships; and, ultimately, as “normal,,” popular, and happy. Moreover, whenever either Rachel or Monica does engage in a behavior that challenges hegemony, she is punished for doing so. Hence, even ideal women will
suffer the unavoidable “negative consequences of female independence,” thereby reinforcing hegemony (Dow, 1996, p. 144).

Conversely, Phoebe and “Fat Monica” usually embody characteristics and behaviors that challenge hegemony and are punished for them. They are likely to be portrayed as unattractive and undesirable to men, as well as laughed at or humiliated, thereby serving as anti-models to viewers. Although Phoebe is often noticeably unconcerned and even unaware of the perceptions others have of her, viewers are encouraged to laugh at her image and behaviors. Thus, although her character is usually portrayed as happy, she serves as an anti-model to viewers who want to be popular. Vulnerable, adolescent female viewers may be drawn to identify with Rachel and Monica who are rewarded for perpetuating hegemony and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from Phoebe and “Fat Monica” as they attempt to gain “self-confidence” by striving “to be attractive at all costs” (Schlenker et al., 1998, p. 147). This argument becomes particularly compelling in light of the research suggesting that the media dramatically influence the behavior of adolescent girls (e.g., Becker, 2004; Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Groesz et al, 2001; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Wiseman et al., 2005).

These conclusions also raise some important implications. For young women, the messages sent on Friends stress that beauty is crucial to be happy and successful. Moreover, the notions of what constitutes beauty, happiness, and success are deeply embedded in hegemony. More specifically, beautiful women are not only physically attractive to men, but are also excessively thin, sex objects. Finally, happiness and success for women are achieved by engaging in activities that lead to securing a long-term romantic relationship with a man. These messages are troubling in that they may perpetuate beliefs that young women must embody these traits at all costs, “even if it means foregoing the development of [their] personal and academic interests” (Schlenker et al., 1998, p. 147).

Another disturbing implication for young women stems from the fact that Friends offers only one female body image, the excessively thin image, as ideal. Moreover, this narrow definition does not reflect the general population who “tend to be spread more evenly across the spectrum of body types” (White et al., 1999, p. 391). While ectomorphic women might be able to achieve this image, endomorphic and mesomorphic women are very unlikely to be able to do so. Yet, viewers watch “Fat Monica” achieve this very outcome through obsessive dieting and exercise. She is essentially transformed into excessively thin, happy, and desirable Monica. Unless a broader spectrum of ideal female body image appears on television sitcoms targeted toward adolescents, it is fairly safe to assume that young women will continue to be influenced in ways that perpetuate disordered eating habits.

This analysis also gives rise to important implications for young men. Certainly, men who watch the program may be influenced to believe that only excessively thin women ought to be considered attractive. More important, however, is the possibility that they will believe that women want to be and ought to be treated as sex objects, as well as submissive to and dependent on men, in order to be happy and successful. If these stereotypical gender roles pervade
television situation comedies as the norm for happiness and success, young men might find it difficult to accept or respect successful, independent women in society.

Certainly, the rhetorical power of such messages are meant to be humorous and viewers ought to be given credit for realizing that humor often relies on deprecation and stereotypes. However, repeating the same narrow covert messages about what constitutes ideal female body image and behaviors across episodes of a particular program or even a genre warrants examination.

Some might dismiss the potential power of the messages in programs like *Friends* by contending that other popular programs counteract them. Whether or not such a contention is true, we believe there is value in revealing the nature of the messages perpetrated on popular sitcoms such as *Friends* as they might influence young women to believe and behave. Moreover, failing to do so essentially grants such programs more power to persuade viewers in subtle ways.

We hope that this study and others like it encourage industry gatekeepers to broaden the kinds of messages portrayed on television as normal and abnormal, desirable and undesirable, and attractive and unattractive, particularly with regard to hegemony and ideal female body image. Likewise, we hope that educators will find ways to encourage critical analyses and discussions with students about the role of media in influencing beliefs and behaviors. Finally, academic scholars must continue to research, publish, and present these results to foster more critical consumers of entertainment media’s persuasive role in society.

References


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Endnotes

1 We are defining “model” as it perpetuates hegemony. We are not arguing, however, that “model” is “ideal.” It is only “ideal” in the sense that it reproduces hegemony and not in the sense that it is how the world ought to be.

2 We realize that some viewers may, in fact, identify with and want to be like Phoebe. We argue, however, that the message being sent via comic relief is one that essentially reinforces hegemony. Most adolescent female viewers who are trying to “fit in” are more likely to interpret Phoebe’s character as someone they should not look or act like if they want to be popular and happy.