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Cross-Border Mass-Mediated Health Narratives: Narrative Transparency, "Safe Sex," and Indian Viewers¹



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Consider the audience effects of the following mass-mediated narratives that consciously incorporated health themes in their emplotments:

In 1986, when a character on Cristal, a Venezuelan telenovela [television novel or soap opera] was diagnosed with breast cancer, the number of women viewers requesting mammograms rose steeply in Venezuela. Later when the show was broadcast in Spain, similar effects occurred (Andalao, 2003).

In 1999, when Soul City, the popular South African television series, modeled a new collective behavior to portray how neighbors might intervene in a domestic violence—that is, by gathering around the abuser's residence and collectively banging pots and pans, pot banging to stop partner abuse was reported in several locations in South Africa (Usdin, Singhal, Shongwe, Goldstein, & Shabalala, 2004).

In 2000, when Camilla, the protagonist on Lazos de Sangre [Blood Ties], a popular Brazilian telenovela, was diagnosed with leukemia, the Brazilian National Registry of Bone Marrow Donors reported that new donor registrations increased by 45

times the average: from about 20 a month, to 900 a month (TV Globo, 2003).

On August 3, 2001, when Tony was diagnosed with HIV on an episode of the popular soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the number of calls to CDC's AIDS hotline within the hour increased 16 times over the previous hour (Beck, 2004).

These four narratives exemplify a rising trend in global media programming, commonly referred to as the entertainment-education communication strategy. *Entertainment-education* is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 1999, 2002). Entertainment-education narratives generally consist of two types: Long-running mass-media programs (such as *Soul City* in South Africa) that are explicitly designed to promote particular health and development themes, or programs (such as *Cristal*, *Lazos de Sangre*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*) that include certain health themes in the context of a larger plot. The latter approach, commonly referred to as *social merchandizing*, involves the conscious placement of a social message, often a health message, in a popular mediated narrative (La Pastina, Patel, & Schiavo, 2004).

The social merchandizing approach is increasingly gaining ground among media producers in Hollywood and in other countries. For instance, in 2002, over a thousand episodes of *telenovelas* produced by Brazil's TV Globo consciously incorporated a range of social issues, ranging from safe sex, to blood and organ donation, to caring for the environment (TV Globo, 2003). In an episode of *Lazos de Sangre*, Capitu, a young Brazilian woman, purposely pulled out a condom during a passionate romantic encounter, gesturing to her partner that sex would only occur if it was protected. Episodes of *El Beso del Vampiro* [Kiss of the Vampire] were timed for broadcast during the same week as the International Blood Donation Day, encouraging Brazilian viewers to donate blood. In Hollywood, social merchandizing began over 40 years ago when scriptwriter Agnes Nixon incorporated a storyline on uterine cancer in the popular soap, *Guiding Light*. Other popular Hollywood narratives in which health issues have been incorporated include *Maude* (unintended pregnancy), *thirtysomething* (cancer), *LA Law* (mental illness), *Beverly Hills 90210* (violence against women), *The Young and the Restless* (diabetes), *7th Heaven* (teenage drug and alcohol abuse), *Friends* (safe sex), and many others (Beck, 2004; Sharf & Freimuth, 1993; Sharf, Freimuth, Greenspon, & Plotnick, 1996).

Since the mid-1990s, the social merchandizing approach has further gained currency in Hollywood through "Soap Summits" in New York and Los Angeles, where Hollywood producers, directors, and scriptwriters gather to exchange experiences in incorporating health emplotments in popular narratives through the Hollywood, Health & Society initiative of the Centers for Disease Control and the University of Southern California which facilitates the incorporation of health storylines in popular entertainment shows and through the Sentinel for Health Award for Daytime Drama, presented to an outstanding Hollywood narrative with a health storyline (Tony's HIV storyline in *The Bold and the Beautiful* received this prestigious award in 2002).

What happens when a Hollywood-produced popular narrative with a health emplotment is broadcast in an overseas context? How is Hollywood's mass-mediated world of health-related persuasion, information, and entertainment interpreted outside its borders? This chapter analyzes how audiences in India interpret "safe sex" emplotments in the Hollywood-produced sitcom, *Friends*. Drawing on a cultural approach to audience interpretation (McQuail, 1997), our research is guided by Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory and Fisher's (1984, 1985a) narrative theory. *Narrative transparency theory* posits transparency as "the capability of certain texts to seem familiar regardless of their origin, to seem a part of one's own culture, even though they have been crafted elsewhere" (Olson, 1999, p. 18). Narrative transparency allows audience members of different cultures to project their own stories, values, myths and meanings into a foreign text, making them derive meanings as if the text was locally produced (Olson, 1999). Fisher's (1985a) concept of narrative rationality, which examines the truth and coherence of a story, also holds important implications for audience members who interpret a foreign text. The present research investigates the degree to which Indian audiences interpreted the "safe sex" emplotment in *Friends* as being a "transparent" narrative, and the degree to which Indian audiences viewed *Friends* as meeting the requirements of narrative rationality.

HOLLYWOOD'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

The global reach of media corporations enables people of different cultures to consume media products produced in foreign lands. These global media corporations, only a handful in number, are primarily based in the United States, mostly in Hollywood (Demers, 1999; Wolf, 1999). Consider the following: Worldwide, audiences are 100 times more likely to see a Hollywood film than see a European film; further, Hollywood satisfies 70% of the international demand for television narratives and 80% of the demand for feature films (*Home Alone*,

1997; *Star Wars*, 1997). Not surprisingly, Hollywood has been criticized for media imperialism and creating a globally dispersed Western monoculture (Boyd, 1984; McChesney, 1997). Past studies seem to suggest that when consumed over a period of time, American media products may influence how an audience member in a foreign country may feel, dress, and act (McMillin, 2002; Olson, 1999; Rogers et al., 2003; Singhal & Rogers, 2001). For instance, reception studies in India found that the conception of the ideal female body type shifted from round to thin, largely through heavy consumption of American television programs (Malhotra & Rogers, 2000). Singhal and Rogers (2001) also noted a shift in the depiction of Indian women in indigenous television programming from the traditional roles of motherhood to that of a modern woman, especially after the advent of foreign satellite channels in India in the 1990s.

Researchers have also found evidence of the growing popularity of local and non-Western media products. For instance, Cantonese soap operas are highly popular in Hong Kong, and Indian soaps draw large audiences in India. Hybrid programs, such as Kung Fu movies, modeled after James Bond movies, also are highly popular in Hong Kong and overseas (Ang, 1996). Mexican and Brazilian *telenovelas* are now exported throughout Latin America and in many countries of Asia and Africa. Despite such evidence of popularity of non-Western media products, American media products remain popular in most global markets. Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory argues that U.S. media texts have certain attributes that lend them a global and cross-cultural appeal.

NARRATIVE TRANSPARENCY THEORY

Narrative transparency theory, first propounded by Olson (1999), builds on Hall's (1980) seminal argument that audiences can derive multiple meanings from a text. Television allows for the production of discursive knowledge and the intended meaning of a message may thus change for different audience individuals. However, Hall's analysis does not explicitly deal with cross-cultural consumption of media products; neither does it investigate the attributes of the text in the meaning-making process.

Critical media scholars have attempted to explain what makes American media products popular in other cultures (Newcomb, 1984; Olson, 1999). The main explanations have centered on media hegemony and imperialism; few dealt with how audience members engage with foreign texts. Newcomb (1984) investigated the language of television and argued that the medium allowed for different interpretations

of its main ideology. In doing so, Newcomb challenged the predominant hegemonic view of global consumption, but still did not investigate how American media products were interpreted in other cultures. Olson (1999) suggested that if certain programs (e.g., *Dallas*) are popular among audiences from different cultures, the media text itself provides at least part of the explanation of its global popularity. Olson argued that the message has a "universal" meaning because of the language (or narratological devices) used to create it.

Narrative transparency questions the claim that indigenous cultures are disappearing because of Western media onslaughts, and that the monolithic American culture dominates the world. According to Olson, "Although the same media products are reaching most people, people do not possess the same ways of reading the meaning embedded in these media products" (1999, p. 6). For Olson, the global media texts are "transparent," that is the text allows audiences to project their own indigenous meaning into the global media product.

As noted previously, Olson's (1999) argument built on the concept of *multiple meaning* of media texts as espoused in reception studies since the 1980s. Hall (1980) argued that, although a producer may intend a "preferred reading" of the message, the audience might interpret the text differently based on their social situation. Fiske (1986) suggested the notion of *polysemy*, which means that there can be multiple meanings given to one text. Olson extends this argument to suggest that a media text has the ability to transcend cultures. Narrative transparency argues that a cross-cultural understanding of the text may take place because the audience individual interprets a foreign text from their own transparent lens of cultural beliefs and values. Transparency theory thus claims that in order to understand the popularity of global media, one has to understand both the media text and the audience members who consume them.

For example, the *Gbagyi* people in Nigeria interpreted *Dallas* very differently from American viewers. Based on their cultural beliefs and ideas, they drew connections between the traits of J. R. Ewing, the central character, and their traditional myths. So J. R. Ewing was viewed as the trickster worm in Nigerian mythology (Olson, 1999). Similarly, Laotian refugees in the United States especially identified with news items that dealt with Ethiopian refugee camps (Conquergood, 1986). The Laotians felt they were "like" the Ethiopian people in the refugee camps. The identifying elements of reality and vividness were drawn from their own personal, lived experiences. Physical distance and dissimilarity in physical appearance were less important to the Laotian refugees than the larger issues (such as displacement, hunger and poverty) shared by both the Laotian and Ethiopian refugees. Viewers were able to push the apparently "foreign" elements of the text to the background, focusing on

personality traits (as in the case of J. R. Ewing) or social realities (as in the case of Ethiopian refugees) that were common.

Elements of Narrative Transparency

The basic premise of transparency suggests no unified meaning in a mediated text. Instead, audiences read the same text differently, depending on the cultural context. The embedding of myths in the narrative makes the text transparent. Myths consist of stories that a culture makes about reality. Although different cultures have different myths, the underlying premise of myths is the same: They satisfy human needs (Olson, 1999). Myths are derived from *mythotypes*, which are inherent human needs. Mythotypes constitute narrative structures that evoke primary human emotions of "awe, wonder, purpose, joy and participation" (Olson, 1999, p. 93). Although myths transcend cultures and can change and evolve over time and space, the universal mythotypes remain constant.

According to Olson, eight narratological devices² internal to the text can convey transparency: virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion, verisimilitude, openendedness, negentropy, circularity, and archetypal *dramatis personae*.

Virtuality is the creation of a psychologically convincing and electronically stimulating environment (Olson, 1999). Audience members of long-running serials develop "hyperreal relationships" with the characters. For instance, many viewers of the popular CBS TV program, *M*A*S*H*, reported acute "separation" anxiety when the program went off air. The *M*A*S*H* fictional family had become more real to the viewers than their own families (Olson, 1999). The sadness felt by fans of Ally McBeal when her childhood love and colleague, Billy, died, provides another example of virtuality.

Ellipticality refers to the narrative technique of leaving the details out (Olson, 1999). Ellipticality makes use of the mythotype of audience participation, allowing the spectator to speculate on what may be going on, and thus "completing" the picture in their own minds. For example, in the *Friends* episode that we shared with our respondents in the present study, audience members may wonder what might have happened in the bedroom when Monica returned to tell her friend Richard that they will not be having sex that night. Viewers may wonder whether or not they really could restrain themselves, creating an ending that fits their beliefs and experiences.

Inclusion in texts is a quality that gives the viewer a sense that they are participating in the unfolding of the plot rather than simply observing it (Olson, 1999). For instance, in *Friends*, writers consciously base each episode on situations that young audiences commonly face: shar-

ing an apartment, petty squabbles and fights about cleaning and cooking, the pressure to go out on a date, falling in love with the wrong person, and struggling to find a good job. Such narratives involve audiences through the portrayal of universal experiences.

Verisimilitude implies that texts convey to the viewer a sense of truth and realness. These plots appear natural and not something that is "fantastic" or "way out" (Olson, 1999). The notion of narrative verisimilitude is central to Fisher's (1984, 1985a) theory of narrative rationality. Fisher argues that human communication is essentially storytelling and all humans are storytellers. Fisher (1984) defined *narratives* as "symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequences and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them" (p. 2). Fisher (1985a) espoused the notion of *narrative rationality*, that is, stories meeting the twin tests of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. *Narrative probability* answers the question, "Is the story coherent?" allowing individuals to gauge whether or not the story makes sense, is believable, and could be real. *Narrative fidelity*, on the other hand, deals with the degree to which a story fits in with the audiences' lives, past experiences, and present beliefs. Narrative fidelity gauges whether or not viewers see the stories as fitting into their worldviews, and whether or not these incidents could happen to them or someone they know.

Openendedness refers to narrative texts that have no end; hence there is no resolution of the plot (Olson, 1999). American soap operas like *Dallas* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* are examples of such plots. Openendedness, according to Olson, promotes the mythic qualities of the media by encouraging audience participation. Because the text has no definite ending, the viewer must revisit the program, hoping for a sense of closure.

Negentropy refers to the manner in which a television narrative can instill a sense of order among its viewers. By seeing the same characters in a familiar setting on a regular basis, viewers gain a feeling of reality, through the mechanism of repetition (Olson, 1999). For Olson, "Television becomes a mechanism for conveying sense and meaning in a world that otherwise appears senseless and meaningless" (p. 98).

Circularity refers to the nature of narratives, which makes the story return to where it began. Circularity restores balance to the narrative and places the characters in a situation similar to where they initially began (Olson, 1999). Olson provides the example of the grand return of Odysseus in Homer's epic, *Odyssey*, as involving circularity. Other examples of circularity include the storyline of *M*A*S*H*, when the characters return home from Korea, and the final episode of *Seinfeld*, where the protagonists repeat the very dialogues that launched the program (Olson, 1999).

Archetypal dramatic personae are "authentic" characters that exist in each culture, for example, the fair maiden, the handsome prince, and the caring mother. Archetypal characters contain an affective component that can transcend cultures (Olson, 1999). The four key archetypal characters in Western epics according to Olson, consist of the fool, the wizard (or cleric), the knight, and the king. These archetypal characters belong to myths and legends in almost all cultures and hold universal appeal.

Based on the aforementioned review of narrative transparency theory, we investigated how the combination of the eight mythotypes contributes to the transparency of Hollywood's narratives. In so doing, we privileged the examination of the first four mythotypes—virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion, and verisimilitude—as they seemed to generate the most revealing insights for our stated purpose.

Our analysis also focused on the other four mythotopes—open-endedness, negentropy, circularity, and archetypal *dramatis personae* albeit mostly for contextualization. Our investigation, specifically, was guided by the following research questions: To what extent do Indian audiences find the narrative of the Hollywood-produced sitcom, *Friends*, to be transparent? How do Indian audiences subject the text of *Friends*, especially an emplotment about "safe sex" to diverse mythotypic readings?

METHODOLOGY

The present research, guided by an interpretive audience approach, explores how local cultures organize mediated communication as an activity, decoded content based on audience characteristics, and form spectator identities through media use (see related work by Lindlof & Meyer, 1987).

Data Collection Procedures

We conducted fieldwork during April 2003 with 39 heavy viewers of *Friends*. These heavy viewers had watched *Friends* for at least two years, considered themselves as fans of the program, tried hard not to miss an episode, and avidly watched the show's reruns. The research procedures included 17 in-depth interviews (with both male and female viewers) and four focus groups discussions (which included 12 men and 10 female participants in total). All interviewees spoke fluent English and all interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted in English. We first asked all respondents questions regarding their perceptions of *Friends*. We then showed an episode of *Friends* with a "safe sex", and interviewed on the content of that episode. The

interviews were semistructured, allowing the respondents to express their individual opinions.³

Respondents' Profile

All 39 respondents (20 men and 19 women) were heavy viewers of *Friends*, who hailed from three Indian cities—New Delhi, Chandigarh, and Hyderabad. Their ages ranged from 18 to 45 years. Most respondents were university students; others included homemakers and professionals, including engineers, architects, and social workers.

The Object of Study: The Sitcom *Friends*

The Hollywood-produced sitcom, *Friends*, is set in Manhattan. It revolves around a group of six friends and their close interpersonal relationships: Rachel Karen Green, Monica E. Geller (Bing), Phoebe Buffay, Chandler Muriel Bing, Ross Geller, and Joey Francis Tribbiani, Jr. *Friends* began broadcasting in 1994 on the NBC Network and immediately become very popular in the United States. The final season was 2003–2004; *Friends* was the highest rated comedy program for American viewers in the 18 to 49 age group for 5 straight years in a row.⁴ In India, *Friends* began broadcasting on the Star World private satellite channel during prime-time hours (8:30 p.m.) in the mid-1990s. In 2003, Star World broadcast it at 7:30 p.m. and at midnight on weekdays. Reruns of *Friends* are broadcast in India on the Zee English Channel on weekday nights at 10 p.m.

The episode of *Friends* that was viewed by our Indian respondents purposely promoted the message of "safe sex." It featured Rachel, Ross, Monica, and her boyfriend Richard (played by Hollywood movie star, Tom Selleck). Condom use was the main theme running through the entire episode (condoms were mentioned six times).

The episode begins with Rachel, Ross, Monica, and her older boyfriend, Richard (a medical doctor), relaxing in Central Perk, a coffee shop in New York's Greenwich Village. Monica says that she and Richard should sleep at her apartment that night. Richard says that he does not have his pajamas. Monica replies that he may not need them, thus hinting that they may have sex.

Richard and Monica arrive at her apartment, which she shares with Rachel. Rachel and her boyfriend, Ross, are shown in a separate bedroom, discussing how many men and women each had dated prior to their present relationship. Rachel lists her former boyfriends. She claims that all of the earlier boyfriends just involved "animal sex." Her present relationship with Ross, she states, is a romantic relationship, not based just on sex. A parallel conversation is shown between Rich-

ard and Monica. Richard admits that he dated only two women in his life. One was Barbara, his wife for 30 years, and the second woman is Monica. Monica is skeptical about Richard's statement. Richard thinks that Monica dated a large number of men.

Before sexual passions run over, both Monica and Rachel are shown heading to the restroom in search of condoms so that they can both engage in protected sex with their partners. Meanwhile, Richard and Ross impatiently wait for their girlfriends to return. In their common quest for condoms, Rachel and Monica realize that they have only one condom in the apartment. After trying to solve their dilemma in different ways, Rachel and Monica finally choose (through the "rock, paper, and scissors" process) and Rachel gets the only condom. Monica tells Richard, "not tonight," because they cannot have unprotected sex.

Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of coding and categorizing of the interviews and group discussions. We employed an open coding procedure through which emergent concepts were identified and their properties and dimensions were discovered in data. While coding the responses, the emergent categories and subcategories were delineated and linked to the specific mythopes that guided the audience engagement with *Friends*.

TRANSPARENCY OF FRIENDS

Analysis of the data revealed that Indian audiences interpret some elements of *Friends* as being transparent and some as opaque as discussed in the following sections.

Virtuality

As noted previously, *virtuality* refers to the psychologically convincing "hyperreal relationships" that develop between the audience members and the characters of long-running television programs (Olson, 1999). Indian viewers of *Friends* displayed elements of virtuality with certain characters of *Friends*. For instance, Harpreet stated: "I'd like to meet a character like Phoebe. ... she is the kind of girl I'd like to be friends with. Phoebe is free, always ready to explore. ... she's ready to participate ... take responsibility. She has this strong, independent streak about her, which I really like in a woman" (Harpreet, personal communication, December 2001).

Further, the characters in *Friends* were able to create a psychological sense of reality among the Indian audiences. Several viewers liked

Phoebe, both for her innocence and foolishness, which were seen as normal human traits. Many respondents found her "excessively silly"; some said that without Phoebe's recurring *faux pas*, the program would "lose its entire flavor." Adil appreciated Phoebe's innocence, labeling it as a "rare quality in a world filled with shrewd people." Even when viewers were critical of the actions of certain characters, labeling them as *dumb*, *silly*, or *irritating*, they still viewed the characters as real people, displaying real emotions.

Several respondents labeled Joey as their most favorite character primarily because of his "simplicity" and for his "logical behavior." Some liked Chandler, for his "level-headedness" for having the "spirit to go on" despite several traumatic experiences in life. Rekha liked Chandler because of "the innocence on his face."

Many of our Indian respondents related to the friendship portrayed on *Friends*. The notion of "sharing things" with friends as well as "fighting with them" was similar to their experience, and hence perceived as real. However, for some respondents, the bonding and friendship shown in *Friends* was seen as unreal: "What they show in *Friends* is good, the way people live together and spend so much time together. But we do not have time to always be with our friends. We manage to spend only a couple of hours with them." Adil, a graduate student in New Delhi expressed how he felt the friendship portrayed on *Friends* was not as deep as he had personally experienced: "*Friends* has not taken up issues such as standing up for each other in times of crisis. They have never shown a real-life crisis like running short of money."

In summary, the Indian audiences display virtuality with most of the *Friends*' situations, relating the relevance of the situations to their own lives to see points of convergence and divergence.

Ellipticality

As noted previously, *ellipticality* represents the narrative technique of leaving the details out, allowing the viewer to speculate on what might be happening (Olson, 1999). When our Indian respondents were asked how they felt about Monica's decision to call off sex for the night because of the nonavailability of a condom, we noted how it evoked several speculative readings.

Amrik strongly believed that Monica's actions would not be possible in India. In India, the male partner "would not have been pushed aside so easily"; instead, he would have "forced himself and persuaded the girl to have sex." Meenu, a young female viewer, believed that an Indian man would have been upset, fought with his girlfriend for calling off sex, and not been as understanding as Richard. Rakesh also felt that if a man and a woman were spending the night together, it was impossi-

ble to "shrug and pretend to say that [it] won't happen." Several respondents felt that under the circumstances, sex would definitely happen. Harpreet, a male respondent, agreed that it is hard to call off sex: "Once you make a plan, you have to perform it. You cannot make a plan and leave it half way. I will be willing to take [a] risk." Even though Harpreet believed that using a condom was necessary to avoid pregnancy, it did not mean that he had to forego sex.

Bala, on the other hand, felt that such a situation—that is, running out of condoms—may arise in real life, and by watching how the characters in *Friends* dealt with the problem, he learned how to possibly act when confronted with a similar situation. Rakesh also felt that in the absence of a condom, he would abstain from sex. In essence, for some Indian reviewers, the *Friends* episode opened speculative readings; for some others, the readings were more closed, whereby they accepted the manifest content portrayed in the plot.

The different readings of *Friends* suggest that its narrative is transparent, allowing the viewers to fill in the gaps. In so doing, Indian respondents negotiated preferred meaning of "safe sex" differently. Some accepted it; some rejected it outright. Several Indian respondents emphasized the impossibility of discussing sexual issues openly. As Mrs. Vaish noted: "This is not part of our culture. If at all a couple would discuss sex, they would have to be married." So, in some ways, the sexuality theme was opaque for our Indian respondents, especially as they could not relate it with their cultural values and sexual mores. However, the ellipticality in the narrative allowed them to engage in speculation, fill in the gaps, and make sense of the unfolding plot.

Inclusion

As noted previously, *inclusion* is a narratological device that gives the viewer a sense that they are participating in the unfolding of the plot rather than simply observing it (Olson, 1999). Dinesh, a New Delhi-based male respondent, for instance, felt that the *Friends* plot was "pretty close" to his reality. He emphasized that young women in Indian metropolitan cities were open-minded, relatively free with boys, and could talk about all sorts of things, including sex, much like the women characters did in *Friends*. Dinesh felt that he could directly relate to the program's content as many of his young women city-based friends openly discussed things with him. Atul, another male respondent, highlighted how he felt included in the *Friends*' plot: "I want to act like Joey with my friends ... the way he talks, he walks ... his mannerisms really appeal to me." So Atul actively participated in the *Friends*' narrative by closely observing Joey while the program was on, and then also

in the post-viewing context, he modeled Joey's behaviors in his interpersonal interactions.

Rakesh, another male respondent, elaborated on how he and his friends used to constantly spend time together—much like the friends in the sitcom, and noted how two of his friends eventually decided to get married—akin to the plot of *Friends*. Rakesh felt that the sitcom's narrative included and elaborated on his own lived experiences, noting "*Friends* is so similar to the friendships I have ... there is no stopping me [from watching it]." Another respondent echoed a similar sense of belonging and association with *Friends*. He observed, "I am able to directly associate with *Friends*. ... We took a house on rent ... three people living together."

Verisimilitude

As noted previously, *verisimilitude* refers to the textual quality that conveys to the viewers that the plot is natural, real, and true to life (Olson, 1999). Verisimilitude hinges on Fisher's (1984, 1985a) twin concepts of *narrative probability*—Is the story coherent?; and *narrative fidelity*—To what degree does the story fits with the viewers' lives, past experiences, and present beliefs?

The Indian viewers assessed the narrative probability of *Friends* based on their personal lived experiences. Most respondents were highly uncomfortable about Monica being so open and suggestive about having sex with her partner in the same apartment as her brother, Ross. Bala noted, "Sex before marriage is not acceptable at any level in India. You never disclose to your brother if it happened. It is not proper." Adil noted: "This never happens in India because here brothers are very protective of their sisters." Zaira agreed: "It is not possible to be like this with my brothers. It is impossible." Harpreet was categorical: "We [in India] cannot tolerate such a relation. ... I won't allow her [my sister] this type of behavior." In essence, open discussion about sex among opposite sex siblings, and the possibility of them (knowingly) engaging in sex in adjoining rooms, is inconsistent with Indian cultural beliefs.

Our Indian respondents also felt that the situation depicting Monica and Rachael fighting over a condom was inconsistent with Indian reality. Stated Mrs. Vaish: "Monica and Rachael are fighting over one condom. These things don't happen in India." Rekha concurred: "You have your own condoms in 'your own' cupboard, but negotiating a condom is a closed topic here." Zaira from Hyderabad was even more emphatic: "Give me a break. Absolutely no. No way. This is absolutely weird. This will never happen in India. I don't think this even happens in America."

Also, Indian respondents did not believe that Indian women would take the lead in procuring a condom and deciding about whether or not sex would happen. This aspect of the plot was inconsistent with the perceptual "image of an Indian woman." As one respondent noted: "It is not good for a woman to carry a condom"; if she does, "her character is not too good." Another respondent clarified: "If her husband allows her to carry a condom ... then no problem; but it is different if he is unmarried." Some respondents, however, agreed that Indian women should "take the lead" in protecting themselves from pregnancy.

Viewers also questioned the narrative probability of *Friends* regarding the notion that Monica would go out with Richard, who is 30 years older than her. This age incompatibility would be very odd in India. As Mrs. Vaish stated: "To be very frank, the first thing that will come to people's minds is that the girl has married for money. No one in India accepts that a girl can marry an older male for just love." Further, Indian respondents could not relate to the idea of a girl dating so many people, and having so many sexual partners.

Our respondents also assessed the narrative fidelity of *Friends* based on their own lived experiences. Many respondents could relate to the living arrangement of the six main characters in *Friends*, as they too had either shared a dorm room with friends while in college, or presently shared an apartment with friends. However, certain aspects of the narrative resonated more with the Indian context than certain other aspects. For instance, viewers found the explicit and open discussion regarding sex, especially the conversation of the number of previous sexual partners as distasteful. One viewer stated: "The candidness is quite American. I don't expect this to happen in India." Another respondent stated that it is unacceptable in India to disclose to your partner that you "had sex with that guy last night," while in the United States, this perhaps would be acceptable. Priya, a 21-year-old unmarried female respondent, noted: "Though some girls do have several sexual partners, they do not talk about it, as premarital sex is still taboo in India, so they won't share this with even a best friend."

Rekha, a young woman mentioned that things were "very different in India." A mother in her forties clearly felt that she, understandably, could not identify with the lifestyle portrayed on *Friends*. Mrs. Vaish, a New Delhi-based homemaker concurred:

... the kind of lifestyle they lead, we wouldn't dream of letting our kids live in such proximity with the opposite sex, or at least we hope they won't. But things have changed, so I won't be surprised or horrified if such a thing was to happen in my family.

Responses from younger Indian viewers were more liberal, compared to the relatively more conservative beliefs held by the married and

more senior (in age) respondents. Younger respondents acknowledged that such "free-wheeling" sexual relationships with the opposite sex were possible, even if not very probable. Most respondents felt that sexual openness was not yet acceptable in India.

Other Mythotypical Elements

Consistent with our stated purpose, in the previous section, our analysis of *Friends* in India focused privileged the mythotypes of virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion, and verisimilitude. However, for contextualization, we further analyze how the mythotopes of openendedness, negentropy, circularity, and archetypal *dramatis personae* influence Indian audiences' reading of *Friends*.

As noted previously, *openendedness* refers to the textual quality of no resolution, which forces the viewer to return to the program with a hope for closure. The plot of *Friends*, consistent with the sitcom genre, evolves episodically without an actual ending to the storyline.⁵ However, the ongoing narrative of *Friends* brought relief to the Indian audiences at the end of each episode—as the characters resolve their tricky situations. In this sense, *Friends* is an episodically "closed" text, but as a genre ongoing and openended.

As noted previously, *negentropy* refers to the textual quality of instilling a sense of meaning and order among its viewers. Seeing the same six characters in familiar settings on a regular basis was meaningful to the Indian viewers of *Friends*. Several of our respondents commented on the "thick" friendships among the series' six (both male and female) characters, something that they wished for in their personal lives. Watching these virtual friendships brought a sense of order, or negentropy, to the lives of these viewers.

As already noted, *circularity* refers to the narrative quality that makes viewers return to where the story began. Circularity also means placing the characters in a situation where they initially began. Our Indian viewers noted that they "looked forward" to the theme song of *Friends*, for it marked the beginning of yet another date with the six characters of the programs. They noted that the *Friends*' plot would invariably begin in the Greenwich Village Central Perk coffee shop. This narrative return to the familiar setting was like returning to the old familiar launch pad, only to take off again.

As noted, *archetypal dramatic personae* are "authentic" characters that are found in each culture and evoke affective responses across cultures. For example, many narratives include the archetype of a medieval knight, usually in the form of valiant die-hard romantic who steals the heart of young woman; or the archetype of a court jester, usually in the form of a comedian who entertains through humor. Several Indian

respondents, as noted, considered Phoebe's role in *Friends* as being "silly, dumb, foolish, and funny." She exemplified the archetypal personae of a court jester.

CONCLUSIONS

The present chapter investigated how Hollywood's mass-mediated world of health-related persuasion, information, and entertainment is interpreted outside its borders. We drew on Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory and Fisher's (1984, 1985a) narrative theory to analyze how Indian audiences subjected the ideological and "safe sex" narrative of *Friends* to diverse mythotypic readings. In so doing, we responded to the call by cultural studies scholars to explore the intersections between texts, audience members, and their contexts.

The analysis just presented clearly shows the value of applying theoretical lenses to investigating the popularity of global narratives like *Friends*, which may purposely incorporate health messages as part of a social merchandizing approach. Clearly, most Indians watched *Friends* for a variety of reasons. Their motivations and involvement in *Friends* support, in various ways, Olson's (1999) mythotypes of *virtuality*, *ellipticality*, and *verisimilitude*, and Fisher's (1984, 1985a) concepts of *narrative probability* and *fidelity*. Not surprisingly, Indian viewers used their own lived experiences in interpreting *Friends*, and negotiated meanings based on personal values, lifestyles, and prevailing cultural norms.

It was interesting how *ellipticality*, which involves audience members filling in the gaps in the narrative, engendered highly affective responses from the Indian viewers. Our viewers wrestled with the role of women in initiating (and calling off sex), flaunting their multiple partners in premarital sexual encounters, and the like. In most instances, either the audience rejected the narrative because it was foreign to their experience, or they strongly felt the characters should have been married, in which case condom use and sexual openness become permissible. In essence, audience members provided their own culturally reasonable and acceptable speculations and resolutions to the unfolding "safe sex" emplotments. This finding suggests that although transparency narrative theory allows for audiences to bring in their own cultural values to interpret a foreign narrative, in reality, the viewers can go beyond to change the plot's context in order to fit their own prevailing realities.

One of the most revealing facets of this study was the sense of "cultural difference" that was clearly articulated and elaborated by Indian viewers of *Friends*. The difference was encapsulated in responses such as "It happens in the U.S. but not here in India," "That is American cul-

ture not Indian," and "They [the U.S.] have no culture." These references to the cultural difference espoused by Indian viewers can be construed as an indicator of the opacity of the narrative. However, opacity does not lead audiences to reject the entire narrative of *Friends*, nor did it offend their cultural sensibilities to the extent that they would switch off the program. In essence, opacity was identified for some specific issues but not for the whole program. While enjoying the program, when appropriate, the audience simply told themselves that this was a "window on another culture; it was not their own." And, on certain occasions, viewers viewed this difference in the context of how things were changing in India, and may be in the future.

Interestingly, viewers acknowledged that what is shown on *Friends* may not happen in India at the present time but may well take place in the coming years. This finding was evident especially among respondents who saw a looming "generation gap" between the prevailing Indian values with respect to mixed-sex friendships and sexuality and what was openly depicted on *Friends*. For instance, none of the Indian respondents said that they would feel comfortable watching *Friends* with their parents, grandparents, or other family elders. Several young viewers freely acknowledged that they were drawn to *Friends* because they knew the program would be considered taboo by their elders, and by watching it, they got the vicarious pleasure of going against the norms.

Linked to the reality of intergenerational difference in engaging with the sitcom was the theme of an "emergent culture," a new Indian culture, which according to majority of the Indian respondents models American culture. Although subtle, this theme was evident in almost all responses. The viewers felt that India was gradually moving toward a free-wheeling, sexually open culture, especially among the urban, elite youth who ape fashions of New York and Paris, drink coffee and cappuccinos, and hang out in bars and nightclubs. However, even those who embody this emergent Western culture live in a culture where sexual mores, in general, are highly conservative. For them, and for others, the sitcom may fill a desired vicarious need.

Does the watching of *Friends*, especially its sexually explicit emplotments, create possibilities for new health and lifestyle narratives by audience members? Our data suggests that watching of American television shows such as *Friends* spurs conversation (even if in hushed tones) among Indian viewers about topics that were hitherto taboo. Without necessarily accepting the "foreign" messages, Indian audience members—through repeated and consistent exposure to mediated programs like *Friends*—gain familiarity with, and a lingo for, talking about taboo topics. Over time, it is likely that repeated conversations on taboo topics make them less problematic, gradually shifting social mores.

What value did our investigation of the "safe sex" emplotment in *Friends* in India add to our understanding of Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory? Interestingly, humor, as a narratological device, emerged as an overarching mythotype in our respondents' voices, even though it is not exclusively singled out in Olson's schemata. Humor, overwhelmingly, was brought up as being the primary affective motivation that goaded Indian audiences to regularly tune into *Friends*. Even though not all the jokes and funny lines were completely grasped by Indian viewers, it was clear that most respondents watched *Friends* because they found it humorous and relaxing. Despite the cultural-situatedness of jokes, humor about sex (and sexual innuendos, in particular) seemed to transcend cultural boundaries.

Further, what value did our Indian investigation of the "safe sex" emplotment in *Friends* add to our understanding of how entertainment-education programs are interpreted by audiences? Although most entertainment-education initiatives are framed within a psychological-cognitive framework to purposely influence audience members' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Slater, 2002), our research design and results illustrate the efficacy of employing a dialogic and sociocultural approach to assessing entertainment-education effects. Our study points to the importance of recognizing how media texts, audience members, and contexts intersect to create multiple polysemic readings.⁶ Our Indian respondents, far from being culturally duped by a foreign text, actively engaged with *Friends* to achieve varied ends—including the mocking (and, in some cases, the outright rejection) of American culture. Such results could only be revealed through a dialogic approach to assessing entertainment-education effects. By exploring how individuals negotiated unique meanings about health and sexuality with *Friends* in their differentiated contexts, our analysis ultimately illustrates how texts become sites of struggle over "preferred" meanings.

When entertainment-education programs seek to engender "preferred" meanings among audience members, it raises various ethical dilemmas (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). These dilemmas underscore the difficulties of planning entertainment education in the United States (Slater, 2002), and perhaps especially so when they are enacted across nation-states in the global public sphere. The *prosocial content* dilemma arises when the message is construed as prosocial by certain audience members and antisocial by others. Although some Indian audience members may consider the use of condoms in a first-time sexual encounter to be desirable, others may view depictions of sexual activity as promoting promiscuity. The *source-centered* dilemma deals with who decides what is prosocial. Should Hollywood produc-

ers really be deciding how people in India should be managing their sexual encounters? The *unintended effects* dilemma deals with the undesirable and unintended consequences that may result from adopting a certain "solution" depicted in a media text. What if an Indian woman is beaten by her male partner because she unilaterally calls off sex because a condom is unavailable? So, on one hand, a transparent narrative might empower an audience member to actively engage with the media text and make choices based on their situated context. On the other hand, does this freedom of interpretation afforded by a transparent narrative lead to greater risks for audience members in comparison to a close-ended opaque narrative, where the path of action is prescribed? Ultimately, the ethical dilemmas of entertainment-education texts are decided by audience members, who choose (or not choose) to embrace a "preferred" reading.

In ending, our analysis of *Friends* helped us gain theoretically rich insights on how Hollywood weaves its global web of transparent mass-mediated narratives. When such Hollywood-produced mass-mediated narratives include health emplotments, they raise important questions for scholars interested in the role of narratives in enacting wellness in the global public sphere.

NOTES

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2. In addition to these eight devices that embody the internal "structural" aspects of the narratives, Olson (1999) called attention to two mythotypes that represent the media text's external attributes and contribute toward its transparency: *omnipresence* and *production values*. Omnipresence refers to the constant presence of electronic media in our lives—whether at home, in a doctor's waiting room, or in a shopping mall. Production values include the budgetary and other technical inputs which enhance the audience receptivity of a media message. Olson argues that Hollywood products are globally attractive because of their mega production budgets and elaborate special effects.

3. The data collection was commissioned to a professional New Delhi-based media research organization, Center for Media Studies, which also transcribed the interviews.
4. Since its launch, it has been nominated for a record-breaking 55 Emmy Awards, including the Outstanding Comedy Series, a recognition it won in 2003 (www.nbc.com/Friends/about/index.html). *Friends* is presently broadcast in over 100 countries, including Slovenia, Brazil, Croatia, Australia, and India, and is especially popular among younger populations. An estimated, 500 million people worldwide watch the show on a weekly basis.
5. *Friends* had its tenth and final season (2003–2004) of broadcast in the United States; although through syndicated reruns, it will maintain its presence on United States and overseas markets for years to come.
6. In this sense, our research may hold implications for the growing body of literature on *interpretive communities* that arise when people sit together and watch a media program together (Beck, 1995; Biocca, 1988; Gunter, 1988; Lindlof, 1988). An interpretive community exists when individuals who count themselves as members of a viewing community collaboratively co-define the viewing experience (when cheering, e.g., for a particular football team; or when watching a soap opera).

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