

(DIS)SIMILAR READINGS

Indian and American Audiences' Interpretation of *Friends*

**Ketan S. Chitnis, Avinash Thombre, (late) Everett M. Rogers,
Arvind Singhal and Ami Sengupta**

Abstract / The present article compares Indian and American audiences' interpretations of the Hollywood sitcom *Friends*. The article is guided by Olson's narrative transparency theory, which 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'. Thirty-seven regular viewers of *Friends* in India and 35 from the US were interviewed personally and in focus groups. Indian viewers questioned the truth-value of the content to conclude that *Friends* portrayed a universal American culture that is completely different from an Indian standpoint. These interpretations made the media text opaque, and the Indian audience members rejected the safe sex message discussed in the episode studied. The American audience found *Friends* overly exaggerated, but safe sex and sexuality messages somewhat more culturally proximate.

Keywords / *Friends* / India / narrative transparency theory / safe sex messages / sitcom / television / United States

*Friends is so similar to the friendships I have . . . there is no stopping me [from watching it].
(Rakesh, a young male viewer of Friends in New Delhi, India)*

*I like Phoebe [because] she says a lot of random things and so do I. However, I took this test
on the Internet once and it said I was most like Rachel! (Laura, a young female viewer of
Friends in the US)*

These quotes illustrate the popularity of the US sitcom *Friends* among young American and Indian audiences. *Friends* has a global appeal,¹ although the reasons for its popularity might vary in different cultures. In the present study, we employ a comparative analysis of how Indian and American youth² interpret this globally popular, Hollywood-produced sitcom. Drawing upon a cultural approach to audience interpretation (McQuail, 1997), our research is guided by Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory. Transparency is '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: 18). Narrative transparency allows audiences of different cultures to project their own values, myths and meanings onto a foreign text, so that meanings are derived as if the text were locally produced (Olson, 1999).

Building on previous studies that examined how Indian viewers perceive *Friends* as being a transparent text (Chitnis et al., 2004; Singhal et al., 2005), the present study compares how American and Indian audiences interpret *Friends*. Our central research question seeks to understand whether or not audiences from a foreign (Indian) culture draw upon the same textual devices that the local (American) audiences use, or do culturally different audiences focus on different elements in the media text? Olson's theory suggests that culturally diverse audience members interpret the same media text differently by bringing in their own values, beliefs and myths. Our comparative analysis seeks to extend Olson's theory, and in so doing explores the different interpretations of the media text when we compare media reception in a local vs global context.

Hollywood's Global Footprint

The global reach of media corporations enables people of different cultures to consume media products from foreign lands (Barker, 1997). These global media corporations, only a handful in number, are primarily based in the US, and mostly in Hollywood (Demers, 1999; Wolf, 1999). Worldwide, audiences are 100 times more likely to see a Hollywood film than to see a European film; further, Hollywood satisfies 70 percent of the international demand for television narratives and 80 percent of the demand for feature films (*The Economist*, 1997a, 1997b). Not surprisingly, Hollywood has been criticized for media imperialism and creating a globally dispersed western monoculture (Boyd, 1984; Chabalay, 2003; Herman and McChesney, 1997). Past studies suggest that when consumed over a period of time, American media products may influence the way an audience member in a foreign country may feel, dress and act (McMillin, 2002; Olson, 1999; Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

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 and Rogers, 2000). Singhal and Rogers (1999, 2001) also noted a shift in the depiction of Indian women in media from the traditional roles of motherhood to that of a modern woman, especially after the advent of foreign channels in India in the early 1990s. However, sexual explicitness on foreign soap operas was generally perceived as undesirable in the Indian context (Rogers et al., 2004).

Researchers also argue that US dominance of global television, though it exists at some level, is perhaps overstated. Rather than the US or Hollywood dominating the world media market, there is a regionalization of television dominated by local or regional players (Straubhaar, 1997). Within this context, researchers 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 soap operas draw large audiences in India (McMillin, 2003; Overland, 2004; Scrase, 2002). Hybrid programs, such as Kung Fu movies, modeled after James Bond movies, are also highly popular in Hong Kong and other nations (Ang, 1996). Mexican and Brazilian soap operas are exported throughout Latin America and in many countries of Asia and Africa.

Despite such evidence of popularity of non-western media products, mainstream American media products still dominate most global markets, as summarized earlier in this section.

Narrative Transparency Theory

In the past, scholars such as 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 concept of polysemy: multiple meanings derived from one text. Other studies treated audiences as interpretive communities, where collective consumption of media products resulted in a co-creation of meaning of the media text (Beck, 1995; Lindlof, 1988). Newcomb (1984) investigated the language of television and argued that the medium allowed for different interpretations of its main ideology, but did not investigate the different interpretations of American media products in other cultures. These studies explain how television allows for the production of discursive knowledge, and how the intended meaning of a message may change for audiences. But they do not provide a theoretical lens that can be applied to compare audience interpretations of global media products created in one culture and consumed by audiences in the same culture as well as in another culture. The present study expands Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory to build on these concepts and helps us understand the popularity of the global media texts.

Narrative transparency theory suggests that a media text has the ability to transcend cultures because of the language used to create it (Olson, 1999). It argues that a cross-cultural understanding of the text may take place because the audience interprets a foreign text using their own cultural beliefs and values. Transparency theory claims that to understand the popularity of global media, one has to understand both the media text and the audience members, local and foreign, who consume them.

For example, based on their cultural beliefs and ideas, the Gbagyi people in Nigeria interpreted *Dallas* very differently from American viewers. J.R. Ewing was viewed as the trickster worm in Nigerian mythology (Olson, 1999). Similarly, Laotian refugees in the US especially identified with news items that dealt with Ethiopian refugee camps (Conquergood, 1986). Geographic distance and dissimilarity in physical appearance were less important to the Laotian refugees than the larger issues that were common between them and the Ethiopian refugees (for example, displacement, hunger and poverty). Viewers are thus able to push aside the apparently 'foreign' elements of the text to focus on personality traits or social realities that are common to their lived experience.

Elements of Narrative Transparency

For Olson (1999) transparency means there is no unified meaning in a mediated text; instead, different people can interpret the same message differently by relating it to their own cultural context. Embedding personal cultural myths in the narrative

makes the text transparent. Myths are stories that a culture creates about reality and satisfy human needs and emotions. 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: 92–3). Therefore, myths transcend cultures and can evolve over time and space; however, the universal mythotypes remain constant. Today, according to Olson, the media satisfy some of these same needs that were satisfied by myths in the past.

Olson (1999) puts forth eight general attributes³ internal to the media text that allow for its mythotypic reading: (1) virtuality, (2) ellipticality, (3) inclusion, (4) verisimilitude, (5) openendedness, (6) negentropy, (7) circularity, and (8) archetypal *dramatis personae*. We discuss each of these attributes and relate them to the overall storyline of *Friends* and in particular to the episode we studied.

Virtuality is the creation of a psychologically convincing and electronically stimulating environment whereby audience members of long-running serials with continuing cast develop 'hyper-real relationships' with the characters (Olson, 1999). *Friends* was broadcast for 10 years in America and for almost the same period in India. In this period, virtuality was created between audience and characters. After *Friends* went off-air, some audiences experienced anxiety as a result of the fictitious relationship they may have developed over time with the characters of the sitcom.

Ellipticality is the narrative technique of leaving out details (Olson, 1999). Ellipticality makes use of audience participation, allowing the spectator to speculate on what may be going on, and thus 'completing' the picture in their own minds. In the *Friends* episode studied, audience members wondered what might have happened in the bedroom when Monica returned, without a condom, to tell her boyfriend Richard that they would not be having sex that night. Viewers may wonder whether or not the couple really could restrain themselves, creating an ending that fits their values.

Inclusion in texts is a quality that gives the viewer a sense of participation in the unfolding of the plot relating to their own lives rather than simply observing it (Olson, 1999). Audiences are naturally drawn deeply into such narratives as they stimulate audience participation. Thus, *Friends* consciously uses situations that are commonly faced by young audiences: squabbles among roommates, the pressure to date, the struggle to find a good job and many other similar situations.

Verisimilitude implies that media texts convey to the viewer a sense of truth and realness (Olson, 1999). The audience can imagine such matters as happening in real life and not something that is 'fantastic' or 'way out'. In *Friends*, the audiences may question the truth-value of the particular storyline, such as negotiating over a condom or a woman calling off sex and the boyfriend complying with it.

Openendedness refers to narrative texts that have no end; hence the viewer is somehow forced to return to the program, hoping for a sense of closure in the near future (Olson, 1999). Even though *Friends* aired its final episode in May 2004, because of its reruns it may be considered as an open-ended series without a final resolution of its plot.

Negentropy is the manner in which a television narrative can instill a sense of

order among its viewers (Olson, 1999). Watching the same characters in a familiar setting, viewers are instilled with a feeling of reality, through the mechanism of repetition. In *Friends*, most episodes are situated in the same few places; an apartment or the coffee shop, eventually bringing order to the chaos by showing the *Friends* family as developing a stronger bond after each episode.

Circularity is the attribute that restores balance to the narrative. It places the characters in a situation similar to where they initially began (Olson, 1999). In the case of *Friends*, this occurred when the final episode was aired in May 2004 and the audience knew how the characters' lives ended in the series.

Archetypal dramatis personae are 'authentic' characters that are found in each culture, such as the handsome prince or the caring mother. Archetypal characters have an affective component that holds universal appeal (Olson, 1999). In *Friends*, the audience could interpret certain characters as dramatis personae such as the fool or the knight.

Research Questions

Based on the preceding review of narrative transparency theory, we sought to investigate the way in which the combination of the eight attributes led to the mythotypic reading of the Hollywood's media product *Friends*, thereby making it transparent among both Indian and American viewers. For our purpose, those media texts in *Friends* that the culturally diverse audiences interpret as being similar to their reality are termed transparent. Texts that are not culturally sharable in both the local and foreign culture are termed opaque (Olson, 1999). Our present study was guided by two research questions:

1. To what extent do Indian and American audiences find the narrative of *Friends* to be transparent? and
2. How do Indian and American audiences subject the text of *Friends* to diverse mythotypic readings?

Our analysis of *Friends* concerned eight mythotopes but especially focused on four of Olson's mythotypes: virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion and verisimilitude. The remaining four mythotopes – openendedness, negentropy, circularity and archetypal dramatis personae – are used to contextualize audiences' interpretations of *Friends*.

Data Collection, Respondents' Profile and Episode Studied

The fieldwork was conducted among 37 Indian heavy viewers of *Friends* in April 2003 and 35 American regular viewers of *Friends* in March 2004. One of the present authors trained researchers from the Center for Media Studies, New Delhi to gather information from the Indian viewers. We conducted five focus group interviews and 17 in-depth interviews with audiences in three Indian metropolis cities: Chandigarh, Hyderabad and New Delhi. Three focus groups were conducted in a south-western university in the US. All interviews and group discussions were in English.

Respondents were first asked questions regarding their perceptions of *Friends*, then shown an episode of *Friends* with a 'safe sex' message, and later interviewed about its content.

All respondents (20 men and 17 women in India, and six male and 29 females in America) were self-selected regular and heavy viewers of *Friends*, aged between 18 and 35 years. Most US respondents were university students, primarily Caucasians, followed by Hispanics and Native Americans. The Indian respondents were students, homemakers and professionals, representing Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths. They had at least completed high school and had near-native fluency in English.

The 23-minute episode of *Friends* viewed by our respondents promoted 'safe sex'. Condom use was the main theme of this episode, with condoms mentioned six times. Monica and her older boyfriend Richard arrive at her apartment, which she shares with Rachel, who is dating Ross, Monica's brother. Before sexual passions mount, Monica and Rachel head to the common bathroom in search of condoms and discover that they have only one condom. Through a game Rachel gets the only condom. Monica tells Richard, 'not tonight', since she does not want to have unprotected sex.

Audience Interpretation of the Transparency of *Friends*

We discuss the Indian and American audiences' display of elements of similarities and differences in interpreting the mythotopes in *Friends*, making it a transparent text. Our analysis is organized according to Olson's eight mythotypic attributes of the text. Responses of Indian viewers are contrasted with the responses and meanings of American viewers.

Virtuality – Forming Relationships with Media Characters

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, Harpreet⁴ 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 . . . take responsibility. She has this strong, independent streak about her, which I really like in a woman.' The narrative also helped create a psychological sense of reality among the Indian audiences. Adil, a male graduate student in New Delhi, liked Phoebe, 'both for her innocence and foolishness', which were seen as being normal human traits and displaying real emotions. Several respondents also named Joey and Chandler as their favorite characters, primarily because of their 'simplicity' and 'level-headedness' respectively.

Many of our Indian respondents related to the notion of 'sharing things' with friends and 'fighting with them' as similar to their experience of friendship. However, for some respondents, the bonding and friendship shown in *Friends* were

unreal: Adil expressed how he felt the friendship portrayed in *Friends* was not as deep as his personal experience: '*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.'

Like their Indian counterparts, some American respondents identified with Phoebe. Tina said that she shared similar traits with Phoebe: 'I am silly and easy going.' However, most American respondents identified strongly with Rachel and Chandler. Audiences related to Rachel as a successful career woman. Lindsey said, 'She [Rachel] works for Ralph Lauren and that is who I aspire to work for.' And Amanda, a 21-one-year-old, said, 'I have gone through many of the same things she [Rachel] has.' Another participant, Laura, took a test on the Internet that revealed that her personality resonated most with Rachel. Some identified strongly with Chandler because he is fun, easy going and always on his toes. Annette said, 'He is funny the way I try to be.' Few audiences could relate to Monica's 'obsessive compulsiveness' and Ross's 'genuineness'.

In sum, American respondents developed a virtual relationship with more characters in *Friends* than the Indian audiences could. The Indian audiences displayed virtuality with respect to friendship and traits of some of the characters of the sitcom.

Ellipticality – Creating a Culturally Appropriate Ending

As noted previously, ellipticality is the narrative technique of leaving out details, allowing the viewer to speculate on what might be happening (Olson, 1999). When Indian respondents were asked their feelings about Monica's decision to call off sex for the night because she was out of condoms, we noted the speculative readings it evoked.

Amrik strongly believed that Monica's actions were not possible in the Indian context. 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, would have fought and not been as understanding as Monica's boyfriend, Richard. Rakesh also felt that if a couple were spending the night together, it was impossible to 'shrug and pretend to say that [it] won't happen'. Harpreet, a male respondent, agreed: 'Once you make a plan, you have to perform it. You cannot make a plan and leave it halfway. I will be willing to take risk.' Although Harpreet believed that using a condom was necessary to avoid pregnancy, it did not mean that one had to forego sex.

Bala, on the other hand, felt that such a situation – running out of condoms – might 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 felt that in the absence of a condom, he would abstain from sex.

American respondents similarly thought it was difficult to simply call off sex, especially when it had been planned. However, most American respondents emphasized that they would comply with Monica's decision. Moreover, American

respondents believed that by abstaining from sex Monica and Richard conveyed a very positive message to the handling of sensitive sexual situations. Amy said: 'It was a great message, don't let the moment carry you away.' Denise concurred, 'Humor and negotiation help a lot. You learn that non-safe sex isn't even an option.' And Emily said, 'I thought it was great! Very responsible to encourage safer sex though I do not know about situations similar to this happening in real life.'

A few American audiences differed from the plot and exercised their freedom to fill in the storyline of what might have happened between Monica and her boyfriend. Leslie speculated, 'In real life, both couples would be having sex.' Lindsay agreed: 'one of them would have gone unprotected.' But most American audiences imbibed the safe sex message. Respondents felt that open communication, and especially humor, helped Monica to convince her partner that 'it [sex] is not going to happen tonight'.

In sum, both Indian and American audiences questioned whether or not it would be so easy to call off sex because of lack of a condom. A significant difference, however, related to the explicitness of discussing sex. Unlike the American audiences, who did not find it odd for friends to discuss sex so openly, Indian audiences found such frank discussion of sex as taboo and culturally inappropriate. However, the ellipticality in the narrative allowed them to engage in speculation, to fill in the gaps and to make sense of the unfolding plot. This transpired between both the American and the Indian viewers.

Inclusion – Audience Participation in the Plot

Inclusion is an attribute 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 male from Chandigarh, observed that the *Friends* plot was 'pretty close' to his reality. He emphasized that young women in Indian metropolitan cities, including some of his female friends, were open-minded, relatively comfortable talking about sex, much like the women characters did in *Friends*. 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, walks. . . his mannerisms really appeal to me.' Atul actively participated in the *Friends* narrative by closely observing Joey while the program was underway, and also in the post-viewing context as he imitated Joey's behaviors in his interpersonal interactions.

Rakesh said: '*Friends* is so similar to the friendships I have . . . there is no stopping me [from watching it].' He elaborated that he and his friends used to constantly spend time together – much like the friends in the sitcom – and noted that two of his friends eventually decided to get married, akin to the plot of *Friends*. Another respondent echoed a similar sense of belonging with *Friends*: 'I am able to directly relate to *Friends*. . . . We took a house on rent . . . three people living together.'

Unlike their Indian counterparts, American respondents strongly felt that their own lived reality was very distant from the friendships that are portrayed in the sitcom. Thus, American audiences did not participate as readily in the plot as the

Indian audiences did. Several American respondents rejected the *Friends* storyline as unreal. Karla said, '[My] conversations are similar with my friends but the way they act [relationships between characters] is not.' Likewise, Amy's response was, 'I don't have those kinds of escapades but I have male and female friends that I am frank with.'

Bruce, who rejected the friendships shown on *Friends* as mere dramatic creations, said: 'The friendship shown in *Friends* is distant to my reality. It is just funny. It accentuates life and makes it funny.' Tamara's response was similar, 'I have friends who are guys and we are close but not like in the show.' For Rebecca, the friendships in *Friends* are: 'Pretty distant because pretty much everyone's life is perfect on the show.' Other American audiences echoed *Friends* as: 'rather distant from their reality'.

These differences between real life and televised friendships made inclusion as a mythotypic attribute almost absent among our US respondents. Indian respondents, on the other hand, related the 'thick' friendships on *Friends* as similar to their experiences.

Verisimilitude – The Truth-Value of the Plot

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). The truth-value and coherence of the plot of *Friends* were assessed by the Indian viewers based on their 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: '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.'

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 scene where Monica and Rachel are fighting over a condom was inconsistent with the Indian reality. Zaira from Hyderabad exclaimed: 'Give me a break. 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 most Indian women would take the lead in procuring a condom and deciding whether or not to have sex. 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'. Some respondents, however, agreed that Indian women should 'take the lead' in protecting themselves from pregnancy. Further, Indian viewers could not relate to the idea of Monica dating a man who is old enough to be her father and her having so many sexual partners.

On the contrary, most of our American respondents actually extolled the depiction of safe sex practices in such non-marital encounters. Ann, commenting on the negotiation between Monica and Rachel for the only available condom, said, 'I think

it is better than in most shows because it included messages of safe sex.' Heather remarked, 'I thought it was comical and very responsible that they both responsibly accepted not having sex if it wasn't safe.' Mark's views were similar: 'I think we need positive sex avenues to talk about the subject constructively . . . they are both openly sexually active women negotiating safe sex'. Julie found the negotiation over the single condom 'as a witty way to portray the importance of using a condom'.

However, some American respondents were unsure that the condom negotiation could actually happen in real life. Emily remarked, 'I would actually send my partner out to get more condoms.' In contrast, Karla felt that negotiating over a condom seldom happened in reality but was 'thrown in because young people were watching'.

Unlike the Indian audiences, American participants overwhelmingly felt that there was nothing wrong in Monica dating a man 30 years older than her. If one is in love, age is inconsequential. Melissa's reaction was: 'It happens frequently in real life [though] I would have preferred to see a younger man with an older woman.' A few respondents, like Marie, said: 'If they are both into it great; if he is just in it for sex, it is not great.'

Akin to their Indian counterparts, several American respondents said they would feel awkward discussing their sex life in front of their siblings. Kara noted, 'I don't talk about sex in front of my brother', emphasizing that in real life siblings do not talk about sex like Monica and Ross. Lisa said, 'That was awkward and not something I could do.' But some of our American respondents felt that it is not completely unlikely in real life for some siblings to talk openly about sex. For instance, Emily said, 'Fine, that's how their relationship works . . . though I would not do that.'

In sum, most Indian respondents felt that sexual openness was not yet acceptable in India. While some Indian viewers were more liberal, they felt that 'free-wheeling' sexual relationships with the opposite sex were possible, but not very common. A few American respondents believed sex outside of marriage was not appropriate, and open depiction of sexuality on *Friends* does not accurately represent their lived experience. But overall, the safe sex message was well received by the Americans, unlike the Indians.

Confluence and Divergence of the Mythotypic Readings

With respect to virtuality, Indian audiences could relate primarily to only two characters: Phoebe, the silly, dumb yet happy-go-lucky girl, and Joey, the laid back, simple guy, and not with the other four characters. The American audience, on the other hand, could establish a virtual relationship with most characters. On the other hand, with respect to inclusion, Indian audiences felt that they could more easily participate in the unfolding of the plot than their American counterparts. The close friendship and escapades among friends were a distant reality for many American viewers. Indian audiences, however, related to the friendship as it resonated with their lives. Ellipticality, the characteristic of the text that allows people to fill in the gaps, was used by the audience to make sense of the scene where Monica and Richard were

negotiating about postponing sex because they were out of condoms. Most American audiences took the message at face value but Indians speculated about it.

The main point of departure about the interpretation of the text, however, was associated with assessing the truth-value of the narrative in terms of its fit with viewers worldview. American viewers caught on to the safe sex message naturally. They found the condom scene hilarious and exaggerated but necessary for having protected sex. Also, they went beyond the plot and suggested ways in which they would have procured a condom. On the flip side, Indian viewers found the condom scene unreal and improbable within the Indian context. Many Indian viewers felt that the sexual discussion on *Friends* was foreign to their experiences. Even those who were comfortable with the open talk about sex dismissed the idea that a woman can take decisions and call off sex. This behavior did not resonate with the Indian viewers.

Other Mythotypical Elements

Consistent with our stated purpose in the above section, our analysis of *Friends* focused primarily on the mythotypes of virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion and verisimilitude. However, for contextualization, in this section, we briefly describe the way in which mythotypes of openendedness, negentropy, circularity and archetypal dramatis personae influence Indian and American audiences' reading of *Friends*.

Openendedness refers to the textual quality of no resolution, which forces the viewer to return to the program with a hope for closure. The ongoing narrative of *Friends* brought relief to the Indian audiences at the end of each episode – as the characters resolve their complex situations. In this sense, *Friends* is an episodically 'closed' text, but as a genre, ongoing and open-ended. Most of our American respondents watched *Friends* about once a week and preferred each episode to be self-contained. This allowed them to be engaged in the storyline even if they missed a previous episode or two. Because of the open-ended nature of *Friends*, most American audience members tuned in to fulfill their need for light-hearted humor as and when they found time.

Negentropy refers to the textual quality of instilling a sense of meaning and order for 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's six characters, something that they wished for in their personal lives. The American respondents believed that the safe sex episode of *Friends* held some meaning in their lives. Jill remarked that 'it is important to let awkward moments roll off you and to use protection'.

Circularity is the narrative quality that makes viewers return to where the story began. Our Indian viewers noted that the *Friends* plot would invariably begin in the Central Park coffee shop in Greenwich Village. This narrative return to the familiar setting was like returning to an old familiar launch pad, only to take off again.

Archetypal dramatis personae are 'authentic' characters that are found in each culture and that evoke affective responses across cultures. Several Indian and American respondents considered Phoebe's role as being 'silly, dumb, foolish, and

funny', as exemplifying the archetypal persona of a court jester. American audiences also noted Rachel as a hardworking, diligent, career-minded woman. The particular reaction to Rachel's character could be compared with that of a tortoise – a universal symbol in fables for a person that works slowly but steadily and wins the race.

Conclusions

This comparative analysis of American and Indian audiences' interpretation of *Friends* yielded several insights. Not surprisingly, Indian audiences negotiated meanings somewhat differently than American audiences. Our results suggest that the different cultural orientation of audience members led them to different mythotypic readings. Overall, the local (American) and global (Indian) audience found many elements in the text of the Hollywood media product *Friends* as transparent; a finding consistent with Olson's (1999) narrative transparency theory. However, the comparative analysis revealed that audiences from different cultures focus on different mythotypic attributes of the media text. Thus, Olson's mythotypic constructs such as verisimilitude (i.e. the truth-value of the text), virtuality (i.e. audience engagement with the characters) and ellipticality (i.e. audience members filling in the details) were used by our American and Indian participants in ways that spoke to their indigenous value-systems.

Our results were also consistent with other studies (Hall et al., 1999) that have showed that audiences from a foreign culture typify American culture based on media texts. Many Indian viewers, who questioned the truth-value of the content, hastily concluded that *Friends* portrayed a universal American culture, and a lifestyle that is completely foreign and different from an Indian point of view. Some of the strongest responses were: 'It happens in the US but not here in India'; 'That is American culture not Indian'; and 'They [Americans] have no culture.' On the other hand, some Indian audiences agreed that unmarried young adults in India are sexually active, but they insisted that sexuality is a very personal matter that even close friends do not discuss. They also felt strongly that a woman would not have a strong negotiating power with respect to initiating or calling off sex as shown in the *Friends* episode. These instances made the media text opaque; not easily transferable to the Indian context.

Finally, our study also revealed that emplotment – the purposeful placement of pro-social messages such as condom use in this particular episode – was more effective among the US audience than with the Indian audience. Perhaps this is because audiences seek cultural proximity when they choose a regional or international program (Straubhaar, 1991). The American audiences, even when they found situations, such as fighting over a condom, as exaggerated, were more receptive to the safe sex messages in the episode. This supports the study carried out to investigate condom efficacy information in another episode of *Friends* (Collins et al., 2003). Indian audiences, on the other hand, found the overt depiction of sexuality offensive and distasteful and quite improbable within their reality.

Thus, narrative transparency theory helped reveal how culturally diverse

audiences interpret the different attributes within a media text by bringing in their values and beliefs. The analysis further showed how a global media product such as *Friends* can become a culturally sharable and transparent text.

One limitation of the present study was that it interviewed a relatively few number of respondents both in India and the US. Respondents in India represented only three regional ethnicities (Punjabi, Telugu and Hindi) and American respondents were mostly a Caucasian student population. The interpretation of the *Friends* episode by audiences within each culture was generally similar, perhaps due to the urban elite characteristics of viewers. Given that global media products such as *Friends* are consumed daily by millions of audiences worldwide, and that it can deal with important sociocultural and health educational topics, future research would benefit if the profile of the respondents were broadened to include audience members from other ethnic groups and cultures.

Notes

The authors thank colleagues at the Center for Media Studies, New Delhi, India for collecting the India-based data of the present research study. We also acknowledge the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for funding the present research through Population Communications International, Los Angeles and New York. We especially thank Irwin 'Sonny' Fox, Mrs P.N. Vasanti, Adite Chatterjee, Sanjeev Kumar, Alok Shrivastav, V.V. Sundar, Michael I. Arrington, Lynn Harter, Devendra Sharma and Saumya Pant for their inputs to the present project. A previous version of this article was presented at the 2004 'Revisiting Globalization and Communication in the 2000s' conference, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

1. Over its 10-year run, *Friends* received 55 Emmy nominations and was ranked in the top 10 of every season it was on air. The final episode of *Friends*, aired on 6 May 2004, attracted over 51 million viewers in the US (see www.cbsnews.com/stories; accessed 15 November 2004) and over 30 million viewers in other countries.
2. We refer to young urban Indian audiences as either Indian audiences or viewers, and American audiences or viewers are terms used to mean young urban American television viewers. This labeling is merely used for the sake of brevity.
3. In addition to these eight attributes that embody the internal 'structural' aspects of the narratives, Olson calls attention to two mythotypes that represent the media text's external attributes and contribute toward its transparency: omnipresence is the constant presence of electronic media in our lives, and production values include the budgetary and technical inputs, which enhance the audience receptivity of a media message.
4. We have changed the names of all the respondents to protect their identity.

References

- Ang, I. (1996) *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Barker, C. (1997) *Global Television: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beck, C. (1995) 'You Make the Call: The Co-Creation of Media Text through Interaction in an Interpretive Community of "Giant" Fans', *Electronic Journal of Communication* 5.
- Boyd, D.A. (1984) 'The Janus Effect? Imported Television Entertainment Programming in Developing Countries', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1: 379-91.
- Chabalay, J.K. (2003) 'Television for a New Global Order: Transnational Television Networks and the Formation of Global Systems', *Gazette* 65: 457-72.
- Chitnis, K., A. Sengupta and A. Singhal (2004) 'Tracking the Global Footprint of Planet Hollywood:

- Narrative Transparency, the Sitcom *Friends*, and Indian Viewers', paper presented to the International Communication Association, New Orleans, LA, May.
- Collins, R.L., M.N. Elliott, S.H. Berry, D.E. Kanouse and S.B. Hunter (2003) 'Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator: The Impact of Condom-Efficacy Information in an Episode of *Friends*', *Pediatrics* 112: 1115–21.
- Conquergood, D. (1986) '“Is it Real?” Watching Television with Laotian Refugees', *Directions* 2: 1–5.
- Demers, D. (1999) *Global Media: Menace or Messiah?* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Fiske, J. (1986) 'Television: Polysemy and Popularity', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3: 391–409.
- Hall, A., T. Anten and I. Cakim (1999) 'Perceived Typicality: American Television as Seen by Mexicans, Turks, and Americans', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16: 436–55.
- Hall, S. (1980) *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*. London: University of Birmingham.
- Herman, E.S. and R.W. McChesney (1997) *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*. London: Cassell.
- Lindlof, T.R. (1988) 'Media Audiences as Interpretive Communities', pp. 81–107 in J. Anderson (ed.) *Communication Yearbook*, 11. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McMillin, D.C. (2002) 'Choosing Commercial Television's Identities in India: A Reception Analysis', *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 16(1): 123–36.
- McMillin, D.C. (2003) 'Marriages Are Made on Television: Globalization and National Identity in India', pp. 341–59 in L. Parks and S. Kumar (eds) *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- McQuail, D. (1997) *Audience Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Malhotra, S. and E.M. Rogers (2000) 'Satellite Television Networks and the New Indian Women', *Gazette* 62: 407–29.
- Newcomb, H.M. (1984) 'On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1: 34–50.
- Olson, S.R. (1999) *Hollywood Planet: Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Overland, M.A. (2004) 'Tea, TV, and Sympathy', *Chronicle of Higher Education* L(18): A38.
- Rogers, E.M., A. Singhal and A. Thombre (2004) 'Indian Audience Interpretations of Health-Related Content in *The Bold and the Beautiful*', *Gazette* 66: 437–58.
- Scrase, T.J. (2002) 'Television, the Middle Classes and the Transformation of Cultural Identities in West Bengal, India', *Gazette* 64: 323–42.
- Singhal, A. and E.M. Rogers (1999) *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Singhal, A. and E.M. Rogers (2001) *India's Communication Revolution: From Bullock Carts to Cybermarts*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Singhal, A., K. Chitnis and A. Sengupta (2005) 'Cross-Border Mass-Mediated Health Narratives: Narrative Transparency, “Safe Sex”, and Indian Viewers', in L.M. Harter, P.M. Japp and C.S. Beck (eds) *Constructing our Health: The Implications of Narratives of Enacting Illness and Wellness*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Straubhaar, J.D. (1991) 'Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 39–59.
- Straubhaar, J.D. (1997) 'Distinguishing the Global, Regional and National Levels of World Television', pp. 284–98 in A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, D. Winseck, J. McKenna and O. Boyd-Barnett (eds) *Media in the Global Context: A Reader*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- The Economist* (1997a) 'Home Alone in Europe', 342(8009, 22 March): 74.
- The Economist* (1997b) 'Star Wars', 342(8009, 22 March): 15–16.
- Wolf, M.J. (1999) *The Entertainment Economy*. New York: Times Books.

Ketan S. Chitnis is an assistant professor in the Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University. His research is focused on communication for development and behavior change communication practices. At present, he is exploring the role of Internet in rural development and centrality

of communication to facilitate participation in long-running social change projects.

Address *211 Journalism Building, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA. [email: ketanc@lsu.edu]*

Avinash Thombre is an assistant professor in the Department of Speech Communication, University of Arkansas at Little Rock. His research interests center on analyzing the impact of new technologies and health communication. He is at present involved in studying transformative experiences of cancer survivors.

Address *Department of Speech Communication, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801, S. University Ave, Little Rock, AR 72204-1099, USA. [email: axthombre@ualr.edu]*

Everett M. Rogers was Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico until he passed away in October 2004.

Arvind Singhal is Professor and Presidential Research Scholar in the School of Communication Studies, Ohio University. He is co-author of *Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action* (Sage, 2003) and *Organizing for Social Change* (Sage, forthcoming); and co-editor of *Entertainment-Education and Social Change* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); and *Communication of Innovations: A Journey with Ev Rogers* (Sage, forthcoming).

Address *School of Communication Studies, Lasher Hall, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA. [email: singhal@ohio.edu]*

Ami Sengupta is a doctoral candidate in the School of Communication Studies, Ohio University. Her research interests lie in issues involving communication and social change. She is specifically interested in studying gender and communication issues in development through post-colonial feminist perspectives.

Address *School of Communication Studies, Lasher Hall, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA. [email: as260903@ohio.edu]*

