

“More Foosball and Beer”: Urban Life and Precarious Masculinity in Friends

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Abstract: This paper intends to explore the precarious masculinity in the celebrated sitcom *Friends* by considering it alongside the urbanization in the United States in the 1990s, which was overlapped with the development of post-feminism, neoliberalism, and the third industry. This paper intends to show that masculinity in *Friends* is demonstrated as precarious and instable, whose preservation relies on the repetition of certain gendered rituals, acts and ornamentations. This is because body politics, shaped by discourses about urban masculinity operates in a subtle way in *Friends*, governing and regulating the male characters, which leads to their self-scrutiny against homosexuality and femininity. A celebrated cultural icon, *Friends* continues to attract audiences around the world and its popularity can be taken as a projection of the nostalgia/expectations of a prosperous era. However, it is important to understand that *Friends* should be viewed as representations of a certain era, instead of an icon of universal values and expectations of lifestyles, because values regarding gender, race, and identity are no longer appropriate today and neoliberal boom which provided the context for *Friends* has already suffered from a bankruptcy.

Keywords: *Friends*, urban masculinity, masculinity crisis, gender performativity

1. Introduction

A widely popular sitcom broadcast from 1994 to 2004, *Friends* can be argued to function as a projection of the vibrance of American urban life after the Cold War. From 1994 to 2004, The ten-year period signified a most symbolic moment in American history when the hegemonic power and international influence of the nation were again at their peak. The sitcom functions as “a prime example of a Clinton-era ‘boom’ text that is...relaxed and uncritical and liberal democratic capitalist hegemony” [1]. It was a “‘simpler’ time, before 9/11, before web 2.0, and before the financial crisis of 2008” [2]. It was set in a time that witnessed the improvement of city security, the development of “mass transit,” the revival of “downtown areas” and “older city neighborhoods, and the return of...baby boomers and Generation X members” to cities [3]. It projected and bolstered “the ‘espresso-culture’ of the 1990s and elevate the coffee house to a national icon” [4]. But the series has been widely criticized of lacked non-white casts, which was in line with most sitcoms of that era [2].

Friends also dealt with gender issues. It is rather obvious that the sitcom is accused as sexist and homophobic [2]. For Naomi R. Rocker, *Friends* is a postfeminist text, and depicts feminism as an individual issue by depoliticizing it [5]. Neil Ewen focuses on the role of Chandler Bing, the big

company employee and argues that from him we can witness a crisis of masculinity due to his “infertility, his ‘periodic reliance’ on Monica, and the questioning of his sexuality” [1]. This paper would also deal with gender issues of *Friends* by particularly focusing on the urban masculinity and the gender anxiety demonstrated in the sitcom. In the 1990s, a “most interesting urban phenomena...” was “a so-called crisis of masculinity” in major cities in developed countries [6]; and “New or reworked masculinities” emerged in America, “especially in urban settings” [7]. In the late twentieth century, major capitalist countries witness a transformation from the production-oriented mode of capitalism to one that is consumption-oriented. Booming consumerist capitalist economy in American cities transformed the way masculinity was constructed. “A neoliberal orientation...has produced images of masculinity that emphasize consumption and gratification as their own rewards” [8]. Under such an environment numerous new masculinities and gender identities emerged, including “the metrosexual, the hipster, and myriad queer identities” [7]. This change further destabilized gender boundaries and identities that had already been instable since the postwar era when the anxious protection of the hegemonic heterosexual norm from homosexuality and femininity was associated with “national security” [9]. By the 1990s, homosocial economic sectors, like industry and agriculture had already declined and were replaced by the third industry where female members proved to be equality capable and important. Then, masculinity highly relied on *demonstration and performance*. Just as Judith Butler notes, “gender is...an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” [10]. This idea is shot through in *Friends*, seen in almost every action of the male characters, who constantly regulate their actions, behaviors, and consumerist choices to preserve their heterosexual gender identity. *Friends* demonstrates masculinity and male identity as *precarious* and instable, and the male characters are anxious to preserve their masculinity through a series of actions, choices, and ornamentations. This because body politics of gender operates in a subtle way in *Friends*, controlling and manipulating the male characters.

2. The Trajectory of Chandler’s Masculinity

Friends was produced in a time when American capitalism went through tremendous changes. By the 1990s, major cities in America prospered as “farm neighborhood” in the country had been declining for decades [7]. Working culture in America also changed dramatically, the bankruptcy of Keynesianism was overlapped with the shift from industry to information, and employment became more changeable, with the possibility of changing different jobs in one’s life [11]. This has been reflected in *Friends*, as major characters are hopping jobs throughout the sitcom, especially Joey and Phoebe. The only exception was Chandler, a city white-collar worker who has been working in a large international company for nine seasons. He is also the only one that does not seem to be satisfied with his job, which also reflects certain emasculating aspects of the working sectors of the third industry in the 1990s.

Traditionally, Chandler’s job would have signified the males’ “hegemony of the professional-managerial class” [11]. However, Chandler’s sexuality is often depicted as confusing [1], and his job has several emasculating aspects, making him a comic version of Bateman in *American Psycho*, also a “man in the flannel suit” in New York that suffers from his own precarious masculinity. For example, Chandler’s job involved the use of computers, which undermined masculinity in working environments in the late 1980s and 1990s. Unlike farm tools or heavy machinery, technology could be easily operated by women; it became “a weapon...over disempowered men and the women who took their place” [12]. Another emasculating aspect of Chandler’s job is related to meaning. As Neil Ewen points out, Chandler’s job “signifies inertia and his settling for a boring” but stable job [1]. Chandler constantly complains that his job is meaningless, and he does not see why his job is important: “If I don’t input those numbers . . . It doesn’t make much of a difference” (S1E1). From a Marxist perspective, Chandler’s job could be worst since it undermines the essence of human beings,

i.e., self-realization through working. *Friends* has in many scenes depicted Chandler's awkwardness in his working environment, especially at the homosocial managerial level. For example, in the company Chandler is constantly mistaken as Toby, but he never dares to correct them (S08E05), partly because Chandler must fit in. In other words, Chandler is supposed to be an "Alpha" in the company ecosystem, but in his working environment Chandler is demonstrated as weak, hesitant, and awkward but obliged to perform manliness in working environments by acting as a managerial figure.

One may argue that the most fundamental aspect of Chandler's masculinity problem comes from father issues, and the trajectory of Chandler's father issue demonstrates the crisis of masculinity can be solved in a certain way. "...masculinity" must be "in the place of the father or not at all" [13]. "American males' sense of masculinity is in crisis" when they are disconnected to their fathers [14]. This is particularly true in Chandler's case, whose father leaves him in his childhood and becomes a transgender performer, which Chandler has been reluctant to talk about even in front of friends. Traditionally, the father figure has been crucial in nurturing the son's identity as a heterosexual man, but in Chandler's life such a figure has been missing, which could be one of the reasons why Chandler has a "quality" that is constantly mistaken as homosexuality (S01E08). It may also explain Chandler's discomfort in front of his supervisor, a fatherly figure, who likes to slap him on his bottom and say "Bing!" (S05E12), and whom Chandler does not admire but tries to impress by playing a subordinating figure; and his embarrassment in front of his father-in-law Jack Geller, whom he can call "dad," but not "daddy" (S07E03).

Yet, Chandler can regain his masculinity and solve his father issue by being a good father. He is economically comfortable, faithful, which are the fundamental elements of being the breadwinner. When they mention their plan of buying a suburban house, Ross comments that their plan is reminiscent of living in the 1950s. It is interesting because it was in the 1950s that America's middle class family ethic gradually took shape, and the "organization man" of middle class were able to afford a big house and support a family living in the suburbs [9]. Also, despite Chandler's infertility, he and Monica still manage to adopt two children, by the end of Season 10, we can discover that jokes related to Chandler's sexuality has disappeared and that he has become a proper family man who is willing to give up his own job for the family. This may indicate a solution for masculinity problems, which is to become a father, a good husband, by which, the emasculated subject could regain his masculinity. Such an idea agrees with the family-valuing neoconservative trend in the 1990s, however, it exude something rather postmodern that masculinity and male identity do not lie in the essence of the subject, instead, it can be undermined and reconstructed through a series of actions, behaviors, and choices.

3. Decorating Urban Masculinity: Ross the Metrosexual Man

Another aspect of American capitalism in the 1990s was prospering consumerism, which also had a major impact on and undermined traditional and normative masculinities [9]. Capitalism of the 1990s has constructed a sophisticated and cultured environment urban environment for males, whose concerns shifted to personal ornamentation, individual hygiene, and healthcare, which were traditionally assigned as feminine [15]. The Metrosexual not only represented the blurring boundaries between masculinity and femininity, but also the objectification of the male body. The male body now became a site of observation, the object to be gazed and evaluated and regulated through consumption. Such gaze may come from both men and women, and the males "are now available for display and objectification in ways that, historically, women have been" [15]; the male body became the "objectified commodity" in the late capitalist scene in the 1990s [16]. However, the objectification of the male body does not necessarily mean that women became the subject because of commercial masculinity. Women are "incentive" for metrosexual men and "metrosexuality" was a means to meet

more women [15]. Some may see such an action as seeking for approval from women, however, in the whole process women “did not request or initiate them” [15]. In this way the metrosexuals inherit normative masculinity by hiding the objectification more cunningly in a more sophisticated way. Females were excluded “systematically” from the “homosocial foundation” of commercial masculinity “secured in the popular discourse of metrosexuality [15].

The above analysis applies well to Ross Geller in *Friends*, who seems to be obsessed with polishing his own looks. For example, he sprays too much gel on his combed hair to an extent that Dr. Green calls him “wet head”; buys new leather pants (S05E11); puts on teeth-whitening gels (S06E08), and when Monica gets spray tanning, he is also rather keen on trying it out (S10E03). It is revealed that Ross’ obsession with polishing his looks largely comes from his anxiety on whether he could attract women with his looks although his ornamentation often functions as causes for his embarrassment in dates and his failure to demonstrate his masculinity properly in front of the opposite sex. For example, in S10E09, Ross wears a pink blouse by mistake, and he is glad that he is attracting a lot of attention (because he thinks he is attractive in the blouse but in fact most people think he is weird); when Joey suggests that he take the blouse off, Ross replies, “Somebody’s afraid of a little competition with the ladies?” But Joey suggests that Ross is looking like a lady and Ross is embarrassed when he finds out that the blouse is made for a woman and his date is wearing a same blouse. Ross’ metrosexuality symbolizes ridiculous attempts to masculinize oneself through ornamentation to attract the ladies. For example, in S06E08, when Ross puts on make up on his face in prepare for his date, Chandler steps in and asks, “Where are all the men?” But it may reveal deeper anxieties of the male subjects and that such anxieties come from the fact that gender identity only exist to the extent they are performed.

When Ross and Rachel are in search of a nanny for Emma, Ross does not like the male nanny because he thinks a man who wants to be a nanny is like a woman who wants to be a king (S09E6), which still reflects a rather traditional gender view, and the fact that Ross is eager to preserve (his own) normative masculinity intact. Another example is when Ross actively playing rugby with Emily’s British friends at the risk of injury; but in fact, he is afraid of it and is terrified (S04E15). In a word, Ross is constantly trying to demonstrate his masculinity by ornamentation or doing certain things; and it seems that his masculinity would disappear as his male posturing ceases. It seems that *Friends* has also attribute father issue to his anxiety about his own masculinity. It is also in S09E06 the source of Ross’ anxiety about masculinity is revealed: the nanny managed to open Ross’ heart, and Ross confesses that his masculinity has been constantly doubted by “tough guy” Jack Geller, his own father, who says, “What’s wrong with you? Why aren’t you outside...playing like a real boy?” This may have also influenced Ross’ way of viewing his son, Ben’s masculinity. He is upset by Carol and Susan letting Ben play with a Barbie doll and tries to introduce Ben to G.I Joe (S03E04).

4. Old Western Masculinity as Commodity in *Friends*

According to S07E22, Joey might be the only one who is secure about his own masculinity among the three. Yet, as an actor, he could assume different roles, which might provide more opportunities to explore different gender roles and masculinity. One of the moments demonstrate the sarcasm of the metrosexual culture is when Joey and his colleges work as perfume promoters in cowboy costumes. Originally, dressed in a tuxedo, Joey is far from successful promoting “Bijan for Men,” while his counterpart, “The Hombre Man” is far more successful because of his masculine look, deep voice, and his black cowboy costume.

As Jane Tompkins put in his *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, the most intriguing factor of the Western myth is “the way they create a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century” [17]. Cinematically, such masculinities are famously represented by Eastwood, “Western figure of the lone male frontiersman” [9]; or Wayne, whose name “became the symbol of American

masculinity” during the postwar era [17]. Such images of an American frontiersman embodied a kind of ideal male subjectivity as well as America’s libertarian traditions, which celebrated individual liberty, self-reliance, i.e., the male liberal subject: “To be a man is...to...primarily, consciousness of self” [17].

This scene shows how American business exploited American males’ nostalgia of Western myth as a promoting tool. The message of the mall where Joey moonlights conveys to the customers is rather clear that one can possess a masculine, old western vibe by wearing a certain kind of perfume. But it also demonstrates masculinity as something that can be *bought*. Roughness and aggression are now neutralized and turned into a commodity showing urban delicacy. The episode soon reveals the sarcasm of such commercial masculinity. When Joey and the Hombre Man are about to see who sprays perfume to the first customer, they look like cowboys in a duel. But the Hombre Man sprays perfume into an old man’s eyes, who get angry and threatens to sue the mall. The Hombre Man immediately loses his cool and his deep voice and apologizes profusely. The contrast easily shows metrosexual masculinity as superficial and pretentious.

5. Gendered Spaces and the Precarious Homosocial Space in *Friends*

As is pointed out by Thompson, “The spatial set-up of *Friends* and its two contrasting gendered apartments supports and reinforces hegemonic models of gender” [18]. It seems to be conveying a rather conservative idea “that men and women *are* fundamentally different...and that gender divisions should be respected and maintained” [19]. Chandler and Joey’s apartment 19 symbolizes a homosocial space, where masculinity is maintained by gendered acts and decorations. In S02E15, Joey purchases a new TV set and a pair of black Barcaloungers, “a symbol of masculine domestic leisure” [18]. On them Joey and Chandler relax with laddish leisure, eating pizza and Cheeto and watching *Bay Watch*. It shows a masculine way of entertainment, yet such comfort also undermines hegemonic masculinity representing roughness. In S07E13, it is revealed that Joey’s Barcalounger is called “Rosita,” a feminine name which seems to set off Joey’s masculinity and his *ownership* over the feminine object. When Rachel introduces the chair she buys for Joey, she reads the product’s name out, which well illustrates the relationship between masculine leisure and consumption: “Lazy Boy E-Cliner 3000.”

However, as is being revealed in some later episodes, such gender division are unstable and fluid and can be easily broken, and the homosocial space of Joey and Chandler is vulnerable to femininity. And such “invasion” is achieved through nothing but gendered acts and decoration, which together constitute a form of performance. A very good example comes from S6E08 in which Joey’s new roommate Janine decorates apartment number 19 with feminine ornamentations, such as pink pillows and flowers and pictures of babies. Chandler seems to be upset by such a change and acts as a “policeman of gender,” who is wary of the “level of feminization” in his erstwhile apartment [18]. Chandler warns Joey: “You got to be careful. The girl thing is dangerous. It’s spreading already.... Be a man! Defend yourself!” (S6E08). Such remark invokes “the language of territory and battle” and reminds people of the boys’ “rejection of decoration and ornament” [18]. Yet Chandler does not do better in his battle protecting his own masculinity because he is already emerged in the feminine and domesticized space well-arranged by Monica.

But such homosocial spaces are also fragile on the inside, too. In *Friends*, Laddish homosocial relationship is funny, yet when the relationship goes slightly over the edge and turns a bit homosexual-ish, it becomes worrying for the males. In fact, the word “homosocial” was a neologism that was “meant to distinguish from ‘homosexuality,’ and it is “characterized by intense homophobia, and fear and hatred of homosexuality” [20]. In S02E16, Joey’s cinematic success provides him with a large sum, and he moves to a fancy apartment, the hilarious scene is that the separation between Joey and Chandler is depicted like a breaking up between two lovers, with one scene showing the depression

of both after their separation. Apart from the constant questioning of Chandler's sexuality from many people, a major scene that shows the homophobia of the other two male characters is in S07E06, in which Joey and Ross take a nap together on a couch. They apparently enjoy the nap, yet Ross is afraid that he might be hooked to "do it again." Anxiety and fear occur when the fragile line between the homosocial and the homosexual is crossed. Despite the homosocial apartment signifies laddish leisure, the distance between the male residents must be kept so that the line is not crossed.

6. Conclusion: Gendered Body Politics in *Friends*

From the above analysis we can see that in *Friends* masculinity is depicted as precarious and instable but depends on the repetition of acts and ornamentations. It has been pointed out by Judith Butler that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" [10]. But why is this an issue? Why male characters in *Friends* are anxious to maintain gender differences and their masculinity?

Despite *Friends* "mocks and undercuts" political issues [5], body politics is shot through the sitcom and regulates the characters in subtle Foucauldian ways through a network of power relays that are shaped by knowledge. By the 1990s, waves of feminist movements have changed views regarding femininity, yet such changes did not occur in the same way when it comes to masculinity. Despite normative masculinity was challenged, "control and domination" are still the criteria for many men, which are now promoted and reassured in Television programs, movies, commercials, in the new age of medias. Knowledge of gender circulates within the society. Individuals "experience power as well as they exercise this power; ...they are always their relays" and regulates their gender behaviors [21]. This is the body politics in *Friends*. Males, represented by the characters in *Friends* are constantly in self-scrutiny to check if they have any non-heterosexual or non-masculine traits, which they must kill off as they emerge. As demonstrated in *Friends*, male characters have limited choices of behavior, entertainment, fashion, occupation, even furniture. If the characters behave in any way non-heterosexual, they would either panic, or immediately engage in masculine activities to compensate for it. For example, when Joey shows Chandler how he plans to flirt with girls by touching Chandler's legs, they immediately recognize it threatens their heterosexuality and turns to "more foosball...and beer!" (S10E03).

As a tremendously successful sitcom, *Friends* features a kind of "intergenerationality" that continues to attract audiences globally and it represents a nostalgic sentiment towards a "simpler" era [2]. However, one should realize that *Friends* is generational. It depicts the lifestyle of a certain class of people in a metropolis in a certain era, whose values are *not* universal. Just as what our experience reveals, the neoliberal economy has been falling since 2008, the world has never reached a stage where individuals can reclaim the prosperity depicted in *Friends*. The same thing is with gender issues; presently gender and identity discussions are hyper-politicized and populist, dividing people into hostile groups. *Friends*, we may say, represents a nostalgia in developed countries, and expectations in developing countries; but *Friends* is not here, not now.

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