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Must-stream TV: The reemergence of NBC's must-see TV in the streaming era

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Must-Stream TV

The Reemergence of NBC's Must-See TV in the Streaming Era

by

Bri Mattia, B.A.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

DePaul University

In Partial Fulfillment

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad

Thanks for letting me have a TV in my room

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Abstract

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By

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DePaul University, 2019

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Committee: Dr. Kelly Kessler

This thesis argues that two current and prevalent television industry shifts—the plethora of reboots and revivals on network television, and forthcoming studio-owned streaming services—are the result of the popularity of past series with audiences on streaming services. I first argue for a focus on the specifics of the series themselves, over the greater trend as a whole in order to determine the validity of these shifts. Approaching each series with the questions “Why then?” and “Why now?” this thesis examines two series from NBC’s famous Must-See TV programming block, *Friends* (1994-2004) and *ER* (1994-2009), that have reemerged in popularity with the target 18-49-year-old audience due to their availability on streaming platforms Netflix and Hulu respectively. Through the analysis of data from two audience surveys, one of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix and one of viewers of *ER* on Hulu, I argue that while nostalgia plays a significant role in their appeal, understanding *how* each series is engaged with by its viewers is critical in answering to the validity of the industry response to their popularity.

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Introduction

In May 2017, NBC entertainment chairman Bob Greenblatt announced to reporters that the network would be bringing back Must-See TV—the branding moniker given to the network’s Thursday night lineup in the 1990s which was both a critical and ratings success. NBC once again constructed a Thursday evening starting off with four comedies, and leading up to a drama set in Chicago for the ten o’clock hour, *Chicago Fire* (2012-present). This mirrored their 1990s strategy, which climaxed with the Chicago set medical drama *ER* (1994-2009), which held the 10pm slot for twelve of the thirteen years NBC’s Thursday nights had first been “Must-See.” NBC’s decision to bring back Must-See TV was made in the midst of a trend that was becoming too significant to ignore.

Due to its January 2015 arrival on the streaming service Netflix, the Must-See series *Friends* (1994-2004) had again become a phenomenon, remaining in the top five series watched on the service and becoming a hit with an all new generation. Netflix’s 2016 revival of *Full House* (1987-1995), *Fuller House* (2016-present), was just the first in an onslaught of television reboots and revivals that would soon proliferate. NBC brought back former Must-See staple *Will & Grace* (1998-2006, 2017-present); ABC brought back *Roseanne* (1988-1997, 2018); CBS followed with their own revival of *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998, 2018); and networks announced countless other reboots of series from the 90s. In January 2018, the streaming service Hulu licensed Must-See tent pole *ER*, which like *Friends* then amassed a coveted audience of 18-34-year-old viewers. Then, finally, in October 2018, WarnerMedia, the conglomerate whose television production arm owns both *Friends* and *ER*, announced that they would be launching their own streaming service in late 2019. What was old was not only new again but profitable again, and therefore WarnerMedia believed it had become more likely that subscriber fees could result in more revenue than licensing their series to existing streaming services could.

This thesis tethers Must-See TV’s ratings dominance and appeal from its inception in 1993 to its resurgence in popularity and appeal with streaming viewers today, while also answering to the validity of two television industry shifts that have resulted, in part, because of its reemergence. I begin by focusing

on these shifts, both the plethora of reboots and revivals on network television and the predicted implications of forthcoming studio-owned streaming services, before shifting focus towards the unending popularity of the Must-See sitcom *Friends*, and the rediscovery of the medical drama *ER*. Through close examination of what appealed to viewers about each series then and now and by providing an understanding as to why each series has experienced immense popularity with streaming audiences, I am able to suggest that the industry response to this trend has been somewhat misguided. Thus, I answer the following questions: why, in 2019, when there are unlimited choices of television content, do series from NBC's famous programming block keep finding and connecting with audiences? And what does an understanding of their popularity reveal about how viewers engage with television in the streaming era? Ultimately, I reveal first, that while nostalgia plays a significant role in the appeal of each series to its streaming audience, both *Friends* and *ER*, have also experienced a sustained popularity, priming them for the resurgence they experienced on streaming. Secondly, that the transition from traditional television syndication to streaming library content for each series is demonstrative of affordability's unique to the streaming model. Lastly, I show that understanding *how* viewers are engaging with a past series on a streaming platform not simply *how many* viewers are watching a past series, is arguably the most fitting approach to reconciling the two television industry shifts that have resulted because of past series' popularity with the key 18-49 year old audience on streaming platforms. Despite the lack of separation of current and past series on streaming platforms, television content is still falling into the categories of fringe time content, and primetime content for streaming viewers I surveyed.

Literature Review

This literature review contextualizes the history of NBC's Must See-TV and the industrial factors that contributed to its success and resurgence. I also introduce nostalgia as it relates to television as a factor at play in the reemergent popularity of Must-See TV series. The review also gives an overview of the two genres in play here: the multi-camera sitcom, which over the decades went from representing

families to replacement families, and the medical drama, which went from presenting doctors as saviors, to presenting doctors as flawed humans in situations more accurately reflecting the struggles of the medical profession. Understanding these genre-based developments is essential to understanding both *Friends*' and *ER*'s appeal to audiences.

A Brief History of NBC's Must-See TV

The phrase "Must-See TV" was coined by NBC's marketing team in 1993, just one year prior to the blockbuster 1994-1995 television season that would include the debut of both *Friends* and *ER*. In the decade prior NBC had established its Thursday nights as an echelon of quality, with sitcoms such as *Cheers* (1982-1993) and *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and dramas *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *LA Law* (1986-1994), dubbing their Thursdays "the best night of television on television" (Johnson 26). The phrase Must-See TV was a natural moniker for a Thursday evening that would become unbeatable. In the introduction to his 2012 book *Top of the Rock: Inside the Rise and Fall of Must-See TV*, Warren Littlefield, president of NBC from 1993-1998, boasted "At its height, NBC's Thursday prime-time schedule of Must See shows attracted a staggering seventy-five million viewers and generated more revenue for NBC than the other six nights of the week combined" (6). Must-See TV was so successful, that according to Amanda Lotz in "Must-See TV: NBC's Dominant Decades," NBC had the "ability to induce audiences to watch anything it scheduled on Thursday night" (269). Series like *The Single Guy* (1995-1997), *Caroline in the City* (1995-1999), *Boston Common* (1996-1997), and *Leap of Faith* (2002) each took their turn filling the 8:30-9:00pm time slot, and while such shows have not been as well remembered or regarded as Must-See's staples *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Friends*, *Frasier* (1993-2004), *Will & Grace*, and *ER*, the strength of the overall Thursday night lineup still allowed such second-stringers to place within in the top-twenty or even the top-ten shows on television. Essentially, viewers wouldn't dare change the channel when that night's episode of *Seinfeld* had concluded just because the lesser liked *Caroline and the City* was now on, because *ER* would be on after that, and they couldn't risk missing even a second of it.

NBC's dominance continued until the television landscape began to change. Lotz notes that "as competitors increased throughout the latter half of the 1990's, NBC, like the other Big Three broadcasters, struggled to find its place" (Lotz "Must-SeeTV" 271). Increased offerings on cable, and especially the increase in original programming on premium cable (most notably on HBO), meant that there was far more programming deemed "must-see" and NBC's viewership began to dwindle. Must-See TV came to an end when *Will & Grace* concluded its original run in May of 2006 and NBC renamed its Thursday nights "Comedy Night Done Right." *ER*, the longest running Must-See series ended its run in 2009 after fifteen seasons. While Must-See TV had ended, NBC's strategy of creating and producing programming in an effort to target upper-class, college-educated, and urban living 18-49 year olds remained in practice across both the broadcast and cable television landscapes.

The Narrowing of the 18-49 Demographic

Outside of the quality of its programming, NBC's Must-See TV success can be attributed to its decision to "more openly brand itself as the network of 'upscale,' college-educated, eighteen-to-forty-nine-year-old viewers" (Lotz "Must-See TV" 270). Ron Becker argues that "the interconnected growth of niche marketing and cable competition in the 1970's and 1980's drastically changed the context within which ABC, NBC, and CBS operated in the 1990's" (80). The 18-49 demographic had always been important to broadcast networks and its advertisers, but in the 90's networks "pursued this audience with a newfound tunnel vision" as advertisers defected to cable (Becker 92). The branding of Thursday nights as Must-See TV was inextricably linked to the focus on this newly narrow demographic, and as Catherine Johnson explains in her book *Branding Television*, not only do branding campaigns aid in attracting certain viewers, but they convince advertisers that they are capable of attracting the consumers who they want to reach (27). Appealing to everyone was no longer the goal; advertisers most wanted to reach this narrow segment of the 18-49 audience, and NBC complied. NBC's Must-See TV was not the first instance of narrowcasting. The networks had been dabbling in narrowcasting since the sixties and the

practice had been built into cable channels' map to success from the 1970s, but NBC was the first of the big-three broadcast networks to succeed with adopting the strategy in the post-cable television landscape.

Becker refers to this coveted audience as the SLUMPY demographic or "socially liberal, urban-minded professionals" (81) who were college educated, members of Generation X, who were at least upper-middle class with a significant amount of disposable income. This definition appears in Becker's book *Gay TV and Straight America*, in which he focuses on how targeting the SLUMPY audience opened up space for gay characters on television. Who this narrowcasting didn't open up space for were people of color; NBC "repeatedly told stories about young, affluent, white urbanites who lived in worlds curiously devoid of people different from themselves" (Lotz "Must-See TV" 271). This was a sharp contrast to the NBC's popular Thursday night programming of the 1980's which featured juggernaut *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) as well as *Gimme a Break!* (1981-1987) and *A Different World* (1987-1993). While *ER* had a considerably diverse cast, the sitcoms that aired in the two hours that preceded it were set in a New York City ostensibly void of anyone who wasn't white. Today more diverse viewers are targeted and more diverse stories are told than those reflected in the 1990s by NBC; that said programming still does not reflect the diversity of the American population. The 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report by UCLA revealed that while people of color account for 18.7 percent of the leading roles in scripted broadcast television programs, in order to reach proportionate representation, a twenty percent increase is needed. UCLA's report also showed that while women briefly reached parity in the 2011-2012 television season, in the years since there has been over a ten percent decrease of women in leading roles on scripted broadcast television programs (Hunt et al. 15).

Another notable and important outcome of NBC's laser focus on the SLUMPY demographic in the 1990's was how it changed the way networks reported television ratings. NBC announced that "starting in September 1993, it would downplay its household ratings and foreground the demographic performance of its shows in all public and industry analysis" (Becker 97). Demographic focused ratings, as well as the focus on a niche segment of the 18-49 year old audience, remain integral to the goals of broadcast networks, certain cable channels, premium cable networks, and streaming services of today's

television landscape. In an era where a mass audience for a scripted series is no longer a tenable goal, networks instead court advertisers who wish to reach a specific demographic.

From Off-Network Syndication to Streaming

In his book, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*, Derek Kompare links the expansion of off-network syndication to deregulation, market expansion, and new technologies that in turn caused a restructuring of the television industry. In the mid-80s cable channels captured audiences' attention by capitalizing on a nostalgia for the television programs they grew up watching. The model of presentation for series in syndication that emerged on cable during this time remains prevalent today:

Series are presented in daily blocks of two or more, encouraging hours of immersive viewing of one particular program. On some channels—most notably Viacom's Nick At Nite and TV land—programs are even periodically run in 'marathons': days-long blocks of continuous episodes of one series or similar series, in themed parts of the schedule. These devices, and others, constitute cables *distinctive repetition*, whereby repetition does not only reign; it is refined and focused, capitalizing on both the television heritage, and viewers' expectation of repetition (171).

The mid-80's also saw the advent of home video. However, unlike film, television did not find success initially with home video. The VCR was not as popular a mode of distributing television as it was for film “the VCR...functioned predominantly as a domestic extension of the film industry rather than a supplement to television...television had never until recently established the same relationship with home video” (Kompare “Publishing Flow” 337), thanks to the advent of DVDs. The VCR, however, had enabled viewers to tape and preserve episodes of their favorite shows, therefore freeing them from the network television schedule, because viewers were now able to record and save episodes on VHS tapes. The DVD “rejuvenated the home video industry, and...finally enabled television to achieve what film had by the mid-1980s, namely, a viable direct-to-consumer market for its programming” (Kompare “Publishing Flow” 337). DVD box sets were compact and convenient, and enabled the first widespread

instances of binge-watching. However, you only need to buy a box set of your favorite series on DVD once, and then it is yours, leaving the studios that produced the series with no opportunity for further profit (outside of other merchandising). According to Kompare, “Television’s primary goal is selling potential audiences to advertisers, not selling products to consumers” (“Publishing Flow” 337); therefore, licensing to syndication, not DVD sales, remained the bigger goal.

Netflix’s introduction of its video-on-demand (aka streaming) service in 2007 served as the first major disruption to off-network syndication and DVD sales. In her book *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, Amanda Lotz writes that “By 2015 it was clear that internet-distributed television was crystalizing as its own sector of the television industry” and notes how streaming services like Netflix lend themselves to the viewing of scripted series (159). Services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video have become a form of syndication on-demand, and their catalogs of licensed content play as much of a role in their appeal as the original content distributed through each service. In an update to his previously published work on Reruns, “Reruns 2.0: Revising Repetition for Multiplatform Television Distribution,” Kompare explains that, “Online episodes are not so much reruns, a time-bound word tracing a linear chronology, as files.” He argues that “there is a growing embrace of the database, rather than the schedule as the key principle of organizing the works” (pp. 81-82). Instead of waiting for a favorite episode to come up in a cable syndicator’s schedule, fans now can watch any episode they want at any time. They can even structure their own ‘marathon.’ Kompare also notes, that past series are not separated from more current series on streaming platforms; they are treated equally as content, and therefore the playing field is leveled between current and past series as they vie for viewers. More similar to the traditional second-run syndication model than the one-time purchase of a DVD box set, the content library model allows both streaming services and studios to capitalize off of past series. Streaming services do so through subscription fees accumulated from viewers who remain subscribed to their service because of the presence of their favorite series in the service’s content library, and studios make money through the licensing fees they collect from streaming services who hope to continue housing popular past or current series. The vertical integration of streaming services by studios like WarnerMedia and Disney

therefore are likely to cause a significant disruption to the content libraries of current streaming services. Licensors, now fully aware of their content's appeal and profit potential, may forgo licensing to services like Netflix and Hulu to attract consumers to their own new streaming services and collect subscription fees for themselves.

Television & Nostalgia

Feelings of nostalgia seem to be one of the driving forces of this renewed focus on reboots, revivals, and reframed reruns. Television and nostalgia have historically been intertwined in various ways. First, television that depicts the past has been widely appealing to audiences; secondly, audiences may feel nostalgia for and a deep connection with television related to their own personal past. For the purposes of this thesis, focus will be paid to the latter. In her book *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, scholar Amy Holdsworth discusses how the idea of *home* is central to both nostalgia and television. The Greek root of nostalgia, *nòstos* means "to return home," and television is a medium that enters people's homes. Television has become central to domestic life. Holdsworth writes that if nostalgia is a desire to be home then "it is this desire that resonates with television's embeddedness in domestic space, the role that television and television memories play in our personal histories, and the way our personal histories are reflected in television" (15). In "Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series" scholars Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz also discuss television's connection with the home, explaining that for audiences the appeal of the act of watching a television show is one of ritual. They explain that "nostalgia is mainly provoked by missing everyday life rituals" and therefore when a television series ends, viewers understandably long for the days when they would sit down to watch a new episode, anticipate the next episode, and find community with others who watched the series as well (133). Streaming platforms allow for a reenactment of something akin to the first two of these.

In the context of cable-driven expansion of the syndication market in the 80s, John Weispenning's "Cultural Functions of Reruns: Time, Memory, and Television" argues that nostalgia is central to the appeal of these reruns. Viewers were motivated to watch reruns because they reminded

them of when they were younger and experienced the series for the first time. Weispfenning also argues that reruns are an ideal object of nostalgia because of their accessibility, stating “the availability of rerun programming on several channels means this collective memory exists in a more visible and retrievable form than an old photo album or home movie” (173). The two-series discussed in this thesis, *Friends* and *ER*, evoke this kind of nostalgia for their streaming viewers who might hold memories of viewing the series in their youth and because each series originally aired during a period of these viewers’ lifetimes that they may perceive as simpler.

The Development of the Multi-Camera Sitcom Family

The genre specificity of the two main series discussed here speaks to the ways in which audiences respond, as their cultural, formal, and ideological positions help position viewers. David Marc writes in his 1989 book *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, that “the situation comedy has proven to be the most durable of all commercial television genres” having “remained a consistent and ubiquitous feature of prime-time network schedules since the premiere of Mary Kay and Johnny in 1947” (11). The majority of sitcoms culturally and critically appreciated today are single-camera, meaning they are filmed more like a movie and not in front of a live-studio audience. In contrast, multi-camera sitcoms are staged plays, on a stage in front of an audience, with four cameras capturing each scene potentially playing out on an artificial-looking set (VanDerWerff “The Classic American Sitcom” par. 18). However, every year since the 1982-1983 television season, American broadcast television’s number one comedy has been a multi-camera sitcom. Television’s number one comedy from 1982-1983 was *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) which featured a laugh track, but was filmed in single-camera style. After *M*A*S*H*, multi-camera’s *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Roseanne* (1988-1997) *Cheers* (1982-1993) *Home Improvement* (1991-1999) *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) and *Friends* each took their turn as television’s number one comedy. *The Big Bang Theory* currently holds the title and was predated by *Two and a Half Men*; despite being ratings successes, these shows have not attracted the audiences that networks have desperately craved

since Must See TV. Both series aired on CBS, whose demographic tends to skew significantly older; its median viewer age is 56.1, the oldest of all the networks (Molloy par. 4).

Scholar Saul Austerlitz declares that “In the history of the form, perhaps no series so thoroughly embodies the essence of the sitcom’s promise, and its appeal, as *Friends*” (260). In its classic form, Austerlitz explains, the sitcom revolved around family. Always in a domestic setting, fathers, mothers, and children of the earliest sitcoms faced thirty-minutes, laugh-tracked problems relatable to the “all-American family.” Popular series of the 50s and 60s like *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) all followed this pattern. After actual families came *workplace* families, with series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Taxi* (1978-1983), *Night Court* (1984-1992) and *Cheers*. Then with the premiere of *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) in 1985, *Seinfeld* in 1989 and both *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Friends* in 1994 came the *replacement* family. The characters of replacement family sitcoms choose to hang out with each other out of no strict obligation, simply because they enjoy each other's company.

Despite the ever-glaring question of why these characters always have time for each other in the middle of a weekday and are seemingly never at work, the replacement family joined actual families and workplace families under the durable sitcom umbrella. Austerlitz argues that *Friends* was the savviest about “its allure for viewers starved for connection with a replacement family” (260). *Friends*, Austerlitz argues, was the last sitcom before targeting niche audiences became the norm, that made a concerted effort to appeal to a mass audience and was successful in doing so. The allure of the replacement family created by the six central characters of *Friends* is central to its appeal with multi-generations of viewers, and will be further explored in chapter two.

The Development of the Medical Drama

Each generation of television has one or more medical dramas of its own. In the introduction to his book *Playing Doctor: Television Storytelling & Medical Power*, Joseph Turrow notes that since commercial television’s beginning in the late 40’s through the fall of 2009, 133 medical dramas, or

comedy series centering on doctors, aired in prime time on American television (11). Television's early doctors were, as Elliot Tapper explains in "Doctors on Display: The Evolution of Televisions Doctors," "infallible supermen with smoldering good looks and impeccable bedside manner" (Tapper 393). *Medic* (1954-1956) and *Dr. Kildare* (1961-1966) both featured infallible protagonists, with *Dr. Kildare* introducing another element that would become central to many medical dramas: the internship. Viewers met Dr. Kildare as an intern and thus followed him as he was "coming of age, becoming confident, becoming competent" (Tapper 394). Popular medical dramas that came later including *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), *ER*, and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present) would too place interns or newer doctors at the center of their stories.

Beginning in the 80s, medical series embraced more elements of melodrama, revolving around doctors' personal and professional struggles, resulting in more realistic outcomes in the medical plotlines. *St. Elsewhere* was unlike any medical drama that had preceded it, for the simple fact that patients died. The handsome doctors were not saviors; not only did patients die but they died because a doctor or nurse made a fatal error, misdiagnosis, or simply because as in real life, not everyone could be cured. Not only did the patients suffer, but the doctors and nurses did as well. Their marriages fell apart; they dealt with depression; the people closest to them died; and even the doctors themselves at times died. However, as Tapper explains, "though it was thematically dark, there was always an upside; something always happened to prove that these doctors and their medicine were worthwhile. [*St. Elsewhere*] was the first show to have as main characters a cancer survivor, a successful black doctor and a recovered drug addict," therefore humanizing the once infallible television doctor, making them even more accessible and appealing to viewers (Tapper 396).

Like on *St. Elsewhere*, *ER*'s doctors were flawed and human, but they blended that with the savior role of television's earliest doctors. In trauma scenes they were action heroes. As television critics Alan Sepinwall and Matt Zoller Seitz explain, *ER* "put the formula on fast-forward, borrowing its pace and production values from summer blockbusters" (192). But despite heroic measures, patients on *ER* didn't always survive, confronting viewers over and over again with the reality that often people die

despite every best effort. *ER* also presented viewers with the harsh realities of working in America's broken health-care system; Tapper explains, "what we saw were doctors who found their jobs draining, even soul sapping." He goes on to say, "the hospital became inhospitable" and "the medical space became suffused with tension, anger and hostility" (397). *ER*'s unabashedly realistic depiction of all that came with working in an emergency department of a big city hospital combined with its action movie style and pacing were not only the reasons for its immense popularity during its original run, but I will argue are some of the reasons it connects with streaming era audiences of today.

Methodology

To approach the task of answering the questions, "Why, in 2019, when there are seemingly unlimited choices of television content, do series from NBC's infamous programming block keep finding and connecting with audiences?" and "What does an understanding of their popularity reveal about how viewers engage with television in the streaming era?" whose answers would in-turn speak to the validity of the two responses by the television industry to past series streaming popularity, I needed to employ the use of multiple methodologies. Throughout this thesis, industrial analysis, cultural analysis, narrative and genre analysis, and aesthetic analysis are applied when necessary to either contextualize the trend from which this thesis stems, or explain the appeal of *Friends* and *ER* to audiences both then and now.

To augment my research, I also conducted an audience study, creating and administering two online surveys, one of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix, and one of viewers of *ER* on Hulu. Respondents who identified themselves as either or both fans of *ER* and *Friends*, having watched the series on the streaming platforms of which they are currently available, and were 18 years of age and older were invited to participate in the survey. Participants could choose to skip any of the questions on each survey, with no questions requiring an answer. The surveys were created using Qualtrics and the links to each survey were distributed via social media sites Twitter and Facebook, on my personal accounts with an request of those who saw the surveys to share my tweets or posts about them with their network of followers in order to further distribute the surveys outside of my own personal network. There were 257

recorded responses for the *Friends* on Netflix survey, and 67 recorded responses for the *ER* on Hulu survey, resulting in a total sample size of 321. As I was hoping to receive responses from Millennial and Generation Z viewers of each series, social media appeared the most apt way to do so, however this also resulted in my sample being skewed towards those generational age groups only, with much fewer responses from viewers 40 and older. In terms of demographics, besides age, I also asked respondents to identify their gender. The sample of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix and *ER* on Hulu as well as the combined sample skewed overwhelmingly female. It is unclear whether the gender makeup of my sample is reflective of the viewership of the series' on their respective platforms, because little, if any, demographic information has been shared publicly. Each chapter will address the potential bias of a majority female sample as it pertains to analysis.

The two surveys featured similar questions regarding how they first watched and/or discovered the series and how they watch the series now. Each concluded with a question that asked participants to write a few sentences (or more) about why they loved the series in question. Therefore, the surveys provided not only quantitative, but qualitative data for analysis. Both surveys also featured the same or similar questions regarding whether respondents do currently or have ever subscribed to cable, what streaming services they currently subscribe to, and if a series move to a new streaming service would motivate them to subscribe to that service. Such questions were included in hopes of determining whether assumptions surrounding the trend of reboots and revivals on network television and the potential disruption of upcoming streaming services were correct.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 focuses on the array of television reboots and revivals that have appeared over the several years, as well as the implications of forthcoming streaming services announced, arguably as direct results of past series gaining newfound popularity through streaming. This will provide a larger industrial context for the shows discussed in the following two chapters. This chapter examines what *New York Times* critic Michael M. Grynbaum claimed in 2016 about networks placing a big bet on nostalgia, as

viewers “bored with the latest network offerings” had been streaming past series instead (par.15). After revivals of NBC’s Must-See staple *Will & Grace* and ABC’s *Roseanne* produced solid ratings, a plethora of series revivals or reboots were suddenly either in “talks” or “development” at every major broadcast network. Hopes seemed to be high that that bringing back past series would in turn bring back viewers networks had lost to streaming services. The chapter then shifts focus to WarnerMedia, Disney, and Apple, each of whom will launch their own streaming service in late 2019. Special attention is paid towards WarnerMedia’s upcoming service HBO Max, owner of both *Friends* and *ER*. *Variety*’s Matt Donnelly reported in October 2018 that WarnerMedia hoped “the long-term profits from a sizable subscription venture will be greater than the upside the studio has traditionally harvested through syndication sales and international licensing” (par. 11-12). Within this chapter I will argue that individual focus on the appeal of each series to streaming viewers proves more applicable in anticipating and evaluating responses by the television industry to the larger trend of past series popularity on streaming platforms. The following two chapters on *Friends*, and *ER* then demonstrate why.

Chapter 2 focuses on the phenomenal success WarnerMedia’s *Friends* has found on Netflix since its arrival on the streaming service in January 2015. By tracing the show’s initial network success through its resurgence on Netflix and a via a lens of audience surveys, I will explore just why this 1990s staple seems to have found 21st century staying power, so much so that following viewer outrage over a feared lapsing series license, Netflix reportedly paid \$100 million dollars to WarnerMedia to continue licensing the series until the end of 2019 (Lee par. 2). This continued and ever-growing prominence within popular culture has been met with an emphatic “why?” by many critics. *New York Magazine*’s Adam Sternbergh calls the show an “iconic a relic of the 1990’s” that “was not only born of that era but may, in hindsight, embody it more completely than any other TV show” (par. 2-3). After the show’s release on Netflix, articles accused *Friends* of being cruel, homophobic, fat phobic, reflective of toxically masculine, and antifeminist, leaving many bewildered as to why *Friends* is so appealing to Millennials and Generation Z. The chapter employs both narrative and audience analysis to answer to why audiences are still drawn to the series and how the role it serves in viewers lives relates to how they watch it.

The third and final chapter of this thesis focuses on *ER*, contextualizing its success then and its success now by using genre analysis to examine the series' elements that made it a must-watch for viewers then and fitting watch for viewers now, as well as using audience analysis to explore how viewers engage with the series in contrast to how viewers are engaging with *Friends*.). *ER* was not only Must-See TV's biggest hit and NBC's biggest hit, but it was also the first series to air in the ten o'clock time slot to place in the Nielsen top ten, landing in the top five for nine of its fifteen seasons and raking number one for three (Lotz 270). Notably, in contrast to *Friends* entry into the streaming landscape, *ER*'s arrival and subsequent popularity on Hulu were not met with bewilderment but approval and celebration by critics like *Vox*'s Emily Todd VanDerWerff who declared its arrival an *event* and boasted that its "lightning-quick storytelling and propulsive filmmaking" make *ER* the "perfect fit for the 'just one more episode' streaming television era" (VanDerWerff par. 3).

Conclusion

Despite the difference in genre, their presence in public consciousness prior to their arrival on streaming, and the streaming platform on which they are available, similarities emerge between the two shows that further contextualize the impact of nostalgia and streaming services impact on each series' reemergence in popularity, and in-turn answer to the validity of the industry shifts examined in the first chapter. This introduction has served as an overview of the knowledge which forms the foundation of this thesis. Throughout the following three chapters, the literature examined about NBC's Must-See TV, the programming blocks target demographic, the transition from syndication to streaming for past series, the relationship between television and nostalgia, and the multi-camera sitcom, and medical drama genres will be further developed and expanded upon as they serve towards this thesis's ultimate goal--to understand the reemergent popularity of these series and whether the industry response to their popularity was advantageous.

Chapter 1: The One With All the Reboots and All the New Streaming Services

The television news website *TVLine* has been keeping a list of all the reboots and revivals in development for the 2019-2020 television season. The current total is 143 (Iannuci par.1). The 2019-2020 television season will also see the arrival of three new streaming services, two of which—Disney’s Disney+ (Disney Plus) and WarnerMedia’s HBO Max—are the first to be *studio-owned*, as opposed to Netflix, Amazon Prime Instant Video, and Hulu, all of which began as content libraries and later expanded into entities producing their own original programming. These seemingly unrelated shifts in the television industry are, I argue, two reactions to the same trend toward nostalgia. Nostalgia TV, which had previously been sectioned off into programming blocks on cable and broadcast networks like MeTV and Nick at Nite, is now commanding the attention of the key 18-49-year-old demographic, thanks to streaming.

Networks seem to have recognized the significant viewership of past television series on streaming platforms and responded by rebooting or reviving everything they possibly could in the hopes of winning back the viewers they had lost. In a 2016 *New York Times* piece, Michael M. Grynbaum observed that this influx of reboots and revivals was “a product of—and hedge against—the rise of Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video, where cord-cutting viewers are rediscovering shows whose syndication days on cable and broadcast networks are long over” (par. 15). Audiences do seem to be nostalgic for and drawn to TV of the past; however, despite the efforts to capitalize upon this nostalgia traditional TV continues to face an unrelenting decline. Nielsen reported in 2019 that in the last two years, broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox) lost a quarter of their 18-49 year old audience, and thirty-three million adults were expected to cancel their cable subscriptions in 2018 (Crupi par. 2-3; Spangler par. 2). Therefore, this strategy, intended as a hedge against streaming services, appears to be largely ineffective on a macro level.

Recent business decisions imply that Disney and Warner Bros., licensors of much of the non-original and nostalgic content attracting large and valuable audiences to streaming services, seem to have

decided that subscription fees might just be a bigger financial gain than licensing in the long-run (Donnelly par. 11-12). While Disney's vast content library (which was only made greater by their acquisition of 21st Century Fox's film and TV assets in the spring of 2019) has led to Disney+'s positioning as the top competitor in what trade presses have begun to refer to as the upcoming "streaming wars," in specific regard to the streaming television landscape the Warner Bros. series *Friends* has been at the forefront of discussion. The series has consistently ranked as one of the top three series watched on Netflix since its debut on the service in January 2015 (Adalian par. 3; Molla par. 3). *Friends*' success on Netflix, however, was not an isolated incident of streaming success for Warner Bros. *ER* also experienced a new wave of popularity following its streaming debut on Hulu. What will it mean for streaming services like Hulu and Netflix if and when heavy-hitters like *ER* and *Friends* defect to a different service?

This chapter explores the ways in which accessibility and nostalgia are intertwined in this recent influx of network reboots and revivals and speaks to the upcoming launches of WarnerMedia's and Disney's streaming services. Exploring the trade press's address of these two phenomena through a lens of survey data I collected from viewers of *Friends* on Netflix and *ER* on Hulu, this chapter examines assumptions and subsequent speculation around the recent trend of reboots and revivals and the potential disruption to the streaming television landscape that industry analysts and trade presses have predicted upcoming streaming services will cause. Ultimately, I argue that because the streaming model positions past television series as equals amongst current television series and because viewers are spending more of their time watching past series than newer offerings, past series are now positioned as relevant to the television landscape unlike how they were in traditional syndication; and this new relevance has resulted in two reactionary industry shifts. This reaction has arguably been misguided, or at least simplistic, with attention paid only to the broad trend in nostalgia-related programming and not focused more directly on specifics of the series themselves.

Reboots & Revivals

The pervasiveness of reboots is an entirely new phenomenon for television, in contrast to the film industry which has seen repeats and remakes of the same stories since its earliest days. In an introduction to a special reboot issue of *Television & New Media*, Kathleen Loock argues that televisual afterlives of series have taken three forms: “*derivative* (reboot, spin-off), *repetitive* (rerun), and *renewed* (reunion show, revival)” (302). Reruns and the business of reruns (syndication) have been the most common ways television series have achieved a cultural afterlife. However, because of the fin-syn regulation of the 1970s-early 1990s, networks that aired a series during its original broadcast run commonly did not reap any profits from syndication. Instead, studios that produced them (for instance Warner Bros. Television) did. With no investment in future syndication dollars, networks historically ordered spin-offs of hit series to continue to capitalize on a series’ success. Because audiences were already familiar with the characters, spinoffs possessed a built-in appeal. This trend was particularly popular during the height of the fin-syn era. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, for instance, had three spin-offs: *Rhoda* (1974-1978), *Phyllis* (1975-1977), and *Lou Grant* (1977-1982). *All in the Family* (1971-1979) had seven, including *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), *Maude* (1972-1978) and spinoffs of its spinoffs. Notably, *Fraiser*, a spin-off of the 80s era NBC Thursday night powerhouse *Cheers*, ran for eleven successful seasons on NBC during the Must-See TV era.

Loock also explores reunion shows, which proliferated at a time, arguably similar to the present, when nostalgia was having a profound effect on the television landscape. She points out that “Starting in the mid-1970s, in the wake of growing interest in television heritage, popular rerun series like *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC, 1954-1960), *Gilligan’s Island* (CBS, 1964-1967) and *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) brought together original cast members for TV-movie reunions” (Loock pp. 303-304). At the same time, this nostalgia manifested itself in the creation of 50s-set sitcom *Happy Days* (1974-1984) and its spin-off *Laverne & Shirley* (1976-1983), the successes of which anchored ABC’s rise in the mid-1970s. Today, however, networks are eschewing reunion specials in favor of reboots and revivals being

ordered to series. The majority of the series that have been rebooted or revived recently, shows like *Will & Grace*, *Murphy Brown*, *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Roswell* (1999-2002), and *Roseanne*, either fully or partially aired during the 90s, echoing the boom in 50s nostalgia on television in the 70s. Notably, as data explored in the following chapters on *Friends* and *ER* reveals, this hunger for television programs of the 90s may be due, at least in part, to the fact they aired during the key demographics' childhood.

This past fall, thirteen new episodes of *Murphy Brown* aired on CBS; NBC's *Will & Grace* began its second revival season and tenth overall; ABC debuted *The Conners* (2018-present), the spin-off which took the place of the network's *Roseanne* revival after the network dismissed its star; and the CW rebooted late 90s WB network series *Charmed* and *Roswell*. In the wake of such series revivals, *New York Times* critic James Poniewozik wrote that "looking at the 2018-2019 TV schedule is like flipping the dials on a time machine" ("This Fall" par. 10). This past season of television was not the first one that had felt like this, however.

In May 2016, after *Friends* had re-emerged in popularity due to its recent arrival to Netflix, and the platform had found success with *Fuller House*, a reboot of the family sitcom *Full House* that February, networks annual upfront presentations to television advertisers were nostalgia focused. In an article about that years upfronts, where networks present their new series to advertisers, *New York Times'* Michael M. Grynbaum wrote that the television industry was facing "an uncertain, uncharted future" and "placing a big bet on the past" because streaming had made past series hits again (Grynbaum par 1).

Streaming's role in engendering the trend of reboots and revivals is indelible, not only because it the inclusion of past series on streaming platforms led to a renewed popularity of nostalgia shows in the first place, but because network's decline in 18-49-year-old viewership has been attributed to defections to the same streaming platforms. In a 2018 article for *Variety*, Todd Spangler reported the results of a study which revealed that in 2018, the number of consumers who had canceled their cable in favor of only subscribing to streaming services was expected to climb from 24.9 million to 33 million, a 32.8% increase ("Cord-Cutting" par. 2). In my survey conducted of streaming viewers of *Friends* and *ER*, over 60 percent of the combined sample said that they did not currently subscribe to cable, whereas over 78 percent said

they had in the past subscribed to cable. Compared to the 39 percent of the combined sample that said that they did currently subscribe to cable, that is an almost 40 percent drop (See Tables 1 and 2).

Viewers who have abandoned networks and cable in favor of streaming television have been well poised to discover or rediscover series from television's past, and not just watch them once, but over and over again. Derek Kompare attributes past series' discovery and popularity on streaming services not only to the fact that they are more easily accessible than ever before, but also to the fact that they are also spatially connected through the service's interface to newer offerings, enabling these older shows to have the same chance of enticing a viewer as a more recent program. Ryan Lizardi echoes Kompare in "The Nostalgic Revolution Will Be Televised," discussing how streaming platforms' presentation of content has enabled a new and more pervasive form of nostalgia. He writes, "the consumer of televisual nostalgic media is presented with a flattened distinction of the past and the present. Texts and brands beloved from the past are presented as persistently relevant and activate a yearning for an eternal return of the same" (42). Netflix's homepage is even designed to encourage viewers to return to the same, with categories entitled "Watch It Again," and "If You Liked..." or "Because You Watched..." showing up for every user. A return to the same is also encouraged by the inherent problem of peak-TV, the moniker often assigned to the current television era due to the oversaturation of content. With an intimidating amount of new television series being produced each year across channels and platforms, many have argued that overwhelmed viewers are instead drawn towards the comfort of series they're already familiar with. "With about 400 scripted shows airing last year alone, built-in name recognition can offer a crucial edge with audiences overwhelmed by new choices" therefore familiarity and producing more of the same have arguably become key network strategies (Grynbaum par. 5).

Effects of this move toward familiarity have taken many forms. Loock explains that the accessibility of past series, as well as the frequency and possibility of series being revived or rebooted, means that a series cancellation or a series finale no longer means textual death. Amidst this ongoing trend, past series that have reemerged in popularity have generated new meanings as they've connected with an audience of a new generation, and series that have met a premature end have been given the

chance to continue elsewhere. For instance, NBC picked up *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-present), which had been canceled by Fox in 2018 after five seasons. This hope of rebirth has not only exists with recently canceled series, but series canceled several years or even decades prior. Netflix revived *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013, 2018-2019) in 2013, seven years after its cancellation by Fox, and Showtime brought back cult-favorite *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) twenty-six years after the cult series had been canceled by ABC. Both moves were met by positive reactions from critics and fans; however, television's recent trend toward familiarity has not received such consistent praise.

Critics have pushed back against the influx of reboots and revivals and the "movie-fication" of the television industry, worried that, as often seems to be the case at the motion picture box office, everything will be either a revival, remake, or an adaptation of a pre-sold product. *Slash Film* writer Kelsey Down's 2017 article "This is Why We Keep Reviving Dead TV Shows (And Why We Need To Stop)" acknowledges fan interest and fervor surrounding revivals and reboots of beloved television series, while simultaneously denouncing them, asking "Are we gluttons for punishment, or do we just not know when to stop?" (Down par. 4). She, like many others before her, also notes that as a result of the success of reboots, producers and networks are deciding against original content in favor of bringing back past series. This criticism, however, goes unacknowledged by networks, who are trying to find a way to stay both relevant and profitable as more and more consumers are opting to cut-cable, in favor of streaming television.

While revivals of past series with their original casts intact have earned solid ratings, and some reboots have fared well in the context of today's television landscape, overall the trend of reboots and revivals has not led to the restoration of the key audience demographic or sheer numbers needed for broadcast networks to be in true competition with the streaming services that contributed to the sharp decline in broadcast television audiences in the first place. In September 2017, the premiere episode of the *Will & Grace* revival, airing in the same 9pm Thursday time-slot it had during the heyday of Must-See TV, attracted 10.2 million Live+Same Day viewers and a 3.0 Nielsen rating in 18-49-year-old demographic (Andreeva "Will & Grace" par. 2). As the series progressed into its second revival season

and the novelty of its return had worn off, its ratings fell to just slightly above the average audience NBC's Thursday night line-up presently attracts, which notably in the context of today's television landscape means it still remains a hit. ABC's revival of *Roseanne*, which premiered in March 2018, garnered ratings that *The Hollywood Reporter* rightly referred to as "unbelievable." Its one-hour premiere episode attracted 18.1 million viewers and a 5.1 Nielsen rating in the key 18-49 demo (O'Connell par. 3) and its ratings remained strong from then on, even despite the controversy surrounding series star Roseanne Barr. Its spin-off *The Conners*, created after Barr's firing, has not received ratings as unbelievable as its progenitor, but good enough to warrant a season two renewal, with 6.63 million viewers tuning in for its season finale (Patten par. 4). CBS's revival of *Murphy Brown*, however, underperformed expectations, attracting 6.2 million viewers and a 0.9 in the 18-49 demo (Goldberg par. 3) and failing to earn a second season. While an audience of 6.2 million on any other network is considered a hit, for CBS whose other multi-camera comedies including *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) and *Mom* (2013-present) averaged audiences of 13.2 million and 7.9 million viewers respectively during the same season, 6.2 million was not enough (Kimball et al. "Mom" par. 4, Kimball et al. "The Big Bang Theory" par. 3). As for reboots, the CW's *Charmed* and *Roswell, New Mexico* did not prove to be ratings hits, but nonetheless performed well enough by the networks standards for both to be renewed for second seasons. Regardless of any ratings successes reboots and revivals have had for the networks, buying into viewers' nostalgia has not been able to reverse the trend they had been hoping to address: the exodus of their 18-49-year-old viewers. In January 2019 Nielsen revealed that the big four networks, ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox, had lost a quarter their 18-49-year-old viewers in the previous two years, resulting in a loss of two whole ratings points (Crupi par. 2-3). While revivals of *Roseanne* and *Will & Grace* each attracted impressive 18-49-year-old demo ratings, those isolated successes were not enough to curb the data in the networks' favor. Despite audiences attraction towards nostalgia and the familiar, rebooting and reviving past series is not the most capitalizing response to audiences' interest. Studios launching their own streaming services to house their content instead of licensing to existing platforms has however, been presented as an advantageous response.

Upcoming Streaming Services

The three biggest streaming services, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Instant Video, have all successfully segued into producing popular and critically acclaimed original content in recent years, but it is important to remember how much their libraries of licensed content have played a part in their appeal to subscribers. In “Push, Pull, Rerun: Television Reruns and Streaming Media,” scholar Anne Gilbert explains that “old television programming was vital to the growth and development of streaming services, as content libraries helped services minimize subscriber churn and offset the risk of expensive, original productions by appealing to viewer interest in familiar programming” (7). When streaming services began to pursue creators for original content, they did not forget about the appeal of licensed content to their viewers. NBC’s Must-See TV series have been associated with the biggest news-making content deals of recent years. After Netflix found immediate success licensing *Friends* in January 2015, Hulu made headlines three months later with a 160 million dollar/\$875,000 per episode deal to stream *Seinfeld* (Littleton par. 2). Hulu then snagged the exclusive rights to Must-See medical drama *ER* in 2018 for an undisclosed amount, and in December of that same year Netflix agreed to pay 100 million dollars to Warner Bros. to continue streaming *Friends* on their service for only the next year. The new deal was reported to be three times what they had originally paid and speaks highly to the appeal and importance of licensed content to streaming viewers and their importance to streaming services in general (Flint and Sharma par.13).

A 2018 study by 7Park Data found that 80 percent of the content viewed on Netflix is licensed programming, not original (Spangler “*Stranger Things*”par. 2). In April 2019, data compiled by Nielsen for the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that as of October 2018 legacy content made up 72% of the time subscribers spent watching Netflix, and that eight of the top ten series watched on the service were *licensed* (Flint and Sharma par. 6-8). *Friends* came in second in terms of minutes watched, behind fellow NBC series *The Office*; the only two originals that made the list were *Orange is the New Black* and *Ozark*. The same data showed that the licensed content of the three companies who plan to launch their own new

streaming services--Disney, WarnerMedia, and NBCUniversal--account for nearly 40% of overall viewing on Netflix (Flint and Sharma par. 6). The recent rush of such studios to forego the limitations of licensing fees and get into the streaming business can arguably be connected to both the aforementioned rise of consumers cutting-cable and the rise in profits from digital media sales. In reference to the latter, as DVD and Blu-ray sales have declined rapidly in the past five years, digital media sales have risen just as quickly. In 2018, Americans spent only 5.8 billion on DVD's and Blu-rays , an all-time low and in significant contrast to their all-time high of 17.5 billion on digital media that same year (Knight par. 4). With traditional profit streams for television legacy content, syndication and DVD sales, fading, media conglomerates are taking new risks.

When AT&T-owned WarnerMedia announced plans for its own streaming service in November 2018, *Variety's* Matt Donnelly wrote:

WarnerMedia is taking a gamble with the decision to forgo some traditional revenue from licensing TV shows and movies to outside buyers in favor of keeping all of that content in-house to make for a compelling subscription-based offering. The hope is that the long-term profits from a sizable subscription venture will be greater than the upside the studio has traditionally harvested through syndication sales and international licensing. (par. 11-12)

Despite the possible impact of WarnerMedia's new streaming service HBO Max on the current streaming landscape, even more attention has been paid to Disney's service Disney+, with trade writers like *The Hollywood Reporter's* Matt Bond speculating that Disney+ could serve as Netflix's first real competitor and therefore disrupter. In December 2018 Bond wrote that "the economics going forward favor Disney, which can more easily scale its shows and movies across the entertainment ecosystem while Netflix spends wildly to basically populate its own platform" (par. 6). An array of other entertainment journalists have echoed this claim. Due to its recent acquisition of Fox, Disney's content dwarfs most of the competition, and because of their long history of locking away content in the metaphorical vault to stoke anticipation, the instant access provided by Disney+ will undoubtedly have appeal. All of that said, WarnerMedia's potential as a disrupter should not be underestimated.

Analytics firm Jumpshot compiled a list Netflix's twenty most viewed shows via online browsers (Molla par.1). Similar to the Nielsen analysis published in the *The Wall Street Journal*, Jumpshot found that Warner Bros.' *Friends* came in second. Of the thirteen series on the list that are owned by someone other than Netflix, and therefore could be taken away from the service, a full 46.15 percent were owned by WarnerMedia. Along with *Friends*, *Supernatural* (2005-present), *Shameless* (2011-present), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), and *The Flash* (2014-present) were among the WarnerMedia series most viewed on Netflix (Molla par. 5). Factor in the success of WarnerMedia series like *ER* streaming on services other than Netflix, and remembering that they also own HBO, WarnerMedia's streaming service, HBO Max, appears to have real potential of being a vital disruptor to Netflix and the streaming landscape in general.

The popular entertainment press has presented the threat of new streaming services in general and Netflix in particular losing legacy content as a full-on crisis. Stories like *Deadline's*, "What Would Netflix Do Without *Friends*?" and *Vox's* "Netflix's Upcoming Content Crisis in One Chart" flooded online media in early 2019. Global technology research company Morning Consult surveyed Netflix viewers, asking them if they would cancel their Netflix subscription if popular titles left the service. A full 49 percent of subscribers aged 18-29 said they would cancel their subscription if *Friends*, *The Office*, and Marvel movies and other Disney series and films were removed from the service (Shevenock par. 4). *Friends'* removal alone was enough for 17 percent to say they would cancel their subscriptions to Netflix.

In contrast to advertiser-based revenue on network and much of cable television, subscription fees serve as the primary source of revenue for streaming services. While many surveyed by Morning Consult responded that yes, they would cancel Netflix if certain content disappeared, consumers tend to subscribe to more than one streaming service. 100 percent of my survey sample subscribed to at least two services and nearly 75 percent subscribed to at least 3 (See Table 3). The most common services identified were Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Instant Video. While it is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of my survey sample (88.9 percent) identified themselves as female, and there are often differences

between men and women in consumer behavior, in regards to streaming services there is an indication that their habits do not differentiate. A 2014 article by *AdWeek* about women's television viewing habits reveals that "millennial women don't deviate from the mean in another important respect: They are extremely active on non-TV platforms" and not only was the overwhelming majority of my survey sample female, but an overwhelming majority (86.72 percent) was also aged 35 or younger and therefore, millennials (Thielman par. 19).

An argument could be made that because viewers already subscribe to multiple services that simply adding one more to the list, while remaining subscribed to the others, seems realistic. Each service would continue collecting subscription fees even though viewers might split their time between more services. Unlike advertiser-driven models, it simply does not matter how much time is spent watching a given service. With this possibility of increased streaming subscriptions comes the real fear that combined streaming subscriptions, especially as services hike their fees, could become just as expensive as the cable subscriptions consumers abandoned.

In a January 2019 *Vanity Fair* article entitled "The Ever-Increasing Cost of Streaming," Joy Press added up the cost of subscribing to all the streaming services currently available, taking into account each service's different subscription levels. She found that the monthly cost of doing so would fall between \$58 and \$105, as compared to a cable-subscription average of \$100 per month (par. 3). Adding in the cost of subscribing to upcoming streaming services, including Disney+, Apple TV Plus, HBO Max, and NBCUniversal, access to all available streaming services would likely run viewers more than the average cable subscription. *Vox's* 2019 article titled "The Future of Streaming is the Cable Bundle" posits that similarly to how traditional TV providers responded to the emergence of cable channels in the 70s and 80s, providers could group streaming services together and charge a single fee. A sort of bundling is already happening. Viewers subscribed to either Hulu or Amazon Prime Instant Video, for example, can add access to premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime or even CBS's streaming service, CBS All Access, for an added cost. Moving towards cable-like bundling means eventually moving towards

cable-like prices. In order to continue avoiding cable-like costs streaming viewers will have to decide which services to forgo, and a services lack of licensed content might make that an easy decision.

In a February 2019 *Forbes* article, “Reality is Closing in on Netflix” David Trainer speculates that the loss of legacy content could be the first thing to effectively slow subscriber growth, stating that: “A big part of Netflix’s success in growing subscribers has been the content that its competitors provide” (par. 15). Hulu experienced a 48 percent rise in subscriptions in 2018, attracting 8 million more subscribers (Chmielewski “Hulu” par 1.). This growth can be attributed to the service adding, and becoming the exclusive home of licensed content, including *ER*, as well as series such as *Lost* (2004-2010), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010) and *Living Single* (1993-1998). This raises the question, what will happen if and/or when licensed content is removed from their current streaming services and made available instead by a service created by their licensor? Would removal result in viewers and fans abandoning a service altogether?

In the surveys conducted of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix and of *ER* on Hulu, I asked the same hypothetical question, “If *Friends/ER* were to be removed from Netflix/Hulu, and become available on a different or new streaming service, how likely is it that you would feel compelled to subscribe to that service?” I followed up the question by asking, “If you answered that you were unlikely to subscribe to a new streaming service for *Friends/ER* why is that so?” and directing participants to write in their answers. The data revealed significant nuance, as well as amplified the importance of studying the appeal of licensed television content on a series by series basis, and not simply observe as a whole.

The majority of viewers for each series responded that they were very unlikely to feel compelled to subscribe to a new streaming service if the series they are a fan of were to move there. However, there is a notable difference in the spread of this data for each series. For *Friends*, the data weighs heavily on the unlikely side, with 65.3 percent of respondents saying that they were either unlikely or very unlikely to subscribe to a new service to stream the series and only 10.5 percent saying they were likely or very likely to add the service. For *ER*, while 40 percent indicate that they are very unlikely to subscribe to a new service in order to stream the series, the same percentage responded that they were either likely or

very likely to do so. In total 50 percent of *ER* viewers sampled are either unlikely or very unlikely to subscribe, but with 10% being unsure and 40 percent being at least likely to do so (See Tables 4 and 5).

In respondents' write in answers it became clear that in contrast to headlines such as "What Would Netflix Do Without *Friends*?" one series may not be the end all or be all for a streaming service. Respondents of both surveys who answered that they were unlikely to subscribe to a new service wrote-in responses along the lines of "It would depend on what else they had" and "Unless there are a bunch of other shows I want to watch, I wouldn't." Since the creation and administration of these surveys, more information has come out regarding what content new streaming services, particularly WarnerMedia's HBO Max, will feature. If I were to do this survey again, I would use the information available now to make the question more specific, mentioning HBO Max and its announced content library, for the purpose of determining if that information would result in a change in response. Regardless, I do think this data suggests that no one show will be so essential to a streaming platform's viewership that its removal could be a significant disruptor all on its own. Many respondents also mentioned that one show would not be worth the additional cost of a new service, with one respondent writing: "Adding another streaming service for one show is financially imprudent." In fact, the most common response to "why not?" was cost. 37 percent of respondents mentioned not wanting to pay for, or not being able to afford to pay for another streaming service in their answers, even those who claimed to be super-fans of the series' in question. One respondent to the *Friends* survey wrote: "*Friends* is my favorite show, but I can't subscribe to EVERYTHING."

The second most common answer respondents gave to why they wouldn't feel compelled to subscribe to a new streaming service for either of the series' was that they had another method of accessing them. Just under 18 percent of respondents said they either owned the series' on DVD, had them saved on their hard drive or in a few cases, both. In her book *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity, and Self-narrative*, Rebecca Williams explains that fans are wary of streaming, writing: "the contingent nature of streaming sites can pose a threat to continued access to a favourite series. For example, one fan notes that 'I do sometimes prefer to buy DVD's, because I don't trust Netflix or iTunes

(or some other distributor) to carry the show indefinitely” (161). Williams also points out what an important role streaming has played in offering a “heightened sense of trust of ontological security” for fans (160). DVD’s often offer fans more content, like episode commentaries and behind the scenes featurettes, but they don’t necessarily lend themselves to watching the show *everywhere*, in the way that streaming does. Many of the *ER* and *Friends* respondents who indicated that they did own the series in question on DVD also lamented the loss of control and accessibility that would come with a favorite series being removed from a streaming service. One respondent to the *Friends* survey wrote that just relying on the DVD’s would “require extra steps to access it” and that the convenience of streaming is what enables so many recent rewatches. Other respondents who did not mention currently having another way of watching the series’ mentioned that they would resort to torrenting a series if it were removed from streaming, a method that would enable them to still have computer and mobile device access. The few respondents who still subscribe to cable mentioned that they would simply watch the series in reruns. However, these respondents again lamented the loss of convenience that would accompany a loss of streaming access, with one respondent who said they would go back to watching on cable adding “albeit with less control.” It is unclear whether or not, despite other methods, viewers would eventually give in to subscribing to new services for the purpose of regaining convenience and control over their viewing of a series, but given the responses I garnered, this possibility should not be ruled out. Unlike how isolated incidents of reboot and revival success did not ultimately restore 18-49-year-old viewership for broadcast networks, licensors could more easily attract those key viewers to their streaming services with the promise of convenient access to their favorite series. Viewers might not simply have a desire for familiar series, but for a familiar method of access.

Conclusion

The success of past series on streaming services has arguably contributed to the overabundance of reboots and revivals on network television and the decisions of several studios and media conglomerates to launch their own streaming services. These current and upcoming radical shifts have and potentially

will lead to significant changes in both the streaming industry and television writ large; however, as made clear by network television's continued loss of 18-49 year old viewers despite the successes of rebooted or revived past series, and the tepid at best response by my survey sample to the possibility of subscribing to new streaming service in order to access licensed content, greater understanding of past series appeal, and the appeal of their accessibility is needed. The differentiation in the spread of data between *Friends* and *ER* in response to the survey question regarding whether their removal from their current streaming platform would compel the viewer to subscribe to a new streaming service in order to continue accessing the series' indicates that the series' differences in genre, modes of watching, audience engagement, and wider accessibility may play a part in the motivation of viewers and should be considered. The following two chapters will provide a closer look at the appeal and the success of *Friends* and *ER*, explore why these two relics of the nineties have found significant success on streaming outlets, and hypothesize about how each series function and appeal to streaming viewers answers to the validity of the television industry's responses to their popularity.

Chapter 2: The One Where Everyone is Still Watching Friends

Friends was pitched to NBC by creators David Crane and Marta Kauffman as an ensemble comedy about “that point in your life when your friends are your family” (Littlefield 154). The series follows six friends, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston), Ross (David Schwimmer), Monica (Courteney Cox), Chandler (Matthew Perry), Joey (Matt LeBlanc) and Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow), as they navigate being single and in their twenties in Manhattan. Although it may be hard to imagine the series as anything other than a ratings hit and cultural phenomenon, its first season fell flat. Summer reruns in 1995 helped *Friends* find its audience and break into the Nielsen top ten (Littlefield 181). After the series ended, its ubiquity in syndication and presence across several different cable networks ensured it remained a constant of American pop culture until streaming brought it back to the forefront. This chapter traces *Friends*’ success and its connection with audiences, beginning with its original broadcast run (1994-2004) and concluding with its recent success on the streaming service Netflix. I explore the series’ rise in popularity during its original airing on NBC, its permeation of American pop culture, and its central and arguably universal appeal. The chapter focuses on *Friends*’ resurgence in popularity and public discourse since it became available on Netflix in January 2015. This includes an analysis of the survey data collected from Netflix viewers of *Friends*. This chapter argues that while *Friends* has remained an omnipresent televisual text due to its ubiquity in syndication, its inclusion on Netflix led to the series being pushed back into the forefront of pop culture discourse nearly twenty-five years after its NBC debut. That said, the chapter will further explore how this shift in platform brought with it potential shifts in just how viewers or fans engaged with the text itself, allowing them to view the series habitually.

There For You: (*Friends* original broadcast run and ubiquity in syndication)

After those fateful Summer of 1995 reruns boosted *Friends* during its second season, the show and cast were everywhere and the show evolved from a ratings success for NBC into a full-fledged cultural phenomenon. The cast appeared on the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *People*, and *Entertainment*

Weekly prior to the premiere of the second season; in December of 1995, along with the cast of *ER*, the six friends graced the cover of *Vanity Fair*'s TV Hall of Fame special issue. Because season one had ended on a cliffhanger, Rachel finding out that Ross was in love with her, the series season two premiere was highly anticipated. The subsequent Ross and Rachel "will they/won't they" became the television storyline everyone was talking about. Co-creator Kauffman recalled, "I was dropping my daughter off for Sunday school at our temple, and literally my Rabbi stopped me and said 'What's gonna happen with Ross and Rachel?'" ("The One About TV"). Viewers were tuning in each week hoping that episode would be the one where Ross and Rachel finally got together. To get their fix of plot and character discussion, and learn how to ask their hairstylist for the "The Rachel" (Actress Jennifer Aniston's haircut that became the must-have style), *Friends* fans turned to the internet.

During the mid-to-late 90's the Internet made participation in fandom easier than ever before. Fans could simply search their favorite show and join a chatroom, message board, or LISTSERV to discuss the series with others who were as engaged as they were. In fact, it was the internet that made Lisa Kudrow realize how big the show was becoming. She recalled: "When we were on *Oprah*, I think that first summer, she showed us all these people in Internet cafes. People were online talking about the show, which was the first-time people were using the Internet to connect with each other, like the new watercooler. I thought, 'Okay, this is something then. This is a big deal'" (Littlefield 185). Jillian Sandel, in her article "I'll Be There For You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families," observes that by the fourth season *Friends* had "spawned a cottage industry of texts which surround the show" including "internet newsgroups, homepages, and web-sites devoted to the show, the actors and the fans" (142). *Friends* permeated more and more of American culture at the same time computers and the internet did as well. Jennifer Aniston and Matthew Perry starred in the instructional video for Windows '95. In 1996, there were 98 websites dedicated to *Friends*, more than any other TV show at the time (Sandell 154). In October 1995, *Entertainment Weekly* overviewed the five biggest *Friends* related fan sites, assigning them each a grade for their thoroughness; the article began, "They'll be there for you when the rain starts to pour—not to mention every time you turn on your computer."

Friends permeated culture both online and offline so much so that the series even changed how Americans spoke to each other. A linguistics study published in the Fall of 2005 links the increasing use of the intensifier “so” over the intensifier “really” to *Friends* popularity. The article argues that “The height of *so* use was seasons 4 and 5, and season 5 was the very year that *Friends* rose to become the number 2 television series” (Tagliamonte and Roberts 295). While the researchers acknowledge there were likely other factors involved, they couldn’t ignore the fact that “the particular acceleration and deceleration of the use of this intensifier seems to tap into the rising and falling popularity of the show” (Tagliamonte and Roberts 295-296). When *Friends* was most popular, more Americans were using the intensifier “so;” when *Friends* popularity began to dwindle, so did its use.

Despite its profuse impact on American culture, *Friends* success had come as a surprise; the pilot did not test well, nor was the series showered with early critical praise. *TV Guide*’s 1994 fall preview issue posed the question: “First came *Seinfeld*. Then came the new Ellen DeGeneres show. Do we need another pack-of-pals show? And while trying to appeal to Xers, the show doesn’t exactly flatter them by portraying young adults as sex-starved losers” (*TV Guide*). What *TV Guide* could not have predicted, however, was that the bond between the series sex-starved characters, and the bond the series formed with its viewers would be the root of the series appeal. Sandel, in her 1998 article, attributed the series’ popularity and appeal to the fantasy it presented about alternative families. The twenty-something characters on *Friends* barely had a grasp on, let alone control over, their professional and personal lives. She notes that they did, however, have control over who they chose to be a part of their alternative family. “The belief behind *Friends* is that the ‘families we choose’ can substitute for badly paid jobs and dysfunctional relationships” (148). Sandell argues that the group mentality between the six friends brought them together, when outsiders--most notably new love interests--threatened the dynamic of the group. Whereas a character’s new boyfriend or girlfriend, or even in the rare instance a new roommate or neighbor--would try and fail to get a seat on that famed orange couch, the viewer was always welcome to take a seat and become a part of the group.

In *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community*, Saul Austerlitz explains: “The sitcom, in its purest essence, is a proxy: a substitute family or substitute circle of confidantes” (259). He argues that *Friends* embodies this essence so thoroughly that it made its viewers forget that this relationship was one-way. A viewer of *Friends* is a part of the gang; the six characters know every intimate and embarrassing detail of each other’s lives, and in turn the viewer does as well, simulating real friendship. Austerlitz argues that the season four episode “The One With The Embryos” demonstrates *Friends*’ next level thoroughness when it comes to letting the viewer feel as if they a part of the group in the moment that earns the episode its biggest laugh. In the episode Rachel and Monica compete against Chandler and Joey in a *Jeopardy!*-style friendship test devised by Ross that features questions such as “Monica categorizes her towels. How many categories are there?” Rachel and Monica lose when they fail to correctly answer the lightning round question “What is Chandler Bing’s job?” All previous questions had been obscure, the answers to which the audience couldn’t have possibly known but got the chance to learn. However, “What is Chandler Bing’s job?” is one that a viewer of the series would feel that they should know, given that the several episodes up until this fourth season episode had centered plots in Chandler’s workplace. “The One With the Embryos” exemplifies the extra step *Friends* takes to ensure the viewer feels that the relationship is not only one way. The audience learns intimate details and facts about the characters that only their closest friends would know, but then also feel flummoxed along with Monica and Rachel when they realize they don’t know the answer to the game’s final question either. *Friends* was appealing to viewers because it not only represented a relatable time in life in which friends become a person’s family, but because it allowed viewers to be a part of the six friends’ chosen family themselves.

Like the Generation X viewers, who were the show’s core audience throughout its original run, *Friends* had to grow up. The beloved twenty-somethings had become thirty-somethings: Chandler and Monica got married, as a result of a drunken one night stand Ross and Rachel had a baby, and every character had consistent and fulfilling employment. *Friends*’ final episode, “The Last One,” aired on May 6th, 2004. The finale remains one of the most watched series finales in American television history,

coming in fifth and just after the finale of another Must-See staple, *Seinfeld* (Conradt par. 6). 52.5 million viewers watched as Chandler, Monica, Joey, Phoebe, Ross, and Rachel, for the final time, stood in the now empty apartment fans had called home for ten years.

Friends' finale, while a significant media event, did not necessitate a decline in the series presence in public consciousness and popular culture because of its ubiquity in syndication. Television scholar Kathleen Loock refers to *Friends* as an "undead text" for exactly this reason. It did not disappear after its series finale; instead it remained meaningful to viewers who then created new meanings (301). *Friends* was first sold into syndication by Warner Bros. in 1996, bringing in \$4 million dollars an episode (Sandell 142). Since then, the series has maintained a constant presence on television, appearing somewhere in syndication practically every single night. A syndication deal with TBS began in 2001 and was renewed in 2011 in a joint agreement with Nick at Nite; TBS is allowed to air reruns of the series prior to 6pm, while Nick at Nite has sole authority to air reruns after 6pm (Dempsey par 3.), giving each cable network equal opportunity to profit from re-running the series without having to split the *Friends* audience. In 2015, more than a decade after the show's series finale, *Friends* was reported to be generating a billion dollars in annual revenue for Warner Bros. in syndication alone and in 2016 *Friends* reruns accrued a total weekly audience of 16 million viewers in the United States (Phillips par. 1, Sternbergh par. 8.) Currently, with a cable subscription, a viewer could watch between nine and twelve hours of *Friends* every weekday. The series airs on TBS in six hour blocks, on Nick-at-Nite in three hour blocks, and intermittently throughout the week in three hour blocks on The Paramount Network (formerly known as Spike TV) with zero overlap--*Friends* delivers on the promise of its theme song: it's always there for you.

Friends' popularity in syndication has resulted in a distinct change to its episodes; they're faster. The episodes are sped up by five percent, creating ninety more seconds of commercial time and therefore taking the most advantage of the series popularity to reap the greatest possible syndication profit. (All Things Considered). TBS goes a step further cutting the opening credit sequence from most of the *Friends* block, playing a sped-up version of the season nine titles and theme song only at the *beginning*.

Friends' enduring popularity has also led to additional revenue streams for Warner Bros., including varying kinds of official *Friends* merchandise. Outside of standard merchandise like t-shirts, DVDs, blu-rays, and even a special 15th anniversary box-set reissue, official *Friends* merchandise runs the gamut: friendship bracelets and necklaces, mugs, glassware, board and card games, picture frames, greeting cards, and the list goes on. Such a volume of official merchandise, alongside the plethora of fan-made merchandise for sale on sites like Etsy, further illustrates the degree to which *Friends* has remained a staple of popular culture. Because of this, scholars Shelley Cobb, Neil Ewen, and Hannah Hamad claim that "no other show has achieved the breadth of impact that *Friends* has on succeeding generations of audiences in terms of speaking beyond those it spoke to during its initial broadcast run" (Cobb et al. 684) and the series availability on Netflix is the most recent and significant way it has succeeded a generation.

Like They've Been There Before: (*Friends* on Netflix)

In October 2014, Netflix announced that all ten seasons of *Friends* would begin streaming exclusively on the service beginning on New Year's Day 2015. Soon after the series made its debut on platform, it became evident that the large streaming audience *Friends* was amassing was largely made up a new generation of viewers, who were on the younger end of the key 18-49 demographic. Netflix does not publicly share any information regarding the viewership or demographics of a licensed series viewership on their service. Evidence of *Friends* initial and continued popularity on Netflix has come from third-party data. Since the series became available to stream in 2015, many outside analytics firms have gathered audience data to determine what Netflix's most watched shows are; *Friends* has consistently placed in at least the top 5 and often the top 3 of television series being streamed on the service, often outranking the platform's original content. In December 2018, the analytics firm Jumpshot released a list of Netflix's most viewed series via web browsers. *Friends* came in second for the most popular series and the most views (Molla par. 4). In an April 2019 survey conducted by MoffetNathanson that simply asked respondents "What are your favorite shows to watch on Netflix?" *Friends* came in

fourth, A public understanding of *who* exactly was watching *Friends* on Netflix was first made evident by television critics and trade presses, most notably *New York Magazine's* entertainment news offshoot *Vulture* in a March 2016 piece entitled “Is *Friends* Still the Most Popular Show on TV?”

For the piece journalist Adam Sternbergh interviewed series co-creator Marta Kauffman, and television critic Andy Greenwald who both shared anecdotal evidence of the series popularity a new and younger generation. Sternbergh also interviewed several fans of the series in their early twenties, who either discovered the series for the first time on Netflix or because of Netflix were able to reconnect with a series they remembered from their childhood. Two of the fans Sternbergh interviewed were writers for *BuzzFeed*, an online media website notably geared toward millennials, who explained that the articles, quizzes and “listicles” about *Friends* they had written for the website were their most popular. *Friends'* presence and popularity on the website has continued. A search for the series on *BuzzFeed* in 2019 yields nearly a thousand results from lists ranking Rachel's best outfits to various quizzes on a myriad of *Friends* trivia. The new generation of *Friends* fans who were clicking on BuzzFeed's content about the series, were capitalized upon further with new lines of merchandise, including one exclusive to Urban Outfitters, a retailer targeted towards young adults, whose 49-dollar sweatshirt with the series logo is a top-rated item that regularly sells out. In 2018 three new books related to or about the series were published, and the dating app Tinder revealed in their “Year in Swipe” report that *Friends* was the number-one series that users referenced in their profiles (Tinder). However the clearest indicator that *Friends* had become a hit with a whole new generation was the December 2016 announcement that historically youth-skewed cable network MTV was going to begin airing reruns of the show.

The evidence of this reemerging phenomenon leads to the question of why. Why *Friends*? Why has this series from a bygone broadcast era become so popular with a new generation of viewers since its availability on streaming? Both Sternbergh, and scholars Cobb, Ewen and Hamad suggest a nostalgia fueled by economic anxiety as a reason for the series resurgent success. Sternbergh notes that *Friends* is not only absent of smartphones, social media and all that has come from modern technology but “moving back in with your parents as a matter of course, and a national mood that vacillates between anxiety and

defeatism” as well (Sternbergh par. 4). Cobb, Ewen, and Hamad conclude that the series’ continued ubiquity in syndication and popularity on streaming is evident of a “a wider nostalgia for the 1990s and that decade’s association with a ‘simpler’ time, before 9/11, before Web 2.0, and before the financial crisis of 2008...its cultural afterlife and persistent ability to find new audiences reflects an anxious nostalgia for pre-Great Recession politics and economics” (688). This argument is not difficult to extrapolate: *Friends* was during its original broadcast run, and is now, a show whose appeal is encapsulated in wish-fulfillment. Viewers want to and value feeling like they’re a part of the series’ eponymous friend group, and a key component of that desire for inclusion is the characters’ lifestyle. The series portrays six friends, living comfortably in Manhattan, in spacious apartments, even on a waitress or struggling actor’s salary--that lifestyle remains just as alluring to twenty-somethings in 2019 as it did in 1994, with a significant caveat. A young twenty-something in 1994 might have had a shot at fulfilling the wish that the series presents; for a young twenty something in 2019 it’s almost unthinkable. In December 2017, *The Huffington Post*’s Michael Hobbes, published an expansive piece entitled “Generation Screwed: Why millennials are facing the scariest financial future of any generation since the Great Depression.” The piece explains in great detail, for instance, why millennials are half as likely to own a home than someone who was in their twenties in the mid-70s, and why it’s projected that millennials won’t be financially secure enough to retire until age 75 (par. 6). Given the validity of the suggestion that economic anxiety may be a significant factor of *Friends* appeal to a new generation, when approaching the creation of my survey for viewers of the series on Netflix I allowed the opportunity for that sentiment to be expressed, unprovoked, in the form of an open ended written response question. What I found however, was even though an alleviation from certain anxieties was expressed, the series’ unique streaming popularity is instead potentially demonstrative of how past series function in viewers’ lives has evolved in the transition from traditional television syndication, to streaming library offerings.

Survey Data & Analysis

In total, there were 254 responses to the survey of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix, which was circulated on social media websites Twitter and Facebook. An overwhelming 89.45 percent of respondents identified themselves as female, only 8.72 percent of respondents identified themselves as male, and 1.83 percent identified themselves as non-binary. There is no substantiated evidence available that indicates that *Friends* is significantly more popular with women. Netflix does not publicly share demographic information about its viewership, and third parties who have collected data to determine which series on Netflix are the most watched have not separated their results by gender. There is however, as discussed previously, substantial evidence indicating the age and generational group of the viewers who are responsible for *Friends* streaming popularity, most notably MTV's decision to air reruns of the series themselves. 87.09 percent of respondents to my survey identified themselves as being between the ages of 18-39, placing them within the same age demographic that the show was intended for and attracted during its original broadcast run. The largest percentage of respondents indicated that they were between the ages of 25 and 29 (28.57 percent), the age of the characters for the majority of the series run. 19.35 percent responded that they were between they were 18-24, 17.54 percent said they were 30-34, and 21.66 percent said they were 35-39. The method chosen to recruit the survey sample could potentially account for the skew of demographic data. According to Pew Research Center more women use social media than men, 78 percent versus 65 percent, and people between the ages of 18 and 29 use social media more than any other age group, at 90 percent (Pew Research Center). The age range represented by my sample is suitable, given that the purpose of this survey was to gain an understanding of the new generation of viewers watching *Friends* on Netflix. However, with the absence of any substantial indicator that *Friends* is more popular with the platforms female subscribers, or a modern female audience in general, I have made it a point to address when results of questions asked in my survey may be particularly problematized due to the formidable unevenness of the samples gender makeup.

When asked the question “How did you first discover/watch *Friends*?” the majority of respondents (58.99 percent) answered that they had seen *Friends* first during its original run from 1994-2004, therefore placing their first experience with it during their childhood (see Table 6), and audiences are most often drawn towards television of their past because of their feelings of nostalgia. 22.12 percent responded that they first saw *Friends* in syndication, 7.83 percent first saw it on DVD, and 7.37 percent listed Netflix as their first experience with the show. When asked “How do you watch/revisit *Friends* now?” the majority responded that Netflix was *one* of the ways they re-watched the series, as respondents could check *all* answers that applied (see Table 7). Syndication came in second and DVD came in third. This result is consistent with both Netflix’s ubiquity and its convenience factor. Netflix is currently the streaming service with the most subscribers in the United States, and it arguably provides more ease of use than either, cable, or DVD’s. The survey data suggests that ease and convenience of watching the series on Netflix also influences *how* and *why* viewers watch the series. The results of subsequent questions I asked respondents regarding their consumption of the series are all indicative of this.

I next asked respondents how recently they had binge watched the series (see Table 8). A majority of respondents indicated that they had binge watched *Friends* within the last year (35.18 percent) or even within the last month (32.66 percent). Although the general term “binge watch” provides a commonality of understanding amongst modern television viewers, it can mean everything from watching more than one episode of a series in one sitting to watching an entire season in one sitting. To pursue more detail, I asked: “With what frequency do you watch an episode or more of *Friends*?” 42.79 percent answered that they did so multiple times per year, and 35.82 percent said they did so multiple times per month (see Table 9). Netflix’s convenience enables this frequent viewing, with the more elevated ease of access than DVD’s or traditional syndication the service offers, viewers are more inclined to turn to a Netflix offering, like *Friends*, for entertainment. For those who responded that they watched an episode multiple-times per week, the majority (57.14 percent) were under the age of 30. 40 percent of those who responded that they watched an episode every day were under the age of 30. Both

findings reinforce the notion that the series continues to foster a strong connection with the valuable demographic networks have lost to streaming.

Over 85 percent of respondents answered that they had seen the series all the way through more than once (see Table 10). With 51.43 percent having seen the complete series 2-5 times, 18.57 percent having seen it 5-10 times and 15.24 percent having seen it 10+ times. Of those who had only watched the series all the way through once, a majority (52.78 percent) answered that they were at least likely to watch it again (see Table 11). Viewers of *Friends* on Netflix are likely influenced to return to the series again and again in part due to the platform's interface. Netflix's home screen displays content to subscribers in categorized lists, and the categories "Continue watching..." and "Watch it Again..." are often among the first a subscriber sees upon logging in, therefore encouraging and enabling a return to the familiar. This data also accounts for why *Friends* has consistently remained one of Netflix's most watched television series - it is not simply being watched by many viewers, but it is being watched by viewers often and over and over again.

In an attempt to further understand the ways in which viewers of *Friends* on Netflix were experiencing and interacting with the show, I next asked the question: "How likely are you to watch *Friends* in the following ways?" Respondents were presented with a list of seven viewing scenarios that was devised partly from patterns that emerged in anecdotal accounts of viewing the show which I encountered through reading popular press articles about the series reemergence in popularity and social media forums about the series at the start of my research, and viewing experiences of the show that were shared with me personally when others learned of my thesis's focus. Respondents were asked to rank each scenario on a Likert scale, which ranged from extremely unlikely to extremely likely. Of the seven scenarios two stood out: "Put the series on in the background while you're doing other tasks" and "Watch an episode before you go to sleep at night." 89.11 percent of respondents reported that they were at least slightly likely to put the *Friends* on in the background while doing other tasks with 61.39 percent of respondents indicating that they were extremely likely to do so (see Table 12). 73.2 percent of respondents indicated that they were likely to watch an episode of the series before they go to sleep at

night. The commonality of these two modes of interacting with the series is an affordability of the convenient on-demand nature of streaming. With traditional syndication, viewers have no control over programming. If a viewer wanted to have a series playing in the background or watch an episode of a series before they fell asleep, they would have no other option than whatever broadcast or cable channels were airing at that time. These two popular modes of interaction are also, as illustrated in the answer to the open-ended response question asking participants to share why they love the series, kindred to the appeal of the series to its streaming era audience.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to write a few sentences or more about why they love *Friends*, and it is from these responses that an understanding of the series appeal to its modern audience, and especially to its modern female audience (given the gender makeup of the sample), was gleaned. What the written responses by the sample first made clear, was that the central appeal of the series has not changed, respondents not only wanted to be friends with the series characters, but felt like they already were. One respondent on the subject of the series characters expressed, “I feel like they’re my friends” and another wrote “I love the characters so much, they feel like my own friends.” A few respondents left any acknowledgement of the characters fictitiousness out of their answers, such as the one who wrote “I loved getting to know them throughout the years.” These responses harken back to Austerlitz’s claim that *Friends* so thoroughly makes its viewers feel as if they are a part of the group themselves. In their written responses, a majority of respondents also mentioned a specific or several characters they relate to, or the characters’ dynamics with each other as a reason for why they love and keep watching *Friends*.

Prior to this write in question, I asked respondents to identify who was their favorite of the six friends (see Table 13). Over fifty percent answered that Chandler was their favorite, with Phoebe coming in second (at 15.94 percent), Rachel third (at 12.08 percent), Monica fourth (at 10.14 percent) Joey fifth (at 7.25 percent) and Ross last (at 3.86 percent). The results to this question differ significantly from the results of a past study in which the same question was asked. In “When Good *Friends* Say Goodbye: A Parasocial Breakup Study” published in 2006, Eyal and Cohen surveyed 279 university students and

asked respondents who their favorite character was. The majority of participants in Eyal and Cohen's study chose favorite *Friends* characters that were the same gender as themselves, whereas the majority of my nearly 90 percent female sample chose the male character Chandler as their favorite friend (512).

Chandler was lauded for his self-deprecating humor, and several respondents mentioned the pairing of Chandler and Monica specifically for why they loved and still love the show with one writing: "I love Chandler and Monica as a couple. I love re-watching them go from friends, to falling in love, to getting married and starting a family." The other significant pattern that emerged from respondent's reflection on the characters was a strong dislike of the character Ross. Respondents made it abundantly clear that they *really* did not like Ross, such as one respondent who wrote that they liked "Everyone but Ross, Ross is the worst." This dislike is likely interconnected with one of the many modern criticisms of the series: that its gender politics are problematic; and Ross's actions during his relationship with Rachel, and his other love interests throughout *Friends*' ten seasons are often cited heavily in critical discourse of the series. Not only, as many online media outlets including *BuzzFeed* which has dedicated almost as many articles to the series "problematic" elements as it has lists of the series funniest moments, have made acknowledgement of, has the series gender politics aged poorly, but its representation of a New York City lacking anyone who isn't white, and homophobic and sexist jokes have as well. However, another pattern that emerged in the written responses provided by my sample was an acknowledgement, and swift compartmentalization of these issues.

Many in their written responses were quick to acknowledge that several jokes and storylines from *Friends* haven't aged that well. However, these respondents were able to compartmentalize their recognition of the series' not-so-great politics, representations of gender, sexism, and race, so that they were still able to enjoy it. One respondent wrote "Some of the jokes haven't aged as well as I might have hoped, and the critical issues with the show become more obvious with every re-watch, but it is such a massive part of me that I will always like it." Another said, "I'll defend it always, in spite of the backlash, because I'm a fan and it's played a meaningful role in my life." Only one respondent to my survey wrote that the series problematic elements became too much for them to ignore and they decided not to watch it

again. For every other response that acknowledged the series problematic aspects, the good outweighed the bad for viewers, like one who wrote: “despite its flaws (especially compared to the progression of society) it makes me laugh and has some good qualities too.” Another pattern which emerged in respondents' answers to why they loved the series, and one that could possibly account for the strong desire to compartmentalize or defend the series problematic labeling, was nostalgia.

While almost 20 percent of respondents (19.46 percent) used either the words “nostalgia” or “nostalgic” in their answers, many also described their memories of watching the series with their mothers, fathers, siblings, childhood friends, college friends, and partners. Many wrote that *Friends* was the first show they ever “followed as it aired” and the first show for which they “ever had an emotional reaction to ending.” The words “simple” and “easy” appeared repeatedly in respondent’s answers when they reflected on the time period of the shows original airing (1994-2004). Many described and/or perceived it as a time “when things were easier” and wished they could “go back.” One respondent wrote “it was situated during the much simpler years, it gives this very nostalgic feeling how things were less complicated back then.” These answers were the closest acknowledgment towards the role economic anxiety plays in *Friends* present day appeal, that both Sternbergh, and scholars Cobb, Ewen and Hamad had hypothesized. However, the most clear and consistent explanation by my sample as to not only why they love *Friends*, but consistently re-watch the series was comfort, and this expression of comfort was not one that was clearly closely aligned with the alleviation of an economic anxiety, but instead with the primary and established function of syndicated television for audiences, even before streaming.

Over 15 percent of respondents used the words “comfort” or “soothing” directly in their responses, with many referring to the series as “comfort TV” or likening it to “comfort food.” Many also linked the comfort they gained from the show with how easy it is to watch. One respondent wrote, “*Friends* is great because it’s easy to watch. You don’t need a lot of feelings to watch.” Another wrote “It’s just an easy show to watch, sit down and relax at the end of a very long day.” The expression of ease in watching the series was not linked by respondents only to its ubiquitous availability in syndication or the ease of putting it on Netflix, but to its genre and narrative. For instance, one respondent wrote “the

action is pretty mindless so I can just zone out while watching it without having to rewind or google things to make the show make sense”

Since the late 1990s complex narrative television has become more the norm and as scholar Jason Mittell explains in his book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, “expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted” because of that (3). In contrast to the rise in complexity, many respondents applauded *Friends* for its simplicity. One respondent expressed that *Friends* was a sort-of palate cleanser for today’s complex TV, writing: “I watch a lot of new dramas so *Friends* is a good way to decompress with a more lighthearted show.” The series’ lightheartedness was another factor which contributed to why respondents found it so comforting. Many respondents used the phrase “stress free” while describing the series, and many expressed a variance of the following answer “It never gets too serious...It’s a nice break from reality.”

The comfort that *Friends* brings to respondents correlates directly with, and is the reason why, 89.11 percent of respondents reported that they were at least slightly likely to put the series on in the background while doing other tasks and 73.2 percent of respondents indicated that they were likely to watch an episode of *Friends* before they went to sleep at night. Six respondents even used the same exact phrase “it’s a comforting presence” while expressing their reasoning for why they often put the series on in the background. One respondent wrote that they put *Friends* on when they are “alone at home and looking for the background noise of something familiar and warm.” Another even went so far as to say “I call it my Death Bed Show. If I’m lucky enough to die of old age in a comfortable bed, I hands down want *Friends* on in the background.” Explaining the reasoning for putting on an episode of the series before falling asleep at night a respondent wrote: “It’s the perfect white noise for falling asleep because it’s enough of a story to not be annoying, but familiar enough to completely tune out.”

In many ways, *Friends*’ function in streaming viewers’ lives appears to be an evolution of the function of syndication in the post-network era. In “The Benefits of Banality: Domestic Syndication in the Post-Network Era” Derek Kompare explains syndicated series were and are meant to fill up the time he

refers to as “fringe,” mornings, afternoons, late at night, essentially any time outside of the 8 to 11pm primetime hours, that prior to streaming mattered the most (55). In the streaming era however, primetime can be anytime; it is no longer restricted, as viewers often discover and watch new series at their own pace, and true appointment viewing is on a steep decline, therefore “fringe” viewing can occur whenever the viewer chooses it to as well. *Friends* was and remains a successful series in traditional television syndication, and understanding the series appeal to its viewers not only highlights why the series was particularly suited for the syndication success that it has had, but for why it has continued to be successful in the streaming television model where licensed content is not relegated to specific hours of the day but available to the audience at any time. Streaming therefore, arguably has enabled the series to become habitual, and a part of some viewer’s everyday routine. *Friends* is always there for viewers, to put on while they get ready in the morning, when they need some background noise, or even as they fall asleep. Despite how often the series is being viewed on the service, which results in it ranking above the majority of Netflix’s television content, it is not being actively watched. This is a significant caveat, that recontextualizes the series’ streaming popularity.

Conclusion

Friends’ multigenerational appeal, continued cultural omnipresence, and newly emerged habitual presence in its viewers’ lives due to streaming, has led to the series’ positioning as a unique television phenomenon. Streaming has not only allowed for the series to become a touchstone for a new generation, but viewers’ experience of *Friends*—putting it on as background noise, having it just be there at any hour of the day—is, I argue, a byproduct of streaming’s convenience. *Friends*, while viewed as dated, has experienced a withstanding appeal, in part because due to its ubiquity in pop culture, many are familiar with it before they even sit down to watch an episode themselves, and when they do the series welcomes them as it has all their viewers, making them feel as if they are a part of the gang, and that these six friends are their friends, too.

Nostalgia plays a significant role in *Friends*' popularity on Netflix to my sample, both their age demographic, the fact that a majority of them had seen the series during its original broadcast run, and their written accounts of having watched the series as a child, make that clear. There is an inherent cyclicity to syndication, during the height of *Friends* popularity, popular syndication block Nick at Nite was airing three hours of *Happy Days* every evening, much like they air three hours of *Friends* now. Will another series eventually supplant *Friends* as a new generation that does not have a nostalgic connection with the series ages into the target demographic? How licensed content role on streaming services will continue to differ from the programming of syndication on traditional television is worthy of continued attention.

An understanding of *Friends*' function, and appeal to its streaming viewers illuminates why I argued in chapter one that approaching each series popularity on a case by case basis may be more fruitful than reacting to the larger trend of past series popularity on streaming services as a whole. Certainly, a replication of this survey with a sample with a more evenly distributed gender makeup would be warranted, in order to discern whether or not patterns found within this data are consistent or specific to the female viewer, and if new patterns or understandings would emerge because it remains unknown whether *Friends* is more popular with a female audience on streaming. However, regardless of the skewed sample, I was able to suggest a categorization of *Friends* streaming consumption that in-turn may suggest that the two industry shifts explored in chapter one were misguided.

Streaming is a leveled playing field, wherein which a series like *Friends* is presented to a Netflix subscriber right beside a current or original series with no differentiation, and no separation between licensed and original, past or current. However, the sample of viewers I surveyed are viewing *Friends* in a categorized way. The series remains, just as it does in traditional television syndication, a popular way to fill fringe time. Licensed content is an important part of the streaming television model, just as syndication is to traditional television because there needs to be something to fill the fringe time for viewers. This self-imposed categorization by my sample may mean suggest that the popularity of a fringe time series may not necessarily mean viewers would be drawn towards a reboot, revival or something

similar in the primetime category, nor may it mean that viewers will feel motivated to follow the series to another platform. Unlike *Friends*, however, *ER*, is arguably primetime content to its viewers.

Chapter 3: The One Where *ER* Sets the Tone

ER was originally intended to be a film, written by *Jurassic Park* author and screenwriter Michael Crichton and based on Crichton's own experience as a medical student. Instead, the script landed at NBC and became *ER*'s two-hour pilot episode. Premiering in September 1994, *ER* would remain in the ten o'clock slot on NBC's Must-See Thursdays until the end of its run in 2009. A critical darling and ratings juggernaut from the beginning, *ER* would become the first series that aired at ten o'clock to ever place within the Nielsen top ten (Lotz "Must-See TV" 270). The series was the tent-pole of Must-See TV; and according to scholar Nancy San Martin, the sheer number of previews that ran during the Must-See sitcoms in the preceding two hours made sure no one forgot it: "The most anticipated (moving, surprising, shocking, star-studded, riveting, unforgettable) *ER* [was] always just ahead, promised by trailers featuring tantalizing clips, expectant music, and sound effects, and fevered voice-overs. *ER* [was] always just coming" (35). The series follows the doctors and nurses working in the emergency department of the fictionalized Cook County General Hospital in Chicago, and began on the first day of third-year medical student John Carter's emergency medicine rotation. *ER* was a progression from the quality ten o'clock hour dramas, such as *Hill Street Blues* and fellow medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, that had won NBC critical acclaim in the 1980s as well as, arguably, the series that moved narrative complexity into the mainstream. *ER* presented narrative complexity with a frenetic pace now commonplace with television dramas, and integrated melodramatic elements more akin to the soap opera in a way that is now commonplace with television medical dramas in particular; that then, however, were just emerging as standards. This chapter will trace *ER*'s success as the tent pole of Must-See TV, to its reemergence in popularity on Hulu, providing an understanding of why, unlike *Friends*, the series did not experience success in traditional television syndication, why streaming is an environment well suited for complex dramas of televisions past to reach a new audience, and the blend of elements that made *ER* commercial both then, and now. This chapter will conclude by arguing that *ER*'s streaming success is potentially

indicative of and a result of, not only the current wave of 90s nostalgia but the present popularity of the medical drama genre with 18-49-year-old television viewers.

See, there's two kinds of doctors: (ER's original broadcast run, and limited success in syndication)

An average of 30 million people watched *ER* every week throughout its first eight seasons, and around 25 million on average did so during its ninth and tenth. During its height, the series often attracted audiences of just over 40 million; for instance, 42 million Americans watched the season two episode “Hell or High Water” in which George Clooney’s character Dr. Doug Ross rescues a child from a storm drain, and 42.7 million people watched the season four premiere “Ambush” which was performed live by the cast (“Nielsen Ratings: Nov. 9-15,” “Nielsen Ratings: Sept. 25-Oct. 1”). Early critical praise for the series assigned reasoning for the series immense popularity and appeal that continue to be the agreed upon merits of quality for the series today. An October 1994 feature of the series in *Time* reads “*ER* is probably the most realistic doctor show TV has ever done. That realism goes beyond the graphic operating-room scenes and rapid-fire medical jargon... The show’s hopped-up pace and jumbled texture—stories start, stop, and overlap at random—set it apart from almost anything else on the air” (Zoglin and Smiglis par. 5). The show kept viewers on the edges of their seats. Showrunner John Wells recalled: “There was so much information coming at you that I think it made the experience feel as if you had to watch it in the same way you would watch a film, that you had to stay involved in it the whole time” (“The One About TV”). *ER* did not pause to explain; it expected its audience to catch up themselves, a fundamental expectation of the complex television viewer.

Mittell pinpoints complex storytelling as an emergent standard by the early 2000s. One of the major outcomes of the popularization of complex television, Mittell writes, is that it has “increased the medium’s tolerance for viewers to be confused, encouraging them to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend” (164). *ER*, however, was not the first television series to require this level of engagement from viewers.

The dramas of MTM preceded *ER* with regard to narrative complexity. MTM was a production company founded by actress Mary Tyler Moore and her then husband Grant Tinker. Prior to producing the 1980s police drama *Hill Street Blues*, and then the medical drama *St. Elsewhere* (both of which aired on NBC), it had served mainly as a producer of sitcoms, most notably *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its spinoffs. Jane Feuer points to the “conditions of creative freedom that enabled MTM to develop an individualised ‘quality’ style” (33). Under the umbrella of MTM creators had the freedom to take genres and formulas television viewers were familiar with, such as the police drama and the medical drama, and take them into new, and more complex directions. *Hill Street Blues*, which premiered in 1981, not only introduced viewers to a new kind of police drama but also, with its “intersection with soap opera, its realism, its mix of drama and comedy” and “its more complex narrative strategies” (Jenkins 183), a new type of television drama altogether. *St. Elsewhere*, which premiered a year after *Hill Street Blues* in 1982, continued this reformulation, this time in a hospital instead of a police precinct. In *Television’s Second Golden Age*, Robert J. Thompson argues that *ER* brought the quality established by *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* into the mainstream. *ER*, Thompson writes:

made a few fine-tuning concessions to make quality attractive to the truly mass audiences. The changes did not need to be major ones, in the nearly fourteen years since the debut of *Hill Street Blues*, most viewers had learned to watch programs that were more challenging and complex than those they had been exposed to before the 1980’s (188).

Thompson notes that *ER*’s most important fine-tuning of the style established by its MTM predecessors was in regard to its pace: “Its hit status was greatly helped by its hyperkinetic pacing. *ER* was perfectly designed for the remote-controlled cable era: it moved so fast you didn’t need to change the channel because it kept doing it for you” (Thompson 188). Furthermore, *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* had employed the use of the Steadicam, but, as scholar Glenn Creeber argues, *ER* perfected it. In his book *Small Screen Aesthetics* Creeber writes: “the camera perfectly portrayed the often desperate confusion and chaos of the Emergency Room. In particular, it looked at times, as if the camera were mimicking the

point of view of an observer (or of a documentary team) jostling to capture every piece of the storyline as it spontaneously unfolded, making the audience feel as they were at the very centre of the action” (72).

These frenetically paced scenes described by Thompson and Creeber occur several times throughout a typical episode of *ER*. For instance, the season four episode “Friendly Fire” features *six* scenes at that pacing within its forty-six minute runtime. EMT’s bring in patient after patient, a man who was hit by a delivery truck while riding his motorcycle, a woman who’s experiencing brain swelling, and a man who shot himself in the leg, to name a few. With each instance the pace immediately speeds up, the Steadicam is in full use; characters yell medical jargon at each other at lightning speed; and the series’ iconic score kicks in. What fills the space between these hyperkinetic scenes are scenes more stylistically and narratively similar to that of a soap opera, which primarily focus on the character’s personal lives. Dr. Ross and Nurse Hathaway are trying to keep their romantic reconciliation a secret from the rest of the ER staff, Dr. Benton and his former girlfriend Carla disagree on a matter regarding their newborn son, and Dr. Greene, who had recently been attacked by a patient, continues to deal with the psychological aftermath. The majority of *ER*’s episodes flip-flop between these frenetically paced scenes and soap opera-esque character driven moments and then back again; therefore, doing the channel-flipping that Thompson acknowledged. MTM drama’s *Hill Street Blues*, and *St. Elsewhere* (as noted by Feur and Jenkins in ‘*MTM’ Quality Television*’) were the first to inject elements of the soap opera into the primetime drama, and *ER* was among many primetime dramas that followed, that continued this intersection. Mittell, acknowledges the soap opera intersection as well, noting that “most complex dramas that proliferate prime time today are serial melodramas and thus share some traits with the daytime soap opera” (233). *ER*’s definitive frenetic pacing, combined with its narrative complexity and integration of elements of the soap opera, arguably are what contributed to the series’ mainstream appeal during its original broadcast run, and are perhaps what makes the series seem more akin to today’s dramas, however this same combination of elements hindered the series’ potential for syndication success at the level of Must-See TV contemporaries like *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) and *Friends*.

ER ended in 2009 after fifteen seasons and 331 episodes, but reruns of the series had begun airing on cable over ten years earlier. However, as opposed to *Friends*, which remained poised for discovery by a new generation thanks to its ubiquity in syndication, *ER* struggled to remain in public consciousness. In 1998, the series entered into its first syndication deal with cable network TNT, who agreed to pay one million dollars per-episode to air re-runs every weeknight (Carter par. 5). Notably, it was around this time that NBC was paying 13 million per-episode to Warner Bros. just to air *ER* themselves (Littlefield 229). *ER* did not dominate ratings on cable like it had on broadcast. TNT's nightly 7pm reruns of *ER* averaged 1.6 million viewers per night in the fall of 1998 (Carter par. 5). Complex serialized dramas often do not thrive in syndication, ironically for the exact reason they're so critically acclaimed and captivating to audiences: they're complicated. It's much harder to flip through the channels, land on a rerun of a series with a complex narrative and follow it than it is for viewers to tune into the middle of a sitcom or a procedural drama rerun. A viewer could stumble upon an episode of *Friends*, having never seen it before, have missed the first five or ten minutes, and still be able to piece together what was happening and understand the character dynamic. As with most situation comedy made after the mid-eighties, *Friends* does have some light-serialization, but that's much easier to overcome than the multiple threads *ER* is connecting within any given episode.

However, networks were able to achieve critical success and capture audience attention with new *ER*-like medical dramas, even while *ER* was still on the air. First came *House* (2004-2012), the new critical darling that took the early 2000s white male anti-hero that emerged in popularity on premium cable network HBO and gave him an M.D and a narcotics addiction. *House* was followed by *Grey's Anatomy*. Similarly, to *ER*, *Grey's* began its series on its characters' first day, but it traded in emergency medicine for surgery, a male dominated point of view for a female one, earnestness for ego and competition, and doctors who were overworked and barely had time for personal lives with doctors who were overworked but also found plenty of time to sneak off together to the on-call room—taking *ER*'s soap opera-esque qualities and dialing them up to ten. TNT ceased airing reruns of *ER* mid-way through 2010, making the series unavailable in syndication until it struck a new syndication deal in with Pop. Pop,

the channel formerly known as the pre-view or *TV Guide* channel, began airing episodes of *ER* in March 2017. Because of increased cable-cutting and the network's own low profile, *ER* failed to experience any kind of major resurgence until Hulu began streaming the series in January 2018.

Welcome back, Carter: (*ER* on Hulu)

ER became available to stream on Hulu on January 14, 2018. Of all the streaming services, Hulu has acquired the most extensive catalog of popular series from television's past, including all the sitcoms that aired as a part of ABC's TGIF, *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983), *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974), and dramas such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002), and *21 Jump Street* (1987-1991). Despite such success with their string of classic acquisitions, the prospect of investing in *ER* was still considered risky. Hulu's vice president of content acquisitions in February 2018 admitted to the services reservations: "To be totally transparent, it was not a no-brainer, because we thought there were some potential risks in terms of if it would really work in this streaming environment" (VanDerWerff "2018's Hottest Show" par. 8). Given the seemingly endless options of television content to choose from, not only on Hulu but on competing platforms as well, it was risky to assume that viewers would push aside all other options to watch fifteen seasons and over three hundred episodes of a medical drama that had fallen out of public consciousness, despite its immense popularity when it originally aired.

In the first promo for the series' availability, played during Hulu ad breaks and posted to YouTube and Twitter just after the announcement of the show's arrival, Hulu chose to highlight the show's prestige as the reason why viewers should watch the series. After a quick montage of clips and as the theme music swelled, the words "23 Emmy Award Winner" appeared. It went on to frame *ER*'s arrival as an *exclusive event* by announcing "Streaming for the first time ever" and "Only on Hulu." A series of popular press articles were published in the days following Hulu's announcement in which television critics listed the episodes of the series that were a must-watch now that it was available to

stream, such as *Vulture's* “The 27 Best *ER* Episodes to Watch If You’ve Never Seen It” and *Uproxx's* “Start With These Classic *ER* Episodes Now That The Great Drama’s On Hulu.”

The assertion of the series quality proved attractive. Just one month after its streaming debut, Hulu reported that their subscribers who had begun watching *ER* had watched an average of 19.4 hours of the show, and that around 5,000 subscribers had finished all fifteen seasons of the series in its first month—which means they would have had to have been watching eight hours of *ER* per day (VanDerWerff “2018’s Hottest Show” par. 10). By May 2018 viewership numbers had grown even higher, with Hulu sharing that 35,000 subscribers had watched every episode of *ER* in the two months following its debut, and that those viewers had watched at least five episodes per day (Lynch par. 2). *ER's* success outlasted what could have just been an initial boom by nostalgic fans. By July 2018 the series was still in the Top 4 overall shows on the platform (Harnick par. 3) and showed no signs of slowing down. *ER's* immediate and sustained popularity on Hulu prompted Vox’s Emily Todd VanDerWerff to declare “the hottest show of early 2018 is a series that debuted in 1994” (“2018’s Hottest Show” par 1-2.) Twenty-four years after its debut, *ER* was Must-See TV again. Hulu’s vice president of content acquisition told E! News in July 2018, that the series:

has surpassed expectations for sure, both from a consumption perspective, but even more so from the zeitgeist that it has kind of picked up. We've launched other big, iconic shows on Hulu, from *Seinfeld* to *Golden Girls* to *Will & Grace* and others, and those have had their moments of excitement, but *ER* has been, I think, bigger and more sustained than we necessarily thought it was going to be...I think there was even more pent-up demand and nostalgia than we anticipated (Harnick par. 6).

Similarly, to *Friends*, *ER's* viewership on streaming skewed significantly younger than that of the expected nostalgic viewer who may have been a part of the key 18-49 demographic that watched the series during its original run. The most common age of viewers who streamed *ER* within the first week it was made available was 27 (Harnick par. 4). As Hulu continued to promote the series during ad breaks on its service, they altered promos to be a bit more playful and directed toward the younger generation. One

ad of note rolled out in May 2018 and claimed “*ER*: Has all the LOLz” and was a compilation of “little old ladies” on the show, making a play on the contemporary abbreviation LOL or laugh out loud. *ER* had used the abbreviation “LOL” to mean “Little Old Lady,” at times shouting, “That LOL in curtain one is still waiting.”

The reasons for why *ER* is so captivating to a modern audience may not be unlike why it was so captivating to audiences in 1994—its frenetic pacing, its narrative complexity, and its integration of elements of the soap opera—all make the show feel like, with a few minor adjustments, it could be from the present. However, television critics have also pointed towards what the series does not have in common with contemporary complex dramas as reasoning for its popularity. *ER* is low-concept. It’s simply about an emergency department and the doctors and nurses who work there. Another reason for *ER*’s novelty, might be that “it’s the type of show that’s fallen a little out of favor in the antihero era that TV has been stuck in (or responding to) since the debut of *The Sopranos* in 1999” (VanDerWerff “2018’s Hottest Show” par.26). There are no prototypes of the antihero that emerged on television in the late 90s on *ER*, the series characters are incredibly earnest and VanDerWeff argues that it is the development of the series characters and the dynamics between characters that made the series captivating both then and now.

A notable commonality between *ER*’s instant popularity in 1994, and its re-emergence in 2018 is that each political climate felt galvanized behind one particular issue: healthcare. Bill Clinton had campaigned on healthcare reform in 1992, and at the same time “the percentage of Americans who believed that that U.S healthcare system needed to be fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt exceeded 90 percent” (Turrow 336). In 2018, healthcare was again on the forefront of voters’ minds and the number one issue during the 2018 mid-term elections. The problems and faults of the American healthcare system that *ER* explores sadly remain. Patients leave against medical advice because they can’t afford surgery or treatment without insurance, the ER must not only serve emergent cases, but function as the only source of care for low-income patients who don’t have any other option, and the department is overcrowded, underfunded, and understaffed, with many patients being treated in hallways.

The data collected from my survey of viewers of *ER* on Hulu did confirm that viewers found the series to be contemporary as opposed to outdated, that the series politics remained relevant, and as *Vox*'s Emily Todd VanDerWerff had argued the development of and the dynamics between the series characters were a significant part of the series appeal to its modern viewers. However, from my data also emerged a possible rationale for the series sustained streaming popularity unlinked to nostalgia or the series individually—the current popularity of the medical drama genre particularly with the 18-49 target demographic—which in turn indicated a valuable level of engagement from its viewers.

Survey Data & Analysis

In total, there were 67 respondents to my survey of viewers of *ER* on Hulu. This lower response rate in comparison to my *Friends* survey was expected, as *ER* had been available on streaming only since January 2018 and as noted, the medical drama simply did not bring with it the same kind of cultural omnipresence of *Friends*. That said, there were some similarities to my *Friends* survey, most notably the majority of respondents (86 percent) to the survey of *ER* viewers were female. The age of respondents did skew a bit older than the *Friends* group, with most respondents identifying themselves as being between the ages of 30-34 (36 percent) and the next most common age group being between 25-29 (18 percent). This aligns closely with Hulu's reporting that the most common age of *ER* viewers on their service was 27. Notably, 16 percent also identified themselves as belonging to the younger group of 18-24 year old viewers. This data, with an overwhelming majority of respondents as either pre-teens, children, or having yet to be born when the series premiered, again confirms both that Must-See TV series are being picked up by a younger generation and that members of the networks' fleeing 18-49 demographic are flocking to series that had once aired on those networks but are now streaming.

When asked how they first discovered and watched *ER*, the overwhelming majority, 62 percent of respondents indicated that they encountered *ER* first during its original broadcast run on NBC, between 1994 and 2009 (see Table 14). Several respondents, in their written responses to the question of why they love the series, shared that they had memories of watching it with a parent growing up, specifically their

mothers (only one mention of a father), with one respondent writing “My mom loved it when I was little” and another mentioning that *ER* was a Thursday night tradition with their mom growing up. One respondent even went so far as to directly identify the source of their love and the appeal of re-visiting the show for them as nostalgia, writing: “watched it in the original run with my mom so there’s nostalgia there.” This echoes the results of *Friends*’ viewers when asked the same question. One could argue that nostalgia plays a significant role in the appeal of each series to their modern streaming viewers due to the concurrency of each series original broadcast run to the majority of modern viewer’s childhoods.

With regard to how they watch and revisit *ER* now, the majority of respondents (60 percent) identified Hulu as one of the ways (see Table 15). This result, much like with the survey of *Friends* viewers, was expected due to streaming convenience, especially in the case of *ER* which experienced a significant gap in accessibility outside of the DVD.

I next asked respondents how recently they had binge-watched *ER*. Given that *ER*’s arrival on Hulu was so recent, I kept the parameters of this question to within the past year. 35.56 percent had binge-watched the series within the last year, 35.56 percent within the last six months, and 28.89 percent within the last month. *Friends* has remained one of Netflix’s top television series because viewers not only watched but rewatched the series multiple times. Therefore, I was curious about whether viewers feel inclined to or have already watched *ER* on Hulu again. To determine this, I first asked respondents if they had seen all fifteen seasons of the series. The impetus for asking this question stemmed from the daunting volume of the series, and from the fact that the series decline in viewership in its later seasons was largely attributed to the departure of several major characters, including Dr. Mark Greene, and Dr. John Carter, who were thought of as essential to the show. 47.92 percent mentioned that they indeed had seen all fifteen seasons and 37.50 percent mentioned that they had not, but intended to. Streaming has afforded viewers with a greater ease to be completist. If a viewer lost interest and fell out of watching a series during its broadcast run it was more likely they would abandon it altogether, losing the desire to follow through with the commitment of watching a series week to week. Today, in the streaming model, it seems

viewers are more inclined to power through less than desirable storylines or even whole seasons, due to the elimination of a week long wait between episodes.

Next, I asked respondents how many times they had watched *ER* all the way through, from beginning to end. 60.71 percent of respondents indicated they had seen the series all the way through once, and 39.29 percent indicated they had seen it 2-5 times (see Table 16). *ER*, given that it is a complex, intense and often emotional drama, is in no way considered an easy rewatch in the way that *Friends* is; but that does not necessarily negate its rewatchability. A 2016 study entitled “Understanding Video Rewatching Experiences” surveyed 150 participants about their rewatching habits and the most common video respondents mentioned they rewatched was television drama. The specific series mentioned by participants were all narratively complex dramas, including *Lost* (2004-2010), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2013) (Bentley and Murray 72). Therefore, I asked those who had only seen the series all the way through once if they planned on watching it again and the majority (52.63 percent) responded yes (see Table 17). Bentley and Murray’s study did not specify how its participants were rewatching these complex dramas, however each series mentioned was in 2016, and is currently available to stream. Streaming is arguably a more ideal environment for complex dramas to continue to thrive than traditional television syndication, because viewers who discover a complex drama on a streaming platform can watch the series episodes in order from the beginning, as opposed to trying to piece together the narrative of whichever episode of the series a cable channel has chosen to air. What the response to my survey, coupled with Bentley and Murray's study seems to imply, is that streaming has also led to complex dramas becoming viable as rewatchable, unlike how in traditional syndication multi-camera sitcoms were what was considered viable as content audiences would feel inclined to rewatch.

As with my *Friends* survey, the final question on the survey of viewers of *ER* on Hulu asked respondents to write a few sentences about why they loved the show. These answers were much more detailed and thoughtful than the majority of responses for the *Friends* survey, in which many wrote surface level answers like “it’s funny.” The significant detail and passion in respondent's written answers can perhaps be accounted for by the development of, and dynamics between characters that VanDerWerff

singled out as a reason for the series' appeal and quality, and the connection between the audience and the series characters formed as a result.

In her book *Media Audiences: Television Meaning and Emotion*, scholar Krystin Gorton singles out *ER* for how it attracts and rewards faithful viewers for emotional engagement with the series characters. Gorton explains how the editing allows the viewer in on the emotion each character is feeling even in the most fast-paced moments, therefore enabling a strong emotional connection between character and viewer (117). About the characters one respondent wrote “The characters and the character development alone is astounding! You can watch solely for the crazy medical drama, but the dynamics between characters and the chemistry the cast shows is what made me keep watching for 15 seasons. And then watch it all again right after because I missed my *ER* family” and countless others echoed the same sentiments. Much like how the sample of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix felt like the six characters were their friends, viewers of *ER* on Hulu felt strong connections to and affection for the series' characters. Many *ER* viewers wrote long and passionate responses about how the characters kept them coming back, like one respondent who said “At first I was only planning to watch until Mark Greene died. Then I was only planning to watch until Romano's arm was cut off. Then I was only going to watch until Romano died. Then I was in too deep and had to watch all of it. But not necessarily out of obligation, in the end—because I truly cared about the characters, because I wanted to see what happened next, because the storylines were interesting and even when people were infuriating (looking at you, Archie Morris) I became invested in their story arcs.”

Not only did respondents express a deep investment in the arcs of the series characters, they further attributed their investment to the storylines and representation that to them made the series feel progressive and current. One respondent shared that *ER*'s “clear political agenda behind a lot of storylines” made it feel “vital.” Another reflected on how impressed they were with how the series held up, writing: “When re-watching the show as an older adult, I was also impressed with how the show handled, and represented many topics considered taboo (especially in the mid 90s), such as sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, HIV/AIDS status, race, etc.” This respondents claims were echoed

by another, who wrote: “Love how representative the cast is (even back in the 90s!) and especially how they cover social issues (e.g suicide among trans women of color; opioid epidemic; Deaf culture, etc. etc. etc.), which was super progressive at the time and is still honestly very unusual.” Many of the series most progressive storylines were not the stories of patients, but of the series main characters, such as physician’s assistant Jeanie Boulet who in season 2 discovered she was HIV positive, and Dr. Kerry Weaver, who later in the series came out as a lesbian, navigating working in the *ER* with a forearm crutch she needed due to congenital hip dysplasia with no main characters making a passing comment about her disability. These characters storylines were the most commonly cited in respondents answers as to why they loved the series.

Outside of an expression of investment and connection towards the series’ characters, and the resonance of the series’ politics, a notable reasoning for *ER*’s appeal to the modern streaming audience emerged: the current popularity of the medical drama genre, particularly with the 18-49-year-old target demographic. I asked respondents if they were a fan of other medical dramas, and the majority, 70.83 percent responded that they were. I then asked those who had responded yes, to share which ones that they were also a fan of. *Grey’s Anatomy*, was mentioned by over 53 percent of respondents as another medical drama they were a fan of, followed closely by *House*, which 48.9 percent of respondents indicated they were a fan of. The other medical dramas commonly mentioned were three, which like *Grey’s Anatomy*, are currently on the air: *The Good Doctor* (2017-present), *The Resident* (2018-present) and *Chicago Med* (2015-present). There are facets *ER* popularized present in the four popular medical dramas currently on the air, including the usage of the Steadicam, the pacing when a trauma is brought in or a patient codes, and the inclusion of soap opera elements; and these series have been successes for their networks. ABC’s *The Good Doctor*, averaged 6.72 million viewers during the 2018-2019 television season, Fox’s *The Resident* averaged 11 million viewers after factoring in multi-platform viewing and is one of the top 20 dramas among young adults and teens, and NBC’s *Chicago Med* averaged 11.4 million viewers and also averages well with 18-49 year old viewers (Welch par. 7, Andreeva par. 4, Porter par. 6). *Grey’s Anatomy* which was renewed for two more seasons (bringing its total to 17) averages 10 million

viewers, 3.6 million within the 18-49 demographic, and is ABC's highest rated drama. Notably, *Grey's Anatomy* has had its own astounding streaming success. In 2017, television executives at Disney shared that 200,000 people view the pilot of *Grey's Anatomy* on Netflix each month and that a total of 2.4 million people a year discover the series via Netflix (Glazer par. 1, Glazer par. 3). In February 2019, the new president of ABC entertainment, Karey Burke, revealed that her strategy to reestablish ABC as the number one network with women was to forefront and further market its medical dramas, *The Good Doctor* and *Grey's Anatomy* (Andreeva "New ABC Boss" par. 5). This is another signifier of *ER*'s value as a streaming commodity, not only is the series being actively engaged with by its streaming viewers, but it is a foundational member of a genre that a broadcast network is using as part of a strategy to attain an audience they deem as valuable.

Conclusion

Despite being the tent pole of Must See TV, *ER* did not experience an afterlife similar to its lead-in series *Friends*. Soon after the series final episode aired in 2009, it ceased airing in syndication as well, having struggled to capture an audience as many other narratively complex dramas had as well, and was only accessible on DVD until Hulu began streaming the series in January 2018. *ER*'s reemergence on Hulu is demonstrative of how past narratively complex series especially benefit from the streaming television model, where they can be easily discovered, and viewed linearly. Hulu in-turn benefits from the level of engagement viewers, like those I surveyed, display for the series. *ER*'s streaming viewers are actively engaged and emotionally invested, they're not putting on the series to fill the silence in the air, nor do they view it as something they can passively watch while doing something else. This is in sharp contrast to *Friends*, and an understanding of the difference in audience engagement between the two series, provides a potential way to assess the value of past series as streaming commodities.

While nostalgia played a significant role in *ER*'s appeal, its reemergence is also arguably the result of another coexisting trend as well: the present popularity of the medical drama genre. Currently, every major broadcast network except CBS is airing a medical drama that is drawing in the 18-49-year-old target

demographic, and *ER* is one of two long-running medical dramas experiencing success on a streaming platform. The response of broadcast networks to the present popularity of medical dramas within the target demographic also reveals with whom the genre is most popular: women. Similarly, to my sample of viewers of *Friends* on Netflix, the sample of viewers of *ER* on Hulu was overwhelmingly female (86 percent), perhaps the reasoning for the unevenness of gender representation within this sample may have something to do with the genres particular popularity among female television viewers.

As revealed in Chapter 1, when I asked viewers if *ER* leaving one streaming service for another would compel them to subscribe to that service, 40 percent answered that they were likely to, when just over ten percent of *Friends* viewers were. To my sample it is clear that *ER* is categorized as primetime content, and therefore potentially worthy of following if it were to be reclaimed by WarnerMedia for HBO Max in the imminent “streaming wars” where past series may play a key role in the assessment of the four new streaming services set to launch in the coming year.

Conclusion

There's an episode of *30 Rock* where network executive Jack Donaghy breaks down NBC's programming priorities, one of which reads to "make it 1997 again through science or magic" (Burditt). NBC reinstating the title of Must-See TV to their primetime Thursday lineup in May 2017 in no way has garnered the network the ratings and recognition it had in 1997, but streaming has made the series that justified the programming block's moniker heavy-hitters again. This thesis's purpose has been to understand the appeal of Must-See series *Friends* and *ER* to the large streaming audiences they've attracted, and use the understanding of their appeal to question the validity of the shifts in the television landscape that have resulted because of it.

While nostalgia is a significant part of why these series have appealed to streaming audiences, the response to my audience surveys also suggested that these series appeal to audiences in 2019 for the same reason they appealed to audiences in 1994. *Friends* continues to connect with audiences for the reason Austerlitz argued: it manages to make the audience forget that the relationship between viewer and characters is one-way, making them feel like the six friends are their friends as well. *ER*'s combination of narrative and stylistic elements that made it a novelty to its original audience, remain integral to the appeal of the series to today's audience as it feels contemporary with current narratively complex dramas.

Prior to their arrival on streaming platforms, each series experienced sustained popularity. *Friends* had a sustained presence in American pop culture and public consciousness since ending in 2004 due to its ubiquity in syndication. The series' availability on Netflix was therefore more of a return to the forefront than a true reemergence. *ER* may have faded from syndication and public consciousness, but the genre that it advanced remained, as medical dramas similar to, and inspired by it, have remained popular with the 18-49-year-old audience on broadcast networks and streaming.

Because of streaming, arguably each series has experienced a newfound or greater reach than they could have achieved in traditional television syndication. For the viewers of *Friends* that responded to my survey, its availability on Netflix has enabled them to use the series to fill fringe time, anytime,

serving as background noise or becoming a habitual part of their day to day lives by streaming an episode of the series every night before they go to sleep. There is another series, besides *Friends*, that is known to be streamed over and over again, and that is seemingly always on in the background of viewers lives: *The Office*. In fact, the seemingly perpetual viewing of both *Friends* and *The Office* on Netflix has been mocked even by the service itself. Do these series share characteristics that embolden habitual rewatching? A more comprehensive examination of the sustained popularity and habitual background viewing of these series via Netflix would be constructive.

ER, being a heavily serialized and narratively complex drama, had little chance of succeeding at the level that *Friends* did, or attaining a new audience in syndication. However, streaming, which grants viewers the control to start at the beginning of a series at any time, and view it linearly, unbound from any schedule, is the ideal environment for narratively complex dramas of television's past to not only be discovered by modern audiences, but be repetitively consumed in comparison to how sitcoms have been in traditional syndication. *ER* is not the only medical drama that has encountered resounding success on a streaming platform, *Grey's Anatomy*, like *ER*, is being discovered, watched and rewatched by streaming audience's. Furthermore, I encountered evidence of the medical drama genre's present popularity with the key 18-49 demographic on broadcast networks, and a hint towards the fact these series largely appeal to women, which made me curious as to whether the majority female response to my survey of the series' viewers was reflective of that. A wider study, not focused on a specific series but on the question of the medical drama genre's appeal to today's female broadcast and streaming audience, would not only be a worthy pursuit, but would provide further insight and understanding than was gleaned from my limited sample.

When I began working on this thesis my intent was to arrive at a suggestion of whether or not the influx of reboots and revivals, and the decision of several major studios to forgo licensing and launch their own streaming platforms--the two most prominent industry reactions to past-series like *Friends* and *ER*'s popularity with target audiences on streaming--were advantageous. My first chapter introduced and addressed these two responses, contextualizing and determining the success of the reboots and revivals

that have aired, and evaluating the perceived outcomes of, and hypotheticals surrounding forthcoming studio owned streaming services. I concluded that a focus on a series' individual appeal and popularity to the streaming audience was more pertinent than a macro focus on the trend of past series reemergent popularity, due to how a difference in things such as genre and audience engagement may aid in assessment of industry responses to their popularity. My close examinations of *Friends* on Netflix, and *ER* on Hulu, in turn demonstrated the pertinence I suggested a series focused approach could have.

I ended my chapter on *Friends* with a reaffirmation of licensed content's indispensability to streaming services, which in order to fulfill their goal of replicating and replacing traditional television, also require content, to fill viewer's fringe time. I also argued that which fringe content is popular may not correlate with a desire for similar primetime content, as fringe content serves a different purpose and function. In contrast, *ER*'s streaming popularity coupled with the fact that similar medical dramas are attracting a substantial 18-49 year old audience for networks, as well as the fact that its successor *Grey's Anatomy* is also experiencing resounding success on streaming, is arguably indicative that the series is more akin to primetime, not fringe time, and therefore a potentially greater commodity. This may explain why 40 percent of *ER* viewers surveyed indicated they were likely to subscribe to a new service for the series, as opposed to only 10.5 percent of *Friends* viewers surveyed indicating they would.

As I was wrapping up the writing of this thesis new details regarding forthcoming studio owned streaming services were revealed, most apropos among them being that WarnerMedia's streaming service, HBO Max would in fact become the exclusive streaming home of *Friends* in 2020 --the first big reclamation of content in what is being referred to as the "streaming wars," which are set to officially begin upon Disney's launch of Disney+ in November 2019. By mid 2020, Disney, WarnerMedia, Apple and NBCUniversal will have all launched streaming platforms, giving Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Instant Video four new and viable competitors. While this thesis has illuminated other avenues for research, the imminent "streaming wars" loom larger than anything else over its focus and its findings. Coincidentally, Must-See TV's inception and success fell within the midst of, and occurred despite of, a transition to the broadcast television landscape that feels akin to what is about to happen to the streaming

television landscape. The multi-channel transition, defined by scholar Amanda Lotz, began in the 1980s, and amongst the gradual two decades of change that would erode the big three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS's) viewership was the introduction of three new broadcast networks: FOX in 1986, and UPN and The WB in 1995 (*The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 13). With every new series announcement, trailer premiere, promise of series that will be streaming for the first time, or reclamation of licensed content, streaming's big three platforms (Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Instant Video) and their forthcoming competitors (Disney+, HBO Max, Apple TV+, and NBCUniversal's unnamed service) are vying for the title of Must-See TV. It is also worth noting that these new services, most notably Disney+, have announced a plethora of reboot and revival series as a part of their strategy to attract subscribers.

Thus, the series-focused approach I argued was more pertinent to understanding whether or not the industry shifts that have resulted because of past series popularity on streaming were advantageous, and the conclusions I came to using that approach with *Friends* and *ER* as my case studies, in turn has yielded questions worthy of critical attention as the transition to multiple streaming platforms, or "streaming wars" unfold. Will viewers follow past series' considered fringe time content to new platforms, or only those considered to be primetime content? Will more past series reemerge in popularity as studio's services provide access to a significant amount of the television content they own, and what category will those series fall into? Understanding what category each past series that reemerges in popularity or is rediscovered due to its availability on its studio's streaming service falls into may aid in determining whether the creation of the service was advantageous, more so than new programming created for the service, given how integral licensed content has been to the foundation and success of preexisting streaming services.

In conclusion, this examination of Must-See TV series *Friends* and *ER* has not only produced an understanding of these series' appeal, but contextualized and ascertained answers to the validity of the television industry's response to past series popularity on streaming and the current wave of 90s nostalgia. Through an analysis of my samples engagement with these nostalgic series I was able to make an argument for their categorization as either fringe time or primetime content, a determinization which

may prove useful in assessing the continuing outcomes to past series reemergence in popularity on streaming platforms, the “streaming wars” being the most significant among them.

Tables

Table 1: Do you currently subscribe to cable?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Yes.</i>	105	39.18%
<i>No</i>	163	60.82%

Table 2: Have you ever subscribed to cable?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Yes.</i>	211	78.73%
<i>No</i>	57	21.26%

Table 3: Which of these streaming services do you currently subscribe to? (Check all that apply)

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Netflix</i>	265	36.25%
<i>Hulu</i>	171	23.39%
<i>Amazon Prime Instant Video</i>	203	27.77%
<i>HBO Now</i>	56	7.66%
<i>CBS All Access</i>	20	2.74%
<i>Other</i>	16	2.19%

Table 4: If *Friends* were to be removed from Netflix, and become available on a different or new streaming service, how likely is it that you would feel compelled to subscribe to that streaming service?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Very Unlikely</i>	72	32.88%
<i>Unlikely</i>	71	32.42%
<i>Unsure</i>	53	24.20%
<i>Likely</i>	18	8.22%
<i>Very Likely</i>	5	2.28%

Table 5: If *ER* were to be removed from Hulu, and become available on a different or new streaming service, how likely is it that you would feel compelled to subscribe to that streaming service?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Very Unlikely</i>	20	40%
<i>Unlikely</i>	5	10%
<i>Unsure</i>	5	10%
<i>Likely</i>	9	18%
<i>Very Likely</i>	11	22%

Table 6: How did you first discover/watch *Friends*?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>During its original broadcast sun on NBC (1994-2004)</i>	128	58.99%
<i>In syndication (reruns on TBS, Nick at Nite, MTV, local affiliates etc.)</i>	48	22.12%
<i>On DVD</i>	17	7.83%
<i>Streaming on Netflix (January 2015- present)</i>	16	7.37%
<i>Other</i>	8	3.69%

Table 7: How do you watch/ revisit *Friends* now?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>In syndication (reruns on TBS, Nick at Nite, MTV, local affiliates etc.)</i>	88	26.91%
<i>On DVD</i>	31	9.48%
<i>Streaming on Netflix (January 2015-present)</i>	201	61.47%
<i>Torrenting</i>	2	0.61%
<i>Other</i>	5	1.53%

Table 8: How recently have you binge-watched *Friends*?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Within the last month</i>	65	32.66%
<i>Within the last three months</i>	31	15.58%
<i>Within the last six months</i>	33	16.58%
<i>Within the last year</i>	70	35.18%

Table 9: With what frequency do you watch an episode or more of *Friends*?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Everyday</i>	15	7.46%
<i>Multiple times per week</i>	28	13.93%
<i>Multiple times per month</i>	72	35.82%
<i>Multiple times per year</i>	86	42.79%

Table 10: How many times have you watched *Friends*?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Once</i>	26	12.38%
<i>2-5 times</i>	108	51.43%
<i>5-10 times</i>	39	18.57%
<i>10+ times</i>	32	15.24%
<i>N/A (did not/have not completed the series)</i>	5	2.38%

Table 11: If you have only watched the series once all the way through, do you think you will watch it again?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Very unlikely</i>	2	5.56%
<i>Unlikely</i>	4	11.11%
<i>Unsure</i>	11	30.56%
<i>Likely</i>	13	36.11%
<i>Very Likely</i>	6	16.67%

Table 12: How likely are you to watch *Friends* in the following ways?

	<i>Extremely unlikely</i>	<i>Moderately unlikely</i>	<i>Slightly unlikely</i>	<i>Neither likely nor unlikely</i>	<i>Slightly likely</i>	<i>Moderately likely</i>	<i>Extremely likely</i>
<i>Linearly (from beginning to end without skipping episodes)</i>	10.29%	8.82%	13.73%	5.39%	13.73%	19.12%	28.92%
<i>Linearly (from beginning to end, skipping a few episodes)</i>	13.37%	10.89%	10.89%	5.45%	22.28%	23.27%	13.86%
<i>Just watching your favorite episodes</i>	10.50%	6.00%	6.00%	8.50%	15.00%	21.00%	33.00%
<i>Watch a marathon of holiday themed episodes (i.e. the Thanksgiving and/or Christmas episodes)</i>	16.75%	7.88%	3.94%	6.40%	18.72%	17.73%	28.57%

<i>Put the series on in the background while you're doing other tasks</i>	2.97%	2.48%	2.97%	2.48%	8.91%	18.81%	61.39%
<i>Watch the series attentively</i>	4.93%	10.34%	12.32%	7.39%	26.60%	22.66%	15.76%
<i>Watch an episode before you go to sleep at night</i>	8.87%	3.45%	4.93%	9.85%	19.70%	20.20%	33.30%

Table 13: Who is your favorite friend?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Monica</i>	21	10.14%
<i>Ross</i>	8	3.86%
<i>Phoebe</i>	33	15.94%
<i>Chandler</i>	105	50.72%
<i>Rachel</i>	25	12.08%
<i>Joey</i>	15	7.25%

Table 14: How did you first discover/watch *ER*?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>During its original broadcast run on NBC (1994-2009)</i>	31	62%
<i>In syndication (re-runs on TNT 1998-2010, and PopTV April 2017-present)</i>	8	16%
<i>On DVD</i>	0	0%
<i>Streaming on Hulu (January 2018-present)</i>	6	12%
<i>Other</i>	5	10%

Table 15: How do you watch/ revisit *ER* now?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>In syndication (re-runs on Pop TV April 2017-present)</i>	11	16.92%
<i>On DVD</i>	9	13.85%
<i>Streaming on Hulu (January 2018-present)</i>	39	60%
<i>Torrenting</i>	4	6.15%
<i>Other</i>	2	3.08%

Table 16: How many times have you watched *ER* all the way through (beginning to end)?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Once</i>	17	60.71
<i>2-5 times.</i>	11	39.29%
<i>5-10 times.</i>	0	0%
<i>10+</i>	0	0%

Table 17: If you have only watched the series once all the way through, do you think you will watch it again?

	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Yes.</i>	10	52.63%
<i>No.</i>	3	15.79%
<i>Unsure.</i>	6	31.58%

Appendix A

“Friends on Netflix” Survey

Q1 What is your age?

- 18 - 24
 - 25 - 29
 - 30-34
 - 35-39
 - 40-44
 - 45-49
 - 50-54
 - 55-59
 - 60+
-

Q2 What is your gender?

- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Prefer to self-describe _____
 - Prefer not to say
-

Q3 How did you first discover/watch *Friends*?

- During its original broadcast run on NBC (1994-2004)
- In syndication (re-runs on TBS, Nick at Nite, MTV, local affiliates, etc)
- On DVD
- Streaming on Netflix (January 2015-present)
- Other _____
-

Q4 How do you watch/revisit *Friends* now? (Check all that apply).

- In syndication (re-runs on TBS, Nick at Nite, MTV, local affiliates etc)
- On DVD
- Streaming on Netflix (January 2015-present)
- Torrenting
- Other _____
-

Q5 Do you currently subscribe to cable?

- Yes
- No
-

Q6 Have you ever subscribed to cable?

- Yes
- No
-

Q7 Which of these streaming services do you subscribe to? (Check all that apply).

- Netflix
- Hulu
- Amazon Prime Instant Video
- HBO Now
- CBS All Access
- Other _____
-

Q8 If *Friends* were to be removed from Netflix, and become available on a different or new streaming service, how likely is it that you would feel compelled to subscribe to that streaming service?

- Very unlikely
- Unlikely
- Unsure
- Likely
- Very Likely
-

Q9 If you answered that you were unlikely to subscribe to a new streaming service for *Friends*, why is that so? (Skip this question if it is not applicable).

Q10 How recently have you binge-watched *Friends*?

- Within the last month.
 - Within the last three months.
 - Within the last six months.
 - Within the last year.
-

Q11 With what frequency do you watch an episode or more of *Friends*?

- Everyday
 - Multiple times per week
 - Multiple times per month
 - Multiple times per year
-

Q12 How many times have you watched *Friends* all the way through (beginning to end)?

- Once
 - 2-5 times
 - 5-10 times
 - 10+ times
 - N/A (Did not/have not completed the series)
-

Q13 If you have only watched the series once all the way through, do you think you will watch it again? (Skip this question if it is not applicable).

- Very unlikely
- Unlikely
- Unsure
- Likely
- Very likely

Q14 How likely are you to watch *Friends* in the following ways?

	Extremely unlikely (1)	Moderately unlikely (2)	Slightly unlikely (3)	Neither likely nor unlikely (4)	Slightly likely (5)	Moderately likely (6)	Extremely likely (7)
Linearly (from beginning to end, without skipping episodes). (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Linearly (from beginning to end, skipping a few episodes). (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Just watching your favorite episodes. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watch a marathon of holiday themed episodes (i.e the Thanksgiving, and/or Christmas episodes). (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Put the series on in the background while you are doing other tasks. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watch the series attentively. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watch an episode before you go to sleep at night. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15 Who is your favorite friend?

- Monica
 - Ross
 - Phoebe
 - Chandler
 - Rachel
 - Joey
-

Q16 On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the most and 1 being the least) how interested are you in seeing a revival of the series?

- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
-

Q17 Are you a fan of other multi-camera sitcoms? (For example, Fraiser, Seinfeld, The Big Bang Theory)

- Yes
 - No
-

Q18 If yes, which ones?

Q19 What other television series do you re-watch/revisit often?

Q20 Please write a few sentences (or more!) about why you love *Friends*.

Appendix B

“ER on Hulu” Survey

Q1 What is your age?

- 18 - 24
 - 25 - 29
 - 30-34
 - 35-39
 - 40-44
 - 45-49
 - 50-54
 - 54-59
 - 60+
-

Q2 What is your gender?

- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Prefer to self-describe _____
 - Prefer not to say.
-

Q3 How did you first discover/watch *ER*?

- During its original broadcast run on NBC (1994-2009).
- In syndication (re-runs on TNT 1998-2010, and PopTV April 2017-present)
- On DVD.
- Streaming on Hulu (January 2018-present)
- Other _____
-

Q4 How do you watch/revisit *ER* now? (Check all that apply).

- In syndication (re-runs on PopTV April 2017-present)
- On DVD
- Streaming on Hulu (January 2018-present)
- Torrenting
- Other _____
-

Q5 Do you currently subscribe to cable?

- Yes
- No
-

Q6 Have you ever subscribed to cable?

- Yes
- No
-

Q7 Which of these streaming services do you subscribe to? (Check all that apply).

- Netflix
- Hulu
- Amazon Prime Instant Video
- HBO Now
- CBS All Access
- Other _____
-

Q8 If *ER* were to be removed from Hulu, and become available on a different or new streaming service, how likely is it that you would feel compelled to subscribe to that streaming service?

- Very Unlikely
- Unlikely
- Unsure
- Likely
- Very likely
-

Q9 If you answered that you were unlikely to subscribe to a new streaming service for *ER*, why is that so? (Skip this question if it is not applicable).

Q10 How recently have you binge-watched *ER*?

- Within the last month.
 - Within the last six months.
 - Within the last year.
-

Q11 Have you seen all 15 seasons of the series?

- Yes
 - No
 - Have not yet, but intend to.
-

Q12 How many times have you watched *ER* all the way through (beginning to end)? (Skip this question if it is not applicable).

- Once.
 - 2-5 times.
 - 5-10 times.
 - 10+ times
-

Q13 If you have only watched the series once all the way through, do you think you will watch it again? (Skip this question if it is not applicable).

- Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
-

Q14 If you have not completed the series, what was the last season of *ER* that you remember watching?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

Q15 If you didn't complete the series, what are the reasons for why you stopped watching the series when you did?

Q16 Are you a fan of other medical dramas?

Yes

No

Q17 If yes, which ones?

Q18 Are there any television series that you watch/revisit often? If so, which ones?

Q19 Please write a few sentences (or more!) about why you love *ER*.

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