



Friends: The Reunion – Critic Sentiment Analysis & Marketer’s perspective

Overview

- 62% of the critics felt that Friends: The Reunion was worth the wait. The audience seemed to agree, with 73% of viewers saying that they loved the show.
- 81.3% of the critics felt that the nostalgia and the emotional connection took them down memory lane and acknowledged this to be the key reason they liked the reunion.
- Almost two decades later, the instant camaraderie and strong chemistry amongst the cast were well noted-special mention made on the backstage conversations, where the actors relived some of the famous scenes.
- An overwhelming 80% of the critics had a positive review in Southeast Asia, followed by 67% critics from the UK and Ireland reviewing the show positively.
- While critics globally remained primarily positive or neutral about the show, 12% of North America and 10% from the Indian subcontinent were scathing.
- In North America, most negative sentiments revolved around James Corden moderating the show, while some felt that the actors were pretentious. While in the Indian subcontinent, the negative comments were mainly about the cameos and the reunion being insensitive cause they failed to address the sexual and body-shaming content of the original series.
- Although the critics were not excited about the cameos, 31% praised Lady Gaga and Lisa Kudrow performance on Smelly Cat. And almost 8% applauded Justin Bieber walking the ramp dressed as Spudnik.

Marketer's Perspective – Observations & Learnings

Nostalgia is warmly relatable. For the producers of Friends: The Reunion, in the daunting present and uncertain future, the relaunch was a nudge towards it - a snug fit!

Target Audience for Friends - Although the audience size has scaled much over the years, the young Millennials rule as the primary demography. These individuals, stepping into the next phase of their lives with their partners, skew focus on career and recreation.

Observations and learnings for a brand marketer:

Connect & Build - Build your brand for your audience using physical elements and emotional connections.

Brands build credibility with their target audience via two fundamental representations - Physical and Emotional.

Physical are mostly tangible - products, logos, merchandising, while emotional connections are through experiences or feelings associated with the physical elements of the brand.

Case in point: Producers of the show **Friends** played on tender, comforting and pleasant nostalgia. They successfully relaunched its **Reunion** episode, nudging its audience towards a bucket full of #throwback posts.

Nurture - Re-use the elements from above to create an instant brand recall. Campaigns that reference the past can elicit a relationship, a passive bond that ties the present to old memories through products.

Case in point: Central Perk, Monica & Rachel's typical New York apartment, Gunther and of course Janice's "O-my-God" all implied a prompt reminder for the audience.

Refresh and expand - Leverage experts within a specific community to endorse and utilize the existing brand power and penetrate a more extensive audience base.

Case in point: This 90's pop culture, with time, enamoured a much larger crowd than its initial target audience. Global youth icons like Malala Yousafzai, BTS, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber and David Beckham, came together for the Reunion episode. The least it did was that these influencers kept the brand relevant for Gen Y & Z.

The Objective

This independent research study targets to seek answers about the relevance of time-tested content, the pre-launch anticipation and post-release evaluation by global digital consumers.

The outcome of Friends: The Reunion may give rise to a nostalgia wave that piggybacks on the 'feel-good' emotions of a vast ready-made historical audience.

The study provides resources to content creators and marketers to understand the opportunities and risks involved in leveraging the security of nostalgia versus tarnishing brands with failed attempts.

The Prelude – History & Magnanimity of Friends – The OG Series

"Sorry, I think I broke it." – said Jennifer Aniston, after posting a selfie with her Friends co-stars Lisa Kudrow, Courteney Cox, Matt LeBlanc, David Schwimmer and Matthew Perry as her new Instagram profile hit a technical glitch and could not accept new followers for a short time

"And now we're Instagram FRIENDS too. HI INSTAGRAM,"

On October 15, 2019, this one post created an online storm, and Aniston made a Guinness World Record by hitting 1 million followers in just 5 hours and 16 minutes, 5 million in 12 hours and 16.5 in the next ten days!

Following few days, each of her fellow co-stars (except Mathew Perry, who did not have an Instagram account at that time) gained over a million followers. Although Aniston is an immensely popular actor, this effect was really about the speculations of a Friends reboot.

Friends, a sitcom about six friends living in New York City, debuted in 1994 and aired until 2004. It gained popularity over the years and hit a record viewership of 52.5 million for its final episode just in the US.

Over the years, the show continued to gain new audiences worldwide and was also dubbed in various languages, reaching an iconic status with a cult fan following.

To avoid messing with the memories and maintain the authentic experience, however, co-creator Marta Kauffman and David Crane, unanimously with the lead star cast, had repeatedly crushed all reboot dreams.

In fact, in 2016, when there was an attempted reunion on NBC's - Tribute to James Burrows, where the lead actors (except Mathew Perry) reunited, both the critics and the audience were not very kind to the show's format.

However, well over a decade later, it was reportedly UK's favourite streaming show and Netflix's second most popular show in the US for the year 2018. The trade couldn't help but notice the undiminishing popularism of the series.

The show found an incremental audience among the digitally-streaming Gen Zs while maintaining its evergreen appeal within the earlier generations.

HBO Max paid Netflix a staggering \$425 million over five years to move the series to its platform for US streaming. Other instances, like 25th-anniversary screenings of the shows 12 most popular episodes across US cinema, pop-ups of Central Perk and Monica's apartment, Lego sets, Ralph-Lauren and H&M fashion ranges, kept the popularity momentum.

Paving way for Friends: The Reunion

Just after a month of Aniston's Instagram uproar, the news leaks in November 2019 about the actors being in talks for a one-off unscripted reunion show to be streamed on HBO Max. It finally became official by February 2020.

The pandemic delayed the filming from August 2020 to April 2021, and ultimately it took place on the show's original soundstage - Stage 24, of the Warner Bros lot in Burbank, California. After a series of social media leaks were crafted to generate the desired pre-release buzz, the show premiered on HBO on May 27, 2021.

The much-awaited reunion clocked over a whopping 2 Million Google searches in the United States alone before it got aired. After the premiere, the internet was buzzing with comments and feedbacks from stalwart media critics, journalists, and audiences alike, about what they liked, hated and everything in between.

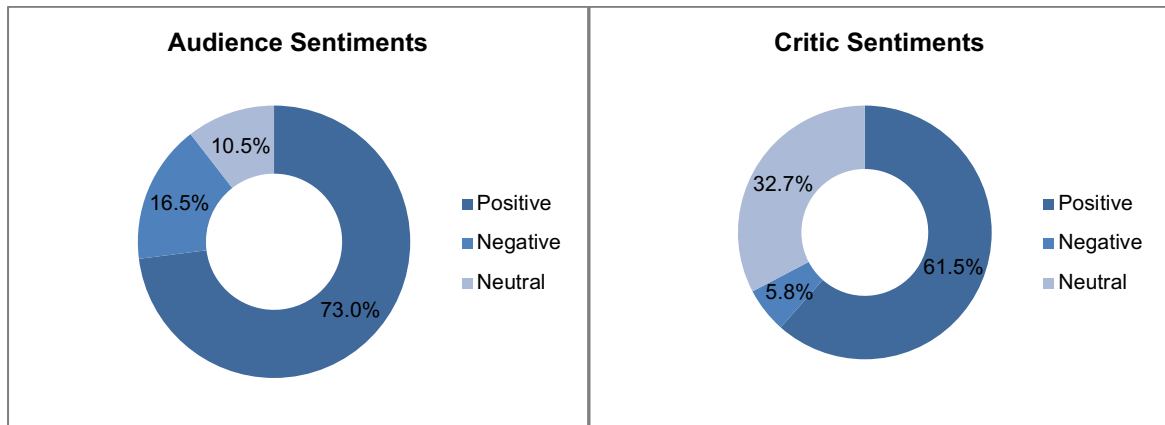


Figure 1: Audience and Critics Sentiment. Source: Skilfinitly Media Analysis June 2021

The study collated reviews of English-speaking viewers and critics from more than 50 digital publications with predominant regional web traffic. The overall verdict was favourable (refer to Figure 1), with more than 60% of the critics and audience agreed that they were not disappointed.

- 51% audience felt that nothing has changed, from Gunther to Mr Heckles and from Richard to Monica; they enjoyed the emotional quotient of the show.
- 24.2% did not like James Corden as a host.
- 12.1% had negative sentiments about the cameos.
- And another 12.1% audience did not like the show as they felt the "fun" was missing.

However, the audience comments lacked nuances to analyse further and identify the key driving factors.

Critics Sentiment Analysis

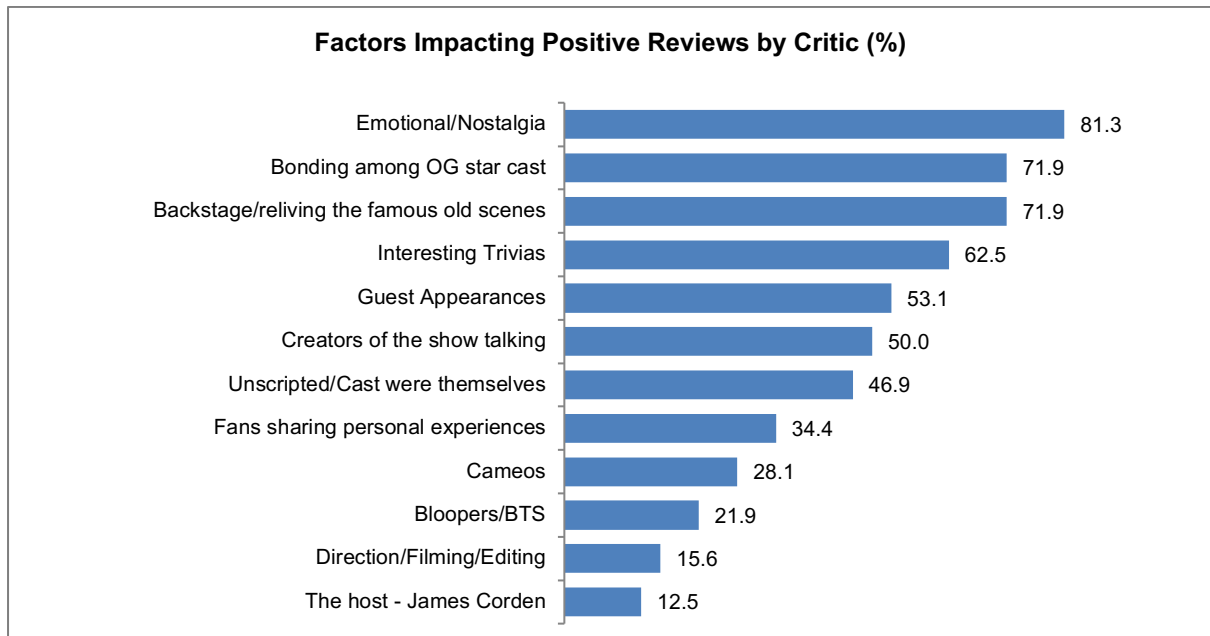


Figure 2: Factors impacting positive reviews by critic. Source: Skilfinitly Media Analysis June 2021

Unlike audience reviews, the critics had a structured, analytical approach to the subject. Instead of a straightforward "like" or "hate", multiple factors were considered, objectively evaluated before inferring the results.

Skilfinitly's Media Analysis methods identified a total of [16 factors](#) that the critic considered in their review process.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of critics rating the Reunion positively due to some of these factors. In contrast, some of these also contributed to negative or neutral feedback, according to other critics. We will elaborate these in the latter part of the study.

Interpretation of Critics Reviews by Region

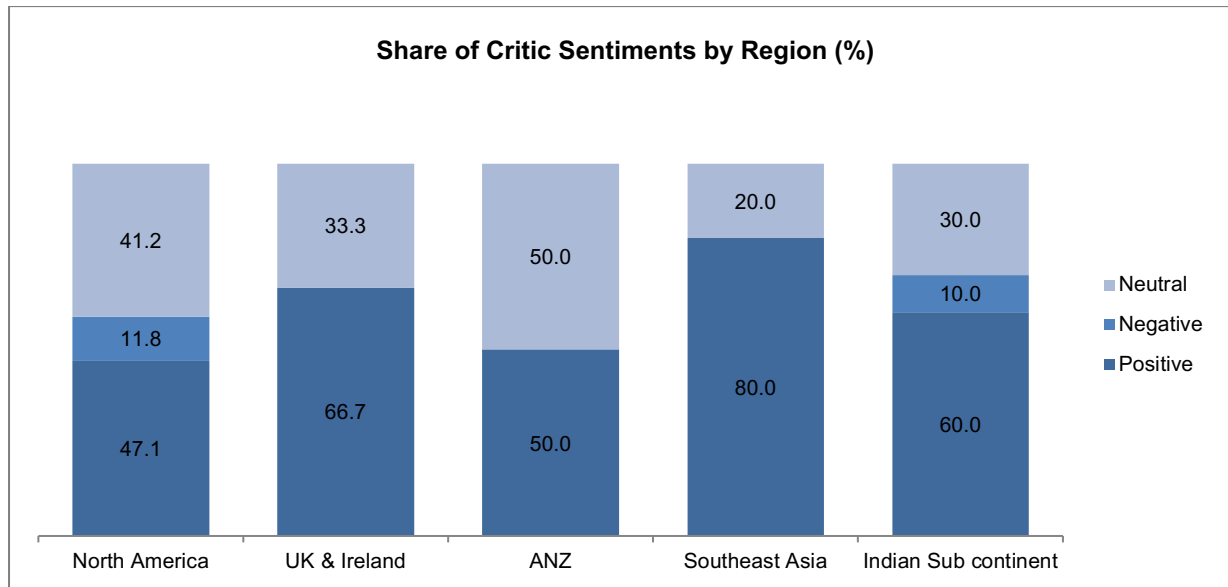


Figure 3: Share of critic sentiments by region. Source: Skilfinitly Media Analysis June 2021

The Positive Southeast Asia

Worldwide motion-picture critics sentiment analysis revealed that the show received its highest appreciation in Southeast Asia. Reason - the actors were spot on in recreating nostalgia for almost 25% of the population (i.e Gen Zs) and the youth.

All critics felt that the chemistry amongst the cast looked genuine, as they played themselves, shared their memories and bonded instantly after 17 years.

"Though the initial reaction from some fans to Friends: The Reunion was, "What, an unscripted special? That's it? It's not a continuation of the show?", after watching the special and crying, and laughing, but mostly crying like The One Where Chandler Can't Cry levels of crying, I'd say this was everything." – [Hong Kong Tatler](#)

Share of Key Positive Factors by Region	North America	UK & Ireland	ANZ	Southeast Asia	Indian Subcontinents
Emotional/Nostalgia	23.1 %	23.1 %	11.5 %	23.1 %	19.2 %
Bonding among OG star cast	17.4 %	21.7 %	13.0 %	26.1 %	21.7 %
Backstage/reliving the famous old scenes	26.1 %	26.1 %	13.0 %	17.4 %	17.4 %

- A combined total of 69.3% of the critics from North America, UK & Ireland and Southeast Asia has liked the emotional and nostalgic aspect of the show. The sentiments do not mirror for Australia and New Zealand.
- The strong bond among the actors was majorly appreciated by Southeast Asia, UK & Ireland and Indian Subcontinents.
- 52.2% critics from North America and UK & Ireland admired the section of the show where the cast was reliving some famous old scenes.

A Divided North America

Interestingly, North America attracted maximum negative reviews (12%). Majority of the critics in this geography did not like the show broadly because:

- They considered the moderator and cameos as distractions that pulled away from the attention from the primary star cast of the show.
- They could not form the same emotional connection as with the actual series and thereby could not fully relive the "warm, fuzzy, quirky friendship", as portrayed in the world's most famous sitcom.
- They also felt that there was no bond among the show's cast, and they were simply pretending to enjoy each other's company.

Share of Key Negative Factors by Region	North America	Indian Subcontinents
The host - James Cordon	100%	0%
Cameos	50%	50%
Nobody talked about issues with original Friends show	50%	50%
Not required/Forced attempt	50%	50%
No bond among cast	100%	0%
More attention should have been given to real guests from the show	100%	0%

A Critical Indian Subcontinent

Unlike the critics from North America, most negative reviews from Indian Subcontinent were about non-addressal of issues from the original show.

- The critics mentioned that the reunion show booted talking about the content built around racial or sexual orientation as in the original show. The avoidance thus was deemed arguably inappropriate in the current age, especially to the new audience base.

"The show's legacy has only grown more complicated as its overwhelming whiteness, and dated deployments of gay panic and transphobia have not prevented it from gaining new fans on streaming" – [Mint, India](#)

- They also discarded the cameos as well as believed that the reunion was not needed and was a forced attempt.

Play safe with neutral comments

Globally, nearly one-third of critics had neutral or mixed reviews about the show.

- 71% of the critic found the section of the show where the actors were reliving the famous old scenes as pretty exciting and amusing.
- The quick hacks were particularly loved e.g how Courteney Cox often had her lines written out on the kitchen table or even in the sink.
- On the other hand, more than half of the critics (59%) did not like the choice of the host of the show and the appearance of unnecessary cameos, which have no relation with the show.

Share of Key Neutral Factors by Region	North America	UK & Ireland	ANZ	Southeast Asia	Indian Subcontinents
Backstage/reliving the famous old scenes	50.0%	14.0%	14.0%	5.0%	17.0%
Interesting Trivias	40.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%
The host - James Corden	40.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%
Cameos	47.0%	8.0%	7.0%	20.0%	18.0%

- Among neutral reviews, critics from North America and Indian Subcontinents (more than 67% in total) loved the segment where the actors' group to do a table read, enacting the scenes from the original episodes.
- Regarding negative afflictions even in technically neutral reviews, "James Corden as a host" tops the list with the highest contribution from North America and UK & Ireland.

Conclusion

Instead of anticipating the next great thing, nostalgia marketing urges us to focus on the great things we already know.

With that virtue, while the Reunion seemed to be worth the wait, it found criticism elsewhere. Despite largely neutral and somewhat negative reviews by the critics in North America, the reunion special did not fail to impress the audience across the globe. The Reunion created enough buzz which in turn kept the audience around the world eager and waiting.

So, we can settle the scores leaning towards anything associated with FRIENDS (original show, original cast), will hardly be discarded by its audience.

Source and Evidence

Critics and audience reviews were collected from over 120+ news websites, social channels and opinion pieces, including Rotten Tomatoes, Mint, across geographies.

The information was structured and further analysed to obtain tonality and factors that critics and audiences converged. This enabled us to bring objectivity to the sentiments.

Disclaimer: All the results are derived from global online data sources. The sample selected does not represent the “motion picture/movie critics” as a whole but represents the specific comments selected by the data analyst for this study.

About the Author

Archi Saxena is a data analyst with expertise in POS data, media relations, and content production. She is currently working as a Branding and Data Consultant at Skilfinity. [Follow](#) her on LinkedIn.

Glossary

Factors	Definitions
The host - James Corden	Sentiments on the section of the show where James Corden was moderating
Bonding among OG star cast	Comparison of the cast's chemistry with the original show
Unscripted/Cast was themselves	Cast was performing without a script
Cameos	Appearances of all the guests who had no relation with the original show
Fans sharing personal experiences	Section of the show with fans' experiences and testimonials
Interesting Trivias	Section of the show where cast was sharing some unheard stories
Emotional/Nostalgia	Content of the show was emotional where viewers were getting pushed down to the memory lane
Bloopers/ BTS	Funny retakes made by actors during the making of original show
Direction/Filming/Editing	Concept and the sequence of events in the whole reunion show
Creators of the show talking	Section of the show when makers of original show were sharing their experiences
Guest Appearances	Appearances of the supporting actors who were a part of the original show for a short period of time
Backstage/Reliving the famous old scenes	Section of the show where main cast was enacting the famous old scenes of the original show
Nobody talked about issues with original Friends show	Nobody addressed the racial/cultural issues with original sitcom, in the reunion show
No Bond among cast	There was no chemistry among the cast; they did not appear natural
Not required/Forced attempt	The reunion show was not required/desperate attempt
More attention should have been given to real guests from the show	There should have been more attention given to the real guests rather than staged moments in the reunion show

© 2021 Skilfinity Pte Ltd. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Skilfinity's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Skilfinity's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Skilfinity disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Skilfinity may address legal and financial issues, Skilfinity does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Skilfinity's Usage Policy governs your access and use of this publication. Skilfinity prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party.