

The one where the characters on *Friends* talk face to face

Millions of young adults are watching *Friends* reruns. Why?

by [J. Dana Trent](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



The cast of the sitcom *Friends*. Photo © NBC.

College students are obsessed with *Friends*. Not their real-life buddies, but the sitcom, whose 236 episodes dominated American TV from 1994 to 2004. Though *Friends* displays the kind of homogeneity younger millennials and Generation Z rail against—it's an all- white, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied cast—they are nevertheless enthralled by it.

Nearly 16 million people watch *Friends* reruns each week. Netflix purchased all the episodes in 2014. The *New York Times* reports that 81 percent of Netflix account

holders are adults under 35. Viacom also cashed in: within weeks *Friends* became its top-acquired MTV program, attracting more new viewers to the network among people 18 to 24 years old and even more new viewers in the 12-to-17 category.

Why would media giants spend millions to acquire an outdated show? In his *Vulture* essay, "Is *Friends* Still the Most Popular Show on TV?" Adam Sternbergh writes that young adults find *Friends* entertaining because of its now-impossible premise: six young Americans take time to talk to each other in person sans cell phones.

To be clear, *Friends* was always based on an impossible premise: a twentysomething clique whose bonds survive Manhattan housing costs, unsteady jobs, and love triangles. But the show encompasses threads of an era that those watching didn't experience. The characters have never swiped, texted, or snapped their days away.

Friends epitomizes what the *Onion* satirically named a "peace and prosperity" vibe obscure to those now teetering on independence. Today's twentysomethings attended elementary school in a post-9/11 America with a nose-diving economy and a climate in chaos. Their parents have been perpetually stressed. Screen time has prevailed over face-to-face interactions.

Recently, the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reported that social media use among millennials corresponds to a higher rate of perceived social isolation or loneliness. According to a study, those who use social media 58 times per week (an average of eight times per day) were three times more likely to report feeling lonely as those who only went on social media nine times per week.

Marta Kauffman, the cocreator of *Friends*, says the appeal of the show to a new generation has to do with wish fulfillment: "They're on social media all the time, so I believe they crave human contact." While today's young adults have spent their entire lives connected, it hasn't been in the way that Chandler, Joey, Monica, Phoebe, Rachel, and Ross were.

The singer-songwriter known as Lorde, whose album *Melodrama* examines this phenomenon among her peers, dubs her cohort "Generation L.O.V.E.L.E.S.S." Partying abates loneliness. "I'm just dreading sitting at home by myself hearing my thoughts hit the walls," said Lorde in a *Vulture* piece earlier this year.

Loneliness used to be eased through strong community ties like those seen on *Friends*. Whether through parties, work, neighbors, hobbies, or religious services, humans found their tribal needs fulfilled in groups. Religions came with built-in access to gathered people whose purpose was something beyond themselves. But according to the Pew Forum, American millennials and Gen Z lead the way among the religious nones—with 36 percent of them not identifying as anything. The social structure that religion provided is crumbling along with declining worship attendance.

But millennials with no interest in organized religion are still turning to its roots and forms to address their isolation. *How We Gather*, a Harvard Divinity School report on new forms of association, identifies six dimensions of gathering. People gather for community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, and accountability. The report's examples include the fitness regimens CrossFit and SoulCycle and a social gathering website called the Dinner Party.

CrossFit is a fitness boot camp designed to push people's physical limitations in order to help them gain confidence and endurance. Its effect has been described as "supernatural" and "almost like meditation." In a Religion News Service article, author and minister John Van Sloten suggests that the sense of communal suffering and growth described by CrossFit members has a religious dimension: "People inherently know that in order to find more life you've got to give something up."

At meetings of the Dinner Party, a similar theme emerges, but with an added layer of vulnerability: grief. Twenty- and thirtysomethings who have lost a partner, spouse, parent, or sibling gather for homemade meals and to talk about their losses. Month after month, the ordinary ritual of a shared meal transforms strangers into family.

One Dinner Party participant, a mathematics professor, echoes a sentiment that might be expressed by a churchgoer: "It is cathartic to be with others who get this aspect of what I'm living with. We all show up with pent-up emotions and get to share the strong and complicated feelings we have. It feels healing and transformative to be together."

Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, authors of *How We Gather*, believe that groups like CrossFit and the Dinner Party could "form the DNA of a fruitful movement for personal spiritual growth and social transformation." The social media era—which

has both connected and isolated us—is shaping alternative ways of gathering. An ethos that replicates aspects of the Judeo-Christian practices of sabbath and community may be gaining momentum among the nones.

Until then, there's always *Friends*.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The one without smartphones."