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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to explore how young adults' experiences of serial shows (TV series or series produced by Video on demand platforms) underpin the process of identity reflection in today's media ecosystem where connected viewing is the norm. Specifically, we examine the appropriation of serial shows; that is, the interpretation and transformation of the text to make it one's own and integrate it into daily life. Our research draws on two sets of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022, with 20 young adults, aged 18 to 26, living in the Montreal area (Canada) during which participants were asked to share meaningful TV series experiences, and to comment key scenes from these shows. Our qualitative content analysis reveals that young adults appropriate in diverse ways the experiences of shows they consider significant and that this process often involves the conservation of fragments of related media content. These digital trace-making practices incorporate a range of media, online platforms, and formats, including diverse paratexts, either created by individuals themselves or retrieved online, and stored on their digital devices. These fragments act as symbolic and mnemonic markers along individuals' personal trajectories, allowing them to revisit their life path and relive the emotions associated with past viewing experiences. The trace-making of the serial experience in this way constitutes an automedial self-writing practice that facilitates the work of memory and helps individuals to constitute themselves as subjects. Watching and rewatching certain shows, or fragments of these shows, also allows for the creation of a "potential space" (Winnicott, 1971) in which young adults can settle, express their emotions, and develop reflexive competencies. This "potential space" can take on various configurations, notably as a space of memory, of home and belonging, of expression and management of emotions, of self-understanding and self-writing, and finally, of dialogue.

1. Introduction

The process of identity construction involves various cultural discourses and practices (Hall 1996; Ricoeur 1990). For young adults today, one of these practices is watching fictional serial programmes commissioned and produced by television studios or other actors operating in the

¹ Professors, Department of Social and Public Communication and School of Media, Faculty of Communication – University of Quebec in Montreal

audiovisual and digital environment² (Glevarec 2012; Julier-Costes, Jeffrey & Lachance 2014; Layland, Hill & Nelson 2018).

Indeed, current productions targeting young adults present new models of becoming adult portraying ‘the ordinary lives of (nearly) ordinary individuals, not so much heroes as identities under construction’ (Glevarec, 2012 :112). These series address issues central to today’s young adults’ lives such as sexual and professional identity, romantic relations, one’s place within the family, relationships with peers, drug use, mental health and mortality) (Maigret & Soulez 2007; Julier-Costes, Jeffrey, & Lachance 2014). Shows capacity to integrate elements of the prevailing sociocultural context and of current events also accentuates their ‘reality effect’ (Glevarec 2012). Young adults often develop strong emotional connection and attachment to characters encountered over long-form serial narratives (Julier-Costes, Jeffrey, & Lachance 2014; Glevarec 2012) fostering ‘companion relationship’ (Glevarec 2012). As Laugier (2019: 119) points out: ‘The character defines a show’s realism, at once familiar yet different, [and] attachment is made possible by the regularity of the encounter over the long term’³. This attachment is further strengthened by the growing diversity of characters in recent years (Berton & Boni 2019) and the ‘emotional realism’ of the situations depicted (Ang 1985; Maigret & Soulez 2007).

Research analysing how individuals use shows as identity resources remains sparse (Delporte & Francou 2015). Pasquier (1999), in her groundbreaking study of the French television sitcom *Hélène et les garçons*, argues that the series provides adolescents with models, values, and scripts that they can use to reflect on their own experiences, as well as opportunities to experiment with social roles.

Researchers in cultural and media studies trying to understand how experiences of media objects such as films (Kuhn 2013b) or television shows (Silverstone 2003; Hills 2002) are integrated into everyday life and identity-construction have drawn on Winnicott’s concept of ‘transitional space’. According to Winnicott (1971), this space, linking reality and imagination, supports the development of the self in relation to others through play, creativity, and cultural experience. While Winnicott focused on early childhood experiences, and transitional objects which help the child navigate emotional issues of separation and dependency, he mentioned that the experience of culture opened spaces in adulthood which he termed potential spaces. Television, through its ritual inscription in the everyday, the regularity of its programming, its repetition, the possibility it offers to return to (revisit) past phases of one’s trajectory, and the creativity implied by individuals’ engagement with its content, shares several characteristics with Winnicott’s notion of potential space (Silverstone 2003). The concept has also been used to explore how viewers ‘[inhabit, negotiate, and move] in and through familiar environments, for example [...] geographies of virtual spaces and environments like those of video games and films’ (Kuhn 2013a: 8), as well as how fan communities engage with media texts. As Hills (2002: 79) argues, ‘Affective play “creates culture” by forming a new “tradition” or set of biographical and historical resources which can be drawn on throughout fans’ lives.’ (Hills, 2002: 79).

² Over the past fifteen years, several studies have documented an interest among various publics, notably young adults, toward serial shows (Glevarec 2012; Combes 2013). In Québec, serial shows are one of the most watched types of online content among young adults (65% of people aged 18 to 24 declare watching serial shows online) and this tendency is more pronounced among individuals identifying as women or as non-binary (ATN 2023).

³ Except where noted, all translations are the authors’ own.

Very few studies have explored shows viewing trajectories, especially those of youth entering adulthood, and the ways in which those experiences are linked with the identity reflections that characterise this stage of life. The conceptualisation of identity which we adopt in this study is that of a narrative production that allows individuals to interconnect the events of their lives within a coherent narrative (Ricoeur 1990). While individuals are shaped by their family history, generation, social milieu, and community (Darmon 2016), they also actively construct their identity by interpreting their past and projecting themselves into the future. This process of narrativisation becomes particularly salient when individuals are confronted with difficulties or 'trials' (Martuccelli 2002).

The objective of the present study is to better understand how experiences of serial shows support the process of identity reflection in the current ecosystem, where the 'connected viewing' (Holt & Sanson 2014) of shows has become the norm among young adults. More specifically, we focus on the various ways young adults appropriate serial experiences or, use media texts to make sense of their own situations. Appropriation involves interpreting and transforming texts to make them one's own, integrate them into everyday life, and connect them to personal experience (Albenga & Bachman 2015; Tosca & Kalstrup 2019). Drawing on perspectives from the Constance School of reception theory, whose proponents were principally interested in the experience of reading, this approach 'sets out to explore the various ways in which receivers are affected by what they read, hear, or see, react to it, and invest their comprehension in their practices' (Quéré 1996: 36). As Albenga and Bachmann's (2015: 71), research suggests, an approach centred on appropriation is useful to understand how reading practices can open a space for self-reflection and identity construction in the everyday, while 'not overstat[ing the effects of texts], but rather situat[ing them] within variable social trajectories and contexts'. They also emphasise that some readings are more consequential than others.

Although the practice of reading may appear to be far removed from that of watching serial shows, Zgierska (2022) highlights the relevance of reception studies of popular literature for understanding viewers' appropriation of contemporary series. She describes serial programmes, as 'audiovisual novels' (Zgierska, 2022: 138), emphasizing similarities with novel reading in terms of interpretative work, immersion, and viewing conditions within today's media ecosystem (Lotz 2021). Connected viewing, enabled by devices and platforms that increasingly integrate media consumption and communication (Holt & Sanson 2014), transform the process of appropriation by giving individuals greater control over their viewing practices (Dessinges & Perticoz 2021; Lotz 2021). Through video on demand (VOD) platforms and portable devices, viewers can watch programmes they wish, at their own pace, across different social temporalities, and revisit excerpts, episodes, seasons or entire series repeatedly (Thoër, Fabre & Leberre 2021).

Additionally, the abundance and increased cultural diversity of series available on streaming platforms allow young adults to more easily find productions that resonate with their personal experiences and reflections. Streaming platforms, notably Netflix, increasingly offer shows featuring characters from 2SLGBTQIA+ and racialised communities (Delaporte 2023).

The extensive offer of series on VOD platforms and the personalised integration of viewing practices into everyday life contribute to the individualisation of the viewing experience.

According to one study, 70 percent of young adults in Québec (Canada) watch shows always or often when alone (Thoër & Agbobli 2020). As a result, the reception of shows has become an ever more intimate and private experience (Thoër, Boisvert, & Niemeyer 2022) although the viewing experience remains a focal point of conversations, many of which take place online (Lotz 2021; Dessinges & Perticoz 2019).

Moreover, young adults are exposed to a multitude of paratexts online, associated with the shows they watch, including recap videos, remixes, fan reaction videos and online discussions among viewers worldwide. Berton & Boni (2019) argue that serial shows should be understood as narrative media ecosystems, raising questions about the role these various digital paratexts play in viewer's experiences and appropriation of series within the scope of young adults' identity construction.

2. Methodology

To explore the way young adults appropriate shows and the role these experiences play in their identity reflection processes, we adopted a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews in order to give voice to participants' experience.

Our results are based on two rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2021 and October 2022 with 20 young adults, aged between 18 to 26, living in the Montreal metropolitan area, and regularly watching series (having watched at least one season of a show in the month preceding data collection). Among participants, 12 identified as women, 6 as men and 2 as non-binary. Although initially planned to be conducted face-to-face, interviews were ultimately carried out via the Zoom video conferencing platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This remote format proved particularly interesting as participants were in front of their computers, one of their usual viewing environments, and in the intimacy of their homes, which favoured sharing of personal matters. It also allowed them to access VOD platforms and social media accounts during the interviews and share screenshots illustrating their viewing practices.

Building on Levy's (2016) work, we focused on show-viewing experiences which young adults considered significant with respect to their personal trajectories. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to indicate on a lifeline (Bertaux 2010) shows that had been important for them. The lifeline helped to stimulate participants' memory work and encouraged reflection on significant viewing experiences. During interviews, participants were asked to describe these experiences, including what made specific shows meaningful, how they had affected them and resonated with their lives. We also explored how participants had discovered these shows, the contexts in which they watched them and the discussions they prompted within social or family circles. Finally, participants were asked to identify the paratexts which they engaged with or created in connection to these viewing experiences.

Secondly, we conducted viewing sessions with six of the participants, who were asked to select three excerpts from two or three series they considered significant and to comment on them during the sessions. The objective was to stimulate the recall of emotions and reflections

associated with the series and to document participants' impressions of how the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of the shows may have played in their emotional engagement.

We then conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Blais & Martineau 2006) of the interview data, by coding the interview transcripts, identifying emergent conceptual categories, and mapping their connections in order to answer our research question: how do young adults appropriate the shows they consider significant and how do these experiences underpin their process of identity reflection?

3. Results

Our results reveal that certain shows occupy prominent positions in participants' personal histories. The shows reported as significant varied widely among participants, reflecting the fragmentation and personalisation of choice within today's media ecosystem (Thoër, Boisvert & Niemeyer 2022). Nevertheless, some series were mentioned by several participants, notably teen dramas or series centered on groups of friends (*Friends*, *Skins*, *Sex Education*, *M'entends-tu*, *Euphoria*, *The Vampire Diaries*), families (*Shameless*, *The Fosters*, *This Is Us*) and co-workers (*Suits*, *Brooklyn 99*, *The Office*, *Greys' Anatomy*), or anime series discovered in childhood or early adolescence (e.g., *Naruto*). Many participants reported rewatching those significant shows, which itself became a marker of significance, as Mathilde, 23 years old, explained: *'What I found difficult was identifying which ones had affected me, so I chose those I had watched multiple times'*.

Participants described viewing practices that, much like reading practices discussed by Macé (2011) become deeply embedded in everyday life (*'the shows stay with you'* as one participant noted). Drawing on the concept of "potential place", we examine series-viewing practices through several interconnected spaces: memory, home and belonging, emotion expression and regulation, self-understanding and self-writing, and dialogue.

3.1 A space of memory

Participants reported experiencing many emotions while watching certain series, especially when characters or situations resonated with their own life. To preserve memories of these viewing experiences, 18 of the 20 participants digitally recorded content. While watching an episode, participants used their cellphone or laptop computer to capture screenshots, film or record excerpts, or note memorable lines of dialogue⁴ as Alexandra (24 years old, discussing *Misfits*):

There was a precise moment that I will always remember, and I wrote it everywhere I had a bit of space to write. It was a moment when the actor Robert Sheehan (as the character Nathan Young) made a speech, a big speech, and it was so well said, so strong and so powerful that I filmed it, I took a screenshot or two, I wrote it down all over my notebooks,

⁴ These traces capturing and archiving practices were not exclusively digital, although the format was predominant in our sample. One participant reported noting lines of dialogue in a notebook, another printed out dialogue excerpts to hang them on her bedroom wall, while two others had had lines of dialogue tattooed on their arms.

I looked it up online and I printed it out. I learned the speech by heart [laughs]. Because it was so well said, every time I look at that moment, the emotion is still there in all its intensity.⁵

Some participants also searched online for photographs, video excerpts, dialogues, and songs and memes they found particularly striking, either using the Google search engine or directly on YouTube, using keywords (such as the name of the show, episode number, names of characters involved, or a short description of a particular scene) often recording this content on their cell phones or computers.

The connected viewing context facilitates the recording and archiving of digital memories by enabling users to pause and providing access to a diversity of show-related paratexts through social media platforms and various websites. On SVOD platforms, such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, young adults can create personalised lists which make it easy to access and rewatch specific scenes or episodes. Streaming platforms (such as Spotify) also offer the possibility of adding music from show soundtracks to personal playlists. One participant used the application TV Time (tvtime.com) to place bookmarks within various episodes to more easily keep track of the different shows she was following simultaneously and to identify specific moments in the narratives to which she wanted to return. For Generation Z viewers, digital ownership matters less than the accessibility of media objects, which can nonetheless become part of the 'extended-self' (Belk 1988).

These trace-making practices aim to preserve the emotions associated with significant viewing experiences. Saving 'pieces' of a show on a cellphone or computer makes memories more tangible and materialises emotional experiences. As Cavalcante (2018: 1187) notes, affects can 'stick' to media objects, giving them lasting affective charge beyond the moment of reception (Cavalcante 2018: 1187).

Participants described revisiting these traces, much like digital photo albums, triggering a 'bittersweet' nostalgic experience that induces memory recall (Kalinina 2016; Niemeyer 2014). Because these traces are stored alongside personal photographs on participants' cellphones they become integrated into participant's personal memories. The fact that they are easily accessible, provides occasions for re-encountering those moments and inscribing them in participants' lives: the moment belongs to them. Maude (22 years old), discussing the show *Féminin Féminin*, explained how filming excerpts on her phone while watching the show on her laptop computer, helped her preserve moments she feels are humorous or light and during which she felt a connection with a character:

I feel like now it's part of my photo and video gallery. And just like that, those are moments that are... well, I have the impression that it belongs to me a bit, and when I look at it again, like during my day, I say to myself: Oh yeah, that's the moment when I clicked a bit with that excerpt, when I laughed... it makes a memory, well, I think it makes a memory. I don't know why this scene where she [a character] falls makes me laugh. [...]

⁵ Interviews were carried out in French; all quoted excerpts have been translated by the authors.

it's the way it's all filmed that connects me a bit to the character through emotions, through complicity.

What mattered most to participants was not necessarily the content itself, but the emotion attached to the viewing experience and the possibility of returning to it later if they anticipate a nostalgic experience (Niemeyer & Uhl 2024). Even when traces were not revisited, simply knowing they existed, that a 'bookmark' has been placed, leaves an imprint and acted as a form of reassurance as to one's capacity to remember. It inscribes the experience within one's personal trajectory, as Alexandra explained : saved screenshots function as "bookmarks" reminding her of meaningful experiences.

The impulse to create such traces is indicative of a desire to underline significant viewing experiences and distinguish them from ones that were more ordinary. The digital trace thus allows individuals to point to a particular moment of their existence and contemplate its greater importance. By marking points of reference or "memory structures" (Kuhn 1995), these digital recollections act as time machines (Niemeyer & Wentz 2014), allowing young adults to replay emotions beyond the moments of their initial experience.

As Juron and Aloisio (2020: 168) emphasise, communication technologies and, more specifically, cell phones have 'transformed the individual into "a tourist of the everyday" (Gunthert, 2015, p.137): incessantly ready "to imagemake" themselves and their lives'. In their study of self-expressions on Facebook, they described these practices as automedial practices of self-writing through which individuals externalise and reflect upon themselves using diverse media forms. In our participants' case these automedial practices allowed them to reflect on their personal evolution as Mitch, 25 years old, discussing *How to Get Away with Murder* explains:

Watching shows over a long period of time allows me to have many viewpoints, many lessons that I'm still learning [...] depending on how I'm evolving. That's what it is: I like to confront ideas I had in the past.

In this sense, these practices foster dialogue with oneself and support process of self-understanding. As Juron and Aloisio (2020: 174) explain, in relation to automedial practices, 'Finally, I understand what happens to me when I project outside myself the things that have made an impact on me, I stand before them so that they may once again come to me and make sense for me'. This process helps individuals project themselves into the future and maintain a sense of personal continuity over time (Zittoun et al., 2003).

3.2 A space of home and belonging

The immersive and repetitive nature of the serial experience opens a second space, in which participants feel safe and less lonely, and able to engage in relatively predictable parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl 1956). Many of the shows mentioned by participants were sitcoms centred on families or groups of friends and set in familiar domestic environments. Young adults described these shows as spaces they could inhabit and return to, places where they felt at home (Pink et al. 2018; Kuhn 2013a). The repetitiveness of the experience created feelings of 'safe

immersion' (Cavalcante 2018: 1197) and assurance which allowed them to settle into these worlds.

The apartment in *Friends*, actually, I had the impression, I really had the impression of being there, you know. That couch looks very comfortable; I really want to sit down with them. To... to go in there. It's very cosy and pleasant, it's as if I were part of that family, that community. In my family, we were five [...] And so I think that maybe sometimes I missed that a bit, that family space where we would gather [...] So I think that I was getting that from the show. (Maude, 22 years old)

These viewing experiences generally involved shows which participants had watched repeatedly over long periods of time. The ritual dimension of the viewing experience and the resulting familiarity with the show and its environment, as with Monica's apartment in *Friends*, contributed to the feeling of inhabiting these spaces. Boldi et al. (2022) allude to this phenomenon in relation to video games:

[T]o inhabit a "place" not only means to "dwell" in a particular "space", meant as a three-dimensional environment in which objects are situated and events occur (Harrison & Dourish, 1996). Rather, it means to create, adopt, and maintain the routines that are rooted in that space. While interacting with spaces, people build internal representations of them (Tuan, 1980): in this way, they develop a sense of "place", that is a space enriched of cultural and social meanings, expectations, pattern of behaviors, and cognitive representations (Harrison & Dourish, 1996).

Many participants also emphasised that the openness of the everyday spaces depicted in series (living rooms, kitchens through which characters move), reinforced their feelings of immersion and presence as Sarah, 24 years old, explains about the UK version of the show *Shameless*)

It's a bit as if you were going to someone's place, I think that's the best comparison. [...] I think also that it's the structure of the show that allows you to feel this way, because their house is always open [...] people come and go regularly so you have the impression of being among the characters, because there's movement. You always have the main characters who stay but I don't know, there's still that side of it where it's still homely.

The convivial nature of serial shows, which portray family, friend groups, and communities, in often idealised ways, fostered feeling of being present with the characters, of being part of a group that, over time, acquires 'a family resemblance' (Laugier 2019) as Mitch, 25 years old, explains about the show *The Vampire Diaries*:

As the seasons go on, a lot of bonds form among the characters. And they would always gather in a mansion; it was the mansion of the two vampire brothers. And there were quite a few people who would gather there. It was big, a big family. Over time, bonds formed and I felt myself in a way entering their world. Basically, it's a family – not necessarily a family with blood ties and all... But it's a group of characters with bonds

among them. It was convivial, and me, I'm always looking for that when I watch shows. I'm looking to feel like I'm with them.

Similarly, Alexandra (24 years old), described *Friends* as a source of stability and comfort that protected her from loneliness and chaos. There, she found familiar characters who could be summoned on demand, offering emotional reassurance without the demands of real-life relationships.

over the years, *Friends* became my remedy in a way, it was a symbol of stability, life seems easier when you watch it, because the characters [...] they're together and they help and tease each other. I would have liked to have a band of friends like them but that's not something you find easily. [...] When I watch [Friends] when I'm sick, it's as if my mother was there to help me and take care of me or to hold me by the hand, but without being too present. [...] It's as if it was telling me: 'it's not total chaos, I'm here' and from there, I can take my obligations one step at a time as soon as I feel ready. It's the perfect deal: see an entourage when you want and as much as you want, without the responsibilities or consequences, or the drama of having real people, or the awkwardness when you want to be alone, but you have people at your place.

The possibility of rewatching a show strongly contributes to this sense of presence and transformed the viewing experience into both a temporal space (a moment to oneself) (Radway 1991), a reassuring ritual, and a virtual domestic space in which viewers could settle. Although rewatching shows is not a new practice (Thoër, Fabre & Le Berre 2021), it gained visibility and legitimacy during the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of celebrities having publicly shared their show-rewatching practices. This was the case, for instance, for the vocalist Billie Eilish, who declared having viewed *The Office* in its entirety no less than 15 times during the pandemic (Cohen et al. 2024).

Many participants also described rewatching episodes or entire season while carrying out other activities allowing familiar voices and intermittently glimpsed images to function as a reassuring 'soundspace', (Treacher Kabesh 2013) which surrounds the individual and immersively links past and present experiences.

These 'holding environments' (Kruger & Rustad 2017), also enabled viewers to pause and manage the saturation of contemporary media environments (Kruger et Rustad 2017), including the abundant offer of VOD platforms and the audiovisual content circulating on social media. Many participants reported returning to familiar series in between experiences of discovering new shows, which they described as emotionally and cognitively demanding.

3.3 A space for expressing and managing emotions

The serial experience thus takes place in a comfortable and safe space in which individuals can step outside daily reality, yet at the same time construct a sense of emotional continuity. As mentioned above, we carried out the present study during the Covid-19 pandemic and most participants reported that rewatching certain shows helped them manage anxiety or mitigate

feelings of depression. According to Cohen et al. (2024), in the pandemic context, rewatching familiar shows provided feelings of predictability and continuity with both the past and former viewing experiences, at a time when the world seemed untethered. We believe that this need for reassuring continuity persists in the current context of economic, political and ecological uncertainties.

Multiple participants associated certain shows such as *The Office*,⁶ with a ‘feel-good’ effect, emphasizing how easily they could escape into their light-hearted worlds at any time of day, particularly through their short-format episodes.

[*The Office*], that’s what I call a feel-good show, [...] it’s dark humour a bit, humour that wouldn’t necessarily be accepted today if they made a show in that style [laughs]. But it’s like so entertaining, and it really makes [me] laugh. Like exactly, we’re just rewatching it now with my friend, and it’s maybe like the fourth time that I’m going through the nine seasons [laughs]. It’s like a series that you can go back to whenever, and like, you know let’s say you just have twenty minutes, you watch one and then you feel really good [laughs], because for real, it frees up your mind. (Claudia, 25 years old)

Other respondents stated that rewatching shows or specific episodes that made them cry had a cathartic effect, allowing them to release emotions at times when they felt sadness or anger. Here, the viewing experience appears as a safe space in which emotions can be welcomed and fully experienced, as illustrated by Julie (26 years old) in relation to *The Vampire Diaries*:

Vampire Diaries [...] is a show I found very difficult to end, because I grew up with it. I watch [this excerpt] often, but it’s often when I’m not doing so well, or when I feel a little depressed, because it’s an excerpt that makes me cry a lot [laughs]. It brings back memories and gives me a lot of pleasure. It makes me sad every time, it lets me externalise if I’m feeling too edgy. [*Vampire Diaries*], it half makes me sad, half comforts me, it’s a little bit like a honey candy when I watch it.

This cathartic effect was also described by Alexandra (24 years old), who explained that she rewatched adolescent series such as *Skins*, when she felt angry with her parents, in order to feel understood and to immerse herself in the characters’ world to once again be adolescent, and feel somewhat selfish.

If one evening I’ve had enough of my parents or of all kinds of things in general, and as a result my mood drops, the first show that comes to my mind is *Skins* or another similar one, because I want a show where the characters do their own thing and don’t care about others. And *Skins* is perfect for that. It makes me feel understood and less alone, and it’s as if the characters were living at the same time as me, they are my on-demand support group.

⁶ *The Office* (US version) is one of the most rewatched shows in the United States (Franklin, 2024). It is also the focus of a highly popular ‘rewatch podcast’ hosted by two of the shows’ cast members, who provide commentary on each episode (Cohen et al. 2024).

Thus, rewatching shows can shape everyday moods (Niemeyer 2014). Digital traces, therefore, do not merely serve to recall memories. By encouraging nostalgic expression and enabling the replaying of emotions associated with prior viewing experiences, collected traces may also contribute to healing (Niemeyer & Siebert, 2023). Connected viewing facilitates this process, since portable devices, much like ‘transitional objects’ (Winnicott 1971), can be taken everywhere.

However, the sought-after effect is not always calming. Some respondents reported using rewatching shows or engaging with associated paratexts to energise themselves, find motivation or intensify their activities. Here again, these practices relied on reactivating the prior emotional experiences, as Mitch (25 years old) explained about *Naruto*:

Naruto, it’s the motivation side of life that it gave me, mostly. I have an enormous playlist on Spotify of all the music from *Naruto*. So, this one time, I made screen captures. I downloaded wallpapers, I put them on my phone, on my networks. It was so incredible. *Naruto*, it’s one of the major things in my life that’s brought me a lot in terms of motivation. In terms of not giving up, all that. When I would wake up in the morning to go to class and when it was cold, I would listen to music from *Naruto*. [...] This is how I can summarise *Naruto*: it’s motivation, it’s a feeling, it’s strong, it’s powerful!

In some cases, shows allowed participants to experience certain emotions by proxy, for example feelings of love during periods when they were single or separated from a partner. The vicarious experience of a romantic relationship through fictional character thus compensated, to some extent, for a lack of emotional connection in participants’ lives.

These testimonies demonstrate that rewatching series episodes or engaging with related paratexts allowed participants to escape, create a comforting atmosphere, or release, express, or reinforce an emotional state. The repeated experience of a show, stimulated by trace-making practices, therefore contributes to the development of personal emotional management strategies or, in Cavalcante’s term (2018: 1194), the construction of ‘affective scripts’:

After repeatedly experiencing similar emotions and affects during media encounters, audiences develop strategies to manage them. These strategies, or what Tomkins (1962, 1963) refers to as ‘affective scripts’, are intended to help individuals get through affectively powerful situations, steering them toward positive feeling states and away from negative ones.

3.4. A space for understanding and rewriting the self

As studies of reading have shown, when fiction exposes characters’ emotions, thoughts and feelings, it can help individuals better understand these affects (De Mulder et al. 2022; Galgut 2010; Mar & Oatley 2008; Nussbaum 2001). This process operates through identification with characters’ hardships and emotions, allowing individuals to imagine themselves in another’s place, adopt a character’s perspective, and reflect through an intermediary, thereby creating detachment from personal experiences (Cohen 2001). As Levy (2016) observed in his research on bedside books, and as we also noted among participants, the elements that become meaningful

are often highly personal and there may be a gap between a character's identity and that of the viewer. What resonated most strongly with participants were the emotions at play for characters in diverse situations. This capacity to be affected by what characters experience appears to increase with prolonged engagement with a serial show, strengthening viewers' feelings of attachment (Laugier 2019).

The viewing experience fosters the expression, acceptance and understanding of affects. It helped participants discern the reasons behind some of their actions in specific situations, allowing them to re-examine life events such as depression, grief, relationship breakup, coming out of sexual identity, and domestic violence. The substance of these self-reflective practices, however, varied from one participant to another.

Alix (24 years old) commented on an excerpt of the show *Breaking Bad*, in which family members express their emotions regarding Walter White's cancer diagnosis. Voicing her reactions allowed Alix to better understand her own feelings regarding a family member's illness.

It was an excerpt that really did me a lot of good. In the sense that my godmother's cancer isn't something that was discussed in the family. [...] I had the impression that we were all living in our own corners. [...] Like, I would have liked if we'd yelled at each other, kind of like characters do, or at least addressed the problem [...]. And I had the impression that everyone was repressing their emotions tremendously, we were all going through it, but no one wanted to talk about it. [...] I couldn't sleep because of that anxiety around death. And I didn't have any support to deal with that, because no one talked to me about it, because it was stifled, it was boxed in. And that screaming match (in *Breaking bad*), it literally - I saw it later, years later - and that was an incredible slap in the face, in the sense of the necessity to talk about death. It's important, it's part of life and the journey that comes with it. (Alix, 24 years old)

Nicolas (20 years old), for his part, reported becoming aware of his own difficulty in expressing emotions and vulnerability through the actions of the character Harvey in the show *Suits*.

The other thing that I detested, even though I adored *Suits*, is when the central character Harvey starts not feeling well, [...] and then, he starts talking to a psychologist. He protects himself from everything to do with his emotions. Like, each time that someone wants to get closer, he needs to get rid of them because it could make him vulnerable. And, well, I was a bit like that before, and it's like I understood that, that I was doing that, by watching it [*Suits*]. It's crazy, but umm, [...] when he was pushing everyone away, I was like: 'oh my God, you're worse!', so that, that stayed with me.

Recognising behaviours or emotions experienced by characters thus helped participants feel less alone and constituted a form of emotional support, that contributed to normalising and accepting life situations, as well as better understanding them.

Some participants emphasised the importance of timing in encounters with a show, suggesting that viewing choices may be influenced by the relevance of given shows to individuals' preexisting self-questioning, as proposed by scholars of reading practices (Macé 2011; Albenga & Bachman

2015). For some participants, awareness of similarities in behaviours or emotional experiences came in the form of a sudden breakthrough. This was the case for Jessica (25 years old), who explained how the show *M'entends-tu* allowed her to recognise the violence she experienced in a relationship:

When I saw that episode, I hadn't experienced a situation of physical domestic violence. But then, when it happened, my situation – it's really weird – I really saw that episode of violence in my head and that's when it clicked for me. I was like 'Wow!'. That's pretty much what I'm living right now. It's not acceptable. It helped me to realise it. I still have a lot of work to do, a lot, but it affected me so much.

For most participants, however, this awareness developed more gradually. Sarah (24 years old) became conscious of her tendency to sabotage romantic relationships on her fourth rewatch of *Skins*. Through repeated viewings, the show enabled her to reconsider her adolescent experiences and better understand the patterns she once sustained in her romantic relationships.

Effy sabotaged her romantic relationships and would end up with less interesting people. I think it was a bit the same for me. In high school, I dated guys with whom I knew things weren't going to work. It was safer for me. I knew that I wasn't committing to anything. [...] And the more I watched the show, the more I realised that Effy was making these decisions that were... let's say, bad choices. And I too realised that I had made bad choices in the past. With time, and while re-watching the show, it made me realise that we were alike.

Certain experiences also provided opportunities to experiment, by proxy, with possible selves, and to form opinions about particular behaviours. Reflection could also emerge through counter identification, as was the case for Alexandra (24 years old), who explained that *Skins* helped her realise she was not drawn to certain excesses associated with adolescence, even if this made her appear overly reserved to her peers.

[In *Skins*], they're all looking to escape reality, to let go and have fun, stay young, feel alive, but it's all by taking drugs, drinking from a very young age and often finding themselves in dangerous situations. This show let me see that it wasn't for me, the drugs, the alcohol, the sex, the partying... so maybe that makes me someone who's a bit boring and who doesn't do anything or doesn't know how to have fun, but I was able to get away from some situations that I would have regretted.

Furthermore, the viewing experience helped participants recognise similarities between the emotional responses of characters and those of people in their social circle, allowing them to better understand the perspectives of others and to imagine themselves in their place. In so doing, they reported a deeper understanding of interpersonal dynamics and relationships.

Various aesthetic elements⁷ of shows contributed to this reflective work. Participants notably pointed to the increased diversity of characters and situations, their ordinariness, the credibility

⁷ A more thorough discussion of the role of aesthetic elements and the semiotic dimension will be developed in a forthcoming study.

of characters and dialogues, as well as certain visual atmospheres and colour palettes. Participants also highlighted the role of humour and the way in which it fosters emotional transparency among characters, something far less straightforward in real life (Zunshine 2012). Humour makes emotional expression less dramatic and, therefore, less confrontational, as Sarah (24 years old) explained in relation to *Shameless* (UK version): 'I think that there was a therapeutic side also to being able to understand what the characters are going through and being able to laugh about it with them'.

Meaning construction around the viewing experience was also stimulated by participants' online searches for information about a given show, including interviews with actors or production team member, its themes and their links to social issues. Engaging with these paratexts contributed to 'the reality effect' (Glevarec 2012) and enhanced the credibility of narratives. Centred on the narrativisation of the self, this self-reflexive process, as Mathies (2020) points out, gives rise to a dialogue with the show, through which viewers create their own imaginary narrative. Mathies (2020: 333), who analyses the reception of literary fiction, describes this process as the creation of a 'self-in-other narrative'. This was the case for Mathilde (23 years old), who felt inspired by the reaction of a female character in *Grey's Anatomy*, criticised because of her sexual encounters:

There was a girl who was criticised because she had a lot of sexual relations with different people. And so, the guys were judging her, were faulting her for it. And I think that it struck a chord because there was a moment in high school when I experienced something similar, when I got a lot of blame. And that got me to question: are men too quick to judge women for the number of their sexual relations? Why is it like that? [In the series] The girl confronted the guy and told him: 'You have no right to judge my actions for something that you broke off'. So, I found it good, the way she said it. And I remember, I took the quote and I put it on my phone [laughs]. [...] It's like the perfect answer that I would have liked to give in my situation.

However, as Mathies (2020) argues, during this process of constant comparison with the fictional character, the readers (or viewers, in our case) may notice discrepancies between the fictional narrative and their own values or expectations. In such case, they begin imagining how characters could have acted differently. This leads to the creation of a new narrative ('the other-in-self narrative') (Mathies 2020: 335) where the viewer is now in charge of the story and can change its outcome. Jessica, (25 years old) while commenting on an excerpt of the show *M'entends-tu*, identified strongly with a female character experiencing domestic violence. As the scene unfolds, she shifted between speaking about the character and herself, eventually addressing and insulting the abusive partner onscreen. In doing so, she, partly rewrote the fictional narrative, but above all, expressed, within the safe space of the show (and of the research interview), a desire to regain control over her life after experiencing domestic violence.

In my relationships, several men were very manipulative, narcissistic, playing a lot with my guilt, very dramatic, almost 'I love you, I'll kill myself if you leave' [...] And see, who brings her flowers, and who plays a lot with her guilt? She's trying to move on, but he keeps coming back. It's hard for her not to give in. I find her very weak. It's not nice to say, but she has trouble standing up for herself. He's very destabilising, a good manipulator. At first, you want to believe him, you think he might have changed. [...] But, he's disgusting. I would never have let him in - well, I can only speak for myself, and I don't

know exactly what I would have done - but I'm almost sure I would have said: 'No! You're a big piece of shit. I never want to talk to you or see you again. But, I might have been a bit like her, like 'Oh, he's nice. He's bringing me flowers.' Or 'He came to see me, maybe he's changed.' But you see that he can change very quickly, and start being aggressive again.

By opening a dialogue with oneself, the experience of the series provides a reflexive space, through which young adults can better understand themselves and others. Viewing this scene, also helped Jessica understand that gendered violence is systemic, and that what she experienced was not only her story, but a more broadly shared experience. This fostered greater self-compassion and empowerment:

I: And what did you feel watching the excerpt again?

J: Discomfort, sadness. I was angry, thinking why her or me? Why are we women so often unable to see what is going on and to respect ourselves? Why can't we put an end to it? It makes me angry, it's a vicious cycle. And, I thought: Wow! I still have a lot of work to do. I've improved, but it's still a continuous effort to fully respect myself. It's not that she hasn't made any progress, but it's still uncomfortable because I see a lot of myself in her.

This process is possible because Jessica interprets her discomfort, pain and anger elicited by the scene, through a feminist perspective. In Ahmed's words (2014: 174): 'If pain does move subjects into feminism, then it does so precisely by reading the relation between affect and structure, or between emotion and politics in a way that undoes the separation of the individual from others'. In encounter with shows, or any other media content, individuals draw on personal affective repertoires while also interpreting emotions through the collective emotional archives of the groups to which they belong (Cavalcante, 2018). The experience of a show thus becomes an opportunity to interpret certain emotions while dismissing or questioning others, opening a space where identities may be explored, contested, or reinforced. In Jessica's case, the series *M'entends-tu?* enabled her to question gendered domination and violence more broadly. As Albenga and Bachmann (2015: 88) argue in their study of the appropriation of feminist ideas through reading, some texts 'open up the realm of possibilities, make emblematic situations of male domination understandable, and can mark the trajectories of emancipation for which they serve as support and temporal markers of the most important stages'.

3.5. The show experience as a space for dialogue

While watching shows is often an individual practice for young adults, participants nevertheless engaged in discussions about their viewing experiences with peers and family members, both offline and online. Interactions with others can play an important role in the decision to watch a particular show, as well as in the viewing experience itself and the appropriation of the text (Pasquier 1999). For some participants, following a show at the same time as peers or members of their social circle prompted awareness of resonance with characters or situations, and these interactions also contributed to the construction of meaning around the serial experience.

Several participants also reported seeking out other viewers' reactions in online spaces, including social media and chat applications, to validate or better understand their emotional response, as illustrated by Julie (26 years old):

[The reading of comments], it's more to validate the feelings or reactions that I had to a situation. Was I just as shocked as someone else by the situations. To know if people are just as sad or happy as me at certain moments [...] to see if people share my pain.

Moreover, series provide shared references that facilitate exchanges and contribute to collective and ritual practices among family members and friends (Pasquier 1999), thereby shaping young adults' identity reflection. They also enable individuals to speak about themselves indirectly. This was one reason many participants gave for sharing meaningful shows with people close to them: to give them access to important aspects of their personal trajectory and make them experience emotions they considered to be defining. Sarah (24 years old), for instance, asked her partner to watch *Skins*, so he could share an experience that had occupied an important place in her life.

It's a show to which I was very attached, it's a universe that was kind of part of, not my daily life, because I didn't watch it every day, but it's something that I went back to often, so it's important for me that he has the same reference points, if you will. Just so we have a bit of that same culture. And I think that, after, I can refer to the show and it's important for me to be able to reference the show and know that he understands me.

Finally, discussing viewing experience with peers and family members allowed several participants to address sensitive experiences or issues, such as sexual identity, by creating a safe space in which difficult emotions could be mediated through the show experience, as explained by Sarah, 24, about the show *Fugueuse*.

I think it was the first time I could tell my mother that I had once been approached by a pimp. It wasn't a long conversation because I know it's a difficult subject for her, and she didn't really want to talk about it more than that. But, still, it allowed me to talk to her about it, and I think that if it hadn't been for that show, I would never have been able to bring up the subject.

The show *Shameless* similarly provided Sarah with the words and emotional tone to discuss her father's eventual death with her siblings:

S: I think back to another scene that made an impression on me and I spoke about it with my brothers and sisters. Our father isn't as healthy as he used to be and we talk more often about what's going to happen when he passes away. And there's a character in the show whose father passes away and they had a very bad relationship. His father was awful and when he dies, finally, [the character], he cries and then his brothers and sisters judge him for it and they say: 'But why are you crying? He was the worst person. He was never nice to you'. And he says: 'I don't get it, but he was my father after all'. And then, I found it interesting to talk about it with my brothers and sisters, because we also don't know how we're going to react to that situation.

I: But they watch the show also?

S: No, no, that's the thing, I just told them about the scene. But I had, like I had just watched that scene, I had the exact words and it was better said and was actually humorous, in a way.

In this way, the show experience constitutes a space of exchange through which individuals can address sensitive issues with their social or family circles and collectively reflect on them, because the emotions elicited by the experience possess a shared and collective dimension.

Conclusion

Our results show that young adults appropriate significant show experiences in diverse ways and that, for most participants, this process involves preserving fragments of related media content. These digital trace-making practices draw on a variety of media, platforms, and formats, including paratexts, either created by individuals themselves or retrieved online, and stored across digital devices and spaces.

Winnicott's (1971) concept of 'potential space' proved particularly useful for understanding how individuals engage with serial texts and use them for self-reflection and identity construction. This potential space can take on various configurations. Memories of series, and especially archived media fragments, act as symbolic and mnemonic markers along personal trajectories, enabling viewers to revisit their life path and relive the emotions associated with past viewing experiences. In this way, trace-making around serial experience constitutes an automedial self-writing that supports memory work and contributes to the construct of the self through the creation of a 'playlist of the[ir] past' (Lizardi 2015), scattered across various digital devices and platforms.

Series experiences also create a space in which young adults can settle, feel at home and belong, while expressing, accepting, and managing emotions, as well as developing reflexive competencies. Show viewing makes it possible to see oneself from the outside, particularly when participants recognise themselves in characters' emotional experiences, allowing them to take a step back from their own lives. It also offers an opportunity to adopt others' perspectives and see through their eyes. In this sense, serial experiences contribute to individuals' ability to reconsider their own mental and affective state, as well as those of others; in other words, to develop mentalisation skills, as has also been observed, in studies of fiction reading (De Mulder et al. 2022; Galgut 2010; Mar & Oatley 2008, Nussbaum 2001).

Beyond stimulating reflexivity and mentalisation, serial experiences allow individuals to experiment safely and vicariously, navigating between imagination and reality and 'playing' with media (Hills, 2002; 2013). This experimentation emerges through the dialogue between fictional and personal narratives, stimulating the narrativisation of the self, helping young adults better understand themselves and negotiate life events (Ricoeur 1991; Mathies 2020). Encounters with the self are thus manifest in the show-watching practices. 'Ordinary' viewers' significant experiences with serial shows and related paratexts become constitutive of the self across the life course and may even become transformative experiences (Gilliotte 2022). The playful dimension of Winnicott's 'potential space' invites us to move beyond the debate opposing active and regressive use of media. As Hills (2013:84) argues: "Above all, Winnicott offers a powerful sense of the vitality, and the healthiness, and indeed the very *ordinariness*, of media culture's 'little madresses'"

We also examined how the connected viewing context might reinforce the relationship between show experiences and identity construction. Our findings suggest that it does in several ways. The affordances of on-demand streaming environments encourage autonomous intimate viewing practices anchored in daily life that increasingly resemble reading (Lotz 2021; Zgierska 2022). Although show experiences may still be discussed within social or family circles, potentially opening spaces to address difficult issues, the rituals attached to the experience of significant shows are becoming increasingly individualised. Connected viewing nevertheless enables individuals to engage with a diversity of paratexts that help to validate and frame experienced emotions. These practices also contribute to ‘the reality effect’ (Glevarec 2012) by anchoring shows’ narratives within broader sociohistorical contexts. Finally, connected viewing expands the opportunities for trace-making of show experiences through the archiving of video excerpts, photographs, lines of dialogue, memes and music (Van Dijck 2007), as well as through diverse forms of self-writing.

As with reading practices, the show experience appears to have become for many young adults ‘one of those conducts through which, daily, [they give] shape, flavour and even style to [their] existence’ (Macé 2011: 10). It is one of the characteristics of media, that they resonate with and activate emotional experiences as Cavalcante (2018: 1190) argues:

[M]edia are clearly more than ideological battlegrounds. As Shouse (2005) argues, ‘the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances’ (p. 3). In this way, media are, as Cvetkovich (2003) argues, ‘repositories of feelings and emotions’ (p. 7).

However, it appears important – and this is a limitation of the present study – to better define the extent to which the show experience can engage and shape viewers’ emotional experiences with regards to renegotiations of class, race, and gender identities (Ahmed, 2014), as illustrated, for example, by the participant who discussed domestic violence. It would also be valuable to examine more closely how social and cultural backgrounds shape individuals’ reflexive engagement with show experiences (Albenga 2011).

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