

The reception of the television sitcom Friends in Portugal: a comparative analysis of Generations X, Y and Z

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A receção da sitcom televisiva Friends em Portugal: uma análise comparativa das Gerações X, Y e Z

Resumo (PT): O objetivo deste artigo consiste em analisar a receção da sitcom televisiva americana Friends em Portugal, comparando as Gerações X, Y e Z. A análise centra-se nas diferenças geracionais na receção e nas gratificações adquiridas relativamente a uma sitcom que alcançou uma influência e uma longevidade que vai muito para além das suas dez temporadas. Adotando uma abordagem quantitativa, os dados foram recolhidos através de um inquérito, com uma amostra de 608 inquiridos das Gerações X, Y e Z. Foi possível analisar as diferenças na forma como as três gerações dão sentido a este conteúdo mediático, confirmando que buscam gratificações distintas e desenvolvem diferentes conexões de identificação e empatia com os personagens. Os resultados mostram, assim, o impacto de uma sitcom originalmente produzida há mais de vinte anos, que não apenas transcende gerações, mas também as impacta de forma diferente.

Palavras-chave: receção audiovisual, entretenimento, ficção televisiva, sitcom, Friends.

The reception of the television sitcom Friends in Portugal: a comparative analysis of Generations X, Y and Z

Abstract (EN): The aim of this article is to analyse the reception of the American television sitcom Friends in Portugal, by comparing generations X, Y and Z. The analysis focuses on generational differences on the reception and the acquired gratifications regarding a sitcom that reached an influence and a longevity that goes well beyond its ten seasons. Adopting a quantitative approach, data was collected through a survey, with a sample of 608 respondents from generations X, Y and Z. It was possible to analyse the differences in the way these three generations make meaning out of this media content, confirming that they are looking for distinct gratifications and develop different identification and empathy connections with the characters. The results thus show the impact of a sitcom originally produced more than twenty years ago that not only transcends generations but also impacts them differently.

Keywords: audio-visual reception, entertainment, television fiction, sitcom, Friends.

Introduction

The mass media were designed to satisfy a variety of needs of their audiences and, in this way, people filter their choices among different types of existing mass media taking into account their values and cultural patterns (Knobloch-Westerwick, Westerwick, & Sude, 2019; Jiménez, López, & Pisionero, 2012; Rubin, 2009). The theory of uses and gratifications allows to identify and analyse the motivations that audiences have for consuming specific audio-visual entertainment content and what type of social learning they derive from that content (Haridakis, & Hanson, 2009; Jiménez et al., 2012; Ruggiero, 2000; Tefertiller, & Sheehan, 2019).

In addition to differences in cultural or educational level, it is necessary to understand that other social factors may influence the audience, in their interpretation and identification of the contents viewed (Livingstone, 2004). Therefore, age can be considered as another factor that can influence differences in attitudes and behaviours towards the consumption of media content (Doherty, Kiley, Tyson, & Jameson, 2015).

The aim of this research consists in analysing the audience reception of the American sitcom *Friends* in Portugal, and comparing the reception among generations X, Y and Z. This research explores the way this influential sitcom creates a sense of belonging and attachment among its audience, across these different generational boundaries.

Friends is one of the most popular and significant sitcoms in the history of television and mass media worldwide. The show developed a new sitcom format, influential all over the world (Knox, & Schwind, 2019; Kutulas, 2018), and a younger generation, born after the premiere of *Friends*, adopted it as if it had premiered recently (Austerlitz, 2019). *Friends* has, therefore, continued to attract new viewers through reruns and streaming services, remaining a cultural phenomenon well after its finale in 2004.

1. Functionalism and the mass media

Audiences perform different social functions from the media. The media can reinforce the social position of their audience and reinforce social norms, as they provide information, express cultural and symbolic values and provide entertainment (McQuail, & Deuze, 2020). In this way, according to the tradition initiated by Lazarsfeld and Merton, the mass media serve to confirm social norms by contributing to a balanced

functioning of society, providing mechanisms that each person uses during common day-to-day activities.

The functionalism theory can be seen as a relevant contribution to the research of mass media (McQuail, & Deuze, 2020). This path initially focused on problems of manipulation, then on persuasion, then on influence, and then on functions. This change was due to the fact that the functions are associated with the normal presence of the mass media in the day-to-day of society. In other words, the main concept that the mass media only had an intentional effect on society was removed, and the attention was focused on the demonstrable consequences of the action of mass media on society as a whole. This is because, audiences shape the content they view to their needs, in a faster way than the mass media dominate them. Therefore, media have a relevant role in diversion and entertainment, as well as in information and influence (McQuail, & Deuze, 2020).

Fedele (2011) divides the social functions of television fiction into four groups, related with (i) entertainment, (ii) the structure of the viewing situation, (iii) narration and (iv) socialization. The first group – the social function of entertainment – consists of the entertainment that the audience derives from the television fiction they view. This entertainment is created through the removal of emotions such as boredom and freedom from routine and day-to-day problems, as it generates new emotions, especially when it is linked to humorous content (Fedele, 2011). The second group – related to the structure of the viewing situation – corresponds to the hourly routine that is modelled in audiences through television programming. Audiences plan their schedules according to the time of the television program they intend to watch that day, which makes viewers adapt to the temporality of the television broadcast (Fedele, 2011).

Regarding the third group - functions related to narration - it is divided into two types of functions. On the one hand, this function concerns the constant and repeated offer of the same type of stories, as they are the ones that audiences always have a need to see - such as *telenovelas* (Fedele, 2011). On the other hand, television also performs functions through the transmission of symbols and values that are already shared in society, making it possible for audiences to visualize their reality on the screen, meaning that television works within and for the community, providing a reflection where it can be seen and compared (Fedele, 2011).

Finally, the last group of social functions of television fiction - related to socialization - consists of the fact that, despite living in a digitally advanced age, television continues to play an important role in socialization related to social learning (Fedele, 2011). This is because television fiction has the ability to convey emotions (Fedele, 2011; Smith, 2022). In other words, these contents represent everyday life, transmit emotions, recreate pain, misfortune and miseries of all kinds. Thus, Fedele (2011) argues that the role of television fiction must be recognized in the socialization process, since it has the ability to control and give instructions to audiences on how they should deal with the problems they face every day. This influence, by televised fiction, doesn't happen only because of the story, but also because of the role that the characters play (Fedele, 2011; Smith, 2022).

2. Uses and gratifications

Nevertheless, it is important to understand, in addition to the social functions provoked, what uses and gratifications audiences appropriate regarding the content they view (Ruggiero, 2000). Therefore, the theory of uses and gratifications can help identify and analyse the personal or social motivations behind audiences' content choices (Haridakis, & Hanson, 2009; Jiménez et al., 2012; Ruggiero, 2000; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). In this way, we can argue that the theory of uses and gratifications overlaps, or at least clearly approaches, within the scope of the functionalist theory (Allen, 1980; McQuail, & Deuze, 2020; Ruggiero, 2000).

In spite of that, it is apparent that the masses are intuitively shaped by a variety of their audience needs. The audiences filter their choices among different types of existing mass media in order to select what most satisfies their needs and desires, taking into account their own values and cultural backgrounds (Jiménez et al., 2012; Rubin, 2009). Uses and gratifications theory was used to investigate audience motivations, as “additional typologies of the uses people made of the media to gratify social and psychological needs” were also developed (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 6). This approach was initially developed by Herta Herzog (1941), with the analysis of the influence exerted by radio soap operas on their listeners, as well as their reasons and experiences – that is, their uses and gratifications. Through this study, Herzog found that female listeners were a regular audience of radio soap operas not just for emotional pleasure and counselling, but also as a way of getting them to think in different ways.

Tefertiller and Sheehan (2019) thus identified five motivations for watching television content, including stress management, relaxing entertainment, habitual/routine viewing, information seeking and social interaction. However, the authors consider that the audience's habitual/routine viewing has a strong negative relationship with the viewers' attention while watching television. The authors also concluded that television entertainment, in addition to entertain, also helps audiences to relax and unwind from their daily routine.

In what regards the uses and gratifications of television fiction, it can be considered has having an addictive quality (Hargrave, & Gatfield, 2002). Besides reducing boredom, television fiction contributes to satisfy the need to disconnect from everyday tasks and problems (Alasuutari, 1996; Lacalle, 2015) and it also satisfies the need to deal with the guilt for not fulfilling other day-to-day tasks, by watching the favourite TV shows (Lacalle, 2015).

Currently, there is an immense variety of television fiction programs that audiences tend to watch casually and quickly in order to obtain instant gratification of their needs (Grandío, 2009; Lacalle, 2015). Especially, if they are formats with short episodes, which make their consumption fast and dynamic, not requiring a detailed follow-up of the plot (Grandío, 2009). This contributes to easily forget the content they have already viewed, namely the plots and topics of the programs. Nevertheless, it contrasts with the fact that audiences continue to remember the characters they most identify with and the most surprising situations (Lacalle, 2015). The importance of the relationship created between characters and audiences is, therefore, evident.

3. Friends

Friends, a television sitcom created by Marta Kauffman, David Crane and Kevin Bright, is one of the most popular and significant shows in the history of television culture and mass media worldwide (Austerlitz, 2019; Knox, & Schwind, 2019; Kutulas, 2018). It premiered in 1994 and ended in 2004, with a total of ten seasons; however, after more than two decades, it remains an audience success (Austerlitz, 2019; Knox, & Schwind, 2019; Sandell, 1998; Todd, 2011). Produced by Warner Bros. Entertainment, Friends attracted millions of viewers each week during its broadcast on the NBC television network, reaching over twenty million for each of the ten-season premiere episodes (Knox, & Schwind, 2019; Todd, 2011). In 1994, during the broadcast of the first season,

the series was the eighth most popular program in America and, in the following years, until the broadcast of its last season, it never failed to be in the top five (Kutulas, 2018).

Nonetheless, it is not just the audiences who watched the series during its broadcast (1994-2004) that feel this connection and identification with the characters (Austerlitz, 2019; Kutulas, 2018; Todd, 2011). A younger generation adopted it as if it had premiered during their own generation (Austerlitz, 2019). Therefore, *Friends* is considered a timeless series, as it not only attracts a young audience that is on the verge of adulthood and who identifies with the characters, but it also attracts an older audience that clings to the series due to the nostalgia invoked by the represented moments of the past (Todd, 2011).

As its name implies, this is a series with a narrative about the friendship and the daily life of a group of friends, six young adults (Monica, Ross, Rachel, Chandler, Joey and Phoebe) aged between 20 and 30 years old, with different personalities, living in Manhattan, New York City (Sandell, 1998; Todd, 2011).

Monica Geller is a chef with a competitive and perfectionist personality and has an obsessive-compulsive disorder associated with cleanliness (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). Throughout the series it is visible that Monica is the emotional centre of the group of friends, connecting everyone through her affectionate and maternal personality (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). Monica's brother, Ross Geller, is also part of the main cast.

Ross Geller, the elder brother of Monica, is a palaeontologist and is the only character who lives alone. He is the only male character in the main cast who becomes a father in the first season of the series, demonstrating his parental figure, and is represented as caring, kind and more responsible than his friends (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). On the other hand, he is also portrayed as a nerd or geek (Knox, & Schwind, 2019).

Rachel Greene, during her adolescence, fulfilled the stereotype of a popular student, always considered rich and spoiled. Rachel tries to start a new life, independent of her parents' money, moving in with her friend Monica and starting to work as a waitress at the six friends' main meeting place, the Central Perk Cafe. Over the course of the series, her emotional and professional growth is noticeable, since in the last season Rachel no longer uses a humour that characterizes and emphasizes her immaturity – on the contrary (Knox, & Schwind, 2019).

Other character of the main cast is Chandler Bing, a former classmate of Ross's in college. According to Knox and Schwind (2019), the sitcom would not be the same without Chandler's sense of humour, as he is seen as the centre of the series' humour and jokes. His character is represented as a humorous narrator of the series, who comments on the adventures and events of the rest of the cast through his sarcastic and self-deprecating jokes (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). Chandler shares an apartment with Joey, also a main cast member (Kutulas, 2018; Sandell, 1998).

Joey Tribbiani has an acting career and one of his most comical traits is his slow wit. His personality is sometimes portrayed as childish, with the aim of conveying and emphasizing an innocent, honest character, incapable of lying or manipulating others, which, according to Knox and Schwind (2019), makes the audience think of him as particularly nice and friendly. Chandler and Joey live in the apartment across from Rachel and Monica.

Finally, in the main cast we have Phoebe Buffay, Monica's former roommate. Phoebe is portrayed as a free spirit, thinking frequently out of the box, empathic but living in her own world (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). For this reason, she is a character that “grows” in the audience as her absurd sense of humour and out-of-the-ordinary attitudes become more familiar (Knox, & Schwind, 2019).

Therefore, this series, by having a narrative focused on the characters and the relationships between them, ended up creating in the audience a feeling of attachment and affection for the characters, as if they were real people (Todd, 2011). This factor was what led audiences to watch the series every week, as they would be aware of what their “friends” would face next (Kutulas, 2018; Todd, 2011). For fans, the actor and the fictional character ended up being intertwined, as if they were one, portrayed as true friends not only among the cast but also for the audience (Todd, 2011).

After twenty-seven years since its debut, we can not only consider Friends to be a very influential series in the production of sitcoms in the United States, but we can also say that it will have an assured place in television culture (Knox, & Schwind, 2019; Kutulas, 2018).

4. Method

4.1. Data collection and analysis

The aim of this research consists in analysing the audience reception of Friends and to compare this reception between the selected generations, following a quantitative approach.

In order to allow for a comparative analysis of results, a previous research (Zsila, Orosz, Demetrovics, & Urbán,2020) was selected as main benchmark. This research, which aims to analyse and explore the reasons for viewing animated sitcoms, adopts a mixed methodological approach. First, the qualitative approach was used in order to explore the reasons for watching animated sitcoms. The motives found were grouped into four categories: (i) Fun, (ii) Entertainment, (iii) Social Criticism and (iv) Relaxation. These categories were used as the basis for a 20-item version of a questionnaire developed by the authors (the Motives for Viewing Animated Sitcom Questionnaire – MVASQ). After data collection, and in order to validate the questionnaire, the sample was divided into two subsamples. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed with one subsample and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with the other, which led to some adjustments in the questionnaire initially developed.

Our objectives consisted in the development of hypotheses and operationalization of concepts based on previous research, the integration with our research and, when possible, the comparison of results. We considered Zsila et al. (2020) as adequate for main benchmark and basis for our methodological options since it is centred on audience reception, with a special focus on the uses and gratifications that audiences acquire through entertainment content. Although the object of study were animated sitcoms, we concluded that the variables used in the quantitative methodology were close to what we intended to analyse. Finally, another reason for choosing this research was the fact that its sample is composed of individuals between 18 and 49 years old. In our investigation we intend, however, to explore generational differences beyond the scope of the previous research.

4.2.Hypotheses

Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Fun and Entertainment; Social Criticism and Relaxation are factors that allow to correctly evaluate the gratifications acquired by watching Friends.

This hypothesis is justified by the fact that Zsila et al. (2020) perform a similar analysis. This hypothesis was created with the aim of applying it to our sample and, thus, comparing the results.

H2: Visualization Situation Structure; Narration and Socialization are factors that allow to correctly assess the social functions that Friends play, as perceived by its audience.

These factors were not used by Zsila et al. (2020) but they are, however, mentioned by Fedele (2011), in the literature review on social functions of the media. Thus, there is no comparative intention, regarding this hypothesis. Even so, as in the previous hypothesis, it is important to test the factors before applying them to the sample.

H3: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of gratifications and social functions when watching Friends.

This hypothesis is justified by the fact that younger generations seek different gratifications when compared to previous generations in terms of media consumption. According to the generational cohort theory, the circumstances and cultural context in which a generation lived affect their ideals, consumptions, and experiences, making them different from the current generation that lives in another context and circumstance (Dou, Wang, & Zhou, 2006). However, despite Zsila et al. (2020) claim that there are no generational differences with regard to the motivations one feels when watching animated sitcoms, in this work we aim to explore generational differences, since this topic has not been adequately explored until now.

H4: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of identification and empathy with the main cast characters of Friends.

The creation of the hypothesis is justified not only by the generational cohort theory, mentioned above, but also by the possibility that the audience establishes a relationship with the characters. People in the audience might act as if they knew the characters, leading to the creation of a fictitious social relationship called parasocial interaction, since the audience feels that their day-to-day problems are solved through the characters with whom they identify in the plot (Fedele, 2011; Livingstone, 1988). Another justification is the fact that Grandío (2009) concludes that the identification the audience feels with the characters of Friends is neither homogeneous nor consistent, that is, there may be a partial or multiple identification, when the audience feels identified with some characteristics of

one character or several characteristics of different characters. Furthermore, the author argues that it is possible for the audience to feel empathy for a character, even though they do not identify with it.

4.3. Measures

Consequently, a questionnaire was prepared in order to test the hypotheses. This questionnaire was divided into three sections, covering (i) the initial screening, (ii) the relationship with characters, (iii) gratifications and social functions, and (iv) sociodemographic characterization.

At the beginning of the questionnaire a screening is carried out, as it is only intended for people who have already seen *Friends*. The following question serves as a screening for the second section of the questionnaire, dedicated to the relationship with characters, since only those who have seen the series for the first time more than 10 years ago should answer, allowing for the generational comparison necessary to test the fourth hypothesis. Individuals who watched *Friends* for the first time less than 10 years ago are immediately referred to the third section of the questionnaire.

The third section of the questionnaire covers the gratifications and social functions, using first the gratifications suggested by Zsila et al. (2020), allowing for a comparative analysis (20 questions). The sequence of these variables in the questionnaire was altered, to minimize its influence on the answers. The questionnaire also covers social functions of television fiction, as suggested by Fedele (2011), with 6 additional questions. A five-point Likert-scale (ranging from 1 = 'Totally disagree' to 5 = 'Totally agree') was used, in the answers for all these 26 questions.

4.4. Participants and procedures

The questionnaire was available between May 24 and July 1, 2021, obtaining a total of 608 valid answers. For the statistical treatment of the results, the IBM SPSS Statistics 27 software was used, and the confirmatory factor analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Amos Graphics 26 software.

In the confirmatory factor analysis, the following references were used: the level of significance (p -value ≤ 0.05), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI: 1 for perfect; ≥ 0.95 for very good; [0.90;0.95] for good; ≤ 0.9 for bad), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI: ≥ 0.95 for good; ≥ 0.90 for acceptable), the Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA: ≤ 0.05 very good; [0.05;0.07] good; [0.08;0.10] mediocre; ≥ 0.10 inappropriate), and the

Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR: ≤ 0.05 for good; ≤ 0.10 for acceptable). Finally, for internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) values greater than 0.60 were considered as acceptable.

4. Results and discussion

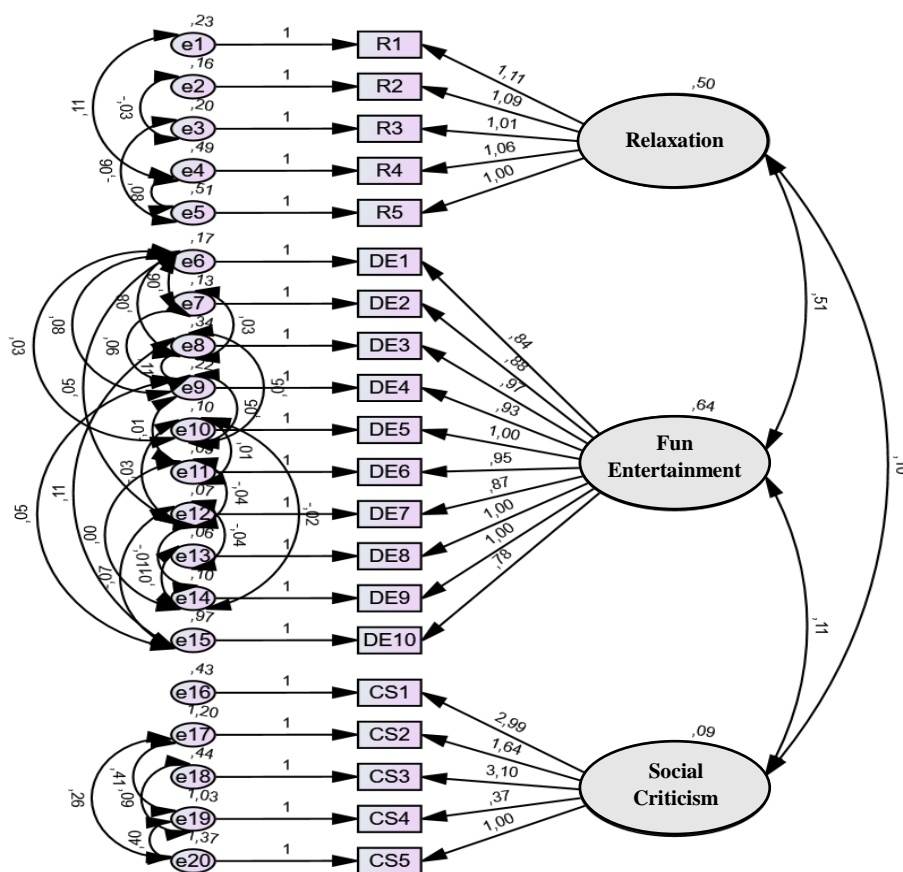
Most respondents are female (75.2%) and belong to Generation Z (52.6%). The fact that the survey was mostly shared on social networks may explain why there are few respondents from Generation X (16.9%), compared to other generations. Almost two thirds (63.5%) of respondents watched the sitcom for less than 10 years.

H1: Fun and Entertainment; Social Criticism and Relaxation are factors that allow to correctly evaluate the gratifications acquired by watching Friends.

To test the first hypothesis, 20 questions (items) with a five-point Likert-scale were used, included in the second part of the questionnaire. These questions are distributed by three dimensions: (i) Relaxation, (ii) Fun and Entertainment, and (iii) Social Criticism (Zsila et al., 2020).

The original three-dimensional model was fitted to a sample of 608 respondents. However, it did not reach a good quality of fit ($\chi^2 = 1425.4$; $df = 167$; $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.895; TLI = 0.880; RMSEA = 0.111 [90% CI: 0.106-0.117], SRMR = 0.0761). To improve the quality of the model, the modification indices were analysed, correlating the errors of the highest items (Figure 1). The new model had a very satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 = 620.4$; $df = 137$; $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.960; TLI = 0.944; RMSEA = 0.111 [90% CI: 0.070-0.082], SRMR = 0.0612) (Figure 1). Zsila et al. (2020) reduced the 20 items to 15, in order to obtain a better model. In our case it was not necessary, however, to proceed with the reduction of items.

Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis



Source: elaborated by the authors, following Zsila et al. (2020).

The reliability of each dimension was also evaluated through the analysis of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha). The values of the three dimensions were above the established threshold of 0.60 (Relaxation = 0.905; Fun and Entertainment = 0.968; Social Criticism = 0.688), indicating good reliability – with ‘Relaxation’ and ‘Fun and Entertainment’ reaching a value above 0.9.

H2: Visualization Situation Structure; Narration and Socialization are factors that allow to correctly assess the social roles acquired from watching Friends.

To test the second hypothesis, 6 questions were used, distributed by social functions suggested by Fedele (2011), namely “Visualization Situation Structure”, “Narration” and “Socialization”. The reliability of each function was evaluated through the analysis of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha). The internal consistency values for the functions were only acceptable in the case of “Socialization” (Visualization Situation Structure = 0.293; Narration = 0.465; Socialization = 0.610). We concluded, for this reason, that only the items used for the social function of socialization were measuring the construct consistently.

H3: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of gratifications and social functions when watching Friends.

A bivariate analysis was performed between the gratifications and social functions covered by the 26 questions in the questionnaire (“I see (or saw) Friends because...”) and generations, using the Kruskal-Wallis test. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Kruskal-Wallis tests for gratifications and generations

Gratifications	Sig.	Difference in distribution between Gen. X, Y and Z?	Between which generations?
It's a good kind of social criticism	0,496	No	
It's a reflection of self-ridicule of people in society	0,754	No	
It breaks social taboos	0,075	No	
It's scandalous	0,857	No	
It's malicious and sarcastic	0,046	Yes	Z and X
It's funny	0,041	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It's humorous	0,007	Yes	X and Y X and Z
I laugh hard when I watch it	0,027	Yes	X and Z
I like these jokes	0,042	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It makes me laugh	0,036	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It entertains me	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It's enjoyable	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It amuses me	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
I enjoy watching it	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It's refreshing	0,262	No	
It relaxes me	0,001	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It allows me to unwind	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It's a pleasant rest	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z Y and Z
It chills me out	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
Switches off my brain	0,001	Yes	X and Y X and Z
My daily routine fits the short duration of the episodes	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It allows me to gather with my family to watch the episodes	0,063	No	
It has a continuous and constant plot, which I like	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z
It gives an accurate social representation of my reality	0,041	Yes	Z and X Y and X
It serves as social learning for my daily life	0,106	No	
I have an empathetic relationship with the characters	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z Y and Z

Source: elaborated by the authors, following Zsila et al. (2020) and Fedele (2011).

There are statistically significant generational differences in 19 of the 26 questions. We can conclude that, in most cases, there are relevant differences between the younger generations (Y and Z), on one side, and the older generation (X), on the other. We can also conclude from here that Generations Y and Z tend to achieve globally similar results. These differences occur mainly in the gratifications regarding ‘Fun and Entertainment’ and ‘Relaxation’, as suggested by Zsila et al. (2020). In the case of ‘Social Criticism’, for instance, only one question had relevant differences across generations – “It’s malicious and sarcastic”, with differences between Generations X and Z.

It is possible to conclude that the answer to H3 is affirmative, with relevant generational differences in terms of gratifications and social functions across generations. Cohort effects are therefore visible, since younger generations value different gratifications and social functions (Dou, Wang, & Zhou, 2006; Inglehart, 1977).

H4: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of identification and empathy with the main cast characters of Friends.

Since those who answer on the relationship with characters have seen the TV series for the first time more than 10 years ago, the sample to test this hypothesis is composed of 222 respondents, from the total of 608.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was carried out to check for differences in the relationship of identification and empathy with each character across generations (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Identification with characters

Characters (Identification)	Sig.	Difference in distribution between Gen. X, Y and Z?	Between which generations?
Chandler	≈ 0,000	Yes	X and Y X and Z Y and Z
Joey	0,486	No	
Monica	0,318	No	
Phoebe	0,028	Yes	X and Y X and Z
Rachel	0,430	No	
Ross	0,032	Yes	Z and X

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 3. Empathy with characters

Characters (Empathy)	Sig.	Difference in distribution between Gen. X, Y and Z?	Between which generations?
Chandler	0,001	Yes	X and Y X and Z
Joey	0,034	Yes	X and Y
Monica	0,017	Yes	X and Y
Phoebe	0,184	No	
Rachel	0,091	No	
Ross	0,853	No	

Source: elaborated by the authors.

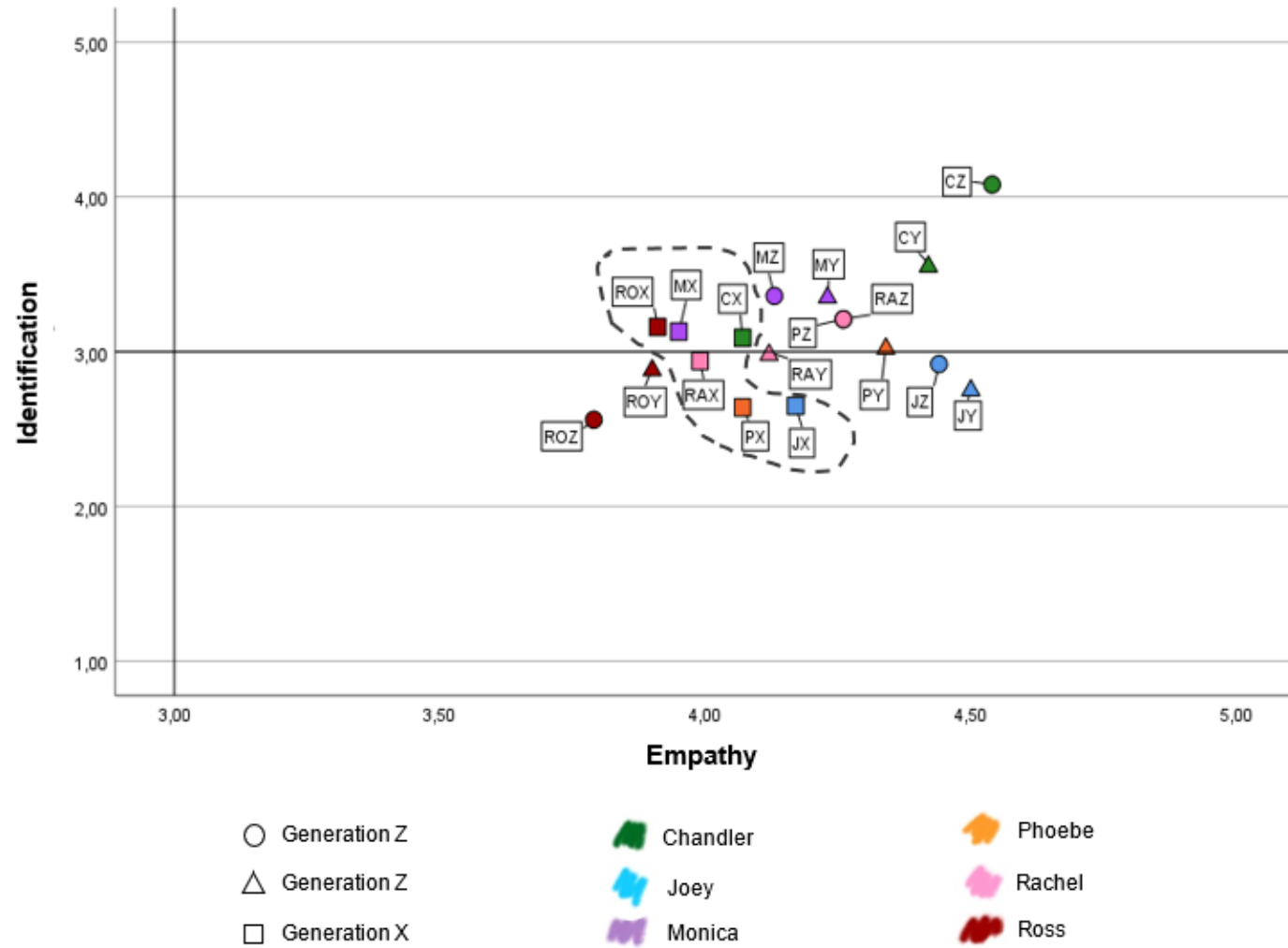
Generational differences in the identification with Chandler, Phoebe and Ross were detected (Table 2). There are differences in the identification with Chandler between the three generations. The identification with Phoebe obtains generational differences between the older generation (X) and the younger generations (Y and Z). In the case of the identification with Ross, there are differences between the younger generation (Z) and the older generation (X).

In terms of empathy with the characters, there are generational differences in the relationship with Chandler, Joey and Monica (Table 3). The differences in the empathy with Chandler occur between the older generation (X) and the younger generations (Y

and Z). In the case of the empathy with Joey and Monica there are differences between Generation X and Generation Y.

A figure was created to compare the differences between identification and empathy with each character, taking generations into consideration (Figure 2). We believe that this analysis could be innovative, insofar as no analysis or graphic representation was found that combined these dimensions, especially at the generational level. For a better definition of the results cloud, the axis regarding empathy is represented as starting on an average score of 3

Figure 2. Identification and empathy with characters, according to generation



Source: elaborated by the authors.

It is interesting to notice, analysing the dotted line in Figure 2, that Generation X is more contained in its evaluations, having a cloud of identification and empathy with less dispersion than other generations. On the other hand, Generation Z fills in both extremes, occupying the highest values of identification and empathy with Chandler and the lowest values with Ross.

Although respondents do not identify strongly with Joey (average identification value below 3, for the three generations), they all feel a strong empathy with the character (average empathy value well above 4, for the three generations). Joey is one of the characters that gathers greater empathy among respondents. This might be explained by the fact that Joey is portrayed as being childish, unable to lie or manipulate others, becoming nice and friendly, as underlined by Knox and Schwind (2019).

A clearly different situation occurs with Ross. With a lower empathy level (an average empathy score below 4, for the three generations), the identification level increases with age (lower identification with the younger generation, Generation Z, and higher identification with the older generation, Generation X). A possible explanation for this is that Ross is the only character with a father figure dimension, also the only character who has lived alone since the beginning of the show, has a stable career, and is sometimes represented as one of the most responsible in the group (Knox, & Schwind, 2019). All these characteristics can be considered as revealing more maturity, compared to other characters, contributing to a higher identification with older generations.

These conclusions are in line with Grandío (2009), that underlines that some respondents may like a character, but do not necessarily identify with it – which happens with Joey. On the other hand, regarding the relationship of Generation X with Ross, the opposite happens. Generation X tends to identify with Ross; however, it is the character with whom they have lower empathy.

Based on these results it is possible to conclude that respondents feel, overall, interconnected and portrayed by the main cast, as Todd (2011) refers to the relationship between fans and the cast of Friends. Thus, it appears that there is a parasocial relationship between the respondents and the characters, since no negative data were obtained regarding the relationship of identification and empathy with the main cast (Fedele, 2011; Livingstone, 1988). Another possible conclusion is that, as Grandío (2009) mentions, the relationship that most respondents feel with the characters is neither homogeneous nor

consistent, being mostly multiple, that is, respondents do not identify themselves or empathize exclusively with one character.

We can conclude that the answer to H4 is affirmative since, through the analysis, it was verified the existence of generational differences in terms of the relationship of identification and empathy with the characters. Although there is a more evident generational divergence in the identification with the characters, between the older and the younger generation, these differences also exist, albeit not so evident, regarding empathy. It may also be possible to justify the results of this hypothesis through cohort effects, since each generation lived in a different cultural context, leading them to obtain different ideals, consumptions and experiences (Doherty et al., 2015; Dou, Wang, & Zhou, 2006).

Conclusions

The first hypothesis (H1: Fun and Entertainment; Social Criticism and Relaxation are factors that allow to correctly evaluate the gratifications acquired by watching Friends) was maintained. That is, after a confirmatory factor analysis and an analysis of internal consistency, the three dimensions presented an acceptable model and values, confirming that they are adequate to correctly assess the gratifications acquired when watching Friends, thus meeting the conclusions of Zsila et al. (2020).

On the other hand, in the second hypothesis (H2: Visualization Situation Structure; Narration and Socialization are factors that allow to correctly assess the social functions that Friends play, as perceived by its audience), only the Socialization factor was confirmed as adequate to correctly assess the social functions that Friends play, as perceived by its audience. The social functions Visualization Situation Structure and Narration did not obtain acceptable values in the internal consistency analysis and, therefore, were not measured. These results could be due to different reasons. A first clue may consist in the fact that the questions related to social functions apply to television fiction in general and the sitcom format, analysed in this study, has very specific characteristics. This may contribute to explain why it was not possible to identify the same factors. Another reason could be the fact that the measuring instrument may have been tested and validated in more detail. Finally, a last clue may refer to the population, since our target audience, in Portugal, might reveal cultural differences in the consumption of television content.

In what regards the third hypothesis (H3: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of gratifications and social functions when watching Friends) is also maintained. Although sometimes the results of Generations Y and Z are similar, there are differences between the older generation (Generation X) and the younger generation (Generation Z), mainly evidenced in the gratifications that Zsila et al. (2020) insert into the categories of 'Fun and Entertainment' and 'Relaxation'. It is important to highlight that the only variables in which the three generations obtained more similar results are the gratifications associated with something more impactful or negative, such as those that Zsila et al. (2020) include in the category of 'Social Criticism'. It was also possible to verify that all the gratifications associated with positive concepts, such as leisure, fun, and relaxation, are the ones that most respondents feel they acquire by watching the Friends series.

Regarding the last hypothesis (H4: It is expected that there will be generational differences in terms of identification and empathy with the main cast characters of Friends), it is also maintained. Using the Kruskal-Wallis test, it was possible to confirm that there are generational divergences in (i) the identification with Chandler, Phoebe and Ross, (ii) the empathy with Chandler, Joey and Monica. With this analysis, it was possible to verify, again, an opposition between Generation X and Generation Z, mainly in the identification they feel with the characters.

All things considered, it was possible with this research to investigate the differences in terms of consumption, ideas, and experiences of each generation, since they seek gratification and have different relationships of identification and empathy with the characters. We can, therefore, argue that this study contributes to the evolution of the research in the field, with original and innovative contributions. Combining and articulating different conceptual and theoretical contributions, in a way that was not found in the literature review, we achieved results that show the impact of a sitcom over 20 years old that, in addition to transcending generations, impacts them differently. It is thus emphasized the fact that there are differences from the point of view of individuals of different generations, at a given moment or life cycle, and consecutively, differences during their personality construction, leading to different groups mobilizing different types of reception of audio-visual entertainment content.

Nevertheless, it is also necessary to mention some limitations and possible future challenges. One of the limitations of this research is the sample imbalance. In a study with more resources, a more balanced sample could be sought, in terms of gender and age. This imbalance, caused by a majority of respondents belonging to Generation Z, is mainly visible in the results obtained in the second section of the questionnaire, on the relationship with characters, since only respondents who had watched the sitcom for the first time more than 10 years ago could respond. Thus, as there were few respondents from the older generations (X and Y), a reduced number of responses was obtained, when compared to the total sample – 222 out of a total of 608. Therefore, by bringing together two measurement instruments from different sources (gratifications and social functions), we feel that it would be positive to adapt the questionnaire better to both dimensions. It would be beneficial to review the questionnaire again and understand what adaptations could be made for the Portuguese population and the sitcom format, since the measurement instrument used was applied to a different sample and in another format.

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