

# **Millennials watching *Friends***

A case study into meaning making of the 90s sitcom *Friends* among the millennial generation.

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the case of millennials watching the popular sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), with an emphasis on how they give meaning to the series in contemporary society. *Friends* is about six friends in their twenties, living in New York. The series has always been popular and available through reruns on broadcast television, but since it is available via Netflix, its popularity has grown, together with the critique on the series. And the most striking thing about this renewed interest in the series is that it mainly comes from people from the millennial generation, a new audience. This contemporary popularity of *Friends* can be explained as part of a bigger phenomenon, where a lot of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s television series get remakes, revivals, prequels and sequels. This study tries to explain this phenomenon, with a specific focus on the case of *Friends* by answering the research question: *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* This study addresses theory from television studies, audience studies and more particular fan studies. The research that is conducted here consists of 13 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with millennials between 19 and 23 years old. The data from these interviews was analysed using the thematic analysis method, five main themes were identified in this analysis. The study found that the motivations to watch *Friends* are mainly based on recommendations from others, and the easy storyline about the daily lives of the characters. The millennials did not identify with specific characters that much, but they could identify with the stage of life that the characters are in, which made the series overall recognizable for them. What they enjoyed a lot about the series is that it is from the 1990s. For the millennials, this created some sort of nostalgia towards this era even though they have not experienced this era very active themselves. Most of the interviewees even considered themselves fans of *Friends* and participated in other activities related to the series. Additionally, the preferred *Friends* over similar, more recent, comedy series like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Modern Family*. The reason why they preferred *Friends* is how they address societal themes and how it is easy to follow and watch when doing something else. When addressing the contemporary critique on the whiteness, and some of the jokes in the series they did not agree at all and argued that for them there were no problematic aspects to *Friends*. All these aspects together show how the millennials give meaning to *Friends* in today's society.

**KEYWORDS:** *Friends, Millennial generation, Television, Fandom, Nostalgia*

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## 1. Introduction

NBC's *Friends* (NBC, 1994 – 2004) was one of the primetime favourites of millions of television viewers between 1994 and 2004. Through *Friends*, viewers were able to follow the lives of six friends; Monica, Rachel, Phoebe, Ross, Joey and Chandler. At the start of the series, they were all somewhere in their twenties, living in Manhattan, New York. The first season starts with the moment that Rachel runs out of her wedding and is looking for Monica, her best friend from high school. From that moment on, the six of them are a really close group of friends, and often hang out together at the coffeehouse Central Perk, or at one of their apartments. Apart from their friendship, relationships between the characters evolve and change over time. More generally, *Friends* is about the daily lives of the group of six friends in their twenties (Quaglio, 2009).

*Friends* was considered one of the most popular TV shows in the United States during the period that it was broadcasted (Quaglio, 2009). The first season was the eighth most popular TV show in the United States in 1994, and the later seasons were always in the top five of the most popular TV shows in the US (Quaglio, 2009). *Friends* has been part of NBC's must-see line-up on Thursday evenings, together with other sitcoms like *Will and Grace* (1998 – 2006) and *Scrubs* (2001 – 2009). This showed how the American broadcaster NBC tried to attract mainly young, urban audiences (Mills, 2005). At the time it was broadcasted, *Friends* was mainstream as well as innovative. That is because unlike its NBC predecessors, *Family Ties* (1982-1989), *Cheers* (1982-1993) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Friends* dealt with *constructed* families as an alternative for or opposed to biological families, a group of friends living together, with family-like relationships. Also, the series addressed themes as same-sex marriage, divorce and adoption, which were not that present in popular television in the early nineties (Kutulas, 2018).

Moreover, *Friends* was a true cultural phenomenon its heydays: it has affected the American audience in several ways, for example, the popular nineties haircut based on the character Rachel (Quaglio, 2009). When in May 2004, the series finale of *Friends* was broadcasted, the influence of this television series on fans' social perspectives and cultural identities became apparent. Allegedly, fans adjusted their schedules to this finale. Later, fans discussed the episode thoroughly among each other, online as well as offline. They established real relationships along with fictional relationships with the characters online. The real relationships are established when the viewers get to know more of the characters by searching for them online and discussing them. The fictional relationships are based on things

like fan fiction and new storylines that are created on for example forums (Todd, 2011).

What this event reveals about the phenomenon *Friends*, and potentially resonates with other popular series/movie-franchises endings, is that the endings of television series are used to create a feeling of finality among the viewers. The finales often reflect upon the lifetime of the series, as well as on the time the viewer invested in the series (Holdsworth, 2011). This evokes certain feelings among the viewers of these series. This is not a phenomenon beholden to just *Friends* but might also be applied to more recent endings of popular hit series, like the very recent ending of *Game of Thrones*, or the ending of hit series *Dallas* at the beginning of the 1990s. What is perhaps different nowadays than two decades ago, is how the internet plays a big role in the relationship between the viewers and the characters. This because it makes it possible for the finale to become an event that was noticeable through different media outlets, turning such a moment into a media event, meaning that is not only notable on television but through different media (Todd, 2011). Allowing viewers to become producers of meaning, they do not only watch television, they experience it (Todd, 2011). The finale as a media event showed the consciousness of an end of an era, meaning that the series was interconnected with a certain time and generation (Williams, 2015). For *Friends* particularly, the finale was framed as a part of a life experience, making the viewers experience emotions like sadness (Todd, 2011). The ending of *Friends* evoked sadness because it showed the group of friends saying goodbye to each other and Monica's apartment, which was the place they hung out most regularly and that formed the centre of the series. So not only the viewers were saying goodbye to the series, but the characters were also saying goodbye to each other in the last episode, making the end of the story definitive.

Although the series' ending in 2004 was perceived as the end of an era, *Friends* is still known and viewed among different audiences. According to Miller (2018) *Friends* started to make a comeback in popular culture around 2014, but *Friends* has always been available on television through the reruns of the series. In addition to this, the series now is available through streaming, which can be seen as a new way to consume older TV content (Kompere, 2010). Netflix got the streaming rights for *Friends* in the US in 2015 and later made it available in other countries as well (Miller, 2018). On the first of January 2018, *Friends* became available through Netflix in the Netherlands. During the last few years, it became available through streaming in many countries, since then it has been streamed thousands of times (Sternbergh, 2016). This is particularly illustrated by the fact that Netflix recently paid \$100 million to keep *Friends* available through their service in 192 countries (Bloom, 2018). This also seems to fit a wider trend of the popularity of reruns, revivals, remakes and other

ways of re-engaging with series that have ended. Other examples of this are the revival of *Gilmore Girls* and the remake of *Full House*, *Fuller House*. On the one hand, this can be explained by the changing media environment and availability of content through streaming services. On the other hand, it can be seen as a strategy from the media industry which is about recreating successful content rather than creating new content. *Friends* is one of the five most-watched series that Netflix offers in several countries and is nowadays watched mostly by millennials, the generation born between 1980 and 2000 (Heisler, 2018). This has led to discussions about the content of the series, as well as questions about why it still is a popular show and why people are still watching it. These discussions are evident in the academic field like Chidester (2008) discusses the whiteness of the show. But also, in popular media, like the BBC and Buzzfeed, think-pieces on for example the whiteness of the *Friends*' cast and its narratives appear, which attest to the cultural impact of *Friends* on society and today's world (Saunders, 2018). To explore this phenomenon and its returned, or ongoing popularity, this study will try to answer the question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?*

### **1.1 Scientific relevance**

Although the media environment has changed a lot throughout the past years, *Friends*, alongside other American 1990s series, remained popular. One of the logical explanations for this might be that popular culture is still dominated by American products (Chiou & Lee, 2008). On the contrary, new technologies and the Internet created new possibilities and influences within the media environment. A new media environment with many new possibilities needs a new analysis because audiences have new ways to engage with content (Todd, 2011), for example through the use of various streaming services. One of the most used streaming services is Netflix, which started as a DVD rental company in 1997 and in 2007 started with their video on demand (VOD) service. Later on, companies like Hulu and Amazon started offering content on demand as well, and these are only the big worldwide examples. Next to this, many countries have their national platforms that offer existing and original content. Not only the availability of content changed, but the way of consumption changed as well. Binge-watching became a well-known practice, meaning that a viewer watches more than one episode of a series in one sitting, this can even lead to watching an entire season in one sitting (Jenner, 2016).

As a result of these changes that were mentioned before, research into a television series like *Friends*, can lead to interesting findings of this new media environment in

combination with an older media product – like *Friends* – that is no longer ‘active’ or releasing new episodes. Research should be done into why some series are still consumed while the production has stopped. Due to streaming services like Netflix, and reruns on television, we can consume and relive something from the past. The consumption of these media products can be part of nostalgia (Lizardi, 2015), or part of ongoing, or long-term engagement with a media product (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). There are different studies into the case of *Friends* (Chidester, 2008; Chiou & Lee, 2008; Kutulas, 2018; Sandell, 1998; Todd, 2011), these studies are about the series itself and the content of the *Friends*. There is less research, and knowledge, on why audiences watch reintroduced series like this, because this is a more contemporary phenomenon. This thesis will focus on how it is possible that some media products are still relevant while others are not and how contemporary audiences make meaning of these media products, focusing on the case of the sitcom *Friends*. Research has been done into attitudes towards the series *Friends* (Chiou & Lee, 2008; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), the sitcom characteristics of the series (Chidester, 2008; Kutulas, 2018) and the interpretations of *Friends* among viewers from different countries, in this case the US and India (Chitnis, Thombre, Rogers, Singhal & Sengupta, 2006). Chen (2016) suggests that the popularity of *Friends* is caused by the feelings of recognition and aspiration it leads to, but since this is not scientifically studied, this needs further exploration. This research adds to the existing literature because it takes the form of a case study to look at how millennials give meaning to *Friends* in today’s world.

## 1.2 Social relevance

*Friends* as a popular television series among a new audience – the millennials – is a case that needs further exploration. Television has always been an interesting medium to research because it has an influence on (national) cultures and behaviour within society (Fiske, 1992). Television helps to shape values, attitudes, and beliefs. Television represents social events and influences behaviour and lifestyle choices (Todd, 2011). TV shows express relationships between family, friends and they can represent social norms. In addition to this, television might influence how an audience perceives certain people, for example how they perceive differences between gender, or between adults and children, et cetera. Additionally, a television series might influence how the viewers behave, which can have a positive as well as a negative effect on society as a whole (Fiske, 1992). This study will expose what norms and values from *Friends* are adopted by millennials and how they give meaning to these norms and values in everyday life. Next to the influence on norms and values, television can

influence the formation of identity. Research found that television viewing choices have an influence on social identity formation, and the other way around. They base their choices on which television show to watch on the level of expected identification with the social groups in the series (Harwood, 1999). Additionally, the engagement with media characters can lead to fundamental changes in the identity formation of young adults over time, especially when they are a fan of a media product and engage very actively (Harrington & Bielby, 2010).

In addition to this, the social relevance of this research lies within the motivations of the millennial audience to watch *Friends*, which might be applicable to other popular 90s series as well. These motivations can influence the creation and targeting of future media products and the understanding of specific audiences. This can be beneficial for production companies, because they can target their products better, but also for consumers because better targeted products make it easier to find a product that fits their interests. These motivations of millennials are particularly interesting because this generation was too young to watch and identify with the series when it was broadcasted on television. This case needs exploration because it is interesting to see why this audience finds it entertaining to watch, while they at the same time problematize some issues within the series, for example for its lack of diversity in characters ethnicities. Their motivations and meaning making are part of their way of audiencing as defined by Fiske (1992), a concept that will be addressed later. The case of *Friends* is in a general way relevant for the television industry to understand how a series can keep an audience or how they can get new audiences for existing products. If there is a better understanding of this phenomenon of popularity of reruns and revivals, producers can take this into account when producing new series, or when they want to get their series popular again.

In terms of the entertainment industry, sitcoms are a big part of it and therefore can explain a lot about the industry. Sitcoms have been one of the most popular genres in the United States since the 1950s, this dominance is not that big in Britain. This difference suggests distinctions that can be made between the entertainment and television industries and how audiences consume television. In a broader context, this can even explain national and cultural identities and the role of humour in specific nations or cultures (Mills, 2005). Additionally, sitcoms can be studied as a tool for cohering specific audiences, implicating that audience groups have similar responses to characters and find similar things funny (Mills, 2005). This makes it interesting to see if this is still the case when there is a new audience group, that is more active in what media they consume. As television and media scholar Brett Mills already argues “Sitcom is, then, not only a valuable form to study because it can feed

into debates about the broadcasting industries, global marketing of programmes and issues of representation, but also because it may offer a new way into much broader debates about comedy and humour as a whole” (2015, p. 8).

As presented above, current research on the motivations and meaning making of an older media-product that remains popular is lacking. That is why this will be researched in this thesis, by trying to answer the question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* Before offering an answer to this question, this thesis will first present the theoretical framework. This is followed by the methodology of this study, qualitative interviews, and why and how these were conducted. After that, it will move on to the results, and lastly the concluding remarks are presented based on the results that were found.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will briefly address previous work on television and audiences, to gain a better understanding of what knowledge there already is on this topic. Mainly focusing on studies from the field of television studies, addressing theories from throughout history. After that, this chapter discusses several theories and concepts that are relevant to the research question, these come from different media scholars and researches. The chapter ends with a brief exploration of the case study of this thesis; the case of *Friends*. The most relevant theories and empirical research are discussed here focusing on how they relate to the topic and the research question of this study.

### 2.1 Television research

As stated before, television is one of the more traditional types of media that is still consumed nowadays. Television plays a role in the construction of social reality of viewers (Shapiro & Lang, 1991). People take meanings from television content; these understandings can be different per individual based on involvement, socio-demographic context and cultural context (Livingstone, 2000). Ageing and structure of lives inform and shape the role of media and media fandom in someone's life, and the other way around (Harrington, Bielby & Bardo, 2011). This thesis considers the role of the 90s sitcom *Friends* in the lives of millennials.

For this study, it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the effect television might have on audiences. One of the foundational theories in television research is the Cultivation Theory: a theory that discusses the long-term effects of watching television. This theory has been developed at the end of the 1970s by professor of communication George Gerbner. Cultivation Theory considers that television cultivates perceptions of reality of the audience, in a way that is different than other mass media do (Gerbner, 1998; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Not everyone consumes TV images and messages, which all television content exists of, in the same way, "Layers of demographic, social, personal, and cultural contexts also determine the shape, scope, and degree of the contribution television is likely to make" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986, p. 23). According to Cultivation Theory, the effects of watching television are indirect, meaning that watching television once does not directly affect the viewers, but it shapes a perception of the world over time. Therefore, television plays a big role in the cultivation of values, beliefs and ideologies (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). This view is more nuanced than theories that existed before the Cultivation Theory, contradicting, for example, the work of Shapiro and Lang (1991) that argued that television plays a direct role in the construction of social reality.

That watching and thus consuming television might have different effects on people, can be further explained with the help of the so-called ‘encoding/decoding’-model created by Stuart Hall (1980). Hall (1980) discussed the encoding/decoding of media messages in the communicative process. According to Hall’s (1980) model, a media message can be anything visual, auditory or written communicated through a media outlet like television, radio, newspapers, or other media. There are meanings encoded to the media product by the producers of the product. The receivers then decode these meanings from the product, which might result in different meaning structures. The codes of encoding and decoding can differ; this has to do with understanding and misunderstanding in communicative exchange. This means that media texts can be decoded, or read, in several ways. This implies that the audience plays an active role in this process, in other words, there is an ‘active audience’ contradicting the classic couch potato image viewers were attributed in previous studies. There are distinctions made between the dominant reading, the negotiated reading and the oppositional reading. The dominant reading, or preferred reading, is when the audience reacts to the media product in the way the producers expected them to ‘read’ it. The negotiated reading is when the dominant reading is partly agreed with by the audience and the oppositional reading is when the audience ‘reads’ the message in a direct oppositional way in relation to the dominant reading (Hall, 1980). This theory adds to this study because the way the millennials ‘read’ *Friends* can influence how they give meaning to the series.

Since there are different meanings decoded to media messages, the role of the audience changes. Nowadays, TV viewers are rather TV users: they are more active in what they watch and when they watch it. This relates to the active role they play in meaning making, the audience makes sense of media messages in their own way (Kompare, 2010). Fiske’s (1992) work on ‘*Married with Children*’ is emblematic here: in this study, he looked at different social formations and how the people within these formations talked about the show. Fiske (1992) used the case of *Married ... with Children* to explain how various audiences ‘audience’ in a different way. Audiencing is about the process of making sense of popular culture. These different audience groups are social formations, based on a set of social interests. The relationship between a text and the audience is not a cause and effect relation, these relations are complex interplays (Fiske, 1992). According to Fiske (1992), the needs of audiences can only be achieved through social action and the audience activity of the media user. By social action he means the activity of articulating the needs within social relations and the establishment of social identity. The audience activity refers to the engagement in social relations without paying attention to social status and inequality. The

satisfaction of audiences lies in the control over the engagement with other audience members in a social way, and the content in a more general way. The difference between Hall's (1980) and Fiske's (1992) work is that Hall (1980) focuses more on the idea that there is a certain message that the producers want to bring to the audience while Fiske (1992) is more about how the audiences make sense of the content. Through Fiske's concept (1992) of *audiencing*, the idea that different audiences have different ways of making sense of a media product is introduced. That is a relevant idea to further examine how millennials make sense of *Friends* in comparison to older audiences who watched *Friends* at the time it was broadcasted.

Before further exploring television audiences and the changes in the television industry that changed the ways of consuming television content, a more general theory about media consumption needs to be addressed here. Different types of media are used for different purposes, according to the uses and gratifications theory of media use, which is widely applied in media research, having its roots in American television research from the 1920s. This theory emphasizes the different needs, orientations and interpretations, influenced by social and/or individual characteristics (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). This approach claims that active use of the media gratifies needs of audiences (Fiske, 1992; Kilian, Hennigs & Langner, 2012).

Important to consider, however, is that what has changed since these studies have been written: the media landscape and television's position, in general, have changed tremendously over the past decade(s). Throughout the years, television has changed from a centralized, mass product distributed through one-way communication into individual consumer choice of a highly diversified range of content with customizable interfaces (Kompere, 2005). Examples of this type of individual consumption are streaming services like Netflix. The traditional rules of the television industry are challenged and changed. As Kompere addresses: "These changes around television are also part of a larger conceptual shift across all media, as the aesthetic, technological, industrial, and cultural boundaries between previously discrete forms (text, film, broadcasting, video, and sound recordings) are increasingly blurred, challenging established practices and paradigms" (2005, p. 198). Where television used to have programming that was limited and timebound, nowadays it is possible to offer a range of content that is available on several devices; television has become a multiplatform medium. Reruns are found on both the 'old' and the 'new' platforms that are parts of television as a medium. The new ways of watching television allow media users themselves to control which content is repeated. The success of television content is measured by how many people engage with the content. As Petersen (2018) explains, "With the arrival of DVD box sets and

streaming services, this notion of sequence, interpretation and repetition changes slightly” (2018, p. 218). Also, in this part, he addresses Netflix in particular: “Netflix offers the opportunity for constantly repeating and viewing old episodes again. Or fans can watch their favourite episodes, jumping from one to the other out of order” (Petersen, 2018, p. 218).

Streaming services offer the possibility to rerun series over and over again, but this is not something new. Reruns have been part of television schedules for many years now and are a result of the production of DVD boxes later on, because these hold entire seasons of series that already have been broadcasted, the development of reruns is discussed by Derek Kompare in his book *Rerun Nation: How repeats invented American television* (2005). He argues that television is a medium that produces and reproduces time. It is made up of the concrete present, hypothetical futures and a recycled past, which can be repeated again and again in the form of reruns. Reruns have become part of the primary products of American television since the 1970s (Kompare, 2005). There are many sitcoms from the 1980s and 1990s that have reruns on television as well as through online platforms, but the ratings are still dominated by *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Home Improvement*, which are all series that started around the mid to late 1990s. *Friends* proved to be a successful rerun and therefore could be exploited efficiently from time to time again (Kompare, 2005). As Kompare explicates “over the course of the seventies, television became the subject of active nostalgia, historical exploration, and cultural preservation” (2005, p. 104). This already indicates how nostalgia plays a role in media consumption and particularly consumption of television content, which will be discussed more in depth in the next paragraph.

Another element playing a role in reruns and their success is audience fragmentation. Audience fragmentation has influenced reruns in several ways, both the traditional way of broadcasting reruns through television channels, and rerunning series through streaming services. First of all, audience fragmentation has led to a broader range of content. Some channels are now even dedicated to one particular genre or a specific niche audience (Kompare, 2005). In the Netherlands, the channel that broadcasts reruns of *Friends*, Comedy Central, is an example of a channel that is dedicated to only one genre, namely comedy. Next to *Friends* this channel shows reruns of series like *Modern Family*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *South Park* and *Bob's Burgers*. The reason for dedicating an entire channel to reruns of comedy series might be in the fact that reruns are still successful when broadcasted in the traditional way, they keep on generating income for both producers and broadcasters (Kompare, 2010). Niemeyer and Wentz (2014) even speak of ‘nostalgia television’ when

discussing these networks that only broadcast television shows, this idea of television and the feeling of nostalgia is addressed in the next section.

## 2.2 Mediated nostalgia

As mentioned before, television, and other media, became the subject of active nostalgia around the 1970s. Thus, consuming “old media” products, like *Friends* nowadays, can be explained as part of nostalgia among audiences, therefore we need a better understanding of this concept before finding out how millennials give meaning to *Friends*. Lizardi (2015) discussed the concept of mediated nostalgia which entails that audiences experience a feeling of nostalgia through the consumption of media products. He argues, “Nostalgia will refer to a yearning for the past or some past state, which results in the focusing in on this past or a past object to assuage this yearning and to reassure already held ideological positions” (Lizardi, 2015, p. 2). In other words, this means that watching *Friends* can be an act of yearning for the past, because it was created in the 1990s, even though many millennials were not even born, or too young to remember the 1990s. Accordingly, it can be stated that contemporary media culture places audiences in a position where they are fixed on the recent past. This trend of nostalgia is seen in many forms of media and is explained by Lizardi (2015), as follows “We could use the past as an adaptive functional mirror with which we could compare and contrast to our contemporary situation, possibly learning something along the way” (Lizardi, 2015, p. 1). This yearning for the past is mainly for a past that is ‘simpler’ or ‘better’ than current society, in the eyes of the audience or the individual. Furthermore, nostalgia can also occur for an idealized past, even when the individual has not experienced this past him-/herself (Lizardi, 2015), which is the case for many of the millennial *Friends*-viewers. Lizardi (2015) argues that this is inauthentic longing for the past because it does not take part in lived experience. This past is only an ideological reality to the individual (Lizardi, 2015). This idea of inauthentic longing for the past is relevant for *Friends*, a series that took place in the early 1990s and thus a significant part of the millennial audience is not familiar with the society back then.

Television is one of the oldest mediums that is used for nostalgia, this is because television connotes a sense of the past, through a collection of images, objects and sounds (Holdsworth, 2011). As discussed by Holdsworth (2011) there are two characteristics that make television a privileged site of nostalgia. The first one is that according to Holdsworth (2011), that nostalgia and television are both attached to the idea of home. And secondly, the dynamics of closeness and distance that television has, allow for a balanced play between

opposites like past and present, and sameness and difference (Holdsworth, 2011). Therefore, nostalgia is not only about the desire to remember the past but can also lead to non-recognition or misremembering of past times (Holdsworth, 2011).

During the past years, the trend of ‘the nostalgic’ in modern television has occurred. Examples of series that were produced during the last few years and that have this nostalgic element are *Mad Men*, *The Hour*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Downtown Abbey* (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014): all these examples follow the lives of characters in a different decade than current times, for example *Mad Men* takes place in the 1960s, and *Boardwalk Empire* takes place in the 1920s. And a more recent example, produced by Netflix, is *Stranger Things*, which started in 2016 and had gathered many viewers from then on and even got nominated for numerous big awards (Wetmore, 2018). According to Niemeyer and Wentz (2016), these series are rather formative of the aesthetics of the nostalgic world they portray. While *Friends* is more about triggering nostalgic emotions, *Friends* does not try to incorporate nostalgic elements because it is an old series which shows the time it took place in. Meaning that *Friends* recalls its own past and consequently becomes nostalgic. *Friends* is even nostalgic within the series, because it is such a long running series, they use the possibility to make flashback episodes to create nostalgic feelings for the characters and the narrative (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014). New media technologies and new forms of consumption have led to uncertainty in the television industry. This might explain why nostalgia arises because this often happens in times of crisis or changes, this also explains the trend of remakes because using successful formats from the past will offer some security.

In addition to the popularity of remakes, reruns, prequels, sequels and spin-offs have been present in television schedules (Holdsworth, 2011). *Friends* is a different case because it did not get a recent remake or spin-off but is still, or again, popular among different audiences. Even though *Friends* is still popular because of its nostalgic aspects for its viewers, this popularity has also led to some controversy. Even though it actually has never been off television, Netflix made it easier available and it is watched even more than it already was. Another series that experienced this is *Seinfeld*. Yet, the challenges of that these older media products, like underrepresentation of different ethnicities, controversial family traditions, the dominance of heteronormativity, et cetera, are allegedly easily or overshadowed by nostalgic feelings for these series. However, the stories are still relevant and relatable, which leads many people to return to the series in time of grief or fear (Miller, 2018). This is because it is a symbol of what is constant in life, the things and the people that will always be there for you, this idea comforts them (Miller, 2018). Media users appear to have a constant desire for

mood regulation. This can be about seeking and maintaining negative as well as positive moods with the help of watching certain series or listening to a specific song. Music and television/film are the forms of media that are most effective and therefore used the most for mood regulation (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004).

Miller's (2018) work on *Friends* offers an insight into this practice of mood regulation through media. She conducted research among fans of *Friends* and found that most of them watched *Friends* when something tragic happened, examples they mentioned were 9/11, the US elections in 2016 and mass shootings in 2017. Many watched it in low times in their lives, as a form of escapism. Media narratives can provide some sort of retreat for users who are uncomfortable with their real lives and social world (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004). This is in line with what Lizardi (2015) argues about how media products from the past are used to compare and contrast to contemporary society. Several authors (Lee & Lee, 1995; Miller, 2018; Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004) mention escapism as a way of engaging with television. To illustrate this, Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld for example, argue that "watching TV can cause self-reflection, or a sense of 'escape', or sometimes even both at the same time" (2004, p. 391). Moreover, they mention that different types of media have different characteristics when it comes to the experiences of the users, these experiences even can be contradictory. An example which is described in the article is the female audience that chooses to watch sad films to cheer them up, this again shows how media can regulate moods of the audience. This can happen because most media entertainment experiences are dynamic, complex and multi-faceted, as Fiske (1992) also discusses. However, enjoyment is often the core of media entertainment experiences: TV viewers like to interact, both emotionally and mentally, with personae featured in media products, these personal relationships lead to the major part of the enjoyment for the viewers (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004).

Nostalgia is in many cases linked to the viewers "emerging adult" phase (Lizardi, 2015). A phase in life in which identity formation, self-exploration and instability are central (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). People who are in this phase of life, which is the transition to adulthood, are not able to fully focus on their present and therefore try to engage with the past a lot (Lizardi, 2015, p. 25). The digital outlets, like Netflix and Hulu, that hold television content create something that is described as a "playlist past" (Lizardi, 2015). It allows individuals to have access to one's media past, whenever they want, allowing them to stay "up to date" with the past (Lizardi, 2015, p. 32). This explosion of access to nostalgic media leads to a media-driven version of the past rather than a critical or collective image of the past, because the repetitive collector's mentality leads to the construction of individualized

nostalgia through their own media consumption. This has to do with the fact that media consumption has become very individualized because of mobile technologies, since the consumption is more individual, the feeling of nostalgia is also formed individual (Lizardi, 2015). Again, this is interesting in light of the research question because having feelings of nostalgia might be one of the ways in which millennials give meaning to *Friends*.

### **2.3 Post-object fandom**

The success of *Friends* in the light of this trend of mediated nostalgia implies that there is a form of previous engagement with *Friends*. However, a part of these fans has said goodbye to the product, but there might also be people that remained fans of *Friends* even after the series finale. To understand the fans of *Friends* we first need an understanding of what fans and fandom are. The term fan has always been well-known in the field of sports, the enthusiastic supporters were labelled as fans. This was later picked up by the mainstream media and then became a popular term (Cavicchi, 2018). Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington explain fandom as “how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world” (2007, p. 10).

A way to explore these feelings of long-term attachment or distancing can be found in the concept of post-object fandom discussed by Williams (2015). There are two types of post-object fandom, the first one is a type of fandom that continues when a media product is no longer ongoing, for example after the finale of a television series. Another type of post-object fandom is when new fans discover media texts and become fans of this particular text even though the production of the text has already stopped, this can happen through the use of new media like DVDs, downloads and streaming services. These ways of viewing contain less risk for the viewer because they know that they can watch it whenever they want and is reassured of the endpoint. Also, this goes against the ‘common culture’ that used to be constructed through TV schedules (Williams, 2015). The case of *Friends* in this study has most to do with the latter type of post-object fandom, the type where a new audience discovers a series when it has already stopped and then become fans, rather than existing fans continuing fandom after the series stops. Williams (2015) argues that fandom, and the relationship with the media text, often continuous through watching DVDs and reruns. While other authors, like Todd (2011) disagree with this, like she states, “while the show will be broadcast in countless reruns, the end of the series indicates the end of audiences’ on-going relationship with *Friends* because there are no more new plot developments” (p. 864). This study will explore if and how millennials audiences build ongoing relationships with the sitcom *Friends*, even though there

are no new plot developments.

Williams (2015) argues that is interesting to look at how fans react to changes, transitions and endings because this can explain how fandom is related to self-narrative, identity and ontological security. There are three reactions by fans to endings of their favourite series or show. The first one is the reiteration discourse, where fans re-establish their identity as a fan by keeping involved with the series (Williams, 2015). The second one, the renegotiation discourse is about reworking the identity as a fan, when they acknowledge that it played a big role in their life, but the fan identity changes after it ended (Williams, 2015). The third discourse, the rejection discourse where fans distance themselves from the series, this is often combined with a feeling of relief and a critical stance towards the series (Williams, 2015). This shows that the reactions to endings can be very diverse, this is also visible when talking to fans about reboots or spin-offs of their favourite series. There are many fans that would love it, but on the other hand, there are many fans that think it would be a disaster. Next to this, there is also some discussion on re-watching series on DVD or streaming or watching reruns on traditional broadcast television. This is interesting for this study, because the millennial generation has the opportunity to both watch *Friends* via DVD or streaming, or to watch it on television, this might have different effects on how they perceive the series. In her book, Williams (2015) also addresses how fans intertwine with characters and events in their own lives. More generally, media audiences identify with characters and events in series, which often plays a role in why the audience likes the series and can lead to ontological security and self-identity. The identification with characters and events will also be discussed in this study to find out why millennials like to watch *Friends*.

*Friends* is not the only show that has become popular again: During recent years, several 1980s and 1990s series got revivals. Examples of this are; *Will & Grace*, *Roseanne*, *One Day at a Time* and *Full House* (Miller, 2018). Often remakes of movies or television series are used to attract new audiences who are too young to know the original (Lizardi, 2015). For *Friends* this is not the case, even though the biggest part of the millennial generation is too young to have grown up with *Friends*, no remake was made to attract this new audience. A specific example that did experience a revival is *Gilmore Girls*. In 2016 a four-episode *Gilmore Girls* special was released through Netflix after the series had initially ended in 2007. One of the reasons why Netflix tries to obtain the rights for popular 1970s, 80s and 90s series and their remakes is the nostalgic aspect of these series. Series that every generation in the family can enjoy. The revival of *Gilmore Girls* fits this family strategy perfectly because the series is about three women from different generations it attracts

audiences from different generations. The idea of Netflix to make a revival of the series, was mainly based on the data they got from the viewers who watched the original seasons that were already on Netflix. They found that it was watched a lot by 18-year olds, who were too young to watch it when it was first broadcasted on television. According to the producers of the original series (Jurgensen, 2018), the format needed to be changed for the revival. Therefore, they choose to make four episodes based on the four seasons. Hence, they argue that it is more of a comeback to see how the characters are doing ten years later, rather than a reboot (Jurgensen, 2018). Line Nybro Petersen (2018) analysed the importance of the revival of *Gilmore Girls* for the fans when they grow old together with a show and their characters. Showing that long-term fandom can disrupt generational belonging when there is still identification with the characters from the original series rather than the older characters from the revivals (Jerslev & Petersen, 2018). Popular media affects life-course processes in a way that it offers a representation of normative age-based behaviour and identities. Our lives have changed into thoroughly mediated lives, media helps to define differences between age groups and generations and to identify with these groups. Long-term fandom makes this harder because the relation between growing older in real life and the media texts that help construct reality becomes more complex (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). These studies link back to the research question of this study because the millennial audience of *Friends* is from a different generation than the Friends characters are. The meaning making process of this audience can show how *Friends* affects the definition of age groups, age-based behaviour and generations. And might give an idea of whether *Friends* also plays a role in the construction of reality for the millennial generation.

Since the series has ended, fans have been asking for a comeback. David Crane, one of the creators of *Friends*, argues that the story has been told from beginning to end, there is no need for reunions (Miller, 2018). He wants people to watch reruns rather than waiting for a reboot or a movie of the series, because the show is about a finite period in people's lives, their twenties and thirties, a reboot could not address the same themes and problems when the characters are in their forties or fifties and therefore will never be experienced in the same way as the series was experienced. He acknowledges that the story of *Friends* is timeless, but the show is not (Miller, 2018). Regarding the research question of this study, the timelessness of the story might play a role in how millennials give meaning to the series. But, to find out if this is the case, there need to be a general understanding of the media consumption of the millennial generation.

## 2.4 Millennials and television

Millennials are a group of digitally connected youth, with the opportunities to engage with media texts across national boundaries. Although this is the case, most media texts consumed by the millennials come from the United States and the United Kingdom (Stein, 2015). This already hints on why *Friends* is popular in several countries over the world, and more specifically, the Netherlands where this study about the meaning making of *Friends* among millennials took place. The term millennial got popularized when in 2000, William Howe and Neil Strauss published their book on this generation. What is striking about this generation that they combine traditional family values with involvement in digital popular and commercial culture, being the ideal multiplatform cultural participant and media fan (Stein, 2015). The millennial generation is very diverse in terms of ideologies and preferences, Stein (2015) uses the example of *Glee* to explain why millennials consume series and TV shows that have “something for everybody”, in *Glee* they try to do this in terms of the diverse characters and the different music genres they use in the series. *Friends* does not incorporate music like *Glee* does, but also has characters with diverse personalities. Also, *Glee* addresses the millennial vision on families, by creating a new family in the form of a group of friends. This is really similar to what *Friends* does, the group of friends feels like a family because of their very close bond and how often they are together (Stein, 2015).

In addition to the diversity in characters and the family values portrayed in *Friends*, the current popularity of *Friends* can be attributed as part of a broad nostalgia for the 90s. The availability through Netflix is one of the ways it got introduced to the millennial audience. Next to its nostalgic feeling, the provision of comfort and pleasure have been discussed as reasons for its popularity among millennials (Chen, 2016). Netflix plays a role in the ‘new’ media sector in which new applications are used by millennials alongside traditional media like journalism, radio and television. These applications enabled new ways for networking and transferring knowledge among audiences. The behaviour of audiences has become more user-driven, individualized and participatory. In general, media users are active and choose which media fulfils their needs best, based on previous experiences and gratifications (Kilian, et al., 2012). Millennials have control over their media environment like no other generation ever had, this generation is born into this fragmented media landscape and therefore is used to using it. The internet is central to their lives and offers them choices. Millennials use television mostly for entertainment, and sometimes for content that is bounded to a certain moment, like the news, the weather forecast or live events that are broadcasted. In terms of entertainment, it is a passive medium that can make them escape from reality (Geraci & Nagy,

2004). Since the media landscape is so fragmented, brands need to advertise successfully in order to get attention from the millennials. This is interesting for the case of *Friends* because it is not a new series, and therefore is not advertised nowadays, this study will address how the millennials discover *Friends* since they are not targeted through advertisements.

## **2.5 Friends and the case of sitcoms**

*Friends* is an interesting case to research because it is a media product that was created more than 20 years ago, *Friends* is a sitcom that has been broadcasted in over forty countries between 1994 and 2004 and was created by the American broadcaster NBC (IMDb, n.d.). One of the most common definitions of sitcoms is given by Mintz and is described as follows; “A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are infinite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour” (1985, as cited in Mills, 2005, p. 27). This definition focuses on structure rather than content. Within the sitcom genre there is flexibility in the industrial structure, like the characteristics of the genre, this results in flexibility in audiences’ reading techniques and complexity of the genre because it is commonly related to many other genres (Mills, 2005).

Sitcoms, and the comedy genre in general play a prevalent role in popular culture. Self-explanatory, the main characteristic of sitcoms in terms of content is the humour, in *Friends* this plays a big role as well. In the creation of the show, two teams of scriptwriters were used, one team which focused on the plot developments and one team that focused on the humour in the script (Dynel, 2011). Berman (1987) described why sitcoms got popular; sitcoms relate to their audience, sitcoms dramatize events or conditions and sitcoms suggest an attitude towards things and towards ourselves. As stated before, sitcoms show changes in society, mainly through the representation of families. They have gone through different stages of representation of families; in the early years of the sitcom, stable families such as in *Father Knows Best*, later on surreal families like *The Addams Family*, secure families like in *The Cosby Show*, and surrogate families like in *Friends* (Mills, 2005). The main theme in sitcoms, therefore, is family life; these fictional families carry implicit lessons about family life in real life. The family problems are presented with humour and within a predictable format. The likeability of the characters in the sitcoms grows, because of the recognizable aspects that are presented in sitcoms because it is about regular life (Olson & Douglas, 1997). *Friends* is not about the family itself, but about a group of friends who live like a family, they

are always together and even share apartments. Next to family life they experience as a group of friends, they all have their own family members who also occur in the series often and therefore they have to deal with family problems from both their real and their constructed family.

There are differences between comedies and sitcoms, the differences between ‘quality’ comedy and sitcoms are discussed by Jenner (2018), the main difference lies in the camera setup and the lightning that is used, which are more technical characteristics. In terms of jokes, sitcoms rely more on repeated punchlines accompanied by a laugh track, while ‘quality’ comedies rely on more complex jokes that are built upon during several episodes, with a repeated sentiment. One of the most famous examples of punchlines from *Friends* is Joey’s “How are you doin’?”. Also, the two types aim for different target audiences, the sitcom tries to reach the masses with all its class connotations and the ‘quality’ comedy tries to reach an audience with a high financial and cultural capital (Jenner, 2018). After Netflix obtained the rights to stream *Friends*, they started to introduce more sitcoms to the platform, where they used to offer more ‘quality’ comedies. They even announced a reboot of the popular 80s/90s sitcom *Full House* in that year (Jenner, 2018).

A sitcom is a product and a producer of its time, *Friends* is one of the cases that succeeded at being popular among different generations (Cobb, Ewen & Hamad, 2018). It is relevant to look at how contemporary audiences place *Friends* in current society. Especially, since it has been criticized because of its whiteness, lack of cultural differences and homophobic jokes (Chidester, 2008; Sandell, 1998). It is interesting to see how *Friends* as a media text relates to generational belonging and identification with characters. According to Williams (2015) watching a programme when it is an ‘active object’ is the superior way to engage with the series, this relates to the idea that a sitcom is a product of its time. On the other hand, Cobb, Ewen and Hamad (2018) explain the popularity of *Friends* among the millennial generation as a part of the nostalgia for politics and economics. Furthermore, sitcoms can even say something about specific television channels and the relationship with their audiences (Mills, 2015). This study will give more insight into whether millennials have a different way of audiencing and engaging with *Friends* than the audience who watched it when it was broadcasted.

This chapter addressed this thesis’ core theoretical foundations to get an understanding of what they encompass and how they relate to this research topic. Also, it gave an insight into the general media consumption of the millennial generation, and how these choices might be

influenced by the media environment, the technological changes and opportunities in this new media environment. The next chapter will discuss how this study, which will answer the question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?*, was conducted methodologically, and why. Followed by a analysis of the results, and the conclusion of this study.

### 3. Methodology

In this chapter the method of the research will be discussed, along with the reasons for using this method and how the research was conducted. Additionally, it addresses how the interviewees in the sample were found and how the analysis of the interviewees was executed.

#### 3.1 Research method

To answer the research question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* As explained in the theoretical framework, this research focused on the case of the sitcom *Friends*, *Friends* is about six friends in their twenties who live in neighbouring apartments in Manhattan, New York (Todd, 2011). The focus on one particular case means that this study has the form of a case study, meaning that it is a research that intensively analyses one single case of a phenomenon, the phenomenon here being the popularity of 90s TV series and *Friends* being the single case (Bryman, 2012). The case of the sitcom *Friends* is chosen because it is well-known case and is still popular among different audiences all over the world, and therefore discussed among different researchers and popular media outlets worldwide. The research question is answered through the collection and analysis of qualitative data. This data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with audience members from the millennial generation, more particular the youngest part of the millennial generation. Qualitative in-depth interviews do suit a case study best because they allow detailed examination of a case and allow to discuss meaning making processes and individual opinions (Bryman, 2012). Meaning making is part of the research question, as mentioned several times before.

#### 3.2 Qualitative interviews

The research question implied that we want to know how an audience perceives a specific media product. In this case how they, the millennial audience, in particular, perceives the relevance of *Friends* in today's society and how they give meaning to this sitcom. As formulated into the research question, as mentioned before; *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* Because of the interest in perception and meaning making, a qualitative method is most suitable, more specifically qualitative in-depth interviews were most suitable. Interviews, in general, give an insight into the points of view of the participants and they allow for rich and detailed answers from the people who are being interviewed (Bryman, 2012). The type of interviews that were conducted here were semi-structured interviews. These are interviews based on an interview guide, which consist of questions and specific topics that need to be covered, to make sure that overall the common

thread is similar among all interviews which makes it possible to compare the answers of the different interviews afterwards and analyse the data (Bryman, 2012). Yet, the benefit of semi-structured interviews is that this type of interviews offers the opportunity to make small changes during the process of data collection. For example, when during the collection of data, which is the conduction of interviews, it turns out that some questions are not entirely clear for the participants or that they cannot answer a particular question, there is the possibility to adjust these questions to make it more answerable for the upcoming interviews. This consequently makes it more valuable for the data collection and later on for the results and conclusion of this research. There is also the possibility during a particular interview to add a few new questions when a relevant topic is mentioned by the interviewee, this enables to dive deeper into the topics that are important or relevant according to the participants, even when these topics did not seem to be that relevant to the researcher at first. Semi-structured interviews also allow to adjust the emphasis of the study when significant issues emerge during the interviews (Bryman, 2012). In terms of the topics of the interviews, there were a few that were most dominant, which were; watching *Friends* in current times, identification with *Friends*, fans of *Friends*, nostalgia in *Friends* and *Friends* in contemporary society. These themes were identified from the data from the interviews, which will be discussed more in-depth later on in this thesis.

### **3.3 Sample and data collection**

A core concept in the research question is the notion of the ‘millennials’, the target audience of this research. According to previous studies (Botterill, Bredin & Dun, 2015; Kilian, Hennings & Langner, 2012), the millennial generation is a relevant phenomenon to explain media usage nowadays, because they grew up with different media and are aware of the possibilities of media. Also, they are the generation that is most active in their consumption of media (Kilian et al., 2012). Millennials are the generation that is formed by people that were born between 1980 and 2000 (Kilian et al., 2012). Another name for this generation is digital natives or the Internet generation (Kilian et al., 2012). The older millennials might have grown up without the internet being an omni-present factor in their youth, the youngest part of the millennials grew up with the internet and can thus be described as digital natives or the internet generation. The group of people that is analysed in this study is the millennial generation, therefore the interviewees were all people who were born between the year 1980 and 2000. The focus of this thesis is on the youngest part of this generation because the people that were born in the 1980s had the possibility to watch *Friends* on television when it

first came out and are therefore a different type of audience. For the interviewees, the goal was to find people who were born between 1990 and 2000. This specific group of people was chosen because this generation forms a big part of the audience of *Friends* nowadays (Sternbergh, 2016). Additionally, members of the young generation who grew up with digital media, allow assumptions about society as a whole, but also offer opportunities to predict the future of media consumption in general (Kilian et al., 2012). This is because they are more likely to experiment with media developments and trends, telling us more about popularity within the media field and what we could expect in the future, not alone what we could expect for *Friends* but also for media products that are produced today, and other ‘old’ media products (Kilian et al., 2012).

The sample of this study consisted of 13 interviewees from the millennial generation, more specifically the youngest half of this generation. The youngest interviewee was 19 years old and born in 1999, the oldest interviewee was 23 years old and born in 1995, all grew up with access to the internet and therefore are part of the internet generation. All interviews were conducted in the months April and May of the year 2019, the first interview took place mid-April 2019 and the last one late May 2019, meaning that all interviews were conducted within a time period of five consecutive weeks. The interviews varied in duration: initially, the intention was to conduct interviews with a duration of 45 minutes. In reality, this proved to be a bit different and the timespan of the interviews ranged from 24 to 46 minutes long. With an average timespan of 30 to 35 minutes. This can be explained by the fact that duration of interviews in qualitative research is an intention rather than a rule, considering that there is often a lot of variation in the amount of time interviews take in answering questions (Bryman, 2012).

The interviewees were found through the professional and personal network of the researcher, starting by using a purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012). This means that the goal of the research was kept in mind while selecting participants, mainly focusing on the fact that the interviewees had to be part of the millennial generation and should have watched a significant part of the episodes of *Friends*, in order to know enough about the series to go a bit into depth on the content of the series. After the first few interviewees were found and contacted, the snowball sampling method was applied. This means that the interviewees that were already participating in the study, were asked if they knew other people who would like to participate in this study. When that was the case, they were contacted, and interviews were scheduled (Bryman, 2012).

In total, this led to interviewing 13 people. All 13 interviewees in this study were

Dutch and lived in or around the city of Rotterdam, which can be explained by the fact that the study took place in Rotterdam, but none of them were from Rotterdam originally. Because all interviewees were Dutch, the interviews were conducted in Dutch because of the convenience for the interviewees. The reason for this is that interviewees often feel more comfortable talking in their own language. When the interviewees are more comfortable, they will talk more easily, and this can lead to more valuable, and useful answers for answering the research question of this study (Polkinghorne, 2005). Therefore, the quotes that were used in the results chapter of this thesis were translated to English because the rest of the study was done in that language. The translation of quotes might influence the results slightly, because the translation of certain words can lead to losing a certain nuance, or changes the literal meaning of the word, because both languages have words that cannot be translated literally (Birbili, 2000).

The sample of the interviewees included both female and male interviewees. Three out of thirteen identified as male and ten out of thirteen as female. This uneven division of gender can be clarified for the reason that female fans of *Friends* were more likely to be enthusiastic about talking about the series. Even though it is a stereotype, it is argued that fandom is gendered and that females are more often fan of media products, because they are more emotional and irrational and get more involved (Stanfill, 2013). In addition to this, the first few interviewees were female, resulting in finding more female interviewees through the snowball sampling method. In terms of profession or education, nine out of 13 interviewees were Bachelor students, some of which were university students and the others were higher vocational education student, HBO in Dutch. The participants participated in a myriad of studies, like philosophy, engineering and social work. All were in their second, third or fourth year of their studies. The four non-student interviewees had all obtained a diploma, ranging between secondary vocational education, to university Bachelor. Two of them already had a fulltime job, working in healthcare or art and design, while the other non-student interviewees worked several part time jobs because they were taking a gap year before continuing their studies. For a more elaborate overview of the interviewees, see appendix A.

Most of the interviews took place in a setting that was quiet and private, such as small coffeehouses, this to comfort interviewees. A quiet space is needed to not let the interviewee or interviewer get distracted, in arranging the locations of the interviews (Bryman, 2012). The interviewees were presented with a choice with regards to the location of where the interview was conducted, to take into consideration that the participant felt comfortable during the interview.

### 3.4 Analysis of data

All interviews were audio recorded for analysis purposes. This enabled the interviewer to be highly alert during the interview and focus on following up on a certain point made and probing when necessary, rather than writing down everything the interviewee says (Bryman, 2012). Directly after each interview was conducted, the interview was transcribed verbatim, using the audio-recording, in order to make the analysis less complicated. The transcripts from the interviews were analysed in relation to the other transcripts. The analysis focused on themes that are similar between the interviews, meaning that the analysis took the form of a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a foundational method of analysis for qualitative research. One of the key advantages of thematic analysis is the flexibility of this method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes capture important patterns of response and meaning making in the data set, these themes were all linked to the overall research question, *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* And previous theories and concepts that were discussed in the theoretical framework, earlier on in this study. The thematic analysis focused on latent content, meaning that the underlying ideas and assumptions of the answers provided by the interviewees were examined, rather than the more superficial answers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To get to these underlying ideas and assumptions the probing method was used, which happens a lot in qualitative interviews, probing means that the interviewer uses certain questions to get to the underlying meaning of the answers given by the interviewees. There was an active role of the researcher in identifying patterns and themes within the entire data set, to get to these themes interpretation and theory were needed and used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes made it easier to analyse the data and come to generalizable conclusions in order to answer the research question of this study. First, the data was transcribed and read over again, this has the purpose of familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After that, the data was analysed in a general way, and the initial coding was done. The main focus here was on looking for interesting elements that relate to the research question of this study. From this, the researcher actively identified five overarching themes, which were based on reoccurring patterns of meaning found in the dataset. The following themes were identified; watching *Friends* in current times, identification with *Friends*, fans of *Friends*, nostalgia in *Friends* and, *Friends* in contemporary society. These themes became the categories for analysis. After that, there was looked for the data that could be analysed under every specific theme. Based on the data that was found for every theme, the themes were divided in smaller themes, using specific codes to find them. Again, these codes were based on the patterns that were found in

the dataset. For example, one of the subthemes of the first theme, watching *Friends* in current times, was watching *Friends* on Netflix. This code was found during the analysis, and later the dataset was again scanned on this code. If this code was found in an interview by a particular interviewee, this was marked written down until all interviews were analysed on this subtheme. An example of how one of the themes was divided into subthemes and codes can be found in Appendix B. After that analysis per subtheme, the specific data on this code was read again and compared, then the most dominant and/or the most notable answers were noted down for the results. After these quotes were noted down, they were compared and discussed in the results chapter. After comparing the answers among each other, the answers were discussed in relation to the existing concepts and theories that were addressed in the theoretical framework in chapter two, there the similarities, as well as the differences, were discussed.

### **3.5 Ethics**

To deal with data carefully and confidentially a consent form was used, giving the participants the possibility to think about whether they really want to participate or not. Also, the consent form informs the participants about how their participation will be used for the research, giving them all the information, they needed to make an informed decision. The consent form informs about the nature of the research and the implications for their participation (Bryman, 2012). Although all the interviewees gave their consent and allowed for the use of their name in the study, to ensure anonymity, their names were anonymized by the researcher. A full overview of these participants (names, age, education level and profession) can be found in Appendix A.

This chapter clarified how the research was conducted and analysed through the use of qualitative research methods, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. And how the interviewees were found through the use of a purposive sampling strategy and snowball sampling. In the next chapter, the results will be discussed. This will be done based on the data from the 13 in-depth interviews that were conducted.

## 4. Results

To answer the research question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted. This chapter will discuss the answers given in these interviews, further illustrating the five themes found in the data. The themes that will be discussed are the following: watching *Friends* in current times, identification with *Friends*, fans of *Friends*, nostalgia in *Friends* and, *Friends* is contemporary society. Theme one illustrating how the millennials discovered this series and the motivations for watching it. Theme two how the viewers can identify with the characters and the events that are presented in *Friends*. The third theme is about whether the millennials see themselves of fans of *Friends* and how they show this. Theme four shows whether *Friends* has nostalgic value for the millennials, and how they compare the 1990s to today's society, based on this series. The last theme explicating how the millennials place *Friends* in today's society, how they compare it to more contemporary television series and how they react to contemporary critique on *Friends*.

### 4.1 Watching *Friends* in current times

To find out how millennials make meaning of *Friends*, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how and when they started watching *Friends*. Eleven out of thirteen interviewees mentioned seeing *Friends* on television even years before they started watching it themselves, this resonates with Kilian, Hennigs and Langner's observations (2012) on the idea that even while the millennial generation grew up with new media, they still used and use traditional media like television to consume media products. When asking the question how she discovered *Friends*, the 19-year old psychology student Eline answered, "I do not remember, but I must have been really young when I saw it so now and then on television" (Eline, 19, psychology student). For another respondent, 22-year philosophy student Angelique answered, "*Friends* has been on television for a very long time". Both Eline and Angelique's statements indicate that have been aware of the existence of the series for a long time. These responses show that the millennials became aware of *Friends* through the broadcasting on several television channels that are available in the Netherlands, but they did not start to engage actively with the show from the moment they discovered it. Kim, a 23-year-old nurse mentions that for her there was a difference between discovering *Friends* and actually watching it, "Uhm I was about 10, but I think you are more like 12 when you really start watching", she argued that when you're 10 you are too young to understand it and like it, and from the age of 12 it started to be interesting to her. Kim was not the only interviewee

who remembers watching *Friends* on television when she was around the age of 12. Likewise, Joost, a 21-year-old engineering student remembers “Yes I was quite a bit younger when I started watching it, like 12”. Another interviewee mentions “I think I started watching it at the end of primary school, but I’m not entirely sure” (Lotte, 23, social work student). This already shows that at least a part of the millennials started to watch it at that particular age.

Although several interviewees were around 12 years old when watching *Friends* for the first time, they acknowledge that they did not engage as active as they did when watching it more recently. When they watched the entire series on Netflix in the right order, they did engage most actively, like Kim says here: “But there were all separate episodes when watching on television, and I never watched it in the right order, but later on I watched everything on Netflix in chronological order, and that’s when I started really enjoying it” (Kim, 23, nurse). Likewise, Nina a 22-year-old applied psychology student says “Uhm at first, I did not know what it was about, because I only saw separate episodes.” While she did not know everything about the storyline, she did enjoy it at that time, she continues: “It was easy to understand and *just fun and nice to watch*<sup>1</sup>. And back then I did not pay attention to the storyline, but only the jokes. And now I follow the entire story, so that was different”. This already implies that one of the reasons for not engaging actively when they saw it on television is that it was hard to follow when watching it there. They could not engage with it that easy, also they were all many years younger when watching on TV, which also influenced how they could engage with it. Meaning that age plays a role in active engagement with television content. Not only the age plays a role, how they watch it, through which medium, influence how they engage. Likewise, another interviewee emphasized how she never watched it from beginning till end on television: “Yes, I saw it on TV sometimes, you know. But I never watched it from beginning till end” (Joy, 23, waitress). Several interviewees mentioned that this has to do with the fact that *Friends* is such a big show. To clarify, Angelique mentions how she considers it an extensive show, referring to its airtime and lifespan: “I think eight or ten seasons, so when you unintentionally see it on television, it is in the middle of a season and an episode then you do not know what happened before or what is going to happen after” (Angelique, 22). Like Kim, Nina and Joy address in this section, they experienced watching *Friends* differently when they were able to watch all episodes in the right order. That was of viewing gives them more understanding of the storyline, and therefore makes it more enjoyable. What Angelique adds here is a possible

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, italics are used to emphasize the most important elements of the quotes from the interviews.

explanation for this. Namely, that the series is so big and there are many storylines, that you cannot start by watching separate episodes, because you will never get as engaged with it as you would when you watch everything.

The motivations for watching *Friends* in its entirety were quite diverse, but there are a few motivations that were most dominant during the interviews. First of all, interviewees mentioned that they started watching the show because friends and/or family members mentioned and recommended it. Joy's reaction here is exemplary: "Uhm I know that Nicky, my roommate already watched it many times and made jokes about it very often. But I never understood them, this was 3 years ago or so" (Joy, 23). She continued with sharing that she even started watching it with the person who recommended it to her: "It was not on Netflix, but about a month before it became available on Netflix, my roommate gave me the first four seasons on DVD, and then we started watching that together" (Joy). Likewise, Romée had a similar experience. She also started to watch the show through the influence of others "Last year there was a hype because Friends would become available on Netflix on the first of January, and I remember that my stepmother was like oh my god, Friends will be online and that is so nice!". She was not only influenced by one person, she continues her story: "My boyfriend then heard via a friend that he should really watch it because that friend finished it within one month, or two. So, that's how came up with the idea of watching it". Although these were voluntary initiatives, and these interviewees started watching on recommendation of others, there was apparently also a level of expectation involved: Eva, a 21-year-old business administration student, was also influenced by the opinion of others, not necessarily because others recommended it to her, but because people expected that she had watched it already. She explains: "Everyone was always surprised that I had never seen it, so that's why I started at a certain moment". Eva was here influenced by the expectations that others had, rather than positive reviews of the series, because people thought she watched it, she started to watch it to meet these expectations. This decision by Eva to watch *Friends* can be seen as partly based on peer pressure, the fact that others thought that she already watched it, made her watch it. Another interviewee mentioned that he started watching it because his girlfriend wanted to watch it. Moreover, they always watch series together because they live together, so it was based on habit and convenience rather than good reviews by others, he said: "Susan, my girlfriend, wanted to watch it I think, and then we started watching everything together" (Erik, 21, graphic designer). In relation to this, this study found that the majority of the interviewees mentioned that they prefer to watch a series with someone else in general. Out of these interviewees, some of them followed the entire series of *Friends* together with someone

else, the biggest part occasionally watched *Friends* with their partner, friends or family members. There are only two interviewees that do not like to watch series together with another person, they give the following reasons on why they have this preference:

Yes, it [watching series alone or with someone] does not matter that much to me, but I think rather alone because you can do other things at the same time. When you watch with someone, then you really watch it, you really have to pay attention and I do not like that, anyway, really watching TV. I always put it on in the background, so I prefer alone, I think. (Eline, 19)

I prefer series that I want to follow, I watch those on my own because you pay more attention then. And uhm yes, a while ago I was watching it [*Friends*] with someone else, but I had the feeling that she did not appreciate it as much as I did, and yes that annoys me. Then they start talking through it and so on, and then I think no, just watch it! [laughs]. (Juliette, 21, tourism student)

These answers are contradictory because Eline argues that she does not want to watch with someone else. This is because she thinks that she has to pay attention and she feels some sort of social pressure to watch it carefully. She just prefers to put on the television in the background, and not actively watch it. Whereas Juliette prefers watching alone because she does want to pay attention when watching a series. She thinks that watching with someone else can distract her from watching, and that annoys her. These results on watching television together deviate from Fiske's ideas (1992) who argued that television creates social formations around a specific TV program and social interests. He argues that these social formations do not necessarily spend much time together as a social formation and often do not have other interests in common (Fiske, 1992).

What the patterns identified in this study show is that first of all, the social formations that existed around the sitcom *Friends* were small, none of the interviewees mentioned watching it with a large group of people, most of them referred to watching it with one other person, and some mentioned that they watched it with 'family members' which are more than one, but big social formations were not mentioned during the interviews. Another difference is that Fiske (1992) argues that there often were no other similar interests among the members of the social formation, which was the case for the interviewees in this thesis. All the interviewees that mentioned watching *Friends* together with someone else, watched it with

their partner, sister, brother, mother, roommate or friend. It would be strange to argue that they do not have other things in common with them, other than liking the sitcom *Friends*.

Thus, these results contradict the theory on the audience group as social formation as discussed by Fiske (1992), it goes beyond the traditional perspective he came up with and offers a new perspective on how and why people watch television together.

According to Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld (2004) media users use television often for mood regulation because, next to film, it is the medium that is most suitable for doing that. Alongside mood regulation, watching television can be used for escaping reality and self-reflection, these can happen at the same time, or separately. Eva (21) mentioned that her mood is a factor that influences why she watched *Friends*; “Sometimes when I felt a bit down and had stress, then I really enjoyed watching it because I always had to laugh when watching *Friends*”. This example highlights the active role of mood in media consumption as discussed by Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld (2004). Additionally, this indicates that the series affects her in a positive way and that she is aware of this and therefore put it on knowingly that it would change her mood, often for the better. On the other hand, Julia a 22-year old waitress and museum intern, explains that one of her motivations of watching *Friends* is to escape reality, as an extension of influencing her mood:

Not necessarily, when I’m happy then it does not necessarily make me happier, maybe when I have had a bad day when I watch it, I forget that day for a bit because it is just, *it just gives a safe feeling, something recognizable*. And then I get to feel for them, instead of living my own day, I think that’s it. It is not that it makes me very sad or happy, but I can really laugh about it.

Again, the fact that it is funny plays a big role here, laughing makes her escape from her own problems. But not only the jokes are important, but also that it gives her a safe feeling and that she gets the feeling of recognition when watching it. This is in line with how media narratives can provide a retreat for viewers who are uncomfortable with their real life at that moment, as discussed by Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld (2004). Miller (2018) argued that the current viewers of *Friends* watch it when something tragic happens, she mentioned the examples of 9/11 and mass shooting (Miller, 2018). None of the interviewees mentioned such big, tragic events, but they did mention having a bad day, feeling down or stressed, meaning that they watch it for mood regulation at lower moments in their lives. Moreover, *Friends* is then the constant factor that has the potential to/ brings them back to a better or happier mood

potentially.

Lotte (23) shared this idea of *Friends* always giving her a certain positive feeling, she explains it as a “... calm and nice feeling instead of a safe feeling”, but it is very similar to what Julia said: “... With every emotion, or however I feel, I like to watch *Friends* because I notice that it does not matter how I feel, that I always feel calm when watching *Friends*. It gives me a nice feeling”. Unlike the pattern that was found that some interviewees mentioned that watching *Friends* gave them a specific feeling, on the whole, they did not have a specific moment for watching it. The interviewees who watched it together with someone else all said that they watched it whenever they were together with the person, they were watching it with, the day or time did not matter to them. One striking finding is that around half of the interviewees mentioned that they occasionally watching *Friends* when they were eating, mainly during dinner or breakfast. For example, Joost (21) says: “I just wanted to finish it as soon as possible, so when I have time, I just watch it. Like during dinner, things like that”. Likewise, Erik (21) mentions: “Oh and we always watched during dinner, when my girlfriend still lived in Rotterdam. Back then we always watched when we were eating”. Nina (22) also argues that she likes to watch it during dinner, she explains why: “Yeah and it’s just time, a bit of pastime, I like to watch series during dinner, and then I do not necessarily want to watch a really heavy story”. Julia (22) says: “Before that I really liked it, then I even watched when I was having dinner or during a fast breakfast before I headed to work”. All these answers indicate that *Friends* is a series that they like to watch when doing something else, mainly because it is easy to watch, and the story is not about heavy topics. This again, links back to the argument that the series gives them a nice and calm feeling because there is no drama or tenseness in it.

Erik (21) continued his interview by explaining why he likes to watch it during dinner, but also why he thinks that other people watch it:

Because it is easy to watch, it is *basically applicable for everyone*, because it [the things that happen in the series] are just *normal things*, of course not all normal, but daily things that happen and some people might not find that interesting, but most people watch that easily. It is just easy to watch during dinner, you know, that *you do not have to concentrate*.

To reflect on this argument, it shows that for him it goes beyond casual viewing it in the background. He really argues that the series is so relatable and based on daily situations, that

you, as a viewer, do not have to focus on the narrative. Eline (19) agreed with how easy it is to watch: “Yes I think that because it is very *accessible and easy to watch*, and that it is one of the series where you can watch everything 10 times and just put it on in the background”. Again, this shows that *Friends* is a series that millennials like to watch while doing something else, they enjoy having it on in the background but do not watch very actively. They argue that this is mainly because the events in the series are based on things that happen in daily life and are relatable to them and their life, therefore they do not necessarily have to actively pay attention to the narrative of the series all time.

Several interviewees addressed that Netflix played a role in their decision to watch *Friends*. In general, because it made it more accessible than it used to be. As is argued here by Angelique: “But from the moment it became available on Netflix I was considering watching it because it seemed fun” (Angelique, 22). As Kompare (2010) mentioned in his article, new ways of distributing content allows media users to control what they watch and when they watch it. Since they are TV users rather than TV consumers, it seems logical that the respondents mention the availability of *Friends* on Netflix as playing a sufficient role in the motivations to watch it. Since it gives them the opportunity to watch it when they want it, rather than regular television where they just have to consume what is on there. The television content becomes more user-driven, which something the millennials are used to (Kompare, 2010). Angelique (22) also addresses in her interview that she thinks that people nowadays do not like to be bounded to a certain time and that they want to divide their time themselves, Netflix contributes to this. As she explains:

Yes, I think so, I think that people nowadays not really get in front of the TV every Monday evening at eight because they really want to see a series. It’s all watching it online and Netflix et cetera, so I think that because of that *people want to decide themselves when they do something and when they watch something*.

In a similar way, Juliette (21) acknowledges the convenience of *Friends* being available on Netflix was one of the factors that made her watch it. “You won’t go and buy the DVD’s, because you already have Netflix. I mean *if I had to buy anything to be able to watch it, I would watch something else*”. This indicates that the content that is easily available is the content she rather goes for, than content she has to invest money in. This is different from Angelique’ argument because she talks about investing time rather than investing money to be able to watch it. However, taking both these arguments into consideration, it can be said that

the millennials are less likely to invest money and time in the consumption of media content. Of course, they invest money in their subscription to Netflix, but as Juliette puts it “You already have Netflix”, this shows that they would not invest additional money, other than the money they already spend on their Netflix subscription. This also shows that in her opinion it is very common to have a subscription to Netflix, this resonates with the idea that the millennial generation makes a lot of use of these new ways of consuming television content. In addition to this, they do not like to be bounded to a certain time or day to watch a series. The interviewees acknowledge that the convenience of Netflix is something they are very used to and that they really enjoy and appreciate greatly how it makes it easier for them to follow a series. An example of this is the following quote:

Yes, and of course that Netflix remembers where you are with the series, I had, I remember that when I went to Curacao with my boyfriend, we downloaded part of the series and it was very annoying because every time we were like, are we at episode seven, or are we already at eight? You know, you just do not know. That is, yes that is really nice when watching via Netflix. (Romée, 22)

She again addresses the convenience and ease Netflix brings. Tom a 21-year old business economics student also addressed this in his interview: “Netflix does bring convenience because it keeps track of where you were and stuff like that, and it also has an influence on what you watch because it recommends a lot of things, I also use that when I watch something. But yes, Netflix has an influence”. He adds to the convenience argument by discussing the recommendation function Netflix offers, which suggest series and films based on what you have watched previously. He says that he makes use of this when looking for new series, but he did not discover *Friends* via this function. Neither did any of the other interviewees, they did not even mention these recommendations by Netflix during their interviews.

#### **4.2 Identification with *Friends***

The second theme is about identification with the series, for some interviewees, this contributed to their viewing experience in a positive way and can be linked back to the motivations for watching the series, as discussed in the previous section. When asking the interviewees if they could identify with certain characters in the series, most of them were a bit doubtful. They did not per se feel a connection with a specific character. Two of the interviewees were very determined that they could not identify with any of the characters.

None of the interviewees recognised him- or herself exactly in one of the main characters in *Friends*. The interviewees that thought they could maybe identify with the characters to a certain extent, focused on specific character traits, rather than a specific character. Lotte (23) discussed how she could identify with all three female main characters in the series: “I really like all characters because I like them all in their own way. Because they all have something you can identify with. Which character would I identify most with? Well, I would have to name several”. Juliette also found it difficult to pinpoint one of the characters, and explained why she identified with both Rachel and Monica:

... Maybe also a bit with Monica *but more because you just started living on your own*. I think a bit more with Rachel because she has for example that she starts living on her own, struggling with money, what she can and cannot spend her money on, and things like that.

Juliette explains here that she can identify with Monica on a more general level, while she identifies with Rachel on a more specific situation. She emphasizes this by mentioning it several times: “For example, I just moved out, so I can relate Rachel’s situation to my own life”, she recognizes this moment in life and the things that play a role here. What these examples illustrate, however, is that there are different levels of identification with the characters. During the interviews, it was found that especially the female interviewees tried to find characteristics of themselves in the characters. This answer by Eva (21) shows this again:

I think Monica because *she is a clean freak, like me*. And Rachel also because is progressive in what she wants in her career and she really followed her own feeling and I do that as well. Yes, but with the others, I do not know. I have heard a few times that they think I’m a Phoebe because I always have a feeling of what is going to happen. And then they say yeah, you’re really a Phoebe.

Eva looked for characterises of herself in all the female characters in *Friends*. Also, she indicates how her friends perceive her, which already played a role for her when deciding to start watching *Friends*. As mentioned before, the identification with characters and specific characteristics was most present when talking with the female interviewees. Among the male interviewees two of them could not identify with a character at all, the only male who could identify with a character is Tom (21):

I think Chandler because *he was not that popular, me neither*, not really. He did not really fit in the group in the beginning, or not necessarily, but he was a bit different

than the rest, maybe I have that as well. I thought he was very funny. I do not want to say that I think I'm funny [laughs] but I need to rely on my humour, and I thought that he was nice to others and I always try to be that myself and uh yeah. So maybe, yes, I think so.

Since none of the interviewees was very convinced about being able to identify with a character, they were asked about identifying with the series in a more general way. A part of the interviewees could recognize things from the stage of life the *Friends*-characters are in. Which is the phase between their twenties and thirties, which most interviewees are in at the moment they were interviewed. This is a phase where identity formation, self-exploration and instability all play a notable role (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). This quote by Nina (22) illustrates this identification with the life phase:

That life goes different ways ... for example I just moved out and I already have a boyfriend and I have friends that already live together with their boyfriends, I have friends that are having children already. I think it is a bit of a weird age, and that happens there as well. They are all on different levels, but they are still friends, and that's also the case with me.

She acknowledges that the most recognisable aspect of this stage of life is that everyone can be on a different page, but that that does not change the friendship she has with her friends, like the friends in the series. After this, she also emphasized that she thinks that this is one of the aspects that makes *Friends* nice and interesting for her to watch because this phase is so recognizable.

About half of the interviewees addressed it very briefly and were not that sure that the stage of life was recognizable for them, most of them argued that that was because they are still a few years younger than the characters were at the beginning of the series. Kim (23) said: "Yes, well ... starting to live together, things like that, but I never looked at it that way actually. I have always had the feeling that *it was way older or something, that they were way older*". Here Kim even adds that the characters seem older than she is herself, even though the characters are the same age as her at the beginning of the series. Because of this, she might have been less able to identify because the stage of life seemed different to her. Erik did not find it very recognisable because he himself is still younger than the characters, but he made a similar argument as Nina did. The argument about how it shows that that stage in life not everyone is on the same page, showing individual self-exploration and instability as distinctive for that phase as Harrington and Bielby (2010) have addressed.

But I'm not far in my twenties yet, so I do not know how it will be [laughs]. But I know, if I think about ... I can try to imagine, so I think it is, yes, I think that you can see that one is more progressed with all those things than another. (Erik, 21)

Here he is talking about things like getting a relationship, finding a job, marriage and children. These are common themes in *Friends*. A few of the interviewees could not identify with or recognize things from the stage of life that the characters are in at all, Eva (21) addresses that that is mainly because she is still a student and, in the series, the main characters are all working:

They were not studying anymore and are all working, and they all have different jobs, because *I'm going to work in the corporate sphere*, and then with them it was really different; Ross was more academic, scientific ... and Rachel was more about coffee and clothes.

She could not identify with that stage in life because they were all working and because they are working in different sectors than she wants to work in. This, in a way, enables her to consider the possibilities and differences there are in future careers and might influence how she thinks about certain sectors and what she wants and does not want in her own future. The male interviewees mainly focused on the age difference between themselves and the characters, as Erik argued, Joost could not identify with it because he is younger than the characters: "No, I'm only 21 ... so that has not started yet".

Even though a specific character or the phase of life was not always recognizable for the interviewees, situations and events in the series were discussed, which anyway lead to recognizing themselves in the phase of life in some cases. An example of this is Romée (22), who addressed a situation with Rachel:

Yes, I had that with Rachel, that she was going to get married and on a certain moment she said, she thought I do not even have any work experience. I do have that [work experience] but not the work experience I really want to use in the future. And I think that was, I could recognize myself in that.

Romée mentions here that she gets the feeling of not having the experience you need to make further steps in your life. Even though she addresses it as an event that is recognizable, what she actually describes here is a feeling, this feeling can be linked back to the phase of life the characters and the interviewees are in. The phase where they have to make career decisions, but also relational decisions and the struggles these decisions can bring. Julia (22) took a more

general approach, which again can be linked back to the phase of life rather than specific situations:

Yes, living with a roommate, relationships, things that happen in relationships. Of course, these things are recognizable, [silence] I cannot think of a specific example now, but I think, also the relationship between female friends in the series, or friends in general, that is just human so that might be recognizable in your own life. But there is no specific situation of which I think, I've had exactly the same.

The relationship between friends came up in a lot of interviews, these were recognizable and some of the interviewees started comparing their group of friends to the group of friends as portrayed in *Friends*. “For example, I also have a fixed group of friends I always hang out with, I think that in that way I can compare myself to them, that … that really appeals”. (Juliette, 21). Juliette here already argues that the fact that she could compare it to her own life made it interesting to watch. Other interviewees did not compare the friendship to their own group of friends immediately, but when discussing it during the interview, they actually realized that there were things that they have experienced or do with their friends as well. This is for example further illustrated in this quote by Tom:

I did not think about it that way. And whether I recognize things from my own group of friends? [silence] not immediately, but there must be things that are recognizable. For example, when people start liking each other or something, that was there as well, and I have experienced that before, so that is recognizable. Or that you just hang out, like they do in the coffeehouse or at home, yes [hanging out] at someone's house is recognizable for me. (Tom, 21)

He mainly relied on the relationships between the group of friends and what they do together, although hanging out is quite broad and probably happens in every group of friends. The example of two people in a group of friends started to like each other is more specific, and therefore more valuable for identification with the series. Although not everything was always that relatable or recognizable for the interviewees, they started to feel sympathy for the characters when they watched *Friends*. In Romée's opinion, this has to do with the length of the series.

You start feeling sympathy for these people, because it is 10 seasons, and I think that every season has 20, 24 episodes? So, you start to feel sympathy for the characters. And afterwards, I really like that because at the beginning when you start watching it,

they are 10 years younger than they are in season 10. *I really grew up with them*, that is what I really love about series that have a big lifespan. (Romée, 22)

What Romée mentions here is very interesting, even while identification does not play that big of a role for the millennials, they do create a bond with the main characters. For her, it feels like she grew up with them, because of the lifespan of the series, and you literally see the characters grow up. Joost also addresses that you start to bond with the characters when watching a series: “That’s always the case. You always create some sort of relationship when you’re watching series … so yes”. According to him, identification and recognizability are always there through the relationships you build with characters when watching series.

#### **4.3 Fans of *Friends***

The majority of the interviewees thought of themselves as fans of *Friends*, one of them was not really sure, and a small number of interviewees did not consider themselves fans of *Friends*. Over half of the interviewees mentioned that they engaged in activities related to the series, this was mainly about following social media accounts about *Friends* or following the actors on social media. There were two answers that stood out in terms of involvement with *Friends*, namely those of Joy and Lotte.

Yes, I think so, I was in New York a few months ago and I tried to find out where the house from *Friends* was, and *we went there*. And that was just amazing, yes you only see the outside of the house, but a few shots. It is of course not shot there but the outside is. It was not even touristic, there were only a few other people taking pictures.  
Yes, the house was just amazing. (Joy, 23)

Here Joy described how she actively engaged in *Friends* related activities, in this case visiting the apartment. It shows active engagement because she took the time and effort during her trip to find out where it was and to actually go there. This shows that she prefers it over other things she could have gone visit while she was in New York. What she says about it not being touristic, can indicate several things. For example, that she was there at a quiet moment, or that not many people take the time to visit that because they do not engage that actively. But for her, it was an amazing experience related to the series. While Joy visited a place that was part of the series, Lotte has elements from Monica’s apartment in the series in her house:

Yes, of course, I also have *Friends* related things in my house, like the picture frame on the door and a magnet on the refrigerator, so yeah, but I do not have *Friends* clothing but that is only because everyone has that in my opinion [laughs].

This shows that she engages with the series in everyday life, because of these elements in her house she gets reminded of *Friends* every day. Also, this shows that she likes the series to a certain extent that she even wants to copy things from the apartment in the series. In the last part of the quote, she mentions the *Friends* clothing. Lotte is not the only one who remarked that there are *Friends* clothes and that these are easily available through big clothing brands: “Uhm you see these shirts with the *Friends* logo very often” (Romée, 22). The way she states it here, make it seem like it is a bad thing to her, that *Friends* has become very mainstream and part of fashion. Likewise, Joost noticed that these shirts are popular, but he would not wear it himself: “I’m a fan, yes, sometimes I see people in the streets with these shirts with the dots, for me that goes a bit too far [laughs]”. Even though there were many fans of the series in this sample, none of them mentioned wearing *Friends* clothing to show their fandom. This might be explained by the fact that it has become too common, as Lotte mentioned “everyone has that”. It is not only worn by fans nowadays but has become part of big fashion brands.

Some of the participants that mentioned that they were not a fan of *Friends* were asked whether they are fans of something else, they all named something they really liked, but they still did not consider themselves a fan of something. Tom pointed out that he is not sure when someone is a fan: “I really like Marvel films, but fan is a big word, but I like to talk about it. When are you a fan? If you go to an event for example?”. While he is not sure how to define fans, Juliette pointed out that there are some stereotype associations people make when talking about fans:

I think fan is such a big word, then it seems like *I only think about that and that my room is full of posters* [laughs]. Yeah, I do not know, I really like it a lot, I really follow I, I’m quite addicted. Uhm yes, I do not know if you could say that I’m a fan, it’s not that I would go to gatherings or things like that. But I really like it a lot, I know someone who has Friends phone cases and things like that. I think that’s a bit too much, posters in her room, I do not have that.

She seems to have a negative feeling with the word fan, because it is a bit stereotyped, and she thinks that some fan practices go too far. These different opinions on fandom and the different levels of engagement with the series can be linked to audiencing as discussed by Fiske (1992), showing that audiences ‘audience’ in different ways. It also shows that the satisfaction of the audience lies partly in the control over the engagement with the content, some of the interviewees really enjoy doing things that are related to the series, while others

get satisfaction from only watching it. In general, this fandom of *Friends* as discussed by the millennials is part of post-object fandom as described by Williams (2015). Initially, there was argued that it was the second type of post-object fandom when a new audience becomes fan of a media product that isn't being produced anymore. This is indeed the case here, because none of the interviewees mentioned watching *Friends* between 1994 and 2004, when there were still new episodes being produced. Therefore, the millennials audience did not say goodbye to *Friends* themselves, when it ended. But it resonates with the idea that you can become a new fan of a past media product, as shown in the quotes throughout this section, and the fact that the majority of the interviewees perceives themselves as fans of *Friends*.

#### **4.4 Nostalgia in *Friends***

Another pattern identified how the interviewees related to *Friends* was through nostalgia. First of all, there was a nostalgic feeling about the 1990s in general among some of the interviewees. Eva (21) addressed this nostalgic feeling that the series gives through certain activities or the styles shown in the series:

I think so, I always really enjoy seeing the *old clothes or hairstyles*. And *living without all the high-tech stuff*, that they really have to pick up the phone or leave a message on a piece of paper, I really like to see that.

Likewise, Nina (22) mentions the nostalgic feeling that is partly created by the differences in technology between now and the time that *Friends* was created in: “I think, for me at least, because it makes me think about social media and mobile phones, computers. There is also that part where Chandler *gets a computer for the first time* I believe”. For some of the interviewees, the series showed how it was to live in a time with less technology. The technology in the 1990s was a popular theme when discussing nostalgia. In particular, the lack of technology, it seemed that the millennials experienced that as something they liked, or even have a longing for. It makes them think about the time without all the social media as mentioned in the quotes by Eva and Nina, presented above. Next to technology, fashion and setting were also mentioned several times: “Yes just the technology, and also the furniture and setting, that also gives a nostalgic feeling, I think that's it” (Eline, 19). Another example of this nostalgic feeling created by the setting and fashion is the following:

Also, because everything is more modern of course and also clothes and stuff like that. But you see [do] things coming back, for example, the clothes, I really enjoyed seeing

that. But I think the ambiance is also really nice, yeah, I think these old elements *make it cosy to watch*. It is an addition to the series. (Kim, 23)

Kim addressed here how the nostalgic feeling was valuable for her and contributed to her opinion on the series and her experience when watching. She uses the Dutch word ‘gezellig’ here to describe the feeling of the series. This word cannot be literally translated into English, but it implies a pleasant feeling or circumstances. As Kim did, Juliette thinks that the fact that it is ‘old’ is one of the factors that makes *Friends* so attractive to watch:

You see a comeback of the 90s nowadays, for example, everyone likes Rachel’s clothes because we wear similar things now. The style of clothes is coming back, the way of life is coming back. When we go to a restaurant ... we enjoy it when it looks a bit retro. Like it looked in *Friends*, so that’s why I think that, and I also think that it is partly because it is in fashion, and the way of living in the 90s, that makes a comeback, *except from the fact that we now have mobile phones and things like that*.

These answers already show that the millennial audience of *Friends* does compare the past to contemporary society. This can lead to an idealized past, especially because the millennials did not experience this past themselves. Lizardi (2015) considers this as the ‘playlist past’, a mediated past that is created through the consumption of different media products, in this case, television, that might evoke such feelings of an idealized past. It is a media-driven version of the past which can be constructed individually or collectively. An aspect of the collectively mediated past that was visible in the interviews, is the idea of the 1990s as a simpler and easier time period to live in. The interviewees largely explained this by emphasizing and highlighting the changes in technology and the pressure that can be caused by social media nowadays. Like Eva clarifies here:

Yes, it would be really nice to live in the 90s. let’s say without all the technology and everything, that is really, I do not know, everything is simpler, not everything is connected. Because nowadays you have a lot of pressure from being online, or when you do not react fast enough, and there everything is still easy and quiet, you can just be offline. (Eva, 21)

This idea of the idealized past can lead to a yearning for the past, which is naturally a part of the nostalgic feeling, resonating with escapism through consuming media products (also see Vorderer et al., 2004). In a similar fashion as Eva, Nina also addressed that she sometimes has the feeling that she would want to live in the 1990s. She became aware of these changes

between the 90s and now, she became aware of through watching *Friends* and herewith the image *Friends* creates of that era. This is part of the collectively created mediated past, because it again addresses how the 90s were a simpler time to live in: Juliette and Nina particularly attribute this in the light of social media. Because of the absence of social media and the pressure social media brings with it, the 90s seems a quieter and less stressful era to them. As Nina elucidates:

Yes, I would want that because I think social media is quite a big problem. I use it myself, but I think it is really bad, *you can see everything from everyone and that causes just so many problems*, when you're hanging out with people and someone is on their phone on Facebook or texting other people. You're never completely with someone nowadays. (Nina, 22)

Social media plays a big role nowadays, and of course, it is nice that you can post a picture on Instagram now and then or share something on Facebook, or anything else you can do. But *the pressure has increased*, in my opinion, like in school, I have the idea that the pressure is way higher than it was in the past. (Juliette)

Both Nina and Juliette mention the negative sides of the technological changes since the 1990s, and especially the downsides of the use of social media. Juliette continuous "I think that social media has made life a bit easier but mainly harder because you're busier with other stuff, which is really bad actually". Here she addresses the case of how social media has an impact on your life because it distracts you from the important stuff in life. She acknowledges that this was very different in the 90s, where *Friends* is set: "But in *Friends*, they do not have this problem, then *they just get together when they have time to do so* and yes, I think that that was an easier life". This indicates a longing for that time period and therefore it can be argued, that it is a nostalgic feeling that is discussed here.

As mentioned before, some of the interviewees addressed the nostalgic feeling of the series and how they as millennials experienced that. On the contrary, there were some interviewees who thought that *Friends* is not nostalgic for their generation, but more for an older generation consisting of people who grew up with *Friends*. Erik did not experience the series as nostalgic for himself, but thought that had to do with not experiencing the 90s himself: "Yes I think it is nostalgic if you have experienced that time period yourself, then you will see a lot of recognizable things, I think". Similarly, Julia thought that the nostalgic feeling not necessarily takes place when people can recognize things, or get reminded of the past, but more specifically when they get reminded of their own past: "Yes, maybe, not

necessarily because they get reminded of their own time and how the 90s were, but more a nostalgic feeling to their lives at the moment they watched it, you understand?”. She thinks that the nostalgic feeling is therefore way more individual and personal, it has to relate to your past, rather than to a general era. Another interviewee, Tom thought it could only be nostalgic for the generation that had experienced the time that is represented in the series, he could not think it would be nostalgic if you did not experience the time period yourself. Meaning that *Friends* cannot be nostalgic for the millennial generation, he said: “Yes, that nostalgic feeling is when you have experienced it yourself”. Even when the interviewees did not experience a nostalgic feeling when watching *Friends*, most of them still addressed that the fact that the series plays in a different time is an aspect that makes it even more enjoyable to watch. For example, Romée said the following about experiencing nostalgia: “Uhhmm not really, because I cannot identify myself with that time, uhm so that nostalgic feeling is not here, but it is nice to watch something from the past”. So, it can be concluded, that the millennials do not all experience a nostalgic feeling when watching *Friends*, but they do value the fact that the series is set in another time period. This can play a role in the motivations for watching the series.

#### **4.5 Friends in contemporary society**

During the interviews, *Friends* was compared to other series several times. While the interviewees mentioned different series from different time periods, but there were a few that were mentioned the most. The most common cases and the biggest exceptions are discussed here. The series that was mentioned the far most, is *How I Met Your Mother (HIMYM)*, which is an American sitcom which ran from 2005 to 2014 and consists of nine seasons. The basic setting of the series is very similar to *Friends* because it is about a group of friends in New York City who always get together at the same place. Even though these series are quite similar, the interviewees had a strong opinion on the differences:

The same things, experiences but I think that *Friends* does it better, it addresses all themes and subjects and opportunities within society. I think *How I Met Your Mother* is more ironically intended. Not funnier per se, but *Friends* is more about a group of friends that lives like a family and that's really nice, I think *How I Met Your Mother* is more manly, or a bit vulgar. (Angelique, 22)

Here Angelique addressed how *Friends* is broader and touches upon more themes within society and has a more serious approach towards daily life and the things that happen in daily life. The fact that she says it is more manly, might lead to attracting a different audience than *Friends* does. As mentioned before, the interviewees thought of *Friends* as a series that is recognizable for everyone, while this quote indicated that *HIMYM* is not for everyone. Additionally, another interviewee mentioned that *Friends* has a better story than *HIMYM*: “It is comparable but at the same time I think that *Friends* is more thought through, it has better humour and in my opinion, it has a better story and *How I Met Your Mother* does not have that as much” (Romée, 22). Not only Romée preferred *Friends* over *HIMYM*: “*How I Met Your Mother* copied some things from *Friends*, like they do not hang out at the coffeehouse but at a bar. And the jokes are more modern, which makes them more vulgar. Yes, I also watched that series entirely, but *Friends* will always be my favourite” (Lotte, 23). As we can see here, they all acknowledge that the series are similar at some characteristics and that *HIMYM* copied or based some aspects on the idea of *Friends*, nevertheless they prefer *Friends* over *HIMYM*. The main reasons for this are the more elaborate storyline and the humour in *Friends*. Next to *HIMYM*, another series that was mentioned a lot was *Modern Family*. *Modern Family* is also an American sitcom but started in 2009 and already released ten seasons. The biggest difference between this series and *Friends* and *HIMYM* is that *Modern Family* is about a real family, while the others are about a group of friends who are always together and behave like a family. This difference also came up when comparing the series during the interviews:

*Modern Family* is more about family obviously, and what happens within that family, so that's a bit different, but it is also such a series, with comedy. Yes, it is a bit similar, both based on just a funny storyline and what people go through together. (Juliette, 21)

Juliette was not the only interviewee who immediately came up with the comparison between *Modern Family* and *Friends*. “Yes, if I look at similar sitcoms, then I think about *Modern Family*, for example, that's one of the first ones I think about because it is also quite popular but really from this time” (Lotte). She acknowledges here that *Modern Family* does really fit in contemporary society, she continues: “And also subjects, it addresses important subjects that are similar to those in *Friends*” here she aims for the societal themes in both series. While she sees the similarities, she also addressed the differences: “But if you place these next to each other, then they are very different series uhm [silence] yes, they just address the themes

in a very different way, that in my opinion, fits contemporary society better”. This is in line with what Cobb, Ewen and Hamad (2018) argued, that a sitcom is a product of its time, Lotte was very aware of this, especially when comparing it to *Friends* which is of course not produced in contemporary society. The issues of whiteness in *Friends* in comparison to how the other series cast their characters, was not touched upon by the interviewees. Nevertheless, Nina addresses that *Modern Family* is more diverse in terms of the characters and their relationships: “*Modern Family* is more diverse because there are gay men in that series, and a ‘normal’ family, and an older man that is together with a young, beautiful woman”. When discussing *HIMYM* none of the interviewees talked about the diversity in that series. Overall, this was a topic that was not addressed that much, therefore it seems not to be playing a big role in the decision-making and meaning making of millennials in relation to television series.

In general, these results seem quite logical, because *Modern Family* has a different storyline and is set 15 years later than *Friends* is. The interviews did not address which they thought was funnier or better, they mainly talked about the situation and relationships in both series and compared these, concluding in explaining these are different because the main idea of the series is different and the time period in which it was produced is very different. Next to this example, the interviewees mentioned numerous other contemporary, popular cases that are very different from *Friends*. For example, Kim (23) mentions *Stranger Things* which is a very popular Netflix produced series, that takes place in the 80s: “I know another series about a group of friends, for example, *Stranger Things*, that’s also a group of friends but there are no themes like in *Friends*, that’s really fantasy stuff, so it’s not about social themes, it is not as serious as *Friends*”. It is interesting to see to which series the interviewees try to compare *Friends*, to get an insight into what other series they watch. In addition to the comparison to other series, the interviewees were asked what their favourite series and favourite genres are, in order to get more insight into their media consumption. What was most striking here that even while all interviewees really liked *Friends* only a few of them mentioned comedy as their favourite genre when it comes to series. These people see *Friends* as one of their favourites, other series that were mentioned here were; *Modern Family*, *How I Met Your Mother* and *Jane the Virgin*. There were not that many interviewees that liked a specific genre, out of these interviewees, one mentioned science fiction as her favourite genre and another one mentioned fantasy as his favourite genre. These people both listed *Stranger Things* as one of their favourite series. More than half of the interviewees liked several genres and did not prefer a genre, in particular, they looked at other things when deciding what to watch: “Action or thriller, or comedy and drama also, actually almost everything. But it has to

have an interesting story, then the genre isn't that important" (Tom, 21). While Tom addressed that it depends on the story rather than the genre, Julia has a different approach:

When I choose a genre, I normally choose something that is easy to watch, except for *Peaky Blinders* that was something that really keeps your attention. But I do not watch that that often because I like to share that with someone, you do not watch that on your own, especially when it is tensive, then I think oh my god, too much. So, when I watch alone, I watch something easy, like *Gilmore Girls* for example. (Julia, 21)

She addresses that there is a difference between watching alone and with someone else, when it comes to choosing a genre to watch. Likewise, Angelique elaborated on this idea of choosing different genres for different situations:

When I watch on my own, I like to watch something happy [silence], I mean no action or horror and things like that, just stories about the lives of people. But when I watch a series with my boyfriend then it is action, most of the time it is action. And when I watch with my mother, we always watch crime series. So, it differs with who I am watching and what I feel like, or what I'm doing, whether I'm watching while I have lunch or that I really sit down to focus on a series. (Angelique, 22)

For her, the people she watches with will influence her choice, together with the situation she is in, what she is doing and how she feels. This gives the idea that she takes a lot into consideration when starting to watch and commit to a series. In addition to this, she mentioned that she does not have a favourite series per se, but she watched several series that she really enjoyed.

In general, only some of the interviewees mentioned *Friends* as one of their favourite series, while more of half of them see themselves of fans of *Friends*. Among the male interviewees, only one mentioned *Friends*, one of them mentioned other series, and one did not have a favourite. Among the female interviewees, which was the biggest part of the sample, there were two people who did not have a favourite series. About one-third of the interviewees mentioned *Friends* as one of their favourite series, other series that were mentioned more than once were; *Gossip Girl*, *La Casa de Papel* and *Jane the Virgin*. Apart from this, there were also series that were only mentioned once among the female interviewees, like; *Modern Family*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Stranger Things*, *The 100*,

*Please Like Me*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Gilmore Girls* and *New Girl*. These are all quite different and show that there is not only one type of millennial that watched *Friends*.

As stated earlier on in this thesis, there has been some critique on *Friends* in contemporary society, this was also touched upon during the interviews. Overall, the interviewees did not care that much about that critique, most people did not even see the problems when watching the series. When informing them about the critique, they did not agree with it and mainly argued that the critique is not grounded. Mainly because the series was created a very long time ago and it should not be a point of discussion, because it can be changed anymore, like Kim argued:

They cannot change it [the series] anymore, it is just an old series, and it does not make sense [to have critique] ... When you watch *Friends* nowadays you really see that difference [how series address societal themes and the representation of different people], but for me, it does not make sense to have critique on it, because it already has been made, and it is fun to watch.

Also, none of the interviewees thought that it was a problem that the characters in the series did not come from different ethnical backgrounds. The fact that all the interviewees come from the same background, they are all Dutch, might play a role in this issue. Meaning that these interviewees are more likely to recognize themselves in the characters because they already have similar physic appearances, like skin colour. Next to this, most interviewees had not even heard about the critique there is on the series. Only Eline mentioned that she knew about the critique, but she did not think about it herself when watching *Friends*: "Yes, I knew that, that there was some critique, that there was not much diversity in ethnicity". Romée thinks that the critique is a result of our contemporary society: "I think that there always will be some critique, because they also have critique on a series from 1994, so the critique will always be there. Because people always have something to say about anything. That is just the society we live in".

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter discussed the different results that were found based on the 13 interviews with millennials who watched the 90s sitcom *Friends*. The beginning of this chapter showed that most of the interviewees discovered or started watching *Friends* because of a recommendation by friends or family. Next to that, their motivations to watch were mainly based on the topic of the series, which is easy and recognizable for everyone. This

brings us to the second part of this chapter, identification with the series. Even though the interviewees could not identify with specific main characters, there were a lot of events and situations that were recognizable for them. These mainly related to the phase of life they are in or things that happen in groups of friends. After that, it became clear that the interviewees see themselves as fans of *Friends* and a part of them even engages in activities related to the series. The fourth part of this chapter discussed the nostalgia of the series, which can be linked back to the motivation to watch the series. The interviewees really liked the fact that the series takes place in the 1990s and this added value for them. What they found most interesting was to see the differences and similarities in technology, fashion and way of living. The last section of this chapter compared *Friends* to contemporary series and discussed how the interviewees reacted to the critique of the series. It can be concluded that there are series with similar elements, but they argued that they liked *Friends* better and that *Friends* addressed societal themes in the best way. Additionally, none of the interviewees agreed with the critique on the series, they did not see any problems when watching *Friends*. The next chapter will go more into depth on these results and discuss the overall conclusions that can be made. These conclusions will be followed by a discussion of this study, followed by suggestions for future research into this topic.

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to find an answer to the research question *How do millennials give meaning to the 90s sitcom Friends in today's world?* by conducting 13 interviews with millennials that have recently watched *Friends*. Drawing on these the main ways of giving meaning are based on; mood regulation, escapism, recognizability of stage of life the characters are in, the nostalgia of the 1990s and the ease of watching the series. Factors that have heavily contributed to this are; the availability through Netflix, recommendations from friends and/or family, the control over the level of engagement and the comparability to contemporary series. This chapter will discuss these ways of meaning making more thoroughly, followed by a discussion of the study and suggestion for future research in this topic.

However, before discussing and clarifying this answer more elaborately, I will reflect on what this thesis has covered. Before this question could be answered, previous research, theories and concepts were analysed and discussed in order to get an understanding of the theoretical background of this topic. Here was found that the popularity of *Friends* among the millennial generation is part of a bigger phenomenon. This phenomenon is the comeback of television content that has ended, there are different forms in which this phenomenon can be experienced; reruns, remakes, revival, prequels and sequels. Well known examples of this, as mentioned before, are *Fuller House* and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*. The case of *Friends* is discussed here, because it differs from the others since there is no new content, but a renewed interest in the original content, by a new audience.

The relevance of this topic can be explained based on its scientific and its social aspects. In terms of scientific relevance, it is interesting because it can explain how *Friends* is still popular, even though the media environment has changed a lot throughout the past years. The social relevance can be explained based on how television shapes attitudes, values and beliefs, and can even influence the identity formation of individuals (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). Next to that, the exploration of this case can give useful insights into the revival phenomenon as a whole, and this can be beneficial for the television industry at large. But in order to get there, existing theories and concepts were addressed.

First, the history of television research was discussed in order to get an insight into why and how people watch television. After that, the most important concept, mediated nostalgia (Lizardi, 2015) and post-object fandom (William, 2015) were explained. Also, this thesis touched upon some research into the media consumption, and television consumption in

particular, of the millennials. In addition to these theories and concepts, there was a small part that addressed the sitcom genre and the characteristics of that genre, in order to get a better understanding of *Friends* and its content.

After discussing these theories, the method of this research was explained. The method was in-depth interviewing, which were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. These different themes were discussed in the results chapter of this thesis and will be addressed in the following sections to explain how these results lead to the answer to the research question.

Four main patterns were found on the motivations of the millennials for watching *Friends* in current times. First of all, many of them got recommendations from friends and/or family members, which showed the popularity of the sitcom among different generations. However, this also illustrated differences in viewing behaviour. This further clarifies what has been addressed in the second chapter, on the television behaviour of the millennial generation. Millennials watching it via streaming services whenever they want, while the generation before them watched it through television on set times. The second type of viewing that was identified, can be described as mood regulation or escapism, resonating with Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld (2004), meaning that the millennials watch *Friends* to change their mood, or to escape their daily lives. This motivation was often about turning negative feelings into positive ones: they like to watch *Friends* when they feel down or had a bad day to enhance their mood. The mood regulation and escapism rely mainly on the funny aspect of *Friends* and the feeling that the series gives to the millennials, which is described as a calm or safe feeling. That also illustrates how the series plays a role in their daily lives. Alongside the motivations of recommendation and mood regulation or escapism, some of the characteristics of the series were mentioned, especially the short episodes and the funny and easy to follow storyline of the series. This made that the millennials argued that it is a nice series to put on when doing something else, especially during dinner. Lastly, they mentioned the role of Netflix, which plays a role in the media consumption of the millennial generation, as discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. They argued that Netflix offers convenience and ease when watching series, and the fact that *Friends* was available through this platform, contributed to them deciding to watch and engage with the series. Additionally, they mentioned that if this would have not been the case, they would have been less likely to watch entirely, because they are not willing to put a lot of money, time or effort in getting access to television content.

As discussed, there were different motivations for watching *Friends*. Part of this is

identification with the series, which is the second theme that was identified during the interviews. There were several levels of identification with the series addressed during the interviews. The levels that were addressed were; identification with characters, identification with the stage in life, identification with situations/events. In terms of identification with characters, the millennials were not very likely to identify with characters. Especially the male interviewees could not identify with the main characters. The female interviewees could identify with some character traits, but not with specific characters *per se*. When looking at the stage of life the main characters in *Friends* are in, there were some similarities between the characters and the millennial audience when they were discussing this phase of life. There were a few exceptions that thought they were too young to recognize things from that phase. When discussing events and situations in the series, the millennials recognized some of them, but when analysing these specific events, it was found that these, again, linked back to the stage in life and the relationships between friends, rather than the events themselves. According to the interviewees, it is about the sympathy and the relationships you build with characters as an audience, rather than identification. This is not specific for the sitcom *Friends* but can be applied to every series, and even films.

The biggest part of the millennials mentioned that they think of themselves as fans of *Friends*, they even engage in other activities related to the series. These activities are mainly online activities, like following the actors or fan pages on social media. There were two exceptions that engaged with the series even more, by engaging in real life rather than only social media. The fact that they consider themselves as fans shows their involvement and enjoyment for the sitcom. In addition to this, they mentioned that they like to be in control over their engagement with the series, which is typical for the millennials, and the internet plays a role in this. This type of fandom enhances the concept of post-object fandom as discussed by Williams (2015). Where a new audience becomes fan of a media product from the past.

Another indicator for watching *Friends* in current times is because it evokes a feeling of nostalgia the interviewees appreciate; this even goes beyond post-object fandom because it creates a larger feeling of appreciation of and interest in the 1990s. The nostalgic feeling of the 1990s was addressed as one of the motivations to watch the series, the millennials argued that that aspect really contributed to them enjoying the series. Especially seeing the differences and similarities in society, technology and fashion between that time and today's society. In terms of technology, they all addressed that it was an easier time without all the social media, some of them had a yearning for the past and that time that seemed easier to

them. They had a nostalgic feeling when watching the series, but they did acknowledge that the feeling would be stronger when they had experienced the 90s themselves.

Lastly, the motivation to watch *Friends* in today's world was discussed, also they compared the series to contemporary television series. The millennials compared *Friends* to several other series, but *How I Met Your Mother* and *Modern Family* were mentioned the most. It became visible here that a sitcom is indeed a product of its time, as was discussed in the theoretical framework chapter. Even though these other series were comparable, they all argued that *Friends* is better, based on the storyline and the societal themes the series address. When choosing to watch *Friends* in today's society, they took different things into consideration; story rather than the genre, with who they are watching, and when they are watching. The millennials did not recognize themselves in the contemporary critique there is on the series, they realize that that is part of how today's society is, but for them it is not a reason to not like *Friends* or to not watch it.

## **5.1 Discussion and future research**

This thesis gave useful insights into how millennials explain a phenomenon of the returning popularity of *Friends*. When looking at the implications of this study for society, it is most useful for producers in the media industries, and more particularly the television industry. This because it gave an insight in why this millennial audience choose to watch the series and how they give meaning to it. This can be applied to other series to be able to create content for, and target content to this specific audience. Nevertheless, there is always the possibility to dive deeper into a phenomenon like this. Like in every other research, there are some limitations to this study. First of all, because this study took place in the Netherlands, the sample consists of only Dutch millennials, of which most were female. Next to that, I choose to only interview the youngest part of the millennial generation. It might be that the oldest part of the millennial generation has a very different opinion and way of giving meaning *Friends* than the group in this study. Since this study took place in the Netherlands, and therefore had a limited sample, it would also be interesting to compare it to millennials from other countries, to see if they react the same to the sitcom *Friends*. An idea here would be to do a comparative study of millennials from different countries. Most interesting would be to look at the American millennials in comparison to millennials from another country, because *Friends* was produced in the United States and that might have influenced the status of the series in that country, and also how that population makes meaning of the series. Another suggestion for future research would be to do a longitudinal study with this sample, to see if the people in the sample still make meaning of *Friends* when they watch it again in 10 or 20

years. Another interesting study would be to look at media products other than series. This because the phenomenon of ‘old’ media products is not only visible in the television industry, but can be found across different creative industries, for example, the music and the gaming industry. Or to relate this study to other cases, that did get remakes or sequels, like *Gilmore Girls* or *Full House* to see how new audiences react when they do not know the original content, or to see how people who watched the original content react to the new content. Nevertheless, this study gave some useful insights to explain this contemporary, rather new, phenomenon and therefore added to both scientific and social knowledge.

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## Appendix A: Overview Interviewees

Nr.	Name	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Ethnicity	Residence
1	Angelique	22	Female	Bachelor philosophy (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	-	Dutch	Capelle a/d IJssel
2	Joy	23	Female	Bachelor Arts and Culture studies (graduated)	Waitress at Lantarenvenster (part time) and sales assistant at Velvet music store Rotterdam (part time)	Dutch	Rotterdam
3	Eline	19	Female	Bachelor of Psychology (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	Waitress at Happy Italy (part time)	Dutch	Hendrik-Ido-Ambacht
4	Romée	22	Female	Small business and retail management (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Floor manager at KFC (part time)	Dutch	Barendrecht
5	Juliette	21	Female	Tourism management (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	Waitress at Happy Italy (part time)	Dutch	Breda
6	Lotte	23	Female	Social work (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Works at escape room Dordrecht (part time)	Dutch	Zwijndrecht
7	Nina	22	Female	Applied psychology (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Research assistant at NEMO (part time)	Dutch	Rotterdam

					Works at centrum voor dienstverlening (part time)		
8	Kim	23	Female	Nursing school (graduated)	Nurse at Allerzorg (fulltime)	Dutch	Zwijndrecht
9	Eva	21	Female	International Business Administration (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	-	Dutch	Rotterdam
10	Tom	21	Male	Business Economics (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Graduate intern at ALTEN Nederland (full time)	Dutch	Barendrecht
11	Joost	21	Male	Engineering (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	Barback at Bokaal Rotterdam (part time)	Dutch	Rotterdam
12	Julia	22	Female	International Bachelor Arts and culture Studies (graduated)	Waitress at Op Het Dak (part time) and intern at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam (part time)	Dutch	Rotterdam
13	Erik	21	Male	Art and Design (graduated)	Graphic designer (full time)	Dutch	Zwijndrecht

## Appendix B: Example themes and subthemes

