

Interview Final: Comfort Viewing Among Mothers

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Introduction

When thinking about the idea of comfort, we often think of physical aspects that make us feel warm, relaxed, or at ease. However, this idea can translate to emotional feelings that come from the media we consume such as movies and TV shows, and specifically the characters and plotlines within them. Through a collection of three in-depth interviews, this study will analyze what feelings and emotions are found in full-time working mothers in regards to movie/TV show “comfort viewing.” This topic is being studied to further understand how comfort viewing has changed over the course of mothers' lives in regards to life circumstances changing, especially in the sense of having children and new careers. Bently & Murray (2016) point out that the “Rewatching of television content has been possible since the 1950s, when it was based on scheduled reruns of serialized content.” However, with the increase of streaming services, many of these habits have become more accessible and of greater variety. After the interviews were concluded, many similarities were found among the interviewees that help to answer the following research question:

What feelings/emotions are found in present-day mothers in regards to movie/TV show “comfort viewing”?

Methodology

By using interviews as the form of research, there is a qualitative aspect that cannot be accomplished through survey or content analysis. This is the best form of research for the study that is being analyzed because it can capture emotions and feelings through physical cues and tone in voice that other forms cannot. The interview questions were selected because they allow for an expansive view of both the past and present of each mothers' viewing habits. Additionally,

they capture the feelings shared around who else they are watching with. These interviewees were chosen because the title of mother implies that they have or have had at least one child over the span of their lives. Furthermore, mothers are typically above the age of 25 which suggests that they have at least some memories that can be shared with the researchers about their viewing habits at a younger age compared to their viewing habits now. This higher age also allows for more life experiences such as career changes, moving cities, or other impactful events that may have had an effect on their comfort viewing. The title of full-time workers also puts all interviewees at an equal standpoint to be compared in their daily lives in terms of “free-time” and availability.

Interviewees were chosen by convenience sampling. The original sampling was intended to interview a general pool of adults that frequently watched TV; however, of the three adults selected, all ended up being mothers which allowed for a more narrow view of the research question and a more detailed analysis of characteristics. Once recruiting all three mothers, a consent form was sent out over email to ensure that they were okay with what was going to happen during the time of interview. The interviews were then conducted over the video software program Zoom, as it allowed for the most personal interaction, as in-person interviews were not available at this time, and gave access to visual cues that phone calls could not. The interviews were semi-structured and took approximately 20-30 minutes.

Analysis

The conducted interviews were first transcribed using the website, Otter.ai. The transcriptions were then gone through to be anonymized by removing any identifying factors of the participants. Once anonymized, steps were taken based on the Grounded Theory for

qualitative data in order to find common themes throughout the interviews. The researchers first used highlighting and memo writing to find connections between the first two interviews. The third interview was then analyzed based on the common themes found in those to see if those themes carried over. This identification is classified as axial coding in which grouping of common concepts allow for emerging themes and codes. After major themes were identified among the three interviews, a table was created that allowed for organization of major themes, codes, and examples from the participants that would fit into the categories.

Findings

Co-viewing with loved ones

Past research done by Wolf, Launay, and Dunbar (2015) discussed the topic of joint attention and how that plays a role in TV viewing with another person. After conducting their own research, they found that “Even after simply watching something on a screen together, without otherwise interacting, participants reported feeling more positive about and socially closer to their partner.” This aspect of co-viewing can be supported by the interview responses from this study of comfort viewing. Mother 1 noted that she would watch her comfort show with her daughter saying: “Oh my god, I was so excited to watch it every night when I would get home from work. My daughter would be waiting for me,” and later connected a similar feeling to watching shows with her father when she was of younger age. She states: “listening to my dad laugh always made me crack up because he just thought it was the funniest show.” By comparing Mother 1’s thoughts of past viewing to her current viewing, it can be concluded that having other people around when watching comfort TV may have a significant role in the overall experience.

This can be further supported through the feelings of comfort viewing of Mother 3 as she compares her past viewing at a younger age with her current viewing habits:

“I think about the people that I hung out with in college or in high school, you know, we watched the same things because we had similar interests. As you get older, you're kind of with your spouse or with your family... So you do kind of what other people you're with are interested in. So I may not be interested in certain show as much as my husband, but I'll watch it now because he wants to watch it. But even though, you know, and I'm still enjoying it, because we're enjoying it together.”

These feelings imply that comfort viewing may not always be about the actual show that a person is watching, but rather who they are watching with. Mother 3 mentions that she doesn't always love the show she watches, but she enjoys the experience anyway because she gets to watch it with her husband. Similarly, Mother 1 found comfort in watching shows with her father at a young age and with her daughter now. Through these shared experiences, it can be implied that co-viewing, specifically with loved ones, can increase levels of enjoyment while engaging in comfort viewing.

Nostalgic memories

Co-viewing and nostalgic memories seem to be very closely related; nostalgia is most commonly associated with positive feelings and memories and those positive feelings have been found to frequently occur when there are loved ones present. Bently & Murray (2016) note in their study that “Movies and television shows have a great power to invoke reminiscing and nostalgia and take people back to other times in their lives.” This is further supported with Weispfenning's (2003) observations, stated in Bently & Murray's study (2016), that “shared

television viewing can shape generational identity as well as develop shared points of understanding between generations, contributing to our collective memory and helping to provide social continuity, making reruns particularly reassuring in changing times.” When asked to think back to a time of comfort viewing at a younger age, the respondents shared feelings that matched these observations and support the further relationship between co-viewing and nostalgia.

Mother 1 says: “I think it would be awesome to watch them [(shows she watched as a teen)] now... I think it would bring back all good memories and be funny.” Although she does not engage in the viewing of the same shows, she expresses her feelings of certainly that she would enjoy the experience if she did. Furthermore, Mother 3 touches on the ideas of generational shifts that Weispenning mentioned in his findings:

“The group of friends that are on this show, remind me of myself and my friends and how we used to hang out. And I'm sure you know, I think back to my parents, way back when they were young, too, they had a certain group of friends that they hung out with and did things with. So I think from generation to generation, the characters in this show, kind of show that you always have people that you can rely on. And they always hung out in the basement. And I think that's like a theme way back when we used to do that to go downstairs, get away from the parents. Go hang out in the basement, so that you're not being watched all the time.”

These feelings of herself as a younger woman, as well as what she imagined her parents felt at a similar age, goes to show that there are aspects in television shows that feel relatable regardless of age. With that being said, these relatable instances are ones that allow for the emergence of

happy memories that bring viewers back to a time in their lives where they felt similar feelings that the characters in the shows seem to display.

Admiration of characters

A blog post by The Harvard Crimson poses the idea that “maybe we occasionally find comfort in characters that look and/or act like us” (Hennessey, 2021). In some ways, this seems to remain true when analyzing responses from the interview participants. Mother 3 said that the shows she liked to watch were very relatable; she says “I definitely see my own children doing the same types of things that these kids are doing on [the] show. And the parents on the show, act and react in similar ways that my husband and I might also.” Mother 3 admires the characters in the show because they remind her of herself and her family, which gives her a sense of comfort.

Adversely, Mother 1 states in regards to the characters in her comfort shows that she just wanted to “hang out with them” and “be friends with them because they were so funny in such a, like, crazy dysfunctional family.” Here, Mother 1 admires the humor that these characters share, and even expresses her desire to be a part of that. Furthermore, Mother 2 states, “I don’t have a lot of drama in my life. So it’s like, kind of fun to watch,” in regards to her comfort show.

Although the characters may not remind the mothers of themselves, they still fall under the admiration characteristic because they enjoy the traits that these characters display and possibly wish to obtain similar personalities or be a part of the storylines that the characters go through. This relates to the overall feelings of comfort viewing because the characters themselves have such a big impact on the audiences in regards to what might be a formation of parasocial relationships; these relationships are when the viewer invests emotional energy, interest, and time into a specific media persona. (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When people express this kind of

connection with TV show characters, they are more likely to go back and rewatch that show so that they can feel those positive emotions again and again.

Changes in life circumstances

Another common theme that was found among participants is changes in life circumstances, specifically in regards to time, or lack thereof. Mother 1 discusses a shift in availability for watching TV after she was out of school and working, had bought a house, and had “25 other things to do than watch a show.” In contrast, Mother 2 discusses her change in availability in the opposite direction. She explains that as her daughter got older, “you don't have to go to sports and you don't have to, you know, school events and things like that. Once she graduated, it's just easier. So there's more time.”

Mother 3 similarly relates to the changes in her kids growing up. She says she began to notice a change in her viewing habits “as [her] kids got older and [she] wasn't watching Zack and Cody, and all these other shows to kind of be watching them with [her] kids.” She then goes on to say: “Now I'm watching what I more or less want to watch. So I'm able to, I don't know, enjoy it for myself more and not enjoy it because of others.” Although all three mothers differ in their ways that their viewing habits have changed, a common theme can be depicted among the shared feelings. Whether it is job changes or their children growing up, all three mother's responses point to common concepts of changes in availability and interest.

Another concept that may be important to note is the increase in streaming services that has made the concept of “binge-watching” more accessible. Mother 3 discusses viewing at a younger age stating: “We'd have to get up, change the channel. Because we didn't have remote controls and all this other fancy schmancy stuff. We'd have to go and watch this show at a certain

time. We couldn't just watch it on demand because it only showed a certain time.” This alludes to the idea that comfort viewing and rewatching experiences were not as convenient as they are now. Mother 1 expressed that “No commercials is heaven,” in regards to streaming shows today. With the availability and wide range of options for comfort viewing on streaming services, it can be implied that this change in the way society watches shows today is a major change in life circumstances that everyone has experienced.

Limitations

One limitation that should be considered includes the fact that the interviews were conducted over an internet application. Although Zoom was the best case scenario with the given circumstances, given more time, a true in-person interview may have allowed for more physical/social cues, resulting in deeper analysis of the participant's thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, a question could have been asked that discussed the age of each mother's children; this was not initially taken into consideration but was noted as something that may have been beneficial to analyze the timeline of changes in life circumstances.

External validity may also be limited as these results were specific to mothers. It is difficult to tell whether feelings of comfort viewing would differ with males or people of different ages. A last limitation that may be important to address would be the age of the researcher conducting the interviews; a younger age in the interviewers may have restricted some participants in mentioning certain shows or past experiences as they may have believed the interviewer would not be able to understand or relate. Future research may want to consider other ages, genders, and perhaps ethnicities to better understand this concept from a wider range of people.

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