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“I want world peace... oh, and bigger boobs”: Repetitions and Stereotyping on *Friends*’ sustainable character Phoebe

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Television (TV) series have emerged as the quintessential entertainment product in popular culture, amplifying their potential for affecting stereotypical representations. However, how stereotypes are embedded and transformed through media has been overlooked. This study investigates repetitions, an essential feature of serial narratives that plays a key role in stereotyping through the construction of characters in TV series. Through a literary deconstructionist analysis of Phoebe Buffay, one of the main characters from the neo-cult TV series *Friends*, we offer a typology of different repetitions – namely, reproduction, layering and evolution – and show how they contribute to cementing the stereotypes of morally desirable yet deviant behaviours, such as sustainable consumption.

Summary statement of contribution:

We contribute to the literature on pop culture and to the literary tradition in consumer research by applying deconstructionist methods to the stereotyping process at stake in serial fiction. In doing so, we explore the role of repetitions, a mechanism typical of TV series that is key to creating both stereotypes and characters. We explain how such a process unfolds.

Keywords: TV series; *Friends*; character; stereotypes; sustainable consumer

Introduction

Television (TV) series are quintessential entertainment products whose narrative and serial nature, similar to reality television's, can conflate both social and intimate experiences (Pradhan & Drake, 2023), enacting in consumers a strong emotional bond with characters (van Laer et al., 2014). Their 'infinite serial structure' (Russell & Stern, 2006, p. 16) favours consumption in high flow. Through binge-watching practices, series transport consumers into their narratives (Feiereisen et al., 2021), arguably provoking significant cultivation effects or offering 'television answers' to real-world problems (Gerbner et al., 1978; Green & Brock, 2000; Oliver et al., 2019). Thus, it can be inferred that the nature of series and particularly their characters can considerably influence the stereotypes or social representations of specific groups (Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Patterson, 2013; Russell & Stern, 2006; Russell et al., 2019; Stern et al., 2007; Thakar et al., 2010; Zanette et al., 2023). However, extant literature has not yet explored the textual elements through which TV series characters are built and how fiction mobilises social representations.

Here, we explore one relevant representation: the stereotypes of sustainable consumers. While sustainability may cover many topics, we mainly focus here on the environmental dimension of sustainability. Such relevance is justified by the need to normalise sustainable behaviours (Rettie et al., 2012) and how culture can play a role in sustainable transition (Köhler et al., 2019; Milkoreit, 2017; Ritch, 2023). However, evidence suggests that such consumers and their practices – for instance, vegetarianism/veganism (De Groeve et al., 2021, 2022) or activism (Bashir et al., 2013; Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016) – are still negatively represented, for example, as 'judgmental' and 'preachy' (Minson & Monin, 2012; Ratliff et al., 2017) or simply as 'eccentric' (Burgess et al., 2012). These representations could be a barrier to sustainable transition (Burgess et al., 2012; Johnstone et al., 2015). Nevertheless, how series mobilise representations of sustainable consumers and how they portray and construct deviance is still unknown. Here, we investigate how discreet and peripheral but repeated representations can create stereotypes about sustainability.

Studying character construction can shed light on the above mentioned research gap. Here, we examine the TV series *Friends*, considered a neo-cult series – a highly popular series across different generations of viewers (Jones, 2018). The sad passing of *Friends* star Matthew Perry in 2023 has provided evidence, if needed, of the still vivid importance of the show to this day's popular culture. This study specifically focuses on one of *Friends*' main characters: Phoebe Buffay, an unconventional character who embodies different facets of sustainable consumption.

She leads a minimalist lifestyle, cares about community and animal wellbeing and subtly critiques consumerism. However, she also embodies the contradictions that have been evidenced by previous literature on sustainable consumers (Johnstone & Tan, 2014; Mazar & Zhong, 2010), as illustrated by one of the opening scenes in which she wishes to have ‘world peace, no more hunger, good things for the rainforest... and bigger boobs!’ (S01E04).

Viewers learn Phoebe’s traits and their nuances through the ‘infinite serial structure’ (Russell & Stern, 2006, p. 16) of the series, which allows for countless similar but slightly different repetitions in tropes and jokes. Because stereotypes themselves are formed through similar repetitions (Angle et al., 2016; Blank et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Valor et al., 2021), we claim that the mobilisation of representations in series is achieved through repeated textual mechanisms. What types of repetitions are enacted in the text, and how do they work together? What do they repeat precisely, and how do they create characters that may affect the stereotypical representations portrayed in the series?

To address these questions, we combined an automatic detection technique for identifying the scenes conveying sustainable consumers’ stereotypes with deconstructionist literary analysis (Stern, 1996a, 1996b). This method ensures a close focus on the text and enables us to capture both the details that an approach based only on watching would miss and the multiple meanings, as the audience may have multiple interpretations (Patterson et al., 1998). Our findings reveal how different types of repetitions contribute to character complexity while reproducing stereotypical representations. We describe three types of repetitions (reproduction, layering and evolution) and show their different functions in establishing and conveying stereotypes in characters. They do so by progressively building on the previous type of repetition to create fully developed characters. In sum, our study contributes to previous literature on popular culture and stereotyping by (1) showing the parallel role of repetitions both in stereotyping (Fiske, 1998; Martin et al., 2014, 2017) and in character construction (Miller, 1982) and by (2) typifying these roles in different mechanism that create fully developed characters, conveying and reinforcing negative stereotypes of sustainable consumption. In our discussion, we also touch upon the theoretical links between these fully developed characters and their contribution to narrative transportation, resulting in a cultivation effect. Finally, we make valuable practical contributions on the impact and construction of serial narration, which can be used in advertising and public policies.

Conceptual background

Repetitions and stereotypes

Stereotypes are implicit or explicit beliefs, representations or perceptions that people have about another group or individual (Bennett et al., 2018; Luomala et al., 2020; Monin et al., 2008; Ratliff et al., 2017; Rozin et al., 2012). People classify others through stereotypes (Akestam et al., 2017; Fiske, 1998; Martin et al., 2014), attributing to their targets certain prototypical traits (Ratliff et al., 2017), which are used to ostracise those individuals who are out of the norm (Fan et al., 2020) or considered deviant (Valor et al., 2021). This seems to be the case for stereotypes of sustainable consumers.

The growing importance of consumer responsibility in terms of sustainable behaviour (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021) has had unexpected effects on the representations of sustainable consumers. Literature has evidenced negative (Bennett & Vijaygopal, 2018; Brough et al., 2016; Gollhofer, 2017) and positive stereotypes (Borau et al., 2021; Funk et al., 2020) but with backlashes for the desirability of sustainable behaviours (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Brough et al., 2016). Indeed, recent studies point out that consumers might feel threatened or even attacked (Kurz et al., 2020; Minson & Monin, 2011) by sustainable consumers' behaviours, and one of their reactions is to negatively classify sustainable consumers (Bashir et al., 2013; De Groot et al., 2021, 2022; Gollhofer, 2017; Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016; Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Séré et al., 2018). Consequently, different types of sustainable consumers (vegetarians, vegans, activists, etc.) are generally associated with deviance, are perceived as holding abnormal beliefs and are rejected by regular consumer groups (Barnhart & Mish, 2017; Kurz et al., 2020). Some studies highlight the crucial role of media in creating and spreading stereotypes of sustainable consumers (Antonetti & Maklan, 2012; Bennett & Vijaygopal, 2018; Brough et al., 2016; Shang & Pelozo, 2020).

Stereotypes are nonetheless malleable (Angle et al., 2016; Blank et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Valor et al., 2021). Individuals build, reinforce, spread and modify them through repetitive social exchanges (Martin et al., 2014, 2017; Pechman & Knight, 2002). This claim of stereotypes' malleability is also supported by the evidence of how fiction may affect public opinion and general behaviours (Chalvon-Demersay, 2015; Kennedy & Lawton, 1992; Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Patterson et al., 2013). Although consumers do not have social exchanges with characters and narratives, cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1978) suggests that substantial exposure to TV content can influence viewers' perceptions of reality, as consumers are

transported into fictional narratives (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014), and produce similar effects as personal experiences. In particular, both empathy with characters (van Laer et al., 2014) and characters' role as behaviour models create bonds between the audience and the character, which result in narrative transportation (Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Patterson et al., 2013; Takhar et al., 2010; van Laer et al., 2014).

However, the prototypical character traits and emotions enacted by a character result from an important aspect of fictional media: a text constructed with intentions. Characters cannot be anything but the results of the text's structure and organisation (Miller, 1982), and their existence in literary studies is constrained by a fictional structured set of actions (Propp V., 2012 [1928]) that gradually builds their development. For example, Holbrook and Grayson (1986) have shown how the consumption choices of Karen's character in the movie *Out of Africa* illustrate her development and nuances. Changes in her clothes and furniture, in particular, operate as subtle clues to the development of this character. In other words, they provide evidence that her actions – in terms of consumption choices – reflect her evolution. As such, audiences' emotions and psychological engagement arise from the text, and repetition is a central element for character development, as explained next.

Different streams of scholarship have shown the influence of fictional content on consumers. Pechman and Shih (1999) have demonstrated the role of movies in normalising smoking by offering specific imagery with which consumers want to be associated. Similarly, TV series have been shown to affect consumption behaviours, such as the consumption of alcohol (Russell et al., 2019) or healthy food (Charry, 2014). Studies on TV series argue in favour of including socially desirable messages in TV series owing to their effect on their audiences' representations (Chalvon-Demersay, 2011; Russell & Stern, 2006). These studies highlight the educational value of TV series in particular (Russell & Stern, 2006; Stern et al., 2007).

Series and repetition

Series' infinite serial structure comprises sets of actions, which are repeated to form characters' unique and recognisable behaviours. These repetitions of behaviours are then ensured throughout the series' multiple seasons, episodes and scenes. By nature, repetition is a core property of seriality and a mechanism for its development. The use of repetitions facilitates the development of audiences' unique bond with characters (Chalvon-Demersay, 2011; Pasquier, 1995), as it maintains the characters' familiarity with the audience (Russell & Stern, 2006),

which leads them to internalise messages from movies or TV series (Södergren & Vallström, 2021).

Hillis Miller's work sheds light on how repetitions in *texts* also act in forming such bonds. Miller is an American literary critic widely recognised for his association with the post-structuralist school of thought at Yale and for his work on deconstructionist methods (Dunne, 2017). In particular, his book *Fiction and Repetition* (1982), on which this study relies, presents several analyses of influential novels in which he reviews different patterns of repetition as the source of narrative immersion – very similar to the narrative transportation mentioned by marketing scholars. He argues that readers notice, enjoy and engage in the identification of the text's recurrent motives (Miller, 1982, pp. 1–3). Those repetitions include various forms such as words, characters, scenes, plots or motives of any sort (pp. 1–3). For Miller, the identification of repetitions enables a reader to get immersed in a narrative (pp. 1–3).

His work method shares similarities with that of Stern, one of the few scholars who explored Miller's work in consumer research, whose exemplary papers on literary analysis also advocated for interpretations based on a 'close reading' of the text (Stern, 1996, p. 138). Furthermore, Miller's work echoes a parallel mechanism for stereotype construction evidenced by previous works in psychology and consumer studies (Martin et al., 2014, 2017), therefore inspiring an explanation for the formation of stereotypes through media and popular culture.

Under Miller's lens, repeated patterns in the long run (such as in series) would determine, consolidate and adapt associations of certain prototypical traits in characters. It would also strengthen the bonds audiences share with the characters and the story. Repetitions forge stereotypes, but repetitions in a literary context also forge characters. Importantly, fictional texts might have unintentional performative effects; they can cement stereotypes even when not necessarily written and produced with this persuasive intent (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). However, what types of repetitions are enacted in the text, and how do they work together? What do they repeat precisely, and how do they create characters that may affect the stereotypical representations portrayed in the series?

Context: *Friends* and *Phoebe*

Some series have gained the special status of neo-cult TV series (Jones, 2023). This status is achieved by rekindling interest in the series, creating a new community of fans with both old

and new viewers. Neo-cult series are initiated by a reboot, which updates the series to address contemporary issues (Jones, 2023). However, we argue that this concept can also be applied to TV series that move to streaming platforms, freeing themselves from the constraints of TV squares (Jones, 2023; Sepulchre, 2011) without losing their success in addition to attracting new viewers. We infer from this that neo-cult series may have a lasting impact on representations and stereotypes and have thus prioritised them in this study.

Friends can be defined as a neo-cult TV series, as it created a cultural phenomenon that significantly impacted the entertainment industry and society (Cobb et al., 2018; Leppert et al., 2018). *Friends* is a popular American sitcom that aired from 1994 to 2004 and depicts the lives of six friends living in Manhattan. The show revolves around the lives of Ross, Rachel, Chandler, Monica, Joey and Phoebe, each with unique personalities and quirks. Monica is a chef, and her older brother, Ross, is a palaeontologist. Rachel is Monica's best friend and a fashion enthusiast. Chandler is Ross's college friend and works in statistical analysis and data reconfiguration. Joey is an aspiring actor and ladies' man, and Phoebe is an eccentric musician with a unique outlook on life.

The show continues to be successful even after 30 years since it first aired. In 2018, its estimated number of streams represented 4.13% of Netflix streams in the US (James, 2019). In 2022, *Friends* was still one of the most streamed series of the year on HBO Max, with 14.5 billion streams in the US alone (Nast, 2023). The show's continued success highlights its importance in the world of entertainment, bringing together a community of both original and new viewers. This neo-fandom (Jones, 2023) is another reason for attributing the status of neo-cultivated TV series to *Friends*. Studying *Friends*, even 20 years after its first release, is valuable. The show constitutes an appropriate context to study how a series conveys stereotypes to its new and original viewers who repeatedly watch it.

We focus here on the character of Phoebe, who embodies the ultimate sustainable character in the series. Phoebe's character has several facets. She has a chaotic past with a traumatic childhood: her father abandoned her family, her mother committed suicide when she was 14, and she was then adopted. She has a twin sister, Ursula, with whom she had a strained relationship. She went from homelessness in New York to becoming a masseuse, a guitarist and a singer. Despite these hardships, she has a very naive and enthusiastic mindset and tries to push away every darkness of the world. Throughout the series, she refers several times to her New Age spirituality, with a touch of conspiracy theory and superstition. She is also a vegetarian, a tree hugger and a fierce defender of animals. She is against fur and displays

sustainable practices such as thrifting. For these reasons, she embodies the sustainable consumer of the series, especially if we focus on the environmentalism aspect of sustainability. By considering Phoebe as a representative of sustainable consumers, we can unveil how the mechanisms of repetition work together in the series to both construct this character and portray sustainable consumers as deviant.

Method

We performed a literary analysis of the script of *Friends*, a widely studied series (Porter et al., 2023). Scripts, previously used in analysing movies, reflect real-life conversations and, therefore, can be used to describe real-life phenomena (Holbrook & Grayson, 1986). They are also part of ‘industrial art’ (Stern et al., 2007, pp. 9–10). This double nature, unique to the script, allows us to consider it as an object constructed with conscious or unconscious intentions from the scriptwriting team towards the audience. We use automated content analysis to select relevant scenes from the entire series’ script; we then use discourse analysis to scrutinise them using deconstructionist techniques and thematic analysis (Stern, 1996a, 1996b) combined with the approach presented by Miller (1982) on repetitions. Next, we describe the several steps of the method. The overview of the method is presented in Figure 1.

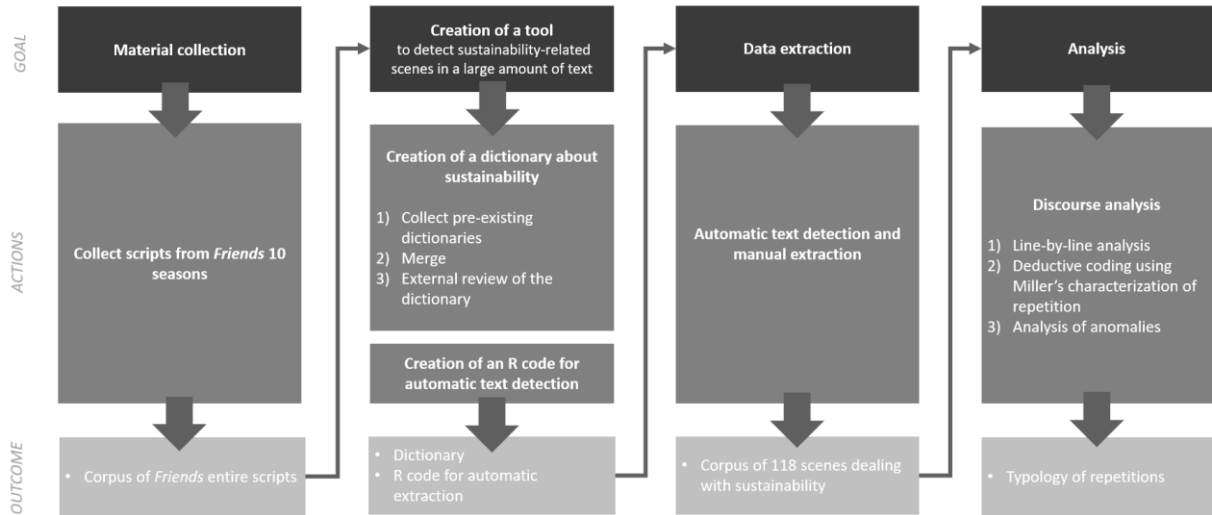


Figure 1 - Research method flow chart

Data sources. The PDF transcripts of the entire series are publicly available on several open-source websites. We downloaded our data from Kaggle, a data science platform. The use of scripts' extracts in this non-commercial study comes under the fair use of copyright-protected work. The complete list of authors can be found on the Writers' Guild of America West website¹.

Dictionary. A dictionary of words related to environmental issues was necessary to automatise text detection. A dictionary approach is recommended when focusing on a particular object or cultural phenomenon, as 'text can be specified in relatively precise or finite ways that can be easily represented by word presence or absence' (Berger et al., 2022, p. 4). The dictionary was created using two pre-existent, published dictionaries of sustainability issues. The standardised one was the FOREST dictionary, comprising several categories of words related to the environmental language (Bengston & Xu, 1995; Xu & Bengston, 1997). The second dictionary used was the one developed by Humphreys (2014) and covered a lot of different aspects related to sustainability. These two dictionaries were aggregated to create a dictionary with a total of 1602 words divided into 22 categories such as 'Calamities', 'Awards & Certifications' and 'Climate & Emissions'.

This first version of the dictionary considers environmental issues' broad meaning and extended consequences. Adapting the dictionary to this research's objectives required its refining to enhance its accuracy and the validity of the words used (Xu & Bengston, 1997). This refinement comprised two tasks. First, it was necessary to simplify the list and avoid redundancy in combining words, as the R code, used for data extraction, could only take one sole word as a valid entry. This was achieved by removing or reducing existing expressions to their core words. For instance, 'SOLID_WASTE', 'WASTE_CHEMICALS', 'WASTE_MATERIALS' and 'WASTE_MANAGEMENT' were replaced by 'WASTE', 'CHEMICALS', 'MATERIALS' and 'MANAGEMENT', respectively. Similarly, the word 'ENVIRONMENTAL' would be able to detect different expressions such as 'ENVIRONMENTAL-FRIENDLY', 'ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST' and 'ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS'. We also included other forms of the word such as plural or gerundive. With this procedure we ensured that an entry containing any of these words would be identified. Further, 'friendly' and 'organizations' could be removed, especially because they are too broad and could create several false positives. Second, some categories or

¹ <https://www.wga.org/writers-room/101-best-lists/101-best-written-tv-series/friends>

words were irrelevant to our experiment and were removed from the dictionary because they were too ambiguous (e.g. ‘SAFETY’) or they distantly referred to environmental issues (e.g. ‘EDUCATION’). We decided at this stage to focus mostly on environmental issues to avoid too many false occurrences.

With these refinements, the dictionary amounted to 500 words. Words that were not directly linked to environmentalism but could refer to environmental problems were retained (e.g. ‘CRISIS’). Although retaining these words resulted in many false positives, we decided to keep them to avoid the risk of missing key occurrences.

After the refinement was completed, the dictionary was validated by three independent coders trained in marketing, consumer and green studies. The coders were briefed about the goals of this study and were instructed to not only check whether the existing words should be kept but also, more importantly, add any critical word missing in the current version. These coders added 426 words. After their additions, we went through the dictionary again to eliminate expressions or simplify the composed words. The final version of the dictionary comprised 582 words.

Automated text detection. The data *corpus* was submitted to text mining using an R code adapted to the study. Our code is now accessible on Open Science Repository (https://osf.io/n8sv4/?view_only=a85774051c6e490c9e4ff3db11bab1b3). Version 4.2.2 of the R was used (see Appendix 1 for further information on the packages used). Each positive occurrence was manually checked within its context using the line number to find the scene in the script. The context helped us understand whether the word relates to sustainability. This procedure was necessary owing to the number of false positives. For instance, the word ‘GREEN’ produced many false positives because the family name of one of the characters was Green. In total, we screened 4,046 occurrences, of which 306 were positive. This resulted in a sample of 118 valid scenes. The script of these scenes was then extracted. The boundaries of each scene were defined by tracking any character’s entrance in or exit from the ongoing action. An examination of these scenes led us to centre the analysis on Phoebe: the lines containing references to environmental-related themes were in large majority Phoebe’s, although previous studies have evidenced that she is the main character with the least number of lines (Porter et al., 2023).

Data analysis. A discourse analysis approach with deconstructionist techniques was used for the analysis (Stern, 1996a, 1996b). This method is particularly adequate for capturing multiple meanings, intertextuality and potential subjective interpretations from audiences (Patterson et

al., 1998). According to Stern (1996a), a text from media is a ‘persuasion to consume that can be analysed in a systematic way’. Hence, for each scene, we applied the three-step deconstructionist protocol by Stern (1996a), analysing textual elements through rhetorical and grammatical analysis. The first step involves identifying textual elements to pay close attention to the text. The second step involves constructing meaning by comparing text attributes with some characteristics of repetitions as explained by Miller (1982). The third and final step aims to expose the different and possibly contradictory meanings of the text and focuses on understanding the position forced on the audience about the sustainable character.

Each round of analysis included two stages: the first author performed the analysis and then discussed the results with the other authors, who could assess the validity of the analysis. All co-authors also watched the entire show to be able to provide contextual elements; however, binge-watching was not used for this study. We started by analysing each scene line by line, focusing on identifying textual elements and structure (Stern, 1996a, 1996b) using rhetorical and grammatical analysis tools (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). Our next step was constructing meaning (Stern, 1996a) by identifying the recurring traits mentioned about sustainable consumers. As previous literature suggests that stereotypes are used as categories to classify, we start with the assumption that we could find recurrent types of stereotypes. We identified which sustainable consumer stereotype was expressed, which character it was about and whether it conveyed negative or positive traits. In addition, we followed Stern’s (1996a) recommendation to identify the scene’s aim, such as introducing a character, first-sight scene or conflict scene. The second round of analysis was inspired by the work of Hillis Miller and the examples of repetitions he provided. We tried to characterise how the stereotypes were expressed in the different scenes: for instance, we coded the length of the scenes, interactions between characters and the content of sustainable consumer stereotypes using the previous typology (Séré de Lanauzé & Lallement, 2020). We also tried to code based on the examples provided by Miller (1982). However, at this stage, the typology did not account for the consequences of the characters’ construction and the stereotyping process at work. Finally, we performed a third round of analysis using open coding to explore these anomalies. In this round of analysis, for instance, we focused on how jokes are used to signal to the audience whether to laugh at a character or to empathise with them. This helped identify when the text suggested deviance. Taking all our codes into consideration, we developed a typology that includes the textual characteristics, the effects on the character and the stereotypes.

Following Stern's protocol, our coding process involved deductive and inductive codes. Deductive codes included categories such as a scene's multiple meanings, viewers' positions and the development of sustainability issues. These were decided before the analytical stage. Inductive codes included transgression, the position of the viewer and the effect of the scene on stereotypes. These were developed through all three rounds of analysis.

Findings

Our analysis uncovered three distinct types of repetition: reproduction, layering and evolution. Our typology (1) focuses on the effect of these repetitions on stereotypes, (2) focuses on elements that are typical of series, such as the length of repetitions and their placement, and (3) considers the differences and the articulation of the different types of repetitions (Figure 2).

Reproduction is a type of repetition whereby a single prototypical trait (Ratliff et al., 2017) is briefly mentioned, often in a hint or a joke, without modifying the trait. For instance, the traits can be naïve, eccentric or animal-lover, but they are introduced only one at a time. Several times, vegetarianism is stereotyped as a deviance and a nuisance. The purpose of this repetition is to reinforce the trait and associate it with the sustainable consumer character, building the foundation or, metaphorically speaking, the 'bones' of the character.

Layering is a type of repetition in which one stereotype is placed next to another through longer developments in the same scene. Layering creates a more complex, multifaceted stereotype (Comunello et al., 2016) by associating the traits of one stereotype with those of another. For instance, vegetarianism is associated with another set of stereotypes, such as esoterism or homosexuality. This more complex stereotype can then be re-used in reproduction and evolution, giving more depth to the original stereotypes. Continuing with the metaphor, layering gives flesh to stereotypes.

Evolution occurs when an established set of prototypical traits is transformed and given a new direction, resulting in characters with added complexity and nuances. This type of repetition may create ambivalence and paradoxes with the original traits introduced in reproduction. It generally takes place over a more extended number of lines, often through a series of scenes or even an entire episode. The transformation of Phoebe into a regular consumer takes place over several episodes, even seasons, which show her shopping or eating meat. Evolution adds more skin to the stereotype, turning it into a fully fleshed character. Each of these patterns of

repetition creates the structure (or bones), substance (or flesh) and nuance (or skin) of stereotypes.

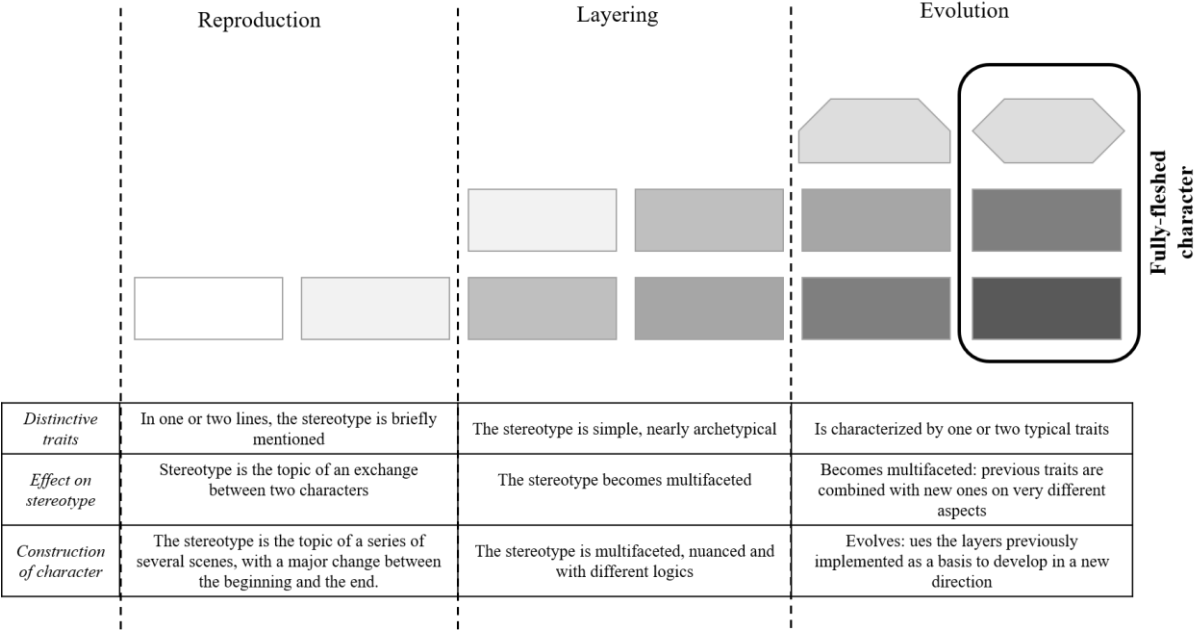


Figure 2 – Types of repetition constructing a character and their effect on stereotyping

Figure 2 highlights the hierarchy of the three types of repetition that maintain the character’s coherence throughout the show. Once the rules are clear, they can evolve. The three types of repetition gradually add complexity, nuance and plausibility to the character. Figure 3 shows the types of repetition by season, illustrating this argument. Reproduction provides the base for the character, and indeed, it is more present at the beginning of the show and then declines. In contrast, evolution, built on the two other types, increases over the seasons to peak in the last season. Layering, which acts as a step between the two, peaks by the middle of the show.

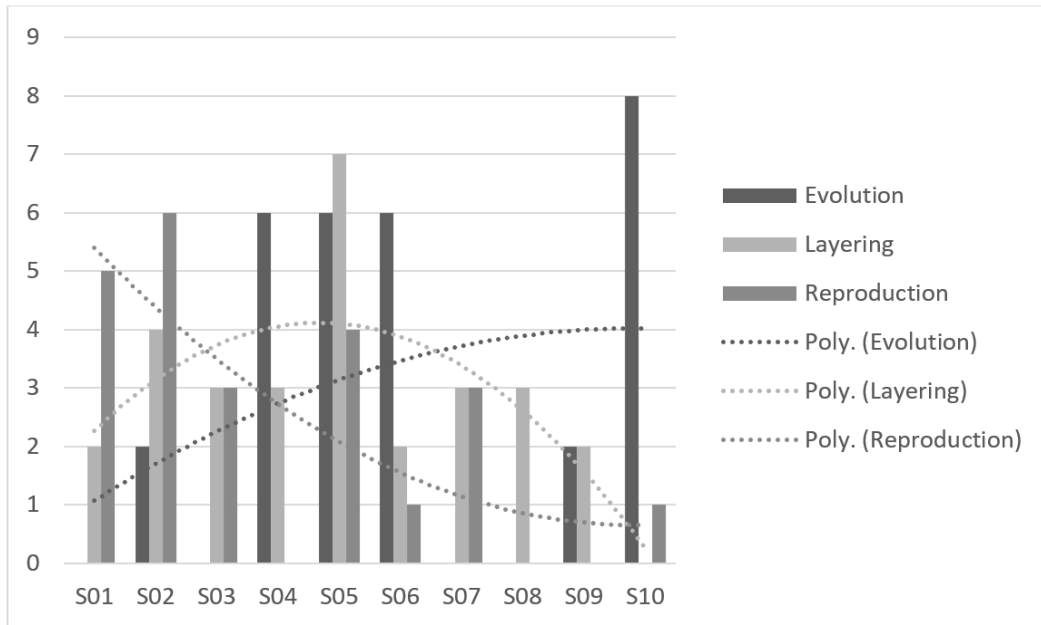


Figure 3 - Count of the types of repetition per season

Reproduction: the bones

Reproduction is found in brief scenes in which only one line refers to the prototypical trait. The line is often not even picked up by any other characters. An example is a scene from S01E07 where Phoebe is alone in Monica’s apartment, working on a new song.

PHOEBE (singing) : New York City has no power, and the milk is getting sour. But to me it is not scary, 'cause I stay away from dairy....
la la la, la la, la la...

This line is not useful to the plot. However, it solidifies the association between Phoebe’s vegetarianism and the ridicule of her song. Because of this briefness, the content of reproduction centres around one prototypical trait, such as being silly or ridiculous here, linked to the vegetarian stereotype. From the perspective of the stereotyping process, repeating a single trait creates a simplified image that can be passed on to the audience (Martin et al., 2014; Pechman & Knight, 2002). The character’s portrayal of the trait reinforces the stereotype because it is presented as factual and taken for granted rather than a matter for debate. In addition, using emotions and humour stalls questioning or condemning the trait as inappropriate or offensive.

Although sustainable behaviours are mentioned in scenes using reproduction, they are not the primary focus. For instance, in a scene from S01E9, Monica prepares Thanksgiving dinner for

the entire group. She spent the whole day cooking to prepare everyone's favourite Thanksgiving meal, and they all complained while she cooked. The conflict escalates, and the first person she blames by name is Phoebe, and her special meal for the outburst.

MONICA: Why? Because everything is my responsibility? Isn't it enough that I'm making Thanksgiving dinner for everyone? You know, everyone wants a different kind of potatoes, so I'm making different kinds of potatoes. Does anybody care what kind of potatoes I want? Nooooo, no, no! (starting to cry) Just as long as Phoebe gets her peas and onions, and Mario gets his tots, and it's my first Thanksgiving, and it's all burned, and, and I... I... (S01E9)

Phoebe did not demand her special meal, as opposed to Joey (nicknamed Mario here because of an ad in which he modelled), who is very demanding several times throughout the episode. Phoebe also helped Monica cook, unlike Joey, and suggested doing her special dish herself. Finally, in this scene, she is trying to calm the escalating conflict. Despite this, she is the first one pointed out by Monica as responsible for Monica's workload.

The vegetarian meal is not the main focus of the scene. Vegetarianism is implicit because Phoebe's vegetarianism is well-known, as she repeatedly mentions it out of the blue earlier in the season (S01E07 or S01E04, for instance). However, this scene associates this special (vegetarian) meal with another implied meaning that encapsulates the prototypical trait affixed to vegetarianism: deviance (De Groeve et al., 2021). Indeed, Monica's line puts on Phoebe and her special vegetarian dish the burden of the extra work she had. By this, she conveys the idea that vegetarian meals require extra effort because they are unconventional. She hints at vegetarianism as a nuisance because it deviates from the common or ordinary practice.

This is an example of a typical repetition of one prototypical trait of sustainable consumers: being annoying for being different. This attributed characteristic of sustainable consumers is found in different interactions in different episodes but, because it is repeated in different contexts and with different emotional appeals (Miller, 1982), it gets solidified as a central aspect of the sustainable consumers' stereotype. The recurring rhetorical questions, the constant repetition of the word 'No' and Monica's crying all convey her intense emotions of pain and anger for the burden she has to endure. As viewers, we feel empathy for, if not relate to, Monica's situation and find Phoebe annoying.

This specific trait of vegetarians as untraditional and requiring extra effort is reproduced in a subsequent scene (S01E12) with the same emotions and the same character. This episode is titled ‘The One with the Dozen Lasagnas’ because Monica cooks a dozen lasagne for her aunt, Syl, and does not know how to get rid of them. Monica set the tone with this opening line about lasagne.

Opening Credits

[Scene: Monica and Rachel’s, Monica is on the phone in the kitchen.]

MONICA: Aunt Syl, stop yelling! All I’m saying is that if you had told me vegetarian lasagna, I would have made vegetarian lasagna. (pauses, listens to the person on phone) Well, the meat’s only every third layer, maybe you could scrape.

The line is brief and reinforces the trait invoked in the previous scene: Monica hints that preparing a vegetarian meal requires additional effort and information because it is not a traditional meal. This is essentially a repetition of the previous statement but with a minor variation in wording. Reproduction can also imply more significant variations in the emotions used to convey the content. For example, consider the effort required for vegetarianism, as depicted in S02E13. In this scene, Chandler is about to tell Phoebe and Monica about his date with a girl named Susie.

CHANDLER: Hey, stick a fork in me, I am done.

PHOEBE: Stick a fork what?

CHANDLER: Like, when you’re cooking a steak.

PHOEBE: Oh, OK, I don’t eat meat.

CHANDLER: Well then, how do you know when vegetables are done?

PHOEBE: Well you know, you just, you eat them and you can tell.

CHANDLER: OK, then, eat me, I’m done.

In this scene, we meet Phoebe, a sustainable consumer, and Chandler, a regular consumer. The two have different reference systems owing to their dietary choices: Phoebe is a vegetarian, and Chandler eats meat. The scene revolves around Phoebe misunderstanding one of Chandler’s jokes, requiring him to go the extra mile to explain it and understand her perspective. Chandler’s final joke is not picked up by Phoebe. The underlying trait remains the same: dealing with a vegetarian requires more mental effort owing to different reference systems. However, here it

is not about cooking but about talking to a vegetarian. The scene emphasises the gap of common references between Chandler, the regular consumer, and Phoebe, the vegetarian, which makes her a greater outsider. The scene also takes a different tone but conveys the same idea as previously. An amusing tone is used here to point out deviance; this contrasts with the first scene shown here, where deviance was conveyed by Monica's expression of frustration and anger. The implied stereotype is reproduced in this content – the prototypical trait of deviance is the same – although the form slightly changes.

Layering: the flesh

Layering is a type of repetition that introduces a prototypical trait (e.g. deviance) through an interaction with other characters, whose reactions will create associations with new traits (e.g. esoteric). Layering assembles a multifaceted stereotype that seems more human-like to the audience because it echoes the multiple facets of human behaviours (Miller, 1982; Randers et al., 2020). This technique is often employed in extended scenes rather than reproduction, as it needs more text to associate a prototypical trait with other aspects. Finally, in scenes that use layering, stereotypical behaviour, specifically, sustainability, is the topic of interactions between two characters, unlike in reproduction, for which the stereotype is mentioned in passing. In S08E09, we see a stereotype confronted by other characters' reactions. In the scene, Phoebe's vegetarianism is the reason for changing the Thanksgiving menu. Joey's lines reflect his indignation, as Monica suggests to not cook a turkey for Thanksgiving.

MONICA: All right, okay, just so you know, I'm not gonna make a turkey this year.

JOEY: What?!

MONICA: Well Phoebe doesn't eat turkey...

JOEY: Phoebe!

PHOEBE: Turkeys are beautiful, intelligent animals!

JOEY: No they're not! They're ugly and stupid and delicious!

MONICA: All right! Okay, it's not just Phoebe. Will's still on a diet, Chandler doesn't eat Thanksgiving food, and Rachel's having her aversion to poultry.

The exclamation marks and the scandalised ‘What’ serve as a rhetorical question. The apostrophe to Phoebe conveys Joey’s feelings about transgressing an American tradition, which is based on the domination of humans over animals (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016). Vegetarianism – or veg*nism in general – questions this identity (Barboza & Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2022; Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016). A few lines later, Joey goes on to comparing Thanksgiving with the Fourth of July – the American National Day:

JOEY: But you gotta have turkey on Thanksgiving! I mean, Thanksgiving with no turkey is like-like Fourth of July with no apple pie! Or Friday with no two pizzas!

This scene repeats the trait of deviance associated with the stereotype of vegetarianism. Phoebe is presented not only as an animal lover/veg*n who takes the defence of turkeys but also as a betrayer of American culture. Instead of an allusion, it develops the stereotype with positive (animal care) and negative (anti-Americanism) traits but without being the scene’s core.

Similarly, in S02E09, Phoebe’s grandmother discloses the truth about her father. In this scene, Phoebe embodies the (controversial) hippie stereotype, but other dimensions get layered into this.

GRANDMOTHER: Alright, that is not your father, that’s just a picture of a guy in a frame.

PHOEBE: Oh God.

GRANDMOTHER: It was your mother’s idea. Ya know, she didn’t want you to know your real father because it hurt her so much when he left, and, I didn’t want to go along with it, but, well then she died and, and it was harder to argue with her. Not impossible, but harder.

PHOEBE: Alright, so, what, he’s not a famous tree surgeon? And then, I guess, OK, he doesn’t live in a hut in Burma where there’s no phones?

GRANDMOTHER: Last I heard, he was a pharmacist somewhere upstate.

PHOEBE: OK, that makes no sense. Why would the villagers worship a pharmacist?

GRANDMOTHER: Honey.

PHOEBE: [realizes] Oh.

First, the primary focus is on Phoebe's search for information about her (sad) family history. This adds an emotional layer to her, making her more than an embodied set of environmental convictions. This emotional bond also gives her a background to which one can relate and that audiences may interpret as a reason for her eccentricity. Second, although the main topic revolves around the revelation of the truth about her father, the scene also touches upon environmental issues, revealing the values that Phoebe grew up with. Her father is portrayed as a 'famous tree surgeon', an occupation that may not exist in reality but ironically symbolises his connection to nature. This aligns with Phoebe's character as a hippie and her love for the environment.

The issue of sustainability is often linked with other meanings, including esoteric beliefs. The grandmother's statement implies this – 'she died, and it was harder to argue with her. Not impossible but harder' – suggesting a possible attempt to argue with her deceased daughter. Similarly, Phoebe believed that her father was worshipped by the villagers, implying a connection to divine or alternative cults that are juxtaposed with his connection to nature. Esoteric beliefs are associated with marginalised identities (Zanette et al., 2023), and juxtaposing this meaning with environmentalism implies a connection between the two. This may reinforce the perception of the individual advocating for sustainability as, though caring, an odd, awkward person.

It is also suggested that sustainable behaviour is connected to marginality and frugality. Phoebe looks up to her father, who lives in a remote village in Burma, South Asia, and defends trees. Despite her father's lack of communication and living in a hut, Phoebe sees his lifestyle as an idealised hippie utopia. By embracing this identity, Phoebe blends esoterism and sustainability through her connection to nature (Zanette et al., 2023). In sum, the layering mechanism of this scene combines the eccentricity of the sustainable consumer with esoterism, marginalisation and isolation. Once these layers are associated, they can be *reproduced* later. For instance, Rachel will later say that Phoebe can throw 'her vegetarian, voodoo, goddess circle shower' (S07E06, line 417).

Another example of this layering is a scene from S08E8 wherein Rachel and Phoebe are having dinner with Rachel's dad, Dr Green. When he offers to order chicken, Phoebe mentions that she does not eat meat. He answers: 'I'll never understand you lesbians' (S08E8, line 80). The exchange on sustainable behaviour – vegetarianism – lasts only five lines. The connection made

by Dr Green between homosexuality and vegetarianism is based solely on the fact that they deviate from the norm. His remark reinforces the deviance: the opposition between the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ accentuates his will to distinguish himself as part of the dominant norm, as opposed to the ‘you lesbian’, which stands like a rebuff. This remark is intended as a joke, even if it now seems outdated for the newest audiences, as the stigma around LGBTQ+ has reduced (Eichert & Luedicke, 2022). Humour gives the audience the possibility to deny this insult. Finally, it combines the first deviant – being a sustainable consumer – with another one – being a lesbian – which reinforces both. Thus, this reaction reinforces deviance and extends its meaning by combining two stereotypes.

In sum, layering reinforces an already introduced trait. It extends its meaning by associating it with other prototypical traits or stereotypes, which come with its complete package of already grounded associations. With this mechanism of repetition, a sustainable consumer is more intricately portrayed. Layering adds depth, making the character more human-like, similar to a living, breathing person. Note that the added layers in this process are consistent with the internal rules of the character. This layering mechanism invariably adds substance without affecting the character’s internal consistency. It builds on a consistent, already grounded set of traits (here, the eccentricity of vegetarianism) and extends it. Yet, evolution impacts the character’s traits and internal rules, as we explore in the next section.

Evolution: the skin

Evolution is a combination of repetitions that results in the transformation of the stereotype. This process requires multiple scenes that are usually part of the same episode but also manifests throughout the series. Through evolution, the complexity of the stereotype is built. The critical factor is that the character must change between the beginning and the end of the scene or set of scenes. This evolution is possible only because the previous mechanism of repetitions has established a solid identity base of the character. Thus, through evolution, the character changes.

The plot of S06E11 revolves around Rachel purchasing new furniture for the apartment she shared with Phoebe and attempting to conceal from her roommate that she bought it from Pottery Barn, a large, mainstream retailing brand inserted in this episode as product placement. Phoebe apparently ‘hates all mass-produced stuff’ and ‘thinks her furniture should have a history, a story behind it’ (Monica, S06E11, line 92). Interestingly, the argument against mass

consumption is not about sustainability but about expressing individuality (Fuchs et al., 2015; Judge et al., 2020). Five scenes from this episode are relevant to our analysis, as they discuss the sustainable practice of buying second-hand (Farrant et al., 2010) and the anticipated moral reproach – when consumers feel judged by others’ consumption choices (Minson & Monin, 2012).

In the first scene, Monica, Rachel, Chandler and Joey discuss Rachel’s new furniture purchase. They caution her about Phoebe’s negative views on Pottery Barn. To avoid Phoebe’s criticism, Rachel fabricates a story about the furniture being an antique apothecary table. In the second scene, Rachel repeats this lie to Phoebe, claiming to have bought it for only \$1.50 at a flea market (SO6E11, line 204). The gap between Rachel’s and Phoebe’s reference systems is so evident that it is where the humour comes from (Yoon & Kim, 2016).

PHOEBE: Well, what period is it from?

RACHEL: Uh, it’s from yore. Like the days of yore. Y’know?

PHOEBE: Yes, yes I do. God, oh it’s just perfect! Wow! I bet it has a great story behind it too. Did they tell you anything? Like y’know where it was from or...

RACHEL: Yes! That I know, this is from White Plains.

PHOEBE: (gasps) White Plains. Oh, it sounds like such a magical place.

In this exchange, Phoebe asks specific questions about the furniture’s price or history; Rachel cannot respond because visiting flea markets and buying second-hand are not in her habits. Rachel’s answers are vague. She adjusts her answers to Phoebe’s reactions: Rachel says the furniture cost her \$500 and corrects herself after Phoebe’s reaction. The audience empathises and forgives Rachel’s lies, as they understand she is trying to avoid Phoebe’s moral reproach (Minson & Monin, 2012). Indeed, lying to or hiding a behaviour from close family or friends reflects a strategy of developing multiple identities to cope with the different reproaches that the different social circles could express (Randers et al., 2021).

Conversely, Phoebe’s reference system appears to be imprecise, dreamy and disconnected from the other characters. She accepts the period of ‘the days of yore’ despite its vagueness. She also fantasises when Rachel mentions the place of origin of the furniture, ‘White Plains’, which is one of the largest cities in New York suburbs. Rachel’s every answer seems to contribute to building Phoebe’s character: a ‘magical place’, from ‘the days of yore’ when apothecaries

would ‘make their potions’ (S06E11, line 182) out of ‘opium’ (S06E11, line 186). This sequence anchors both Rachel and Phoebe in their distinguished characters.

The third sequence is a combination of the two previous ones but takes place at Ross’s apartment (S06E11, lines 220–278). In the first part of the sequence, Rachel enters Ross’s apartment and discovers that he bought the same piece of furniture as her. She asks him to hide it before Phoebe arrives, repeating nearly the same line from Monica earlier: ‘she [Phoebe] says it’s all mass-produced, nothing is authentic, and everyone winds up having the same stuff’ (S06E11, line 246). She reproduces – and by doing so, reinforces – the argument of Phoebe being a weird do-gooder. Ross replies that Phoebe is ‘weird’ because she hates Pottery Barn (S06E11, line 256), anchoring the regular view of sustainable consumers as deviant.

In the second part of the sequence, as Phoebe arrives, she notices the sheets covering the furniture. Rachel hastily responds that they are again from a flea market, but in reality, they are from Pottery Barn. However, Phoebe reacts differently from the first time:

RACHEL: He got it at a flea market!

PHOEBE: You bought your sheets at a flea market? Ross come on, you gotta loosen the purse strings a little.

Despite being a sustainable character, she perpetuates the stereotype that associates certain second-hand products – here sheets – with poverty or stinginess, leading her to look down on Ross. She establishes boundaries for acceptable, sustainable behaviour, beyond which it becomes undesirable and even pitiful.

The fourth sequence reproduces what happens with the apothecary table following an accumulation distinctive of comedy. Rachel and Phoebe’s apartment is full of new pieces from Pottery Barn, about which Rachel has lied to Phoebe off-screen. They comment about all the furniture to Ross as being an ‘early colonial bird cage’ (S06E11, line 436) or ‘a room separating apparatus from Colonial times’ (S06E11, line 442). Rachel invents three historical periods to convince Phoebe: colonial times, yore and yesteryear. Phoebe still does not notice and is caught in her wonder; she is full of exclamations and superlatives: ‘another amazing find’ (line 440), ‘great story’ (line 440) and ‘Rachel has such a great eye’ (line 450). Building on this accumulation, the sequence ends with Ross suggesting that Rachel take Phoebe to the so-called flea market. This line prepares the following sequence, where Phoebe and Rachel will both behave out of character.

In the final scene, Rachel and Phoebe return from the flea market. Rachel, who used to be a shopaholic at Pottery Barn, now guides Phoebe through the market. She is – temporarily – using the sustainable consumer identity. Phoebe, on the contrary, borrows the regular consumer identity of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, as they pass Pottery Barn, Rachel confesses to her past lies. Despite this, Phoebe is tempted by the products. To avoid compromising her values, she creates a (fake) moral dilemma about buying a lamp (Randers et al., 2021).

PHOEBE: No-no-no, but I am mad! I am mad! Because this stuff is everything that is wrong with the world! And it's all sitting up in my living room and all I can think about is how I don't have that lamp!

RACHEL: Well then honey, buy the lamp! Hey, we have that 60 bucks from Ross.

PHOEBE: I can't! I can't! Unless... Well are you saying that-that you would move out if-if I didn't buy that lamp?

RACHEL: What?! No! I'm not gonna move out!

PHOEBE: But are you saying that you would move out if I didn't buy that lamp?

RACHEL: (gets it) Oh. Yes! I would so move out!

PHOEBE: Okay then I don't have a choice! I have to buy that lamp!

RACHEL: That's right!

By the end of the series of sequences, Phoebe has converted from the anti-consumerist sustainable character to a character consumed by the desire to buy at a mass-produced brand. This evolution enables the series to add nuance to the character: Is she a hypocritical sustainable consumer (Minson & Monin, 2012), is she just a sustainable consumer with a moral dilemma and moral identity crisis to solve (Randers et al., 2021), or has she turned into a more consensual character by the capitalistic dominant ideology (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016)?

The mechanism of evolution can be found throughout the series. The evolution of sustainability issues through the seasons supports the logic. As the series goes on, environmental issues progressively disappear. Figure 4 shows the decrease in the number of sustainability occurrences per season, indicating that once Phoebe's prototypical traits are consolidated, she can be nuanced and adapted.

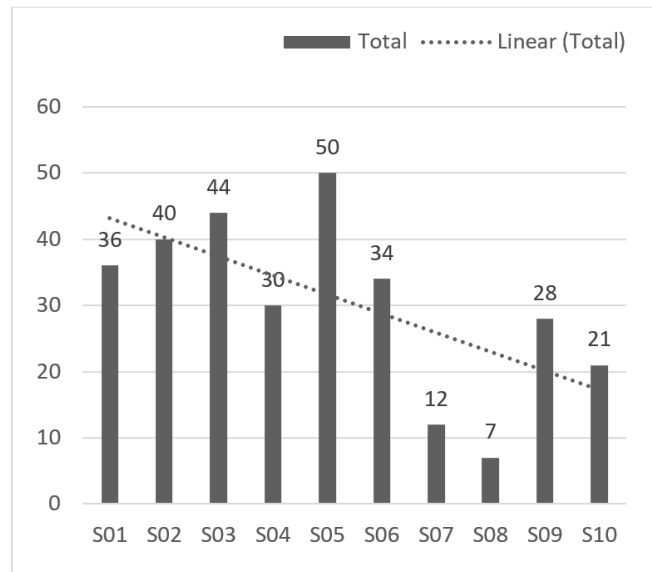


Figure 4 – Occurrence of sustainability-related words per season

Although several previous scenes have shown her expressing more consumerist, regular behaviours – dreams of ‘piloting a commercial jet’ (S05E11, line 100), ‘love the casino’ (S05E23, line 354), being the first to want a ride in Ross’s new sports car (S07E14, line 114) and even eating meat (S09E07, lines 349–353; S04E16, line 32; S04E16, line 346) – these peak at final season. In the last season, the only occurrence of sustainability issues can be found in Phoebe’s wedding preparations (S10E07). Initially, she wants to donate the entire wedding budget to charity, aligning with her values (‘It does seem like this money could be put to better use’) (S10E07, line 37). She, with her fiancé, makes the donation. Later, she confesses that she wants a lavish wedding for herself. The script specifies a stage direction of her covering her mouth while saying it, as if she is ashamed of this desire that goes against her beliefs. After that, she returns to the charity to retrieve the check (S10E07):

CHARITY GUY: So you’re asking us to refund your donation to the children?

MIKE: Yeah! This feels really good.

PHOEBE: I am sorry. I am, but this wedding is just really important to me.

CHARITY GUY: Hey, it’s not my business, (he takes their check from a drawer) besides it’s probably a good thing. We really would have been spoiling the children, all those food, and warm clothing...

PHOEBE: Hey, that's not fair! A person's wedding is important! And especially to me! Ok? I didn't have a graduation party! And I didn't go to Prom. And I spent my sweet sixteen being chased round a tire yard by an escaped mental patient who in his own words wanted to 'kill me' or whatever. So I deserve a real celebration and I am not gonna let some sweaty little man make me feel badly about it. (She storms out)

This scene progressively reveals Phoebe's true spirit. She starts with an apology but quickly gets angry. The pronoun 'I' appears five times in her last line, unlike the 'we' pronoun used in the Charity Guy's line. When she tells her fiancé about the incident later (S10E07, lines 434–452), she even suggests that she could have used violence to retrieve the money: 'And if that guy at the charity gives us a hard time, my friend hasn't shot anyone in a really long time' (S10E07, lines 434–452). Situated at the end of the series, this wedding episode shows the final evolution of the sustainable character whose sustainable identity is neutralised.

Discussion

Studies on the impact of media on representation have mostly explored the reception of TV series, focusing on the emotional connection between audiences and fictional characters (Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Thakar et al., 2010; van Laer et al., 2014) but leaving aside the construction of characters in the analysis of their effects. Our study offers a distinct perspective by examining the structure of texts in fictional products and focusing on repetition mechanisms that both enable the construction of a fully fleshed character and portray stereotypical representations. Through this approach, we draw a parallel between the role of repetition in the process of stereotyping, as found in psychological studies (Fiske, 1998; Martin et al., 2014; 2017), and the use of repetition in constructing characters, as supported by literary tradition (Miller, 1982).

We also identify three types of repetition – reproduction, layering and evolution – that interconnect and build upon each other to create a fully fleshed character from a collection of prototypical traits and give it life by making it evolve. The hierarchy of these types of repetition is crucial to maintaining character coherence and gradually adding complexity to the character, as shown in Figure 2. The chronological repartition of each type supports our claim of a hierarchical, progressive organisation of the types, as shown in Figure 3.

Through reproduction, Phoebe is represented as eccentric and is associated with sustainable/vegetarian stereotypes. Layering adds more meanings to these traits, associating the

sustainable/vegetarian stereotype with other traits such as naivete or even anti-Americanism. Finally, evolution transforms her into a more consensual character. Through Phoebe, all these traits repeat and reinforce the idea of the sustainable consumer as a deviant or abnormal individual. Interestingly, Phoebe is also the main character with the least number of lines (Porter et al., 2023). Although she progressively gains the protagonism of sustainability-related occurrences throughout the seasons, by the show's end, Phoebe progressively loses these deviant traits as the script makes her *evolve* into a more consensual character, closer to the regular consumer, who wants world peace, yes, but also bigger boobs.

Academic contributions

This work offers a new perspective on TV series. Most past studies on TV series have focused on audiences and reception (Jones et al., 2018; Pechmann & Shih, 1999; Pradhan & Drake, 2023; Russell et al., 2019; Stern et al., 2007; Takhar et al., 2010). They examined the mechanisms that fiction triggered but not how mechanisms unfold in fiction. By adopting an approach from the literary tradition, our study draws attention to the text as an object of 'industrial art' (Stern et al., 2007, pp. 9–10) that deserves to be analysed from this perspective. As an art, series both draw from and reinforce cultural schemes such as stereotypes. Our study shows the potential of fiction to contribute to the study of public discourses and contributes to promoting fiction in academic work, as fiction is still an under-researched but promising object to study public discourse.

In particular, our work aligns with and extends the work of Russell and Stern (2006). By combining literary analysis and literature on stereotypes, we provide an understanding of the mechanisms that precede the bond between the character and the audience (Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Paterson et al., 2013; Takhar et al., 2010). We encourage further studies to approach the repetition mechanisms detailed here from the perspective of audiences' reception.

Our study also supports previous research on stereotypes and offers a new perspective on it. First, it supports two major tenets from previous research: the use of stereotypes as a categorisation tool (Fan et al., 2020; Fiske, 1998; Valor et al., 2021) and the malleability of stereotypes (Angles et al., 2016; Blank et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2017; Valor et al., 2021). Stereotypes are drawn upon to develop Phoebe's character, making her stand out as a deviant character. The mechanisms identified in this study could also explain the malleability of

stereotypes: through repetitions and especially layering, disparate meanings get associated with a social category.

The study also suggests that the evolution mechanisms at work in serial fiction can be one of the sources of the paradoxical stereotypes of sustainable consumers. The evolution mechanisms in fiction may explain the ambivalence found in social representations because they enable the development of contradictory prototypical traits attached to the sustainable consumer. Future research can consider this claim for exploring the reception of such contradiction by audiences. In particular, for neo-cult series, research can consider whether characters similarly influence old and new audiences.

Finally, our study can inspire new perspectives on our understanding of narrative transportation (van Laer et al., 2014) and cultivation (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Gerbner et al., 1978; Green & Brock, 2000) by showing how certain textual structures may favour such processes. Previous work on narrative transportation has claimed that the character is the entry point for the process to operate (van Laer et al., 2014). Our findings support Miller's claim that repetitions in narrative structure could facilitate the audience's immersion (Miller, 1982). Moreover, considering that literary analysis has proven useful in investigating the gradual development of a character with whom the audience can empathise (Napoli & Ouschan, 2019; Thakar et al., 2010; van Laer et al., 2014), we possibly gain a deeper understanding of how empathy with characters could be established, which is a crucial aspect of narrative transportation. We suggest that future research use literary analysis tools to explore how the second criterion of narrative transportation – a plot that stimulates the audience's imagination (van Laer et al., 2014) – is created in various media forms.

Managerial and societal contributions

Our study has several interesting implications for marketers and policymakers. First, it showed that repetitions (reproduction in particular) are useful to establish and consolidate certain prototypical traits of stereotypes; therefore, marketers and policymakers could use reproduction in advertising pieces or online content campaigns to consolidate positive traits connected to socially desirable stereotypes. However, practitioners should also be aware of the effects of stereotypes, especially in comedic contexts. Our findings demonstrate stereotypes' potential for generating performative effects, showing how repetitions can reinforce stereotypes. Hence, we

urge professionals to be vigilant about repetitions in humoristic communications and to use them wisely. Stereotypes, even when perceived as harmless and funny, can have unexpected consequences, such as stalling the sustainability transition by associating sustainability with negative traits. In sum, managers, marketers and policymakers should consider the ethical concerns raised by the use of stereotypes for comedy.

Our study also showed that stereotypes can evolve and gain complexity through layering and evolution. This study makes significant contributions about using repetition as a tool to build consistent storytelling, and the findings can consequently inform advertising campaigns such as serial advertisements that are likely to use similar communication strategies. Marketers and policymakers could conceive storytelling-based campaigns that allow for the development of characters – perhaps positively influencing consumer behaviours. In 2005, the French government created a serial advertising campaign starring Sam, a fictional character who embodies the designated driver, who would not drink during a night out and drive friends home. The character was appreciated, leading to the campaign's success among the target population, mainly young people (Frenette et al., 2016). The government used this character for several years in road safety campaigns, and the name Sam entered the common language to designate the person who would not drink. Similarly, through several repetitive campaigns that reinforced the image of the Barbie Doll as representative of the professional woman, Mattel tried to turn Barbie into a positive, inspiring feminist figure (*Where My Girls At?*, 2021). This attempt culminated with the (controversial) anti-patriarchal, though still commercial, tale told in the Greta Gerwig's iconic *Barbie* movie, which, from a branding perspective, is considerably successful in dealing with the contradictions inherent to Barbie's prototypical traits. The movie is an evolution of the dolls and YouTube campaigns. Professionals can thus extend the use of repetitions, applying it through multiple forms of media, to implement new representations for an external audience, such as consumers about a brand, or an internal audience, such as employees about a company's strong common identity. Managers can use the different types of repetitions to develop strong identities in their communication campaigns.

Because repetitions enable stereotypes' evolution, this research also opens avenues for developing new destigmatisation strategies for stereotyped groups in media and fiction, such as religious and cultural minorities, the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities (Södergren et al., 2023). Using strong characters with whom an audience can connect appears to be an effective strategy for destigmatisation, especially through the serial narrative. *Ru Paul* is a serial reality show with a repetitive structure and strong main characters, who participate in

the normalisation of the queer community through their strategy. In *Ru Paul*, the repetitions progressively normalise the spectacle of a stigmatised practice of drag shows by creating a new social reality around it (Campana et al., 2022). It uses repetition to transform the stigma and make it the core of the show's commercial strategy. The identification of discourse strategies in this study can prove useful for developing similar destigmatisation strategies for campaigns or fiction (Södergren et al., 2023). If repetitions are employed for character construction, can they be arranged so that they undo a stereotypical image? Could Phoebe be shown as smart and socially accepted in some episodes without compromising her sustainable identity?

Limitations and areas for further research

Some limitations of our study should be acknowledged. First, although *Friends* is a top-rated show, it was produced in a period when certain modern consumption trends, such as binge-watching, did not yet exist. Yet, the audience response may be affected by binge-watching practice (Canavan, 2023). Hence, binge-watching should also be considered as a method for future research. Furthermore, *Friends* is a sitcom and, therefore, needs to respect the structure and constraints of this genre. Future research can explore the differences in textual mechanisms between series belonging to different genres. Another limitation of our study is that it only considers the text and not its reception. Further studies are needed to investigate the reception of the text by the audience in terms of its effects – do the mechanisms influence audiences as expected? – or in terms of its content – does the audience establish a critical distance from the presented stereotypes owing to the age of the show? The literature on media effects has shown that the critical mind of the audience should not be neglected (Oliver et al., 2019). Finally, and in line with the previous limitation, although we can hint at the potential effects of narrative transportation, establishing them demands a different methodological approach.

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