

Television viewers shun mobile devices when watching favourite shows

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Television viewers are turning their noses up at using mobile devices to enhance their favourite programmes, according to research carried out at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol).

A study of viewing habits was conducted to measure audience appetite for interacting with 'second screens' - smart phones or tablet computers - while watching TV shows.

Media and cultural studies lecturer Sherryl Wilson said her research

found viewers were often not interested in engaging with [social media](#) or TV show companion apps, particularly when enjoying their favourite drama programmes. She said the 'surprising' findings cast doubt on the technology industry's belief that viewers were increasingly eager to enrich their viewing experience by interacting with [mobile devices](#).

Participants in the study snubbed their second screens entirely if engrossed in shows such as American horror drama series *The Walking Dead*, only reaching for their mobile devices when viewing quiz shows and reality TV programmes.

Dr Wilson said: "There is lots of industry excitement about the use of second screens alongside TV programmes and lots of innovation happening. Broadcasters and programme makers see second screens as a way of capturing an increasingly difficult to get hold of commodity – attention, and monetising it. But the industry is living in great expectation rather than looking at what the reality is.

"In our study, if a participant was watching *The Walking Dead* or a drama they were immersed in, they would switch off their screens because they don't want to be distracted by them. This wasn't something we were expecting. They were most likely to go to a second screen when watching shows that are already quite social, like quiz shows, game shows and reality TV shows.

"There are some amazing apps out there, including one for *The Walking Dead* in which you can guess the number of zombies that have been killed, but the sample in my study were not interested in things like that."

There has been a rise in the number of people using mobile devices while watching television in recent years, with a growing percentage of comments or posts on social networks being made about content as it is being viewed. The phenomenon has seen the audience engaging in

multiple ways including polling, chatting and accessing background information about shows being broadcast. A recent report from Accenture suggested 87 per cent of people now use a second screen while watching TV.

For her pilot study, Dr Wilson surveyed teenagers, students, families and pensioners in Bristol who had all previously used second screens to access complementary content while viewing television. She asked them how they used their second screens and whether the mobile devices enhanced or diminished their viewing experience.

She believes the findings revealed a 'complete lack' of understanding from technology companies about audience viewing behaviour.

Dr Wilson, programme manager for media culture and practise at UWE Bristol, said: "There is a long history of qualitative audience research about television viewing, focussing on how people interact with what's on and what debates the shows trigger. What I found coheres with what previous researchers have found - not what the industry says is happening.

"There are claims by [technology companies](#) and start-ups that social media is making TV social again, like it never was social or has stopped being social.

"Industry doesn't understand TV audiences - it makes assumptions about them. It thinks TV is laid back and passive, and that new media and digital technology is leaning forward and active. But this isn't true because there is no single way of watching television. The industry doesn't recognise the different ways of [watching television](#) and the pleasures that come from them."

More information: S. Wilson. In the Living Room: Second Screens

and TV Audiences, *Television & New Media* (2015). DOI: [10.1177/1527476415593348](https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415593348)

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