

An exploration of binge-watching

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Abstract

Binge-watching video streaming services is on the rise, especially for college students whose demographic makeup 24% of Netflix users (Iqbal, 2019). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the binge-watching of video streaming services and college student behavior. Participants noted that binge-watching video streaming had an impact on their day-to-day activities and perceived behaviors, differing on exactly how much time spent consuming video streaming should be considered binge-watching.

Keywords

Netflix • Employees • Binge-watching • Bingeing

Introduction

Since the beginning of Netflix's video streaming service in 2007, individuals have had access to a variety of movies and television shows. Prior to COVID-19, these forms of media have brought various forms of entertainment to the homes of 60.1 million subscribers in the United States (Smith, 2019). In the first quarter of 2020 and during the disarray created by COVID-19, almost 16 million people subscribed to Netflix, setting a company record, with 2.3 million new subscribers from North America. With almost 183 million subscribers, Netflix has emerged as a global entertainment juggernaut (Lee, 2020).

In a 2017 survey of US college students, only 8% of respondents said that they did not have access to a Netflix account that they used with 37% of the 92% of respondents with Netflix accounts reported watching it every day (McAlone, 2017). From this wave of streaming came the idea of binge-watching. This new way of watching television shows has caused people to watch episode after episode, hour after hour, instead of needing to wait until next week's episode aired on a network channel like they would previously. According to McAlone (2016), Netflix has created an elite category of binge-watcher. With the number of hours being spent each day binge-watching, time is being taken away from other activities in their lives and could also be affecting their behavior.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the effects of binge-watching on college students' behavior. This study

was designed to answer the following question, "Does binge-watching Netflix have effects on college students' behavior in their day-to-day lives?" The researchers used Uses and Gratification Theory as a lens through which to view the research question. This is an audience-centered approach which focuses on what individuals do with media, not what media. This theory explores why people use the media and what it is that they use it for (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2016).

Literature Review

Television consumption has reached a growing amount in recent years with the introduction of streaming services. Rather than staying up late to watch or recording your favorite episodes, Netflix allows for full seasons to be consumed consecutively and without break. According to Marsh, Ferrao and Anuseviciute (2014), 63% of U.S. TV viewers are binge-viewers, but only 30% self-identified as 'binge-viewers'. They reported that most of the binge-watching occurs at home through a video streaming service or broadcast/cable TV. As far as behavior goes, 7 in 10 binge-viewers do not feel guilty after binge-watching and do not wish to stop binge-watching, although they recognize the negative side effects of binge-watching and that it has displaced certain activities in their lives.

As of 2019 and prior to COVID-19, Netflix had 151.56 million subscribers with 60.1 million in the U.S. 23% of U.S. adults stream Netflix daily. The average amount of video consumed on Netflix per week was about 1 billion hours, or 70% of Netflix users binge-watching shows. 37% of Netflix U.S. subscribers that binge-watched content at work. The average amount of Netflix content that was

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watched per day in the U.S. is 1.8 hours per day. 79% of U.S. millennials use Netflix.

As COVID-19 struck and stay-at-home orders rose, many Americans turned to video streaming services to pass the time, with use rising and peaking March 23, 2020. While Nielsen research noted that staying at home can result in an approximate 60% or more increase in consumption of video streaming, video streaming trends varied at the start of the stay-at-home order. States that were the first to issue mid-March stay-at-home orders saw large increases in video streaming. Nielsen noted that the largest increases in video streaming occurred between the hours of 1:00 and 4:00 PM (50% increase), hours during which adults are typically not home. Men and women ages 2-17 and 25-54 saw almost 60% increases in video streaming during this period (Streaming Consumption Rises in U.S. Markets with Early Stay-at-Home Orders During COVID-19, 2020).

Marsh, Ferrao and Anuseviciute (2014) define binge-watching as watching three or more episodes of the same TV show in one sitting. In a national online survey conducted among adults eighteen and older, respondents spent 5 or more hours a week watching television content on varying devices with almost 75% noting they were binge-watchers. This resulted in researchers making the assumption that 63% of U.S. TV viewers binge-watch, but only 30% self-identify as so (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014). Binge-viewers were more likely to be female (67%) than male (59%). Millennials were the generation that binge-views the most at 80%. While Gen Xers make up 68% of binge-viewers and Boomers 49% (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014). Panda and Pandery (2017) found that 63% of the population that streams content online does not have children. Consumers aged 18-29 are most likely to be the ones that are binge-watching. College students form a significant portion of the population that is binge-watching. Nine of ten college students are using Netflix on a regular basis and are binge-watching television shows (Panda & Pandey, 2017). When respondents were informed that they were binge-viewers, 51% stated that they enjoyed watching content this way and 55% said they will continue to binge-view as more television content is created. 1 in 2 binge-viewers will still watch TV shows in real-time once they finish catching up through bingeing on all of the episodes (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014). Most respondents felt no guilt about their binge-watching habits. 7 in 10 binge-viewers reported not feeling guilt after binge-watching and did not wish to stop their behavior. Male respondents were more likely than the females to admit that binge-watching has deprived them of sleep (30%), that they don't admit to being a binge-viewer (28%), they wish they could stop, but can't (21%), binge-watching has negatively impacted their relationships with others (21%) and that they feel guilty after binge-watching (19%) (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014). Men were also more likely to recognize how binge-watching effected other behaviors in their everyday lives. Some of the activities that were displaced in their life were reading (22%), sleeping (19%), outdoor activities (15%), watching TV in real-time (15%), exercising/sports (14%), listening to music (13%), hobbies (12%), going to the movies (12%), studying (11%), time with friends and family (10%), working (10%) and eating (10%). 57% of women believed that binge-watching impacted the time they spent on other areas in their lives, compared to males 47% (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

According to Panda and Pandey (2017), binge-watching has advantages as well as disadvantages for viewers. Studies have shown that binge-watching could affect one's well-being because it tends to be an addictive activity. This could lead to isolation, loneliness, and lethargy, which on a larger scale could lead to depression and obesity. Others have argued that it could be simply a form of entertainment that satisfies the needs of consumers and could help one relax and have more of a positive outlook on life. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi examined the addictive properties of television compared to substance dependency. They used electroencephalogram studies on individuals as they watched television. The results of these studies were that people were relaxed, passive and exhibited little mental stimulation while watching television. This relaxed feeling would turn into stress once the viewing session was over. To avoid this feeling, individuals would continue to watch more episodes to avoid any stress (Panda & Pandey, 2017). These results may suggest men were also more invested in their binge-watching experience. 45% spent more time watching TV shows than they used to (34% female. 44% discover new shows through streaming services and start watching the newest episodes when they come on television (37% female). 32% of males wait until the full season of a TV show is available to them before they start watching it (23% female). 32% would pay more money if it meant they would have immediate access to the full season of a TV show (24% female). 34% schedule binge-watching ahead of time (22% female) (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

Both men and women binge-view for the same reasons, but women do it at a greater extent. Some of the reasons include: to catch up on missed episodes and stay up-to-date with what's on TV (46% vs. males 32%), the inability to resist watching another episode of a show they enjoy (41% vs. males 32%), the ability to control when and how they watch TV shows (38% vs. males 28%), being bored and having spare time (37% vs. males 27%), it is the only way that they are able to keep up on what is going on in television (31% vs. males 27%). Women are also binge-watching for instant gratification. 28% reported binge-watching so that they do not have to wait to see what happens in a show (16% males). 25% of females reported getting addicted after the first episode (19% males) (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

College students are motivated to binge watch because of opportunities for social engagement, escape from reality, easy accessibility of TV content and advertising. Students are motivated to spend time binge-watching to be able to engage in conversations with other people in their lives to avoid feeling "left out". Students also are looking to escape reality through binge-watching. Leaving their worries of their studies, peer pressure, uncertainty of the future and job prospects to engage into a different world (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Binge-watching is an activity that most respondents admitted to doing multiple times a week. Two in 3 stated that they binge-viewed at least once a week. 11% said they did it every day, 29% said they did multiple times a week and 22% said they did once a week. Most bingeing took place during the evening. 58% binge-viewed in the evening during a weekday while 60% did so in the evening on a

weekend. Females (46%) were more likely to binge-view evenly throughout the year than males (38%) (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

The more that college students binge watch, the higher the chance is that they will spend more time of their lives doing so. As students become more dependent on binge-watching to escape, they will gradually begin to lack other ways of coping with emotions – like alcohol addiction. As individuals rely more on binge-watching to cope with reality, there is a further decrease in adaptive coping and an increased dependence that will satisfy ones' gratifications. When students are feeling anxious or nervous after spending a certain amount of time binge-watching, their tendency to continue to binge-watch will continue (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Although binge-watching in moderation is good for social engagement, binge-watching to escape reality holds the possibility for students to get addicted to it. This behavior is enabled by the technological advances that are allowing television shows across multiple platforms so easily accessible. The results of their findings concludes that while students are motivated to spend more time satisfying their gratifications, there is still a danger that exists when it comes to getting addicted, especially if there are negative gratifications at the end of a binge-watching session (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Binge-watching is done 98% of the time at home alone (67%) or with a significant other (38%). This occurs via streaming services (50%), broadcast/cable TV (43%) or DVR (31%). Males were more likely than females to use broadcast/cable TV to binge-view. When it comes to streaming services, Netflix was used the most at 37%, HBO Go and Showtime at 17% Hulu at 11% and Amazon Instant Video at 9%. The most common device used to binge-view was the television (54%, followed by a computer of laptop (27%) and finally DVR (23%)(Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

When broken down by generation, streaming services are used most by millennials (54%). 36% of Gen Xers used streaming services and 46% of Boomers did as well. Broadcast/cable TV and DVR were both the least popular ways to binge-view across all of the generations (Marsh, Ferrao, & Anuseviciute, 2014).

Research and Data Collection

This phenomenological qualitative study explored on participants' binge-watching habits and its perceived effect on their daily lives. Phenomenological studies generally focus on respondent experiences, so the researchers decided to use an interview-based method to gather information regarding participants' experiences with binge-watching Netflix. This approach allowed the researchers to gain a variety of perspectives and attitudes regarding the perceptions and effects of binge-watching. The researchers collected information from 25 random participants at King's College and abstained from collecting information that identified the subjects. The researchers randomly approached individuals to participate, seeking their consent. If they denied consent, they were politely excused. If the participants agreed to answer the questions, it constituted as consent.

Participants completed the interview that consisted of 3 to 5 questions related to the research topic. The questions were mostly

open-ended which allowed the conversation to continue beyond the predetermined questions. The questions were as follows

Results

Most of the participants had access to a Netflix account and watched it on a daily or weekly basis. Respondents noted that they utilized Netflix 3-4 times a week, with a varying number of hours spent watching. There was no consensus among respondents regarding the number of hours spent watching Netflix that would constitute binge-watching. Some respondents indicated that consuming Netflix for two hours a day is binge-watching while others suggested that three or more hours is binge-watching. Most participants believed that binge-watching could be defined as watching consecutively for four or more hours a day. Most respondents reported similar experiences and behavior patterns while binge-watching and reported that other activities in their day-to-day lives were negatively affected. They reported that they lacked the motivation to engage in and complete the most basic of day-to-day activities. All respondents noted that binge-watching affected their motivation to do College course work, go to work (employment), engage in good hygiene and healthy diet, or participate in exercise and physical fitness activities. Participants reported a feeling of isolation, failing to congregate with family or friends face-to-face or virtually, and felt detached from the world, regardless of the type of content they were consuming on Netflix. While reflecting on these experiences and behaviors, respondents indicated that they were aware of that they were engaging in behaviors and experiences that were negative, but they indicated that they were willing to risk such negativity to meet their binge-watching needs. More than one respondent indicated that they were "trapped" by Netflix, as one program ends another immediately begins. Several respondents reported that the Netflix "trap" kept them up late at night and largely contributed to a lack of sleep and rest.

The participants who reported that they did not subscribe to Netflix reported that they had utilized the service but ceased using it due to a disinterest in the content available on the platform. Some indicated that they switched to Hulu as a less expensive alternative. Other respondents noted that they switched to other web streaming services, including Disney+, Direct TV, ESPN, and Amazon Prime.

Conclusion

As noted by the researchers there was no consensus among respondents regarding the number of hours spent watching Netflix that would constitute binge-watching, although most participants believed that binge-watching could be defined as watching consecutively for four or more hours a day. It may be possible that traditional College students have constructed a worldview of video streaming in which time and its passing are irrelevant, and that meeting their particular use and or gratification for consuming video streaming services is the highest priority, regardless of how long it takes to meet those needs. It may be possible that the binge-watching of video streaming services become a norm for traditional College students, and this concept is worth further exploration.

Respondents were quite aware that there were negative consequences to their binge-watching habits. A general lack of

motivation to engage in social and day-to-day activities was prominently reported. It appeared that at times Netflix had a paralyzing effect on the respondents. The researchers noted that respondents reported that they were aware that such lack of motivation and general lack of performance could have a detrimental effect on grades, health and wellbeing, employment status, and personal brand, but they refused to cease binge-watching activities. The potential for Netflix to create such an effect is worth further study. Expanding to include perceptions of other video streaming platforms in a future study, such as Hulu, could offer a better insight on the relationship between binge-watching and perceived changes in behavior. In addition, it may be useful to review the social behaviors and participation habits of traditional College students prior to Netflix. This information may further illuminate the concept of social isolation that may be associated with Netflix.

Netflix is designed to keep people watching. It meets the uses and gratifications of viewers, as noted in the research, and (regarding its structure) as one program ends another begins, therefore respondents noted that this kept them watching. Respondents welcomed this format even if they were aware that it led to a feeling of social isolation. The researchers found that it is content that fuels the fire of Netflix, and that once there was no longer content of interest on Netflix, respondents stopped watching. Some indicated that they switched to Hulu, Disney+, Direct TV, ESPN, and Amazon Prime.

To maintain its position of leadership in video streaming, Netflix needs to continue to produce content that captivates. Of equal importance is that the firm's subscription fee structure is perceived to be reasonable by its customers. A few respondents reported that they switched from Netflix to Hulu due to rising costs of Netflix' subscriptions, and so this may be of a concern for the firm (during and following the pandemic), perhaps as a prompt to Netflix to carefully continue to review its fee structure on an ongoing basis.

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic offered a new glimpse into the world of binge-watching video streaming services. Nielson (2020)

reported that Americans flocked to streaming services to pass the time during the stay-at-home order, with the largest increases in video streaming occurred between the hours of 1:00 and 4:00 PM (50% increase), hours during which adults are typically not home. This increase in midday video streaming may suggest a decrease in workplace productivity, and the researchers found that this would be worth of research. Nielsen also reported that while there was a small uptick in video streaming among traditional College students, it was men and women ages 2-17 and 25-54 who saw almost 60% increases in video streaming during this period (Streaming Consumption Rises In U.S. Markets with Early Stay-at-Home Orders During COVID-19, 2020). Further research should be conducted on other streaming platforms and different age groups to further explore the effects of binge-watching and related, perceived behaviors.

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