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Binge-Watching Audience Typologies: Conclusion

Lisa Perks, Emil Steiner, Ri Pierce-Grove and Lothar Mikos

Binge-watching was a relatively obscure phenomenon before 2012. Although practised and discussed in niche circles since before the advent of DVDs, it was not until streaming services and broadband internet became more and more ubiquitous that binge-watching received increased media and academic attention. Between 2015 and 2020, researchers have asked many questions about binge-watchers, including why they watch, what motivates them, how engaged they are (or not), and what outcomes they report after the binge-watching experience.

Scholars exploring these questions have found a range of motives, a variety of experiences, a spectrum of engagement, and positively and negatively valenced binge-watching outcomes – some of which are dependent on one another. Why a person binge-watches is strongly tied to what they hope to get out of the experience. What they actually get out of it is tied to what they watch and how they watch it (Castro et al. 2021; Steiner 2017). Our audience part of this book has uncovered additional patterns and structures of binge-watching. To round off the part, we use this chapter to describe audience typologies that shed some light on the why, where, when, with whom, how, and to what end of binge-watching.

MOTIVES

Steiner and Xu (2020) found the following binge-watching motives: ‘catching up, relaxation, sense of completion, cultural inclusion, and improved viewing experience’ (90). These aligned with finding by Perks (2015), Pittman and Sheehan (2015), and later Panda and Pandey (2017). While some motives, such

as relaxation and cultural inclusion, are similar to those of traditional television, others, such as *sense of completion* and *improved viewing experience*, result from the technological affordances of streaming video and high-speed internet. Central to these motives is the issue of control as a motivator, in the sense of using technology to control the viewing experience – catching up, sense of completion. Viewers’ desires to express that control – whatever, wherever, whenever – became amplified through binge-watching. Thus, the more you watch, the more control you symbolically express. The extrinsic motivation of cultural inclusion moved in lockstep with the perceived improvements and seasonal bounties of television content associated with Peak TV (Jenner 2019).

ENGAGEMENT

Motives alone cannot explain why people binge-watch. The relationship of their viewing rituals to those motives tells a more complete story. Steiner and Xu (2020) noted that viewers ‘differentiated their binge-watching experiences by their levels of attentiveness’ (90), which they conceptualised as a Viewer Attentiveness Spectrum (VAS). Viewers seeking relaxation tend to select shows that require less attentiveness than the shows selected by viewers seeking the improved experience (in contrast to linear/appointment viewing) and enhanced narrative transportation and emotional/linguistic engagement. This ‘textual appetite’ (Perks 2015) drives textual engagement through viewer control of the text and textual control of the viewer. Tukachinsky and Eyal (2018) similarly found that the longer the binge, the greater the intensity of parasocial relationships between viewers and characters. Mikos (2016) found that viewers become accustomed to a series because they engage more intensively with the characters. Concurrently, and ironically, that attentiveness is perceived by viewers, and marketed by Netflix, as ‘a disruption of scheduled TV viewing’ (Pilipets 2019, 3).

TYPES OF BINGE-VIEWERS BY MOTIVE/ ATTENTIVENESS

In a large quantitative study of American binge-viewers, Pittman and Steiner (2021) found two overlapping subtypes across the dimensions of planning, company and engagement: feast-watching and cringe-watching. How and why we binge-watch is the shaper of these subtypes in the synchronicity, or lack of it, between motive, content selection and ritual. The positive feelings associated with feast-watching and the negative feelings associated with cringe-watching were found across genres and are related to how a viewer’s experience (how and

what is watched) aligns with their motive (why). As Perks (2015) writes, flow has now become viewer-directed and viewer-contained (xxii). Fundamental to all of these is the control to shape one's viewing experience by the entangled relationship of motive, engagement and content selection.

VIEWING PATTERNS

Intentional vs unintentional binge-watching

Merikivi et al. (2019) identified viewer autonomy as a central element of trans-disciplinary binge-watching definitions (10). Digital streaming platforms pave the way for viewer agency in terms of *accessing* and *programming* content – affording even more autonomy and ease than DVD box sets or DVRs (see Jenner 2017; Perks 2015). However, the act of bingeing, not just accessing the texts or starting to view, has varying degrees of agency. Binge-watchers report a range of (un)intentionality in their chronologically condensed succession of episodes. Perks (2015) used the phrase 'insulated flow' to capture the 'extended and focused attention on one text' (xxiv) that happens in a streaming binge-watch. Insulated flow is encouraged by narrative features and content-delivery services (queuing up the next one). Continuing to watch can also be attributed to 'self-regulation deficiencies' (Tukachinsky and Eyal 2018), 'impulsivity' (Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski and Pesseau 2018), or other internal factors that make it hard to stop watching once the story is rolling.

Perks (2015) found a mix of intentional and unintentional media marathons from her interviewees. Many people 'schedule shifted' – postponing previously scheduled plans or routine obligations to make way for their binges (22). Some of the most common behaviours were postponing sleep or reducing the amount of sleep, de-prioritising eating or food prep (i.e., ordering in instead of cooking) and putting off work. However, many media marathoners were intentional, saving binge-worthy content for a work or school break, or for a break in weekly scheduled TV programming. Those who planned out their binges, Pittman and Sheehan (2015) found, were more likely to be motivated by engagement (considering binge-watching to be more interesting or entertaining than traditional viewing), hedonism (enjoying the sexual or violent content in binge-watched shows), and social factors (connecting with friends over content or feeling less lonely while bingeing).

Bingeing as stable trait vs situational occurrence

The scant evidence on the topic of binge-watching as a stable trait or situational occurrence all gestures in the direction of situational. Riddle et al. (2018)

surveyed over 200 undergraduates, finding that 78% engaged in intentional *and* unintentional binge-watches (2017, 600). Of the 19% who reported only one type of binge-watching, the vast majority were intentional about their viewing (2017, 600). Analysing interviews with adults who media marathoned while going through a health struggle, Perks (2019a) found that the majority of participants ‘tapered’ their marathon – watching less television and fewer episodes in one sitting – once they started feeling better. She wrote that bingeing ‘was not a pathological or fixed pattern; rather, it was a purposeful coping response to unique circumstances and individual cognitive, emotional, and/or physical needs’ (31).

Pierce-Grove (2020) found users changing their content preferences as well as bingeing patterns according to circumstances. For example, one interviewee who received word that he would be targeted and blacklisted switched to bingeing content from the country to which he hoped to emigrate. A different interviewee binged narrative content and local sports while at home, but when he left home to bike across the continent, he switched to sporadic watching of non-narrative videos about extreme physical feats. These results show that binge-watching practices are integrated into the demands and rituals of viewers’ lives (see Chapter 8 in this volume).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought binge-watching suddenly to prominence as one of the safest pleasures available. The discourse shifted accordingly. In the press, sweeping objections to screen time receded in favour of finer distinctions between ‘good’ screen time and ‘bad’ screen time. Millions of healthy people found themselves unexpectedly in the position of Perks’s ‘health copers’. In order to avoid becoming sick, they had to stay home as much as if they already were. For Perks’s participants, binge-watching ebbed naturally when health struggles resolved. It remains to be seen whether that behaviour will play out on a larger scale for the populations who find themselves pinned to their sofas by the needs of public health.

Viewer agency matters, but networks, distributors and streaming services play a role in determining in what direction the binge-watching trend will go. Take, for example, the survey respondent in Perks’s chapter who said he ‘always binges’ and that it was ‘tough’ to watch *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011–19) episodes on a weekly release schedule. We expect binge-watching to become a more stable pattern over time, especially if media executives cave in to viewer preferences: As a generation of ‘streaming natives’ grows up, binge-watching will move toward the new normal of television engagement (see Perks 2015).

Based on qualitative interviews, Steiner (2018) found the following binge-watching subtypes based on rituals that are distinct from what typically have been considered binge-watching: 1) sleep bingeing; 2) speed bingeing; and 3) sports bingeing. Sleep bingeing is described by interviewees as ‘watching video on their phones in order to relax in bed at night’ (163). While watching TV while falling asleep is not new, what distinguishes this practice is that the content is almost

always Low Viewer Attentiveness Spectrum (LVAS) and previously viewed, and viewers often may not actually watch (164). Also, Mikos (2016) found that some viewers prefer binge-watching in bed before falling asleep. Speed viewing is a ritual subtype driven by the motives of catching up and cultural inclusion. Viewers use technologies to speed up the pace at which the show plays, allowing them to consume more quickly (167). Sports bingeing is perhaps the most non-conforming subtype. Because the flow of live television cannot be controlled (at least as far as skipping ahead) by viewers, most scholarship has omitted it from content that can be binge-watched. However, Steiner (2018) found that viewers of tournaments such as US college basketball's March Madness and the World Cup used the term binge to describe their consumption. While these were rare, a follow-up study (Steiner 2020) found that viewers define the components of binge-watching – consumption of multiple episodes that build toward a conclusion during an intense period of time – with the same language as they use to describe the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament.

Solo viewing vs communal viewing

The third viewer engagement pattern of solo versus communal relates to the first two dichotomies or spectra in the viewing patterns section: communal viewing is likely to be both intentional and situational. It is intentional because co-viewing takes planning. It is often situational because of the challenges that planning poses. However, we'll also see that asynchronous binge-watching can be a communal experience.

Mikos and Castro's chapter described binge-watching as 'me time' and an 'us activity' that can be 'shared with partners, family members, and, less frequently, with friends'. Perks (2015) described ritualised marathon viewing for buzz-worthy shows such as *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010–) and *The L Word* (Showtime 2004–9). Of the participants in Perks's study for this book, 40.8% ($n=49$) reported co-viewing at least one of the two shows they binge-watched. Most often, the co-viewing happened with romantic, cohabitating partners. Sometimes, mutual interest in a new show inspired the viewing. Other times the binge-watchers had a longer relationship with the show. A 28-year-old white woman enjoyed earlier seasons of *Better Call Saul* (AMC 2015–) with her husband. Together, they 'binged the seasons of this show in preparation for the new season coming out'. Co-viewing complications arose for some. A 25-year-old white male participant started binge-watching *Stranger Things* (Netflix 2016–) with his partner, but their stamina didn't align through the season. He reported: 'they fell asleep and I had to finish it so I netflix cheated on them'. Mikos (2016) found that partners with interest in different content sometimes watched their respective favourite series separately, but agreed on common consensus series, usually those that were the subject of much public discussion, that they watched together.

Scheduling complications or an inability to be in the same room while watching isn't necessarily an impediment to bingeing 'together'. Perks (2015) described asynchronous marathoning as a 'shared, but temporally separate, [social] experience' (34), noting that many people binge-watched content that friends or family recommended – and then engaged in lively discussions about it. For binge-watchers going through a health struggle (often homebound or stuck in a hospital), the asynchronous marathon was a productive social opportunity. Perks (2019b) found that many binge-watched content alone that friends, family members and co-workers recommended, thus banking 'social capital' that could be 'realized in the moment *and* stored up for redemption in future social interactions' (323).

The spectrum of solo viewing to co-viewing is more accurately a range of practices that accounts for opportunities to connect with others through many means and temporalities. Many binge-watches are solo enterprises; however, that label doesn't account for the binge-watching inspiration (perhaps a friend's recommendation) and a social aftermath (discussing the show with others in person, online or through other means). Additionally, some motives, such as transportation and cognitive engagement, may lend themselves better to content selections that demand the kind of attentive engagement better suited to solo viewing (Pittman and Steiner 2021).

Alternating vs continuous binge-watching

In an early blog post on binge-watching, Amanda Lotz described herself as occasionally alternating between two series, as one might alternate between a magazine and a novel (Lotz 2014). Pierce-Grove found that behaviour – alternating between watching several shows or types of video content – mirrored in a population of 55 interviews. Some interviewees watched a show continuously, watching straight through a single series from beginning to end, but many viewers interrupted one show with episodes of another over a period of weeks. The presence of a partner tended to influence people toward alternating content, as they switched between shows they enjoyed together and shows that one partner watched alone (Pierce-Grove 2020).

BINGE-WATCHING OUTCOMES

Regret

Binge-watching need not have negative outcomes, but some viewers do experience regret following a prolonged media engagement experience. Perks reported that some 'film and television marathoners felt ashamed of not

having anything tangible to show for their time' (2015, 57). Those who anticipated regret, Walton-Pattison et al. found, were less likely to binge-watch (2018). Pittman and Steiner (2021) concluded that 'solo, accidental, and distracted (cringe-watching) predicts increased regret and decreased well-being' (1). It should be noted that they position *accidental* as 'no planning or pre-meditation was involved so that a viewer's binge motives may not align with content selection' and *distracted* as 'exerting attention in a fashion that inhibits a viewer's attainment of gratification sought' (2).

For others, it was the *quality* of the experience that led to regret (or not). Perks applied the economic term 'sunk costs' to describe how some viewers regretted wasting 'time on a series that was not ultimately pleasurable or entertaining' (Perks 2015, 58). Some people she interviewed knew that they did not enjoy watching the end of their chosen story (*Lost* [ABC 2004–10] earned two mentions), but they kept going just to see how it ended – a dissatisfying experience. This finding dovetails with a participant quote from Steiner's (2017) qualitative study: 'I only feel bad about binge-watching if the show sucks' (155).

After observing that 'the need for completion often led to the longest binges and was often associated with negative feelings' (Steiner 2017, 155), Steiner pursued this line of inquiry quantitatively. Pittman and Steiner 'found that the more participants binged a show out of a cognizant desire for [narrative completion], the less likely they were to regret it' (2019, 10). However, actual narrative completion did not significantly impact regret. The authors propose that '[t]he takeaway here for viewers who want to maximize their binge-watching experiences is to remain relatively cognizant of the process, sporadically asking themselves, "Do I care what happens next? Am I actually enjoying this show?"' (10) Interviewees from Mikos and Castro's study evaluated binge-watching largely as a positive experience and only very few showed regret.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia captures a lingering feeling that connects a previous viewing of a text to a binge-watch. Steiner observed a spectrum of viewer binge-watching attentiveness, finding that '[I]less attentive bingeing is almost always for relaxation, nostalgia, and distraction' (2017, 151). Those three motivations – relaxation, nostalgia and distraction – accurately map onto Perks's study of media marathoners who went through a health struggle. One participant binged *Mad Men* (AMC 2007–15) following a surgery because: '[I]t's one of my favorite shows, so it was comfortable. And I knew it, and I really didn't have to focus that hard.' He could recover from his surgery while

relaxing with a distracting show that he knew he liked. Perks's larger work on media marathoning books, film, and television found that re-engaging familiar texts 'facilitated interactions between the present-day reader and [their] past self' (2015, 53). In other words, people reflected back on what they were doing and who they had been at the time of their first viewing or reading. The experience of nostalgia spins a long thread spanning text, viewer and temporality.

Character engagement

Binge-watching or marathon viewing can encourage viewers to form strong connections with characters and storyworlds, leading to speculation, analysis, reflection and deep appreciation. Tukachinsky and Eyal's marathon viewing study found that '[t]he more back-to-back episodes that viewers consumed, the more they interacted with the characters, reflected upon them, and empathized with them' (2018, 285-6). These viewer/character interactions are signs of parasocial relationships, which refer to feelings of friendship or closeness between viewers and characters (see, for example, Horton and Wohl 1956). When comparing traditional television viewing to marathon viewing, Tukachinsky and Eyal found that marathon viewing was 'related with greater PSR [parasocial relationships]' (2018, 288). Perks observed that these parasocial relationships can lead to parasocial mourning when a text concludes: at the end of a series, media marathoners missed the characters, the storyworlds, and the marathoning experience itself (2015).

DEFINITIONS

Binge-watching discourse has consistently defined binge-watching as multiple episodes watched, rather than multiple hours spent. In a chapter in this volume, Pierce-Grove finds that this emphasis on episodes, rather than time, is mirrored both in how users think about watching and how they watch. Analysis of a large dataset of user viewing histories showed that the more episodes a given season had, the less likely viewers were to complete it. The correlation was stronger than with the number of minutes in a season, and was independent of both the run-time of an individual episode and how highly the show was rated. This suggests that episode boundaries provide viewers with choice points in which they may choose to continue or not, and that the more choice points are presented, the more users drop off.

Qualitative interviews confirmed that viewers thought of episodes, rather than hours, as the units of a binge-watch. They uniformly described their viewing in terms of episodes, and, when planning or negotiating with members of

their household for binge-watching time, negotiated for episodes, not hours. We can reasonably conclude that episode boundaries, however arbitrary, delineate the units of a binge-watch for both viewers and scholars.

SUMMARY

Binge-watching is not a homogenous practice. During its period of booming media coverage (2010–15), it was framed as a lengthy, all-consuming experience in which activities of ordinary social life were suspended. But even during this time, cracks and contradictions appeared in the simplistic framing of binge-watching. Viewers and journalists described ‘leisurely’ binge-watches, absent-minded binge-watches or binge-watches that took up very little time but consumed multiple episodes (Pierce-Grove 2016). Since then, researchers have continued to tease apart the multiple practices that have been bundled together under the rubric ‘binge-watching’. We are now prepared to establish a taxonomy of these practices.

Binge-watching types can differ according to motivations and viewing practices, and according to personality, personal circumstances, social relations, and an interest in specific content. Some motives, such as relaxation, nostalgia and cultural inclusion, do not differ very much from classic television engagement. Others, such as a sense of completion and improved viewing engagement, seem to be typical for binge-watching. The main differences in the binge-watching experience typologies can be found between intentional and unintentional viewing, stable trait and situational occurrence, solo viewing and co-viewing, and between alternating and continuous viewing. These different binge-viewing patterns or classifications are ideal-typical, but they can certainly co-exist within individual viewers. The typologies described here show the heterogeneity in cultural practices of binge-watching.

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TV

Better Call Saul (2015–), USA: AMC

Game of Thrones (2011–19), USA: HBO

L Word, The (2004–9), USA: Showtime

Lost (2004–10), USA: ABC

Mad Men (2007–15), USA: AMC

Walking Dead, The (2010–), USA: AMC

