

## A Study on Binge-Watching in Relation with Loneliness & Psychological Well-Being

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### ABSTRACT

The advent of digital technology has led to the emergence of various video streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hotstar etc. These popular on-demand services provide the audience with easy access to popular movies, television series and web documentaries. Convenient access to these services, wherein, has led to an increase in the practice of viewing multiple episodes, movies, documentaries, or series in rapid succession, for long periods of time in a single sitting, known as 'Binge-Watching'. This 'overindulgence' in viewing online content can induce loneliness and impact the psychological well-being of viewers. However, this concept has been the subject of limited research. For this purpose, the current investigation attempts to evaluate the relationship of Binge-Watching with Loneliness and Psychological Well-Being. The sample consisted of 100 Indian college students in the age range of 18-21 years. Problematic Series Watching Scale (Orosz et al., 2016), The 18 item Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978) were administered. Data was analyzed using Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation Coefficient, and t-ratio. Subsequent analysis yielded a significant positive association between binge-watching and loneliness, while a negative association emerged between binge-watching and psychological well-being. Results of the current study, therefore, may be utilized heuristically with other studies to prevent an increase in negative consequences of binge-watching.

**Keywords:** *Binge-Watching, Psychological Well-Being, Loneliness*

Today the internet has undeniably become an integral part of our lives since it grants us access to everything under the sun - useful information, diverse mediums of entertainment viz., movies, games, web series, music videos etc., at the click of a button. Recent technological advancements have brought 'Online Streaming Services' (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime) primarily into the limelight, which have almost replaced the trend of 'Television Watching'. For instance, Wagner (2016) posits a drastic shift from viewing entertainment series on Television to watching them now on online streaming services. The availability of this viewing content at the touch of the fingertips has led to a remarkable rise in the popular practice of 'Binge-Watching'. However, the concept of 'binge-watching' has

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only recently surfaced as a topic of empirical research, therefore lacking empirical definitions. Netflix defined the practice of binge-watching as the consecutive watching of a minimum of two episodes of the same television series in one sitting (Feeney, 2014). While another definition by Pena (2015) conceptualizes binge-watching as ‘Marathon Viewing’, which is referred to as viewing a number of episodes of a single web series in a short span of time. Trouleau (2016) in his research identified three classes or types of binge-watching behaviours based on the number of episodes a viewer watched:

1. **Hyper-Binge:** Consumption of a considerably large number of episodes – more than 7 episodes in a single day.
2. **Binge:** Watching 3-7 episodes in a day.
3. **Regular:** Watching only 1-2 episodes in a day.

A recent study conducted by Netflix posited that binge-watching has become exceedingly popular amongst ‘Indians’ as compared to viewers in other countries, making Indians the second highest binge watchers in the world (88 per cent) after Mexicans (89 per cent) (Dogra, 2017). With a significantly evident rise in the consecutive viewing of content at a rapid pace, there is a tendency that binge-watching practices may become problematic. Expanding on problematic behaviours, Orosz et al. (2016) posit that two most important factors to predict or label any activity as ‘Problematic’ are ‘Mood Modification’ and ‘Escapism’. They, thus, proposed and explained the concept of ‘Problematic Series Watching’ based on the Component Model of addiction proposed by Griffiths (2005). This model has subsequently been adapted in the present study to conceptualize the practice of ‘Binge-Watching’. The six components proposed in the component model were:

1. **Salience:** Binges dominates the viewer’s feelings, thinking, actions, and behaviour.
2. **Mood Modification:** A change in mood or feelings experienced by the viewers after indulging in binges.
3. **Tolerance:** A need for indulging in more rampant succession of media content in order to experience similar pleasure formerly obtained by lesser rapid succession.
4. **Withdrawal Symptoms:** Experiencing unpleasant feelings and/or physical effects as a result of reducing Binge-Watching or discontinuing binges.
5. **Conflict:** When Binge-Watching results in interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts affecting the viewer’s personal and social relationships.
6. **Relapse:** A tendency of earlier patterns of Binge-Watching to recur after years of abstinence or controlled watching.

While almost 55% of adults identify themselves as binge-watchers (Manley, 2016), binge-watching practices may be accredited as a distinct problem commonly observed among college students functioning on irregular schedules (Chaudhary, 2014). This practice of binge-watching i.e., one which occurs when viewers watch multiple episodes in rapid succession in order to escape from the problems of their everyday lives and consequently uplift their mood states, may turn problematic in no time further for a variety of other reasons. For instance, Panda and Pandey (2017) depicted “social interactions”, “escape from reality” and “easy accessibility to television content” as the most common motivations amongst college students to indulge in binge-watching practices. While, Snyder (2016) posited “strong and interesting plotlines”, “high quality content”, “deep conflicts” (conflicting opinions of the viewers regarding which character’s side they are on or which character will succeed) and “suspenseful episodes” to serve as the major key elements that make a show “binge-worthy”. This intense immersion and indulgence of viewers to media content can prove to be detrimental not only to their physical, but also to their mental health. For instance, International Communication Association (2015) posited that viewers indulge

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in addictive behaviours like binge-watching to experience a momentary relief from their disturbing reality, which is accompanied by feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness, wherein, has been defined as an affective and cognitive discomfort or uneasiness experienced by an individual, stemming from their perception of being alone (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Recent studies posit that 56% of viewers who binge-watch prefer to do so 'alone', suggesting binge-watching to be an alienating and isolating phenomenon (Chaudhary, 2014). Sung et al. (2015) conducted a popular study on 316 participants aged 18-29 years at the University of Texas, Austin. The findings of the study depicted that the individuals who were lonely and depressed were more likely to indulge in the practice of binge-watching in order to escape and break free from their unpleasant emotional states. Similarly, when the health and wellness costs associated with binge-watching behaviours were examined, it was found that higher levels of binge-watching practices lead to higher levels of loneliness (Simmons et al., 2019). Similarly, Starosta et al. (2019) added that people who indulged in binge-watching with the highest frequency were more likely to be driven by their escape motivation and the motivation to deal with their feelings of loneliness. Even though the term binge-watching is widely understood in the context of 'online streaming services' these days, some recent studies of Pittman and Sheehan (2015), document that these practices may not simply be limited to it, but also extend to traditional television platforms by subscribing to cable television.

Thus, it may be contended that binge-watching not only influences our mental and emotional states but impacts our overall Psychological Well-Being, i.e., a state of happiness and fulfilment, characterized by a healthy and positive outlook towards one's life associated with low levels of distress and staying healthy not only physically but mentally (American Psychological Association, n.d.). According to Ryff (1995), Psychological Well-Being is understood as a realization of one's true potential which is an outcome of a truly fulfilled and well-lived life. Ryff (1989) purports six core dimensions that encompass the construct of Psychological Well-Being namely:

1. **Self-Acceptance:** This refers to the process of self-actualization and maturity. Individuals having a sense of high self-acceptance are more likely to hold a positive attitude towards themselves, a true understanding about their self, and thus, be truly accepting of oneself for the way they are.
2. **Positive Relations with Others:** Individuals high on the 'Positive Relations' dimension are likely to be warm, affectionate and empathetic. They have fulfilling interpersonal relationships with others and attach great value and significance to their relationships.
3. **Autonomy:** Autonomous individuals are determined, independent with a tendency to evaluate or assess oneself on the basis of their personal standards. They do not tend to be influenced by conventional beliefs and stray away from social desirability which is reflective of their individuality.
4. **Environmental Mastery** – Individuals high on this dimension possess the ability to choose, create and modify the environment or their surroundings in accordance to their needs and psychic conditions, by taking advantage of the available environmental opportunities.
5. **Purpose in Life:** Individuals having a sense of Purpose in Life tend to be productive and possess a sense of direction towards their goals in life.
6. **Personal Growth** – Individuals with a sense of Personal Growth tend to be open to new experiences, taking up challenges, embracing change or dynamism and

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engaging in activities or behaviours that help them to develop their potential and grow as a person.

Literary review relating psychological well-being and binge-watching, however, remains scarce and an analysis of the existing studies depicts both negative and positive influences of binge-watching practices on psychological well-being of viewers. For instance, a recent study conducted by Troles (2019) posited that engaging in binges enhances an individual's mood, and results in feeling relaxed and happy after having watched the video streaming content. Studies have also contended that viewers indulging in binge-watching are likely to experience a sense of 'Autonomy' (as their favoured content is available at their disposal, which gives them the control over deciding whether they want to continue watching the content or not) that subsequently reflects in their increased psychological well-being (Granow et al., 2018; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). While other studies like that of Karmakar and Kruger (2016) yielded results that were in contrast to the previous studies, viewers who indulged in binge-watching were more likely to experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, and consequently a lower psychological well-being. Research has further contended that viewers may experience goal conflicts, which can result in negative self-evaluation and a long-term negative influence on their life satisfaction (Granow et al., 2018). Consequently, goal conflicts can have an adverse impact on an individual's level of psychological well-being. Further, Panda & Pandey (2017), added that the viewers, in an attempt to maintain their relaxed state of mind, actually found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle as they seek to escape their negative feelings by resorting to binge-watching. In turn, the conclusion of binge-watching sessions paved way for their negative feelings to resurface and getting re-engaged in binges, thus intensifying their addiction and accounting for a lower psychological well-being. This growing dependence on binge-watching as a means of escaping the harsh reality or evading its accompanying negative emotions (particularly amongst college students) resulted in a gradual deterioration of their ability to adaptively cope with their negative emotions (i.e., worsening of adaptive coping mechanisms) (Panda & Pandey, 2017) and potentially resulting in reducing their levels of psychological well-being. Similarly, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) found that even though viewers felt relaxed while bingeing on their favoured content, these feelings often got terminated shortly after the series came to an end and got replaced with feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and stress, thus negatively influencing the viewers' overall psychological well-being (Dandamudi & Sathiyaseelan, 2018).

### ***Statement of the Problem***

The aim of the present investigation is to study Binge-Watching in relation with Loneliness and Psychological Well Being among Indian college students.

### ***Hypotheses***

- H<sub>1</sub>: Binge-Watching is expected to be positively related with Loneliness.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Binge-Watching is expected to be negatively related with Psychological Well Being.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Significant gender differences are expected in relation with Binge-Watching,
- H<sub>4</sub>: Significant gender differences are expected in relation with Loneliness.
- H<sub>5</sub>: Significant gender differences are expected in relation with Psychological Well-Being.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

The current study was administered on a sample of 100 Indian college students (50 males and 50 females) in the age range of 18-21 years selected from various colleges in Chandigarh, Patiala, and Bangalore. Demographic information was also obtained from the participants.

### *Instruments*

For the present study, the following standardized psychometric instruments and questionnaires were employed to measure the three variables- Binge-Watching, Loneliness and Psychological Well-Being.

- **Problematic Series Watching Scale (Orosz et al., 2016):** The scale consisted of 6 items, based on the six components of addictions viz., Salience, Mood Modification, Tolerance, Withdrawal Symptoms, Conflict and Relapse. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1-Never to 5-Always). A total was obtained by adding the score of each item and higher scores indicated higher levels of problematic series watching, and thus in this case, higher levels of binge-watching.
- **Ryff's Psychological Well Being Scale, Short Form (Ryff & Keyes, 1995):** The scale consisted of 18 items measuring six attributes of Psychological Well-Being – Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. The participants were required to indicate their degree of agreement with respect to each statement on a seven-point Likert scale (1- Strongly Agree to 7- Strongly Disagree). Ten items were reverse scored. Six sub-scores were thus obtained by adding the score of each subscale. Higher scores indicated greater levels of psychological well-being.
- **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978):** Developed by Russel et al. (1978), the UCLA Loneliness Scale was designed to assess and subsequently measure feelings of loneliness and social isolation as experienced by an individual. The scale consisted of 20-items ranging on a four-point Likert scale (3- I often feel this way to 0- I never feel this way). The participants were required to rate each statement in accordance with the option that best described them. A total was obtained by adding the score of each item and higher scores indicated higher levels of loneliness.

### *Procedure*

For the present study, the random sampling method was used for selecting the participants to ensure that each unit of the population will have an equal chance of being selected for the sample. It was ensured that the informed consent of the participants was taken prior to the administration of the questionnaires. After obtaining the informed consent, the participants were required to complete three questionnaires, which were administered both manually as well as through google forms to ensure greater number of participants and cater to their convenience. The conclusion of the data collection phase was followed by the data analysis phase which involved employing the appropriate statistical tools and techniques.

## RESULTS

Keeping in view the objectives and the hypotheses of the current study, descriptive statistics consisting of means and standard deviations, and inferential statistics consisting of correlation and t-test, were conducted.

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**Table 1 shows Means, S.D., and t-ratios of Binge-Watching, Psychological Well-Being, and Loneliness. (N=100)**

S.No.	Variables	Males		Females		t-ratios
		Means	S.D.	Means	S.D.	
1.	Binge-Watching	14.8	4.98	14.04	4.39	0.21
2.	Purpose In Life	13.72	3.74	14.3	3.64	0.22
3.	Environmental Mastery	15.74	2.4	14.88	3.01	0.06
4.	Self-Acceptance	15.42	3.73	15.84	3.47	0.28
5.	Personal Growth	17.8	2.49	17.74	3.01	0.46
6.	Autonomy	15.1	3.02	15.26	2.84	0.39
7.	Positive Relations with Others	13.38	3.9	14.42	4.03	0.1
8.	Overall Psychological Well-Being	91.18	11.69	92.44	13.11	0.31
9.	Loneliness	18.3	12.02	20.5	13.25	0.19

\*t-ratio significant at .05 level = 1.66

\*\*t-ratio significant at .01 level = 2.36

**Table 2 shows Inter correlation matrix for Binge-Watching, Psychological Well-Being, and Loneliness among Females (N=50).**

S.No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Binge-Watching	-	-0.22	-0.38**	-0.42**	-0.38**	-0.12	-0.31*	-0.47**	0.46**
2.	Purpose In Life		-	0.17	0.32*	0.57**	-0.11	0.39**	0.63**	-0.39**
3.	Environmental Mastery			-	0.57**	0.48**	0.36**	0.18	0.67**	-0.45**
4.	Self-Acceptance				-	0.50**	0.14	0.43**	0.76**	-0.47**
5.	Personal Growth					-	0.19	0.44**	0.81**	-0.52**
6.	Autonomy						-	0.02	0.36**	-0.01
7.	Positive Relations with Others							-	0.68**	-0.60**
8.	Overall Psychological Well-Being								-	-0.64**
9.	Loneliness									-

\*correlation value significant at .05 level = 0.24

\*\*correlation value significant at .01 level of significance = 0.33

**Table 3 shows the inter correlation matrix for Binge-Watching, Psychological Well-Being, and Loneliness among Males (N=50).**

S.No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Binge-Watching	-	-0.04	-0.22	-0.19	0.08	-0.12	-0.08	-0.16	0.27*
2.	Purpose In Life		-	0.12	0.07	0.25*	-0.01	0.32*	0.52**	-0.06
3.	Environmental Mastery			-	0.37**	0.30*	0.38**	-0.03	0.51**	-0.11
4.	Self-Acceptance				-	0.40*	0.33**	0.45**	0.74**	-0.21
5.	Personal Growth					-	0.37**	0.28*	0.67**	-0.07
6.	Autonomy						-	0.03	0.53**	0.06
7.	Positive Relations with Others							-	0.64**	-0.07
8.	Overall Psychological Well-Being								-	-0.13
9.	Loneliness									-

\*correlation value significant at .05 level = 0.24

\*\*correlation value significant at .01 level of significance = 0.33

**Table 4 shows the inter correlation matrix for Binge-Watching, Psychological Well-Being, and Loneliness in Total Sample (N=100).**

S.No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Binge-Watching	-	-0.13	-0.28**	-0.30**	-0.15	-0.12	-0.20*	-0.31**	0.35**
2.	Purpose In Life		-	0.13	0.19*	0.42**	-0.06	0.36**	0.58**	-0.22*
3.	Environmental Mastery			-	0.45**	0.40**	0.36**	0.07	0.59**	-0.31**
4.	Self-Acceptance				-	0.45**	0.24**	0.44**	0.75**	-0.34**
5.	Personal Growth					-	0.27**	0.36**	0.75**	-0.33**
6.	Autonomy						-	0.03	0.44**	-0.03
7.	Positive Relations with Others							-	0.66**	-0.33**
8.	Overall Psychological Well-Being								-	-0.41**
9.	Loneliness									-

\*correlation value significant at .05 level = 0.17

\*\*correlation value significant at .01 level = 0.24

The present investigation aimed to study the relationship of Binge-Watching with Loneliness and Psychological Well-Being. Binge-Watching was expected to be positively correlated with Loneliness and the results of the current study largely support the hypothesis i.e., significant positive associations were observed between Binge-Watching and Loneliness for the total sample (as evident from Table 4) and females (Table 2) at  $p < .01$  level and for males at  $p < .05$  level of significance. Secondly, Binge-Watching was expected to be negatively associated with Psychological Well-Being and results came out to be significant at  $p < .01$  for both the total sample and females, while no such association was evident for males (as evident from Table 3). Lastly, contrary to the hypothesis, the results implicated no significant gender differences in any of the variables under study.

## DISCUSSION

In relation with Binge-Watching and Loneliness, studies in consonance to current findings depicted that the phenomenon of binge-watching may lead the viewers to experience loneliness and lethargy, along with feelings of depression and obesity (Panda & Pandey, 2017). Another survey conducted on a sample of 2000 viewers depicted that the viewers engaging in binge-watching practices were more likely to experience such feelings of loneliness, depression, emptiness, and anxiety as compared to others (Downey, 2018).

While studies in relation with Psychological Well-being and Binge-Watching posited that heavy viewers reportedly felt less happy and more anxious as compared to light viewers (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), signifying poor psychological well-being. Frey et al. (2007) further, seconded, that heavy viewers reported experiencing anxiety, lower life satisfaction, and consequently, a lower psychological well-being as compared to light or non-viewers. Moreover, emotional consequences were also implicated to be more prominent amongst heavy viewers after indulging in binges. For instance, in a study by Dandamudi & Sathiyaseelan (2018), it was found that after indulging in binges, there was a tendency of the heavy viewers' mood becoming worse, which made the binge-watching session less enjoyable and negatively influenced their psychological well-being.

In relation with gender differences, however, studies yielded mixed results. For instance, Warren (2016) in their study found a significantly higher frequency of binge-watching amongst female viewers as compared to male viewers. Similar findings were observed in

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another study of Davies (2018), which demonstrated that female viewers were more likely to indulge in binge-watching as compared to male viewers.

Early studies of gender differences in Loneliness such as that of Upmanyu et al. (1992) found that males were lonelier in comparison with females. Similarly, Borys and Perlman (1985) revealed that males were more likely to obtain higher scores on the UCLA Loneliness Scale, however, females were more likely to perceive and label themselves as lonely. However, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Maes et al. (2019), unlike early studies, demonstrated similar mean levels of loneliness for both males and females across the lifespan, supporting the hypothesis of the present study.

Finally, no significant gender differences were found in relation with Psychological Well-Being in the current study, as opposed to the literary findings. Studies revealed that males had higher self-acceptance and autonomy than females; while females showed more personal growth and positivity in relations compared to males (Matud et al., 2019). Contrarily, Salleh and Mustaffa (2016) posited no significant gender differences in any of Ryff's dimensions of Psychological Well-being, supporting the findings of the present study. Similarly, Khanbani et al. (2014) found no significant differences between males and females in relation with 'self-acceptance' and 'autonomy' dimensions of psychological well-being.

In context of the current study, it becomes rather crucial to address its limitations. The present research may be deemed limited in scope with respect to its generalizability, which necessitates a deeper exploration and investigation into the practice of binge-watching and taking into account a larger sample size. The correlational research design of the current research simply establishes the direction of relationship among the variables in question, and not causality. Thus, future researchers can undertake studies to determine the cause-and-effect relationship between binge-watching, and other pertinent variables such as, loneliness, quality of life, emotional intelligence, health-related issues, and other psychosocial concerns. Finally, there is a felt need to investigate binge-watching practices from a clinical perspective, especially in an Indian context. Behavioural addiction, anxiety, depression, quality of sleep and sleep disturbances, etc. can be examined to understand the significance of binge-watching in the development of clinical psychopathology.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study aimed to examine the highly prevalent practice of binge-watching in relation with loneliness and psychological well-being among Indian college students. It can be implicated from the results of the current study that reduced social interactions and the tendency to stay at home can potentially lead binge-watching and loneliness to co-occur, which can further negatively impact viewers' psychological well-being. Thus, certain strategies like maintaining journals, reading books, practicing mindfulness through meditation, fostering social relationships with peers, planning vacations with family, identifying and reflecting on one's own feelings and emotions, pursuing hobbies, and remaining physically fit and active can be adopted to reduce the incidence of binge-watching. Further, binge-watching practices can be kept in check by setting a limit for the number of episodes to watch in a day, taking breaks between watching content, exercising, or doing chores while binge-watching, and watching content with others, which can further curb loneliness and stimulate psychological well-being. In relation to gender differences, however, results were contrary to previous studies and the reasons for this dissonance may be that maximum studies were not administered on the same age group i.e., 'college

students', and almost all studies were based on diverse cultures, and not the Indian population. Thus, the dearth of literature available on the emerging practice of binge-watching warrants rigorous research exploring the same, specifically in an Indian context.

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The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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