

## Era of Binge-Watching: An ‘Asset’ or an ‘Abyss’?

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### ABSTRACT

Binge watching, contemporarily, is a new pattern of watching television or online shows since COVID-19, where maximum episodes are viewed in just one setting for at least 2-3 hours. Smart phones and laptops are the conventional devices used to stream on shows on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime & Hotstar for the sake of entertainment, leisure experiences, relaxation, enjoyment etc. But alternatively, binge watching accompanies cons for viewers like low level of conscientiousness, low emotional stability, impulse control difficulties, lack of premeditation, sleep problems, anxiety, stress, depression, cognitive problems, conduct & inattention issues etc. People engage in binge watching when there's high need for sensation seeking, need for escapism, breakout from loneliness, social learning & motives linked, character identification, cultural inclusion, sense of completion, emotional regulation etc. Problematic and non-problematic viewing are evaluated on different spectrum & hence controlled viewing under moderate levels should be recommended. Occupation can have an impact on the decision to binge watch, but it's independent of age and gender.

**Keywords:** *Binge Watching, Video-on-Demand, Entertainment, Escapism, Loneliness, Mental Health Issues, Personality Traits*

The current way to watch television shows and stream online services had dramatically changed over the past decades where ‘Binge watching’ had been found as a change in the streaming era where people view their favourite series or shows which are entertaining or informational for prolonged periods at once. It has become common on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Hulu, Television etc. on gadgets such as smartphones, tablets & laptops. In one of the surveys conducted by Netflix in 2014, it was evidently found that people watched 2-6 episodes on television in just one occasion. It's the younger generation that binge watches at higher ratio with 73% ranging from 18 - 29 years for at least once a week. The augmentation of such video-on-demand services had led to an increase in frequency to regularly binge watch & stream. According to Mood management theory given by Zillmann, binge watching is done for emotional regulation because people endeavour to regulate their mood levels and shift it to a more positive state via watching their favourite TV shows or streaming but such effects are dependent on individual's self-control. At one end of the continuum, binge watching tries to establish beneficial social connections for people along with stress relief but on the other end, it's accompanied by potential health consequences like heart problems, social isolation, behavioural addictions, cognitive decline, sleep issues, physical activity reduction etc.

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### ***Binge-Watching: A Pro or Con?***

Binge watching is one of the popular trends being noticed in the contemporary period especially amongst the young adults where they binge watch multiple episodes of tv shows in just one setting. In 2020, Starosta & Izydorczyk found that binge watching can be entertaining, leisure experience & relaxing but on the same hand, it can lead to behavioural addiction & mental disorders like depression, anxiety, or sleep disturbances. People who binge watch are predicted to possess neuroticism, introversion, isolation, self-esteem, and low conscientiousness as well. People engage in such binge watching to fulfil immediate gratification, impulsivity, and urgency. Binge watching features the symptoms of addiction like guilt, loss of control, negative social and health consequence, withdrawal, neglect of duties etc. but because of limited research, the relation between binge watching & mental disorders is assumed to be bidirectional in nature. Shim & Kim in 2018, did an online survey on 785 South Korean binge watchers to identify the motivations to binge watch and to explore the effect of sensation seeking and cognition need on binge watching. Results showed that subjects perceived binge watching as a source to fulfil their enjoyment, control, efficiency, and fandom. People binge watched shows which were especially recommended by others. Sensation seeking and cognition need positively affected binge watching & fostered effects of binge-watching motivation. Binge watching behaviours are contemporarily observed at a higher frequency which are felt to be entertaining but potentially problematic as well. Therefore, Starosta et al., in 2021, aimed to probe that how difficulty in emotional regulation, impulsivity and one's motivation to binge watch predict problematic behaviour. The study was conducted on 645 young adults using Excessive binge-watching questionnaire, Viewing motivation scale, Emotional regulation scale & Impulsive behavioural scale. Results portrayed that impulse -control difficulties, lack of premeditation & escapism are prominent and significant predictors of binge-watching behaviour. Additionally, once motivation to deal with loneliness, best way of spending free time and informative & entertaining motivations were also found to be significant predictors of binge watching. Granow et al., in 2018, demonstrated positive impacts of binge watching by an online study done on 499 subjects. On one aspect, binge watching is assumed to raise viewer's enjoyment, recovery experience and vitality through increased perceived autonomy but on the other hand, it triggers goal conflicts and feeling of guilt, reducing well-being. The outcome of the study aided the hypothesis that is binge watching can be perceived to be a recreational activity as long as goal conflicts and guilt feelings could be avoided. Binge watching positively affected wellbeing inducing increased perceived autonomy. Hence, controlled viewing under moderate levels is recommended. But is binge watching really addictive? This was answered by Ort et al., in 2021, with an online survey on 415 media users who streamed at least one service. Contradictory, results are just paradoxical to previous research stating that binge watching overall related to only low level of problematic behaviours. Although, excessive binge watching increased problematic behaviour, but outcomes suggested that regular binge watching cannot be labelled as 'addictive' or 'problematic'. Binge watching done for entertaining & relaxation was negatively related to problematic viewing. Relatively to frequency of binge watching, loneliness, escapism, learning, social interaction, and stimulation can proliferate problematic behaviour. Morgan in 2017, tried to find the 'effect of binge watching and character identification on goal occupation' with a sample of 734 students. Results exhibited that there's some association between viewers goal career and their favourite character. The genre of shows could also impact identification between viewers and character as because previous studies have indicated such stronger parasocial relationship (Kanazawa, 2002) but there's lack of evidence and significance for stating whether binge watching strengthens the relation

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between self-goal and favourite character's career as no such significant relationship was found.

Binge watching is closely associated with mental health disorders like depression, loneliness, sleep problems, anxiety and stress & this was made demonstrative via the study done by Alimoradi et al., in 2022, where they found that binge watching was linked to these disorders. Robust correlation of binge watching was found with stress & anxiety along with stronger associations with sleep and depression during covid 19. Binge watching pertained to stress and sleep problems more in developing countries than in developed countries. These associations were significantly positive. In a similar study done by Sung & Chang in 2021, depression, social interaction anxiety and loneliness were some of the associated mental health concerns with binge watching. The study was a cross-sectional study done on 1488 participants aged about 20 years using purposive sampling. It was found that binge watching scores positively correlated with depression, loneliness & social interaction anxiety scores ( $p < 0.001$  for each). Thus, binge watching increased the risk of social interaction anxiety, depression & loneliness. But when Lehmkuhler in 2020, did a study on 38 participants in a 14-day experience sampling study, it was tried to investigate whether binge watching relates to depression more specifically, the feelings of guilt overtime or not. Unfortunately, binge watching had no associations with depressive symptoms, but guilt feelings and concentration issues were found to be higher the next morning and even immediately after watching. But these associations were short & small and could depend upon the kind of content watched.

Binge watching is insidious to other health concerns like emotional, conduct, cognitive, anger control, hyperactivity, and family. This was illustrated in 2022, by a study done by Ozkent & Acikel on 189 adolescents using a cross-sectional design. It evidently portrayed that binge watching had close associations with emotional, cognitive problems, family, conduct and inattention concerns (DSM-IV). Higher frequency of binge watching was significantly linked to emotional issues ( $p < 0.001$ ), cognitive problems ( $p = 0.001$ ), conduct problems ( $p < 0.012$ ) and inattention ( $p < 0.001$ ). Such associations were also higher with sleep as what had been found in the study done by Exelmans & Bulck in 2017 on 423 participants between the age range 18 to 25 using an online survey. Scales like Pittsburgh sleep quality index, Fatigue assessment scale, Pre-sleep arousal scale and Bergen insomnia scale were administered for this purpose. Results indicated that 80.6% of the participants identified themselves as binge watchers ( $N = 341$ ). Among these, 32.6% of the viewers had poor sleep linked to their binge watching. High binge-watching frequency led to poorer sleep quality, more fatigue, and increased symptoms of insomnia. Here, cognitive pre-sleep arousal mediated such relationships. Buschmeyer in 2022, tried to probe the relationship between binge watching and perceived stress by his study done on 38 participants between the age range 18 to 51 years for 14 days who filled up 3 short daily questionnaires pertaining to their moods, feelings and behaviours. Outcomes revealed that binge watching was significantly correlated to high stress levels the next day of the study but unfortunately, number of hours and episodes watched didn't have a significant linear effect on their stress levels. Hence, stress wasn't a significant predictor of binge watching or no. of hours & episodes watched the same day. Binge watching could be a predictor of high stress the next day but not a consequence on the same day.

### ***Need for Binge-Watch***

In 2018, Shim et al., investigated the 1) association between attitude towards binge watching and degree of binge watching 2) role of personality traits and need of cognition with a

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sample of 714. It was found that there exists a positive association between negative attitude and the extent of binge-watching behaviour. High immediate gratification with negative attitude for binge-watching were found more likely to binge watch. The depreciating side of binge watching is something which had been probed by Starosta et al., in 2021 with a sample of 645 Polish students to examine the problematic symptoms of binge watching i.e., anxiety- depressive syndrome. For this purpose, State trait anxiety inventory, Depression measurement questionnaire, Questionnaire of excessive binge watching & Viewing motivation scale were used. There was significant relationship found between anxiety-depressive syndrome and motivation where escape motivation and motivation to deal with loneliness were associated with the same. These factors mediated the relationship between anxiety-depressive syndrome and binge watching. Gabbiadini & more in 2021 conducted a study on 196 tv series viewers to explore the psychological factors underlying binge watching. Outcomes revealed that binge watching revolves around 3 factors viz. feeling of loneliness, escapism and identification with media characters which acted as predictors for binge watching. Higher feelings of loneliness associated with higher binge-watching behaviours. Additionally, only escapism predicted subjects' identification with viewed characters promoting higher binge-watching tendency. Ultimately, binge watching was found as a coping strategy for media escapists who found binge watching as enjoyable and privileged online space for escapism and to allow themselves (i.e., their loneliness) to identify with the fictitious characters.

In a qualitative semi structured interview of approximately 60 minutes and informal discussion for 30 minutes conducted by Steiner & Xu in 2020 on 36 participants (21 women & 15 men) between the age 22 to 66 years, it was found that binge watching is primarily motivated by relaxation, catching up, cultural inclusion, sense of completion and enhanced viewing experience but portability and navigability of streamed videos influenced binge watching. Viewers feelings about their binge watching were found to be ambivalent. Binge watching was one of the behavioural patterns observed during COVID-19 which was assessed by the longitudinal study done by Sigre-Leiros et al., in 2023 on a sample of 1356 TV series viewers between the age of 18-79 years. People engaged in such recreational activities to regulate their emotional states. The study was conducted through a period of 6 weeks online longitudinal survey where results highlighted that males and social motives for binge watching predicted decreased negative affect levels. But problematic binge watching aroused by loss of self-control as a single predictor leading to increase in negative affect overtime. Ultimately, binge watching acted as a maladaptive emotional regulation strategy during unprecedented situations.

Interestingly, Ramayan et al., in 2018 performed a qualitative study on 12 participants using purpose of sampling via a focused group interview. Results stated that binge watching can be deciphered along the following lines i.e., entertainment, education, escapism, social and watched character. In case of entertainment, people found binge watching to be rewarding and fun going which included experience of automaticity (without thinking consciously), without any social pressure for such engagement with instant gratification. But many viewers were found to lack vigilance of their own viewing behaviour neglecting food and sleep. Consequently, watching more than 5 episodes decreased pleasure and increased passive leisure activity. But some subjects binge watched with their family members leading to binge-bonding rendering a platform for nurturing interpersonal communication, occurring during the binge-bond session. Escapism is another cause for binge watching as mentioned prior. Subjects binge washed to procrastinate exam stress, prolonged classroom engagement and to defer academic preparation for the sake of detoxification. They feel worry-free and

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peaceful when binge watched creating a fantasy world of whatever they watched. Due to the needs to form social connections, binge watching had become prominent since all binge watched shows had become a staple topic of casual conversation. Hence, people tried to binge watch in order to be on the same pace and catch up with current television shows to stay updated. Sometimes it's even a matter of concern that who finishes the series' first which leads to a competitive rapid pace viewing to triumph the race. Some people binge watch as because they can form emotional connections with the fictional characters being portrayed forming parasocial relationship influencing their viewing. Binge watching even promoted educational pros to the subjects of the study where they could acquire knowledge of cultural contexts and sharing the same with others.

### ***Gadgets & Platforms***

Starosta et al., reproduced their study in 2020, where they aimed to identify the psychological factors associated with problematic symptoms of binge watching and on which device people tend to binge watch excessively. The sample comprised of 1000 participants between 19 - 27 years where outcomes revealed that binge watching mostly occurs on laptops and smartphones and low level of conscientiousness is strongly linked to the symptoms of binge watching and personality traits like low emotional stability, low agreeableness & low intellect hold a significant relationship with binge watching. The Indian researchers Dhanuka & Bohra in 2019, did a cross-sectional study on 19 participants aged between 80 to 25 years from Mumbai to probe the behavioural change of youth towards virtual content when its wellbeing effects. It was objectively demonstrated that participants' occupation had an impact on the decision to binge watch independent of their age and gender. The most common platforms to binge watch when Netflix, Amazon Prime & Hotstar with comedy and horror being the most common watching preference. Although 42% of the participants felt like breaking the trend to binge watch but still couldn't. They were vigilant about the ill effects like addiction, repercussions on mental and physical health (43.21%), decline in productivity (53%), antisocial traits (48.9%) and sleep disturbances (77.8%). 75.6% of the viewers felt satisfaction of such high binge watching but unfortunately 31.1% experienced emotional issues.

### ***Binge-Watching Frequency***

A study done by Castro et al., in 2021 on 13 participants (6 students, 5 professionals and 2 identified as both) using exploratory study focused on 40 Netflix viewing session. Outcomes elicited that binge watching is done in order to relax, relief from boredom and escapism. The average hours of binge watching was recorded to be 2 hours 10 minutes. Subject's valence level i.e., happy-unhappy significantly reduced after binge watching but their positive affective states increased after reading sci-fi genres. Their negative affective states declined after viewing comedy genres and slightly increased post watching drama. However, the levels of arousal i.e., relaxed/stimulated remained constant. In a study done by Steinbach in 2018, on 23 participants using a daily questionnaire over the course of 15 days, it was observed that subjects streamed online video services on a regular basis and binge watched 36% of the days. On average 1.42 hours per day was spent on such viewing. Participants who binge watched spent less time in physical activities and housekeeping and more time in social activities. But no negative influence was found on learning behaviour or grades.

In one of the studies conducted by Oberschmidt in 2017, to find the relationship between binge watching, compensatory health behaviour and sleep on a sample of 329 young adults via a cross-sectional study, it was found that relationship between compensatory health behaviour and sleep wasn't influenced by binge watching frequency. It was highlighted that

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nighttime binge watching & watching with others negatively influenced sleep quantity, especially watching with friends. However, binge watching frequency didn't correlate with sleep outcome, hence the correlation stands to be questionable.

### ***Problematic v/s Non-problematic viewing***

A recent study had shown that problematic and non-problematic binge watching aren't the same. This was depicted by Flayelle et al., in 2022 using a large sample of 4275 TV Series viewers. The study comprised of 2 sets of conduction where in first set, they modelled intensity of non-harmful binge watching as dependent variable and in the other they modelled problematic binge watching as dependent variable. It was highlighted that emotional enhancement motivation followed by social motivation and enrichment where saliently modelling non-harmful binge watching whereas coping or escapism followed by lack of perseverance and urgency prominently modelled problematic binge watching and acted as its predictors. Ultimately, it could be deciphered that non-harmful/non-problematic viewing or binge watching is characterised by positive reinforcement while problematic viewing or binge watching is associated to negative reinforcement and impulsive traits. Stoldt in 2016, did a study on 127 undergraduate students to probe the television viewing habit changes due to digital media morphosis of tv. The survey elicited significant difference between traditional and binge watchers. It was found that binge watchers gained higher entertainment, escapism, character correspondence & basis for social interaction relatively to traditional watchers by watching & consuming shows quickly.

## **DISCUSSION**

This new era had been characterised by a fascinating term called 'Binge-watching' which refers to excessive viewing of tv series or online services in just single session where laptops and smartphones (Starosta et al., 2020) are the most common gadgets used with the most conventional platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime & Hotstar with comedy and horror being the most watched preference (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019). The average time spent on such viewing is recorded to be 2 hours impacting subject's valence level i.e., happy/unhappy. Positive affective states increased after watching sci-fi genres, but negative affective states declined after watching comedy and slightly increased post watching drama (Castro et al., 2021). Binge watchers spent less time in physical activity and housekeeping and more time in social activities, but no negative influence is found on learning behaviour or grades (Steinbach, 2018).

Entertainment, leisure experience & relaxation are some of the reasons as for why people engage in such binge-watching behaviour (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). It leads to fulfilment of their immediate gratification, impulsivity, and urgency. Even people who need cognitive acquiring and are characterised as 'sensation seekers' opt binge watching behaviour (Shim & Kim, 2018). But binge watching is a recreational activity as long as goal conflicts & guilt feelings could be avoided (Granow et al., 2018). The genre of the shows and favourite character's goals can impact the identification between viewer and character (Morgan, 2017).

Unfortunately, the depreciating side of the same behaviour is quite evident because binge watching had been found to be behaviourally addictive leading to social interaction anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances along with neuroticism, introversion, isolation, and low conscientiousness as well (Sung & Chang, 2021; Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). Contradictorily, binge watching had no association with depression, but guilt feelings and concentration issues are found to be higher immediately after watching but such associations

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are found to be short and small and could depend upon the kind of content watched (Lehmkuhler, 2020). Even sleep didn't associate with binge watching frequency and hence the correlation stands to be questionable (Oberschmidt, 2017). Binge watching is insidious to other health concerns like emotional, conduct, cognitive (Ozkent & Acikel, 2022) aspects as well as it leads to increased symptoms of insomnia, fatigue & stress (Exelmans & Bulck, 2017) but number of hours and episodes watched do not have significant linear effect on stress levels. Hence, binge watching is a predictor of high stress on the day followed but not a consequence (Buschmeyer, 2022). Eventually, the relationship between binge watching & mental disorders is found bidirectional in nature.

Some of the prominent causative elements that make people binge watch are escapism, motivation to deal with loneliness (Starosta, et al., 2021), character identification, coping strategies, cultural inclusion, emotional regulation & education. Binge watchers identify their behaviour to be as a coping strategy, enjoyable and privileged online space for escapism to allow themselves to identify with the fictitious character (Gabbadini et al., 2021) to let go their loneliness and increment relaxation, regulating & improving their emotional states during unprecedented circumstances (Sigre-Leiros et al., 2023). Binge watchers binge-watch with their family members leading to binge-bonding, rendering a platform for nurturing their interpersonal communication during the binge-bond session. It makes them worry-free & peaceful that aid them escape from current stress leading to detoxification. As binge watching is a staple topic of casual conversation in day-to-day life, hence people try to engage in such behaviour to be on the same pace and to catch up with the current trend of television shows to stay updated in social context. Sometimes it's even a matter that who finishes up the series' first in a competitive pace to triumph the race. Binge watching promotes the viewers with a parasocial relationship formation with their fictional character, acquiring knowledge of cultural context and sharing the same with other (Ramayan et al., 2018). But problematic and non-problematic viewing or binge watching aren't the same. Studies have revealed that non-problematic viewing is characterised by positive reinforcement while problematic viewing is attributed to negative reinforcement and impulsive traits (Flayelle et al., 2022; Stoldt, 2016).

### ***Recommendation***

At one end, binge watching behaviours is considered to be assisting in order to have escapism, immediate gratification, learning and educational benefits but on the same end, it has negative consequences associated like mental health related issues and personality concerns impacting daily life and overall functioning. Hence, a controlled viewing over such behaviour is recommended under limited time exposure viewing sufficient amount of content without much hindrance to psychological well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

Binge watching has its own pros and cons, but the disadvantages state is more emphasising and concerning. On average, people binge watch for at least 2 hours on smartphones & laptops on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hotstar leading to depreciating effects on their health. Immediate gratification, escapism, knowledge, entertainment, enjoyment, relief etc. are some of the salient factors leading to binge watching but it's detrimental effects cannot be overlooked. Unless a clear distinction can be made between problematic & non-problematic viewing, drawing a straightforward conclusion may not be plausible because what seems problematic to some binge watchers may not be the same for others on the same line & vice-versa. Hence, further exploration is suggested.

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