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To cite this article: J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, Lori Andersen Spruance, Kala Frantz & Jessica Sloan Kruger (2019) College student television binge watching: Conceptualization, gratifications, and perceived consequences, The Social Science Journal, 56:4, 470-479, DOI: [10.1016/j.soscij.2018.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2018.10.004)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2018.10.004>



Published online: 23 Dec 2019.



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# College student television binge watching: Conceptualization, gratifications, and perceived consequences

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 May 2018

Received in revised form 10 October 2018

Accepted 11 October 2018

Available online 25 October 2018

### Keywords:

Television

Binge watching

College students

Qualitative

Uses and Gratifications

## ABSTRACT

Largely facilitated by technological convergence, television binge watching is a newer media phenomenon. The current exploratory study recruited a random sample of college students (18–25 years old;  $N=406$ ) from a university in the western United States. Using a Uses and Gratifications framework, qualitative methods were implemented to better understand how college students conceptualize binge watching, their motivations for engaging in binge watching, and any potential perceived consequences. College students' definitions of binge watching included the key components of quantity of time, consecutive viewing, and number of episodes. The college context was perceived to facilitate the practice of binge watching. Participants perceived that binge watching could have adverse physical and mental health consequences. In the social realm, some participants indicated that binge watching was a social activity and could lead to making new friends, but some cautioned that binge watching could be socially isolating.

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In fall 2015, 17 million students enrolled in undergraduate education in the United States, which is a 30% increase from 15 years ago (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Media is a central component of college student life, “[media] can function both as a socializing agent and as something that emerging adults purposefully seek out as a way of expressing autonomy, exploring identity, and building or maintaining relationships.” (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013, p. 125). College students

utilize both new and traditional forms of media, and spend more daily time with media compared to any other activity.

The current exploratory study aimed to understand a more recent media consumption trend known as TV binge watching (Pittman, & Sheehan, 2015). The average adult in the United States views four-and-a-half hours of live Television (TV) daily (Nielsen, 2016b). With the internet and new viewing platforms, the way people view TV has evolved. Presently, young adults (18–34 years old) spend six hours and 40 min weekly with TV-connected devices (e.g., multimedia device, Amazon Fire [[www.amazon.com/firestick](http://www.amazon.com/firestick)], Apple TV [[www.apple.com/tv/](http://www.apple.com/tv/)]; Nielsen, 2016a), college students (18–24 years old) specifically watch more video on the internet when compared to other age groups (Nielsen,

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2013b), and 92% of colleges students have access to a Netflix ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)) account (Brown, 2017). Currently, the concept of binge watching has been discussed widely in popular media, but has received limited empirical attention (Pierce-Grove, 2016).

At present, there is not agreement regarding an empirical definition of binge watching (Pierce-Grove, 2016) and the research on binge watching that is available has provided fixed definitions of binge watching for participants (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). However, it is unclear whether prescribed definitions of binge watching align with the conceptualizations of those who are experiencing the phenomena. The current qualitative study was conducted to gain an in-depth conceptualization of this media phenomenon from college student voices. A college sample was selected for this exploratory study because, compared to other age groups, young adult consumers are the “most likely to binge watch” (Nielsen, 2013a; Panda & Pandey, 2017, p. 429). Further, traditional TV viewing has been associated with a variety of consequences (Matrix, 2014; Sussman & Moran, 2013), but binge watching is arguably a distinct type of viewing (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Thus, this exploratory study also sought to identify college students’ perceptions regarding the potential consequences of engaging in TV binge watching.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) posits that media users are goal directed, self-aware, and active (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Because media users are active, they choose a medium from competing media options that best gratifies their needs. This approach further postulates that as consumers are self-aware they can accurately self-reflect on the needs that were met through media consumption. Ruggiero (2000) predicted that the internet would lead to “profound changes in media users’ personal and social habits and roles” (p. 28). New technology, including internet based video platforms, have played a central role in the phenomenon of binge watching (Jenner, 2016). Jenner (2016) proposed that we have entered a new period of television, where video on demand (VOD) platforms offering exclusively online content “is a move away from the television set” (p. 259). Past research has identified the uses and gratifications of TV. For instance, Rubin (1983) reported that people are motivated to choose TV viewing for relaxation, companionship, entertainment, escape, information, and arousal purposes. Some also are motivated to view TV out of habit or to pass the time. It could be that college students are motivated to binge watch to meet similar needs. However, with the development of newer media forms, U&G scholars have posited that new affordances must also be considered (Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Ruggiero (2000) argued that demassification (i.e., the individual’s control over the medium), asynchronicity (i.e., the staggering of messages that allows for convenience in interaction), and interactivity (i.e., connection between users, responsiveness of the medium to users, playfulness [e.g., meeting entertainment needs]) should be considered in U&G studies with new

technology developments. Binge watching likely involves both older and newer motivations because of the convergence of a more traditional media form (TV) with the contemporary internet streaming platforms. Pittman and Sheehan (2015) argued, “Binge-watching is arguably different from other types of viewing since it gives users a degree of control over their viewing activities they have never had before” (para. 17).

## 2. Conceptualization of binge watching

Newer developments in technology (e.g., DVD, VOD, DVR) allow users to schedule their TV viewing autonomously (Jenner, 2016; Matrix, 2014). This opens the door to watching several episodes of a series in one sitting, rather than waiting for the episodes to air live. The new developments in TV have created a new phenomenon entitled *binge watching* (Jenner, 2016). Some have challenged the term binge watching because of the negative connotation associated with the word “binge” and prefer *marathon viewing* (Silverman & Ryalls, 2016), while others have associated the practice with a specific VOD platform and refer to binge watching as the *Netflix Effect* (Matrix, 2014). Pierce-Grove (2016) indicated that there is not a consistent definition of binge watching and that there is still a need for an empirically grounded definition.

Researchers have used different definitions in their empirical research regarding binge watching. For example, binge watching has been defined “as consuming two or more episodes of a single television series in one sitting” (Silverman & Ryalls, 2016, p. 522), “continuing a viewing session [after watching one episode], consuming content from the same series, and returning quickly to begin a new viewing session” (Schweidel & Moe, 2016, p. 16), “watching more than two episodes of the same TV show in one sitting” (Walton-Pattison & Dombroski, & Presseau, 2016, p. 3), and “watching two or more episodes of the same series in a single sitting, or watching one or more episodes of the same series for several consecutive days” (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015, para. 26). One of the challenges of these definitions is that TV episodes vary in duration (e.g., some are 20 min, some are 40+ min). Walton-Pattison et al. (2016) argued that a definition should include watching multiple episodes of the same show consecutively. However, Jenner (2016) wrote, “At any rate, what exactly constitutes a [TV] binge is likely to be different for everybody and defined through highly individualised terms and practices” (p. 265). The definition may even be different for different age groups. A logical step toward identifying an empirical definition, which accounts for the potential for individualized terms and practices, would be to ask people who have had experience with the phenomenon how they conceptualize the practice of binge watching.

## 3. Binge watching: gratifications and consequences

Limited research is available regarding gratifications that are met from choosing to binge watch. Pittman and Sheehan (2015) used a fixed-response survey and snowball sampling procedures to begin to understand the uses and gratifications among adult binge watchers ( $N=263$ ;

$mean_{age} = 29$ ). Survey results indicated that binge watchers were motivated by five factors: (a) engagement (i.e., more than entertainment, but active involvement in viewing), (b) relaxation (i.e., to relax, unwind, or rest), hedonism (i.e., “derived feelings of pleasure from fun or fantasy” para. 22), (c) to pass time (i.e., something convenient to do to fill time), and (d) social (i.e., to cope with loneliness or an activity to do with others). Only one study has quantified college students ( $N=240$ ) motivations for binge watching (Panda & Pandey, 2017). Results indicated that college students were motivated to binge watch for social engagement (e.g., to fit in), to escape, the easy accessibility of TV content, and advertising. Both U&G studies provided participants with a definition of binge watching and utilized fixed-response surveys. The question still remains whether current research definitions align with those who are experiencing the phenomenon. Pittman and Sheehan (2015) encouraged future research to better understand and expand the different motivations for binge watching using random sampling procedures. Further, research on binge watching has relied on quantitative methods (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Walton-Pattison et al., 2016) and qualitative methods could allow for more in-depth understanding of this relatively new phenomenon.

There has long been concern about prolonged TV viewing because of the negative consequences (Matrix, 2014). In their review of the negative impacts of TV viewing, Sussman and Moran (2013) indicated that TV viewing could have negative consequences for academic performance, sleep, physical health (obesity), and relationships. TV viewing has also been associated with unhealthy diet practices (Blass et al., 2006) and those who watch TV for long hours report lower self-control, well-being, and higher levels of anxiety and material aspirations (Frey, Benesch, & Stutzer, 2007). Emerging research on binge TV watching indicates that when a person feels guilt or shame about previous TV binge session they are more likely to engage in further binge watching behaviors (Panda & Pandey, 2017). Also, higher TV consumption has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes among adults (Tremblay, Colley, Saunders, Healy, & Owen, 2010). The studies cited in this section largely focus on traditional TV viewing and it is unclear what the consequences of binge watching might be for college students. This is an important area to explore, because young adulthood is a time period where lasting health behaviors are developed (Nelson, Story, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Lytle, 2008).

#### 4. Purpose of the current study

The current exploratory study was designed to understand college students' conceptualization of binge watching and the perceived consequences. College student perceptions are important because perceptions can influence behavioral outcomes (Taylor, 2014) and they are in the age group that are most likely to binge (Nielsen, 2013a; Panda & Pandey, 2017). A qualitative approach was selected to give voice to college students' experience with binge watching. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

**Table 1**

Sample characteristics ( $n = 406$ ).

Sex	<i>n</i>
Female	238
Male	166
Decline to state	2
Ethnicity	%
Non-Hispanic White	86.2
Decline to state	3.9
Other	3.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.0
Latino	2.5
African American	0.5
Native American	0.2
Marital status	%
Single	81.2
Married	18.8
University class standing	%
Freshman	32.3
Sophomore	19.5
Junior	24.5
Senior	23.7
Number of enrolled course credits	%
10 or less	5.8
11–16	73.3
17–20	20.9

**Research Question 1.** How do college students conceptualize binge watching and the motivations for engaging in the behavior?

**Research Question 2.** What are college students' perceptions of the consequences (positive or negative) of binge watching?

#### 5. Methods

##### 5.1. Sample

The sample included 406 college students between the ages of 18 and 25 ( $m = 20.6$  years old,  $sd = 2.02$ ). Table 1 includes the sample characteristics. The majority of the sample was female (58.9%), single (81.2%), and reported they were Caucasian (86.2%). The greater part of the sample lived off-campus (58.6%) or in on-campus (20.7%) student housing.

##### 5.2. Procedures and data analysis

Study procedures were approved by an Institutional Review Board at a western university in the United States where data collection occurred. The university registrar's office generated a random sample of 1,995 college students. In October 2015, email invitations were sent to the selected students to participate in an online survey. Survey completion took approximately 20–30 min and 500 students elected to participate (25.06% response rate). To incentivize participation, 50 participants were randomly selected to receive a gift card. Ages of students who com-

pleted the survey ranged from 18 to 46 and, because the current study focused on students between the ages of 18 and 25, responses from students who did not report their age ( $n=68$ ) or were outside of the age range ( $n=26$ ;  $m=27.9$  years old,  $sd=4.76$ ) were excluded from this study.

### 5.2.1. Research question 1

The online survey was developed in concert with current research on binge watching and among researchers at three universities. The first research question focused on how college students conceptualized binge TV watching and why students might engage in the practice. Participants responded to two open-ended items: (a) *From your perspective, how would you describe binge TV watching?* and (b) *Describe reasons a college student might decide to binge watch TV.* Additionally, to address the current challenge in the variance of episode length in defining binge watching (Walton-Pattison et al., 2016), participants were asked a follow-up fixed-response item that read, *How many consecutive hours of TV watching during one sitting do you consider to be binge watching?* (less than an hour per day to 10 or more hours at a time). One additional item was asked to assess perceived prevalence: *Most people in my age group tend to binge watch television* (5-point Likert scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) procedures were used to analyze open-ended responses. Two researchers independently immersed themselves in the data to identify key thoughts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Twenty-eight participants were excluded from the analysis who did not provide a response to either open-ended items. The two researchers then met together, and based on the key thoughts, agreed upon 16 coding categories. Then participant responses were independently coded line-by-line (van Manen, 1984) by the two researchers (87% inter-coder agreement). Coding disagreements were resolved through discussion and consulting the data. After coding processes were complete, the two researchers met again and identified commonalities among the codes that resulted in three “key categories” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) or themes that accurately represented participants’ responses. Descriptive statistical procedures were used with the fixed-item responses and the researchers agreed upon where to present these descriptive results within the qualitative results.

### 5.2.2. Research question 2

The second research question sought to understand college students’ perceptions of the consequences (positive or negative) of binge watching. Participants’ responses to open-ended survey items were used to answer this research question. First participants were asked to, *Describe some positive or negative consequences of binge watching TV for college students, if any.* Then follow-up questions regarding exercise and eating behaviors were asked (*Describe how binge TV watching might influence what a college student eats?; Describe how binge TV watching might influence a college student's physical activity level?*). Again, a conventional qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was implemented and the analysis procedures described in research question one were followed in

this analysis. Eleven participants did not provide responses to the three open-ended items and were excluded from the analysis. The analysis resulted in 17 codes (90% inter-coder agreement) and four themes.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Research question 1: college students’ conceptualization of binge watching

The first research question aimed at understanding how college students conceptualized TV binge watching and why college students might participate in this media practice. Three themes were identified (a) defining binge watching, (b) binge watching as an enticing alternative, and (c) how a college setting promotes binge watching (see Table 2). Themes are presented in order of prevalence and representative examples include participant gender and age parenthetically to contextualize the results.

#### 6.1.1. Defining binge watching

College students’ commonly defined binge watching in terms of the consecutive amount of time spent watching TV or by the number of episodes or movies viewed in one sitting. A male (20) college student explained that binge watching is, “Watching TV for hours on end without doing anything or taking a break. Being determined to watch a whole series without stopping.” Participants used words and phrases like “excessive amounts of time,” “hours upon hours,” “great amount of time” in addition to sharing amounts of time ranging from one to nine hours of TV viewing as they defined binge watching. In a follow-up quantitative question, participants reported that, on average, binge watching included 4.62 ( $sd=1.48$ ) consecutive hours of TV watching. Some participants believed that the definition included time minimums, but ultimately binge watching involved watching “several episodes” (responses ranged from at least three episodes to completion of an entire TV series) or “two or more movies.” For example, one student (male, 24) shared that binge watching included “Watching multiple episodes of a series. Less dependent on time (But needs to be over an hour) and more on the number of episodes watched.” Finally, although fewer in number, some students indicated that binge watching was a process that begins with “amazing shows” becoming available through streaming platforms like “Netflix,” “Hulu,” and “Amazon Prime” that college students watch in a short period of time because they want to know what happens next in the storyline. In line with this conceptualization, a student (female, 20) simply stated that her binge commenced when a “... new season of ‘American Horror Story’ (Falchuk et al., 2012) came on Netflix. Priorities.”

#### 6.1.2. Binge watching is an enticing alternative

College students reported that binge watching was often used as a method of distraction from homework, responsibilities, emotional/mental health issues (i.e., loneliness, depression, anxiety), and reality. For instance, a college student (female, 18) divulged that she binged watched:



**Table 2**

College student (n = 378) conceptualization of TV binge watching: results from a qualitative content analysis.

Coding area	Case %	Example
Theme 1 defining TV binge watching		
Defined by amount of watching time	45.77	"In a more general sense, I'd say anything equal to or higher than four hours in a day is binge watching." (female, 20)
Defined as consecutive	39.42	"Watching a series of the same content in a continuous back to back." (male, 22)
Defined by number of episodes/movies	20.90	"[Binging is] watching more than 3 episodes of a series, or more than 1 movie" (female, 22)
Quality of show	17.46	"More often I think people [binge watch] when they are really into a certain show." (female, 19)
Platform	9.79	"I don't watch shows live anymore. I just binge watch Netflix." (female, 20)
Theme 2 TV binge watching as an enticing alternative		
Procrastination	52.91	"My roommate binge watches TV to avoid doing homework" (male, 20)
Mental health/emotional issues	21.69	"When you are lonely [binge watching] makes you feel less lonely." (female, 20)
Addiction and self-control	14.29	"[Binge watching] encompasses a lack of self-control and self-discipline." (male, 20)
Guilt	11.64	"I would also say it includes feelings of guilt and regret after you are done watching." (male, 21)
Escape from reality	10.32	"[Binge watching] is an easy way to . . . escape the realities of this world for a little bit." (female, 18)
Theme 3 college setting promotes TV binge watching		
De-stress and relax	30.69	"Stress and relaxation are probably huge reasons college students binge watch TV." (male, 21)
Coping with boredom	23.54	"You have nothing better to do. So you just watch TV until you eventually do something" (female, 19)
Normal among college students	13.23	"The culture of [binge watching] is also very popular so it makes it seem acceptable." (male, 19)
Access	11.38	"Being a broke college student, [binge watching] is a cheap alternative." (female, 18)
Entertainment	8.20	"[Binge watch] because TV is made to be entertaining and enjoyable" (female, 20)
Multitasking	3.97	"Thanks to multiple media sources, we aren't used to focusing on only one thing at a time." (male, 23)

Note: total percentage exceeds 100% because a line-by-line coding approach was used and most participants reported more than one coding area within their responses.

Because life sucks and there's too many things that are thrown at [college students] every day for us to not need something to distract us. . I just had an hour long anxiety attack this morning over my rent payment that I can't pay. Now I'm watching "Grey's Anatomy" (Rhimes, 2005).

Another student (female, 18) shared that when students feel overwhelmed with homework, college students say, "I'm just going to take a break and watch one show.' Which we all know never happens. And they end up watching several shows for several hours." College students acknowledged that the binge watching is an enticing option, but using it for distractive or avoidant purposes could often end with negative consequences such as "procrastinating school work," "feelings of guilt or regret," and "addiction."

### 6.1.3. College setting promotes binge watching

With limited money, limited/no parental supervision (i.e., "parents aren't there to tell you to turn the TV off"), and roommates, college students indicated that the college environment facilitated binge TV watching. When college students (n = 374) were asked about the perceived prevalence of binge watching among college students, well over

half of the participants agreed (59.4%) or strongly agreed (14.4%) that most college students engaged in binge watching. A few students reported that they used binge watching as background noise while they were accomplishing their responsibilities. More common within this theme, was the notion that binge watching was a valid relaxation tool once responsibilities were complete. A college student divulged, "Relaxation is probably [a] huge reason college students binge watch. I know that after a big test, my roommates and I tend to crash and want to relax and get our minds off of stress" (male, 21). College students also indicated that binge watching is a common form of affordable and accessible "entertainment" or "fun" in college. Many saw binge watching as a normal social process. "If your roommates are into a show you usually get sucked into the show as well" (female, 21) or binge watching could allow a college student to ". . . bond with friends by watching something together" (female, 21).

### 6.2. Research question 2: perceived consequences of binge watching

The second research question sought to understand the perceived positive and negative consequences of college student TV binge watching. Four themes were identi-

**Table 3**

College student (n = 395) perceptions of the consequences of TV binge watching: results from a qualitative content analysis.

Coding area	Case %	Example
Theme 1 TV binge-watching and college student physical health		
Consume unhealthy food/beverages	66.50	"It might encourage unhealthy eating habits such as eating out or consuming junk food with very little nutritional value." (female, 22)
Food choices based on convenience	51.72	"Eating foods that are easy to eat, little preparation." (male, 22)
Binge watching displaces exercise time	50.25	"Wasting time watching TV takes away time to exercise." (male, 22)
Decreases motivation to exercise	24.63	"No desire to be active when you could sit down and 'relax'." (male, 22)
Sedentary activity	24.38	"Binge watching is an outstandingly stationary hobby." (female, 18)
Food intake (eat too much/too little)	15.52	"They could eat more because they are mindlessly snacking while watching." (female, 18)
Decreases sleep	5.91	"The most common thing I see is that college students stay up way too late and end up sleeping through their classes because they are too tired." (male, 22)
Theme 2 TV binge-watching and college student responsibilities		
Negatively impacts school responsibilities	41.87	"It has a negative effect on school work because it is often an excuse to avoid doing homework or studying." (female 18)
Relaxation from responsibilities	22.17	"Watching television can be a good way to relieve stress during college." (female, 20)
Waste time	19.70	"Negatives are mostly involving time. There are many other things I could be doing instead." (female, 21)
Entertainment	5.42	"It can be an inexpensive form of entertainment." (female, 21)
A reward for completing responsibilities	2.22	"[My roommate] is very diligent about doing his homework. [Binge watching] is his reward to himself for completing hours of study." (male, 24)
Theme 3 perceived social consequences of college student TV binge-watching		
Harms social relationships/experiences	18.47	"They become distant from friends and family and don't go out and have actual human interaction." (female, 21)
Improves social relationships/experiences	12.32	"Students are in the loop with current TV shows, socially savvy when TV show conversations come up." (male, 18)
Hurts communication and social skills	8.87	"They don't get out and talk to others as much as they could." (male, 23)
Theme 4 TV binge-watching and college student mental health		
Leads to mental health challenges	11.82	"It can possibly create anxiety (knowing you have other things you should be doing) or depression or chronic laziness." (male, 20)
Disconnection from the real world	8.13	"I think that binge watching disconnects people from their lives. It's cool to do it occasionally but if you are constantly thinking about TV or movies it distracts from your actual life." (male, 21)
Coping	1.72	"They use it to help their depression and anxiety instead of facing those problems and getting the real help that they need." (male, 20)

Note: total percentage exceeds 100% because a line-by-line coding approach was used and most participants reported more than one coding area within their responses.

fied and participants perceived that binge watching had consequences for college students' (a) physical health, (b) responsibilities, (c) social experiences, and (d) mental health (see Table 3). The themes are presented in order of prevalence.

#### 6.2.1. TV binge watching and college student physical health

College students perceived consequences of binge watching in terms of eating habits, physical activity level, and sleep disruption. The majority of college students reported that binge watching could result in eating "unhealthy" or "junk food." A college student (female, 19) explained, "Usually when you are in front of a TV screen, you eat junk food. So, if a college student binge watches TV they are probably consuming unhealthy foods." College students also reported eating foods that are "easy" and "convenient" when making food choices while binge watching. A student (female, 22) described, "When binge watching it's more desirable to eat something that is fast

or easy so they can return to watching." Some college students stated that binge watching could lead to increased or decreased food consumption. For instance, a college student (female, 19) shared, "Some students might eat more when they binge watch or some students might forget to eat when they binge watch." Many college students reported that binge watching could displace exercise time, or decrease the motivation to exercise. One college student (female, 18) explained, "The more TV a student watches, there could potentially be a "numbing" effect that makes it seem as though other tasks which the student needs to accomplish may become less important. Physical activity would certainly become less important." Many students referred to binge watching as a sedentary activity. One participant (female, 18) declared, "Binge watching is an outstandingly stationary hobby." Lastly, although fewer in number, college students reported sleep disruption as a potential consequence of binge watching by using phrases like "lack of sleep," "less sleep," or "sleep takes a back burner."

### 6.2.2. TV binge watching and college student responsibilities

College students collectively reported that binge watching could negatively affect school work and other responsibilities. One student (male, 21) explained, “Sometimes college students may choose to watch TV instead of studying or doing homework, which could cause serious problems in classes.” Another participant (female, 22) described the negative consequences more broadly, “Procrastination and stagnation in all avenues and disciplines of life.” The common idea was that binge watching was a waste of time that takes “up time that should be used for more important things” (female, 21).

In contrast, college students clarified that binge watching could also provide respite from the stresses of school and everyday life responsibilities. A college student (male, 23) stated, “[TV binge watching] can be relaxing and a good break from life.” Another student (male, 24) expressed, “I am able to relax a little bit and take a deep breath.” Some students even reported that TV binge watching was a self-granted reward for completing homework and other responsibilities. TV binge watching was perceived to be an affordable and accessible method of “relaxation,” “decompression,” and “entertainment” for resource limited college students. One student (female, 22) stated, “We don’t have the financial freedom to support other forms of art or entertainment, but shows on Netflix are abundant and have plenty of hidden gems.”

### 6.2.3. Perceived social consequences of college student binge watching

College students reported various social consequences of binge watching. Students perceived that binge watching could negatively influence social relationships by limiting the “number of experiences that they will have” (male, 21) and by becoming “distant from friends and family and don’t go out and have actual human interaction” (female, 21). Social consequences also included a perceived decline in college student communication and social skills. One student (female, 18) explained that binge watching, “can make them socially awkward to be around.”

However, some students also perceived that binge watching could facilitate positive social consequences. Students who held this perception explained that binge watching could create opportunities to be on the inside of popular jokes/humor, a starting point for making new friends, and also some students reported that they binged watched with their friends. Supporting these perceptions students explained that binge watching could help in making new friends because it “gives you things to talk about with other college students” and help in becoming “culturally literate and able to understand most people’s jokes” (female, 18).

### 6.2.4. Binge watching and college student mental health

Some college students perceived that TV binge watching could have negative consequences on college student mental health. A college student (female, 21) divulged, “...I believe that TV binge watching in this case isn’t the problem, it’s a symptom of a bigger issue.” TV binge watching was thought to be a method of escape that did not

always benefit a college students’ well-being. College students perceived that TV binge watching could lead to declines in mental health (e.g., “depressive like symptoms,” “addiction,” “added stress from procrastinating obligations”) and that some students relied on TV binge watching as unhealthy way to cope with mental health challenges. A participant (male, 20) cautioned, “They use [TV binge watching] to help their depression and anxiety instead of facing those problems and getting the real help that they need.”

## 7. Discussion

The current exploratory study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of college students’ perceptions of binge watching. College students perceived that binge watching was a phenomenon experienced by most of their peers. The results are discussed in terms of current research and U&G.

### 7.1. Defining binge watching

Consistent with [Jenner’s \(2016\)](#) proposition, college students’ conceptualization of binge watching did present some “individualised terms and practices” (p. 265). College student responses in this sample diverged, in part, from previous definitions of binge watching that have relied on viewing a minimum number of episodes ([Panda & Pandey, 2017](#); [Pittman & Sheehan, 2015](#); [Silverman & Ryalls, 2016](#); [Walton-Pattison et al., 2016](#)), and instead placed larger focus on the quantity of time in their conceptualization of binge watching. On average, college students indicated that a binge watching session entailed watching over four-and-a-half hours, which was approximately two hours more than the average binge sessions reported by adults in the UK ([Walton-Pattison et al., 2016](#)). The higher amount of time is not unreasonable with full-time college students’ reports of an average of four hours of daily leisure (which includes TV viewing; [Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016](#)) and U.S. adult reports of four-and-a-half hours of daily TV viewing ([Nielsen, 2016a, 2016b](#)). Many of the college students indicated that time needed to be consecutive or in “one sitting,” which is consistent with previous definitions of binge watching ([Panda & Pandey, 2017](#); [Pittman & Sheehan, 2015](#); [Silverman & Ryalls, 2016](#); [Walton-Pattison et al., 2016](#)). Some participants (21%) did define binge watching by number of episodes, and similar to reports in the U.K. (2.91 episodes; [Walton-Pattison et al., 2016](#)), a three episode minimum was proposed to constitute a binge and participants also included movies, which are also available on VOD platforms.

Finally, like [Matrix \(2014\)](#) reported, some participants associated the practice with specific VOD platforms and associated the practice of binge watching with a specific show or the quality of the show. According to [Jenner \(2016\)](#), “The kind of attention demanded by some series seems to make it necessary for viewers to consciously make a decision to focus entirely on the series, something only possible if viewers can schedule autonomously” (p. 266). Participants in this study affirmed that they wanted to know what happens in the storyline of specific shows



and they commenced their binge sessions around show releases/availability on VOD platforms.

## 7.2. Positive consequences of binge watching

Uses and gratifications theory posits that active and goal oriented users seek out competing media to gratify their needs or to achieve positive consequences (Katz et al., 1973). Binge watching brings together a more traditional media source (TV) with the more contemporary internet streaming platforms that allow for more control of TV than ever before (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Because of this technological convergence, it is important to consider both traditional and newer media affordances within U&G. The current results are discussed in terms of context and of the affordances of interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity (Ruggiero, 2000), while integrating identified traditional gratifications for TV viewing.

### 7.2.1. Context

College students reported a variety of needs that were gratified through choosing to binge watch. Katz et al. (1973) indicated with in U&G that consumers select media based on their context, the content facilitated by the medium, and their awareness of the media. College students indicated that the college context has normalized the practice of binge watching and that they perceived the majority of college students engage in binge watching. Further, it appears that some college students believed that that the college environment facilitates the practice of binge watching—with high autonomy from adults and low accountability for personal time spent.

### 7.2.2. Interactivity

With the advent of the internet came new opportunities for users to interact directly with media or connect with people through technology in ways that had not been possible in the pre-internet media landscape (Ruggiero, 2000; Sindar & Limperos, 2013). The affordance of interactivity focuses on interacting with the medium, the facilitation of interaction with others, and also includes playfulness, which can lead to gratifying entertainment needs. Consistent with Pittman and Sheehan's (2015) and Panda and Pandey's (2017) findings on binge watching, college students discussed social motivations to engage in binge watching. Previously, Rubin (1983) indicated that traditional TV viewing gratified the need of companionship. Similarly, college students did report engaging in binge watching with friends as a form of companionship or they used it as a method of interaction when they were lonely at college. Previous research has looked at how college students binge to fit into a group or because their friends engage in the behavior (Panda & Pandey, 2017). Different than previous studies, some participants in this sample reported that binge watching was a way to make new friends. The reasoning was similar to Matrix's (2014) proposition, that TV binge watching facilitated connection, community, and “enabled viewers to participate in cultural conversations, online and offline” (p. 120). Participants in this study indicated that binge watching could put them in

“the know” with popular culture, which would allow them to better navigate the college social landscape.

### 7.2.3. Demassification and asynchronicity

Ruggiero (2000) indicated that demassification is the level of control a person has over a medium and asynchronicity allows for interaction that is not restricted by staggering messages. Streaming TV allows users a new level of control over TV viewing that has not previously been possible (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Users no longer have to tune in at a specific time or record a show on a VCR to view TV content. These affordances allow users to experience the flexibility and control. Some college students explained how they benefited from these affordances. For example, some stated that they planned ahead and used binge watching as a reward for accomplishing responsibilities. Students used this flexibility and control to choose specific content when bingeing to meet needs (e.g., for entertainment, when feeling anxious). Also, consistent with traditional TV viewing (Rubin, 1983) and emerging research U&G with binge watching (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015), participants reported that they binge watch as a convenient way to pass the time. Further, in terms of demassification, users can only gain access and have control over the content they view if it is accessible and affordable. College students shared that the affordability of binge watching as a motivator for use.

### 7.2.4. Escape

The gratification of escape met by binge watching is likely made possible by the affordances of interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity (Ruggiero, 2000) as users have control over access and content, are not restricted by synchronous TV programming, and as they interact with the media for entertainment. College students reported that they used binge watching as a means of escape, which has been previously identified as a motivation for traditional TV viewing (Rubin, 1983), hedonism (identified as a motivation for binge watching; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015) and relaxation, which is line with previous research on traditional TV viewing (Rubin, 1983) and binge watching (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Young adulthood has been identified to be a time period marked by high stress (Leppink, Odlaug, Lust, Christenson, & Grant, 2016), and college students in this study perceived that they were under a lot of stress. Escape was discussed as both a way to distract from obligations, which was seen to be more consistent with using binge watching as a way to distract themselves or justify procrastination, and as way to escape reality or the stresses of the world. The latter was more associated with the concepts of relaxation and hedonism. Participants discussed how the act of binge watching was relaxing and could allow them to escape the stressors experienced in the college context, but could also be fun and enjoyable. The way participants conceptualized this might provide some additional support for the postulation that binge watching could be used as a restorative experience (Pang, 2014; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015), or, in other words, a way to mentally recharge by engaging in thoughts distinct from typical daily thoughts/activities through quality

content that allows the viewer to feel they are in a different world (Kaplan, 1995; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015).

### 7.3. Negative consequences of binge watching

College students in this study perceived that binge watching could have negative consequences on their overall health, social life, and academic achievement. In line with previous research (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Silverman & Ryalls, 2016; Walton-Pattison et al., 2016), participants indicated that following a binge a person might experience guilt and regret for the time taken away from responsibilities, especially academic responsibilities. Some participants were bolder and stated that binge watching could play a role in the development of mental health challenges—when binge watching is used as an escape or as a facilitator of procrastination, stress is compounded because required tasks are not complete or an addiction could possibly develop. Past research has identified that increased TV viewing is associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Frey et al., 2007; Tremblay et al., 2010). A few participants indicated that binge watching was at times used as a coping mechanism for existing mental health challenges, but they did not believe it was a healthy coping mechanism. Also, in contrast to the aforementioned perceived social benefits of binge watching, some college students perceived that binge watching could lead to social isolation and a decrease in social skills. However, Jacobsen and Forste (2011) found no relationship between face-to-face interactions and daily time spent watching TV among university students. Finally, consistent with research on traditional TV viewing on physical health (Blass et al., 2006; Sussman & Moran, 2013), but new to the study of binge watching, participants perceived that binge watching had a negative impact on college student diet, exercise, and sleep habits.

### 7.4. Future research

There is not currently an agreed upon definition of binge watching (Pierce-Grove, 2016). College students' conceptualization of binge watching in the study largely focused on the quantity of time, consecutive viewing, and number of episodes. Existing empirical studies have used definitions of binge watching that have relied on consecutive viewing and a minimal number of episodes. These definitions are not specifically accounting for time or movie content that are available on VOD platforms. Currently, it is possible that two people with the same TV viewing habits may classify binge watching differently. It is critical for researchers to develop a consistent empirical definition. To move in this direction future research should consider using multiple items to measure binge watching, including consecutive amounts of time, number of episodes, and number of movies. It may also be that the original concept of binge watching (viewing several episodes of the same show) and viewing consecutive hours of TV have become blurred in the social vernacular. Conducting further qualitative research asking participants if there is a difference between binge watching and consecutive hours viewing would provide additional understanding. Clarifying this

difference (if there is one), would allow for more meaningful exploration of the diet and exercise consequences highlighted by participants in this study.

In consumer comparisons, the college student age group is the most likely to binge watch (Nielsen, 2013a; Panda & Pandey, 2017). Participants in this study implied that the college context facilitated binge watching. Sampling college students and young adults who have decided not to attend college would allow researchers to identify further the contextual role college plays in binge watching. The phenomenon could also be experienced differently by age groups, and studies comparing the experience and motivations of binge watching with different age groups would be informative. Finally, as identified in previous studies (Panda & Pandey, 2017), participants acknowledged the possibility of addiction as a mental health concern associated with binge watching, but in this study some participants discussed how college students are using binge watching as a method for coping with existing mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression). Considering the high level of stress experienced by college students (Leppink et al., 2016) examining this potential relationship would be important.

## 8. Limitations and conclusions

There are limitations to this exploratory study. The data came from one university, and although a random sample was used, the sample was homogenous in terms of ethnicity. Student binge watching conceptualizations, motivations, and perceived consequences may vary at different universities and with more diverse samples. Replicating the study with more diverse samples would be beneficial in the development of a consistent empirical definition of binge watching. Despite the limitations, the U&G framed qualitative study gave voice to college students' experiences with binge watching. Previous research on binge watching has provided definitions of binge watching for participants and this was the first study that allowed participants to share personal conceptualizations of the media practice. Results provide some support for current definitions used in empirical work and important considerations for defining the phenomena in future research. Participants indicated binge watching was a phenomenon on their campus and shared in detail their binge watching motivations and perceived consequences (both positive and negative). The rich results provide several directions for future research.

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