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Binge-Watching Redefined: A Proposal for Future Classification and Research

In 2015, the term "binge-watch" was officially declared the word of the year after the Collins English Dictionary reported a two-hundred percent increase in its annual usage (Samuel 80). But in spite of the term's recent explosion in utility, propelled by the growing popularity and normalization of the overindulgent viewing behavior it describes, scholars are still struggling to reach a consensus about the term's definition. Much of the existing literature on binge-watching correlates the phenomenon to the rise of popular streaming services like Netflix and Hulu and the unprecedented levels of choice and access that these services afford. However, the vast majority of published research has overemphasized the genres and platforms typically associated with the term and, thus, have erroneously limited the concept of binge-watching to viewing multiple episodes of a serialized, narrative television program in uninterrupted succession, often ignoring short-form and amateur video content found on other popular streaming platforms such as Youtube, Vimeo and, more recently, Tiktok. This academic oversight unnecessarily narrows the term's scope which, in turn, reduces our potential in understanding the phenomenon while excluding essential data from consideration for further research. In this essay, I will argue that the definition of binge-watching and its corresponding research should be expanded beyond the realm of serialized, narrative television programming to include all genres and formats of streamable, bingeable video content.

There are numerous discrepancies in how the binge-watching phenomenon has been defined and studied by scholars since the term's inception in the early 2010s. And while it is necessary to establish a standardized definition, it is also imperative that we do so in a way that identifies where the varied definitions overlap and which criteria have been used most consistently by scholars to characterize binge-watching—thereby, preserving the relevance and integrity of the research that has been done thus far. Fortunately, the authors of *Binge-Watching Serialized Content: A Transdisciplinary Review* have done just that, taking an exhaustive academic inventory of the existing research on binge-watching and consolidating prior definitions across disciplines. Through their systematic analysis of prevailing academic definitions of binge-watching, the authors identified "continuity" and "viewer autonomy" (Merikivi 6) as key features of the binge-watching experience, which were then incorporated into their proposed convergent definition of binge-watching which reads as follows: "a consumption of more than one episode of the same serialized video content in a single sitting at one's own time and pace" (Merikivi 6). The extent to which this convergent definition effectively combines the most prevalent features of past binge-watching research is both its strength and its weakness. The problem lies in the fact that most academics and journalists have hastily married the concept of binge-watching to *serialized* video content, dismissing the non-serialized video content that is also being widely consumed in the same continuous, autonomous, and excessive fashion. But even though the authors of this review opted to include the word "serialized" as a qualifier in their definition (a qualification that I will later dispute in greater depth and detail) they also acknowledged that binge-watching "goes beyond popular content adhering to traditional molds of television" (Merikivi 10), citing "amateur-made video blogs" (Merikivi 10) as one example of video content that is currently underrepresented in binge-watching research.

Indeed, amateur video content demands representation in the research, as it accounts for a significant portion of the content being created and consumed by today's masses. The internet is flooded with an endless stream of viral memes and videos that can attest to the undeniable influence everyday people are having on visual culture. In *Photography Changes and Democratizes Visual Expression*, digital imaging analyst Steve Hoffenberg describes how the rise of consumer digital cameras and the increased ease, access and affordability of digital photography has turned the general public into visual content creators. Hoffenberg explains, "with the advent of film cameras, digital cameras, and now camera phones, photography has taken visual expression out of the exclusive realm of artists, and literally put it into the hands of the masses. That changes everything" (Hoffenberg 174). The revolution of visual expression that Hoffenberg describes, along with his assertion that this "changes everything," suggests that a new breed of mass media is rapidly emerging—a different animal, so to speak—and old notions that once distinguished mainstream television from amateur video content, for instance, may no longer be relevant or useful in today's era. With visual expression now in the hands of the masses, the amount of amateur content in circulation today is wildly unprecedented, and our consumption of this content is soaring to new levels. This realization reinforces the necessity of expanding binge-watching classifications and research to include amateur video content created by the masses.

So far, the vast majority of academic literature on binge-watching fails to account for the staggering amounts of amateur video content we consume through public platforms like Youtube. However, surveys and statistics found beyond the binge-watching literature suggest that our consumption of short-form amateur content via Youtube is likely on par with, if not greater than, our consumption of serial network television via Netflix. One recent report from

The Nielson Company's National TV panel showed that, as of mid 2020, "streaming now comprises one-fourth of all television minutes viewed, with Neflix being the largest contributor to streaming share at 34%, followed by YouTube at 20%" (The Nielson Company 15). Mind you, these percentages only account for minutes viewed on television sets, excluding other streaming devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Another recent report which took other streaming devices into account suggested that American consumers are actually spending far more time watching videos on Youtube than on Netflix or any other platform. In 2019, Youtube was reported to be the most popular streaming service in the U.S. with over 163 million monthly users, compared to Netflix who had approximately 46 million monthly users (Watson "Leading"). With regards to the amount of time spent watching videos on these platforms (a statistic that should be of particular interest in binge-watching studies) a 2017 report showed that U.S. consumers spent a monthly average of 8 hours and 54 minutes watching YouTube, and 2 hours and 51 minutes watching Netflix (Watson "Monthly"). Granted, these statistics are by no means definitive, nor do they guarantee that consumers are binging their Youtube content in the same way that they binge-watch serial episodes on Netflix. However, these figures do suggest that Youtube content consumption, at the very least, deserves the serious consideration and scrutiny of binge-watching researchers.

Having addressed the issue of academic underrepresentation in binge-watching studies with regards to amateur video content, we will now return to the problem of limiting the classification and research of binge-watching to *serialized* video content, specifically. Not only is it possible for a viewer to binge-watch non-serialized content while maintaining continuity and viewer autonomy—I would argue that short-form, non-serialized content has the potential to be even more binge-inducing than serialized content, due to its relative brevity, selectability, and

digestibility. In *Time Wasting and the Contemporary Television-Viewing Experience*, Dr. Michael Samuel—a professor of television studies at Warwick University—evaluates the viewer autonomy aspect of binge-watching (i.e., the viewer's choice of what to watch, when to watch it, and how long to watch it for) and the extent to which that autonomy can be at odds with the continuity factor, particularly with such a plethora of options for modern viewers to choose from. He claims that traditional television programming presented the viewer with an immersive, seamless stream of carefully orchestrated content to get lost in, using Raymond Williams' concept of "flow" to name the comparatively passive state of TV viewing. Today's highly interactive and personalized viewing experience, by contrast, interrupts that flow—undermining the immersive quality of a more limited and passive viewing experience. Samuel continues his assessment, citing the work of John Ellis to help deepen our understanding of the modern viewer's predicament of choice, stating:

> When considering choice, one must also bear in mind the inability to choose as an essential aspect of the contemporary viewing experience. On this matter, Ellis writes: "To choose is to be aware of alternative possibilities, possibilities that are being missed. So a feeling of anxiety results, that of 'time-famine', the feeling of having too much to do and not enough time to fit it into." (Samuel 84)

With Ellis' concept of time-famine clearly articulated, we can see how having too many options may actually hinder the viewer's ability to binge-watch. Too much variety overwhelms viewers with possibilities, evokes a sense of hesitation and self-doubt, and ultimately causes viewers to experience what Ellis refers to as "choice fatigue" (Samuel 84). This is especially true when viewers are faced with the prospect of committing to multiple episodes (or entire seasons) of a new series. Compare this daunting, time-famine-triggering task with the relative ease of

selecting a short-form, non-serialized video to watch. Note that the average Youtube video, according to a 2018 study, is only 11.7 minutes long (Clement)—substantially shorter than the average episode of network a television series, which is traditionally programmed to fill either half-hour or one-hour time slots. Simply put, these shorter, one-off videos relieve the pressure of choosing by demanding a lesser time investment from the viewer. Like popcorn, this kind of content is light, plentiful, and easy to gorge on.

Admittedly, my argument that short-form, non-serialized video content is even more bingeable than serialized content is backed with very little support outside of my own logic, intuition, personal experience, and anecdotal evidence. I suspect that a well-conducted study on the matter would provide the very evidence I lack, but such studies appear to be non-existent for the time being. Unfortunately, the majority of researchers have not been casting a wide enough net when collecting data about the binge-watching phenomenon. In addition to the narrow definitions that often plague binge-watching research, many studies are saddled with inadequate sample sizes and niche demographics. For example, one study conducted at Southwestern University in 2018 surveyed a number of college students about their binge-watching habits and their motivations for engaging in the behavior. Not surprisingly, the researchers applied the same serial-specific definition of binge-watching echoed by their predecessors: "watching two or more episodes of the same TV series in one sitting" (Sung 413). Additionally, their sample size consisted of only 292 survey respondents (of which 223, or 76%, were female) and the demographic of their sampling pool was limited to students at Southwestern University (Sung 414). In other words, their sample—which was supposed to represent the general binge-watching population—was dubiously confined to a particular age group, in a particular region (Texas), of a particular occupation (college student) and, predominantly, of a particular gender.

Inadequate studies like the one held at Southwestern University fail to capture the diversity of data needed in order to help us better understand not only the potential motivations for binge-watching, but also the short- and long-term effects of binge-watching and, most importantly, its health implications for society and the individual. A number of these potential consequences are explored in *A Critical Theory of Binge Watching*, where writer Jake Pitre ponders the possible dangers of the growing trend, compounded by looming academic uncertainties about the social and psychological implications of television viewing in general. Pitre urges us to be mindful and cautious about the ways we engage with television, insisting that there is still a great deal we have yet to learn about our relationship with the medium. Pitre explains "scholars and consumers alike will put pressure on any new medium to account for what differentiates it from others. But this process takes place alongside a struggle to understand how the medium works and what effects it has on us" (Pitre). Meanwhile, as we struggle to understand the effects and mechanisms of the ever-changing medium, the medium changes us. Everything from sleeping disorders, to addictive tendencies, to our "hyper-polarized political climate" (Pitre) has been associated with TV consumption, and the unprecedented rate at which our televisual appetite is increasing makes a truly comprehensive study of the binge-watching phenomenon all the more urgent.

Without an academic consensus about what it is that constitutes binge-watching behavior, researchers will only be able to scratch the surface in their understanding of the rampant cultural phenomenon, oblivious to many of its fundamental causes and the profundity of its effects. However, in order for such a consensus to be reached, a greater diversity of data surrounding the binge-viewing phenomenon must be gathered and considered so as not to overlook or eliminate valuable insights and information from the literature unnecessarily. Underrepresented genres,

platforms and populations must be brought into the fold and accounted for in the research, and samples should always be as large and random as possible in order to maximize the integrity and validity of the data sets. Additionally, scholars must recognize that today's masses are both creators and consumers of visual content. Therefore, any further exclusions of amateur content consumption from future binge-watching research would be a grave oversight given the considerable creative impact that everyday people are having on our lives, our media, and the trajectory of our ever-evolving visual culture.

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