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BINGE WATCHING: WHY ARE COLLEGE STUDENTS GLUED TO THEIR SCREENS?

Veda Anita Dandamudi* and Anuradha Sathiyaseelan**

ABSTRACT

Binge watching is the practice of viewing television for prolonged periods of time where viewers tend to watch multiple episodes of the same series in succession. Young adults, especially college students, frequently engage in this behaviour, representing a modern form of heavy television use. Research findings indicate that binge watching is motivated by certain factors including boredom, stress, loneliness, social engagement and addiction deriving from habit. Parallels can be drawn between binge watching, heavy television use and television addiction all of which are associated with negative consequences for physical health, mental health, social interaction and academics among college students. This warrants the need to spread awareness on the deleterious effects of binge watching television for students and implementing intervention and training programs to help counteract such effects. However, much research is required to further understand the impact of binge watching and its incurrence of negative consequences for which appropriate solutions need to be devised.

Keywords: Academic obligations, Binge watching, Social engagement, Television shows, and College students.

INTRODUCTION

A substantial portion of college students' time throughout the year is accounted for by various academic obligations, with most of the day spent attending classes (Finlay, Ram, Maggs, & Caldwell, 2012). However, students are also noted to spend an average of 40 hours a week on social and leisure activities (Brint & Cantwell, 2008).

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Specifically, they engage in two different types of leisure. On one hand, students partake in serious leisure (e.g. volunteering, amateur sports) which requires long term commitment and helps in skill development but on the other hand they also engage in pleasurable activities requiring little to no skill which is known as casual leisure (e.g. socialising, watching television) (Stebbins, 2001 as cited in Finlay et al., 2012).

In a highly technocratic world, it is unsurprising that more casual leisure time is occupied with the use of technology. The current college student population, named “Generation Next” is known for being more digitally active than previous generations as they use various forms of electronic media. They tend to communicate using smart phones, play video games, use social networking sites and also watch movies and television programs (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). In fact, majority of college students report watching television on a regular basis (either every day or almost every day), spending an average of one to two hours a day engaging in this residual leisure activity (Greenwood, 2008; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Mokhtari, Reichard, & Gardner, 2009).

Yet, students now have different means of watching television apart from traditional cable, with the increased popularity of online viewing among this demographic (Damratoski, Field, Mizell, & Budden, 2011). Currently, shows can be watched on online streaming sites (e.g. Netflix, Hotstar, Amazon Prime) or downloaded illegally on torrents, making televised content easily accessible (Fortune, 2017, McPherson, 2015; Saunders, 2017). Programs are also instantly accessible with entire seasons being made available all at once and come with the added benefit of no advertisements (Matrix, 2014).

This has contributed to the development of a new television consumption pattern in the place of appointment viewing. Known as binge watching, it is the practice of sequentially viewing a large number of television shows, especially all the episodes of one series (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). Currently on the rise, three fourth of viewers identify themselves as binge watchers (Sung, Kang & Lee, 2015 as cited in Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). Particularly, it is a common habit among college students and young adults, who are viewing on their own time as per their convenience (Damratoski et al., 2011; Devasagayam, 2014; Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017).

BEHIND THE SCENES: WHAT ENABLES BINGE WATCHING BEHAVIOUR

While binge watching is a popular viewing pattern among the younger demographics, the exact motives and purpose behind engaging and continuing this behaviour have yet to be extensively explored. At present, it would appear that there are a plethora of contributing factors, speculated on the basis of television uses and gratifications.

Boredom

Watching television serves an alleviatory function for boredom. Heavy television viewers are noted for being easily bored and therefore use television as a way to fill time when they have nothing else to do (McIlwraith, 1998). Similarly, college students have specifically cited boredom during their free time as the major reason behind their binge watching in the summer, before the academic year began (Devasagayam, 2014).

Stress

Television is also used to alleviate stress and its relaxing effect has been found in experiments conducted by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) wherein they monitored the heart rate, skin resistance and brain waves of television viewers. Their results indicated that viewers feel relaxed while watching television but this feeling was terminated upon cessation of their viewing. Therefore, one may surmise that students have a stress reduction motive behind binge watching as it has been consistently found that they face a plethora of stressors (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2013). In fact, when reality is stressful and unpleasant, students binge watch as an opportunity to escape, with television programs becoming a way for them to 'leave' unsatisfying circumstances such as examinations, peer pressure, studying and uncertainties regarding their future career and evaluations (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Loneliness

In the transition to college life and adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, students also face various challenges including interpersonal difficulties and loneliness for which television is sought out to satisfy social interaction needs (Aherne, 2001; Greenwood & Long, 2009; Hurst et al., 2013). Students gain a sense of belonging by substituting real life companionship with television and using this medium as means to identify with others (characters and actors) (Greenwood & Long, 2009).

This is facilitated by the development of imagined friendships with characters where viewers feel as if they have a special connection with them, known as parasocial relationships (PSR) (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Greenwood, 2008; Greenwood & Long, 2009). Research evidence supports the social surrogacy hypothesis according to which PSRs in favoured television shows provide students with a sense of belonging (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). A significant predictor of developing PSRs among college students is loneliness indicating that they turn to their favoured programs when they feel lonely and report a reduction in such feelings while viewing (Derrick et al., 2009; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Furthermore, greater parasocial involvement with favourite characters has also been predicted by increased viewing hours and such relationships have been established while binge watching for a long duration (Devasagayam, 2014;

Greenwood, 2008). Binge watchers report having developed PSRs which propelled them to continue watching the television show so as to sustain the relationship and spend time with their favourite characters (Devasagayam, 2014).

Social Engagement

Apart from compensating for paucities in interpersonal connections, binge viewing is considered to be an acceptable behaviour that has social value for college students and young viewers. Binge watching both enables and enhances their interaction in peer groups and participation in social conversation and such viewers are motivated to spend increasing amounts of time doing so in order to speak to their friends about the series they are viewing (Matrix, 2014; Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Stemming from this need for relatedness is the fear of missing out (FoMo) wherein college students and young viewers fear that they will be excluded from cultural conversation if they have not seen a particular program (Conlin, Billings, & Averset, 2016; Panda & Pandey, 2017). Specifically, FoMo plays a role in the viewing pace of drama series wherein viewers binge watch to catch up with the current narrative and therefore be able to belatedly join the cultural conversation (Conlin et al., 2016).

Additional social contributing factors are recommendations and feedback on television series from others, thus exemplifying the interactional influence involved (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Habit and Addiction

Binge watching is integrated into viewers daily lives as a cultural practice thereby becoming a habitual activity (Mikos, 2016). However, the more college students binge watch, there is a greater proclivity for them to spend more subsequent time doing so, thus resulting in dependence (Panda & Pandey, 2017). This lends credence to the existing argumentation put forth that prolonged viewing is an addiction to television (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Sussman & Moran, 2013). In fact, 60 percent of binge watchers report feeling addicted to the television shows that they watch (Devasagayam, 2014).

Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) chose to explain the addictive nature of television based on the association viewers make between watching television and tension reduction which is reinforced in various ways. On one hand it is positively reinforced by relaxation while viewing and negatively reinforced by stress and rumination after the activity is ceased.

This is supported by the finding that students who feel nervous or anxious after binge watching for a significant amount of time have a higher propensity of continuing to engage in this behaviour. A vicious cycle ensues as students who binge watch for more time in order to escape reality find solace in doing so which escalates their escape and furthers their addiction (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Another key concept that has been used to explain addictive behaviour is flow, which is “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Chou & Ting, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi 1977 as cited in Panda & Pandey, 2017). This is experienced by college students while binge watching and wherein they are psychologically invested, view with focused concentration and have a distorted sense of time (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Therefore, consistent reinforcement for watching television and state of flow contribute to this ritualistic habit becoming an addictive behaviour (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Sussman & Moran, 2013).

Known as television addiction, it is characterised by increased craving and viewing time, increased urges to continue viewing and inability to discontinue the behaviour despite attempting to stop which leads to watching for longer than intended (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Sussman & Moran, 2013). Similarly, binge watching is an automatic process where viewers continue viewing television without thinking (Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski, & Presseau, 2016). There is also an association between binge viewing and low self regulation, with those who find it difficult to control themselves having a tendency to continue watching (Sung, Kang & Lee as cited in EurekAlert!, 2015), perpetuating the addiction to television series.

IMPACT OF HEAVY TELEVISION USE AND BINGE WATCHING

Operating differentially for viewers, binge watching can satisfy various gratifications yet it also has the potential to become an overindulgent or addictive behaviour. Though appearing to be fairly innocuous, binge watching is conjectured to have multifarious effects on student viewers based on the parallels drawn to heavy television use.

Physical Health

The physical health ramifications of prolonged television exposure have been extensively researched. As a sedentary activity, high exposure to television is associated with physical inactivity among adults, especially for female college students whose physical exercise is negatively correlated with television viewing (Buckworth & Nigg, 2004; Meyer et al., 2008). Consistent research findings have also associated prolonged television exposure to higher risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes (Grøntved & Hu, 2011).

Research evidence has also highlighted the effect of television use on eating patterns. Van den Bulck (2000) found that viewers tend to adjust their eating habits in accordance to their television viewing habits. Furthermore, adults who watch television tend to consume more high calorie snacks, fast food, soft drinks, alcohol and less nutritious food such as fruits and vegetables (Bowman, 2006; Sisson, Shay, Broyles, & Leyva, 2012; Van den Bulck, 2000). These findings can be

explained based on the fact that watching more television means that there is more time to eat snacks and consume drinks (Van den Bulck, 2000).

With such unhealthy dietary practices being associated with heavy television viewing, research has also investigated the association between television use and obesity, yielding mixed results. On one hand, time spent watching television has been associated with obesity in adults, with those watching more than two hours a day having high body mass index (BMI) and being obese (Bowman, 2006; Vioque, Torres, & Quiles, 2000). However, Van den Bulck (2000) found no such link to obesity.

In addition, prolonged television viewing is associated with sleep disturbances, lack of sleep and alterations in melatonin levels, thus affecting the sleeping patterns of viewers (Sigman, 2007; Van den Bulck, 2000). In particular, increased fatigue, insomnia and poor sleep quality are associated with higher frequency of binge watching, mediated by cognitive pre-sleep arousal which is potentially attributed to the greater narrative involvement and character identification occurring when binge watching (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017).

Psychological Consequences

Watching television for prolonged periods of time also has ramifications pertaining to cognition, emotion and mental health. Cognitive effects include deficits in concentration and attention span (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, & McCarty, 2004; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). After heavy use of television, viewers report lower levels of alertness and difficulties in concentrating when compared to before they began (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). In addition, a prospective study of adults identified that worse cognitive functioning (poorer executive control and slower processing speed) in mid life is associated with high levels of television consumption during early adulthood (Hoang et al., 2016).

Heavy viewers also experience emotional consequences. They report that their mood is either the same or worse after watching television for a prolonged period of time and the experience of heavy viewing is less enjoyable (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Binge watchers have reported feelings of emptiness after a show or a season of a series concluded (Devasagayam, 2014). Similar experiences were reported by viewers who underwent parasocial breakups with characters they had PSRs with when the character was taken off the show or the show ended, resulting in loneliness and depression (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Higher levels of loneliness and depression have also been associated with binge watching behaviour, along with anxiety and fatigue (Devasagayam, 2014; Sung, Kang & Lee, 2015 as cited in Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017; Wheeler, 2015 as cited in Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). Finally, other consequences include lower life satisfaction among heavy television viewers when compared to light viewers and non viewers (Frey, Benesch, & Stutzer, 2007).

Academics

Research has also identified that heavy television use has an impact on college students' academics. Increased television viewing is positively related to academic dishonesty which includes cheating on assignments and examinations or plagiarising others' work (Pino & Smith, 2003). On the other hand, there is a negative correlation between watching television and grade point average as well as academic confidence, particularly among female college students (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Walsh, Fielder, Carey, & Carey, 2013). Multitasking by using electronic media like television while engaging in academic work is common among college students and this habit serves as a distraction with detrimental effects on students' performance (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Apart from serving as a distraction, watching television can also displace time spent on other activities such as academic and recreational reading among college students (Mokhtari et al., 2009).

Social Life

Some researchers are concerned that binge watching has deleterious effects on long term social skills (de Feijter, Khan, & van Gisbergen, 2016 as cited in Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017; Panda & Pandey, 2017). In the case of college students, watching television is often a solitary activity and the time they spend doing so replaces the time they could be spending with friends, going out and various other social oriented activities (Finlay et al., 2012; Van den Bulck, 2000).

However, others contend that binge watching is actually a social phenomenon. Though people view alone, they feel the need to discuss with their friends about the series they are watching. Media marathons are also organised as a personal leisure activity among groups of friends, typically on weekends, and even incorporated into the daily rituals of couples, acting as a social event with viewers' partners (Mikos, 2016).

Addiction

Television addiction has social and role consequences by impacting relationship maintenance, jeopardising functions at work and at home, reducing time spent with colleagues and friends and less time participating in community and volunteering activities (Bruni & Stanca, 2008; Sussman & Moran, 2013). Heavy viewers report feeling guilty and dissatisfied about not having spent that viewing time on productive activities, work or other recreation activities (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Sussman & Moran, 2013). Binge watchers have reported a similar goal conflict wherein such viewing undermines their pursuit of goals and they also anticipate feelings of regret after a binge watching period (Walton-Pattison et al., 2016).

Students, in particular, experience feelings of loneliness, stress, anxiety and emptiness after completing a binge watching session, which is attributed to the

disturbance in flow associated with addiction. Additionally, as their dependence on binge watching to cope with reality increases, other adaptive coping strategies to deal with their emotions deteriorate (Panda & Pandey, 2017).

Implications

Overall, empirical work on heavy television use and binge watching regarding suggest that there are various motivating factors and consequences for such behaviour. Based on these research findings, certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the relevance of binge watching in the current media landscape.

Firstly, watching television, especially binge watching, is a popular leisure activity among college students who now have more viewing platforms in the form of online streaming sites. However, in order to prevent overindulgence in this sedentary behaviour due to such ease and instant access, it is important that colleges promote alternative, non television leisure activities and hobbies. This includes physical exercise, sports, volunteering, student club participation, and socialisation events where students can make friends so as to improve their interpersonal relations, reduce loneliness and increase their physical activity (Huang et al., 2003; Sussman & Moran, 2013).

Secondly, research on heavy use of television and binge watching has highlighted that there are various negative consequences of such viewing habits on physical health, mental health, academics and social interaction. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness among college students on such harmful consequences through media education sessions conducted by college counsellors, faculty and peer educators. Raising awareness can also be done by asking students who binge watch to keep a diary of their television viewing and the quality and enjoyment from the experience to highlight how such practices are affecting them (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Efforts to raise awareness can also be supplemented by interventions, orientations and training sessions conducted in college to reduce the impact of television viewing. In particular, students may benefit from orientations on sleep hygiene which discourages the use of television in bed, and effective studying which would highlight the distracting effects of media multitasking (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Sadock, Sadock & Ruiz, 2015). Additionally, training on time management is necessary to prevent students from spending excessive time on non essential activities such as binge watching which conflict with the pursuit of productive goals like academic work (Strang, 2015; Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski, & Pless, 2016). Training in relaxation and mindfulness techniques can also help students cope effectively with stress rather than turning towards television as a form of escape (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Shaikh et al., 2004). Apart from this, such techniques would be beneficial in reducing cognitive arousal contributing to sleep disturbances associated with binge watching (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). Furthermore, to counteract the effects on

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physical activity and eating habits, intervention programs can be designed to reduce television viewing, unhealthy snacking and promote physical exercise (Bowman, 2006; Huang et al., 2003).

Finally, it is important to consider the addictive nature of television which leads to prolonged viewing and its associated negative effects. Binge watching or television addiction is characterised by increased viewing duration and automaticity resulting in viewers spending more time watching than they had intended (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Sussman & Moran, 2013; Walton-Pattison et al., 2016). This warrants the need for specific strategies and measures to reduce binge watching duration such as interventions addressing impulsive behaviour, anticipated regret and maladaptive coping strategies (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Walton-Pattison et al., 2016). It has also been suggested to reduce binge watching time by using an app to make viewers aware of when they watch beyond an optimal duration, which research demonstrates is after five episodes (de Feijter, Khan, & van Gisbergen, 2016 as cited in Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). While certain online streaming services have already implemented such measures, there is a need to devise more solutions and this need can be addressed through greater data driven research being conducted on binge viewing (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017).

Therefore, binge watching is a key area of concern not only for viewers but researchers as well. Despite television having been dubbed a form of old media in the digital era, binge watching reiterates the fact that viewers are more engaged with television content than ever before and this viewing pattern is a behaviour that has yet to be extensively researched with regard to its impact and underlying motivations.

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