

Social and Health Effects of Binge-Watching

Introduction

During the 21st century, the consumption of Television (TV) shows shifted from watching episodes released every week to streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu. The establishment of these streaming services led to a new phenomenon called binge-watching, defined as the practice of watching multiple movies or episodes of TV in rapid succession. In 2015, Collins Dictionary designated “binge-watch” the word of the year (Mangan). According to a 2015 survey by Deloitte, “millennials spend nearly 50% of their time watching movies and TV shows on their mobile devices” (“Digital” 7). While binge-watching studies attempting to determine the effects, positive and negative, proliferated after the inception of the term, people remain ignorant of the true impacts resulting from binge-watching their favorite show. Although binge-watching TV shows yields some social and health benefits, negative social and health impacts occur more frequently, and avoiding them requires vigilant self-monitoring.

Social Isolation

Proper binge-watching may provide social benefits, but erroneous execution typically incites negative outcomes, for example, binge-watchers often cancel social plans in favor of staying home and binge-watching. According to a 2018 poll conducted by Morning Consult and The Hollywood Reporter “[nearly] one-quarter of all TV watchers (24 percent) have canceled social plans to continue watching a show; among young adults, that number rises to 45 percent” (Sabin Par. 5). Binge-watching increases lead to a negative cycle of canceling social plans to binge-watch. This cycle feeds Binge-watching’s addictive properties resulting in an intensified desire to binge-watch, but over time binge-watchers develop a tolerance which forces

engagement in longer binge-watching sessions exacerbating the negative cycle. As a result of binge-watching, chemicals flood the brain producing feelings of happiness and pleasure which furthers John Stuart Mill's claim that "happiness is the sole end of human action" and that humans desire "nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness" (4). The decision to remain at home for hours on end with a TV show which promises pleasure and happiness instead of venturing into unknown social situations demonstrates happiness as the driving factor behind human actions.

Social Isolation Depression

While the binge-watching cycle promises pleasure and generates happiness at the expense of social plans, the termination of binge-watching results in the high fading and sometimes precipitates depression. A University of Toledo study found that people who binge-watch TV are likely to suffer from anxiety and/or depression (Elhai). This depressive state causes more binge-watching to return to a state of happiness from the depression. Complicating matters further Sophia Tolliver, a family medicine physician at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center explains that "Studies have connected a lack of socialization to increased risks of heart disease and stroke, not to mention, fewer significant social relationships may increase the rates of depression and other mood disorders" (qtd in Birch Par. 7). The increased risk of depression caused by social isolation becomes augmented when the binge ends. The depressive state partially results from social isolationism and increases other health issues.

End of Binge-watching Depression

This issue became more complicated when Cognifit expanded on binge-watching related depression claiming that "a phase of reactive depression when the binge is over and our last

episode has finished- some people mourn the loss. It's considered situational depression because it's happening due to an identifiable event (the episode ending)" (Bohren Par. 5). The episode ending brings an end to the stimulation in the brain resulting from dopamine production which leads to a depressive state. Socialization issues created by binge-watching TV shows leads to multiple health complications. Substituting human interactions for virtual interactions such as TV shows establishes a mental rapport between the viewer and the characters, but its termination begins a mourning process causing a depressive state. Therefore, when binge-watching TV Shows, people need to avoid watching alone and spending several hours isolated, replacing human interaction with virtual interaction.

Relationship benefits

Despite this, some argue binge-watching TV shows creates a community, common ground for conversation with friends, and an activity for couples to aid their relationship. TV shows create a common experience over which to bond and easy conversation topics. Binge-watching causes communities to arise and fosters online forums on which TV show fans can gather to debate amongst each other and share their thoughts and feelings. Kylie Fitch claims that under the right circumstances binge-watching "can be a great way to bring relationships closer. Watching television with others provides a place of common experience: shared 'show lingo,' inside jokes, and an easy way to be together" (Pars. 6-7). While shared experience and its ability to create feelings of belonging and connections remains underrated, the conversation is still vital. While binge-watching creates a shared experience making conversation easier by eliminating the need to prompt and develop a conversation, it still requires conversing about the show, not just sharing the experience. Although shared experience is beneficial the conversation

is still important. Sarah Gomillion agreed with Fitch and performed a study that proved Fitch correct when it concluded that, in circumstances such as long-distance relationships or working couples with conflicting schedules family gatherings and excursions with mutual friends may scarcely occur. However, “sharing TV shows and movies with one another might allow couples to maintain closeness by creating a sense that they share social connections” (Par. 3). The unique qualities of binge-watching which make it so negative also allow for positive outcomes. The ability to watch alone for hours on end leads to negative consequences, but this quality also creates benefits. Michele Willens, a self-proclaimed binge viewer, agrees and adds that binge-watching is the new date night and may help revitalize stale relationships. However, unlike other shared experiences couples may have binge-watching offers great freedom to participate at their convenience, they can watch together as a regular date night with increased privacy or separately, but still share the experience allowing for relationships that struggle from a lack of time together to share moments regarding the TV show. Social benefits of binge-watching include an expansion of conversation topics and enhancement of relationships, but the repercussions of social isolationism caused by choosing to stay home and binge-watch a TV show instead of socializing outweigh any possible benefits.

Physical Health Consequences

Positive health effects such as stress reduction can result from binge-watching, but more often negative effects arise from binge-watching. Those who binge-watch a TV show spend hours sitting in one place increasing their risk for health conditions. Sophia Tolliver explains that her first concern “is how sedentary you can become ... Studies show that sitting for long periods of time can increase one’s risk for metabolic syndrome, which can increase your risk of heart

disease, stroke and Type 2 diabetes” (qtd in Birch Par. 5). As a result of sitting in one place for hours on end, fatal health issues can arise. Eliminating these health issues requires taking breaks, getting up, walking around, stretching between episodes, and standing for part of an episode.

Binge-watching Addiction

While this solution requires minimal effort the addictive quality of binge-watching makes it difficult to stop watching even for a few minutes. Northwestern Medicine claims that “[Binge-watching] your favorite series could produce a ‘high[.]’ ... Your brain craves more and more, and as long as you continue to binge, your brain produces dopamine” (“Binge” Pars. 4-5). The fleeting happiness feeling causes an extreme desire to binge-watch continuously and continue the next day exacerbating the physical health issues resulting from the sedentary lifestyle and canceled exercise plans feeding binge-watching’s addictiveness. The Dalai Lama states that in “today’s materialistic life, people seem mainly concerned with sensory experiences. So that’s why their satisfaction is limited and brief, since their experience of happiness is so dependent on external stimuli” (Bstan-’dzin-rgya-mtsho, 53). Binge-watching directly proves the Dalai Lama’s statements as it provides temporary happiness feelings resulting from the stimulation of TV watching and demands continuous watching causing addiction or dependence so they can maintain their fleeting happiness feeling leading binge-watchers to sacrifice aspects of life to pursue their innate human desire for happiness and pleasure. Binge-watching causes individuals to sacrifice their sleep and results in poorer sleep quality, increased fatigue, and increased insomnia symptoms. According to Psychology Today, stimulation of brain activity and alertness causes sleep troubles resulting from extended “[exposure] to the storyline, imagery, and action of [a] show” “known as pre-sleep arousal” (Breus Par. 6). Sleep deprivation correlates

with depression, memory deficits, lack of coordination, accident proneness, and heart problems. Sleep deprivation leads to a weakened immune system and repeated sleep loss augments the risk for health issues. Results in an even greater cycle starting with staying up too late watching TV resulting in sleep deprivation leading to health conditions which cause depression or a desire to remain seated due to weakness increasing binge-watching producing more happiness and forming the addiction causing sleep loss again the next night resulting in a perpetuating cycle forever getting worse.

Health Benefits

However, positive health impacts such as stress relief eventuate from binge-watching. John Mayer, Ph.D., clinical psychologist, claims, "It is hard to shut our minds down and tune out the stress and pressures. A binge can work like a steel door that blocks our brains from thinking about those constant stressors that force themselves into our thoughts" (qtd in Page Par. 14). This exhibits that in controlled doses the act of binge-watching can lead to stress release and great pleasure, but it requires careful consumption of TV in small doses and avoiding repeat binge-watching to avoid addiction. In addition, Binge-watching a series or several movies can activate regions of the brain involved in arousal, vision, and aggression among many others including sensory-motor locales, the septum, and the visual cortex. Frequent activation of these areas helps the brain stay healthy and better sustained which causes the slowing of neuron loss and non-neural cells resulting from forcing the brain circuits to work thus delaying the decline of cognitive processing. (Bohren). This indicates that the unfavorable addictive effects of binge-watching can administer a healthy stress release, but this benefit results from the addictive dopamine flood entering the brain creating happiness feelings, and becoming addicted negates

the benefit. Although binge-watching after a tiring week can offer positive benefits such as the slowing of cognitive aging and stress release, it becomes addictive which leads to an increased risk of health conditions.

Solution/Resolution

The solution to binge-watching requires that each person self-monitor themselves as they binge-watch. Carefully controlling binge-watching habits allows binge-watching to occur with great benefits while avoiding the side effects such as addiction and interference with daily life. However, this requires an understanding of the addiction caused by binge-watching, and avoiding it requires the almost impossible task of relinquishing the high felt when binge-watching. Binge-watching is comparable to any other addiction; it alters brain chemistry and affects the body in ways that resemble heroin addiction (Page). Each individual themselves must implement this solution as they see fit, a huge limitation because of the addictive nature of binge-watching, and ending an addiction requires the individual to submit themselves to the arduous process and admitting to having an addiction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, binge-watching can produce social and health benefits such as creating a shared community for discussion, relieving stress, and maintaining the health of the brain. However, the negative social and health implications such as addiction, sleep deprivation, increased risk of fatal conditions, increased depression rates, and the lack of socialization outweighs the few benefits. As a result, avoiding the side effects and reaping the benefits of binge-watching requires careful control.

Word Count: 1972

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