Like what you see?

Source: Kara Hengesbach, "What to Binge Watch over Holiday Break," cm-life.com, Dec. 18, 2017

The term "binge-watch" was first used in 2003 and means "to watch many or all episodes of (a TV series) in rapid succession," according to Merriam-Webster. [1] The phrase gained popularity in 2013 when Netflix released the full 13-episode season of House of Cards at once. [2] In 2015, "binge-watch" was declared the word of the year by Collins English Dictionary, which said use of the term had increased 200% in the prior year. [3]

73% of Americans admit to binge-watching, with the average binge lasting three hours and eight minutes. [4][5] 90% of millennials (ages 20-33) and 87% of Gen Z (ages 14-19) stated they binge-watch. 40% of them binge-watch an average of six episodes of television, or about five hours, in one sitting. [4] Helen Newstead, Head of Language Content at Collins Learning, stated "The rise in usage of 'binge-watch' is clearly linked to the biggest sea change in our viewing habits since the advent of the video recorder nearly 40 years ago." [3]

Is binge-watching a harmless pleasure or a harmful addiction? The pros and cons of binge-watching are explored below.

Pro 1

Binge-watching leads to beneficial social connections. Binge-watching creates a sense of community around a show, something experts call a "shared cultural space." This common ground allows viewers to discuss and enjoy the show with everyone from a coworker to the stranger in line at the grocery store. Instead of feeling lonely or isolated, this shared space makes it easier to relate to other people and share personal perspectives. [6] [7] [8]

Romantic relationships can also be strengthened by binge-watching together because it creates a shared interest, is a fun activity, can be a conversation starter, and is an easy way to share time together. Binge-watching can also be a type of couples therapy for troubles such as illness or difficult family relationships. If couples see fictional couples having the same problems, they may be able to better understand and deal with the issues in real life. [9]

A study published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships found that binge-watching can help long-distance relationships by replacing shared activities like going to dinner together and having mutual friends. Sharing the pretend world of the shows creates the mutual friendships and experiences needed to strengthen long-distance relationships. [10]

Con 1

Binge-watching leads to mental health issues. A University of Texas study found that binge watchers were more likely to be depressed, lonely, and have less self-control. [15] One of the study's authors, Yoon Hi Sung, PhD, stated: "When binge-watching becomes rampant, viewers may start to neglect their work and their relationships with others. Even though people know they should not, they have difficulty resisting the desire to watch episodes continuously." [16]

Binge watching can lead to addiction. Dr. Renee Carr, a clinical psychologist, said "The neuronal pathways that cause heroin and sex addictions are the same as an addiction to binge watching. Your body does not discriminate against pleasure. It can become addicted to any activity or substances that consistently produces dopamine."

Another study found that, rather than relieving stress, excessive TV watching is associated with regret, guilt, and feelings of failure because of a sense of wasted time and inactivity. [18]

When that binge-watching session is over, the viewer may be more likely to "mourn" the loss of the show by experiencing depression, anxiety, and feelings of emptiness. [19] [20]

Pro 2

Binge-watching has health benefits like stress relief. According to psychiatrists, binge-watching releases dopamine in the brain, which creates a feeling of pleasure and can help people to relax and relieve stress. [11] Psychologists say that finishing a series can give viewers feelings of control and power, which can be beneficial if viewers are not feeling that in their daily lives. [7]

John Mayer, PhD, clinical psychologist, stated, "We are all bombarded with stress from everyday living, and with the nature of today's world where information floods us constantly. 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." [8]

Binge-watching can also be healthy if the show relates to the viewer's real life. For example, a character could be a role model or solve a problem that the viewer is currently dealing with. The show might offer a sense of friendship and new solutions that could make someone's day-to-day life better. [8]

Con 2

Binge-watching leads to serious physical health problems. Binge-watching requires sitting for hours and hours, which has long been linked to slow metabolism, heart disease, cancer, blood clots, and deep vein thrombosis. [21] [22]

If the viewer is hooked on a show, they're more likely to sit on the couch eating unhealthy food and snacking more, which is linked to weight gain and damaged arteries. [22] [23]

One study found that binge-watching was related to poorer sleep quality, more fatigue, and insomnia, because of pre-sleep arousal. In other words, getting very invested in the characters and plot of multiple episodes of TV right before bed leaves the viewer thinking about the show more and unable to sleep. [5] A survey found that 45.1% stayed awake all night to binge-watch a show. [24]

Researchers have also found that watching three or more hours of TV a day is associated with premature death. [25]

Pro 3

Binge-watching makes a show more fulfilling. While binge-watching, the viewer can feel the pleasure of full immersion (aka "the zone"), which is a great feeling similar to staying up all night to finish a book or project. [12]

Many shows are now made for binge-watching. Consider how many full seasons Netflix releases at once, including , Orange Is the New Black, and Stranger Things. [13] Watching multiple episodes at once makes the story easier to follow and more enjoyable than a single episode. [7]

Shows made for binge-watching are often more sophisticated, with multiple intricate storylines, complex relationships, and multi-dimensional characters. Media theorist Steven Johnson, MA, says that watching this sort of show may make viewers smarter because greater attention and thinking are needed to process them. [12] [14]

Con 3

Binge-watching makes the show less fulfilling. Watching without a break can also reduce the pleasure of anticipation viewers feel when they have to wait for a new episode. [7] Damon Lindelof, the co-creator of popular shows such as Lost, stated, "This idea of anticipation. That Christmas morning feeling... doesn't exist in binge culture." [26]

Sonya Lyubomirsky, PhD, stated, "At first, a new TV show is really exciting, but the more you watch, the less you enjoy it over time." [7]

A lot of shows are not made for binge-watching. Consider plot points that repeat after a commercial break or at the beginning of a new episode. If someone binge-watches, they'll notice more repetition. Also, the viewer won't have time between episodes to digest and really think about the show. [26] A study found that binge-watching lowered levels of sustained memory and self-reported enjoyment levels. [27]