

Behind the Binge: The Hidden Motivations Powering Our Streaming Obsession

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Abstract

Binge watching is consuming multiple episodes of series or content in one sitting. It has become a leisure activity and in the comfort of home, made it a cozy experience for viewers especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and isolations resulted in more time at hand for selfcare and me time. It has emerged as a prevalent behavior, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The extended lockdowns and social isolation led audience binge watch content, so they are informed, entertained and connected. The study aims to provide insights of the factors and motivations influencing binge watching behavior. A quantitative research methodology was applied, utilizing a structured survey with a randomly selected sample of 450 participants. Results reveal that young adults are the primary binge-watchers with Netflix being the most preferred platform. The findings indicate that relaxation, escapism and social engagement are the primary drivers of binge-watching, while adverse effects include guilt, disrupted sleep patterns and reduced productivity. The study suggests that while binge-watching provides entertainment and emotional relief, it can also lead to compulsive viewing habits requiring self-regulation strategies. Viewers found relaxation, stress relief and distraction in digital cocooning and so the media consumption became a me-time ritual just like a bedtime routine.

Keywords: Binge-watching, streaming obsessions, Netflix, entertainment consumption, streaming platform.

1. Introduction

Binge-watching was defined as “The experience of watching multiple episodes of a specific television program or series in a single sitting or a marathon that spans at least several hours

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or seasons of that program” which “may occur either online or offline and can involve the use of a television, DVD player, computer, tablet or other video-enabled mobile device” (Yorio, 2013).

Binge-watching has its roots in the 1980s and 1990s when audiences purchased DVD box sets of popular shows. However, the term ‘Binge-watching’ became mainstream in 2013 when Netflix introduced the practice of releasing entire seasons of shows like *House of Cards* at once. This encouraged the audience to watch episodes consecutively. The evolution of media consumption has drastically changed with the rise of streaming platforms, fostering the habit of binge-watching. Unlike traditional television, where episodes were spaced out weekly, binge-watching allows viewers to engage in extended viewing sessions at their convenience. While YouTube has long been a go-to platform for diverse, free and user-generated content, Netflix brought a new dimension to entertainment by offering curated, premium series and films. Netflix was introduced in Pakistan in 2016 but initially faced challenges of high subscription costs, limited localized content and relatively low internet penetration. Though its popularity surged during the COVID-19 pandemic as viewers turned to digital platforms for entertainment while staying at home. With its extensive library of binge-worthy content, Netflix significantly contributed to the rise of binge-watching behavior in Pakistan during this period. Binge watching has evolved as an unconscious habit that viewers spend hours consuming the content without realizing the extent of their engrossment. As a result, in 2013 another term ‘Netflix effect’ also emerged in the same timeline as term binge watching. *“The Netflix Effect is when a new series catapults an unknown actor to fame – overnight – a result of millions of people binge watching a show”* (Morgan, 2019, para. 1). Binge watching became a cultural habit during the pandemic, providing coziest escape and means to self-care. The digital escapism also instilled dual screen behavior making it a guilty pleasure for many.

Binge-watching behavior after COVID -19 has become a guilty pleasure for people and the dilemma is that it has become a routine as it gives them instant gratification. Also, the fact that viewers do not realize its harm as it isn’t immediate and instantly visible to them. To cater to this behavior getting deeply rooted in youth it’s important to identify the factors and the motivations that lead to this obsession. The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the key factors that lead an individual to binge watch content.
- To figure out the motivations driving binge watching behavior in Youth.
- To access the extent to which the binge watching is perceived as a guilty pleasure in Youth.
- To explore how streaming platform features (e.g. autoplay) influence binge-watching behavior.
- To determine whether binge-watching habits have changed post-COVID-19 compared to during pandemic viewing patterns.

The current study aids the domain researchers about the factors and motivations behind the binge-watching behavior among the Youth. The root causes of the excessive screentime, the motivations behind them, the screentime being the guilty pleasure and the features that unconsciously playing their part in the increased watch time etc. are explored in the current study.

Understanding these aspects is crucial, as effective interventions can only be developed once the underlying causes are identified. The findings of this study, researchers will be able to understand the binge-watching patterns better, ultimately highlighting its potential risks to both physical and psychological health.

2. Literature Review

Motivations for Binge-Watching

Cha and Chan-Olmsted (2012) analyzed the substitutability between online video platforms and traditional television. They highlighted how factors like content variety and user convenience influence viewing choices. Individuals who are non-users of online video platforms consider these platforms as substitutes for traditional television compared to the users. Steiner and Xu (2018) identify viewers' primary motivations for binge-watching as catching up, relaxation, sense of completion, cultural inclusion and improved viewing experience. The easy accessibility and navigation of streaming platforms play a significant role in forming binge-watching to avoid problem behaviors. Viewers are uncertain about their binge-watching.

Shim and Kim (2018) explain that participants engage in binge-watching mainly for relaxation, entertainment and to escape from daily stress. Personality traits of an individual, such as high levels of neuroticism and low levels of conscientiousness are associated with a greater tendency to binge-watch. Dimph de Feijter, Vassilis-Javed Khan and Marnix S. van Gisbergen (2016) investigate the contextual factors influencing binge-watching and its impact on well-being. It suggests that the viewing environment and circumstances can influence the emotional outcomes of binge-watching. Asmael's (2018) reveals that individuals perceive binge-watching as a gratifying activity that provides a sense of control, without leading to negative outcomes such as anxiety, addiction or isolation.

Emotional and Psychological Outcomes of Binge-Watching

Ionuț Paul Boca (2017) examined how the rise of online streaming services has transformed television consumption habits, particularly through the phenomenon of binge-watching. It finds that the release of entire seasons by platforms like Netflix encourages prolonged viewing sessions, leading to both positive emotions such as enjoyment and satisfaction and negative outcomes, including feelings of guilt and regret. It highlights the complex interplay between modern content distribution methods and viewer psychology, suggesting that while binge-watching offers instant gratification, it may also result in adverse emotional consequences. Castro et al. (2019) presents an exploratory study examining binge-watching behaviors among millennials. They found out that the participants primarily engaged in binge-watching for relaxation, entertainment and escapism. The participants mostly binge-watched the sessions alone,

while the choice of content was based on mood and time availability. Also, where the binge-watching provided immediate enjoyment, it sometimes led to post-viewing regret or a sense of time wastage. Flayelle et al. (2019) examines binge-watching behaviors among TV series viewers. They figured out the four distinct groups were identified: recreational viewers (low involvement), regulated binge-watchers (moderate involvement), avid binge-watchers (high but non-problematic involvement) and unregulated binge-watchers (potentially problematic involvement with negative outcomes). By analyzing motivations, impulsivity and emotional reactivity, it suggests that high engagement in binge-watching differs from problematic behavior, cautioning against over abnormalizing this common leisure activity. Weipu Wang (2019) explores the psychological factors influencing binge-watching behavior suggesting that individuals often engage in binge-watching for avoiding problems and coping up with stress. It suggests that binge-watching as a deliberate escape can lead to feelings of guilt and regret. While binge-watching serves as a stress-relief strategy, it may also result in adverse emotional consequences when used to evade real-life issues.

Binge-Watching During Special Circumstances

Dixit, A., Marthoenis, M., Arafat, S. M. Y., Sharma, P., & Kar, S. K. (2020) found out that the binge-watching behavior increased 73.7% during lockdown with an average screen time shifted from 1-3 hours to 3-5 hours daily. It suggests that the lockdown's role in altering media consumption habits due to which the News and YouTube were predominant content and platforms. Binge-watching has become a widespread leisure activity since 2013, especially among youngsters. In the systematic review, Starosta and Izydorczyk (2020) examined binge-watching behavior studies from 2013 to 2020 which identifies two main perspectives on binge-watching: one highlighting its entertainment value and positive aspects and the other focusing on negative outcomes and potential behavioral addiction.

3. Research Methodology

This is a survey study to observe the factors and motivations that lead to binge watching behavior using a random sampling technique. Quantitative data was gathered through an online Google survey form, distributed to people selected by random sampling technique. The questionnaire comprised 15 closed ended questions.

The study attempts to comprehensively answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How has the duration of binge-watching sessions evolved in Viewers?

RQ2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence viewers' preferences for content genres? **RQ3.** What are the primary platforms or streaming services preferred for binge-watching content?

RQ4. What are the main motivations behind binge-watching behavior in viewers?

4. Data Analysis and Findings

COVID-19 has played a significant role and is an important factor in promoting binge watching behavior in the audience. The current study aims to assess the motivation that leads to binge watching behavior. For this, sample of 450 recipients were gathered through random sampling technique. The frequency and percentage of the demographic variables were obtained using SPSS v.24. the demographic details of variables are given in table no. 1. Furthermore, the sample of current study is 450 respondents, out of which Females were 42.2% (n=190) and males were 57.8% (n=260). The majority of the respondents i.e. 73.3% (n= 330) lied between the age bracket of 20-25 years, 20% (n=90) were between 26-30 years and only 6.7% (n=30) were below 20 Years of age. The education of respondents was 66.7% (n=300) were bachelors, 20% (n=90) were masters/ MPhil, 11.1% (n=50) were matriculate or intermediate and 2.2% (n=10) were having some other education. The most respondents were the students i.e. 50% (n=225), 28.9% (n=130) had private jobs, 11.1% (n=50) owned a business while 10% (n=45) had government jobs

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	190	42.2
Male	260	57.8
Age		
below 20 Years	30	6.7
20-25 Years	330	73.3
26-30 Years	90	20.0
Education		
Matriculation/ Intermediate	50	11.1
Bachelors	300	66.7
Masters/ MPhil	90	20.0
Other	10	2.2
Occupation		
Student	225	50.0
Government Job	45	10.0
Private Job	130	28.9
Business Owner	50	11.1

Impact of COVID-19 on Viewing Habits:

Figure 1 and 2 shows that viewers mostly have screen time of about 3-4 hours with 39%. Where 19% have a watch time of 1-2 hours there screentime of 11% viewers exceed to more than 4 hours but

surprisingly 31% viewers try to limit their screen time to less than an hour while they binge watch. 26.7% viewers say that they rarely binge watch now. 23.3% viewers tend to binge watch on weekends, 20% a few times a week, 13.3% binge watch daily, 11.1% binge watch once a week where 5.6% binge watch once a month.

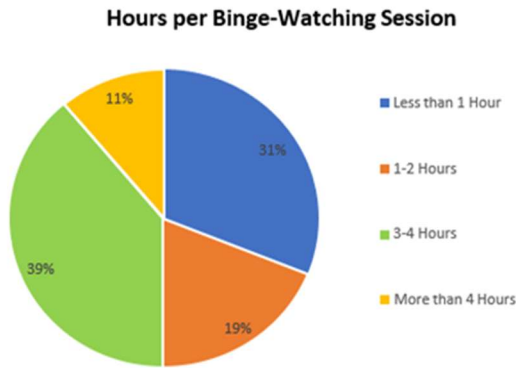


Figure 1: Hours per binge-watching session

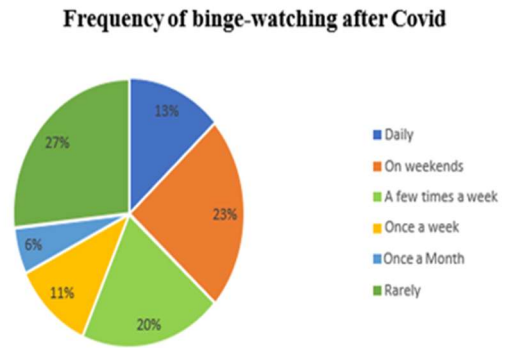


Figure 2: Frequency of binge-watching after COVID-19

Data shows that 55.6% people agree that their binge-watching behavior has significantly increased due to COVID-19. 31.1% people believe that it stayed the same. 61.3% people agreed that their overall screen time increased (Figure 3).

Binge Watching Behavior During COVID-19 Lockdowns

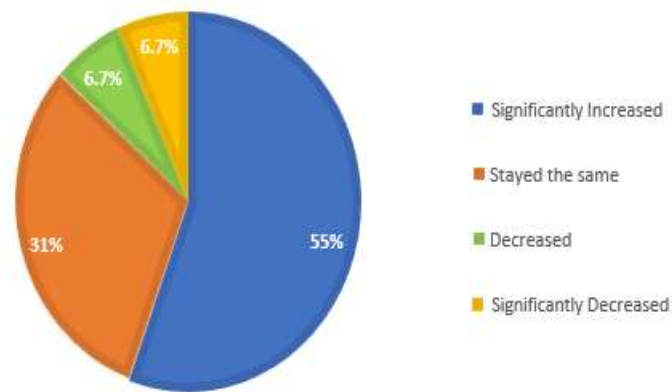


Figure 3: Binge Watching Behavior during COVID-19 lockdowns

Content and Platform Preferences

50% viewers prefer to watch online content only whether its news or entertainment. Where 16.7% watch dramas on Television. 16.7 % viewers consume both television and online platforms for news consumption (Figure 4). 80% viewers prefer Netflix for content consumption, 5.6% prefer Amazon Prime: 5.6% and 14.4% consume some other platforms (Figure 5).

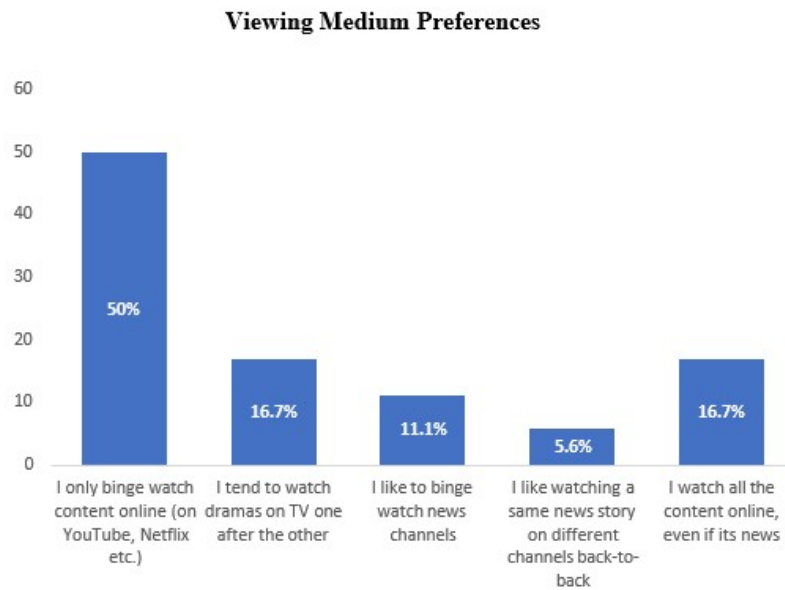


Figure 4: Preference of Medium for content consumption

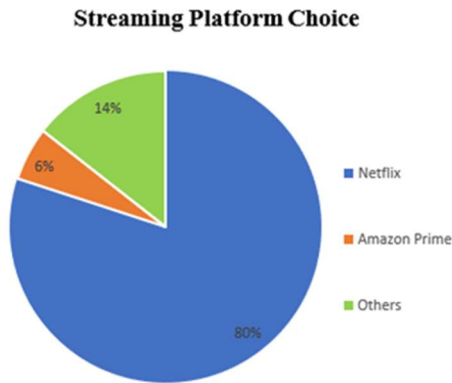


Figure 5: Streaming Platform choice

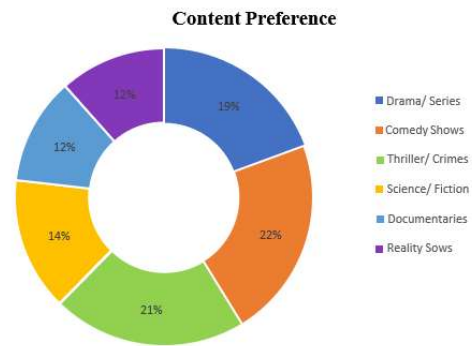


Figure 6: Content Preference

Change in Preference of Content During Pandemic

The statistical data suggests that 22% viewers preferred comedy, 21% preferred thriller/ crime, 19% like dramas/ series, about 14% like watching Science/Fiction while 12% tend to watch documentaries and 12% preferred reality shows. 46% viewers agreed that they watched more comforting and lighthearted shows probably more entertainment-based content. Where most viewers watched entertainment, 21 % viewers also liked watching thriller and intense shows, but 33% viewers found no change in their preference during Covid-19 pandemic. 41.1% feel relaxed after binge watching the content, 31.1% feel guilty while they binge watch, 21% media consumers feel happy and excited on consuming the content and 6.7% media consumers feel anxious if they are interrupted during their binge-watching session.

Change in Preference of Content During Pandemic

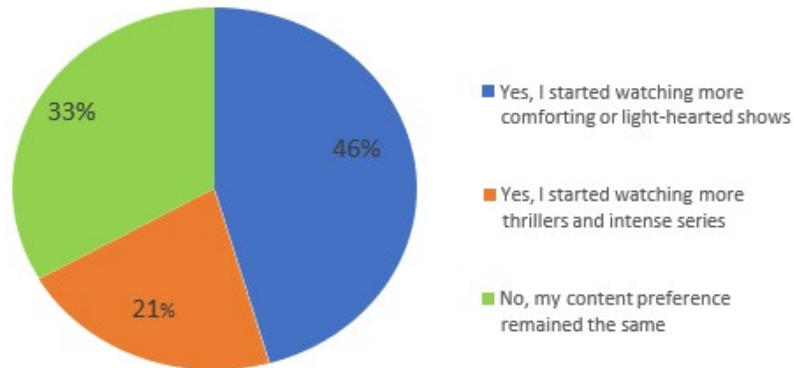


Figure 7: Change in preference of content during pandemic

Emotional Response to Binge Watching



Figure 8: Emotional Response to content consumption

Routine Disruption:

50.9% said binge-watching frequently disrupted their sleep/daily routine and only 8.9% claimed it never did. 38.9% wanted to reduce screen time

Binge watching effects sleep schedule or daily routine

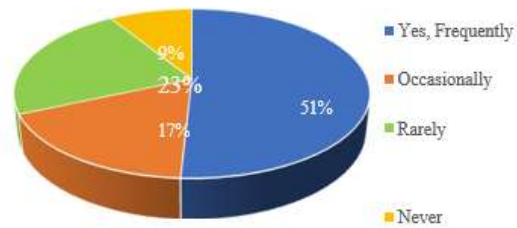


Figure 9: Routine/ Sleep Disruption

Factors Leading to Binge Watching:

67.8% binge-watched to avoid spoilers (Always: 14.4%, Often: 16.7%, Sometimes: 36.7%) Where 32.2% felt no social pressure. 34% viewers consume content to be entertained & relaxed, 23% tend to watch content due to curiosity or cliffhangers. 17% want to combat boredom. 15% find escapism in binge watching content and 11% have their social reasons to binge watch.

Factors that lead to binge-watching behavior

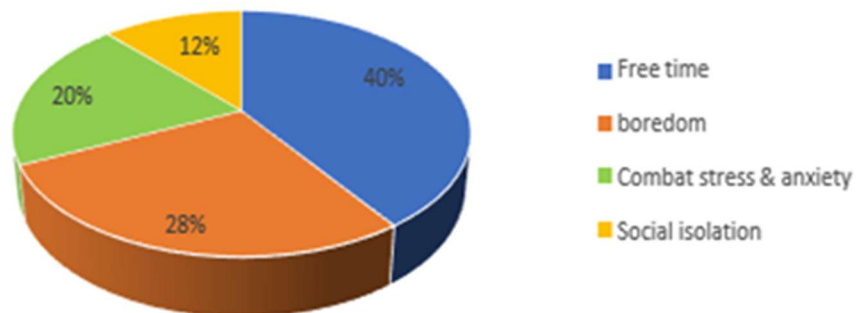


Figure 11: Factors that lead to binge watching behavior

Motivations Behind Binge-Watching

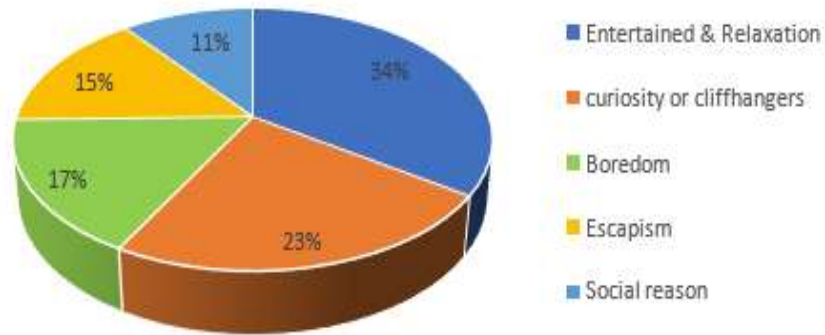


Figure 10: Motivations behind binge-watching behavior

64.4% people feel that they have a lot of free time due to which they tend to binge watch. 44.4% believed that due to boredom they tend to binge watch. Where 32.2% said they consume media to combat stress and anxiety, 18.9% opted found refuge in screen time from social isolation.

Autoplay episodes encourages to binge watch more than planned episodes hence when asked in the survey 40% viewers agree that their autoplay options is by default always on. Where 30% viewers prefer autoplay feature, sometimes there only 21.1% said they manually stop autoplay feature.

Autoplay Feature

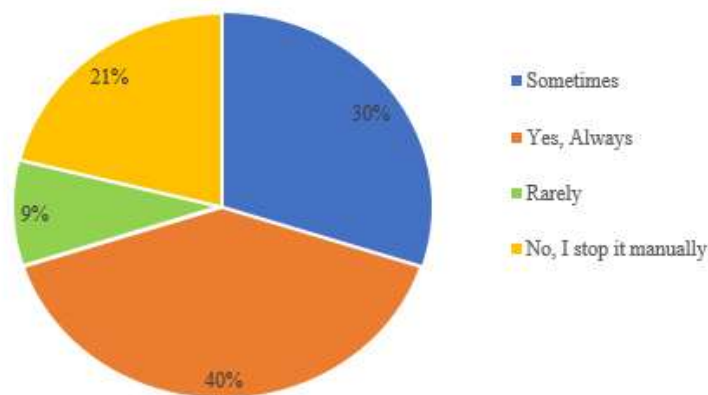


Figure 12: Autoplay Feature

5. Discussion

In the light of the data analysis and findings the study has been able to answer the research questions as follows.

RQ1. *How has the duration of binge-watching sessions evolved in viewers?*

The data collected suggests that 39% viewers (Figure 1) tend to binge watch for 3-4 hours in a session and it exceeds for 11% viewers for more than 4 hours. But the data also reveals that 31% viewers try to limit their screentime to less than an hour.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, as people are back to the normal routine with jobs, university and day to day life, 23% people now mostly binge watch on weekends, 20% tend to binge watch a few times a week but 27% rarely binge watch now (figure 2). Where 55.6% people agree that their binge-watching behavior has significantly increased.

RQ2. *How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence viewers' preferences for content genres?*

The statistical data (figure 7) suggests that viewers preferred comedy, thriller/ crime, and dramas the most. Which proposes that viewers mostly preferred entertainment. Also, according to the data (figure 8), 41.1% feel relaxed after binge watching the content whereas 21% viewers feel happy and excited on consuming the content. According to the data (figure 6), 46% viewers watched more comforting and lighthearted shows, and 21 % viewers also liked watching thriller and intense shows, but 33% viewers didn't find any change in their preference during Covid- 19 pandemic.

RQ3. *What are the primary platforms or streaming services preferred by viewers for binge- watching content?*

80% viewers prefer Netflix for content consumption (figure 5). When surveyed about the viewing medium audience preferred (figure 4), 50% viewers prefer to watch online content only no matter its news or entertainment.

RQ4. *What are the main motivations behind binge-watching behavior in viewers? Are there any other factors involved?*

The primary motivation for 34% people behind binge watching was entertainment and relaxation (figure 10), curiosity or cliffhangers made 23% people binge watch. 17% used as combat mechanism against boredom by binge watching content. 15% find escapism and 11% have their social reasons. The factors other than these motivations were that people had a lot of free time (figure 11) 64.4% stated this factor. 44.4% believed that they binge watched media due to boredom. 32.2% said they consumed media as they felt stressed. 18.9% felt social isolation due to which they binged on media content.

6. Conclusion

The in-depth data analysis shows that binge-watching is highly prevalent in the 20–25 age group. Over the passage of time binge watching has not only become a guilty pleasure for many but people now find digital cocooning as more comforting and a way to unwind. Where people had been binge watching, some of them are trying to limit their screen time. The content consumption pattern indicates that emotional appeal & curiosity are the strongest drivers. Binge-watching behavior gave rise to streaming culture as they provided personalized recommendations and endless content choices according to one's mood and taste. Excessive screen time has many harmful effects as well and while most users associated binge-watching with positive feelings, nearly a third felt guilt and half report routine and sleep disturbance. A large segment wishes to reduce their binge-watching, showing a potential for behavioral interventions. The autoplay feature a surprising culprit, further makes one crave for 'just one more episode' resulting in binge-watching a complete season in rapid succession within a few hours. No doubt the content is calming but quite indulgent which makes you lose track of time. Autoplay feature and spoilers act as digital nudges that pushes users into extended viewing.

7. Recommendations

The study gave insights about the motivations and factors that adds to the streaming obsession. since many respondents still binge for 3–4 hours or more, it's important to create awareness about screen-time management, especially as life returns to normal. Also, viewers preferred comforting, light-hearted and entertaining content the most, the content creators and platforms should invest in feel-good or uplifting genres to support emotional wellness. As the findings suggest autoplay features play a significant role in promoting binge watching behaviors, it's important that viewers should have awareness of such features and control them other than just getting carried away by them. Platforms should also consider enhancing features like reminder pop-ups, watch timers or end-of-episode delays to help users self-regulate their screen time. Given the stress, boredom, and isolation-related bingeing during COVID-19, streaming services could have collaborate with health organizations to share mental health messages or break prompts between episodes. Since binge-watching is often used to cope with boredom or stress so digital well-being campaigns should address emotional triggers behind prolonged viewing.

8. Limitations

This research study had 450 participants mostly including youth representation. The future studies can include participants of different age groups, professions, income levels, and cultural backgrounds for broader insights. The respondents in this study were mostly the consumers of Netflix. Study differences in user behavior across different platforms can also be considered. The motivations and factors behind the binge-watching behavior can also be studied in detailed.

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