Effects of Binge-watching of Netflix on Students: A study of Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract: This paper explored the effects of binge-watching of Netflix on students at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. It adopted the qualitative approach employing the phenomenology method. The selection of participants was done using purposive and snowball sampling. Recurring themes from data collection of semi-structured interviews with students were analysed. Findings indicated that most students gained some knowledge and others had sleeping disorders from binge-watching of Netflix. Also, other findings showed that students experienced some kind of academic disruptions and user self-satisfaction. It was obvious that some students enjoyed the picture quality and aesthetics of the visual elements. Further, others ended up draining their pockets by buying more data to binge-watch. It was concluded that controlling binge-watching of Netflix by individuals may be an alternative to prevent some consequences and addictions.

Keywords: Binge-watching, Department of theatre and film studies, Ghana, Netflix, Students, University of Cape Coast

1. Introduction

Due to technology, binge-watching has become a behavioural phenomenon among viewers of internet streaming channels in recent years. Since the arrival of video-on-demand (VOD) streaming, most viewers have moved away from the traditional consumption of conventional broadcast television channels. Formally, what viewers preferred to watch was usually controlled by television stations according to their programme schedule (Schwediel & Moe, 2016). Also, Eboch (2015) notes that viewers in the late 20th century waited until series were available on video cassettes and DVDs to purchase and watch. As a result, video-online streaming has been another form of viewing lately and attracted a lot of subscribers to choose that over the conventional way of broadcasting, whereby television shows are aired according to what they want the viewers to see. Such video-on-demand streaming platforms are the likes of Hulu, Netflix, HBO Max, Fubo TV, Sling TV, Peacock, Prime Video and Disney Plus. It is noted that the mode of viewing series, seasons or episodes on TV has changed since they are available online streaming channels like Netflix that can be purchased and watched. Littleton (2014) adds that the emergence of online consumption media now presents viewers with the opportunity to switch between channels and decide their viewing schedule through digital video recorders or video-on-demand programming. Usually, people who binge-watch do so on several devices such as broadcast television, mobile phone, laptop, computers and tablets based on the availability of streaming services on the internet and broadcast television content (Merrill & Rubenking, 2019). For video online streaming, viewers have the benefit to watch the TV show of their taste. Thus, a result of binge-watching on online streaming channels among viewers or consumers.
Largely, the word “binge” is explained as consuming or taking something in excess (Anghelcev et al., 2021). This may be likened to eating a particular kind of food in excess within a certain period of time. Therefore, Matos and Ferreira (2020) explain binge-watching as the viewing of TV shows for an extended period in one sitting. Sodano (2012) supports that binge-watching is simply considered as a long-lasting viewing of multiple drama series and episodes on television at a go. Similarly, binge-watching is the serial viewing of a particular television programme over a longer period of time (Rubenking et al., 2018). Schwediel and Moe (2016) consider binge-watching as the consumption of more TV episodes within a period. In that perspective, Perks (2014) prefer scholars to use the terminology media “marathon viewing” to binge-watching in describing the entire experience. This is because she feels the whole idea of using the word “binge” presents some negative assumptions in viewers’ minds. However, Ferchaud (2021) disagrees since she feels the whole concept is more of participant based and also depends on the consumer’s perception than the numerous viewings of serialised episodes. Therefore, the individual involved and the experience gathered in serial viewing matter most. Since multiple viewing is done in one sitting, there is, in our perspective, some form of individual involvement beyond merely the multiple viewing aspect, making the use of these two phrases a semantic issue. It is preferable to use the term binge-watching for the purposes of this essay. Moreover, Jenner (2017) explains binge-watching in media contexts as the serial watching of series on online streaming channels like Netflix as compared to scheduled programmes on traditional television. Previous research confirms Netflix is one of the leading providers of streaming media. Rahman and Arif (2021) view Netflix as one of the top streaming channels with over 208 million subscribers. Similarly, Netflix (2019) presents that it remains the dominant streaming service with over 158 (one hundred and fifty-eight) million subscribers. Data released by Netflix in the third quarter of the year 2019 indicated that the streaming platform has over 167 (one hundred and sixty-seven) million paying subscribers (Netflix, 2020). This number increased rapidly from 5 (five) million in 2012 to more than 167 (Hundred and sixty-seven) million in 2020 (Chang, 2020). Currently, it is worth mentioning that Netflix is available in more than 190 (one hundred and ninety) countries.

As matter of fact, binge-watching demands a lot of time spent watching an episode due to the nature of watching multiple episodes of series in a succession (Peterson, 2016). Generally, as observed, students especially at the tertiary level are often influenced by the idea of watching several series and episodes of programmes in one sitting on Netflix (Rubenking et al., 2018). Also, this phenomenon has become more popular among young adults due to the influx of several types of video content available online and its accessibility globally (Susanno et al., 2019). Likewise, Flayelle et al. (2017), is of the view that this new norm of watching TV seems to be targeting especially young adults. According to Chastin et al. (2018), it is usually observed that the main users of Netflix, Amazon and other streaming platforms are underage. Another study conducted by Chambliss et al. (2017) revealed that binge-watching on Netflix seems to be an issue diverting and disturbing the academic performance of many undergraduates. In their research, findings showed that respondents in a rate of sixty-three percent (63%) indicated this behaviour of binge-watching as a hindrance and respondents in a rate of sixty-four percent (64%) saw it as a waste of time. Further, Riddle et al. (2017) in a study indicated that binge-watching is very common among university students. Upon investigating students of one hundred and seventy-one (171), only five (5) of them claimed they never experienced binge-watching. Thus, university students present an interesting group to research and a selected group worth studying in the area of binge-watching. Although previous researchers in other parts of the world have conducted some form of studies on the behaviour, effects or influences of binge-watching among students, there is a paucity of research on it academically in Ghana. This paper aims to enlarge the research on the effects of binging of Netflix among university students.
2. Literature review

2.1. Binge-watching behaviour and effects

Generally, binge-watching behaviour is prompted by various factors among college or university students. According to Devasagayam (2014), most college students experience boredom during their free time hence relying on streaming platforms to ward off fatigue. In my opinion, this transpires in the early days of reopening school and when lectures are not in session or during long vacations. Moreover, it is noted that most students get stressed facing pressure from examinations, difficulties in studying lack of concentration and personal problems. Therefore, binge-watching may be used as a way of de-stressing from such circumstances (Panda & Pandey, 2017). In addition, it is revealed that the more students continue to binge-watch daily, it becomes a kind of culture thus growing into a habit. From that perspective, they would prefer binge-watching as a form of dependence (Mikos, 2016; Panda & Pandey, 2017). The resultant effect cultivated behaviour of viewers can only be imagined in various consequences. Likewise, numerous studies on binge-watching by individuals in one sitting at several consecutive times prove to have effects on viewers in diverse ways. These may be positive or negative depending on the individual who is involved in that form of bingeing. According to Sung et al. (2015), a research conducted among participants between 18 and 20 years, indicated that most of them suffered from bingeing. This ensued in a change in their mannerisms and some of these occurrences when they go on uncontrolled may be harmful to their health. It is noted that binge-watching has become another form of entertainment in consuming media content presently that demands a kind of self-control by individuals to prevent certain consequences.

3. Research methodology

The study adopted a qualitative framework using a phenomenology method. The selection of research participants used purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The main reason for the selection of participants was based on students who binge-watched Netflix for more hours in one sitting. A number of seven (7) undergraduate students were selected for this study and interviewed which comprised four (4) males and three (3) females. Also, participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Duration for interviewees lasted twenty (20) minutes for each participant. This made it possible to probe participants further for answers during the interviews to gain rich data. Researchers had to end the interviews when they reached a saturation point to allow for data transcription and analysis. Also, there were some forms of biases and reflexivity during data gathering which is usually accepted in most qualitative research. Data were transcribed and the recurring themes were coded for analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Knowledge acquisition

The majority of participants claimed that binge-watching of Netflix gave them a wealth of knowledge to expand their horizons in their field of expertise. This is what they had to say:

Participant 2

“Hmmm…..I usually watch 3 to 4 episodes within a week. As an aspiring film student, I am able to gain some knowledge and skills that can be applied to my students’ film productions. I have realised that whatever we learned in class in terms of film style and techniques are used by most filmmakers globally”.

Participant 4

“In my opinion, I think bingeing on Netflix is another learning platform aside from what I learn in class. I usually come across varied image sizes, compositions and camera angles used by filmmakers in their visual storytelling”.
Participant 3
“Personally, as a budding filmmaker, I believe watching different genres of TV series and episodes would enhance my knowledge and skills as an image creator”.

Participant 1
“My dream is to become a great screenwriter thus binge-watching on Netflix would give me ideas to express myself visually on screen”.

Participant 5
“Aaaah!!! .....for me, bingeing on Netflix is a learning curve. The storylines of the TV series I have watched are just amazing and very intriguing. I gather ideas that can be applied in my scripts”.

Participant 7
“There is so much information on filmmaking techniques at my disposal”.

Participant 6
“This is really a classroom for learning visual storytelling”.

It was obvious that viewers binge-watch to get inspired in the field of filmmaking. Besides, they learned a lot of technicalities in visual storytelling in relation to their specialization. As presented by Sharma (2020), viewers are able to broaden their knowledge on topics in various areas of specialisation when binge-watching. Also, Jones et al. (2018) support this view and presented that users are frequently provided with new information and understanding of issues as a form of further knowledge.

4.2. Sleep problems
The second prevalent theme was the issue of changes in sleeping patterns as a result of binge-watching of Netflix.

Participant 1
“For me, “Breaking Bad” is my favourite and I can sit a whole night and watch the entire series till the next morning”.

Participant 2
“I can watch series on Netflix for a whole day and postpone my sleep to the following day. In total I watch seven series in a year”.

Participant 4
“I binge on Netflix a whole day without feeling sleepy. Sometimes, I have to postpone my bedtime to enjoy Korean series like “Legend of the Blue Sea”, “Boys Over flowers”, “All of us are Dead”, “I am Not a Robot”, “Nevertheless” and “It’s Okay to Not Be Okay”.

In supporting this result, Ahuja (2020) in a research conducted among some Indian youth highlighted that binge-watching caused sleeplessness and resulted in unhappy feelings. Although participants did not openly admit that binge-watching disturbed their sleeping order it was obvious that it changed and reduced their sleeping time according to some of their submissions. Whereas some stayed up late to watch a streaming series others had to postpone their sleep in watching a TV show on-demand. In probing further some confessed that they had only a two-hour sleep before daybreak. It is noted that binge-watching requires a large amount of time and a viewing period. This may result in insomnia and can be hazardous to their health.

4.3. Academic disruptions
In their accounts, some participants highlighted that their studies were interrupted due to binge-watching which possibly affected their academic performance.
Participant 2
“Initially, I was able to manage my time between studying and bingeing, but as of now, I am rather getting addicted to bingeing on Netflix. Currently, I prefer bingeing on Netflix to sitting behind my books to read. My results for last semester were really bad with low grades and my parents expressed some kind of dissatisfaction”.

Participant 3
“My studies are somehow affected due to the rate at which I binge lately. Instead of finding time to read and learn, I would use that quality time to watch a TV series. Before I realize, procrastination of studies sets in and the entire day is far spent”.

Although participants were not clear on binge-watching having an effect on their academic work, it was obvious that close monitoring of their contributions and performance in class and examinations kept dwindling. In this view, a previous study on the academic performance of students who binge-watched established that using electronic mediums like TV and studying at the same had detrimental effects on students (Jacobson & Forste, 2011). This was observed among college students who engaged in such practice and resulted as a form of distraction.

4.4. Social interaction gratification
Participants acknowledged that they gained some satisfaction socially as a result of binge-watching of Netflix.

Participant 4
“I get a sigh of relief when watching TV episodes since I am able to discuss with friends who are also into bingeing on Netflix from other departments”.

Participant 6
“I am able to discuss the episodes that were shown the previous day with my colleagues. This creates some kind of film discourses in relation to what some lecturers have taught us”.

Interestingly, meeting together as peers to discuss the episodes and series watched on Netflix gave some participants a kind of satisfaction. They were able to discuss and do constructive visual criticism and analysis of the TV episodes. Binge-watching has transformed traditional TV viewing into a rather current means through online streaming platforms giving viewers a lot of control to satisfy their needs (Pittman & Sheehan 2015). From that perspective, viewers had the ability to choose the time and period to consume the media content. They made sure their viewing experiences were placed on the optimal value over other daily activities to their satisfaction.

4.5. Hedonism (self-gratification or pleasure-seeking)
Participants expressed the self-pleasure and enjoyment they experienced when binge-watching of Netflix.

Participant 4
“The fact that I can download series and watch them in my comfort gives me a sigh of relief. Nowadays, the hustle of going to the movies or cinema to watch films has become a thing of the past. Also, downloading straight from the internet sometimes attracts mobile viruses which may require a lot of time to clean. Thus, bingeing on Netflix is preferred over downloading films with other softwares. Further, Netflix does not show any form of commercials or adverts intermittently when showing films to avoid getting distracted and this freaks me a lot. The series I enjoy watching most are “Blood Sisters” and “Good Game”.

Participant 6
“God !!!......bingeing on Netflix gets me overexcited since it supports various devices such as TV sets, Mobile phones, Tablets, Blue Ray and Game Consoles. Frankly speaking, it is one of the popular streaming platforms I would recommend to my colleagues on any day. It performs well on android and windows phones as compared to Apple TV streaming on iPhones. I am able to schedule my viewing alone which makes way for several viewings of episodes in one sitting”.

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Participant 3
“When I have enough time, I usually go ahead and watch directly than post-pone the viewing. I am excited just by subscribing to Netflix. Besides, we have a family subscription which does benefits individual family members”.

Some participants in order to satisfy their personal pleasures downloaded series and watched them numerously over a period. They preferred that to going to the cinema halls to watch movies. Others got relieved since the streaming platform supported android smartphones. As supported by Katz et al. (1973) consumers are eager to chase media content to satisfy their needs based on the concepts and theory of Uses and gratification.

4.6. Picture quality and aesthetics
Participants noticed something peculiar about productions on Netflix which was the picture quality and aesthetics of the visual elements.

Participant 5
“I watch Netflix merely because of the picture quality and aesthetics of the episodes and series shown. Currently, I am watching a Nigerian legal titled “Castle and Castle”. I love the editing and picture quality and that always pushes me to binge. Personally, I presume Netflix has some set standards for individual filmmakers who submit their works to them and these are international standards”.

Participant 7
“Ha ha ha………. due to the background sceneries and quality pictures, I would watch and watch and watch again”.

According to some participants, the picture quality and the aesthetics of the TV series kept them bingeing on Netflix and got them glued to their seats for more hours. It is noted that most of the productions on Netflix carry some form of beauty and are very attractive.

4.7. Go bust
Some participants revealed that binge-watching of Netflix increased the amount they spent on buying internet data bundles which resulted in draining their pockets.

Participant 1
“I spend an amount of GH¢ 60.00 (Sixty Ghana Cedis) a month to binge on Netflix. In the middle of the month, I realize I have spent all my daily upkeep money on subscriptions”.

Participant 2
“Although Netflix has made it easier for viewers to enjoy bingeing online, one needs to purchase more data. However, due to economic hardships, purchasing data has become problematic. Therefore, I am forced to take some amount from my weekly pocket money to purchase data in order to binge”.

Participant 4
“Hmmmm……..data purchase is an issue now because I usually spend a lot on that to be able to download the TV episodes and watch them instantly or later. This makes me go broke”.

This result may be credited to the fact that fees charged by some telecommunication organisations for data purchases are too high. Besides, the internet network bandwidth in our part of the world is very low in some communities as compared to other countries and that requires mobile phone users to buy more data. Also, online streaming needs a lot of data that can cause a user lots of money within a month. Thus, downloading films on Netflix demands some gigabytes of data needed to be purchased which may cause some consumers to unsubscribe. In our opinion, some telecommunication organisations should provide high internet speed to enable customers to enjoy binge-watching on Netflix. According to a recent report by Rosney (2022) on British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.), a lot of viewers are unsubscribing from Netflix for one or more reasons. It is
noted that due to the global recession currently, most subscribers cannot afford to pay more for online streaming. In that regard, extra expenses may cause viewers to unsubscribe from some online streaming platforms. Occasionally, audiences may decide to stream or download for later viewing but it also depends on the individual’s schedule.

5. Recommendation
It is quite evident that despite all the positive and negative effects, binge-watching can become an addiction if not controlled by individuals. In our opinion, it may be difficult for policymakers to control students of binge-watching of Netflix. This is because as individual viewers, they have the freedom and taste to choose from whatever genre they are tempted to watch. Generally, the decision lies on an individual either to turn off all Netflix notifications on their electronic devices or block applications that would enable them to get access to programmes on Netflix. Until then, Netflix would keep attracting its viewers with intriguing, thrilling and exciting films, series or episodes that always get them glued to their seats. Nonetheless, Netflix and other online streaming platforms are doing so well in solving the issues of the supply chain by making sure local distributors get their TV series or episodes and film productions to audiences at any given time.

6. Implications for further research
Given the abundance of articles on it, binge-watching is no longer a subject that is unexplored in terms of research and academia. Therefore, this study provides a platform for further qualitative research to explore and analyse the consequences of students binge-watching of Netflix in the Ghanaian media landscape on their mental health.

7. Conclusion
The aim of this study was to explore the effects of binge-watching of Netflix on students at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. According to the results of this study, the key findings indicated that binge-watching had some positive and negative effects on students at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. First of all, students acquired some knowledge as another way of learning. Secondly, binge-watching affected some students on their sleeping patterns since they ended up sitting a whole night to watch an entire TV series or episode. Furthermore, the academic performance of some students was affected due to binge-watching. In this regard, they spent their quality time binge-watching on Netflix than studying. Moreover, other participants expressed some kind of pleasure and satisfaction they gained inwardly and socially watching series on Netflix. Finally, it is obvious that students spent a lot of money on internet data acquisition which ended up draining their pockets during the semester or when on holidays. As a result, considering the main key findings of this study, controlling binge-watching may be another solution to ease some consequences and addictions. As technology keeps advancing in media content production, the onus lies on viewers to be able to control their binge-watching habits in order not to be addicted in any form.

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