


Binge-watching motivates change: Uses and gratifications of streaming video viewers challenge traditional TV research

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how binge-watching culture and technology are changing the ways viewers understand and interact with television. We propose that the motives and rituals of binge-viewers can be used to expand uses and gratifications (U&G) theory. We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews to gather thick descriptions of why people binge-watch, how they binge-watch, and how they feel about binge-watching. The findings indicate that (1) viewers' primary motivations for binge-watching are catching up, relaxation, sense of completion, cultural inclusion, and improved viewing experience; (2) the portability and navigability of streaming video technology influence binge-watching rituals; and (3) viewers are ambivalent about their binge-watching. Based on the findings, we propose that a viewer attentiveness spectrum is a more accurate descriptor of contemporary TV watching than the passive/active dichotomy. We further argue that the changing motives and rituals of TV viewers can be used to bolster the quantitative surveys often employed in U&G research and to address the lingering criticisms of U&G theory.

Keywords

Audiences, binge-watching, streaming video, television, uses and gratifications

Although over 70% of Americans binge-watch (Deloitte, 2015), including former President Obama (HuffPostTV, 2013), until recently few media scholars were studying this emergent viewing behavior (Perks, 2015; Pittman and Sheehan, 2015). To contribute to the growing body of literature on binge-watching, our article explores it as a media ritual from the perspective of

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audiences' motives and needs. To do so, we apply uses and gratifications (U&G) theory as our guiding framework. We hope to find out what motives people have for binge-watching and what consequences are involved in binge-watching. By analyzing audiences' experiences through qualitative interviews, we aim to provide new perspectives for U&G research.

There are several benefits for using U&G theory to study binge-watching. First, over the last 50 years, U&G theory developed into a framework for understanding audiences' exposure to televisions, newspapers, radios, the Internet, and computers (Ruggerio, 2000). If researchers can explain people's motives for using media, their behavior such as media selection and content sharing can be further explored (Haridakis and Rubin, 2005).

Second, U&G theory not only focuses on motives but also describes other psychological effects and media selection behaviors. As Lin (1996: 574) argued, it permits researchers to investigate 'mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, motives, communication channels, communication content, and psychological gratifications within a cross-cultural context'. Therefore, U&G theory can be used to understand motives for binge-watching and to analyze how people binge-watch.

Third, U&G researchers have recently called for conceptual and methodological refinements for studying emerging media (Rubin, 2009; Ruggerio, 2000; Sundar and Limperos, 2013). In the past decades, the validity of U&G theory has been challenged. White (1994) argued that U&G research has exaggerated audiences' active use of media. The societal influences, cultural factors, and technological impacts have to some extent been overlooked (Rubin, 2002; Ruggerio, 2000; Sundar and Limperos, 2013). In addition, critics have questioned the use of preexisting measures to explore audiences' motives (Massey, 1995). Miller (2005) further argued that little is known about how different parts of U&G constitute a coherent theory. Despite its 50 years of development, U&G theory has often been criticized for its lack of predictive power and coherence.

However, one of the strengths of U&G theory is its capacity to evolve into a more sophisticated model (Ruggerio, 2000). It allows researchers to continuously add the most updated findings of motives, social and psychological origins, and media use outcomes to the theory (Ruggerio, 2000). Today's emerging technologies and the concomitant new forms of computer-mediated communication have provided scholars an unprecedented opportunity to revisit, refine, and revitalize U&G theory. As binge-watching is an emergent media behavior that blends culture and technology, we are applying U&G theory to better understand why people binge-watch while simultaneously addressing the calls for conceptual and methodological refinements of U&G theory through reflexive analysis and interpretation of our findings.

Literature review

Media studies and binge-watching

Television has been studied for nearly a century, but for much of that time scholars have studied it with unidirectional, cause-and-effect logic. From the Frankfurt School's harsh, deterministic critiques (Adorno, 2001) to social scientists' dire prognostications of the medium's influence over behavior and perception, television viewers by and large have been treated as passive receivers (Bandura et al., 1963). Audience individuality and agency were objectively controlled in the experiments of effects scholars or claimed to be pacified and homogenized through the indoctrination of corporate capitalism in the critiques of Marxists. Thus, from its mainstream inception, television's identity has been fixed to the 'idiot box' narrative (Lotz, 2014; Mittell, 2000; Ouellette

and Lewis, 2000; Spigel, 1992) – an industrialized system of commoditized lowbrow culture with the power to manipulate its passive viewers into consumerist ideology (Gerbner, 1976; Postman, 1982) and potentially violent behavior (Mendelsohn, 1989).

Cultural theorists began to challenge the notion of audience passivity (Bennett, 2009; Williams, 1973; Morley, 2003) in the 1960s and 1970s. Social scientists also began shifting the focus of their quantitative work from direct effects of media to audience responses (Katz et al., 1974). Feminist theorists of the 1980s and 1990s rebranded audience members as active in media consumption through discourse (Weedon, 1987). Radway (2009: 199) encouraged a negotiation and renegotiation of the ‘nature of the relationship between audiences and texts’. Meanwhile, Fiske (1987) argued that TV audiences are better conceptualized as readers of texts. Ang (1991) and Bobo (1995) critiqued the top-down power dynamics and unidirectional flows associated with the media industry and social science research. Sender (2012: 2) argued that conceptualizing the producer–viewer relationship as cooperative can ‘legitimize the audiences’ scrutinizing gaze’.

Television’s identity has been complicated in the 21st century by an expansion of what constitutes TV (Thompson and Mittell, 2013), fandom and digital labor (Andrejevic, 2008; Duffy, 2017), ‘performances and the production of user-generated content’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 64), connected viewing (Holt et al., 2016), and self-conscious audience participation (Sender, 2012). Under this newer conception, the viewer and broadcaster share some control over the content and distribution of TV (Steiner, 2017: 143).

The technology and culture of binge-watching further problematize how television is conceived and perceived. Although Oxford dictionaries named ‘binge-watch’ one of the most popular new words for 2013, the definition itself is still ‘being articulated in and through the media’ (Steiner, 2014: 2). Media Critic Mary McNamara (2012) provided one of the first formal definitions of binge-watching: ‘any instance in which more than three episodes of an hour-long drama or six episodes of a half-hour comedy are consumed at one sitting’. Emerging qualitative research on binge-watching has articulated the behavior as watching consecutive episodes of the same show for at least 2–4 h in succession (Perks, 2015; Petersen, 2016), though Pierce-Grove (2017) argues that number of episodes may be a more accurate delineator of binge-watching than number of hours. The quantity of time or episodes constituting a ‘binge’ may vary, but the defining action of binge-watching appears to be a consistent and sequential viewing of at least two episodes of a show in succession.

However, the term itself is linguistically problematic. Until 2012, binge connoted dangerous or harmful behavior such as binge-drinking and bingeing and purging (Oxford, 2013). The word means a period of indulgence without control. Despite that modifier, mainstream media has generally portrayed binge-watching as a liberating experience (Stelter, 2013) and even a cultural driver (Wallenstein, 2013). That ‘whatever, whenever, wherever’, narrative has been embraced by audiences and producers (PRNews Wire, 2013) who, by doing so, are unfixing the definitions of ‘binge’ and of ‘television watching’. While the bookworm/couch potato dialectic may be growing passé, distinctions of class and taste percolate through the journalistic and scholarly conceptualizations of binge-watching (Bianculli, 2016; Tryon, 2015). The notion of higher/lower culture demarcations of the texts of binge-watching is didactically addressed in Thompson and Mittell’s (2013) *How to Watch Television*. The authors propose critical readings of complex texts as an enhancement of the viewing experience. Mittell (2015) further expands this concept in *Complex TV* stating that viewer expectations for challenging texts and new distribution modes afforded through technology have driven producers to create stories requiring greater

attentiveness. Thus, engagement in a text is depicted as a process of active viewing that elevates the text's quality.

While the indulgence associated with traditional definitions of bingeing remains, the control over that indulgence is being renegotiated. Stating that you are a binge-viewer in 2017 is less a confession of weakness than it is a proclamation of your cultural and technological bona fides. The term's popularity is partially attributable to its subversive signification and to its rebellious reclamation of that which was once perceived as dangerous and lowbrow: excessive TV watching. The cultural reclamation is taking place in and through technology that affords audiences control and portability of a nearly limitless diversity of content that can be considered high art (Marechal, 2013). That cultural reclamation is forcing a revolution within the TV industry (Lotz, 2014). Scholars note how binge-watching is disrupting norms of televisual advertising (Schweidel and Moe, 2016) as well as traditions of content production and distribution (Lotz, 2014: 8–11).

Perks (2015) uses multiple methods to explore new consumption rituals of multimedia texts. Through a hybrid of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and journal keeping, she analyzes reader experiences with books, films, and TV series from a rhetorical perspective. She argues that textual constructions in time with viewer pleasure contribute to enhanced sensations of immersion and transportation during binge-watching experiences. She relates this enhanced cognitive involvement to the complexity of texts (66) that binge-watching allows and encourages from studios and producers. Furthermore, she argues that marathoning, a term she prefers to bingeing, 'has resulted in an alternative model of flow [from Raymond Williams's (1973) description of 20th century TV watching], one that is seemingly user-directed, self-perpetuating (because of technology and reader motives), and often self-contained' (p. xxii). This viewer empowerment via improved texts is often tied to the popular contemporary narrative of TV's Platinum Age (Bianculi, 2016) through the affordances of streaming video technology. Audiences are not just empowered by the technology to control the time, place, and manner of their consumption (Newman, 2014), they are using the technology to share and generate culture in ways that influence content producers (Jenner, 2014). Shows that had died on traditional broadcast television, such as *Arrested Development*, are resurrected by the demand of binge-viewer fans and bought by streaming services that eschew traditional ratings-based revenue models (Jenner, 2014; Lotz, 2014). As Newman and Levine (2012: 2) point out, this illuminates tensions around our understanding of TV as the 'cultural value of the medium undergoes negotiation and revision'. In action then, binge-watching is a behavioral hybrid of technology and culture (Steiner, 2017: 144). It is a symbolic rearticulation of audience control ironically performed by audiences losing control on their own terms.

Since binge-watching is changing how television is seen and understood technologically and culturally, we argue that it has the power to change how media scholars study television. Building on this theoretical foundation, we first examined how audiences binge-watch from a perspective that acknowledges viewer agency. This perspective is reflected in our methods, which replace unidirectional researcher→subject/broadcaster→receiver logic with a process of dynamic discourse and grounded theory. We began with in-depth, open-ended interviews to locate binge-watchers' 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1973: 58) within and without the nostalgia of television's idiot box narrative. We then used the thick descriptions that viewers provided to examine how U&G research on television might be enhanced through the changing light of binge-watching technology and culture. As Sender (2012: 24) points out, 'Participants' research reflexivity offers a frame to reconsider contemporary debates about audience research and the role reflexivity might play in these debates'.

Tenets of U&G theory

U&G theory can be traced to early gratification studies in the 1940s (Haridakis and Whitmore, 2006). Katz et al. (1974: 20) argued that U&G research focuses on:

(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones.

Based on Katz et al.'s (1974) conceptualization, Rubin (2002) listed five assumptions of U&G theory. First, people's communication behavior including the selection of media and the use of media is goal-directed. Second, audiences are active in their use of media channels. Third, social and psychological factors such as personality can mediate people's media use behavior. Fourth, media compete with other forms of communication such as interpersonal interaction to gratify people's needs and wants. The last assumption is that media may affect the way people rely on certain media channels (Rubin, 2002).

U&G theory is an audience-oriented theory with a typology of audience activities across two dimensions (Levy and Windahl, 1984; Massey, 1995): (1) audiences' exposure status, which includes audiences' activity before media exposure, during media exposure, and after media exposure and (2) audiences' selectivity, involvement, and utility of media (Massey, 1995). According to Kim and Rubin (1997) and Massey (1995), a typical example of preexposure activities includes people's selection of media channels, anticipation of involvement in media exposure, and motivations for media use. During-activity behaviors include audiences' selective perception, attention, parasocial interaction, and elaboration (Massey, 1995; Rubin and Perse, 1987b). Post-activity behaviors include selective recall of media content, evaluation, and opinion leading (Massey, 1995; Rubin and Perse, 1987a).

Challenges to U&G theory

The explication of audience activities has provided a systematic way to study audiences' active media use. However, criticisms have emerged in both the conceptualization and operationalization of U&G theory. Though Rubin (2009) responded to some of the criticisms, issues remain for motive identification, origin of the needs, and need gratifications. Our research questions are therefore framed to address the lingering challenges to U&G through a qualitative understanding of how and why people binge-watch.

Challenges to motives. U&G researchers have identified a variety of audience motives for television viewing. Rubin's (1983) pioneering work on audiences' TV viewing motives suggested that audiences watched TV for relaxation, companionship, entertainment, social interaction, information, habit, passing time, arousal, and escape. Drawing on Rubin's (1983) studies, Haridakis and Rubin (2003) examined audiences' motives for watching the violent content on TV. They found that audiences watched violent programs for passing time, unwinding (i.e. relaxation and escape), entertainment, information, social interaction, and arousal (i.e. excitement). Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) looked at why audiences watched reality TV shows and found that relaxation, passing time, and entertainment contributed to their viewing motivation.

Today, viewers can experience television through new media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. U&G theory has been applied to explaining users' motives for selecting these media channels (Haridakis and Hanson, 2009; Park et al., 2009; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008). For example, Haridakis and Hanson (2009) considered YouTube as social media and found that people use YouTube for its convenience in entertainment seeking and information seeking. People also watch YouTube videos for co-viewing (i.e. watching with others) and escape.

Typically, these motives for TV viewing and for emerging media use were identified through surveys asking about participants' media use experience. Many motives have been identified through the use of preexisting measures for different media channels. However, this method of surveying for motives has been criticized because participants often need to respond to questions that have been used in prior research (Massey, 1995). For example, the Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) Internet use motives scale was built on the Rubin (1983) television viewing scale. The YouTube viewing scale (Haridakis and Hanson, 2009) was built on both the Rubin (1983) television viewing scale and the Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) Internet use scale. Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) also relied on previous measures of audiences' TV viewing motives (e.g. Nabi et al., 2003; Rubin, 1983, 1985; Rubin and Perse, 1987a).

Although U&G researchers have used factor analysis to extract major emerging media use motives from traditional media, it is likely that emerging media gratifications would not be easily discovered. Existing measures based on traditional broadcast television may inhibit us from understanding new motives and gratifications for binge-watching's evolving technologies and culture.

Based on the limitations, researchers have suggested updating the motives for emerging media use (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). Rubin (2009) argued that even some major motives identified in earlier U&G research are too broad and need to be specified. For instance, media users seek information almost all the time in media use. Social interaction involves information seeking. Entertainment seeking and information seeking may also overlap. Thus, in addition to referring to previous measures, it is necessary to identify audiences' motives for emerging media use with specific descriptions that fit emerging media use behavior.

In this article, we critically apply U&G theory as the guiding framework of our research on binge-watching. We expect to understand why people binge-watch, and by doing so to improve the scope of future quantitative U&G surveys designed for large sample sizes. We also hope to learn how motives for binge-watching differ from those in prior U&G research. Thus, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What motives do people have for binge-watching?

RQ2: How are the motives for binge-watching similar to and different from the motives identified in prior U&G research?

Challenges to the origins of needs. Early U&G researchers argued that social and psychological factors influence people's media selection and exposure, resulting in needs gratifications (Katz et al., 1974). However, the original tenets did not specify how other factors influence people's media selection and exposure. Ruggerio (2000) argued that cultural factors may strengthen people's needs and provide guidance for people's gratifications. For example, in some non-Western countries, the active audience argument has low acceptability (Cooper, 1997; Ruggerio, 2000).

Apart from cultural factors, Sundar and Limperos (2013) argued that media technologies themselves can influence audiences' gratifications. Previously, media only referred to mass communication tools such as newspapers, radio, television, and film, while now emerging media technologies such as streaming video have become more interactive, mobile, and smart.

In light of the evolving characteristics of contemporary media, Sundar and Limperos (2013) pointed out that U&G scholars should consider the roles of modality (i.e. the affordance that enables people to present through different functions of the media), agency (i.e. user-generated activities such as comment posting, identity building), interactivity (i.e. the affordance that enables users to make real-time changes), and navigability (i.e. the affordance that enables users to explore the medium) in media use. Similarly, Ruggerio (2000) argued that the factors of interactivity (i.e. the extent to which participants can control or exchange roles in mutual discourse), demassification (i.e. individuals' control over the medium), and asynchronicity (i.e. messages may be staggered in time) should be considered in future U&G research.

Based on these challenges, researchers have proposed that U&G theory should take technological characteristics into consideration. Sundar and Limperos (2013) argued that emerging media technologies have led people to form new habits (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). For instance, the torrent of tweets second screeners post while viewing a show (Gil de Zúñiga and Liu, 2017), or the text messages they send to their friends, some of who are also watching and simultaneously criticizing that show on blogs and Facebook.

Though binge-watching is associated with people's traditional television watching habits (e.g. watching television), it is apparent that streaming media services like Netflix have combined the advantages of large screen television viewing, streaming video, and social media (rating and reviewing) capabilities. Audiences can watch their favorite shows at any time while cultivating their profile through show ratings and favorite lists. Audiences can also use the streaming and storage technology (e.g. Netflix, YouTube, DVR) to take their living rooms anywhere. Additionally, the technology affords them the ability to pause content, rewind, and add closed captions. These affordances have provided binge-viewers with vastly different user experiences than traditional broadcast television viewing. Thus, in order to understand the technological impact on users' needs gratifications, we propose the following research question:

RQ3: How do technologies motivate audiences to binge-watch?

Challenges to need gratifications. Gratifications have been referred to as 'expectations and desires that emanate from and are constrained by personal traits, social context, and interaction' (Rubin, 2009: 167). Although gratifications of media use have received much attention from U&G researchers, early research did not fully consider the differences between gratifications sought (GS) and gratifications obtained (GO). U&G scholars also have not fully explored unintended consequences in media use.

To understand the relationships between GS and GO, Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) tested six models that explain the discrepancies between GS and GO. They found that expectancy-value discrepancy model (EVDM) is most predictive of media satisfaction. Specifically, EVDM predicts media use satisfaction based on either overobtention of a positively evaluated gratification or underobtention of a negatively evaluated gratification. In this model, audiences' media use experience is associated not only with what they seek but also with what they obtain through media use. Audiences' evaluations of the gratifications also play a role in their use experience.

Despite Palmgreen and Rayburn's findings, the differences between GS and GO need to be further explored. The conceptualization of U&G has made it clear that people are not simply active or impervious to external influence (Rubin, 1993). Also, Katz et al. (1974: 20) implied that people's media use may result in 'mostly unintended consequences'.

Prior research has suggested that media exposure consequences include political socialization (Rubin, 1978), medium satisfaction (Perse and Rubin, 1988), utility (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000), parasocial interaction (Rubin et al., 1985), chronic loneliness (Perse and Rubin, 1990), Internet addiction (Kim and Haridakis, 2009), Internet dependency (Sun et al., 2008), and viewer aggression (Haridakis and Rubin, 2003). However, the gratifications from binge-watching remain unexplored. Thus, we use U&G theory to explore what 'consequences, mostly unintended consequences' binge-viewers experience. Therefore, our fourth research question is:

RQ4: What are the user consequences of binge-watching?

Method

Rationale for qualitative research method

Binge-watching is a hybrid of technology and culture. It challenges traditional unidirectional models of broadcaster and receiver through its shifting of the perceived dynamics of power. To reflect this methodologically, we chose to use qualitative interviews with open-ended questions that attempt to put the viewer, as interviewee, on a more equal footing (Lotz, 2000). Our rationale was that in-depth interviews provide more substantive and robust answers to how and why questions (Weiss, 1994) and provide thick descriptions that can make the quantitative surveys of U&G more robust. Furthermore, we analyzed interviewees' thick descriptions using pragmatic, inductive reasoning, and grounded theory that recognizes our own positions as researchers (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Sender, 2012). Our perspective also acknowledges that the viewer's position (Ang, 1991) is primary to the media behavior, if not the content creation. Our approach favors reflexive subjectivity over objectivity (Charmaz, 2014). We acknowledge that our position as researchers is in discourse with the interviewees and this project holistically (Torfing, 1999). Our goal is for that openness to be reflected by the interviewees so that the conversations facilitated a richer and freer dialogue. From the conversations, we hope that U&G researchers can expand quantitative surveys to better reflect today's TV viewers.

Participants and procedures

During 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews each lasting approximately 60 min and informal discussions each lasting approximately 30 min. Twenty-one women and 15 men participated. The participants were between 22 and 66 years old and lived in either the Philadelphia or New York City metropolitan areas; four were born outside the United States. Some participants were contacted during the spring of 2015 to answer follow-up questions derived through the dynamic grounded theory process. All but one of the interviews were conducted in person. The strength of using face-to-face communication is that researchers can observe interviewees' facial expressions during face-to-face interaction.

We used open-ended questions in a semi-structured format that allowed the conversations to flow organically (Weiss, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were used because they provide researchers with the flexibility to ask both preestablished questions and improvised questions.

Although most of the interviewees answered (directly and indirectly) all 25 questions/prompts on the protocol to delve into the interview topics and to clarify the answers from the participants, the order of the questions was adjusted according to the flow of the conversations (Brennen, 2013). Again, the goal was to loosen the interview structure in order to liberate rich and personal insights. Additionally, icebreaker questions were designed to warm up the conversation (Brennen, 2013). Prompts, silence, and verbal cues such as phatic responses were used in the interviews to engage participants more naturally.

Data analysis

Data were coded according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2010) four-step data analysis strategies: data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and interpretation. We employed qualitative and inductive methods (Emerson et al., 2011) to memo and code the content (Charmaz, 2014). As the interview process evolved, some repetitive key words and themes came up in the conversations. We reviewed and coded the data in a descriptive way while continuing to have conversations with interviewers that influenced the themes and codes. This dynamic process continued until late 2014, when we reached a saturation point. The process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) helped develop the properties of our motivations and positioning of binge-watching with U&G based on the thick descriptions of how people define binge-watching, how and why they binge-watch, and how they feel about binge-watching. When we kept hearing similar answers with no new properties or categories emerging, we determined that we had a sufficient sample to begin the analysis. Then we recoded the descriptive data analytically to sort for categories and recurrent themes to articulate the rituals, motives, and structures of feelings of our interviewees.

Findings

Motives and viewing experience (RQ1, RQ2)

Based on the data, we found that viewers have the following motives for binge-watch: catching up, relaxation, sense of completion, cultural inclusion, and improved viewing experience. We also noted that interviewees often differentiated their binge-watching experiences by their levels of attentiveness.

Viewers reported being motivated to binge-watch older episodes and seasons of a show in quick succession prior to the release of a new season. Catching up through binge-watching was described as a convenient and empowering behavior. It allowed interviewees to control their entertainment by scheduling viewing at their convenience.

Although binge-watching is often a concentrated study of a complicated television text, it can also be a relaxing diversion for viewers. Some interviewees described binge-watching shows they had seen before, 'rebinging', as a way to unwind or to fall asleep. Others reported the pleasure of having familiar programming playing as 'background music' during multitasking. Some said that 'rebinging' was nostalgic. Even if the content was new, viewers reported 'vegging out' by bingeing reality programming or formulaic sitcoms where the stories were self-contained in each episode, and the dialogue (one-off jokes) superseded plot or setting.

Interviewees reported that they got satisfaction from viewing a show to its conclusion. That satisfaction was described as 'a sense of completion', similar to the feeling when finishing a book, and interviewees felt that binge-watching facilitated this process more efficiently than broadcast

television watching. Some viewers described themselves as compulsive readers and compulsive watchers. 'I'm either going to hate it or I'm going to like it, and if I like it I'm going to watch all the episodes in a week', said a 28-year-old real estate developer from Philadelphia.

I do the same thing with books. Once I start a book it's very difficult for me to put it down. I will sit there for 18 hours with a book. I don't know if that's related or my personality, but that's the way I am There's this feeling inside me, and I want all my questions answered . . . and it's on Netflix so I can keep going . . . I get a sense of relief when I finish. I have to finish.

That same interviewee also admitted that her need to complete a show was 'a problem'.

For such people, the sense of completion was a vital motivation for binge-watching. 'I can go on until there's no more show . . . I've never met anyone who consumes media the way I do'. One interviewee stated that he refused to start a show until he knew it had ended. 'I need to know that I can complete it'. The need for completion often led to the longest binges and was most often associated with negative feelings. Netflix's Post-Play function, which automatically starts the next episode in a series at the conclusion of the previous episode, appears to make stopping harder. While the narrative immersion may be enhanced by less interruption between episodes, the technology also makes it harder for a compulsive viewer to stop. Even if viewers attentively binged a show that they thought of as highbrow, they sometimes felt they had 'over-binged'.

Interviewees were more bashful about watching to fit in, though as they opened up during our conversations, cultural inclusion became a consistent motivator. One interviewee, who works at New Jersey university, described a group of colleagues who she respects discussing the Netflix drama *Orange is the New Black*. 'I wanted to be part of the cool club', she admitted. She also noted that if these colleagues were discussing the show, then it *must* be culturally relevant. Two interviewees reported binging *House of Cards* because they knew friends would be talking about it on social media, and they did not want the surprises spoiled. 'I'd have to avoid human contact'. This aspect of cultural inclusion is related to the catching up motive, in that some viewers 'caught up' to become a part of the show's online discourse and/or to avoid spoilers.

The cultural inclusion motivator extended to online communities. Some expressed a guilty sense of pride at what posting about a show signified. To announce you have Netflix or HBO is to make an announcement of class. Conversely, a 37-year-old stockbroker considered himself 'ontologically incompatible' with anyone who liked the popular NBC sitcom *Friends*. 'We can work together, but we can never understand each other'. Social media can also create cultural territories. 'I used to participate in fan communities', one interviewee told me ruefully. She quit when she found a job. 'It was too much'. Participation in a show's cultural community was the most frequent external motivation reported by binge-viewers. At the same time, viewers noted changes in that community. 'We don't have the water cooler conversations anymore', said a 54-year-old professor. 'We don't have to wait until Friday to talk about Must See TV [on Thursday night]'. Another interviewee believed there was more talk. 'The way we watch is really communal right now', she said referring to the online conversations that take place through social media.

Interviewees also binge-watch for the perceived improvement in narrative immersion. Every interviewee preferred the Netflix model of full season releases to the once per week model of broadcast television. 'This is how a show should be watched', stated one viewer who believed show runners write the season as a complete narrative arc that is best enjoyed in a single sitting. The perceived authenticity of the viewing experience was a common justification for viewers motivated by narrative immersion. An interviewee told me that binging a show allowed him to 'get

inside the writer's head'. If each season of a show is written as a unified arc, then binge-watching allows viewers to experience that arc without interruption.

Interviewees felt that the variety and quality of content had 'improved' because of binge-watching. 'There are so many shows out there that are so good', one interviewee said. 'You read more articles about award show snubs than about the shows that win the awards'. Although it was not stated directly, there was a detectible underlying sentiment that binge-viewers had some role in making TV programming 'more intelligent'. Interviewees cited the ability to create lists and to rate shows as empowering, though no one stated that they believed those ratings directly changed programming. Instead, the perception was that producers were responding to the improved attention afforded through the technology. 'There's just so much goodness', said one viewer. In concert with the rating and review technologies, the ability of viewers to communicate globally through social media was seen as evidence of the power viewers now have to affect television culture. 'I'm sure Netflix is listening [to social media discussions]. They do that'.

Interviewees described binge-watching along a continuum of attentive viewing to inattentive viewing. Higher attentiveness bingeing was described as a focused study of the text that was both entertaining and informational and often motivated by the need to catch up or feel narratively immersed. Lower attentiveness bingeing was almost always for relaxation or distraction. Attentiveness levels are difficult to measure from interviews, but we found a relationship between them and the show's content, genre, and structure. Hour-long serial dramas like *The Sopranos*, *Lost*, and *Mad Men* demand more attentive viewing. Episodes often end with cliff-hangers that entice viewers to continue watching. During higher attentiveness binges, the goal is to absorb and analyze the content, which often has complex characters, dialogue, and plot. Viewers rewind and rewatch scenes to improve their understanding of the story. The complexity of shows that necessitate attentive viewing is part of their entertainment experience.

Viewers characterized shows that they binge-watch less attentively as 'background noise'. Although they may have the show on for several hours, they reported doing other activities such as housekeeping and cooking while the episodes played. 'I'll do the dishes or homework', a 23-year-old student said of her multitasking during lower attentiveness bingeing. 'I know when to look up'. The content included sitcoms with single-episode arcs like *Family Guy* and *Big Bang Theory*, procedural dramas like *CSI* and *House*, and reality shows with formulaic structures and frequent recaps like *19 Kids and Counting* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. Most interviewees noted a connection between their viewing attentiveness and the content. Some reserved shows requiring higher attentiveness for weekends and vacations when they had more downtime; lower attentiveness bingeing took place any time viewers wanted to 'relax and just have something on'.

Interviewees were aware that their differences in attentiveness were related to the structure of the shows. 'If you're watching an episode of *Lost*, and there's a sandwich in one scene, you need to know where that sandwich is, or you miss something'. Another spoke about the placement of dolls in an episode of *True Detective*, which foreshadowed something several episodes later. Noticing such details may be crucial in a mystery show. In a sitcom, such details are usually less relevant to a viewer's entertainment experience. One interviewee, who was binge-watching *Arrow* on Netflix, described lower attentiveness bingeing thus:

Oh no, I don't pause or rewind. I could be in the kitchen making coffee, then five minutes later I come back and [Arrow] is still beating people up. I don't feel the need to stop everything and obsessively watch something like that. It takes a lot less effort to watch a show like *Arrow* than a show like *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones*, which would be one I would pause.

Although the content (type of show) determined how attentively a viewer binged, it should be noted that viewers chose the show to watch with knowledge of that determination. That is to say, if a viewer wanted to relax, they selected a show that required less attention. If a viewer wanted to learn or be challenged by an immersive narrative, they selected a show that had to be watched more attentively.

Some of these motives and viewing experiences were discussed in prior U&G research. However, there were some motives for binge-watching that were different from traditional U&G ones. The similarities and differences between these motives (RQ2) are further analyzed in the discussion section of this article.

Technology factors (RQ3)

The interviewees differentiated binge-watching from traditional broadcast TV in terms of portability and the commercial-free sequential viewing facilitated through streaming video technologies. While some interviewees acknowledged that it is possible to binge-watch broadcast commercial television, such as a *Seinfeld* marathon, and many had at some point watched broadcast TV for extended periods of time, no one characterized binge-watching through that medium. Several people stated that they 'hate commercials'. A 29-year-old student said that she finds 'traditional TV annoying now. Even DVR. I don't like commercials. I don't like how commercials get super loud. I don't like waiting for the next episode. Netflix makes TV better'. Clearly advertising interrupts the focused continuity that viewers associate with binge-watching, but there were also signs that streaming video is perceived as something other than television. The ability to continue viewing across multiple devices (phones, laptops, tablets, and TV sets) and the technological control of content, described as being able to pause, rewind, and fast-forward, was essential to the experience and challenges the perceptions of commercial breaks (Greer and Ferguson, 2015). 'When I need to go to the bathroom I can pause', one person told me, rather than 'waiting for a commercial . . . If I don't understand an accent I can rewind'.

Technological convenience also affects viewing patterns. Most binge-watching takes place at home, during weekday evenings and weekends, for those who work Monday to Friday. Some interviewees also reported binge-watching during vacations, especially for those shows that they didn't have time to watch during workweeks. Viewers motivated by the sense of completion often held off on starting a show until they had downtime because they were aware that they would not want to stop watching. 'I do plan on clearing my schedule for a few days for *OINTB*', a 30-year-old writer from Philadelphia said, referring to *Orange is the New Black*. 'I have taken sick days to finish a show', another interviewee admitted sheepishly. 'Long weekends usually mean Netflix', another said. Binge-viewers celebrate the freedom of being able to control the content consumption while acknowledging the power of the content to control them. As one interviewee said in August 2014, 'I'm not going near *Game of Thrones* until Christmas'. Season Four of the HBO fantasy drama was aired in the summer of 2014.

Binge-watching is most often a solitary behavior, especially when shows are viewed on mobile devices. 'It's hard to share an iPad for three hours', one interviewee pointed out. However, social media technology allows for virtual communal binge-watching. A 25-year-old student in Philadelphia had tried binge-watching with a friend in Colorado over Skype, but 'it didn't really work'. Another interviewee binged with her roommate who didn't like TV: 'I got her into *Vampire Diaries*'. One interviewee described the experience of binging *Lost* with his wife through Netflix as cooperative and trust-based. 'If I watched ahead that would be cheating'. When asked if he had ever cheated on his wife,

he admitted, tongue in cheek, that he was tempted, especially when she was ‘out of town’. Due to conflicting schedules, tastes, and energy levels, collaborative in-person binges are typically shorter than solitary binges. In-person binge-watching groups greater than two are irregular and far less common according to interviewees. One interviewee had attended a *House of Cards* party when Netflix released the second season of its political drama in February 2014. ‘But no one stayed for all 13 episodes’. Sharing the control of consumption and other logistical/scheduling constraints makes ‘group bingeing’ less common than solitary bingeing. However, many interviewees reported binge-watching alone so that they could discuss the shows with other people. Some interviewees reported watching shows by themselves but communicating with other people, who were also watching alone, through texting and social media. They felt copresence (Zhao, 2003) through the technology. ‘We can’t be together for *Orange is the New Black*, but we’ll text each other’.

Consequences of binge-watching (RQ4)

Some interviewees expressed regret about their increased consumption and the compulsiveness that the technology affords. Features like Netflix’s Post-Play make it harder for viewers to resist the urge to find out what happens next. This leads to increased watching that would not have happened had the viewer needed to wait a week for the next episode. ‘Netflix is the devil’, joked one interviewee. ‘You could be dead, and the episodes would keep playing’.

Interviewees used terms associated with addiction (compulsion, withdrawal, overdose, habit, functional (binge)) to describe their binge-watching. Some reported feelings of regret and self-loathing after longer binges. Several interviewees admitted to being less productive or missing work because of long binges. However, their admissions were often tempered with pride, particularly after binges of ‘highbrow’ content. ‘Was I exhausted and gross feeling?’ an English teacher from Philadelphia mused while describing how she binge-watched all five seasons of the HBO drama *The Wire* over summer break. ‘Would I do it again? Of course! It’s probably the best show ever made’.

Interviewees characterized lower attentiveness bingeing as a worse use of their time than higher attentiveness bingeing. ‘If I’m binge-watching *My 600-LB Life*’, a 29-year-old nanny in Philadelphia said referring to the television channel (TLC) reality show, ‘by the second hour I know I’ve decided to waste a day. Either I’ll commit to that or I’ll stop. But I have done it . . . it doesn’t feel good’. Satisfaction derived from the relaxation motive was described as short-lived, particularly with reality shows. However, some viewers intentionally avoided shows that they felt they would need to watch more attentively because of the time commitment. ‘I’m afraid to get into a show like *Dr. Who*; that would be two months of my life’. That same interviewee – a mathematics doctoral student – was comfortable bingeing episodes of the Fox animated comedy *Family Guy* because he could stop watching it more easily. He was a compulsive reader motivated to binge-watch by the sense of completion. The longest and most obsessive binge-watching is often associated with shows that require more attentive viewing, though these are also the binges that people seem most proud of. The feelings were complicated and ambivalent. Viewers appear capable of feeling guilty and proud simultaneously.

Discussion

One of the purposes of this article was to explore U&G theory and respond to U&G scholars’ call for its conceptual refinement. First, we noticed that binge-viewers have some similar motives as regular television audiences. For example, audiences binge-watch for relaxation and inclusion (Rubin, 1983; Weaver, 2003). Meanwhile, interviewees also mentioned that their binge-watching

was motivated by a sense of completion, catching up, and narrative immersion. Prior U&G research has not fully addressed these motives. The reason that these motives have been overlooked in prior research may be because those studies often employed existing surveys to explore users' motives (Massey, 1995). Sense of completion and catching up reflect affordances of current viewing technologies unavailable or extremely inconvenient for broadcast TV. Compared with the limitations of live broadcasting systems, viewers now can choose to watch several episodes consecutively. Interviewees' responses indicate the validity of expanding the motives. Narrative immersion corroborates Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) findings that narrative realism and immersion positively predict viewers' enjoyment of watching films. It also feeds into and is driven by what Perks (2015: 70–71) calls 'textual appetite' for both the pleasure of immersion in the story and the use of 'cognitive skills' to further the entertainment.

When we were examining interviewees' motives for binge-watching, we found that these motives were difficult to apply to the typology of audience activities in U&G research. Although Levy and Windahl's (1984) typology of audience activity provided scholars with a systematic way to understand audiences' viewing behavior, the boundaries of pre-activity behavior, during-activity behavior, and post-activity behavior have become blurred. For instance, sense of completion can be understood as both pre-activity behavior and during-activity behavior. Before watching, viewers may hope to complete an entire season to achieve the sense of accomplishment. They also could feel motivated to finish watching the whole season once they start watching or so that afterward they can move on to the next season. Similarly, inclusion can be pre-activity behavior, during-activity behavior, and post-activity behavior. Therefore, despite the significance of understanding audience activities based on pre-, during-, and post-activities, we propose that due to technological characteristics and cultural factors, binge-watching obscures the traditional U&G typology of viewing behavior. The technology and culture of binge-watching has complicated the linear nature of time previously ascribed to broadcast TV. As Choi (2011) notes, 'Speed is just distance divided by time, and binge consumption of a TV show collapses both—the time it takes to watch a whole run, the distance between you and the people who made it'.

In addition to the typology of audience activities, Rubin (1984) used ritualized use of media and instrumental use of media to describe people's passive and active use of media. Instrumental use is involved with information seeking and affinity with the content of medium. It features viewers' active selection of media channels and media content (Perse, 1990). Ritualized use of media is related to lower activity levels such as relaxations, escape, habitual use, passing time, and higher attachment to the medium itself (Rubin, 1983, 2002).

Despite the usefulness of active viewing versus passive viewing in understanding U&G research, the distinction between active use and passive use remains unclear. For example, is watching television for relaxation passive viewing or active? If audiences purposefully choose to watch television for loneliness relief, is their watching behavior ritualized viewing? Therefore, in order to avoid the vagueness between active viewing and passive viewing, we propose a spectrum that represents the valence of audiences' attention from attentive to inattentive. We believe that our viewing attentiveness spectrum (VAS) is a more proper representation of binge-watching experience.

The first advantage of adopting the VAS is that it moves researcher understanding beyond the dualism of active or passive. Instead, attention itself is understood as 'a psychological process by which information, usually from the external environment, is made available for cognitive and emotional analysis' (Anderson and Kirkorian, 2006: 35). Attentive viewing (higher VAS) and inattentive viewing (lower VAS) could represent the degree to which viewers make cognitive effort to concentrate on television content. Based on our data, interviewees do not merely switch from

passive viewing to active viewing. Instead, their attentiveness varies and sways depending on the genres and plots of the shows they decide to watch. A dichotomous active viewing versus passive viewing may be inadequate to describe viewers' gravitation toward streaming, whereas a spectrum could benefit research in illustrating viewers' protean attentiveness. The second advantage of using the VAS is that researchers can focus on the attention allocation and task switching behavior in the process of media use. Comparatively, active viewing versus passive viewing lacks the capacity to explore the micro processes of watching television because audiences can be both passive and active during binge-watching. Third, the dynamic of attention could be measured through observation, eye-tracking devices, secondary task reaction time, and self-reported surveys (Anderson and Field, 1985; Anderson and Kirkorian, 2006), while active viewing versus passive viewing would be difficult to measure. Therefore, we propose the VAS as an improved descriptor of audiences' viewing status.

Our results also corroborated Sundar and Limperos's (2013) argument that media technologies influence audiences' gratifications. This is consistent with the criticisms that U&G theory has an exaggerated view of people's active use of media. We found that the functions of emerging technologies such as navigability and in-episode control motivate people to binge-watch and re-binge-watch. The ludic nature of such media enhances engagement (Perks, 2015). Simultaneously, due to the convenience of these functions, audiences in turn prefer these technologies. Therefore, technological convenience and people's gratifications constitute a loop, which further encourages audiences to binge-watch through the technologically afforded control. Additionally, the conveniences of binge-watching technology indicate that people have motives across different communication channels (Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Flanagin and Metzger, 2001).

The original U&G theory suggested that people's media use results in need gratifications and other unintended consequences (Katz et al., 1974). As prior research did not fully explore what consequences, especially unintended consequences media users would have, we asked interviewees about the outcomes of binge-watching. The responses indicate that audiences often have an ambivalent relationship with binge-watching. On the one hand, a viewer can feel ashamed, guilty, and regretful after a long binge. On the other hand she/he may also feel proud and culturally connected, after that same long binge.

Conclusions, implications, and limitations

In this article, we reviewed the application of U&G theory in the context of binge-watching. We found that viewers have the motives of catching up, relaxation, sense of completion, cultural inclusion, and improved viewing experience. We also found that technological characteristics such as portability and navigability can motivate users to binge-watch. We further found that viewers have mixed feelings for binge-watching.

The rapidly evolving technology and culture that constitute and drive binge-watching have complicated audience conceptions of television and, therefore, how television should be studied through U&G. We argue that the convergence of technology and culture renders binary theoretical oppositions insufficient to unpack television watching today. Our hybrid of qualitative and quantitative positioning reflects the ambiguity and ambivalence of this emergent/convergent media behavior. To appreciate its nuances, we must understand that binge-watching cannot be either positive or negative, cultural or structural, but an evolving human experience driven and energized by contradiction. The thick descriptions of viewers provide a rich foundation for scholars to reimagine how television is studied through an inclusive diversity of methods. As the

producers are adapting video programming because of the new relationships viewers have through technology, perhaps media scholars can adapt their techniques for examining 21st century viewers.

This study has some limitations. First, although this article aims at responding to conceptual refinement of U&G theory, it only touched upon a few tenets of the theory. It would be hard to rebuild the theory purely based on our data. Some criticisms of U&G theory still need to be answered. For example, this article did not discuss the conceptualization of people's needs. It also did not discuss the possibility of constituting a coherent theory. Even though we tried to answer and add some new perspectives to U&G theory, future research can look for empirical evidence to support our perspectives and meanwhile respond to the criticisms above (Miller, 2005; Ruggerio, 2000).

Second, this article only applied U&G theory to binge-watching. We acknowledge that to refine U&G theory through the lens of binge-watching is limited. As Sundar and Limperos (2013) pointed out, emerging media have changed audiences' behavior. Binge-watching is only one phenomenon of people's emerging media use. U&G needs to be applied to more modes and contexts in order to test its validity and optimize its theoretical foundations.

Third, although in-depth interviews have many advantages, the time they take to conduct necessitates smaller sample sizes than quantitative surveys. The 36 interviewees represent a reasonably large sample for qualitative work, which was sufficient to reach a point of saturation in this study. Additionally, they represent a diverse cross section of the urban US population, including non-US citizens. We also recognize that they may not be sufficiently diverse to extrapolate across general populations, especially given the sample size. However, our thick descriptions of the relationships between binge-watching motives, VAS, and U&G could be operationalized and systematically tested through quantitative experimentations across large and diverse groups. Such research would not only have heuristic value within the academy but have commercial application outside of it.

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