

BINGING – A FAD OR A PERMANENT CHANGE IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION? A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Binging – and binge-watching in particular – has been receiving growing interest from communication scientists for a couple of years. Thus, after five decades of watching audio-visual content according to TV schedules, a recipient gained more autonomy regarding the content and ways of watching. The author aims to analyse the factors influencing the potential permanence of this specific way of media consumption, with literature review as the main method. These factors include different definitions of the concept, synonyms, applying the *binging* term to different media formats (binge-watching – binge-listening – binge-reading – binge-gaming), technological and social circumstances. These factors differ in their quality and scale. Will their convergence and synergy permanently change the practices of media consumption? Referring to previous changes in media differentiation, accessibility, and reception, although binging would probably become rather next, but not the dominating form of media practices of leisure time. The cognitive value of the article is to offer a theoretical basis for further quantitative and qualitative research on the reception of different media formats and genres; binging included.

Keywords: binge-gaming, binge-listening, binge-reading, binge-watching, listicle culture, media consumption

Introduction

Binging – and binge-watching in particular – has been receiving growing interest from media and communication scientists for a couple of years. It has been explored as a research field more intensively since streaming platforms have started offering complete seasons of series. Thus, after five decades of watching audiovisual content according to TV selections and schedules, a recipient gained more decision-making regarding the content and ways of watching. However, the term *binge* is added not only to watching, but also to other media reception activities, like reading, listening, or gaming. Therefore the question arises – is there a general trend of media overconsumption, a permanent change in media reception behaviour? Or is it only a fad, promoted temporarily by media providers (streaming platforms in particular)? What are the factors influencing the popularity of media binging?

Research Aim and Methodology

This study aims to find out if binging is only a fad or a permanent change in media consumption. To achieve this, the author conducted an in-depth critical review of the literature concerning different forms of binging. The following elements were proposed and analysed as important for defining the character of binging:

- diversification of the definition of binging (as revealing different ways of perception of this phenomenon);
- synonyms used in the studies (e.g. media marathoning);
- application of the binging term to consumption of different offered media (binge-watching – binge-listening – binge-reading – binge-gaming);
- social and technological background (participatory culture, listicle culture);
- the impact of content providers on media reception;
- individual background and lifestyle of media users.

Literature for this study was cross-searched and selected from different sources, like the Web of Science Core Collection database, Scopus database, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, to provide comprehensive, broad research material enabling the realisation of the goal. Results of these searches will be discussed in detail below, however, it is worth noting that the evidence on binge-watching studies dominates, with more than 100 research papers published in the years 2014–2021 (the searching took place in July 2021), while publications on other forms of binging are much lower in number.

The Findings

In this section, the results of the study will be provided, in the following order. Firstly, the ways of defining “binge-watching” are discussed, because this form of binging is the most popular among the users, and most often described in the literature. Then, binging concerning other media content will be analysed, and finally – the technological and social factors significant for an increase of binging behaviours will be discussed.

Binge-watching – Different Concepts of Perception and Definition of This Phenomenon

The first association with bingeing in the media context is binge-watching TV series. It results from either the scale of this phenomenon or its acceptance and promotion by the content producers and providers, who have offered and used this term, as well as encouraged the viewers to binge (for more – see below).

What is binge-watching? An experienced viewer would answer intuitively that this is one of the ways of watching series productions available on streaming platforms. It specifically consists of spending a long time watching more than one episode, sometimes even the whole season of a series. It can be realised both individually and in a group, in a planned or impulsive way. Some viewers like this mode of watching particularly due to the smooth narration flow, avoidance of waiting for solving the following cliff-hangers, and being updated with cultural products being discussed in one's social group.

The binge-watching definition offered by Netflix is considered the initial one, often referred to in the following publications. It says that binge-watching is: watching two to six episodes of the same show in one sitting (Netflix 2013).

This informal understanding of binge-watching is not effective for research goals. However, its scholarly clarification seems not to be simple as well. It is confirmed in systematic reviews of such definitions (e.g. Flayelle et al. 2020; Merikivi et al. 2020; Pierce-Grove 2017; Starosta, Izydorczyk 2020; Sung et al. 2018). Their authors focus on the problems of developing definitions concerning formal features, such as the watching time of a number of episodes qualifying a watching session as binge-watching. Definitions refer to the number of episodes watched by binge viewers and/or the amount of time spent on watching, or to the frequency of sessions (at least once a week). As mentioned above, the first reference is the definition offered by Netflix, naming 2–6 episodes, however, there are also definitions suggesting the minimum of 3 episodes, and those not indicating the upper limit. The watching content can also be different: episodes (or seasons) of series are mentioned the most frequent; however, other audio-visual productions offered at streaming platforms or external carriers are also considered, like series of feature films (e.g. “Star Wars”, “Harry Potter”) or other genres (documentaries, concerts, etc.).

Binge-watching is also often presented as a risk of excess and addiction. The issue of different types of binge-watching studies – as a form of leisure and as a risk of addiction and risky behaviour with potentially negative consequences – is considered mostly in psychological studies (e.g. Starosta, Izydorczyk 2020).

As time goes by and evidence increases, other topics have emerged in the discussion: a viewer's autonomy, his/her freedom from the TV schedule regime, individual choices of time, place, carrier, and content being viewed. The continuity or completion of a season, series, or film series was also discussed (Merikivi et al. 2020; Pierce-Grove 2017). In consequence, Jani Merikivi et al. (2020, p. 702) developed another operational definition for their study: “a consumption of more than one episode of the same serialized video content in a single sitting at one's own time and pace”.

Both Merikivi et al. (2020) and Maeve Flayelle et al. (2019) showed that binge-watching can be discussed and studied as one of the dimensions/ways of watching behaviour when the latter is perceived as a continuity – e.g. from the audiovisual media reception in the TV schedule regime on one end to binge-watching on the opposite one.

Mareike Jenner (2017; 2019; 2020) focused on the qualitative elements of binge-watching definitions, in particular a viewer's autonomy and choice of place, time, source, and content being watched. She wrote:

With the lines between fans and non-fans increasingly blurred, the practice of binge-watching, despite its etymological links to unhealthy behaviour, signifies a socially legitimised excess, the luxury of time and “quality” television combined in implicit fan activity. As such, it may imply the agency commonly associated with fans, but conceptualises this as inherent to VOD. (Jenner 2017)

A serialised form is not necessary (although it is most often), but freedom from the TV schedule, individual choice, control, or planned loss of control of a viewer. Additionally, Jenner wrote about quality TV, again underlying conscious choices, and separating the part of binge-watching which is not automatic and impulsive, but planned and controlled (Jenner 2017). Consequently, in 2018 the following definition was offered:

Binge-watching is always understood as self-determined viewing: It is the viewer who decides when to watch and what to watch, not the broadcasting schedule. Another key aspect is that binge-watching only happens with serialised formats as opposed to films or one-offs. (Horeck et al. 2018, p. 499)

Such a perspective enables qualitative studies of binge-watching referring not only to the intensity and characteristic of the phenomenon as such but also to binge-watching as an audience and fan practice, with particular attention to bingeable audiovisual texts (Jenner 2020).

A good recapitulation of the evolution of binge-watching conceptualisation can be the study of Alice Viens and Kirstie M. Farrar (2021) who definitely departed from determining time or number of episodes as the factors conclusive for a session to be binge-watching or not. They defined the latter as “viewing multiple episodes of the same program or series in the same sitting with varying levels of intentionality” (Viens, Farrar 2021, p. 5). Therefore, they summed up the discussion on the difference in the longitude of episodes and/or seasons and shifted the focus on the continuity of viewing and the recipient's intentionality, as well as the feel of control on the situation in different aspects.

Binging in Consumption of Other Media Formats

Binge-watching is not the only form of binging media content. In terms of synonyms, there is also binge-viewing used, but also the terms concerning other media formats, like binge-listening, binge-reading, or binge-gaming (ordered here according to popularity). There is also the broad term covering different formats, i.e. media marathoning.

Media marathoning is a synonym or an umbrella term for binging. It is worth noting the perspective of Lisa Glebatis Perks, who develops a media marathoning paradigm (2015), covering change in viewing films, series, and reading books – organising (individual or group) viewing sessions of film series or seasons, as well as reading book series consecutively. Perks introduces this term to avoid the negative connotations of binge-watching, as well as to offer a broader concept, covering different media formats being consumed in such intensive ways. Shortly speaking, she defines media marathoning as “readers or viewers rapidly engaging with a story world” (Perks 2015, p. ix), answering their needs of novelty and emotional relations, thus focusing on flow in the narration, and immersion in the fictional world. She also refers to moral dilemmas experienced by the characters and auditorium. Consequently, she introduces the concept of *ludic media engagement*, to determine the differences between *immersive* media marathoning and other, *traditional* modes of texts’ and films’ reception. However – if media marathoning can threaten everyday routines (sleeping, eating, interpersonal relations), then it cannot avoid the negative associations with binging.

Binge-listening is analysed from at least two different perspectives. The first is the perspective of health sciences, defining binge-listening in the context of “high weekend leisure noise vs. low weekday work noise exposure” (Beach et al. 2014) as facing a noise harmful for the hearing organ. This is a risk of e.g. playing instruments, attending concerts or clubs.

The other perspective refers to podcasts. Rebecca Mead’s observation in *The New Yorker* can be a starting point here, that they “are designed to take up time: they are for those moments when you can’t be jumping among apps on your phone” (Mead 2018, p. 48). Podcasts are also the object of binge-listening research in social or cultural sciences (e.g. Berry 2016; Hancock, McMurtry 2018; Waldmann 2020), rather than listening to music or audiobooks. The key aspects being discussed here include the freedom of choice of the time and place of listening, and the length of such a session, available due to similar reasons as for films (devices, media convergence, the listicle culture, individualism). Binge-listening is often supported by the broadcasters, regarding charged access to podcasts as additional materials. However, there are also podcasts provided by freelancers, independent journalists, or even private persons, therefore there are many possible choices, supporting individualism and freedom of the listeners. The content publishing strategy is also similar – of all episodes/chapters at once (e.g. Waldmann 2020). The listening itself supports flow in narration, and an intimate relationship between the listener and the content, characters, or the speaker (Waldmann 2020).

The term *binge-reading* is less popular than binge-watching, and even binge-listening. Natalia Samutina (2017) applied it while writing about intensive, immersive, and affective reading. However, she distinguished “«good reading» of a «proper literature» and «affective reading» for pleasure”. Binge-reading relates to “extensive binge-reading in the online space of an ostentatiously emotional culture” (Samutina 2017, p. 258). This regards specifically fan fiction, developing worlds and plots perfectly adapted to the readers’ (fans) needs. Binge-reading considers “«impatient communities» of fan fiction readers and writers” (Samutina 2017, p. 258), which means, strongly emotional reading, which is often incomparable to “struggling” with belles-lettres.

Therefore, although intuitively, in the first instance, one would say that binge-reading is actually ideal reading – with the deep, emotional flow into narration – it is actually very different from one another. Being lost in literature is clearly not the same as being flowed in the worlds created according to the needs of the fan communities of specific universes. Therefore binge-reading should be studied and analysed as an individual, specific reading strategy, dedicated mostly to e-texts.

Lower engagement, entertainment, and reception of texts are confirmed by Angela Choi, Thanshu Sun, and Heeseung Lee, who studied relations between binge-reading and the readers’ reviewing activity, and their commentaries in social media. They found that:

When consumers are engaged with binge reading in the same series, they are less likely to use high levels of cognitive words, less likely to generate informative reviews, and exhibit no significant differences in terms of explicit endorsement. On the other hand, consumers with binge breadth reading use more explicit words, but no significant difference exists concerning cognition and informativeness embedded in online reviews that are generated by consumers who are engaged with binge breadth reading. (Choi et al. 2018)

Binge-gaming appeared to be the least used term, replaced sometimes also with marathon gaming (Anthony et al. 2020), which actually contradicts Perks’ assumption to interpret *marathoning* in a rather objective way.

A common perspective on narrative media, namely books, films, and games was offered by Lindsey C. Maxwell, and Alec C. Tefertiller (2019). They discussed the recipient’s freedom and decisiveness considering the pace and ways of consumption of the proposed narration. Referring to the results of a quantitative survey concerning usage of these three types of media, the authors proved similarities in narrative experience between book readers and film/series viewers, while games appeared to have a lower capacity of imaginary immersion in narration, they did not leave permanent impressions on the participants and were less surprising with plot twists. Audiovisual materials appeared to be stronger in narration flow and transportation than books and games, which is in accordance with the transportation theory. The authors concluded, that watching (or binging) a well-written TV production can be perceived as “high-culture entertainment media consumption” (Maxwell,

Tefertiller 2019). However, there is a discussion among culture scientists and sociologists, if the differentiation between high and low entertainment (or culture) is still valid (e.g. Peterson, Kern 1996; Warde et al. 2007).

Technological and Social Factors Influencing Binging of Media

Three groups of factors influencing binging can be determined and discussed here, namely: digital content delivery technologies, the complexity of media content, and audience behaviours (e.g. Perks 2015).

Obviously, the development of the high speed Internet and digital technologies are crucial factors, which enable the creation, provision, and reception of audiovisual (and other formats) digital media content. They also enable individualisation and customisation of the offer, according to one's interests and preferences, in time and place depending on personal decisions only. However, we can also observe changes on, for instance, the series market, where platform providers stop entertaining to binging, which actually requires fast, regular, and almost never-ending provision of new seasons and series.

The complexity of media content relates to the scope and diversification of offered formats. Obviously, it refers to media convergence, supported by the potential of social media. Social media supports communication between the authors, providers, and the users, as well as the development of fan communities, where discussions on the favourite narrations are conducted, and fan fiction is created. These communities, as well as media convergence, enable an almost unlimited flow of stories and characters between formats and support emotional transportation.

Consequently, audience behaviours and social context should be discussed here. All these above mentioned three elements – social media, fan communities, and media convergence – encourage convergence of the roles, development of prosumerism, and participatory culture, where the readers, listeners, and/or viewers can become authors and reviewers. Binging becomes a part or symptom of a wider listicle culture (Horeck et al. 2018), in which the recipient executes his/her free choice of content and mode of media consumption, as mentioned above. The human need for narration as a general background should not be missed here.

Conclusions

All the factors discussed in this paper differ in terms of their force or scale. Will their coincidence and synergy change media consumption permanently? Considering previous changes in media accessibility and reception, one can positively answer this question, although binging would become another, however not dominating form of leisure and entertainment, as it happened before to other new media formats (like broadcasting or cinema). The brief analysis of definitions, studies, and factors

influencing the popularity of bingeing as an activity and a name for a specific mode of media consumption leads to the following conclusions.

Bingeing as a form of media consumption has emerged in consequence of the technological changes enabling it. Binge-watching is the most popular among all media-related bingeing, which can result from two reasons. The first one is the promotion of binge-watching by streaming platform providers. The other is the relatively larger amount of audiovisual content than other digital formats (texts, audio files). Binge-listening is the second in line, considering mostly podcasts, although with a shorter history. Binge-listening is also related to promotion by the providers of such content, and its accessibility – in the whole series, just like TV series or films. The community of devoted listeners can also be important. Interestingly, this mode of reception does not regard audiobooks and fictional literary narrations.

Binge-reading has also been used in research. These studies focus on emotions, the need for transportation and flow into narration, and consider for instance fan fiction. The scholars emphasise the lack of in-depth reflection among such readers, as seen in their comments (simple wording). One could intuitively perceive binge-reading as an ideal reading – far from reality, immersed in narration. However, it seems to be quite a different and new form of text reception, considering mostly simple stories answering for the need of continuity of a story and missing favourite characters. Immersion appears to be in quite simple narration, enabling fast reading and knowing the following text, plot, or character (like in fan fiction). Thus presumably, ideal reading should be named *slow reading* (referring to other *slow life* practices). Binge-reading would then describe specifics of reading in mostly virtual fan communities.

Finally, binge-gaming is hardly discussed in the literature. It may be due to the fact, that gaming itself is strongly engaging in narration, time-consuming, with a risk of addiction involved. In this perspective, binge-gaming would be a tautology.

As a research topic, bingeing as a form of media consumption is quite a new idea. Its definitions considering different media formats have still been under development. The most advanced is the one for binge-watching. Its evolution from a selection of formal determinants (time, number of episodes, etc.) to substantial characteristics (freedom of choice, narration flow) can be observed in the following studies. However, the process of defining other types of bingeing is open.

Future research should also include the place and specifics of bingeing among other forms of media consumption, as well as other forms of leisure and entertainment. The ludic media engagement concept of Lisa Perks seems to be important, as describing the difference of specific types of media reception. Finally, the studies on bingeing as a potentially addictive activity have not yet been concluded.

The study as a critical literature review is just a starting point for both qualitative and quantitative analyses of reception of different media formats and genres. Binge-listening and binge-reading seem to be promising here. Considering discussions in (but not limited to) social media concerning new productions, seasons, titles, etc., a relation-building potential of bingeing should be further explored, and consequently

the development of new cultural canons in (micro) communities. Even those who binge individually can perceive themselves as members of specific communities.

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STRESZCZENIE

Binging – chwilowa moda czy trwała zmiana w sposobie konsumpcji mediów?

Bingowanie – zwłaszcza *binge-watching* – staje się przedmiotem zainteresowania nauk o komunikacji i mediach. Po kilku dekadach oglądania treści audiowizualnych w porządku ustalonym programem telewizyjnym, widzowie zyskali autonomię jeśli chodzi o wybór treści i sposobu oglądania. Celem artykułu jest analiza czynników wpływających na utrwalenie *binge-watchingu* jako specyficznego sposobu konsumpcji mediów. Do jego realizacji zastosowano metodę analizy literatury przedmiotu. Wśród badanych czynników uwzględniono: różne sposoby definiowania zjawiska, synonimy, zastosowanie określenia *binging* do różnych formatów mediów (*binge-watching* – *binge-listening* – *binge-reading* – *binge-gaming*), uwarunkowania techniczne i społeczne. Zwrócono uwagę na ich zróżnicowanie pod względem jakości i skali. W wyniku przeprowadzonej analizy stwierdzono, że – uwzględniając zróżnicowanie mediów, ich dostępność i sposoby odbioru – *binging* stanie się jedną z form konsumpcji mediów w celach rozrywkowych, nie będzie jednak formą dominującą. Wartością poznawczą artykułu jest przygotowanie podstawy teoretycznej do dalszych badań ilościowych i jakościowych nad recepcją różnych formatów i gatunków medialnych, w tym nad odbiorem noszącym cechy *bingowania*.

Słowa kluczowe: *binge-gaming*, *binge-listening*, *binge-reading*, *binge-watching*, konsumpcja mediów, kultura wyboru