

The Mental and Physical Effects of Binge-Watching Television



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dagoaty/4501126718>

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Contents

Introduction	2
Binge-Watching Defined	2
Background Information	2
Major Players	4
Netflix	5
Hulu	5
Amazon Prime	6
Binge-Watching as Addiction	6
Physical and Mental Effects of Binge-Watching	7
Physical Effects	7
Mental Effects	9
Combatting the Effects of Binge-Watching	10
Conclusion	10
Sources:	11

Introduction

As streaming media services like Netflix and Amazon Prime become more prevalent in our society, it's important to understand the danger of binge-watching television and the effects that it has on a viewer both mentally and physically. Because binge-watching is a relatively new problem, there have been few studies done on these effects.

The goal of this report is to give the reader information as to what binge-watching television entails, what the major issues are with it, and how to combat ill effects of sitting and watching television for several hours a day.

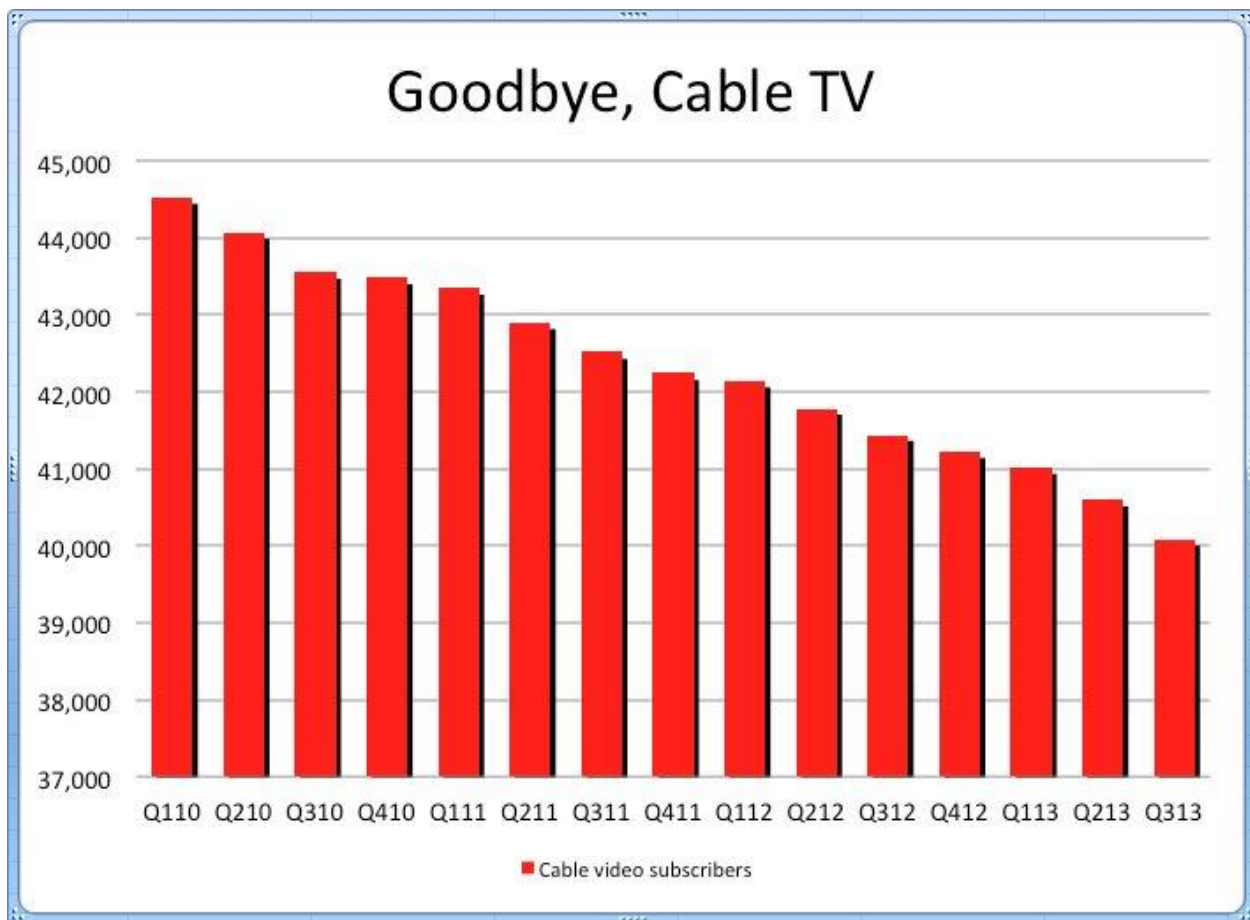
Binge-Watching Defined

For the purposes of this report, **binge-watching will be defined as watching between two and six episodes of a 30-minute or 60-minute television show at in one sitting**, which is also the definition used in a study done by Netflix. This study, which was done in 2013, interviewed 1,500 subscribers and found that 61% of those surveyed considered themselves binge-watchers (Netflix).

Background Information

Online television viewing has been on the rise over the past several years. By mid-2014, total online television viewing grew by 688% (Wohlsen). Not only are viewers watching on laptops and PCs, but also with devices such as Apple TV, Google Chromecast, and Roku. These devices make up 10% of all online viewing (Wohlsen).

With this rise in online viewing comes the decline of traditional cable television subscriptions. As seen in the following chart, the number of these subscriptions has been steadily falling since early 2010. Between 2010 and 2013, over 5 million cable subscribers canceled their service. In order to lessen the blow of losing these customers, cable companies were quick to tack on extra service charges to existing customers, which then made low-income customers cancel their cable service, which *then* leads to a cycle of cable becoming too expensive for the lower-income customers (Edwards).



Source: Business Insider.

The same study also found that binge-watching isn't necessarily always a solitary activity:

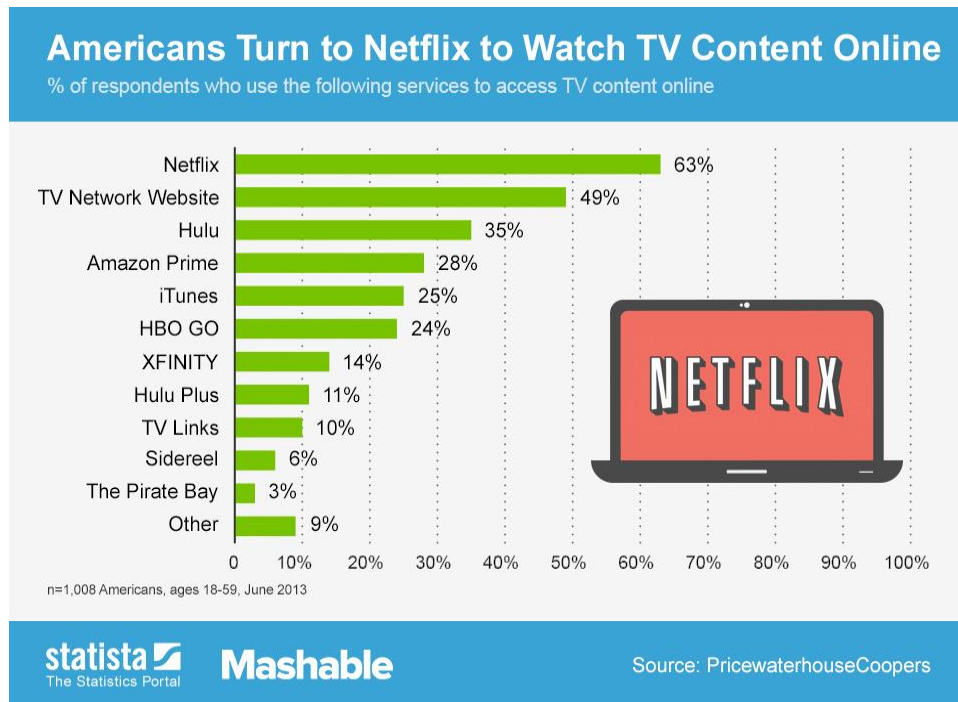
- 30% of those interviewed said they prefer to binge-watch alone.
- 51% prefer to watch with at least one other person.
- 39% said they "saved" shows until they could watch it with certain people.

Lastly, in his research for Variety.com, Mark Grasser found that binge-watchers fall evenly into four categories:

1. Those who watch while sick/injured and stuck at home.
2. Those who refuse to wait a week to see what happens in the next episode.
3. Those who watch a series because others tell them they are missing out.
4. Those who want to revisit TV shows they've already seen (Grasser).

Major Players

According to research compiled by PricewaterhouseCooper, Netflix leads the pack when it comes to streaming media sites. Above is a breakdown of the most popular sites for online content. Note that of the 11 sites listed (not including "Other"), four of these sites do not require payment, though the legal and moral positions of some of them may be questionable.



Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers

Netflix

Netflix is the most popular site for streaming television and movies. The service began as a way for customers to rent DVDs through the mail instead of having to go to a physical store like Blockbuster. Through the years, they entered the streaming media field and have conquered the competition. In the United States as of early 2015, there were 40 million Netflix subscribers who were watching over 10 billion hours of entertainment monthly. Over 30% of all U.S. internet traffic goes to Netflix during peak hours (Netflix).

Hulu

Not including individual network websites, Hulu is the second-most used site for streaming. According to Statistic Brain Research Institute, Hulu has 4 million paying subscribers with over 38 million yearly unique viewers. The major difference between Hulu and Netflix is that Hulu

offers a limited number of free videos. In its beginnings, all of the content was provided free but with commercials added. Presently, the pay service does still have commercials inserted into the videos, so many may opt for Netflix over Hulu for this reason alone.

Amazon Prime

Amazon Prime comes in third in popularity for content streaming sites. Along with streaming television and video, Prime customers also have access to streaming music, a limited free Kindle eBook library, and free and discounted shipping for products bought on Amazon.com. There are currently over 40 million members of Amazon Prime, but not all use the streaming services, which is why it is below Hulu and Netflix in popularity rankings.

Binge-Watching as Addiction

While binge-watching is a new addiction, researchers have been studying the effects of television watching since it became commonplace in the home. The problem isn't with the television programming itself, but with being sedentary for long periods of time, as will be discussed in the next section. However, according to Andrew Romano, a journalist for *Newsweek*, for extreme cases, television can have the same kind of withdrawal symptoms as habit-forming drugs. It isn't known what causes one person to be addicted to television and another to not have those symptoms, so it is important to stay vigilant and keep an eye out for any worrisome physical and mental effects while binge-watching.

Physical and Mental Effects of Binge-Watching

Physical Effects


A study done by Dr. James A. Levine at the Mayo Clinic compared adults who spent less than two hours daily in front of the television and those who spent more than four hours daily in front of the television. He found that those who spent the most amount of time watching television had a 50% increased risk of death from any cause and a 125% increased risk of events associated with cardiovascular disease (Levine).

Additionally, there are many physical problems that are caused by sitting for long periods of time:

- Obesity
- Metabolic syndrome
- High blood pressure
- High blood sugar
- Excess abdominal body fat
- Abnormal cholesterol levels
- Death from cardiovascular disease
- Death from cancer

The chart below from the organization Get America Standing summarizes the specific physical problems caused by sitting too long.

9 Ways Prolonged Sitting Can Harm You



HEAD
Sitting for long periods of time can cause blood clots to form which can travel to the brain causing a stroke.

LUNGS
You are twice as likely to develop apulmonary embolism or blood clot if you sit most of your day.

ARMS
The reduction of physical activity leads to hypertension or high blood pressure

STOMACH
Excessive sitting contributes to obesity & colon cancer. Enzymes in the blood vessels of muscles responsible for burning fat shut down leading to the disruption of the body's method of metabolizing fuels.

FEET
Numbness in the feet can be caused by poor circulation. It can also cause nerve damage or pressure on nerves when you sit for long periods.



NECK
Fluid retained in the legs during the day moves to the neck at night & contributes to sleep apnea. Neck muscles are stressed leading to pain.

HEART
People who live a sedentary lifestyle are up to twice as likely to die or develop diabetes and heart disease than those who move frequently.

BACK
Sitting for long periods of time places a high amount of pressure on the spine. Over time, sitting can result in compression of the spinal disks. Because muscles are tight from pressure, sudden movements can lead to injury.

LEGS
Fluid collects in the legs during sitting. Standing and walking helps pump it through your body.

@getUSAsitting

www.getusastanding.org

Additional Physical Effects:

- Watching television mindlessly can also lead to eating mindlessly, which in turn increases weight gain. That, coupled with a slowed metabolism from lack of movement, is a certain path to obesity.
- Binge-watching in a dark room, such as at bedtime, can interrupt the sleep-wake cycles in a person. It is also easy to get caught up in a television show and not realize how much time has passed, which leads to lack of sleep at night and sluggishness during the day.
- Another problem with sitting for long periods of time is the threat of deep vein thrombosis and blood clots, which can develop in even the healthiest of people if they stay in one position for too long (MacMillan).

Mental Effects

The major mental effect of binge-watching television is depression. Because the majority of binge-watchers tend to do so as a solitary activity, it's easy to cut one's self off from friends and family during a bout of depression. Without treatment, depression can easily worsen over time, especially with no other social interaction.

According to a study done by Yoon Hi Sung, Eun Yeon Kang, and Wei-Na Lee of the University of Texas, those who compulsively binge-watch television are more likely to have issues with self-control. "These viewers were unable to stop clicking 'Next,'" even when they were aware that they had other tasks to complete (International Communication Association).

Combatting the Effects of Binge-Watching

One of the more prevalent suggestions to overcome binge-watching comes from Michael Hsu. He says to only watch a show three-quarters of the way through, turning it off when there's a bit of a lull in the action. If the viewer isn't presented with a reason to watch the next episode, Hsu says, they will not watch it right away.

Other ways to prevent ill effects associated with binge-watching:

- Disabling any auto-play feature that may be automatically turned on, as it is the case for Netflix and Hulu.
- Set the Wi-Fi router to turn off automatically at a certain time every night.
- Stream shows on mobile devices while using a treadmill, elliptical, stationary bike, or other gym equipment.
- Set a time to take breaks every 30-45 minutes to stretch the calves to prevent blood clots and deep vein thrombosis.
- Watch with friends. By making binge-watching a social activity, the viewers will be talking and moving more than if they were to watch alone.
- To prevent binge-watching from interrupting sleep, set a cut-off time for watching television. This goes for mobile and traditional devices alike.

Conclusion

The effects of binge-watching television are both real and serious. They should not be taken lightly. However, by practicing self-control when it comes to watching several episodes in a row and leading a more active lifestyle, the effects can be lessened and possibly avoided.

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