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<b>Article:</b>	<b>Binge Watching Netflix in Pakistan: Factors and Psychological Impacts on University Students in Lahore</b>
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**ABSTRACT**

This study explore the binge-watching phenomenon among university students in Lahore, focusing on their motivations and the psychological impacts of extensive Netflix consumption. Utilizing the Uses and Gratification Theory as a framework, the research aims to provide insights into why students engage in binge-watching and how it affects their well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants from three universities in Lahore, aged 19 to 24, to gather qualitative data. Thematic analysis identified seven key themes: boredom, self-gratification, post-binge-watching depression, para-social attachment, social comparison, isolation, and procrastination. These themes explained the nature of binge-watching behaviors and their repercussions on mental health and daily routines. The findings suggest that while binge-watching serves as a means to alleviate boredom and stress, it also leads to negative psychological outcomes such as loneliness, depression, and emotional detachment from reality. Participants expressed a strong affinity for media characters and reported using Netflix to fulfill emotional needs and escape from academic pressures and pandemic-related isolation. Understanding the motivations and consequences of binge-watching among university students is significant for developing targeted interventions that promote healthy media consumption habits and support mental well-being in academic setting

**Key-words:** Binge watching, Netflix, Heavy Viewing, Isolation, Post-Binge-Watching Depression, Procrastination,

## 1. Introduction

Binge-watching has recently emerged as a prevalent phenomenon, driven by the paradigm shift in entertainment consumption behaviors on streaming platforms such as Netflix. In today's world, binge-watching is considered the most convenient and instant way of gratification, as it offers unrestricted access to entertainment content on any internet-connected device. Additionally, the online availability of the entire TV show enables people to watch as many episodes as they desire (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Since now it is a modern approach to consuming media content, it increases the possibilities of various harmful mental and physical effects (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Several studies have declared insomnia and exhaustion as the initial indications of binge-watching (Lemenager et al., 2021). A few more studies postulated that inactive or detrimental lifestyles, neglecting other chores, and avoiding social interaction are the consequences of binge-watching (Rubenking et al., 2018). Moreover, many studies have revealed that binge-watching was commonly practiced in the days of covid-19 pandemic when people were isolated inside their homes which resulted in significant psychological disorders among people (Garbóczy et al., 2021). According to research stress, anxiety, depression, tension, hypersensitivity, trauma, and mood swings are the post-binge-watching symptoms that people experienced during the pandemic (Rubin & Wessely, 2020).

Binge-watching has also gained prominence and popularity in Pakistan, especially among college and university-going students. Social isolation, academic pressure, and affordable access to streaming services are some of the factors that have intensified this trend (Bhatti et al., 2022). Despite the fact that binge-watching is a widespread phenomenon among university-going students in Pakistan, very little research has been done to investigate the underlying causes that contribute to the psychological effects of this practice in the region. The majority of the literature in Pakistan on this phenomenon is quantitative and does not provide specific details on how students interpret or understand it (Paulus & Aziz, 2023; Asgher & Gohar, 2022; Ilyas et al., 2023).

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions to mitigate the potential negative effects on students' well-being and academic performance. The paper asks the following research questions: 1. What are the factors that lead university students in Lahore towards binge-watching Netflix? 2. What is the psychological impact of binge-watching Netflix on these students?. The study has employed qualitative research methodology by conducting in-depth interviews with the students of three Universities of Lahore.

The data was transcribed and coded to derive themes. The study adopted the deductive coding approach, by deriving the themes from the literature and the conceptual framework of uses and gratification theory, for the interview guide. It enables the researchers to test the existing framework by applying it to the specific phenomenon in a specific context and interpret the experience of the students in accordance with the framework. It also helped researchers in comparing the findings of the study with the previous studies conducted in other contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Netflix, established in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph (Schmidt, 2020), has revolutionized digital entertainment through its subscription-based streaming platform, offering a vast range of on-demand content globally (Peng, 2021). This shift has normalized binge-watching as a prevalent method of consuming media, allowing viewers immediate access

to entire series online (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, binge-watching surged as a coping mechanism for isolation, offering instant gratification and distraction (Karuza, 2020; Rahman & Arif, 2021). However, this trend has also been associated with subsequent feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among young adults post-viewing (ÇAYCI, 2021).

Excessive digital media usage, including binge-watching, has been linked to increased rates of depression and anxiety among young adults (Li, et al., 2019). Studies indicate that prolonged exposure to digital screens can lead to adverse psychological effects such as anxiety, mood swings, and disrupted sleep patterns (Woods & Scott, 2016; Lemenager et al., 2021; Schuur et al., 2018). Binge-watching depression refers to the distress and loneliness experienced upon completing a series or movie, forcing viewers to confront reality once again (Kottasz, et al., 2019). Loneliness, characterized by feelings of incomplete intimacy in relationships, persists across age groups despite enhanced digital connectivity (Pittman & Reich, 2016; Savci, 2016). Research suggests that loneliness can drive excessive use of entertainment platforms like television and the internet (Hassan et al., 2024; Caubergh et al., 2021). Idealized relationships and lifestyles shown in the media might make viewers feel empty and increase social comparisons (Batik & Demir, 2021; Yang, 2016). On the other hand, romanticized media about healthy relationships makes viewers feel a connection to the characters and promotes binge-watching (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

For heavy viewers, the distinction between factual and fictitious content has become unclear due to the ease of access to digital media (Amedie, 2015; Shrum, 2002). Research indicates that a high level of exposure to violent or intimate media content is associated with a rise in viewers' hostility and behavioral imitation (Bryant et al., 1981; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). According to Ramos et al. (2013), there is a correlation between excessive media consumption and indirect depictions of aggressiveness, wherein aggressive acts are more likely to be displayed. The addictive aspect of binge-watching is well-known, since it frequently results in a loss of control over media consumption and negative health outcomes such irregular eating and sleeping schedules. According to Brand et al. (2019), the Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model, excessive use of digital media might exacerbate depressive, anxious, and negative moods.

Additionally, heavy screen time is associated with heightened levels of anxiety, depression, fatigue, and loneliness (DeLong et al., 2014; Wheeler, 2015). Research also indicates disruptions in eating and sleep patterns among heavy media consumers (Bulck & Bergh, 2000).

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

Uses and gratification theory was initially coined by Katz and Blumler (1974) in the early 1940's. The theory studies why people use certain types of media, what needs they tend to fulfill by using that media, and what gratifications they get from it (Ruggiero, 2000). The theory embeds the effects of media on people and how they consume media to fulfill their needs and get satisfaction through it (Hossain, et al., 2019). The key assumption of this theory is individuals can consciously select media content per their needs, choices, and demands to fulfill their certain goals, including socializing, gratification, and entertainment (McQuail, 1994; Weiyan, 2015).

The uses and gratification theory currently anticipates two assumptions regarding the usage of media and media content. The first assumption suggests that the audiences are active in selecting the media content they want to consume. The second assumption suggests that the active members of the audience are well aware of the reasons why they want to consume certain types of media content. According to the uses and gratification theory, this is based on the ground to determine the specific needs and uses of individuals and to understand the gratification they get from their desired media content. The audience in this theory plays an active role in choosing media content, and the communication process. This theory basically relies upon four concepts that include the active audience, gratification sought, gratifications obtained, and satisfaction (Kim, 2018; Hassan et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of binge-watching relies very much on the Uses and Gratification (U&G) Theory. It can be stated that people consume digital content through streaming channels and watch multiple episodes to gratify their specific needs. Binge-watching has become a common habit for instant gratification in today's world. Individuals, especially young adults, gratify specific their needs and wants by viewing digital content on streaming channels (Karuza, 2020). However, studies postulate that after finishing TV series and confronting back reality, people reported post-binge-watching depression and loneliness (Sun & Chang, 2021). Ultimately, the process of binge-watching repeats in the loop because people use it as a habitual addiction to escape boredom and loneliness, and this is how they gratify their needs through binge-watching.

#### **4. Methodology**

The current study adopted a qualitative research method to explore students' motivations and effects of binge-watching and get in-depth insight into the core of their lives. The target population in this research was young male and female university students of Lahore, aged 19 to 24. The study sample included 12 students both male and female aged 19-24 from universities including COMSATS, University of Lahore (UOL), and Beaconhouse National University (BNU) by using a purposive sampling technique. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. A total of 10 open-ended questions were prepared based on the recurring themes of the literature review of this study which were later transcribed properly. After this, coding was done to identify the recurring themes. The last step was a thematic analysis of the collected information; which is based on the experiences of the participants.

#### **5. Findings**

##### **5.1 Boredom**

Boredom emerged as a significant theme as there was a consensus among respondents that they watched movies and TV shows on Netflix to avoid or overcome feelings of boredom. Each of them shared their experiences about drastic emotional changes after the movie marathon. Additionally, participants talked about the factors that encouraged them to consume online media content (on Netflix) in which they mentioned that the quarantine period was extremely stressful for them, and to avoid getting bored at home all the time, they watched movies on Netflix. Moreover, it is evident in their answers that binge-watching is considered a harmless and convenient way to kill boredom and get entertainment

##### **5.2 Self Gratification**

During the interview, participants actively spoke about the reasons for their active role in using Netflix excessively for binge-watching purposes. The majority of the participants agreed that they consumed Netflix to relax their minds from hectic academic and work routines, kill boredom during quarantine, and meditate, to avoid disturbing feelings of stress and anxiety, for entertainment purposes, and to unburden their minds from stress. Hence, it is evident in their responses that people consume online media content for gratification purposes. Karuza (2020) also identified in his study that binge-watching was practiced as an instant way of gratification during lockdown by people since they were isolated inside their homes. Additionally, participants shared their experiences about psychological changes they experienced after heavy binge viewing in which they mentioned aggression, depression, stress, and loneliness as post-binge-watching effects (Yasir et al, 2023).

### **5.3 Post-Binge-Watching Depression**

It emerged as an important theme since participants repeatedly mentioned that they felt depressed after watching episodes all night. They openly shared their emotional experiences after long hours of binge-watching, mentioning that they felt blank and lonely after finishing a show and confronting reality again. Participants shared their experiences of emotional changes after long hours of binge-watching; in which the majority of the respondents indicated symptoms of anxiety and depression. One of the respondents described it as a ‘drastic change in emotions’; and the other used the term ‘rollercoaster of emotions’. Furthermore, they addressed their post-binge-watching experiences of emotional changes as loneliness, sadness, stress, and dullness.

### **5.4 Para-social Attachment**

Para-social attachment emerged as another vital theme as most of the participants talked about having imaginary relationships with media characters. They mentioned that they felt sad when there was a sad or emotional scene in the film. Furthermore, there was a consensus among all the respondents that they felt connected to the storyline and characters of the movie or TV show. Whereas, a few participants mentioned that they felt lonely and empty after ending their favorite TV show because they could no longer watch those characters. Moreover, the participants were asked if they Google their favorite celebrities, or follow them on social media after watching their movie or show, to which all the participants agreed that they do follow them on social media afterward. All the respondents agreed that following celebrities on social media is a must. Adverse experiences can be identified in the responses of the participants where they mentioned that they encountered loneliness and emptiness after ending a good movie or TV show.

### **5.5 Social Comparison**

Different patterns of social comparison behaviors were discovered about how Para-social attachment with fictional characters generates the desire among viewers to have similar social relationships as represented in media content. This behavioral pattern was repeatedly determined in the responses of a few participants in which they explicitly shared their perceptions about their personal life in comparison to fictional life. One of the participants was of the view:

“Yes, in my mind, I get so attached to the characters portrayed in the movies or shows. I feel so emotionally connected with every character, admiring their dress, social lifestyle, relationships, and activities.”

All of the participants mentioned that they desire to experience the same social relationships as portrayed in media content. Yet, they mentioned that reality is completely parallel to what is shown in the movies where their desires always remained unaccomplished. Their responses exhibited disappointment and social loneliness.

During the interview, the participants were asked if they wished to have social relationships similar to those portrayed in the movies to which all the participants agreed. One of them shared his desire to experience the same healthy work-life relationships with colleagues, and friends hanging out in big circles and groups; mentioning that reality is opposite and disappointing. Another participant expressed disappointment as she talked about her desire to have a healthy relationship with her siblings and experience closure as it is shown in movies. Similarly, a participant talked about her desire to have an ideal relationship as represented in media content with her intimate partner; however, she said that it makes her sad because she could never experience it in real life.

### **5.6 Isolation**

It appeared as a recurring theme as the majority of the participants mentioned that they encountered feelings of isolation after investing most of their time in binge-watching Netflix. When the participants were asked about the change of emotions they felt after a movie marathon, their replies included signs of isolation. They mentioned that after watching movies or episodes for extended hours, they spent time some alone before interacting with people again. Through their replies, it can be identified that they encountered difficulty in accepting reality after the movie marathon. Participants revealed that interaction with reality was stressful and draining for them. Moreover, two of the participants indicated symptoms of isolation by mentioning that they delay going outside for daily life grocery shopping; and skip family dinners to stay at home.

Therefore, it is evident from the responses of the participants, that they intentionally isolate themselves after completing a long process of binge-watching to prepare themselves for social interactions. Participants agreed that they isolated themselves during the process of binge-watching. One participant mentioned that his screening hours grew during the isolation days of covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, another revealed that Netflix keeps her distracted from the world for quite some time as she disassociates herself from friends and family while using Netflix; through which it can be identified that they only watched movies without any human interaction.

### **5.7 Procrastination**

It emerged as the last and final theme for this research as procrastination is one of the consequences of problematic binge-watching. Binge viewing becomes problematic when viewers exceed their limit of consuming media content to the point where they suffer a threat to the well-being of their mental and physical health (Sun & Chang, 2021).

Similarly, participants openly shared their experiences after long hours of binge watching through which it can be analyzed that all of them were somehow suffering the consequences of problematic binge-viewing. The replies of participants revealed that they would delay dinner and skip daily life activities such as going to the gym or taking a shower, to complete a movie or episode first. They mentioned that they intentionally delayed outside plans with friends and family to watch Netflix and chill at home. While a few participants mentioned that they have disturbed sleeping schedules as a consequence of heavy binge-

watching. Some of the participants' replies included delaying grocery shopping and cleaning the house as a result of excessive digital exposure.

Moreover, there was a consensus where all the participants agreed that they had messed up their sleep routines because of their habitual addiction to binge-watching. They mentioned that binge-watching was their favorite free-time activity during the days of quarantine, and they watched movies and episodes all night. The majority of the participants repeatedly mentioned that they either delay or entirely skip their meals when they are in the process of binge-watching. Lastly, half of the participants agreed that they delayed their assignments until the very last minute of the deadline because they did not want to interrupt their process of binge-viewing.

## **6. Conclusion**

The binge-watching phenomenon among university students in Lahore reveals a nuanced interaction between motivations and psychological impacts, which can be effectively understood using the Uses and Gratification Theory. The Uses and Gratification Theory posits that individuals actively choose media to fulfill specific needs and derive gratification from their media consumption. In the context of binge-watching Netflix, participants in this study engaged in this behavior primarily to alleviate boredom, seek entertainment, relax from academic pressures, and temporarily escape from stress and anxiety induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. These motivations highlight how streaming platforms like Netflix serve as convenient outlets for immediate gratification, offering a vast array of content that meets diverse emotional and entertainment needs. Boredom emerged as a significant factor prompting binge-watching sessions among the participants. Especially during extended periods of quarantine, Netflix's accessibility and range of material offered a simple way to overcome feelings of loneliness and monotony. The participants also shared how their binge-watching practice was developed when they needed to relax and distract, constantly at the cost of other pursuits such as meeting their academic responsibility and socializing.

The psychological effects caused by binge-watching were notable as participants reported that they experienced a wide range of emotions after watching. The prevalent themes were loneliness, depression, and disconnecting emotionally from reality following binge-watching. Para-social attachment, emotionally invested in plots and fictional characters worsened the feelings of social comparison and emptiness. This phenomenon demonstrates the effect of media consumption and the portrayal of relationships and lifestyles on viewers' perspectives by blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Two important effects that have been found in terms of behavioral changes were procrastination and isolation. The participants often kept themselves separated, ignored day-to-day obligations, and delayed social engagements during binge-watching episodes. Their daily routines, academic achievement, and personal connections were all impacted by this activity. The temptation of endless streaming caused people to procrastinate, which resulted in missed deadlines and irregular sleep patterns, which increased participants' stress and anxiety levels. By using the Uses and Gratification Theory to analyze the causes and effects of binge-watching, interventions to encourage university students to use media in a healthier way can be designed. These findings can be used by educators and mental health specialists to encourage students to balance their screen time with other activities that promote their wellbeing and to increase awareness of the possible hazards associated with excessive media usage.



This study has some limitations, just like any other work that is now available. To begin with, our study focused exclusively on Netflix; however, binge-watchers also utilize a variety of other channels and streaming services, such as Hulu, Amazon, Disney Plus, and HBO Max. Secondly, the sample size of this research was restricted to only three universities of Lahore; however, it can be increased to more than three universities for vast research. The funds and resources for this research were less adequate due to which the sample size of this research was limited to only three universities of Lahore. Lastly, this research was restricted to only university students, specifically ages 19 to 24; however, the phenomenon of binge-watching is not age or gender specific.

Taking into consideration the limitations of the study, here are some recommendations for future research. This study was carried out on both male and female university students of Lahore; however, in future research comparative analysis could be done between both genders. Additionally, this research was carried out on university students of age group 19 to 24; yet future researchers can explore more age groups as well. Moreover, the funds and resources could be expanded in the future to increase the limit of sample size for vast research; that could incorporate more than 3 universities. Furthermore, collective analysis of digital viewing can be done including all famous streaming channels such as Hulu, Amazon, Disney Plus, and HBO Max. Lastly, future research can also be based on the preferred and approachable streaming platforms by young individuals and how these platforms affect their cognitive well-being.

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