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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

Netflix as comfort zone: Qualitative research on viewing as subjective experience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines viewers' motivations for Netflix viewing and the emotions evoked by the experience. Netflix emerges as a comfort zone for viewers. Furthermore, as the criteria for defining binge-watching are not explicit in the existing literature, this research delineates such behaviour through participants' narratives. Twenty-six interviews were conducted with individuals aged 18-35 years old. Viewing options play an important part in viewers' medium experiences. For viewers, Netflix affords a sense of control. Choosing it over other sources of viewing gives them a sense of agency. The characteristics of the Netflix platform (ad-free, on demand viewing, customisation), as well as perceptions about traditional TV, prompt participants to choose Netflix as a near-exclusive source of TV products. Escapism, a soundscape within the home, a soothing comfort zone and a socializing factor with tangible/digital others; these were highlighted as the most important motivations for Netflix viewing. Frequency and duration of viewing are enhanced by identification with the fictional characters, while participants describe parasocial interactions. Immersion in the television programme and narrative transportation in the fictional world emerge as a key desire that drives viewing and encourages binge watching behaviours. Furthermore, the platform's characteristics, e.g. cliffhangers, encourage binge-watching through an urge to complete the narrative. The findings of the present study broaden our understanding of contemporary digital means of escape and emotional fulfillment, since it is one of the few empirical studies focusing on Netflix in Greece. The findings may also apply to several other on-demand platforms, such as the Greece-based Cinobo and Ertflix.

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In the digital age, how we consume entertainment content has undergone significant changes, with the prevalence of streaming platforms revolutionising the way we watch TV programmes and films. Digital media provided by platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, Disney+, Fox and Hulu have eliminated spatial and temporal constraints and contributed to the widespread popularity of on-demand viewing in recent years (Flayelle et al., 2019). In Greece, Netflix users amount to 500.000¹, not including multiple viewer connections. In this regard,

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/netflix-users-by-country>

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Netflix, one of the most popular streaming platform, seems to not only provide its subscribers with an extremely abundant collection of films, TV shows, and other entertainment material, but also introduces new viewing habits and motivations (Jenner, 2016).

The current study, therefore, aims to enrich the existing literature, especially in the Greek media context, and to deepen our understanding on the viewing habits and motivations regarding on-demand and linear, traditional television. Moreover, we aim to define binge watching, a term that is closely related to Netflix, and identify the motives that may impel this form of viewing.

Appealing features of Netflix streaming platform

Several key differences emerge when comparing traditional TV with Netflix and similar platforms. Traditional television operates on a linear programming model, where viewers must adhere to fixed schedules and tune in at specific times to watch their favorite shows (Horeck et al., 2018; Shim et al., 2018; see also Vamvakas & Gazi, 2017). This synchronous or scheduled broadcasting model contrasts with the self-directed viewing experience offered by Netflix, where viewers have the autonomy to decide when and what they prefer to watch (Horeck et al., 2018; Shim et al., 2018). As Needham and Woods (2010) point out, the shift to digital viewing is less about the content and more about the access to it, since the subscriber is not just paying for the exclusive content but rather for the digital TV experience which offers personalized viewing management. Furthermore, the traditional television industry relies heavily on advertising, frequently and prolongedly interrupting its programming with commercial breaks that help to attract revenue. In contrast, Netflix provides a 'pure' viewing experience without advertisements and derives its revenue mainly from subscriptions (Horeck et al., 2018).

Moreover, Netflix facilitates the "insulation" of the content flow by providing features such as skip intro, post-play function, and releasing the whole content at once enhancing the experience of seamless viewing (Horeck et al., 2018; Jenner, 2018). Regarding the content delivery format, traditional television often offers programmes as single episodes with a fixed interval between viewings, while Netflix releases entire seasons, allowing viewers to watch the available entertainment material sequentially without the need to wait (Horeck et al., 2018). This transformative approach to television production is accompanied by a change in the television experience as Netflix offers a personalized viewing environment. Utilizing algorithms and user data, Netflix recommends content tailored to individual viewing habits and preferences (Horeck et al., 2018; Jenner, 2016). The platform's extensive content library, covering various genres, provides viewers with a wide range of options to explore and even the option to record viewing by creating lists that are potential benchmarks of their personal viewing experience (Horeck et al., 2018). In addition, Netflix distinguishes itself by producing and releasing its own original content, helping to create a distinctive brand and building a community of subscribers (Jenner, 2016). Complementing this, Netflix offers the flexibility of cross-border accessibility, allowing viewers to access its content across local or national borders (Horeck et al., 2018). It also caters to the flexibility of individual viewing habits, accommodating subscribers who may deviate from their daily TV schedule due to their daily routine or preferences. Overall, these characteristics highlight the fundamental differences between traditional TV and Netflix, underlining how the platform has reshaped the experience of viewing TV content (Horeck et al., 2018; Jenner, 2016; Shim et al., 2018).

Defining binge watching

When Netflix released a full season of *Arrested Development* in 2013, approximately 10% of viewers had watched the entire season within 24 hours, highlighting the growing trend of binge watching (Matrix, 2014). In addition, 361,000 Netflix users watched all nine episodes of *Stranger Things* season two in one sitting within 24 hours of its premiere (Rahman & Arif, 2021). Binge watching is a widespread phenomenon in modern TV viewing, characterised by the consumption of multiple episodes of a TV series or streaming content in a

concentrated period. This practice has become popular and is enhanced by the availability of VoD (Video on Demand) platforms that offer a wide range of content and the convenience of watching on any internet-connected device, as well as the instant availability of entire seasons (Jenner, 2016). Although difficult to define with any degree of accuracy, binge watching is apparent when the level of consumption exceeds what may be considered manageable or expected. For example, binge watching sessions range from two to six episodes per session, with each session lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes (Kulak, 2020). Castro et al. (2021) estimated that average binge-watching session was two hours and 10 minutes. On streaming platforms that release entire seasons at once, viewers often consume an entire season in a few days or a single weekend. Jenner (2018) notes that defining binge watching behaviours based on the number of episodes in a session or comparing on-demand watching to linear watching are not accurate means of measuring excessive behaviour. Therefore, behaviour that may appear troubled can only be assessed on the basis of individual circumstances.

Netflix's operating framework encourages binge watching behaviour (Kulak, 2020), as the automatic succession of episodes creates a sense of continuity and eliminates the need for viewer intervention. The viewer is required to intervene if they wish to stop watching, otherwise one episode succeeds another maintaining the viewer's immersion in the programme (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Along with this, Matrix (2014) reports that the rise of binge watching seems to have had a significant impact on television storytelling. TV shows are designed with intricate plots, narrative flashbacks and mysteries that encourage viewers to carefully reflect on episodes. This approach keeps audiences engaged and cultivates communities of fans who analyse and discuss the elaborate details of programmes on social media. In addition to the impact on storytelling, binge-watching has also affected the structure of television series. Jenner (2016) reports that networks are increasingly ordering shorter seasons of 10 to 13 episodes instead of the traditional 22-episode format. This change is due to the preferences of viewers who seem to prefer immersive, shorter episode formats over longer ones. As Kulak (2020) notes, online platforms such as Netflix are now prioritizing shows that are "worth" binge-watching, as they are more likely to attract and retain audiences. The success of shows such as *Arrested Development*, *Orange Is the New Black* and *House of Cards* on Netflix has demonstrated the value of satisfying viewers' desire for uninterrupted, continuous marathon viewing (Jenner, 2016; see also, Dimitrakopoulou & Savvakis, 2017 for a detailed analysis of *House of Cards*).

Research shows that younger individuals, particularly those in the 18-34 age group, are more likely to engage in binge watching compared to older age groups (Anghelcev et al., 2020; Jenner, 2016; Matrix, 2014). Kulak (2020) reports that this age group is characterized by a stronger preference for digital media consumption and greater familiarity with streaming platforms. However, binge watching is not limited to younger generations, as studies have also found significant engagement in binge watching among older adults as well. In addition, binge watching does not appear to be limited to specific demographic groups, as it is observed in groups of different gender, socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels (Horeck et al., 2018).

Binge watching has been associated with both positive and negative implications on an individual's sense of psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing. On the one hand, binge watching can deliver a sense of relaxation, escape and enjoyment, allowing individuals to immerse themselves in compelling narratives (Castro, et al., 2021; Kulak, 2020). On the other hand, Gabbiadini et al. (2021) report that excessive indulgence in binge watching has been associated with negative outcomes such as increased sedentary behaviour, poor sleep quality and reduced social interactions. Of course, the effects of binge watching may vary depending on individual characteristics, viewing habits and the balance between binge watching and other daily activities.

Motives for (binge) watching

Several studies have focused on exploring the motives that drive subscribers to Netflix and other similar platforms, most of which employ the "uses and gratification" theory to provide an explanatory framework (Castro et al, 2021). Podara et al. (2019) have stated that viewing habits of post-millennials (digital natives/Gen Z) in Greece and Cyprus satisfy the main assumptions of "used and gratification" theory, in contrast to millennials' viewing habits. According to the uses and gratifications framework, media consumers have specific objectives and needs and continually seek to satisfy them by means of various media (Pittman & Sheenan, 2015). More specifically, the theory sets out with three assumptions (Panda & Pandey, 2017): (a) audiences are active, i.e., they voluntarily seek out media to satisfy certain needs; (b) people are aware of these needs, can identify them, and their self-reports are reliable, (c) media compete with other forms of content consumption, including interpersonal communication, to meet these needs. Thus, Netflix subscribers, by choosing when, where and how to access its content, seek to maximise the satisfaction they receive from the experience of consuming its entertainment product.

Drawing on the above theoretical framework, Pittman and Sheehan (2015) define the motives for marathon viewing as the intense engagement of the audience with the content and the desire for socialisation. Binge watching often involves participation in physical and digital communities where discussions about content, characters, actors, spoilers and anticipation of future seasons or the possible cancellation of a show are discussed. This collective engagement can be described as "binge" culture (Kulak, 2020). The feature of "Teleparty", a Google Chrome extension enables watching content on the platform with synchronized video playback and group chat, making collective marathon watching possible when the "binge watchers" are not in the same room (Heubl, 2020). This phenomenon is therefore not an exclusively individual activity but rather often a coherent element in a group of people or even a whole community (Kulak, 2020).

In addition, Pittman and Sheehan (2015) talk about marathon viewing as a regulating behaviour in the context of planned relaxation, spending leisure time and hedonism in the context of entertainment. The findings of Kulak's (2020) study are also interesting as they make evident the regulating factor of this behaviour in relation to the emotional state of the individual and in relation to the pursuit of immediate gratification. Finally, it is worth mentioning that certain features that intentionally distinguish contemporary entertainment content, such as cliffhangers that refer to the ending of an episode at a moment of great suspense, may also create an incentive for some to indulge in marathon viewing (Flayelle et al., 2019). Some individuals are, therefore, likely to be more prone to marathon watching as they seek to fulfil their comprehension of the events (Cacioppo et al., 1984).

The present research aims to address the following questions using mainly international research findings, since, to our knowledge, the topic of binge watching has not yet been thoroughly explored in Greece:

1. What differences do participants identify between on-demand viewing and linear, traditional television? Why do they choose one over the other?

Based on the existing literature, linear and on-demand viewing have discrete differences that may motivate the selection of one type of viewing over the other. So, this research question serves to provide a context in which this preference can be better understood.

2. How do participants define binge-watching?

Our search is for a definition that reflects the subjective conditions and variations of the experience.

3. What incentives encourage binge-watching, according to the participants' narratives?

Based on existing literature a plethora of motives have been documented. This research question focuses on the ones that viewers/users in Greece feel as drive to their behaviour.

4. What feelings surround the black screen, i.e. the termination of the binge-watching experience?

This research question attempts to document the aftermath of the behaviour and whether the viewers/users have achieved the fulfilment of their motivation.

Method

A qualitative research strategy was employed to respond to the research questions of the present study and the technique of semi-structured interviews was applied as a method of data collection. Being a research attempt in a field that is still inchoate, qualitative semi-structured interviews were selected because of their potential to trace important parameters of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants

Twenty-six individuals -seven men and 19 women- were interviewed, aged 18 to 35 years old. The sampling criterion was that they were using or had used an on-demand platform on a regular basis in the past. Although it was not specified at the initial selection that Netflix would be the focus of the study, it emerged as a near-major player in the sampling criterion. Netflix's supremacy in terms of on-demand platforms was also noted in previous Greece-based research (Podara et al., 2021).

Material

An interview guide was constructed for research purposes taking into account the relevant literature (Flayelle et al., 2019; Horeck et al., 2018; Jenner, 2018; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015) and the scope of the research questions. Therefore, the central items of the guide were structured in a way that would cover important facets of the topic:

1. Habits and attitudes regarding on demand and TV viewing.
2. Definitions and description of binge-watching behaviour.
3. Motives for binge watching.
4. Thoughts and feelings after the termination of the activity.

Data Analysis

The analytical procedure followed did not divulge from standard practice in the field (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Christensen et al., 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2013). More specifically, thematic analysis was applied in the effort to identify the main themes of the data. "Themes" are determined by the frequency of reference and by the significance attributed to them by the interviewees. In a similar fashion, the subthemes that emerge from the main themes come under discussion always with reference to the main research question that the article sets out to examine.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2022 (April – May). Snowball sampling was applied, guided by the on-demand platform viewing criterion (Creswell, 2012). Initially there was an open verbal call by the researchers to identify the first volunteers and then snowball sampling was activated. The researchers informed the participants about the issues of research ethics, and the participants were given an informed consent form. The collected interview material was transcribed, and the analysis was carried out on the transcripts according to thematic analysis framework; main themes and subthemes were retrieved from the interviewee's narratives.

Findings and Discussion

Netflix means control, choice and connection

As Jenner (2018) states, Netflix may not adhere to the linear TV structure, imposing certain programmes at certain times and days, but it does structure the viewing experience through special features such as the skip intro, post-play function, the structure of the home page with the “now watching” and favourites fields, and the ability to pick up the episode where the viewer left off. These features, that are the dominant reasons why viewers choose Netflix over other forms of viewing, provide Netflix with an anthropomorphic identity, born out of the magic of algorithms [“the program is waiting for me” (F., 32 y.o.), “it understands exactly what you want” (M., 19 y.o.)] and seem to enhance viewer engagement (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). These features are perceived by users as control over content [“you are in total control” (F., 23 y.o.)], combined with the absence of advertising (in exchange for a subscription) and on-demand viewing of rich content on any screen from anywhere versus forced viewing. All these issues were included in the first part of the research interview guide and fully confirm international research evidence and Greek literature (e.g. Logotheti, 2017; Podara et al., 2019).

Most participants stated that they do not watch traditional TV, and some did not even have a TV set at home [a trend already pointed out by Logotheti (2017) and Podara et al., (2021)]. Indicatively, one of the participants (M., 19 y.o.) noted “I don't watch any other programmes on TV at all. I'm indifferent to news programmes, recurring series that we've seen a million times, TV shows, which are now more like reality shows as they are all staged”. The illustrative quote contradicts one of the main arguments for choosing Netflix. One of the most popular shows on Netflix is “Friends”, which participants say they watch repeatedly. “Friends” was an extremely popular series, which began airing in 1994 and ended in 2004 after 10 seasons. The series was aired on the NBC television network and much later the Netflix platform. In 2022, the series was pulled from Netflix, however, it was brought back a few months later, bringing relief to viewers who expressed strong feelings of anger and sadness after the initial cancellation of the series. The habit of watching a familiar programme was also highlighted in our previous research with adolescents (Sidiropoulou, 2019). Back then this habit was linked to the avoidance of astonishment by the flow of the program; a carefree experience while eating lunch after school.

As for the first Netflix experience, it was usually with friends or through friends, as many shared their account with others. Several were those who logged on to Netflix because of the buzz generated around a program, either out of curiosity or because they wanted to be part of the conversation. This is also confirmed by Dimitrakopoulou and Savvakis (2017) on their insightful findings on the Netflix show “House of Cards”.

Therefore, regarding the first research aim, the choice of on-demand viewing over traditional watching is based on a sense of control over the activity, a sense of choice over the content, and a sense of connection with other people based on shared interests. As Logotheti (2017) points out, the new viewing practices came as a result of bottom-up procedures (viewers' communities) and not because of corporate decisions of the traditional media. The following sections present and discuss the participants' definition of binge-watching behaviour, the motivations for Netflix viewing and binge watching, and the consequences of binge watching in terms of participants' thoughts and feelings.

Binge watching or marathon viewing?

A clear and adequate definition of binge-watching behaviour remains to be formulated (Jenner, 2018; Viens & Farrar, 2021). Prior to discussing our participants' definitions of marathon viewing, the following quote challenges the very concept of marathon viewing, bringing us closer to the definition of binge-watching. More specifically, one participant stated:

Not marathon. Because marathons have an end, binge watching has no end...no end. That is, if at some point the series ends, having entered the binge-watching mindset, you will go and watch something else afterwards. Some other series, some other video, something you've seen before, meaning that once you get into the binge-watching mindset you won't say oh it's over, I'm going to brush my teeth I don't know. You can't be in the mood. Let alone the show that's started, and you watch, you know it's 12 episodes of the show and then they put out a season of 4 episodes. I want more, man. What do we do? (M., 25 y.o.)

While in Greece this behavior has been termed as “episode marathon” (μαραθώνιος επεισοδίων) (Dimitrakopoulou & Savvakis, 2017; Logotheti, 2017), based on the participant's observation the most suitable term is that of binge-watching (Flayelle et al., 2020; Horeck et al., 2018; Kulak, 2020; Matrix, 2014; Shim et al., 2018; Song et al., 2021). Moving on to the definition of binge-watching, some of the participants defined this pattern in terms of the hours or number of episodes that the activity must involve. Indicatively, several participants provided definitions based on duration: “The moment you exceed the duration of a film, i.e. two and a half to three hours, you're in for a marathon” (M., 24 y.o.), “Seven to nine hours or six or seven episodes or more, in front of the screen, that's what I would call marathon viewing” (F., 24 y.o.), “I don't want to be exaggerating, I would say four to five hours or if you watch five 45-minute episodes, for the 20-minute episodes almost twice as long” (F., 25 y.o.), “[...] Definitely over four hours [...] but in one session, in one sitting, boy, over three to four hours, I think you're binge watching” (F., 26 y.o.).

Moreover, some participants, inspired by their own personal experience, define it in terms of the feelings and thoughts framing the activity. Indicatively, a 27-years-old participant commented: “[...] from the perspective of having to watch it all almost compulsively or from the perspective of needing it to a certain extent. How does one enter his/her home and turns it on for companionship?” (M., 27 y.o.). While others mentioned:

[...] watching a lot of series without a schedule...watching a lot without a schedule, I don't put a limit on how much it is to watch. You wouldn't say "I'm going to sit down and watch an episode" you sit down and say "now I'm going to start watching. (F., 25 y.o.)

Marathon watching is the viewing that people do on various visual content such as series, movies in which they watch for hours without being able to stop because they want to finish the content they are watching and sometimes absently or even unconsciously. (F., 25 y.o.)

What emerges from the above quotes is that binge watching is experienced as an activity with no predetermined end ("now I start watching"), compulsive ("without being able to stop") and arising from a necessity ("that you need it to a certain extent"). Participants argue that the "cliffhanger" aspect of Netflix productions is the main reason why they are driven to marathon viewing. One participant mentions that one reason for continuously watching is "because it ends, let's say, at an exciting point so you want to keep going" (M., 25 y.o.) while another participant mentions that "I just wanted to finish it or find out the ending. Like how it will be continued in the next episode" (F., 26 y.o.).

However, according to participants, binge viewing does not allow for immersion in the plot. As they report, during the marathon activity “[...] you get lost, you get on autopilot [...] you don't grasp the details, but you basically overlook them” (M., 24 y.o.). Several participants described distractions from either other activity (e.g. preparing food while the program continues to play) or other screens (e.g. mobile phone). They indicated:

No, no, most of the time if I watch something for 5 hours, the first 2 hours I'll be there, the other 3 hours I'll be dawdling, I'll do other things, I'll pick up the mobile phone, I might go and make something to eat, so I won't concentrate so much on the plot and I might even rewind several times to check what I've missed. (F., 24 y.o.)

[...] that's the essence of binge watching that you watch, watch, watch, but at the end of the season if you get into a discussion about it, as a rule, and I've seen it in myself, I'll forget some of the key details, and I'll

have to re-watch it to be able to participate in the discussion, whereas in the weeklies because that's what it is, you have the time frame to fully devote to watching the show, so you'll remember the details after the episode is over. (M. 24 y.o.)

Screen multitasking is more common when participants are viewing something they have watched before and know how it will unfold, or when the programme they are watching feels like it does not require “grey matter” (i.e. cognitive effort) (F., 30 y.o.). In their focus group research Podara et al., (2019) found that screen multitasking wasn't a common practice when the program was deemed as interesting. Also, in the aforementioned research, participants didn't share content of social media while watching a program. Based on our findings, participants are simultaneously active on digital social networks or in a video game, as one participant, indicatively, described: “Most of the time I'm using my phone as the same time, whether I', on social media or playing a game. (F., 27 y.o). While others indicated:

Yes, for some reason I must be occupied with something including my hands, not just my eyes, so the easiest thing is to pick up the mobile in my hand and start replying to messages or permanently sending something, checking the flow on Instagram. (F., 26 y.o.)

The more interesting the show is, the less [screen multitasking] is likely to happen. But it's not that it will never happen at all. It will always be the mobile phone or something. That's most likely because I don't actually want to be looking at a screen. The times when I do feel good or fully focused and I won't look at another screen is when something I'm really interested happening and I', having a good time or I'm out with friends. (M., 27 y.o.)

Nevertheless, the second screen is also used to seek information about the TV show or movie they are watching at that moment, when some information about it has been "lost" or something interesting - which is not explained - has come up. In this case, it could be suggested that the second screen acts as a complement to the experience of viewing and is an attempt to reconstruct the meaning that seems to be disrupted by the overcoming of attention strengths and information burnout, but also external distractions (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Indicatively:

Of course I use other screens... I spent most of the program at the same time always texting on my mobile phone. And there have been times when I've turned the flow backwards because I was paying more attention to the phone than to the program. (F.23 y.o)

Therefore, with respect to the second research question, participants seem to define binge-watching as compulsive and need-driven behaviour. It exceeds two and a half hours and can be as long as nine hours and often there is no predetermined limit of watching. Binge watching does not allow immersion in the plot due to the cognitive load and other screens are often enlisted to fill the gap of understanding.

Incentives for binge-watching

The purpose of this section is to present and discuss the findings of the third research question regarding the motivation behind binge-watching. Three main themes emerge that reveal the layered and intricate response to this question of what makes people engage in this behaviour. The first theme that emerges concerns the soothing and comforting effect brought about by the viewing experience, an effect made very desirable by a hectic routine and an individual's complex relationship with their environment. The second theme relates to the impact on social interaction but also the parasocial dimension that emotionally enriches the experience. Finally, the third theme that offers insights into the question of motivation is narrative transportation and the need for cognition.

Comfort sounds: a soothing escape from daily reality

The need to relax and escape from the daily routine and the troubles attached to it are what motivate Netflix viewing. This is shown by already conducted research that focuses on the motivations for using modern digital

media, such as mobile phones (Sidiropoulou, 2019). Most participants mentioned the need to break away from daily life through their Netflix screens. Here are some indicative remarks:

Because it's something that calms you down, it's something that takes your mind away from everyday life and problems. [...] I put something on and I don't overanalyse it. I need something to distract me that has nothing to do with what I'm living and that's how I calm down. (F., 25 y.o.)

I think it's the fact that it doesn't make me think too much. That is, if I'm too tired, I won't choose something that's too active, something that will put me in too much thought, or if I'm not feeling very well within myself, I'm sad, or something is going on in my life in general. I'd rather see something that's either fantasy that will take me on a journey, it's not real, or it's something that will take my mind away and I won't think too much. (F., 27 y.o.)

After the quarantine and now that it's a transitional period of my life I have used it (Netflix) many times to calm down and stop thinking. To not think, basically. I practically don't want to do anything physical; I don't feel like going for a walk, I don't feel like exercising, I'm too tired to do that. While I know that if I picked up a book it would relax me, I'd rather have the numbness that Netflix gives you than the calm that a book gives you [...] that there's a compulsion to finish it without necessarily having any interest in the show itself or in thinking. (M., 27 y.o.)

We note here that several participants mentioned reading a book as an alternative activity to Netflix, but they find reading tedious and not as fulfilling as viewing. What participants seem to be looking for is immersion in a fantasy world completely separate from their own (Green & Brock, 2000). Previous studies (Castro, et al., 2021; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015) have also identified escapism, relaxation and boredom relief as main motivation for choosing Netflix.

A frequent reference in participants' comments was the use of Netflix as background sound in the home when they are alone or engaged in other activities. Essentially, they described their Netflix sounds as tones that eliminate the silence of an empty house and can also act as a sonic hypnotizer. Indicative, two participants commented: "I certainly often find myself just putting it on and playing without watching, to help me fall asleep, for example" (M., 25 y.o.), "There was a movie playing and... just something to listen to, say, or to relax with something I'm interested in" (F., 26 y.o.). "Friends" emerged as a comfort show, as noted by several participants. Indicative:

Now that[...]I'm watching "Friends" again for, I don't know, the hundredth time, I don't watch it with the same dedication anymore, meaning I can start watching a particular episode that interests me, and gradually stop watching it and it just runs in the background[...]I know its storyline, and I'm pretty much familiar enough with the plot that I don't have to put so much effort into learning it from the beginning. So, for me it's soothing to know what's going to happen. (F., 26 y.o.)

There are 4-5 series which are my comfort series. For example, "Friends" which I am watching now for the thousandth time and just running through the episodes I don't bother to watch. I watch some, I binge watch, I fall asleep, I wake up, I sleep, I cook, I tidy up, and sometimes if I want to watch something I'll sit down to watch something. (F., 32 y.o.)

Pittman and Sheehan (2015) describe binge-watching as a type of restorative experience "where an individual is removed either physically or psychologically from the obligations and daily life" and is transported to a whole different environment, immersed in it and actively engaged with the characters. This description, which is consistent with the findings of the current study, allows us to proceed to the next subthemes in the exploration of the motives of binge-watching experience.

Social and parasocial interactions

As already mentioned, the experience of Netflix viewing, and the binge-watching side of it, is often a shared activity with tangible or digital friends. In fact, a new digital community has emerged - binge culture (Kulak, 2020) - based on the consistent viewing of Netflix material. Also, the phrase 'Netflix and chill', beyond its direct denotation, can be understood as an invitation with flirtatious connotations to a person of interest. Several of the participants drew attention to the socialising element of viewing as an important dimension of the experience. Indicatively two participants mentioned: “It is an incentive for companionship and bonding relationships. You could, say, invite your friends or your boyfriend or your girlfriend to watch a movie...” (F., 26 y.o.), “Also, Netflix is a way to connect with other people. Let’s say, my best friend and I talk for hours about the show or movie we've seen. It's a way of connecting and sealing the friendship somehow” (F., 25 y.o.). Another participant outlines the socialising dimension of viewing:

[...] because we want to feel that we are, how can I say it, part of the whole, because, for example, if it's a very viral series, like it was then with the “Squid Game”, for example, uh, a lot of people saw it, saw it, let's say, in one day, uh, why did they want to be part of the conversation? I saw it and I want to be part of it and so on. (F., 26 y.o.)

Beyond ties in the tangible or digital domain, ties also seem to be created at the imaginary realm, which fulfil the function of companionship, social participation and escapism. The sense of belonging to the group of "Friends" or "How I met your mother", which are the most common programmes mentioned by the participants, can be understood by the concept of parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions had been studied long before the consolidation of digital technology, as they were identified in the relationship that some viewers developed with protagonists of television programmes. As Giles (2023) points out, parasocial interactions exist exclusively in the private sphere of the individual and in the imaginary realm, in contrast to social interactions which belong to the social realm. Although parasocial relationships have been extensively studied in terms of traditional media, the full integration of digital technologies in contemporary life and thus the opportunities for interaction they offer, which blur, as Giles mentions, the boundaries between the social and the parasocial, facilitates to a significant extent the formation and preservation of parasocial interactions.

Several participants mentioned that identification [which is a precursor to parasocial bond, according to Giles (2023)] with the heroes is what drives engagement with the content and possibly leads to marathon viewing behaviours (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Indicatively they mentioned: Sometimes you even identify with a hero in the series (F. 24 y.o.). “[...] It's like I get a little bit into their company, so many times I've watched it”, a participant (F., 25 y.o.) mentioned about watching the series "Friends". Likewise, for the series "Friends" and other similar series, a participant (M., 25 y.o.) describes the emotional attachment to the characters as follows:

If you watch e.g. “Friends” or “How I Met your Mother” or even “Umbrella Academy” which has so many main characters, so much character progression, that you feel like you grow up with them. I mean there are so many inside jokes in “How I Met your Mother” that I felt part of the group. I've never been drawn to a show like that before. Let me just say that this group are my friends. Okay I wasn't saying that consciously, but when I watched it, I felt part of the group.

The TV characters are designed in a way that evokes a sense of closeness and intimacy for the viewers (Giles, 2002). Viewers in turn embraced them as friends while engaging in a one-way, non-dialectical and non-reciprocal relationship with them. Repeated exposure to the presence of these television heroes establishes and reinforces parasocial bonds (Auter, 1992; Perse & Rubin, 1989) and perhaps this may be the basis of the attachment to programmes such as "Friends", which are watched incessantly by viewers on repeat, even though they have been off the air for 20 years. Parasocial relationships may be an important indicator of excessive viewing, as they become an important part of a person's life. A 23 y.o. female participant mentioned

that “I feel really, really good [when I watch Netflix]. It actually gives me relief. I feel like I identify with the main characters and I’ve reached the point of addiction”. Another participant (19 y.o) reported:

I clearly think I am a (binge watcher) and I caught myself thinking I was addicted to it as we had gone on holiday and if one day I didn't watch even one episode, it was painful. I feel like I've let my show down, that I've let the main characters down, that I can't see what has happened in the next episode. Clearly, I get very sore with whatever show I happen to watch. There are very few shows that I have started watching and eventually given up on.

The frustration and disappointment he feels he has caused to the main characters in the series due to the interruption of watching, clearly describes the parasocial bond. In conclusion, consistent viewing habits facilitate the formation and reinforcement of bonds based on common interests. Participants described the socialising aspect of the viewing experience. However, their narratives also highlighted the one-sided but satisfying social bonds with their telecompanions.

Narrative transportation and need for cognition

Complementary to the features of current forms of viewing is the immersion in television fantasy, which is described as the transference in a narrative world [and] conceptualized as a distinct mental process, an assimilative fusion of attention, images and emotions (Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative transportation is an experiential response to the world of television programmes, which is transformed into a real place. According to Green and Brock (2000), to succeed in narrative transportation a story is required that contains a plethora of unanswered questions and unresolved conflicts, and whose protagonists struggle to manage a variety of intractable crises. Narrative transportation can lead to short-term loss of sense of time and total fixation on the events of the television programme with simultaneous cognitive blocking of stimuli in the immediate environment (Green, 2004). It therefore involves the emotional and cognitive absorption of the individual into the imagined world of the television programme. In fact, Green and Brock (2000) suggest that the viewer (or reader) may not even notice someone entering the room where they are, immersed in the story. In addition, emotional involvement is also highlighted in the viewers' or readers' need for the desired ending, which usually involves the redemption of the good guys and the punishment of the bad guys.

Several participants described the experience of narrative transportation as something that arises from consistent viewing, but also as something they seek in order to escape, regulate emotions and relax. One participant (M. 19 y.o) noted “I'm no longer stressed that there might be something I have to do and it's really a way to go into another world, to identify with the main character. And to see it and feel like I'm living myself in it”. The need to remain immersed in the experience is manifested in the following quotes:

In the beginning when I first started watching Netflix, I tried to be a bit restrained. Now I'm not! Now I'm going to start the series, and I know I have to go downtown for a job, so I'll download the episode to have on my phone to keep watching on the subway. And if I'm so drawn into the show, I'll be thinking about when I'm going to get home to keep watching it. (M. 32 y.o)

It's that you are transported with a click into another reality, so if you like it so much and you are so interested you feel that you are experiencing the feelings of the actors and that they are in another world, in another country, on another planet, depending on... um, these... you forget about your everyday life, about your problems. (F., 26 y.o.)

A consequence of narrative transportation is a return to reality with altered perceptions or attitudes. This brings in an important component of the imperative to study narrative transportation, as the narrative worlds of television programmes or books are public narratives (Cyrulnik, 2010/2008), in contrast to personal narratives, in which a multitude of viewers and readers are exposed simultaneously. Green and Brock's (2000) study, therefore, moves away from the interesting exploration of narrative transportation as a mode of escape

and reaches for exposure to public narrative as a means of persuasion and belief manipulation. Gazi's qualitative study (2017) in Greek TV viewers of American soap operas during the 80's and 90's establishes an understanding on the persuasive effect of dedicated viewing. She explains that viewing of American shows cultivated a turn away from local values and tradition towards more liberating attitudes regarding romantic and friendship relationships, sexual behavior, consuming practices, lifestyle trends, etc.

Walter et al. (2018) examined the impact of the second screen [in terms of second-screening as discussed earlier] on narrative persuasion. According to the researchers, the second screen enriches the viewing experience and promotes an in-depth information process, both of which can result in higher immersion in the programme, identification with the characters, and susceptibility to attitude change. Although Castro et al.'s (2021) research shows that media multitasking while binge-watching didn't have an impact on viewer's level of immersion, Walter et al. (2018) point out that binge-watching behaviour may disturb bonding with characters and emotional involvement, as discussed previously. Furthermore, binge watching doesn't always result in the viewer's desired level of engagement, as sometimes it is not possible to limit external distractions (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015).

The last motive, the need to complete the narrative, is linked to Cacioppo and colleagues' (1984) theory about the need for cognition. This refers to the need of some individuals to organise and evaluate information and not remain caught up in abstract meanings or incomplete stories. The motivation to complete the narrative is linked to narrative transportation, as the enthralled viewer has a need to know the fate of his or her favorite tele-companion. Consequently, individuals characterized by the need for narrative completion may be more prone to marathon watching, as they seek fulfilment through a comprehension of events. Several participants described the need for narrative completion as a key motivation, which they associated with binge watching. A 25-years-old participant outlined her experienced with the need for narrative completion: "I find myself very often saying "okay, don't overdo it", but it's very easy for me to go astray. That happens to me because I am impatient to see what happens next". While another participant noted this experience as follows:

Both Netflix and TV give me the same feeling. When I turn them off, I feel like I'm going back to a routine and it's something I don't like at all, and I'm in a constant state of anticipation, whether I'm watching a movie or whatever. I'm waiting to see what happens. (F., 35 y.o.)

The very fabric of Netflix shows, however, is based on cliffhangers that keep viewers' interest and encourage binge-watching behaviours. At the same time, individuals prone to impulsiveness succumb more readily and without deliberation to suspenseful finales (see Flayelle et al., 2019). As one participant (M., 25 y.o.) notes:

Uh, it always gets you to the best... what makes more sense, [...] you're going to watch, you want to see the next one and what happens next, and I want the next one and the next one and the next one...it's new, it's going to have a plot, like, you've never seen before.

Therefore, what gets highlighted under research question three and the search for motivation, is narrative transportation and the consequent need for narrative completion. Castro et al. (2021) observed an interrelationship between self-perceived binge-watching behavior and the need for completion. They noted that participants in their study who avoided using the term binge-watching to label their behavior were those who stopped watching amid an episode. They associated this finding with decreased attention and immersion in the program. The "conventional storytelling, which has a beginning and an end" was found to be more appealing to viewers in Podara et al. (2019) research than non-linear structure. The linearity of Netflix programmes is disrupted by cliffhangers but is ensured by the provision of subsequent episodes or even the entire season, which encourages binge-watching.

Switching off the screen and getting back to normal

The screen switching off signals the resurgence of thoughts and feelings about the very issues our participants were trying to evade. Castro et al. (2021) assumed that the decline in the levels of happiness, noted in their research, was a result of the return to reality after the immersion in a fictional world. The main feelings reported in the current study were discomfiture brought on by a return to reality, regrets about wasting time and reduced productivity, loss of precious moments, and frustration. As one participant (M., 27 y.o.) says, "to a certain extent you've drawn on what you were seeking, but that lasts for a while". Another participant (M., 32 y.o.) outlines Netflix experience as something that "helps you to raise the procrastination of obligations". If relaxation is what you were seeking or a sense of everyday life, you need to refresh it, it's fleeting". The return to daily routine can be summed up by the following remarks:

When the screen turns off, I feel so much frustration, I've even happened to go out for a walk and think about when I'll be back to continue viewing the episode I was watching. I want to turn off the screen only to fall asleep. (M., 19 y.o.)

When the screen shuts down, I feel like I'm coming into another condition with obligations, meaning I'm saying whew... it's over, you must come back, that's it and I must come back. In fact, viewing is pure choice. (F., 23 y.o.)

For some, switching off the screen is associated with quite negative feelings. As one participant (M., 25 y.o.) indicates, when the screen is turned off, he feels "depressed, meaning you feel a sense of accomplishment when you watch a series in a row [...]. [You think that] you don't have things to do with your life or you do, and you ignore them, so I said depressed". Remorse often accompanies the return to reality after the experience of marathon viewing:

I might start by relaxing which will indeed relax me. But, at a certain point, I may overstep the boundaries of relaxation and consume time out of my day that I won't realize. [...] I'll realize it at the end of my day, when I'll think about what I did today... and say "bravo", you watched this show all day. So, the guilt kicks in right there. (M., 32 y.o.)

Often the relaxation and rest that was anticipated has not been achieved, especially when it is a marathon activity. Indicatively, participants reported "[...] when you sit up until one o'clock at night, it's a bit difficult to rest and the next day to wake up very happy and go to work" (F., 26 y.o.).

Guilt and frustration were the feelings that participants expressed after a binge-watching experience; these feelings are also accompanied by physical fatigue and lack of sleep. In addition, the switching off of the screen also brings about the sense of actuality from which participants were initially trying to escape. As a concluding remark one of the participants (M., 25 y.o.) mentioned:

I think it's a waste of time and I wish I had never started a single series, as I did until I was 19. Unfortunately, I got sick [...] and I watched all the episodes of Picky Blinders and that's where Pandora's box unlocked, and I wish it would close one day. I know [it's like] the cans of worms [that you can't] to put a lid on, that's the worst. I wish no one would watch any series. If only they didn't have the money, we could all do things for ourselves.

Netflix as comfort zone

The present research is one of the few empirical studies in Greece that focuses on the experience of on-demand viewing through the subjective gaze of the user/viewer. Through the narratives provided by the qualitative interviews, participants' experiences highlight the para-social bonds that they develop with the lead characters of the television products. These parasocial bonds are often accompanied by the narrative transportation to the fictional world of the series or film. Meanwhile, the design of Netflix's shows features cliffhangers that activate narrative completion processes, which encourage and reinforce binge-watching behaviours. The behaviour of

binge-watching is defined by the participants as arising by a personal need, compulsive and with no predetermined end. The current research has also indicated that binge watching prevents the full comprehension of the show and triggers additional screens to help grasp the meaning. Furthermore, the article's findings establish Netflix as a comfort zone. This implies a space where the viewer does not feel anxious or stressed, and does not need to exert any effort, or prove their ability or determination. It is also soothing for viewers because watching does not require the production of results or the achievement of goals. However, the black screen (i.e. the ending of viewing) is associated with guilt, frustration and physical fatigue. Individuals describe thoughts regarding the loss of valuable time, reduced productivity, and a painful return to the reality which they were trying to evade.

Another observation that the present research yields is that on-demand viewing is not necessarily a solitary or lonely activity. Rather, it can often strengthen existing bonds or allow participation in the wider community of binge-watchers. However, it also denotes the decline of traditional television production, the flow and structure of which does not seem to satisfy younger viewers. We believe that the present study can shed some light on the transformation of viewing experience, that does not apply only to Netflix but to all on-demand platforms. Even traditional television has adapted to on-demand viewing by creating their own platforms such as web TVs (e.g. Ertflix, Ant1+) (Logotheti, 2017; Podara et al., 2019).

Furthermore, on-demand viewing acts as a further channel that offers a temporary escape from reality. In this sense, it complements the use of smart phones and digital social networking. It seems as if the need to escape from reality is pressing and forms the most critical and urgent desire of contemporary youth.

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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

Το Netflix ως μια ανακουφιστική εμπειρία: Ποιοτική διερεύνηση της υποκειμενικής εμπειρίας παρακολούθησης

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Ποιοτικές συνεντεύξεις

ABSTRACT IN GREEK

Η παρούσα έρευνα αποσκοπεί στη διερεύνηση των κινήτρων παρακολούθησης Netflix και των συναισθημάτων που συνοδεύουν την εμπειρία. Επίσης, καθώς τα κριτήρια ορισμού της λαίμαργης παρακολούθησης είναι ασαφή στη διεθνή βιβλιογραφία, η παρούσα έρευνα αποσκοπεί στην οριοθέτηση της εν λόγω συμπεριφοράς μέσα από τις αφηγήσεις των συμμετεχόντων. Πραγματοποιήθηκαν 26 ημιδομημένες συνεντεύξεις με άτομα 18-35 ετών. Η αίσθηση ελέγχου ως προς το μέσο αναδεικνύεται ως ο πιο κρίσιμος παράγοντας επιλογής του Netflix έναντι άλλων πηγών παρακολούθησης. Ως σημαντικότερα κίνητρα αναδείχθηκαν η απόδραση από την καθημερινότητα, ως ηχητικό χαλί μέσα στο σπίτι, ως υπνωτικό, και ως κοινωνικοποιητικός παράγοντας με απτούς και ψηφιακούς άλλους. Η συχνότητα και η διάρκεια παρακολούθησης ενισχύονται από την ταύτιση με τους ήρωες, η οποία αναδεικνύεται σε συνήθη συνθήκη από τους συμμετέχοντες καθώς περιγράφουν παρακοινωνικές αλληλεπιδράσεις με τους τηλεοπτικούς ήρωες. Η εμπύηση στο τηλεοπτικό πρόγραμμα και η αφηγηματική μεταφορά στον φανταστικό κόσμο αναδεικνύεται ως βασική επιθυμία που ωθεί στην παρακολούθηση και ενθαρρύνει συμπεριφορές λαίμαργης παρακολούθησης. Τα ιδιαίτερα χαρακτηριστικά της πλατφόρμας του Netflix (απουσία διαφημίσεων, κατ' επιλογήν παρακολούθηση, εξατομίκευση των προτεινόμενων τηλεοπτικών προϊόντων) και οι αντιλήψεις σχετικά με την παραδοσιακή τηλεόραση, οδηγούν τους συμμετέχοντες στην επιλογή του Netflix σχεδόν ως αποκλειστικής πηγής τηλεοπτικών προγραμμάτων. Η δομή των προγραμμάτων που περιλαμβάνουν κατά κόρων αγωνιώδη φινάλε ενθαρρύνει τη λαίμαργη παρακολούθηση ως μια απόπειρα ολοκλήρωσης της αφήγησης. Τα ευρήματα της παρούσας έρευνας διευρύνουν την αντίληψη μας σχετικά με τα σύγχρονα ψηφιακά μέσα απόδρασης αλλά και συναισθηματικής πλήρωσης στη χώρα μας, καθώς αποτελεί μια από τις λίγες ελληνικές εμπειρικές έρευνες με επίκεντρο το Netflix. Τα ευρήματα μπορούν επίσης να βρουν εφαρμογή και σε άλλες πλατφόρμες κατ' απαίτηση παρακολούθησης, όπως το Cinobo και το Ertflix.

CORRESPONDENCE

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