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Unraveling Structured Routine: An Exploration of Audiences' Habits in the Post-Network Age

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Over the past decades, audience researchers have strived to investigate the impact of traditional and emerging factors on audiences' television viewing behaviors. With the popularity of streaming services, the way people consume and discuss media content has been fundamentally transformed. However, academic understanding of the extent to which habits impact people's practices of viewing streamed content remains limited. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews and browser extensions from a group of Netflix users in the United States, this study found that participants' viewing habits determine not only when they watch but also how and what they watch. Furthermore, despite having almost unlimited viewing options, many participants still tended to watch programs that they were familiar with or had watched before. The findings highlighted that, even in today's fragmented media environment, participants' streaming viewing practices were repetitive and deeply embedded in the structured routines of their daily lives.

Keywords: audience behavior, viewing habits, streaming service, Netflix, mixed-methods approach

The audience is one of the central elements in media studies. A quick Google search of "audience behavior" yields millions of articles. In fact, it is hard to imagine any form of media research that is not, on a certain level, about audiences (Webster, 1998). To fully assess the media's role in society, researchers need to not only study how people use and respond to the media but also understand the mechanisms behind audiences' media activities (e.g., Ang, 2006; Morley, 2003; Napoli, 2012; Webster, 2018).

In media research, there has been a tendency to explain audience behavior as the result of either structural (e.g., audience availability) or individual factors (e.g., motivation). Similar lines of research, emphasizing the primacy of either macro-level structures or micro-level factors, persist in the literature on media choice (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Webster, 2018). Furthermore, as one of the critical components in

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people's behaviors (Wood & Neal, 2007; Wood & Rünger, 2016), the role of habit in determining television audience behaviors deserves more scholarly attention.

Additionally, since 2005, streaming media platforms and Internet entertainment services have fundamentally altered the ways in which audiences watch, discuss, and consume media content (Lobato, 2018; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Although conventional media (e.g., broadcast, cable, and satellite television) still account for the majority of the time people spend watching TV (Epstein, 2020), a large portion of audiences have been moving away from consuming traditional linear broadcast channels and toward streaming media to gain more control over their media consumption. A recent report shows more than 80% of U.S. households currently subscribe to at least one streaming service (Pattison, 2023), and more Americans now pay for streaming services than for cable or satellite subscriptions (Brantner, 2019). Given the dramatic change in the media landscape, studies on the role of habits in determining audiences' viewing behaviors are ripe for reconsideration and extension (Napoli, 2012).

Moreover, as a leading platform in the streaming industry, Netflix has not only reshaped the way many audiences consume entertainment content but also altered the content production and distribution processes (Rodriguez & Moses, 2022). Nearly 30% of the global streaming video subscriptions are for Netflix, which has captured more than 80% of the market in the United States (Molla, 2019; Pattison, 2023). Despite its impact, scholarly research on the viewing behavior of Netflix users is relatively scarce. To bridge the gap, this study engaged 31 Netflix users in the United States and tracked their weeklong viewing activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a mixed-method approach that integrates data collected through in-depth interviews and browser extensions, the present study aims to further explore the role of habits in shaping audiences' media streaming behaviors in the post-network age.

Literature Review

The Role of Habit in Audience Research

In traditional audience research, agent-based theories and the structural approach are expressions of different paradigms (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Webster, 2018). In the agent-based approach, a person's needs or motivations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), attitudes or beliefs (Ajzen, 2005), mood management (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002), and/or program-type preferences (Prior, 2007) take precedence. As one of the dominant agent-based theories in media studies, the uses and gratifications theory focuses on how audience members choose different types of media to fulfill diverse needs (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Audience scholars applying the uses and gratifications approach examine the relationships between television viewing motivations, attitudes, and behavior and attempt to identify the patterns of interaction among them (Rubin, 1983).

The agent-based approach considers individuals as purposeful actors, while the structural approach emphasizes the importance of macro-level factors (e.g., audience availability, scheduling strategies) as the primary determinants of audience behaviors (e.g., Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2018). Giddens' (1984) structuration theory forms the basis of the structural approach, partly because it emphasizes that structures and agents mutually shape individuals' behaviors, and a fundamental component of structuration

theory is routinization or habit (Copper & Tang, 2009). A significant amount of social psychology research has demonstrated the critical role of habits in influencing people's behaviors (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood & Neal, 2007; Wood & Rünger, 2016). However, media researchers seem to have paid much less attention to the role of habit than psychologists (Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997).

A habit generally refers to an activity that is routinely performed, tends to occur subconsciously, and is usually formed by repeating a specific action in certain circumstances (Bayer & LaRose, 2018; Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2021). Wood and Neal (2007) conceptualized habits as "learned dispositions to repeat past responses" (p. 843). In practice, most media use is ingrained in the rhythms of day-to-day life and thus "has a predictable, recursive quality" (Webster, 2009, p. 222). Among media users, the habit process usually yields a stable and long-term pattern of frequent use (LaRose, 2010). Many psychology studies have suggested that people's daily behaviors are driven partially by intentions and controlled in some part by their habits (e.g., Carden & Wood, 2018; Wood, Quinn, & Kashy, 2002). It has been estimated that more than half of media behaviors are habitual, although some scholars argue that the percentage is even higher (Adams, 2000; Wood et al., 2002).

Habits and Media Consumption

Within audience research, the role of habit can be traced to Blumler's (1979) review of the uses and gratifications approach, in which the author suggested that many audiences are driven more by habitual factors (e.g., the desire to pass time) than by particular goals. Findings across different viewing contexts showed that television audiences' viewing practices are largely determined by their habits and daily routines (LaRose, 2010; Qin, 2023; Rubenking & Bracken, 2018).

Rosenstein and Grant (1997) used Nielsen diary data to compare audiences' weekday and weekend viewing patterns and found that habit played a greater role in the development of audience behavior patterns than previously realized. LaRose (2010) sought to address the ambiguity about habit conceptualization in media research and encouraged uses and gratifications researchers to employ separate measures of media habits. For instance, the Self-Report Habit Index developed by Verplanken and Orbell (2003) has 12 Likert-type items tapping three characteristics of automatic behavior. Irani, Jeffries, and Knight (2010) investigated the television-watching practices of 14 households through diaries and in-home interviews. Their results showed that the audiences' viewing was largely based on the rhythms of individuals' lives, households, and peers (Irani et al., 2010). With respect to digital media, several studies also identified habits as one of the strongest predictors of individuals' streaming viewing practices (Rubenking & Bracken, 2018; Shim, Lim, Jung, & Shin, 2018).

In media research, habits are commonly considered an indication of audience passivity (Rubin, 1983). In the uses and gratifications approach, a habit typically has been operationalized as one of several possible media use motivations, coequal with factors such as passing the time and seeking enjoyment or information (LaRose, 2010; Rubin, 1983). However, such conceptualization and operationalization are not appropriate because habit and motivation have fundamental differences (LaRose, 2010). Specifically, habits are automatic and unconscious mental processes (Wood, 2017), but motivations are conceptually part of

an active selection process, and even ritualized motivation still assumes that active selection (e.g., to pass the time) is taking place (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

Habitual media behaviors may be initiated as actively planned and reasoned choices as the uses and gratification model would have it (LaRose, 2010). However, with repetition, watching television becomes a habit as people unconsciously perform the behavior (Adams, 2000; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997). Given this conceptual contradiction (e.g., habit is passive vs. gratification assumes active), it is reasonable to say that the uses and gratifications approach and other active media selection models are not sufficient to address the role of habits in media consumption (LaRose, 2010).

As opposed to agent-based researchers, structural proponents pay closer attention to habitual behavior (Cooper, 1996; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997). Structural phenomena such as channel loyalty, repeat viewing, and binge-watching behavior all contain a habitual component that impacts the program choice process (Shim et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

Habit Formation: A Psychological Perspective

As noted above, habits have received much less attention in media and communication research than in the psychology field. Social psychology studies have not only focused on the measurement of habits and their consequences but also explored the underlying mechanisms that drive habit formation and change (e.g., Carden & Wood, 2018; Wood & Rünger, 2016). In psychology studies, the term "habit" is often used interchangeably with the term "automaticity" (Wood, 2017), and it also is often related to some types of addiction, such as binge-watching and binge-eating. In general, habits are made up of three major components: Cue, routine, and reward (Duhigg, 2012; LaRose, 2010; Wood, 2017).

A cue refers to any element in the environment (e.g., a location, a time of day, an emotional state, or an immediately preceding action) that potentially can recur as actions are repeated, which plays a critical role in the habit-formation process (Duhigg, 2012; Wood & Neal, 2007). For instance, Shim and colleagues (2018) found that many audience members could not stop themselves from binge-watching when they came across certain cues. LaRose (2010) noted that media structure and social structure provide the contextual cues that trigger media habits, and changing habitual behavior often relies on introducing new contexts that do not cue the behavior (Wood, 2017).

Routine generally refers to the actions that have been performed repeatedly, such as binge-watching on Saturday nights or eating food while watching television (Castro, Rigby, Cabral, & Nisi, 2021; Duhigg, 2012). Additionally, reward refers to the positive reinforcement for the desired behavior, making it more likely that the behavior will be performed again (Wood, 2017; Wood & Rünger, 2016).

Some studies have suggested the reward obtained from media usage plays an important role in the habit-formation process (Carden & Wood, 2018; LaRose, 2010). For instance, an audience member may feel more relaxed after watching a comedy, which then may increase the likelihood of repeating the action next time. That is, the reward audiences obtain from their media usage reinforces their viewing behaviors, which further impact the habit-formation process (LaRose, 2010).

Additionally, a good habit can reduce the mental effort of decision making, which allows people "to maintain complex behavioral patterns without becoming overwhelmed by a huge cognitive task load" (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997, p. 325). In a media context, habits are also closely related to audiences' repeat-viewing behaviors (Cooper, 1996). That is, many audiences prefer watching the same programs multiple times or watching multiple episodes of the same series, partly because repeat viewing the same programs requires much less cognitive load or attention than watching unfamiliar ones (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Wood & Rünger, 2016). Moreover, it is important to note that the technology of streaming platforms may facilitate habitual viewing patterns. For instance, prior studies have shown that features like Netflix's auto-play minimize the users' actions and increase watching (Rodríguez Ortega, 2023; Steiner & Xu, 2020), which may contribute to the processes of habit formation.

In an early study of audience duplication, Cooper (1996) argued that the role that habit plays in reducing cognitive load on audience members may become increasingly important. Such an argument becomes even more true in the contemporary media environment. In the post-network era where audiences have almost unlimited choices of content and ways to get that content, habit and its relevant elements (e.g., familiarity, certainty) may play a more important role in reducing the cognitive load on audiences, which further influences their program choices and viewing patterns.

Viewing Habits in the Post-Network Age

In recent years, various streaming media platforms and Internet entertainment services have fundamentally altered the ways in which audiences consume content. Many audiences have been moving away from broadcast channels toward streaming online content (Lobato, 2018). A Nielsen report (2019a) showed that nearly seven of 10 homes in the United States have a device capable of streaming content, with a similar percentage having access to a streaming service.

The way streaming media platforms present and filter content is fundamentally distinct from the flow of linear broadcasting. It resembles a database more than a program schedule (Lobato, 2018). In an environment with essentially unlimited media choice, audiences are now better positioned to consume a steady diet of their favorite shows and avoid content they find objectionable (Webster, 2018). Online media platforms (e.g., Netflix) provide audiences with a wide variety of content, more interactive and personalized media interfaces, fewer or no advertisements, easy access to on-demand content, and the ability to share content through online channels (McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Despite its pivotal importance, few studies have sought to explore the role of habits in audiences' streaming viewing behaviors. Thus, this study aims to examine the role of habits in audiences' Netflix viewing. The following research question guides this inquiry:

RQ1: To what extent does habit influence audiences' Netflix viewing?

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews with data collected through browser extensions installed by participants on their computers to identify the roles individual and structural factors play in explaining audience members' streaming viewing.

The study had three phases: (1) pretest interviews with 31 Netflix users, (2) installation of the browser extension (i.e., Netflix Viewing Stats) and the submission of screenshots of each participant's weeklong Netflix viewing activities, and (3) posttest interviews with participants to discuss their viewing activities.

Netflix Viewing Stats is a Chrome extension that allows users access to a viewing statistics dashboard that is fully integrated with Netflix's official site.[2] It is important to note that the browser extension captures profile-based viewing activities, including the user's viewing behaviors across all types of devices, including mobiles, computers, and smart TVs. Figure 1 shows example screenshots of the extension.

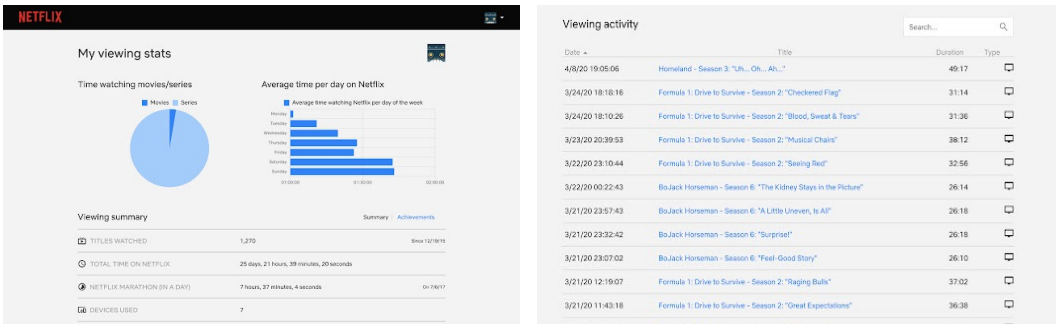

Figure 1. Example screenshots of the extension.

Participant Recruitment

Following Institutional Review Board approval, a two-stage snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants in the United States. An announcement was posted on social media, and a clear description of the research process was provided to prospective participants. In this study, the formal part of each initial interview lasted about 30 minutes and was followed by a 10-minute informal discussion. To provide more flexibility and to reach participants from diverse backgrounds, the interviews were conducted and recorded via the online conferencing tool, Zoom.

This study used open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, allowing the conversations to flow organically (Brennen, 2017). Icebreaker questions were designed to build a rapport with interviewees. Next, based on the proposed research question and previous studies (e.g., Flayelle, Maurage, & Billieux, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020), participants were asked a number of open-ended questions about their Netflix viewing behaviors, such as, "When are you usually available to watch Netflix?"; "Can you describe your typical Netflix viewing experience?"; and "Do you have any routines when you get ready to watch Netflix?" During the interview, the order of the questions was adjusted according to the flow of the conversation. At the end of the interview, detailed instructions were provided to participants on how to install the Netflix Viewing Stats extension on their computers. After this, participants were asked to watch Netflix as usual for a week.

[2] For more details, please visit: https://medium.com/@h_martos/netflix-viewing-stats-unleash-your-data-fa2adb33827c

One week after the phase-one interview, a follow-up e-mail invitation was sent to respondents asking them to upload their screenshots from the Netflix viewing extension. The participants were also invited to a follow-up interview that took place in the following weeks. The follow-up interview was used to further explore participants' particular viewing activities and discuss other themes as they arose. The follow-up interview questions were designed based on the initial interview and each participant's screenshots.

Participant Demographics

Both interview sessions were conducted at the participants' convenience over a four-month period, from August to December 2020. A total of 31 Netflix users participated in this study. The majority of the participants were women (64.5%) between 18 and 44 years of age, who lived in 13 different states. More than half of the participants (54.8%) were White, 19.4% were Asian, 16.1% were African American, 6.4% were Hispanic or Latino, and 3.2% were mixed race. Occupationally, the participants included federal employees, full-time students, stay-at-home parents, health-care professionals, university professors, and engineers. In this study, all participants had been using Netflix since 2015. Appendix A shows the demographics of the participants.

Analytic Strategy

Data from about 35 hours of interviews were analyzed using an inductive approach, often referred to as a "bottom-up" approach to knowing, in which researchers uncover themes based on information from respondents. The inductive approach was chosen because it allows "research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). To differentiate the participants in the study without identifying them by name or gender, a randomized number (e.g., P1, P2) was assigned to each.

Results

As noted in the Methods section, this study included three phases. The findings for each of the study's three phases are presented based on the research question and theme, with a comparison of results from each phase enabling the researcher to gain a better understanding of participants' specific viewing practices. In the first round of interviews, most participants said that they had specific habits or routines when watching Netflix, and several notable themes emerged.

Phase One Results

Theme 1: Netflix Before Bed: An Integral Part of Participants' Sleep Routines

When asked when they usually watched Netflix, more than half of the participants said that they typically watched Netflix in the evening, especially before going to sleep. Such findings are consistent with many prior studies (e.g., Forstmann, 2019), which found that "Netflix before bed" is popular among audience members.

Many interviewees said that they preferred watching Netflix at night not only because they had more time available during this period than in other parts of the day but also because viewing streaming

media had become an integral part of their sleep routine. As P26 said, "Typically, I would say so like every night when I go to bed, I play *The Office* (Daniels, Gervais, & Merchant, 2005–2013), and just like fall asleep with it on." Similarly, P15 said, "I watch Netflix usually later in the evening, sometimes even like really late at night."

Additionally, several participants mentioned that they watched during the evening and night because they wanted to relax after an exhausting day of work, and watching Netflix helped them wind down. As P29 said, "Nighttime is like, I'm done with all my obligations and responsibilities and I'm just relaxing." Another participant (P2) said, "So usually, Netflix happens after dinner or during dinner. So, either I'm eating food or have already ate our meal and just sitting on the couch, kind of wrapping up our day." When asked what type of routine she had when watching Netflix, P26 said, "I think the only routine I would say is, when I watch it before I go to bed because then I'm like, it's just part of like me falling asleep every night but otherwise I think it's pretty sporadic."

Theme 2: Watching While Eating: "Movie Theater Without Leaving Home"

In addition to the theme of watching Netflix at night, another notable theme that emerged in the first round of interviews was the relationship between Netflix viewing, food consumption, and the viewing environment. In the current study, many participants said they watched Netflix while eating and that eating food had become a part of their streaming viewing routine.

When asked what types of routines she used to have before watching Netflix, P1 said, "I do usually make myself a bowl of popcorn before I start watching something." Similarly, P9 said, "If I'm watching during the afternoon. I have to make sure my food is ready. Like I'm about to put it in my mouth right before I turn on the show." P13 echoed this point and said, "I also always have my snack, my bottle of water because I don't have to stand up to every time, or a cup of tea. I like to have some tea, sitting here and watching Netflix." Likewise, P27 said, "I do have a routine. I usually cook before I watch Netflix, and I eat food while I'm watching."

Additionally, many participants said they tried to enhance their viewing experience by creating a comfortable viewing setting—just like watching at a movie theater without leaving home. For instance, P28 said, "If it's more earlier in the day, I do like to cue up the show that I'm going to watch on Netflix. I will have my plate ready and press play when it's time to eat." P12 noted,

> Very often I watch TV and eat at the same time, like I have dinner or, you know, if I'm not having dinner at the table, I may have a snack like some popcorn or some fruit snacks while I'm watching, just to kind of make it an enjoyable experience almost like being in the movie theater without leaving my home.

These conversations showed that eating behaviors have become an integral part of many participants' Netflix viewing activities, which may contribute to a more enjoyable and relaxed viewing experience. In other words, many participants eat food when watching Netflix, not necessarily because they are hungry, but simply because they have come to associate streaming media with eating.

Theme 3: Streaming as Background Noise

Aligned with prior studies (e.g., Steiner & Xu, 2020), this study also identified "streaming as background noise" as an important component in participants' viewing behaviors. Many participants indicated that they often used Netflix for background noise, to fill the silence and to keep them company.

When asked about her typical Netflix viewing experience, P30 said, "It's either like background noise for me, or sometimes I just use it because I got done with these works, so I'm going to chill out to like, watch episodes and waste an hour and a half of my day." Another participant (P12) noted, "I'll just throw on a TV show that I used to watch a bunch of times over and over again, so that I can kind of tune out and just have it in the background."

Several participants said they typically had Netflix on as background noise when they were doing something else. As P24 said, "Often, I'll be listening to it passively in the background while I do something else." P26 echoed this point: "If I'm cleaning the house or cooking food, I like to have TV shows in the background." When asked about her experience with having Netflix as background noise, P22 said, "I think usually that's on the weekends. If I'm doing chores, I'll just throw something on, and it doesn't even really matter what it is, because I just want like background music or background noise."

When describing their viewing routines, some participants said they often had Netflix on in the background to fill the silence or for company. One participant said, "Because I was working from home, I needed that noise in the background quite a lot." Another participant echoed this point and said,

> I did not watch TV often before. And because we're kind of forced to stay home, it's kind of like one of the easiest things that you could just do . . . just so you can hear noise and feel like you're around people. I think, we're just doing this out of habit because it's just there.

Additionally, the technology of Netflix facilitates such a habitual viewing pattern. For instance, a few participants also mentioned Netflix's auto-play function (Steiner & Xu, 2020), which allows the next episode in a series to be played automatically. One participant (P17) described his experience with the auto-play function in detail: "It just goes, it counts down and gives you the five-second warnings, and usually I can't even grab my remote before the next episode starts. So, this type of function just encourages you to watch more."

Phase Two Results

The primary purpose of the second phase of the study was to ascertain whether participants' actual viewing behaviors matched what they said they did. To analyze the participants' Netflix viewing activities, the researcher first downloaded the screenshots submitted by participants and then input the data into an Excel spreadsheet with the following information: The title of the show or series, the episode title, the date and time participants began watching a show, and the amount of time they spent watching.

The researcher calculated the amount of time participants spent viewing by first identifying a viewing session—operationalized as the length of time a participant spent watching Netflix in one sitting. In this study, some viewing sessions only included a single episode, and other sessions included multiple

episodes from the same or different series. Because of the way the browser extension captures participants' viewing activities, for a single episode or the last episode in a sitting, the study assumed that the participant watched the whole episode and used the duration of the episode as a proxy measure of time spent viewing.

This study identified 268 viewing sessions: Of these, 118 were single-episode sessions, and 150 were multiple-episode sessions. Further analysis showed that 54% of multiple-episode viewing sessions (*n* = 81) were binge-watching sessions—watching at least three episodes of the same series in one sitting (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). This is somehow consistent with prior studies, which found that 70% of Americans engage in binge-watching television shows (Gitnux, 2023).

On average, each binge-watching session lasted 124 minutes. Two participants engaged in a significant number of binge-watching sessions (P23, 10 sessions; P25, 15 sessions); this could be partially because they were compelled to stay home during the pandemic and had more time available to watch during the interview periods.

Daypart Analysis

In the media industry, a daypart is a core parameter of program scheduling and advertising strategy (Cooper, 1996; Eastman & Ferguson, 2012). Television programmers use various techniques to schedule programs and to match those programs with viewers' daily routines and activities (Guo & Sun, 2020; Voorveld & Viswanathan, 2015). For example, morning news programs are often formatted in small segments because audience members are engaged in other activities like getting ready for work, eating breakfast, and getting children off to school (Battaglio, 2012). As such, their attention is likely divided between these activities and watching television. The current study used the traditional television dayparts to analyze whether participants' Netflix viewing followed those patterns. The dayparts are the following: Morning news (5 a.m. to 9 a.m.), morning (9 a.m. to 12 p.m.), daytime (12 p.m. to 3 p.m.,), early fringe (3 p.m. to 5 p.m.), early news (5 p.m. to 7 p.m.), access (7 p.m. to 8 p.m.), prime time (8 p.m. to 11 p.m.), late news (11 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.), late fringe (11:30 p.m. to 1 a.m.), and overnight (1 a.m. to 5 a.m., all Eastern time; e.g., Barrett, 1999; Eastman & Ferguson, 2012).

Program Type Analysis

Further analysis showed that this group of participants watched 85 unique shows during the research period; including 21 feature films, 20 general dramas, 18 documentaries, 10 reality shows, seven situation comedies, three action-adventure programs, two science-fiction shows, two comedy variety shows, one general variety show, and one talk show. *Schitt's Creek* (E. Levy & D. Levy, 2015–2020) was the most popular (seven participants watched 69 unique episodes), followed by *The Office* (Daniels et al., 2005–2013) (three participants watched different 16 episodes).

Phase One and Phase Two Comparison

In the initial interviews, many participants said they typically watched Netflix in the evening, especially before going to sleep. The analysis of participants' actual viewing behavior was consistent with what they reported. This group of participants watched 376.55 hours of Netflix during the research period, which was from August to December 2020. Prime time had the heaviest viewing, with 33.3% of total viewing done in this period (Table 1). Additionally, just more than half of the total viewing time (54.1%) occurred between 7 p.m. and 1 a.m. The results also showed that Netflix viewing peaked during prime time every day of the week (Table 2).

Table 1. Total Viewing Time by Daypart.

Daypart	From	To	Total Viewing Time (in hours)	Viewing Time (percentage)	Average Viewing Time per Person (in hours)
Morning news	5:00 a.m.	9:00 a.m.	2.42	0.6%	0.08
Morning	9:00 a.m.	12:00 p.m.	19.90	5.3%	0.64
Daytime	12:00 p.m.	3:00 p.m.	43.85	11.6%	1.41
Early fringe	3:00 p.m.	5:00 p.m.	42.73	11.3%	1.38
Early news	5:00 p.m.	7:00 p.m.	46.15	12.3%	1.49
Access	7:00 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	27.83	7.4%	0.90
Prime time	8:00 p.m.	11:00 p.m.	125.3	33.3%	4.04
Late news	11:00 p.m.	11:30 p.m.	16.80	4.5%	0.54
Late fringe	11:30 p.m.	1:00 a.m.	33.50	8.9%	1.08
Overnight	1:00 a.m.	5:00 a.m.	18.07	4.8%	0.58
	Total		376.55	100%	12.15

Table 2. Total Viewing Time (in hours) by Daypart and Day of the Week.

Daypart	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Morning news	0	0.48	0	1.12	0	0	0.82	2.42
Morning	2.38	1.1	1.07	3.15	1.67	1.07	9.47	19.90
Daytime	4.53	10.87	5.68	3.7	4.18	8.28	6.6	43.85
Early fringe	5.22	7.22	9.33	5.13	7.78	3.85	4.2	42.73
Early news	3.97	5.27	10.22	7.15	7.03	7.15	5.37	46.15
Access	2.27	4.1	6.68	4.55	3.65	5.32	1.27	27.83
Prime time	19.57	14.15	16.65	20.4	20.9	22.83	10.8	125.3
Late news	1.77	3.37	1.35	1.35	2.65	2.13	4.18	16.80
Late fringe	4.47	6.53	4.25	4.5	5.35	3.87	4.53	33.50
Overnight	6.02	1.78	0.78	2.75	1.45	3.78	1.5	18.07
Total	50.18	54.87	56.02	53.8	54.67	58.28	48.73	376.55

Additionally, the results showed that there were no significant fluctuations in total viewing time in terms of the day of the week. As shown in Table 3, Saturday had the heaviest viewing (1.88 hours per person), followed by Wednesday (1.81 hours), Tuesday (1.77 hours), Friday (1.76 hours), Thursday (1.74 hours), Monday (1.62 hours), and Sunday (1.57 hours). That is, the length of time the participants watched Netflix did not differ too much by day of the week.

Table 3. Total Viewing Time by Day of the Week.

Day of the Week	Total Viewing Time (in hours)	Viewing Length (percentage)	Average Viewing Time per Person (in hours)
Monday	50.18	13.3%	1.62
Tuesday	54.87	14.6%	1.77
Wednesday	56.02	14.9%	1.81
Thursday	53.80	14.3%	1.74
Friday	54.67	14.5%	1.76
Saturday	58.28	15.5%	1.88
Sunday	48.73	12.9%	1.57
Total	376.55	100%	12.15

Phase Three Results

Theme 1: Repeat Viewing

Repeat viewing refers to the viewing behavior in which audiences watch the same programs multiple times or watch multiple episodes of the same series (Cooper, 1996). Aligned with many prior audience studies, the second round of interviews showed that "repeat viewing" on Netflix was common among this group of participants. When describing how and why they watched specific shows, many participants said that they preferred watching the same program multiple times or watching multiple episodes of the same series, partly because this type of viewing required much less attention than watching unfamiliar programs.

For instance, when asked why the show *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz & Savage, 2007–2012) *was chosen*, P19 said, "It is one of the shows that I love to watch over and over again." Additionally, when asked why he watched *The Office* (Daniels et al., 2005–2013), P17 said he had watched the same episodes of the series many times, especially before going to sleep. He explained,

> I've seen *The Office*, like probably seven times through seasons . . . I just watched that [*The Office*] when I was going to bed. When I'm going to bed, I like to watch things that I've already watched, because then I'm not like too involved in it, and then it keeps me up.

When asked what they planned to watch after they finished watching a season, several participants said that they would rewatch their favorite series or movies when they did not know what to watch next,

even though they had watched the show many times. For example, when asked what he planned to watch after finishing the show *Schitt's Creek* (E. Levy & D. Levy, 2015–2020), P17 said,

> I'll turn on *The Office*. I have binge-watched it a long time ago, and it's one of my favorite shows. So, after I finished watching *Schitt's Creek*, because I don't have anything, a new show to binge-watch right now. I'll turn on *The Office* and watch that until I have a new show to watch.

Furthermore, when asked why they watched particular programs, several participants could not recall having watched the programs. For instance, some participants said they could not remember the content of the shows, and they explained that it was probably the time when they fell asleep. When asked about the reasons for watching multiple episodes of the same series late at night, P15 said, "I play it when I go to bed, and I don't pay attention to it at all, or just have it on for like noise. So honestly, it's probably playing when I go to bed for like another couple of hours, but most of the time, I'm just asleep while it's playing." Similarly, when asked about the reasons for watching three episodes of *Chappelle's Show* (Chappelle, Brennan, & Armour, 2003–2006) at midnight, P7 said, "I just kind of throw it on before I go to bed. So really, I probably watched like two of those episodes and then fell asleep and Netflix does the auto-play thing."

While several participants said they repeat viewed the same programs because it required less attention than watching unfamiliar ones, other reasons were also cited. For example, several participants said they would rewatch previous seasons of a show to refamiliarize themselves with the storylines and characters before the new season began. When asked why the person decided to watch the previous season of *Ozarks* (Dubuque & Williams, 2017–2020), P15 said,

> Me and my girlfriend, we started rewatching *Ozarks* to get ready for the new season that comes out in March. Because it has been a year since we watched the last season of *Ozarks*. And so, it has been a while since the new season comes out, so you kind of forget a lot.

Discussion

By employing a mixed-method approach that combined data collected via in-depth interviews and browser extensions, this study explored the role of habits in audiences' Netflix viewing behaviors. The study advances existing audience scholarship by revisiting the role of habit and providing new insights about its role in determining viewers' streaming behaviors.

In line with traditional television audience research (e.g., LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Webster, 2009), the current study found that participants' viewing habits determine not only when they watched but also how they watched and what they watched. It is worth noting that viewers may engage in a routine as an active way to combat stress or alleviate boredom, serving goal-directed purposes. However, conversations with participants revealed that the predominant nature of their viewing behaviors leaned toward habit-based patterns, involving unconscious behaviors, rather than ritualized motivations (Rubin,

1983). The study's findings underscore that participants' Netflix viewing practices were repetitive and deeply embedded in the structured routines of their day-to-day lives.

Among the themes identified in the first round of interviews, Netflix before bed was the most frequently mentioned routine among this group of participants. The analysis of their actual viewing behaviors supported this. The results showed that prime time remained the most popular daypart, and participants' Netflix viewing peaked during this time every day of the week.

Furthermore, in line with prior studies, the study found eating food had become a part of many participants' Netflix viewing routines. This viewing behavior mimicked sitting in front of the TV with dinner from the early days of TV. For instance, in the late 1990s, Nielsen research found that about two-thirds of Americans ate dinner in front of the TV (Beresini, 2015). This study showed that, although streaming had become the predominant way audiences consumed television, some traditional television viewing habits among audience members still held true.

Additionally, consistent with prior studies (e.g., LaRose, 2010), repeat viewing was common among this group of participants. Several earlier studies showed that the number of options available was a significant predictor of audiences' repeat-viewing behaviors (Barwise, 1986; Cooper, 1996), with repeat-viewing levels decreasing as the number of options available to viewers increased (Webster & Newton, 1988). However, the present study did not support this.

Instead of a negative relationship between the number of options available and repeat-viewing levels, this study found that, even in a high-choice media environment, some participants still tended to watch programs that they were familiar with or had watched before, partly because the sheer number of viewing options could be overwhelming. In the first round of interviews, several participants said they would rewatch the same series or movies if they did not know what to watch next. In the second round of interviews, some participants also said they watched the same programs again or watched multiple episodes of the same series, primarily because watching familiar programs helped them relax and required less attention and risk than watching unfamiliar ones.

Such results are consistent with several recent studies by Nielsen (2019b, 2023). For instance, a Nielsen report showed that the five most-watched programs on Netflix during the last three months of 2019 were classic programs that began on broadcast networks (e.g., NBC, CBS, and ABC) (Bauder, 2020). Another report revealed that, even with millions of choices on streaming platforms, today's audiences still turn to classic TV programs, emphasizing the importance of "the comfort of the classics" in audiences' viewing choices (Nielsen, 2023, para. 16).

The current study suggests that even with a vast array of content choices, participants tended to gravitate toward familiar shows, underscoring the enduring influence of established habits on content consumption. This pattern may also be pivotal to Netflix's ability to retain users in between new seasons. For instance, recognizing the prevalence of repeated viewing may help Netflix in content production and inform its recommendation algorithms (Chun, 2016). The current study found that many participants did not necessarily prefer new content during hiatus periods; some even expressed a preference for delving into

background stories to understand program production. Netflix could consider more habitual components (e.g., repeat viewing) when refining recommendation algorithms, promoting seasons that viewers have watched before, and recommending show backstories during hiatus periods to retain users.

Moreover, Netflix is known for its commercial-free model. However, following a significant loss of subscribers and slowed revenue growth in the first quarter of 2022 (Maas, 2022), Netflix introduced ad-supported plans with a lower price for its subscribers.[3] Although the long-term effects of how such structural shifts impact audiences' habitual viewing practices and the streaming industry remain ambiguous, advertisers and platforms can benefit from understanding the habitual nature of streaming, leveraging insights into when and where ads are most effective.

Overall, this study found that many participants consumed certain streaming content out of habit rather than making active choices. Participants enjoyed the comfort of the familiar, and the reward they received from watching streaming content reinforced their behaviors, which further impacted the habit-formation process. As many audience scholars have pointed out (LaRose, 2010; Webster, 2018), in an increasingly complex media environment, viewers' habits and familiarity with content might become more important in helping them decide what to watch.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides fresh insights into understanding the habits in determining audiences' Netflix behaviors, there are several limitations and future directions that need to be considered. First and foremost, this study collected data in mid-to-late 2020, a period during which many participants were under quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on audiences' daily lives, including their emotional states (e.g., feelings of uncertainty) and entertainment activities, and participants may have had unique daily routines and viewing habits during this period.

As Johnson and Dempsey (2020) indicated, "Television provided a sanctuary during lockdown for those seeking familiar and 'safe' content which offered an escape from the worrying realities of the pandemic" (para. 4). In other words, comfort or habitual factors may have been more important in influencing participants' viewing behaviors during the pandemic than they otherwise would have been. Furthermore, anxiety reduction may play an important role in determining participants' routines and viewing habits. For instance, affect theory suggests that optimal mental health involves maximizing positive affect and minimizing negative affect (Gibbs, 2011). It is possible that the participants in this study tended to engage in streaming viewing to minimize negative affect or emotions. Future research could employ affect theory and the idea of intimate publics to delve deeper into this aspect, enhancing our comprehension of audiences' media usage during and after the pandemic age.

Second, the study only focuses on Netflix, and the rationale for doing so is solid—Netflix remains the dominant streaming service. However, viewers of other streaming platforms may have different viewing habits. Future studies could explore whether and how audiences' streaming viewing behaviors differ across

[3] https://help.netflix.com/en/node/126831

platforms. Additionally, considering the study was conducted during a special period and only involved a small group of participants, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Future studies could consider drawing a sizeable and representative sample to investigate how viewers' engagement in specific activities, such as binge-watching and repeat viewing, vary based on demographics and audience availability.

To summarize, the current study underscores the continuing impact of habits in determining participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. The results showed that, in today's fragmented media environment, audiences' viewing behaviors (e.g., when, how, and what to watch) are still embedded in the rhythms of their daily lives and influenced by their habits. Future research should continue this line of inquiry. In today's evolving media landscape, continuing to explore the role of both traditional and emerging determinants in television audience behaviors remains a worthwhile scholarly pursuit.

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Appendix A. Participant Demographics.

	Age (years)	Gender	Education	Race	Area
1	18–24	F	Bachelor	White	Illinois
2	25–34	F	Graduate	White	Georgia
3	35–44	F	Graduate	African American	Michigan
4	35–44	F	Graduate	Asian	Arizona
5	25–34	F	Graduate	White	Georgia
6	35–44	M	Graduate	White	Michigan
7	25–34	F	Bachelor	White	California
8	35–44	F	Graduate	White	Ohio
9	25–34	F	Some college	Mixed race	Nevada
10	25–34	F	Bachelor	African American	New York
11	18–24	M	Bachelor	White	Missouri
12	35–44	F	Graduate	African American	New York
13	25–34	F	Graduate	Hispanic	California
14	25–34	M	Graduate	Hispanic	Arizona
15	18–24	M	Bachelor	Asian	Arizona
16	25–34	F	Bachelor	White	Missouri
17	18–24	M	Some college	White	Wisconsin
18	18–24	F	Bachelor	White	Indiana
19	18–24	F	Bachelor	White	Missouri
20	25–34	M	Graduate	White	Arizona
21	25–34	M	Graduate	Asian	Arizona
22	25–34	F	Bachelor	Asian	California
23	18–24	M	Graduate	Asian	Arizona
24	25–34	M	Bachelor	White	Kansas
25	35–44	F	Graduate	African American	New York
26	18–24	F	Bachelor	White	Missouri
27	25–34	F	Graduate	Asian	Arizona
28	18–24	F	High school	White	Indiana
29	25–34	M	Bachelor	White	Georgia
30	35–44	F	Graduate	African American	Ohio
31	25–34	M	Bachelor	White	Arkansas