**Unraveling Structured Routine:**

**An Exploration of Audiences’ Habits in the Post-Network Age**

Abstract

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, which are commonly overlooked in audience research, impact people’s streaming viewing remains limited. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews and through browser extensions, this study found that participants’ viewing habits determine not only when they watch but also how and what they watch. Further, 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’ Netflix viewing practices were repetitive and deeply embedded in the structured routines of their daily lives.

*Keywords*: Audience Behavior; Television Research; Viewing Habits; Streaming Service; Netflix

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**Introduction**

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 not only need to study how people use and respond to the media, but also need to understand the mechanisms behind audiences’ media activities (e.g., Cooper, 1996; LaRose, 2010; Napoli, 2012; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2014).

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, personality). Similar lines of research, emphasizing the primacy of either macro-level structures or micro-level factors, persist in the literature on media choice (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Webster, 2009, 2014). However, as one of the critical component in people’s behaviors (e.g., Knowlton et al., 1996; Wood & Neal, 2007; Wood & Rünger, 2016; Verplanken, 2006; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003), habit has received much less attention in contemporary television audience research.

Additionally, since 2005, streaming media platforms and internet entertainment services (e.g., Netflix, Hulu) 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 (Rainie, 2021). 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, the roles of habits in determining audiences’ viewing behaviors are ripe for reconsideration, extension, and innovation (Napoli, 2012).

Moreover, as a leading platform in the streaming industry, Netflix not only has reshaped the way many audiences consume entertainment content, but also altered the content production and distribution processes (Rodriguez & Moses, 2022). Nearly 30% of 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. Through a mixed-method approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews with data collected through browser extensions, the current study aims to 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 (e.g., uses and gratifications theory) and the structural approach are expressions of different paradigms (e.g., Adams, 1998; Barrett et al., 2023; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Webster, 2018). 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, the exclusivity of and access to content) as the primary determinants of audience behaviors (e.g., Taneja et al, 2012; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011; Webster et al., 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; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). A significant amount of social psychology research has demonstrated the critical role of habits in influencing people’s behaviors (e.g., Knowlton et al., 1996; Wood & Neal, 2007; Wood & Rünger, 2016; Verplanken, 2006; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). However, media researchers have paid much less attention to the role of habit than psychologists (e.g., Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Webster, 1998).

A habit generally refers to an activity that is routinely performed, tends to occur subconsciously and which usually is formed by repeating a specific action in certain circumstances (Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; Wood, 2019). 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), while it is surprising that most audience research has not considered the role of habit. Among media users, the habit process usually yields a stable and long-term pattern of frequent use (LaRose, 2010; Goh et al., 2019). For example, we check email upon arrival at work, watch television after getting home, and open social media when we have some free time. Many psychology studies have suggested that people’s daily behaviors are driven partially by intentions and controlled in some part by their habits (Carden & Wood, 2018; Wood et al., 2002). It has been estimated that over half of media behaviors are habitual, although some scholars argue the percentage is even higher (e.g., 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 were 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 (Cooper, 1996; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021).

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 (SRHI) developed by Verplanken and Orbell (2003) has 12 Likert-type items tapping three characteristics of automatic behavior.[[1]](#footnote-1) Irani et al. (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. With respect to digital media, several studies also identified habits as one of the strongest predictors of individuals’ streaming viewing practices (e.g., Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Shim et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

In media research, habits are commonly considered an indication of audience passivity (Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Step, 2000). ​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, seeking enjoyment or information (e.g., Rubin, 1983; LaRose, 2010). However, such conceptualization and operationalization are not appropriate because habit and motivation have fundamental differences​. Specifically, habits are automatic and unconscious mental processes (LaRose, 2010; 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 (Katz et al, 1974; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Rubin & Step, 2000; 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 & Eastin, 2004). 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 (e.g., LaRose & Eastin, 2004; LaRose, 2010).

As opposed to agent-based researchers, structural proponents pay closer attention to habitual behavior (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Stone & Stone, 1990). Structural phenomena such as channel loyalty, repeat viewing, and emerging binge-watching behavior all contain a habitual component which impacts the program choice process (Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Shim et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster & Wang, 1992).

**Habit Formation from 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, 2017; 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 (e.g., LaRose et al., 2003; Seo & Ray, 2019), such as binge-watching (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020) and binge-eating (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991). In general, habits are made up of three major components: cue, routine, and reward (e.g., Duhigg, 2012; LaRose, 2010; Wood, 2017; Wood & Neal, 2007).

A cue refers to any element in the environment (e.g., a location, a time of day, an emotional state, a person, 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; Shim et al., 2018; Wood & Neal, 2007). For instance, Shim et al. (2018) found that many audience members could not stop themselves from binge-watching when they came cross certain cues (e.g., a technology-driven environment or digital devices). 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 (e.g., 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 et al., 2021; Duhigg, 2012; LaRose, 2010). Additionally, reward refers to the positive reinforcement for the desired behavior, making it more likely the behavior will be performed again (Wood, 2017; Wood & Rünger, 2016).

Some studies have suggested the reward obtained from media usage (e.g., entertainment, information) plays an important role in the habit formation process (e.g., LaRose, 2010; Limayem et al., 2007). 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 obtained from their media usage reinforced their viewing behaviors, which further impacted the habit formation process (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; LaRose, 2010).

Further, 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; Webster & Wang, 1992). That is, many audiences prefer watching the same programs multiple times or watching multiple episode 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; Webster & Wang, 1992; Wood & Rünger, 2016).

In an early study of audience duplication, Cooper (1996) argued that the role that habit play in reducing cognitive load on the 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 (Lotz, 2014; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021), 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**

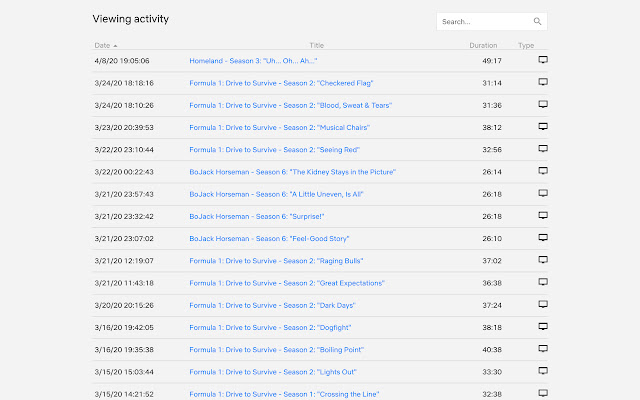
In recent years, various streaming media platforms and Internet entertainment services (e.g., Netflix and Hulu) have fundamentally altered the ways in which audiences consume content. Audiences have been moving away from broadcast channels toward streaming online content to gain more control over their media consumption (Raine, 2017; Schweidel & Moe, 2016). A Nielsen report showed that nearly seven out of 10 homes in the United States have a device capable of streaming content, with a similar percentage having access to a streaming service (Nielsen, 2019a).

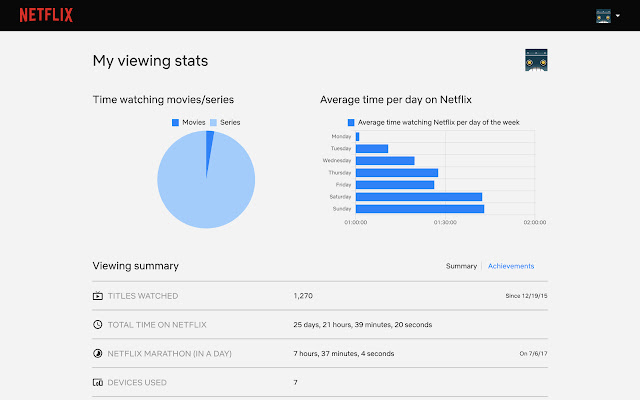
The way streaming media platforms present and filter content is fundamentally distinct from the flow of linear broadcasting. It resembles a database more than a program schedule (Lobato, 2018). In an environment with essentially unlimited media choice, audiences are now better positioned to consume a 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 questions guide 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) pre-test 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 (e.g., the amount of time they spent on Netflix, the specific shows they watched), and (3) post-test interviews with participants to discuss their viewing activities.

 It is worth noting that 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]](#footnote-2) The extension captures profile-based viewing activities, including the user’s viewing behaviors across all types of devices. Figure 1 shows example screenshots of the extension.

**Figure 1.** Example Screenshots of the Extension

**Participant Recruitment**

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval,[[3]](#footnote-3) a two-stage snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants in the United States, both male and female. 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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This study used open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, allowing the conversations to flow organically (Brennen, 2013; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Rabionet, 2011). Icebreaker questions were designed to build a rapport with interviewees. Next, based on the proposed research questions and previous studies (e.g., Flayelle et al., 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?”, “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 installation, participants were asked to watch Netflix as usual for a week.

One week after the phase-one interview, a follow-up email invitation was sent to respondents asking them to upload their screenshots from the Netflix viewing extension. Along with the email, participants were 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 screenshot.

**Participant Demographics**

Both interview sessions were conducted at participants’ convenience over a four-month period, August to December 2020. A total of 31 Netflix users participated in this study. The majority of participants were women (64.5%) between 18 and 44 years old who lived in 13 different states. Most participants had at least a bachelor’s degree, and some had graduate degrees. Over half of the participants were White, nearly 20% were Asian, 16.1% were African American, 6.4% were Hispanic or Latino, and 3.2% were mixed race. Occupationally, participants included federal employees, full-time students, housewives, health care professionals, university professors, and engineers. In this study, most participants had been using Netflix since 2015.

**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 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). 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 method section, this study included three phases. The findings for each of the study’s three phases are presented by research question and theme with a comparison of results from each phase allowing the researcher to have a better understanding of participants’ specific viewing practices. In the first round of interviews, most participants said that they have specific habits or routines when watching Netflix, and several notable themes emerged.

**Phase 1 Results**

***Theme 1: Netflix before bed: An integral part of participants’ sleep routines***

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

Many interviewees said that they preferred watching Netflix at night not only because they have more time available during this period than in other parts of the day, but also because viewing streaming media has 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, and just like fall asleep with it on so I do that every single night, unless I’m traveling*.” Similarly, P15 said, “*I watch Netflix usually later in the evening, sometimes even like really late at night*.”

In addition, several participants mentioned that they watch during the evening and night because they want to relax after an exhausting day of work, and watching Netflix helps them wind down. As P29 said, “*night time 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 has when watching Netflix, P26 said that “*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 watching Netflix at night, another notable theme that emerged in the first round of interviews is the relationship between Netflix viewing, food consumption, and the viewing environment. In the current study, many participants said they watch Netflix while eating, and eating food has become a part of their streaming viewing routines.

When asked what types of routines she has before watching Netflix, P1 said, “*I do usually make myself a bowl of popcorn before I start watching something*.” Similarly, P9said,“*Whenever I’m watching before I go to sleep. I have to make sure, like all the lights are off, I’m in my pajamas and I’m tucked into bed. Then I’m ready for that and then 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 many prior audience studies (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020), this study identified “streaming as background noise” as an important component in participants’ viewing behaviors. Many participants indicated that they often use Netflix for background noise, to fill the silence, and to keep them company.

When asked about her typical Netflix viewing experience, P30 said, “*I definitely would say that 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 just like hanging out*.” Another participant (P12) noted, “*I’ll just throw on a TV show that I used to watching 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 have Netflix as background noise when they are doing something else (e.g., cooking, cleaning). 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 have 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*.”

**Phase Two Results**

The primary purpose of the second phase of the study was to ascertain whether participants’ actual viewing behaviors match what they said they do. 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 (i.e., Netflix Viewing Stats) captures participants’ viewing activities, for a single episode or for the last episode in a sitting, the study assumes 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: 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 (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). On average, each binge-watching session lasted 124 minutes.

***Daypart Analysis***

In the media industry, a daypart is a core parameter of program scheduling and advertising strategy (e.g., Cooper, 1993; Webster, 2014). Television programmers use various techniques to schedule programs and to match those programs with viewers’ daily routines and activities (Beyers, 2004; Eastman & Ferguson, 2006). The current study used the traditional television dayparts to analyze whether participants’ Netflix viewing followed those patterns. The dayparts are: 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; Cooper, 1993; Eastman & Ferguson, 2006).

***Phase 1 and Phase 2 Comparison***

In the initial interviews, many participants said they typically watch Netflix in the evening, especially before going to sleep. The analysis of participants’ actual viewing behavior is consistent with what they reported. This group of participants watched 376.55 hours of Netflix during the research period, which was August to December 2020. Prime time (8 to 11 p.m.) had the heaviest viewing, with 33.3% of total viewing done in this period (Table 1). Additionally, just over 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).

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 participants watched Netflix did not differ too much by day of the week. This could partly be because of the pandemic when many participants stayed at home and were more available to watch television than they had been.

**Table 1**. Total viewing time by daypart.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Daypart | From | To | Total Viewing Time (in hours) | | Viewing Time (percent) | | Average Viewing Time per person (in hours) |
| Morning News | 5:00 AM | 9:00 AM | 2.42 | | 0.6% | | 0.08 |
| Morning | 9:00 AM | 12:00 PM | 19.90 | | 5.3% | | 0.64 |
| Daytime | 12:00 PM | 3:00 PM | 43.85 | | 11.6% | | 1.41 |
| Early Fringe | 3:00 PM | 5:00 PM | 42.73 | | 11.3% | | 1.38 |
| Early News | 5:00 PM | 7:00 PM | 46.15 | | 12.3% | | 1.49 |
| Access | 7:00 PM | 8:00 PM | 27.83 | | 7.4% | | 0.90 |
| Prime Time | 8:00 PM | 11:00 PM | 125.3 | | 33.3% | | 4.04 |
| Late News | 11:00 PM | 11:30 PM | 16.80 | | 4.5% | | 0.54 |
| Late Fringe | 11:30 PM | 1:00 AM | 33.50 | | 8.9% | | 1.08 |
| Overnight | 1:00 AM | 5:00 AM | 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 | From | To | Mon | | Tues | | Wed | | Thur. | | Fri | | Sat | | Sun | | Total | |
| Morning News | 5:00 AM | 9:00 AM | 0.00 | | 0.48 | | 0.00 | | 1.12 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | 0.82 | | 2.42 | |
| Morning | 9:00 AM | 12:00 PM | 2.38 | | 1.10 | | 1.07 | | 3.15 | | 1.67 | | 1.07 | | 9.47 | | 19.90 | |
| Daytime | 12:00 PM | 3:00 PM | 4.53 | | 10.87 | | 5.68 | | 3.70 | | 4.18 | | 8.28 | | 6.60 | | 43.85 | |
| Early Fringe | 3:00 PM | 5:00 PM | 5.22 | | 7.22 | | 9.33 | | 5.13 | | 7.78 | | 3.85 | | 4.20 | | 42.73 | |
| Early News | 5:00 PM | 7:00 PM | 3.97 | | 5.27 | | 10.22 | | 7.15 | | 7.03 | | 7.15 | | 5.37 | | 46.15 | |
| Access | 7:00 PM | 8:00 PM | 2.27 | | 4.10 | | 6.68 | | 4.55 | | 3.65 | | 5.32 | | 1.27 | | 27.83 | |
| Prime Time | 8:00 PM | 11:00 PM | 19.57 | | 14.15 | | 16.65 | | 20.40 | | 20.90 | | 22.83 | | 10.80 | | 125.30 | |
| Late News | 11:00 PM | 11:30 PM | 1.77 | | 3.37 | | 1.35 | | 1.35 | | 2.65 | | 2.13 | | 4.18 | | 16.80 | |
| Late Fringe | 11:30 PM | 1:00 AM | 4.47 | | 6.53 | | 4.25 | | 4.50 | | 5.35 | | 3.87 | | 4.53 | | 33.50 | |
| Overnight | 1:00 AM | 5:00 AM | 6.02 | | 1.78 | | 0.78 | | 2.75 | | 1.45 | | 3.78 | | 1.50 | | 18.07 | |
| Total | | | | 50.18 | | 54.87 | | 56.02 | | 53.80 | | 54.67 | | 58.28 | | 48.73 | | 376.55 | |

**Table 3.** Total viewing time by day of the week.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Day of the week | Total Viewing Time (in hours) | Viewing Length (percent) | 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 3 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 (Webster & Wang, 1992).Aligned with many prior audience studies (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Webster & Wang, 1992; Wood & Rünger, 2016), the sound 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 requires much less attention than watching unfamiliar programs.

For instance, when asked why he watched *The Office*, P17 said he had watched the same episodes of *The Office* many times,especially before going to sleep. P17 said,“*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.*” Similarly, when asked why the person chose the show *Gossip Girl*, P19 said, “*it is one of the shows that I love to watch over and over again.*”

When asked what they plan to watch after they finish watching a season, several participants said that they will re-watch their favorite series or movies (e.g., *The Office* and *Friends*) when they do not know what to watch next, even though they have watched the show many times. For example, when asked what he plans to watch after finishing the show *Schitt’s Creek*, 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*.”

Further, when asked why they watched particular programs, several participants could not recall having watched the programs. For instance, some participants (e.g., P7, P15) 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 why the person watched 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 why the person watched three episodes of *Chappelle’s Show* 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 requires less attention than watching unfamiliar ones, there were other reasons that also were identified. For example, several participants said they would re-watch 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, P15 said, “*me and my girlfriend, we started re-watching 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*.” P10 also said she often went back to watch past seasons of a show in order to catch up with the storylines of the current season.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

By employing a mixed-method approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews and through 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 fresh insights about its role in determining viewers’ streaming behaviors.

In line with traditional television audience research (e.g., Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; LaRose, 2010; Webster et al., 2006), the findings from the current study showed that participants’ viewing habits determine not only when they watch, but also how they watched and what they watch (e.g., program selection). Contrary to the assumptions of agent-based theorists that individuals are goal-directed and rational (e.g., Katz, 1974; Rubin, 1983), the study’s findings highlighted that participants’ Netflix viewing practices were repetitive and deeply embedded in the structured routines of their day-to-day lives.

Among these 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 (8-11 p.m., ET) remained the most popular daypart, and participants’ Netflix viewing peaked during this time every day of the week. This could be because most participants were available and had fewer responsibilities during these periods, and watching Netflix has become an integral part of many participants’ sleep routines (e.g., Forstmann, 2019; Gohl, 2021). The results also partly support Webster’s (2014) argument that, even in today’s fragmented media environment, audience viewing behaviors still follow consistent patterns, which predictably vary by time of day and day of the week.

Further, in line with prior studies (e.g., Vaterlaus et al., 2019), the study found eating food has become a part of many participants’ Netflix viewing routines. This viewing behavior mimics sitting in front of the TV with dinner from the early days of TV (Chitakunye & Maclaran, 2014; Gore et al., 2003; Pearson et al., 2017). 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 has become the predominant way audiences consume television, some traditional television viewing habits among audience members still held true.

Additionally, consistent with prior studies (e.g., LaRose, 2010; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997), this study found repeat viewing was very 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, 1993), with repeat-viewing levels decreasing as the number of options available to viewers increased (Davis & Walker, 1990; 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 can be overwhelming (Porter, 2022). In the first round of interviews, several participants said they will re-watch the same series (e.g., *Friends, the Office*) or movies if they do 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). Another report revealed that, even with millions of choices on streaming platforms, today’s audiences still turn to classic TV programs (Nielsen, 2023). The report found *The Simpsons* (1989), *Big Bang Theory* (2007), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005),and *Seinfeld* (1989)were among the top most-streamed shows in 2022 among women aged 18-34, suggesting that ‘the comfort of the classics’ played a significant role in today’s audiences’ viewing choices.

This study’s results suggest that many participants consume certain streaming content out of habit rather than making active choices. Participants enjoy the comfort of the familiar, and the reward (e.g., relaxation) they receive from watching streaming content reinforces their behaviors, which further impacts the habit formation process. As many audience scholars have pointed out (e.g., Cooper, 1996; LaRose, 2010; Webster, 2017; Webster & Wang, 1992), in an increasingly complex media environment, viewers’ habits and familiarity with content might become more important in helping them decide what to watch.

**Limitation & 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 most importantly, 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., the feelings of loneliness and uncertainty) and entertainment activities (Jarzyna, 2021), 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.” 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. Future studies could consider using year-long tracking data to test how audiences’ viewing frequency and program choices differ from the pandemic and post-pandemic ages.

Second, the study only focuses on Netflix, and the rationale for doing so is solid—Netflix remains the dominant streaming service (Winslow, 2022). However, viewers of other streaming platforms, such as Hulu, HBO Max, and Disney+, may have different viewing habits. Further, the study’s sample did not include Netflix users under the age of 18 or over the age of 55. While this is reasonable considering Netflix’s core subscribers in the U.S. tend to be Gen X and Millennials (Jay, 2023), future studies could explore whether and how audiences’ streaming viewing behaviors differ across platforms and age groups.

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 an ever-evolving media environment, continuing to explore the role of both traditional and emerging determinants in television audience behaviors remains a worthwhile scholarly pursuit.

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1. The three characteristics includes: habits are uncontrollable (e.g., “behavior X is something ... I do automatically”), are implemented without awareness (“I do without having to consciously remember’’), and are efficient (“that would require effort not to do it”). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more details: <https://medium.com/@h_martos/netflix-viewing-stats-unleash-your-data-fa2adb33827c> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All participants were informed about the study and signed a consent form certifying their willingness to participate. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Following IRB approval, the interview data was stored in a secure cloud drive, which is password-protected and accessible only via dual-authorization. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)