

An Exploration of Binge-Watching and Its Effects on College Academics

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## **Executive Summary**

This study sought to develop a better understanding of the online streaming behaviors of college students today and the connection to academic commitment. Specifically, ‘binge-watching’ was the concept of interest. Binge-watching is the act of watching consecutive hours on media content in a single sitting. Conclusions drawn from this data collection are shared with the goal of providing student affairs administrators and academic faculty with a better understanding of current behaviors of college students today in respect to online streaming. By developing a greater comprehension of students’ behaviors, these stakeholders can develop specific policies and practices to increase the level of academic engagement attained by college students.

The research draws attention to the fact that students are spending less time devoted to academic pursuits. Over half (59.2%) of the student participants reported that watching online content is distracting from their academics. Additionally, 25.4% of participants spend 8 or more hours per week watching online content and 87% of participants reported spending more than 3 hours streaming content in a single sitting on at least one occasion. Perhaps more striking is the fact that 29.6% had spent more than 8 straight hours watching online content at some point. When compared to academics, 40% of participants spend 8 or more hours per week on academic coursework. Despite this statistic, 39.4% of students reported that they are less engaged in their academics than with online content. This finding begs the question as to whether participants were over-stating the number of hours that they dedicate toward academic coursework. Academic faculty and student affairs practitioners would be well served to develop a deeper understanding of this apparent lack of academic engagement to increase the overall level of student success obtained by college students today.

## Introduction

The heavy use of technology by college students, especially the millennial generation, is not something that is surprising or groundbreaking to researchers. Many departments now communicate through a variety of social media sites to entice student participation. There are many studies that explore the effect that Internet and social media usage have on college students. Many of these studies focus on how this usage relates to areas such as student involvement and interpersonal relationships (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011).

One new phenomenon in the area of the Internet and technology that has not been heavily explored is that of “binge-watching”. The word binge is defined as “an unrestrained and often excessive indulgence” (Merriam-Webster’s Online, n.d.). Therefore, ‘binge-watching’ is the phenomenon of watching multiple episodes of a television program in a single sitting. The idea of binge-watching increased in popularity with online streaming capabilities from companies such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and others. Although individuals may partake in binge-watching in a variety of ways, this study will focus on developing a greater understanding of those behaviors that include in the online streaming of content.

With these ideas in mind, this study seeks to gather more insight in regards to the following question: what effect does binge-watching have on students’ dedication of time to academics?

In the following paper, several aspects of the study will be reiterated and further explicated. Stakeholders of the project are discussed, which includes student affairs practitioners and academic faculty. This is followed by a review of the amount of existing literature. Much of the literature regarding the concept of binge-watching is about the Internet and addictive behavior, not the concept of binge-watching itself. This dearth in the literature is one that will be

further explored. Data from this study yielded interesting results and leaves much to be explored.

### **Stakeholders**

A better understanding of the time effects of binge-watching may be vital to both student affairs practitioners and academic faculty alike. Student affairs practitioners in the areas of housing or student activities have the ability to gear programming initiatives toward increased academic engagement outside of the classroom. This may come in the form of academic programming or creating an environment that is conducive to completing academic work.

A deeper comprehension from faculty could yield diverse approaches and strategies during class time that may further engage students with their studies. Research shows that students are spending less time focused on their academic work (Babcock & Marks, 2010). This is concerning as one of the purposes of higher education may be academic success. Institutions measure academic success in a myriad of ways (e.g. graduation rates, overall grade point averages, persistence rates). The concept of binge-watching and how it affects time devoted to academics is one that may impact many students, thus affecting student affairs practitioners and academic faculty alike. This being said, the stakeholders of focus for this study are student affairs practitioners, such as individuals that work in housing or student activities, and academic faculty.

### **Existing Literature**

Currently, there is a gap in the literature that exists in regards to the concept of binge-watching. Much research exists in regards to Internet usage and addiction, but lacks in the area of consecutive online streaming. As the concept or behavior is relatively new, much research compares binge-watching to that of online behavior in a broad sense.

### **Binge-Watching**

Despite the fact that binge-watching is a fairly new concept, there are scholars that have begun to develop studies that attempt to gain a better understanding of online streaming behavior (Matrix, 2014; Jenner, 2014). One of the concerns with describing this behavior of streaming is the fact that binge-watching seems to be a hard concept to measure. For this study, we use Jenner's (2014) definition of binge-watching as watching three or more hours of content in a single setting. One study argues that binge-watching is a new form of engagement for individuals (Matrix, 2014). There is a connection between online streaming to social media and our society's increased technological dependency. Binge-watching, according to Matrix (2014) is just another example of our culture of instant gratification. Having a seemingly endless supply of media allows access to hours of content.

### **Internet Usage Among College Students**

Students' use of the Internet is not something that is a new area of interest. The current generation of students is often stereotyped as being dependent on technology. Various forms of media and technology being used in the classroom are now the norm (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). From a young age, students today are being taught how to use technology and it is a part of everyday life. There is research that has been conducted that suggests technology can have a negative effect on a student's academic success depending on the amount of time spent online (Anderson, 2001).

### **Academic Engagement**

Connected to the Internet's effect on a student's academic engagement are the recent trends regarding academic engagement for today's college students. Research has shown that over the past four decades, students have become less committed to their academic success

(Babcock & Marks, 2011). Based on the trend alone, a common depiction of the average college student today could be that they do not devote as much time to academic success and may not be as influenced by potential success or failure. There are multiple factors that influence academic success (e.g. class attendance, hours spent studying) and commitment to academics is among these (Dollinger, Matyja, & Huber, 2008). A more comprehensive understanding of today's current college student population may yield a more positive outlook on students' behavior and motivation.

### **Framework**

This study utilized three distinct theoretical frameworks: Astin's (1984) work with student engagement, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, and Kuh and colleagues (2005) work on institutional factors in creating student success. Astin (1984) studied student engagement as the amount of physical or psychological energy given to a certain task. Astin concluded that student engagement requires an investment from the individual student. Additionally, Astin presented the thought that the level of involvement reached by the student is a direct result of perceived gains. A second concept to keep in mind is that of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is the notion that one will engage in tasks in which they are proficient and is dependent on the amount of effort that one is willing to put forth. Finally, Kuh and colleagues (2010) present six principles (e.g. focus on student learning, clear pathways to student success, environments adapted for educational enrichment) that institutions to keep apply that have the ability to increase the level of overall educational effectiveness. It is important to remember the impact that an institution's policies and practices can have on the student experience.

## Methods

### Data Sources and Collection

Primary data collection allowed for a more targeted approach to this research project. By facilitating a quantitative study, a larger population was included in the data collection. The structure of this quantitative design also allowed participants to remain anonymous and increased the chances of obtaining honest feedback. With establishing a dataset, the information gained can be analyzed in myriad ways, allowing for greater comprehension and a broader range of conclusions. By surveying a diverse population, findings will be well representative of the entire student population.

An electronic survey served as the primary instrument for data collection. The survey link was sent via email to a group of potential participants and posted on a social media site. Participants were notified of the goals of the research in the beginning of the survey. The survey consisted of 20 questions. The first set of questions sought to identify demographic characteristics, such as race, age, sex, and class rank. Following questions inquired as to individual behaviors when it comes to time spent streaming content online, type of content, and consecutive hours spent watching content. Participants were also asked questions regarding their study habits, interaction with faculty, and overall grade point average.

The sampling method that was utilized for this survey was snowball sampling. The target population included any individual that was currently enrolled at an institution of higher education. By using a convenience/snowball sampling method, data collection included individuals of varying demographic characteristics, grade classification, and academic majors/minors. In total, there were 74 individuals that participated in the survey.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Student Participants*

<i>Student Characteristics</i>	<i>(n=71)</i>
Gender	(.43)
Female	78%
Male	20%
Additional Category	1%
Race/Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	70%
Hispanic or Latino	15%
Black or African American	8%
Asian or Asian American	4%
Other	3%
I prefer not to respond	3%
Traditional Age (18-22)	91% (1.46)
Current Classification	(1.05)
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	4%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	20%
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	32%
4 <sup>th</sup> Year	31%
Graduate Student	12%

Standard deviation shown in ( ).

## **Analysis**

Following the data collection, responses were examined and analyzed. Analytical testing was performed using SPSS software and the Qualtrics research suite. Demographic variables, such as gender, age, and race/ethnicity, were controlled for in order to best identify relationships between online streaming and academic engagement behaviors. Specific results from the data set will be further discussed, but one finding of note is worth including in the analysis. Linear regression and bivariate correlation tests were run, but there was no finding that resulted in statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). Despite the lack of statistical significance, there are several patterns that emerged from the analysis of the data set.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study, one of which being the sample size. It is difficult to develop a strong correlation between the act of binge-watching and academic behavior with the use of such a limited population. A more diverse sample would also increase the strengths of findings. The sample consisted of 79% that identified as female and seventy percent identified as non-Hispanic White. This does not allow for broad conclusions to be made, as the population is not diverse. Although there were 13 institutions represented in the sample, 81.1% of the population attended the same institution, which does not allow for a great deal of institutional diversity. A purposive sample may have been beneficial in targeting a diverse population that attended an array of institutional types. The study also did not control for other campus involvement. Engagement outside the classroom may influence time spent on academic engagement.

### **Findings**

The results of the data collection are rich and can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. As previously discussed, analytical tests did not yield a finding of statistical significance, but the pattern of results is interesting none the less. Much of the description below will look at percentages and averages of behaviors in respect to online streaming and academic behavior. Appendix B illustrates the more striking results in graphic form.

#### **Online Streaming Behavior**

There are many interesting findings presented by the data. 72% of those surveyed reported having a current subscription to an online streaming service. Nearly all of those that reported having a subscription had a subscription to Netflix. This ease of access suggests that a great deal of students utilize streaming services on a regular basis. Going further, 25.4% of

participants said they spend 8 or more hours a week watching online content. These results suggest a strong trend of watching online content, but the questions that asked about binge-watching behaviors were also surprising. Out of the sample surveyed, 38% reported watching multiple episodes on online content in a single sitting 3 times or more per week. Results showed that 29.6% had spent more than 8 straight hours watching online content at some point. Finally, 87% of participants said that they had spent more than three consecutive hours watching online content in a single sitting.

### **Academic Behavior**

Overall, the questions surrounding academic behavior did not lead to unforeseen results. The data showed that there is a tendency for those students surveyed to have little interaction with their faculty outside of the classroom. Nearly half (49.3%) of those surveyed reported approaching their faculty outside of the classroom less than once per month. If students are not approaching their faculty regarding assignments or course content, one could make the supposition that these students are not heavily engaged in their academic courses. This thought is supported by another question on the survey that asked participants about their level of academic engagement. 39.4% of students reported that they are less engaged in their academics than with online content.

### **Discussion**

Results from this study illustrate several patterns. Despite attempting to find a correlation between binge-watching and academic engagement and lacking statistical significance, there are several behaviors of note. First, there is a lack of faculty engagement and a surplus of online content consumption. The study asked whether students approached faculty outside of the classroom, but it could be hypothesized that students may not be approaching faculty in-person,

but do communicate electronically. The study results also suggest that students are spending a comparable amount of time watching online content as they are studying. Despite this, 59.2% of participants agreed that watching online content is distracting from their academics. Overall, the results presented from this study were not surprising, nor do they differ from current stereotypes or beliefs about college students today.

The findings from this study provide a foundation for further discussion on the online streaming behavior of current college students. As there not much literature has looked at binge-watching, it is difficult to compare or contrast results from this study with those of others. The use of streaming content is one that clearly involves a great number of the student population, based on this sample group. As the results indicate that this phenomenon, student affairs practitioners and academic faculty would be well served to develop a better understanding of binge-watching behaviors. As not much literature exists on the concept of binge-watching, these results provide scholars with an opportunity further explore this concept.

### **Future Research and Program Implications**

There are a number of ways in which the phenomenon of binge-watching could be further studied. Primarily, a future study should include a wide range of institutional types and diverse sample population. As this study chiefly focused on online streaming behaviors as compared to academic behaviors, further research could explored how binge-watching may affect other campus or social involvement. The results gleamed from this data set suggest that students are spending a great deal of time watching online content, but report similar time spent studying. The area of academic engagement that appears to be lacking is faculty interaction. Nearly half of the participants reported interacting with faculty outside of the classroom less than once a month.

Additional studies may examine lack of student-faculty interaction and the role that technology or online behavior contributes to that lack of interaction.

Programs and practices can benefit from a better understanding of student behavior in that institutions have the ability to put initiatives in place that encourage involvement, both academically and socially. Student affairs departments can continue to push programming that provides opportunities for students to get out of their room and dedicate less time to online activity, including binge-watching. As the results suggest a lack of academic engagement, institutions may benefit from an overall increase in academic engagement efforts. As technology continues to play an integral role in the socialization of this student population, institutions must adapt in order to ensure that students are afforded the opportunities to achieve a great level of student success.

## References

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Appendix A  
Copy of Distributed Survey

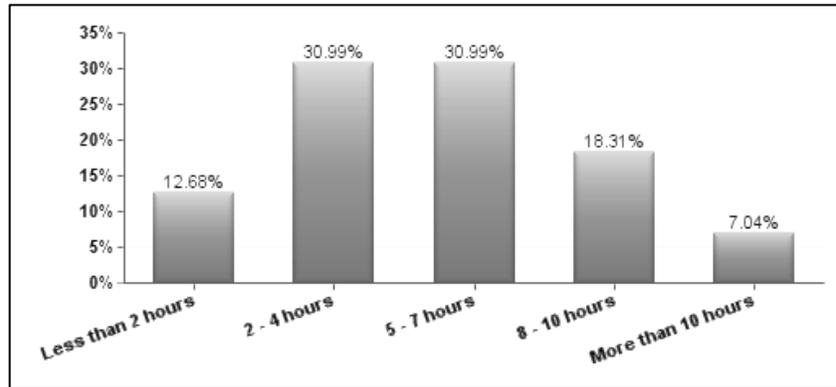
1. Please indicate your gender.
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Additional Category
    - i. Please describe
2. What is your age?
  - a. Drop down (less than 18 – more than 35)
3. How do you identify?
  - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - b. Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - c. Asian or Asian American
  - d. Black or African American
  - e. Hispanic or Latino
  - f. Non-Hispanic White
  - g. Other
  - h. I prefer not to respond
4. What is your current classification in college?
  - a. 1<sup>st</sup> year
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> year
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> year
  - d. 4<sup>th</sup> year or above
  - e. Graduate Student
  - f. Not Applicable (skip logic to the end of survey if selected)
5. At what university are you currently enrolled?
  - a. Fill in the blank
  - b. I'm not currently enrolled at a university (skip logic to the end of survey if selected)
6. What is your academic major of concentration? Discipline areas
  - a. Humanities
  - b. Social Science
  - c. Natural Science
  - d. Business
  - e. Education
  - f. Fine Arts
  - g. Other
7. Do you currently subscribe to a company that provides online streaming content?
  - a. Yes
    - i. If yes, with which provider do you have a subscription?
      1. Netflix
      2. Hulu
      3. HBOgo
      4. Amazon
      5. Other

- a. Fill in the blank
  - b. No
8. What type of content do you stream most often?
  - a. Television Shows
  - b. Movies
  - c. Documentaries
  - d. Other
    - i. Fill in the blank
9. On average, how many hours per week do you spend watching media content (e.g. TV shows, movies) online?
  - a. Less than 2 hours
  - b. 2 – 4 hours
  - c. 5 – 7 hours
  - d. 8 – 10 hours
  - e. More than 10 hours
10. If streaming a television show, how often do you watch multiple episodes of the same program in a single sitting?
  - a. Never
  - b. Less than once a month
  - c. Once a month
  - d. 2-3 times a month
  - e. Once a week
  - f. 2-3 times a week
  - g. Daily
11. Have you ever spent more than three consecutive hours watching online content in a single sitting?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
12. What is the most time you have spent consecutively watching online content?
  - a. Drop down (less than 3 – more than 10)
13. What mediums do you use to stream content? Check all that apply
  - a. Computer
  - b. Tablet
  - c. Smart TV
  - d. Other
    - i. Fill in the Blank
14. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:
  - a. I find that watching online content is distracting from my academics.
    - i. Strongly Disagree
    - ii. Disagree
    - iii. Neither Disagree or Agree
    - iv. Agree
    - v. Strongly Agree
  - b. I feel more engaged in academic coursework than with online content.
    - i. Strongly Disagree
    - ii. Disagree

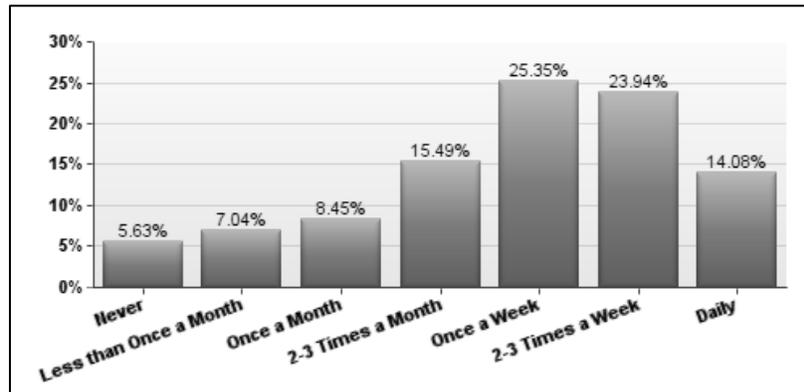
- iii. Neither Disagree or Agree
  - iv. Agree
  - v. Strongly Agree
15. How often do you approach faculty outside of the classroom?
- a. Never
  - b. Less than once a month
  - c. Once a month
  - d. 2-3 times a month
  - e. Once a week
  - f. 2-3 times a week
  - g. Daily
16. How often have you skipped class in the last six months?
- a. Never
  - b. Less than once a month
  - c. Once a month
  - d. 2-3 times a month
  - e. Once a week
  - f. 2-3 times a week
  - g. Daily
17. On average, how many hours per week do you spend on academic coursework (e.g. homework, studying)?
- a. Less than 2 hours
  - b. 2 – 4 hours
  - c. 5 – 7 hours
  - d. 8 – 10 hours
  - e. More than 10 hours
18. What is your current GPA?
- a. Less than 1.0
  - b. 1.00 – 1.99
  - c. 2.00 – 2.49
  - d. 2.50 – 2.99
  - e. 3.00 – 3.49
  - f. 3.50 – 3.99
  - g. 4.0
19. How did you hear about this survey?
- a. Class
  - b. Through an employer
  - c. Social Media
  - d. Through a friend
  - e. Other
    - i. Fill in the blank

Appendix B  
Survey Results of Interest

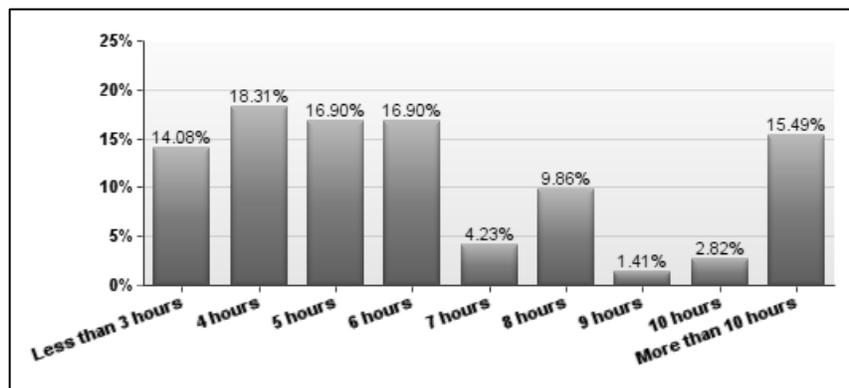
On average, how many hours per week do you spend watching media content (e.g. TV shows, movies) online?



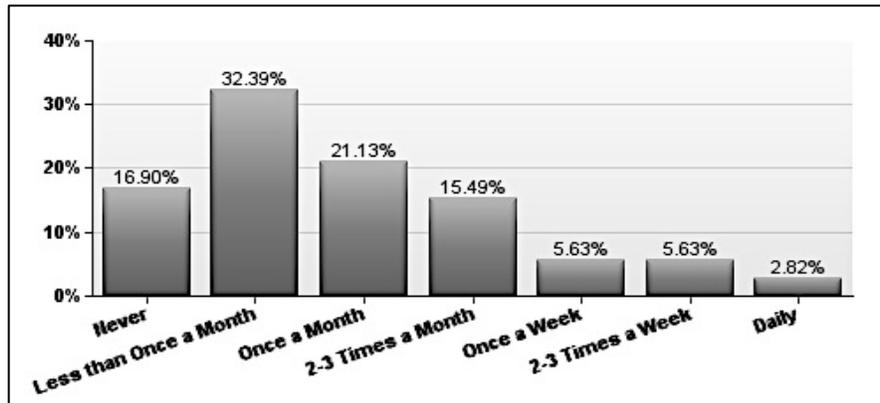
If streaming a television show, how often do you watch multiple episodes of the same program in a single sitting?



What is the most time you have spent consecutively watching online content?



How often do you approach faculty outside of the classroom?



On average, how many hours per week do you spend on academic coursework (e.g. homework, studying)?

