

Active in Structure: An Integrated Model of Structural Theories and Individual Factors in  
Explaining Audience Behavior in the Post-Network Age

by

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past 60 years or so, audience researchers have strived to investigate the impact of structural and motivational 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, the academic understanding of whether factors traditionally found to impact television viewing behaviors continue to do so in the streaming age remains limited. Building on both agent-based and structural theories in television audience research, this study employed a mixed-method approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews with that from screenshots captured with a browser extension to revisit the roles of structural and motivational factors in participants' Netflix viewing.

The study's results underscore that, even in a high-choice media environment, structural factors (e.g., audience availability, content availability and exclusivity) and traditional viewing motivations (i.e. for relaxation and enjoyment) remain critical in determining participants' viewing practices. Specifically, the platforms and devices that people use to watch television may differ from those used in the network era, but why they watch, when they watch, and what they watch are still determined by the motivational and structural factors identified in traditional television audience research. In addition, the results showed that newer structural factors such as program scores on recommendation sites have less of an impact on participants' viewing decisions.

Habits, which are commonly overlooked in audience research, played an important role in influencing when, how, and what participants watched on Netflix. Further, despite having access to 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. The study advances television audience scholarship by providing fresh insights about the traditional and emerging factors in determining viewers' streaming behaviors. Theoretical implications and future directions are discussed.

DEDICATION

THIS DISSERTATION IS DEDICATED TO:

My Loved Ones,

For Your Encouragement and Tremendous Support

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# CHAPTER 1

## 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 (Livingstone, 1993; 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. Over the last century, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate audience behaviors in radio, television, the internet, social media, and emerging media technologies (e.g., Adams, 1998; Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper, 1996; Katz et al., 1974; Ksiazek & Webster, 2008; LaRose, 2010; Napoli, 2012; Rubin, 1983; Ruggieor, 2000; Sahly et al., 2021; Shao, 2009; Sundar & Limperos, 2013; 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., Barrett, 1999; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Giddens, 1984; Goodhardt et al., 1987; Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Webster, 2009, 2014). Although media scholars have called for more attention to the interplay between structural and individual factors (e.g., Cooper, 1996; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Webster et al., 2006, 2018; Webster & Newton, 1988; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), few studies specifically have sought to determine these

interactions.

Although audiences may choose the specific media they consume based on their preferences or motivations, the process of that choice is constrained by different media and social structures (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Cooper, 1996; Taneja et al., 2012). As Webster (2009) argued, most studies of media choice focused on either individual or structural factors, but neither of them alone is sufficient to explain the complexity of audiences' media selections.

### **The Duality of Audience Behavior Research**

Agent-based theories (e.g., uses and gratifications) and the structural approach are expressions of different paradigms (e.g., Adams, 1998; Barrett, 2019; Cooper & Tang, 2006; Tang et al., 2021). The agent-based approach considers individuals as purposeful actors, while the structural approach emphasizes the importance of macro-level factors (Webster, 2018). With a few exceptions (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), each has tended to be used with little consideration for the other. Additionally, the duality of audience behavior is conceptualized as the process through which agents and structures mutually shape audience behavior, what Giddens (1984) referred to as structuration. Giddens' way of reconciling that divide provides a model for how audience behavior theories might be integrated into a more robust framework (Webster, 2018; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011).

Giddens (1984) indicates that our social systems are “situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space” (p. 25), in which conscious and purposive agents create stable social structures, while social structures constrict or enable actors’

behaviors. For example, audiences may actively choose when and what to watch on Netflix, but in reality, they act within highly structured environments (e.g., access to a Netflix subscription and the content). In Giddens' (1984) view, structure and agency are constituted as a "duality." In the media context, audiences rely on media structures to exercise their agency and, in doing so, reproduce and alter the overall media structures (Webster, 2018).

Although structuration theory provides a powerful way to reconcile the tensions between agent- and structural-based approaches, acknowledging the shortcomings of both does not make it easier to design studies that accommodate both perspectives (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Webster, 2018). This is partly because, methodologically, it is difficult for researchers to collect data that includes measurements of both audiences' motivations and of media structures. Most media measurement companies only provide aggregated data, and individual-level data is usually unavailable. As Cooper and Tang (2009) argued, "the difficulty of combining individual and structural factors in determining audience exposure, in addition to fundamentally different assumptions, rests in the differential levels of analysis employed within each area of inquiry" (p. 402).

Some studies have utilized integrated frameworks to investigate audiences' traditional television viewing behaviors (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Kim & Viswanathan, 2015; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Tang et al., 2021; Wonneberger et al., 2011; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), but how these factors interact and ultimately shape audiences' streaming viewing behaviors has not been fully explored. Researchers have argued for integration of the roles played by gratifications and other factors into a general

theory of media consumption (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979); other studies have integrated the uses and gratifications theory and models of choice to locate the interchange between programming structures, content preferences, and viewing conditions in the program choice process (e.g., Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Cooper and Tang (2009) conceptualized media users as “active within structures” (p. 415) and suggested that audience members actively choose media content within the constraint of structural factors. Findings across different cultural and viewing contexts commonly suggest that structural factors increase the explanatory power of integrated models to a much larger extent than individual factors (e.g., Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Heeter, 1985; Kim, 2016; Kim & Viswanathan, 2015; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Tang et al., 2021; Webster, 2014, 2018; Wonneberger et al., 2011; Yuan & Webster, 2006).

Although previous studies in this line of research made considerable progress in explaining audiences’ viewing behaviors, they have several limitations that are worth further attention. First, most studies focused on linear media channels like cable and broadcast television. Second, most of these studies used self-reported measurements of audiences’ viewing behaviors, usually via surveys. A few of them (e.g., Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Wonneberger et al., 2011) have used more accurate measurements, such as observational data. However, audiences may change their “normal” behaviors because of the social desirability bias, and each participant was usually observed only for a very short period of time (e.g., one day). Having data from a longer period of time would provide improved external validity.

Additionally, most previous studies attempted to predict audience viewing activities based on motivational and structural factors, but little is known about the relationships between these predictors. Given that audiences' viewing decisions are constricted by various social and media structures, more scholarly attention is needed to focus on the interactions between structural factors (e.g., audience availability, content accessibility) and streaming viewing motivations.

### **The Evolution of Television**

The first electronic television was developed by pioneers, such as Philo Farnsworth and Vladimir K. Zworykin, in the late 1920s (Abramson, 1995; Hofer, 1979). In its early stages, television was costly and available only to the privileged few (Audioden, 2019). As the Federal Communications Commission settled on a single technical standard and television became more affordable, more people adopted it (Dennis & DeFleur, 2010). During the 1950s, television gradually began to replace radio as the most popular medium (Baran & David, 2015). Since then, television has been a routine part of people's lives, shaped popular culture, and become, perhaps, the most influential mass medium in human history (Fiske, 2002).

Lotz (2014) identified three eras in the history of television. The first stage was the "network era," which spanned from the early 1950s to the early 1980s and was characterized by the adaptation of radio-network modes of content creation, distribution, advertising, and audience measurement to the television context (Lotz, 2014; Zrzavy, 2008). The second stage is the era of "multi-channel transition," which ended in the late-1990s. During this stage, newer technologies, such as the video cassette recorder (VCR)



and remote controllers, expanded audiences' viewing options and control over the program schedule (Haggins et al., 2018).

The last stage is the “post-network era”, which is defined by the digitization of media content and the resulting convergence of multiple media (Zrzavy, 2008, p. 85). Television in this era is consumed via newer technologies such as mobile devices (e.g., smartphones, iPads), video-on-demand devices (DVRs), streaming (e.g., Netflix, Hulu), and video sharing websites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo). In this era, the “Big 3” networks (i.e., ABC, CBS, and NBC) are no longer dominant (Lotz, 2009, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

In general, the post-network era is typified by (1) choice, (2) control, (3) convenience, (4) customization, and (5) community (Lotz, 2009). Compared with watching linear television like broadcast and cable, audiences have greater access to unlimited content, which can be consumed anytime and anywhere. Despite the fact that people are now using more social media and other emerging technologies, television is still the most used electronic medium among U.S. adults who in an average day spend more than four hours watching TV (i.e., live + time-shifted); longer than the three hours and 45 minutes in which they interact with their smartphones (Nielsen, 2020).

Additionally, since 2005, streaming media platforms and internet entertainment services (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, YouTube) have fundamentally altered the ways in which people discuss and consume media content (Barrett et al., 2022; Lobato, 2018; McDonald

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<sup>1</sup> What distinguishes radio and television networks from streaming services is the way content is delivered. In the former, a central operation provides programming to audiences via affiliated or owned interconnected stations which are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (Dennis & DeFleur, 2010; Edgerton, 2007). These stations are geographically dispersed, and are contractually bound to the content distributor (e.g., ABC, CBS, and NBC). In contrast, streaming platforms like Netflix deliver their content directly to their subscribers without an intermediary.

& Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Although conventional media (e.g., DVDs, broadcast, cable and satellite television) still account for the majority of the time people spend watching TV (Epstein, 2020), a large portion of the audience has been moving away from consuming traditional linear broadcast channels and towards streaming media to gain more control over their media consumption (Mikos, 2016; Rainie, 2021; Schweidel & Moe, 2016; Watson, 2019). A recent report shows more than 80% of adults in the United States currently subscribe to at least one streaming service (Dabhade, 2021), and more Americans now pay for streaming services than for cable or satellite subscriptions (Brantner, 2019). Further, according to Nielsen, on average, U.S. adults spent nearly two and a half hours per week on streaming video in 2020, accounting for one-fourth of all television viewing (Bursztynsky, 2021). Given the dramatic change in the media landscape, the roles of structural and individual factors in determining audiences' behaviors are ripe for reconsideration, extension, and innovation (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Napoli, 2012; Webster, 2018).

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 (Morgan, 2019). Nearly 30% of global streaming video subscriptions are for Netflix, which has captured more than 80% of the market in the United States (Clark, 2020; Molla, 2019). 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 apply an integrated approach to

explore the interplay between structural and individual factors in shaping audiences'  
media streaming behaviors in the post-network era.

## CHAPTER 2

### The AGENT-BASED APPROACH

The agent-based approach to understanding audience behavior considers individuals purposeful, reasoning actors whose media usage is thought to be determined by an individual's cognitive and affective conditions (Katz et al., 1974; Webster, 1998, 2018). An agent can be defined as an actor who has the capacity to adapt his or her state to changes in the environment (Castells, 2009; Giddens, 1984). With the agent-based approach, a person's needs or motivations (Katz et al., 1974; Papacharissi, & Rubin, 2000; Rubin, 1983; Shao, 2009), attitudes or beliefs (Ajzen, 2002), mood management (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Vorderer et al., 2004), and/or program-type preferences (Owen & Wildman, 1992; Prior, 2007; Rust et al., 1992) take precedence.

Uses and gratifications (Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 1983; Shao, 2009), economic models of choice (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983), planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Nabi & Sullivan, 2001), and selective exposure (Zillmann & Bryant, 2013) are among the most influential theories in this field. Agent-based theorists typically assume individuals are fully aware of the potential options available and will rationally choose the one that can provide the most benefits to them (e.g., Katz et al., 1974; Larose et al., 2001; Lin, 1999; Papacharissi, 2008; Rubin, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000; Webster, 2018; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983).

Scholars working in the agent-based tradition go “direct to the source” to determine the motivations for why audiences first choose to watch television and then watch specific programs (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Kippax & Murray, 1980; Lull, 1980;

Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In other words, agent-based approaches primarily focus on “what do people do with media” rather than “what media does with people” (Severin & Tankard, 1997; Webster, 2014).

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

As one of the dominant agent-based theories in media studies, uses and gratifications theory dates back to Herzog’s (1940, 1944) studies of quiz show fans and soap opera listeners and to Lasswell’s (1948) proposed communication model, which focused on how people use the media and how their media usage leads to different effects. Lasswell (1948) identified three major functions of the mass media: surveillance of the environment, correlation of events, and cultural transmission. Later, a fourth function was added to the model: entertainment (Wright, 1960). These pioneering studies demonstrated that audience members choose different types of media to fulfill diverse needs (e.g., Herzog, 1940, 1944; Katz et al., 1974; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rubin, 1981, 1983).

Scholars applying a uses and gratifications approach examine the relationships between television viewing motivations, attitudes, and behavior and attempt to identify the patterns of interaction between them (Abelman et al., 1997; Barrett, 2019; Katz et al., 1974; McQuail, 1985; Rubin, 1981, 1993). Katz et al. (1974) outlined the principal objectives of the uses and gratifications theory, and indicated that it is concerned with “(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media

exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (p. 20).

### ***Clarifying Uses and Gratifications***

Many critics have argued that the term “gratification” was defined too vaguely (e.g., Lometti et al., 1977; Swanson, 1977). It was often used interchangeably with the term “motivation” in many media studies (Mele, 2003), and scholars needed to distinguish between gratifications-sought and gratifications-obtained (e.g., Bae, 2018; Greenberg, 1974; Hussain & Shabir, 2020; Palmgreen et al., 1980, 1981; Perse & Rubin, 1988).

Gratifications-sought refers to audiences’ expectations about specific outcomes before using the media, while gratifications-obtained are the results of media usage (Lin, 1999; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). For example, an audience member’s desire to watch a television program to gain information is a type of “gratifications-sought,” while the degree to which the program really provides valuable information to that person is called “gratifications-obtained.” Conceptually, the term “motivation” is closely related to “gratification-sought” and both reflect some sort of outcome expectation (Bae, 2018; Charney & Greenberg, 2001; Lin, 1999).

It is important to note that the relationship between gratifications-sought and gratifications-obtained is not a simply linear one. The degree to which an individual is satisfied with the gratification-obtained from their media usage may, in turn, affect or reinforce future media use motives (Charney & Greenberg, 2001; Palmgreen et al., 1980). Further, audience members’ motivations may not always lead to actual media usage (e.g.,

Ajzen, 2011; Colwell, 2007; Lin, 1993; Palmgreen et al., 1985; Shim & Kim, 2018).

Most of the time, audience members' motivations or gratifications-sought only existed as mental states at the pre-viewing stage (Lin, 1993). Whether they impacted actual viewing activities is constricted by other factors.

### ***Uses and Gratifications Applications***

Over the last half-century, the uses and gratifications approach has been widely applied in a variety of media contexts, including traditional mass media, interpersonal communication, the internet, and now streaming services and other media technologies (e.g., Abelman et al., 1997; Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Albarran et al., 2007; Greenberg, 1974, Katz et al., 1974; LaRose et al., 2001; McQuail, 1985; McQuail et al., 1972; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rubin, 1981, 1983; Ruggiero, 2000; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tang & Cooper, 2013). It also has been used, sometimes along with other theories (e.g., social cognitive theory, the technology acceptance model), to explain individuals' media adoption and usage (e.g., Chiang & Hsiao, 2015; Chung & Austria, 2010; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Shao & Kwon, 2019; Smock et al., 2011; Mäntymäki & Islam, 2016; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Rauschnabel, 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

McQuail et al. (1972) examined the pattern of gratifications derived by audiences of a radio series and television news and found individuals primarily use radio and television to escape the boredom of daily life and to keep in touch with main events in the world. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) investigated audiences' exposures to public

television and demonstrated that uses and gratifications served as a complement to structure-level factors, such as media availability and social constraints.

Building upon Greenberg's (1974) work, which attempted to understand the uses and gratifications children sought in television, Rubin (1983) identified the key motivations that drive audiences' television viewing behaviors. These include (1) entertainment, (2) to pass time/habit, (3) information-seeking, (4) escape, and (5) companionship. Rubin (1983) also categorized audiences' motives for television viewing into two groups: (1) *instrumental*, which is more goal-oriented, where the audience actively decides not only to watch television but also is active in choosing what to watch; and (2) *ritualized*, which is less active, where the viewer largely chooses to watch television to pass the time or as a diversion. These motivations are strongly tied to the amount of television viewed, affinity with the medium, and channel-changing behaviors (e.g., Katz et al., 1974; McQuail, 1997; Perse, 1990; Rubin, 1983, 1984; Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Rubin and Perse (1987) investigated audiences' television news viewing activities and showed that instrumental gratifications (e.g., seeking excitement, information) were positively related to audiences' intentionality (purposive and planned media usage), while ritualized use (e.g., passing time) was negatively related to purposive viewing behaviors. In line with Rubin and Perse's (1987) findings, Perse (1992) found that utilitarian viewing motives (more active motives) significantly predicted audiences' attention to news reports, while pass-time motives (more passive) had a negative effect on their



attention to local television news. Both studies showed that individuals' different viewing motivations can lead to diverse viewing patterns (Perse, 1992; Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Additionally, Walker and Bellamy (1991) conducted a survey to study users of remote control devices (RCDs) and identified several motives for using RCDs, and found that RCDs required more active participation by the users than television, cable, or VCRs. Selective avoidance (e.g., screening out unfavorable content) was also found to be a major motivation for using RCDs, particularly to avoid commercials and political content. In a later study, Perse and Ferguson (1993) explored whether new television technologies (e.g., cable television and RCDs) increased audiences' viewing satisfactions. Their results showed that the use of these technologies significantly enhanced audiences' satisfactions toward television. Also, they found television exposure (e.g., the amount of time a viewer spent watching television) and perceived informational benefits were the strongest predictors of television satisfaction.

Several other studies explored children's and adolescents' television viewing (e.g., Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Atkin, 2001; Lin, 1993). For instance, Lin (1993) explored the relationships among adolescents' motivations, activities, and satisfactions toward television viewing. The findings showed that more strongly motivated audiences not only spent more time watching television, but also had a higher level of viewing involvement. In another study, Abelman and Atkin (2000) identified children's motivations, including entertainment, pass time/habit, information, escape, and companionship, for watching cable television. Among those, pass time/habit was the strongest factor. They found these motivational factors were positively related to the

frequency of viewing, television affinity (i.e., audiences' perceptions of the importance of television stations in their lives), and network affinity (i.e., perceptions of the importance of broadcast networks in their lives). All of these studies demonstrated that audiences' characteristics and pre-viewing motivations not only determine program choices and levels of viewing involvement, but also lead to different cognitive and behavioral outcomes post viewing (Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Lin, 1993; Perse, 1992; Perse & Ferguson, 1993; Rubin, 1983, 1984).

More recently, uses and gratifications theory has been applied by media scholars to study emerging media technologies, including the internet and social media, as well as streaming media (e.g., Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Charney & Greenberg, 2002; Gros et al., 2017; Kim & Sintas, 2021; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Shao, 2009; Shao & Kwon, 2021; Smock et al., 2011; Tang & Cooper, 2013). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) sought to identify predictors of individuals' internet usage, and identified five key motivations behind that usage. These motivations include interpersonal utility, passing time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. Charney and Greenberg (2002) addressed motivational factors for video-sharing websites, and found interpersonal-related motivations (e.g., social interaction and community belongingness) had a positive effect on users' levels of engagement.

Shao (2009) employed uses and gratifications theory to investigate user-generated media, and found that individuals' motivations for engaging with these types of media varied by specific activities. For example, individuals consume user-generated content to fulfill information needs, and they interact with other users to enhance social connections.

In line with Shao's findings (2009), Smock et al. (2011) examined the motivational predictors of the use of specific Facebook features (e.g., status updates, and comments) as well as overall Facebook use. They found that within the same platform, individuals' motivations varied based on the characteristics of the different features. For example, individuals posted comments on social media to seek social interactions, while they typically updated their statuses for expressive needs. Both Shao (2009) and Smock et al.'s (2011) studies suggest that a unidimensional measure of media use may obfuscate the motivations for using different features.

Other studies have employed a uses and gratifications approach to look at audiences' selections of different television programs (Tang & Cooper, 2013; Young, 2013) and their use of video streaming services (Balakrishnan and Griffiths, 2017; Chiang & Hsiao, 2015; Fernández-Robin et al., 2019; Gros et al., 2017; Huda, 2020; Klobas et al., 2018). For instance, Balakrishnan and Griffiths (2017) investigated audiences' YouTube use and content creation activities. They found social gratification had a significant influence on both types of YouTube activities, whereas technology-related gratification (e.g., convenience) had no significant effects. Similarly, Gros et al. (2017) investigated the motivational factors behind the use of Twitch—a live streaming service in which users can broadcast a game and react to viewers' comments simultaneously. In line with prior studies (e.g., Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Tang & Cooper, 2013), Gros et al. (2017) revealed that being entertained and seeking social interaction were the most important reasons for users to spend time on live-streaming services.

Among the many motivational factors noted in the uses and gratifications literature, the hedonic motive (entertainment-related) was identified as the most important (e.g., Bae, 2018; Chung & Austria, 2010; Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019; Lovato & Piper, 2019; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oranç & Ruggeri, 2021; Stevens & Dillman Carpentier, 2017; Tamilmani et al., 2019; Tang & Cooper, 2013; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019), which is in line with the classic motivational principle that people pursue pleasure and avoid pain (e.g., Higgin, 2006; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Lin, 2001).

With respect to uses and gratifications studies of digital media, one of the most notable findings is that social motivation has become more salient in audiences' viewing behaviors (e.g., Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Gros et al., 2017; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Kim & Sintas, 2021; Steiner & Xu, 2020). This is partly because the rise of social media and multi-screen activities promote a higher level of social engagement (Pittman & Tefertiller, 2015; Tang & Cooper, 2017; Webster, 2018), and the increasing popularity of various programs also leads to a fear of missing out among audience members (Conlin et al., 2016; Steiner, 2017).

### **Streaming Service Audience Behavior Studies**

In the early days of television audience research, the U.S. market was dominated by the “Big 3” broadcast networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC. In the 1980s, cable television began to experience rapid growth, which provided a much wider range of channels to audience members (Allen & Thompson, 2019). The invention of the remote control and VCR also expanded viewers' media choices and control (Haggins et al., 2018; Lotz, 2014) and in the early 2000s, the television industry entered the “post-network era”

(Lotz, 2014; Starks, 2013). Today, streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and high-speed broadband or Wi-Fi connections enable audiences to have more control over their media consumption, and scholars have begun to explore audience viewing behaviors in this environment (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Castro et al., 2021; Flayelle et al., 2019; Hou et al., 2019; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

Bondad-Brown et al. (2012) investigated users' motivations for using traditional television and online video services, which is a bit different from and predate streaming services like Netflix. They found that the entertainment motive significantly predicted traditional television viewing, while informational purposes were more salient in online video viewing. Tefertiller and Sheehan (2019) identified five motivational factors for audiences' use of streaming services. The factors include stress management, entertainment, habitual viewing, information-seeking, and social interaction. Aligning with many linear television studies (e.g., McQuail, 1997; Rubin, 1983), Tefertiller and Sheehan (2019) found entertainment to be the strongest motivation for using streaming services.

Additionally, as streaming services became ubiquitous, a new pattern of media consumption emerged, which is termed "binge-watching" (Flayelle et al., 2017; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Vaterlaus et al. 2019). Binge-watching refers to the viewing behavior in which audiences watch multiple episodes of television shows in a compressed time frame (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Shao & Benaza, 2018). Considerable studies have been conducted to understand audiences' binge-watching behaviors in different

cultural and platform contexts (Flayelle et al., 2017, 2019; Merikivi et al., 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Schweidal & Moe, 2016; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Shim & Kim, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Trouleau et al., 2016; Vaterlaus, 2019; Walton-Pattison et al., 2016).

Pittman and Sheehan (2015) identified relaxation, engagement, and hedonism as salient motivations for viewers who binge-watched shows on Netflix. Their results showed that, for those who plan ahead to binge watch, program quality (aesthetics) and social motives strongly influence audiences' viewing behaviors. Similarly, Vaterlaus et al. (2019) also found that individuals binge-watched television in order to keep up with current events/shows, or to make new friends.

More recently, Steiner and Xu (2020) explored why people binge-watch through streaming media services. Their findings show that viewers' primary motivations for binge-watching streaming media content are catching up (e.g., watching to avoid spoilers), relaxation, a sense of completion, cultural inclusion, and an improved viewing experience. The functions of new technologies such as navigability and in-episode control were found to significantly impact binge-watching rituals. Their study also indicated that individuals binge-watched via streaming media partly because they "wanted to be part of the cool club" (Steiner & Xu, 2020, p. 10). Findings across different contexts commonly suggest that many audience members like to consume streaming media for socialization purposes, such as to facilitate social interactions, to create stronger social bonds, and to show they belong to a community or group (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al.

2019).

Integrating constructs from uses and gratifications theory and the technology acceptance model, Shao and Benaza (2018) investigated the factors that underlie audiences' online viewing behaviors. Their results indicated that enjoyment, easy access to content, and social recommendations were the most salient. In contrast to the often-mentioned social benefits of streaming viewing, Vaterlaus et al. (2019) found that while many audience members were motivated to watch shows on Netflix to make new friends, such viewing behaviors could eventually lead to social isolation and a decrease in social skills. An analysis of children's television viewing demonstrated that the relationship between television viewing and social isolation varied by content. Specifically, viewing violent programs was negatively related to the time children spent with friends (Bickham & Rich, 2006). These findings implied that, although many audience members were motivated to watch television to be more social, such motivation could eventually lead to negative consequences (e.g., Bickham & Rich, 2006; Vaterlaus et al., 2019).

### ***Streaming Research Outside the U.S. Context***

Scholars also have been interested in examining audience streaming behaviors outside the U.S. (e.g., Ayten & Bulat, 2019; Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Castro et al., 2021; Nanda & Banerjee, 2020; Rigby et al., 2018; Sung et al., 2018). For instance, researchers have looked at millennials' and Gen Z's streaming behaviors in Portugal (Castro et al., 2021), Indonesia (Susanno et al., 2019), and Turkey (Ayten & Bulat, 2019). Other studies looked at adults' streaming viewing behaviors in countries such as India

(Nanda & Banerjee, 2020), the United Kingdom (Rigby et al., 2018), and Germany (Mikos, 2016).

Castro et al. (2021) examined the motivations and contextual factors surrounding Portuguese millennials' Netflix use. Their results showed that millennials primarily use Netflix to relax, for boredom relief purposes, or to escape. In line with studies conducted in the UK (Rigby et al., 2018) and the U.S. (Sung et al., 2018), Castro et al. (2021) also found that watching alone was more common than watching with someone else. As Rigby et al. (2018) indicated, streaming viewing is essentially a personal activity. Audiences usually “watched alone so they could watch what they wanted, rather than coming together to watch something of mutual interest” (Rigby et al., 2018, p. 69).

Likewise, Susanno et al. (2019) examined millennials' binge-watching behaviors in Indonesia. In line with prior studies (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Sung et al., 2015; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Vaterlaus et al. 2019), their study showed that social engagement, escape, and an attractive price were three major reasons for millennials to binge-watch shows on Netflix. Among these factors, the most notable is the need for social engagement. That is, the Indonesia millennials in the study binge-watch to engage socially and to avoid being left out (Fear of Missing Out), a result consistent with that of Ayten and Bulat (2019), who found that Gen Z viewers (between 18-24 years old, 1995-2010) in Turkey primarily binge-watch Netflix programs for social interaction.

By adapting key constructs from the technology acceptance model and uses and gratifications theory, Camilleri and Falzon (2020) investigated European audiences'



streaming viewing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, and found individuals' ritualized motivations were positively related to their intention to use the streaming service, while instrumental motivations (e.g., information-seeking) were not. In line with findings from traditional television research (e.g., Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Rubin & Perse, 1987), Camilleri and Falzon's (2020) study demonstrated that a large portion of audiences were streaming media content on a habitual basis rather than making active choices.

Additionally, Nanda and Banerjee (2020) examined how various motivations for binge-watching were related to gratification-obtained among Indian audiences. Their results showed technology-related motives (e.g., modal experience) and entertainment were positively related to the gratification obtained from binge-watching. However, the motive to escape from reality was negatively related to gratification-obtained (Nanda & Banerjee, 2020). Such results were somehow contradictory to earlier studies (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Sung et al., 2018). Specifically, Panda and Pandey (2017) found that the motive to escape from reality was positively related to the amount of time spent binge-watching, and Sung et al. (2018) found no significant relationship between the escape motive and binge-watching behaviors (p. 421). These contradictory results may be partly explained by the complex nature of the escape construct. Nanda and Banerjee (2020) suggested that future research should look into two kinds of escapes—escape from structure (such as daily stressful activities) and escape into anti-structure (such as cults, rituals, and fandom)—to uncover the role of the escape motivation in media streaming behavior.

Overall, previous studies have identified several key motivations that impact streaming viewing behaviors. These include: (1) seeking enjoyment, (2) passing the time, (3) relieving boredom, (4) arousal, (5) catching-up, (6) for companionship, (7) social interaction, (8) escape, and (9) being included in a community of interests (e.g., Nanda & Banerjee, 2020; Pittman and Sheehan, 2015; Rigby et al., 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). While people watch streaming content for some of the same reasons identified in studies of traditional television viewing (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; McQuail, 1997; Rubin, 1983; Ruggiero, 2000), one of the most notable findings in recent literature is that streaming viewers demonstrate strong needs for social interactions, to catch-up, and to feel included in a community of interests (e.g., Ayten & Bulat, 2019; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Susanno et al., 2019; Vaterlaus et al. 2019).

## **Criticisms of the Agent-based Approach**

### ***Theoretical Flaws***

Although several studies demonstrated the explanatory power of uses and gratifications theory and the overall agent-based approach, both also have a number of limitations. Many media scholars have contended that uses and gratifications theory is not a rigorous social science theory (e.g., Baran & David, 2015; White, 1994; Wimmer & Dominick, 1994), while others have argued that it exaggerates the capacity of audience members and ignores the fact that media usage can be restricted by various social structures (Baran & David, 2015; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Liu, 2015; Webster, 2014). Specifically, although individuals have some capacity for subjective choice, their

gratification and decisions are still largely constrained by personal, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Massey's (1995) early studies called for a shift in the audience-centered approach toward examining the cultural interaction of individuals with the media. Other studies argued that the definitions of some of the central constructs of the uses and gratifications theory were too vague and could not be precisely measured (e.g., Carey & Kreiling, 1974; Elliott, 1974).

Ruggiero (2000) and Rubin (2009) responded to some of these criticisms, but issues remained about the assumption of active audiences, motive identification, the origin of needs, and the role of habitual behaviors (e.g., Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). For instance, Sundar and Limperos (2013) noted that contemporary uses and gratifications research on the motives for online media use continued to largely be based on the characteristics of traditional media. They argued that gratifications (e.g., enjoyment and information-seeking) are conceptualized and operationalized too broadly and miss the nuanced gratifications obtained from newer media.

Additionally, many scholars have called for future studies to consider the potential influences of new media technologies on users' gratifications (e.g., Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Ruggiero, 2000; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Although the study does not argue for a technological deterministic approach, it is true that different media features provide opportunities for audience members to satisfy novel needs and desires (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016; Rui & Stefanone, 2016). As a consequence, individuals may develop new expectations for their media choices, which leads to different motives for media use. For instance, researchers have identified several

gratifications related to streaming media content. These include social interaction, an immersive experience, and cultural inclusion, which had not been widely discussed in traditional television research (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020).

Unlike many investigations of traditional television viewing (e.g., Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Eastman & Ferguson, 2006; Perse & Ferguson, 1993; Rubin, 1983), social interaction has been identified as a prominent motive of streaming media consumption (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Susanno, Phedra, & Murwani, 2019; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). This is partly because contemporary audiences' access to the internet, social media, and multi-screen activities facilitate social engagement (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017; Pittman & Tefertiller, 2015; Tang & Cooper, 2017). The increasing popularity and impact of streaming media content also may lead to stronger social motives among audiences. That is, audiences may have a strong motive to consume streaming content to catch-up or to be a part of the conversation. In an era where audience members are constantly connected by mobile and networking technologies (Jenkins et al., 2015; Wellman et al., 2003), these potential new viewing patterns and gratifications are worth more research attention.

### ***Methodological Flaws***

As LaRose et al. (2001) pointed out, “uses and gratifications researchers typically start with descriptions of common media uses, obtain ratings of the frequency or importance of those uses, and factor analyze the results to obtain gratification factors that are then correlated with media use” (p. 396). That is, in addition to several theoretical

flaws, some agent-based studies also suffer from a number of methodological limitations. This line of studies usually relies on self-reported data to measure audiences' media usage, and recall bias is almost unavoidable. For example, many uses and gratifications studies assumed that audience members were fully aware of their own media usage and motives and were able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that usage (Baran & David, 2015; Rubin, 2009).

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of most uses and gratifications studies preclude any causal assertions, and non-probability sampling violates the assumptions of many statistical analyses (Hayes, 2020; Meyers et al., 2013). Given that most latent motivations are hard to articulate, measures of individuals' motives usually raise validity concerns (Becker, 1979; Ruggiero, 2000). Although many researchers have sought to address these methodological flaws by employing diverse methods, such as interviews, experiments, or multi-phase surveys (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2011; Luo & Remus, 2014; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Yuan & Webster, 2006), criticisms remain. As Webster (1998) argued, "audience activity is a slippery concept. Nowhere is it more troublesome than in the assertion that people are aware of why they do what they do, and that they can provide reliable reports of the meanings and gratifications of media use" (p. 202).

To date, contemporary audience research seems to focus on individual factors, such as motivation and preferences (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Mahoney & Tang, 2016; Rubin, 2009; Webster, 2014). However, the agent-based approach not only suffers from a number of limitations, including a reliance on self-reported media

use, predefined variables, and often a cross-sectional design, but also runs the risk of missing insights that come with a macro-level analysis. Given the complexity of audiences' media selections, focusing on individual factors can lead us to overlook the roles of the media themselves and social structures in shaping contemporary audience behaviors (Webster, 1998, 2018).

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

Distinct from the agent-based approach which considers individuals as reasoning actors, the structural approach emphasizes macro-level factors as the primary determinants of audience behavior (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Cooper & Tang, 2013; McQuail, 1985; Taneja et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2006, 2014; Webster & Lichty, 1991; Webster & Newton, 1988; Weibull, 1985; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). Giddens' (1984) work emphasized the pivotal role of social systems in shaping individuals' behaviors, which formed the basis for this approach (Copper & Tang, 2009; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Stones, 2005; Webster, 2018; Weibull, 1985; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). As Giddens (1984) defined it, structure is usually understood as "some kind of patterning of social relations or social phenomena.....that make it possible for discernably similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space" (p. 16-17). Giddens (1984) conceptualized structures as the rules and resources that people use to achieve their purposes. In the media context, these include both media structures and social structures, such as language, social networks, commute time, and work schedules (e.g., Barrett, 1999; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2011, 2018).

Audience researchers have used a number of methods to explore the relationships between structural factors and audiences' viewing practices. These include surveys, interviews, and observations (Abelman et al., 1979; Cohen, 2002; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Kim, 2016; Rubenking, 2016; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Tang et al., 2022; Voorveld

& Viswanathan, 2015; Yuan, 2011). Numerous scholars also have conducted studies using aggregated data (usually secondary analyses of Nielsen data) to demonstrate consistent patterns of macro-level audience behavior (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1992; Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Goodhardt et al., 1987; McDowell & Dick, 2003; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2005; Webster & Newton, 1988; Webster & Wang, 1992; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). Most of these studies focused on audiences' program choices, with programs' ratings used as a measure of audience viewing behavior.

In television research, traditional structural factors include audience availability, scheduling strategies, the exclusivity of and access to content, the number of competing options, program type, continuing/non-continuing storyline, channel assignment, network affiliation, and the promotion a program receives, among others (Adams, 1998; Adams & Eastman, 1997; Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Davis & Walker, 1990; Eastman, Neal-Lundsford & Riggs, 1995; Eastman & Newton, 1998; Goodhardt et al., 1975; Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Webster et al., 2006; Webster & Wang, 1992). In a study of the relationship between program ratings and affiliation change, Barrett (1999) found the previous year's rating was the most significant predictor of a program's performance in a subsequent year, and affiliation change was less significant than other variables. Likewise, Adams and Eastman (1997) showed that the best predictor of a program's performance was its performance in the past.

Webster and Wang (1992) found program scheduling characteristics, continuing vs. non-continuing storylines, and program ratings taken together accounted for 83 percent of the variance in audiences' repeat viewing. In a more recent study, Taneja and



Viswanathan (2014) examined the factors that influence time spent with different genres of television content, and they found that even in this high-choice media environment, structural factors such as availability still play dominant roles. Findings across different contexts showed that structural factors were more influential than individual factors (e.g., motivation, preference) in explaining audiences' television viewing and general media consumption (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Perusko, et al., 2015; Taneja et al., 2012; Taneja & Webster, 2016; Webster, 2014; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Webster & Phalen, 1997; Wonneberger et al., 2009, 2011).

### **Audience Availability**

While traditional agent-based approaches focus on how an audience member chooses between different viewing options, audience selectivity is essentially a two-step process: the audience member first decides whether to watch (a largely passive activity) and then decides what to watch (a more active behavior) (Barrett, 2019; Cooper, 1996; Gensch & Shaman, 1980; Heeter & Greenberg, 1988; Katz et al., 1974; Perse, 1990; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Webster, 2006; Webster et al., 2005; Webster & Phalen, 1997). One of the key factors that influences the first choice is audience's availability, which is widely considered a precursor to other structural factors (Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009).

Audience availability generally refers to when the audience is able to use a medium (Barrett, 1999; Cooper, 1993; Copper & Tang, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2014). Simply put, audiences will use media only when they have the time to do so and have access to these media (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). It is important to note

that just because audience members are available, it does not mean they will watch (Taneja, et al., 2012; Webster, 2018). Many studies operationalized audience availability as time spent watching television, but such a measure did not include the time an audience member might be available to watch television but decided to do something else (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja, et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2006). To overcome this limitation, Taneja et al. (2012) expanded the measure of availability beyond time spent viewing and HUTs (households using television) and PUTs (persons using television) to include “time spent at work, time spent at home, and time spent commuting” (p. 958). In line with prior studies (Ferguson & Perse, 1993; Webster, 2011; Yuan & Webster, 2006), Taneja et al. (2012) identified audience availability as a crucial determinant of media repertoires.

In television viewing, availability leads to a decision on whether watch television that often precedes program choice (Cooper, 1996; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Studies on traditional linear television found that audiences watch television at the same time each day, irrespective of what programs are on (Barwise et al., 1982; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster & Phalen, 1997), partly because they are available during these time slots. Further, as Webster (2014) noted, television viewing follows consistent patterns, predictably varying by time of day, day of the week, and week of the year.

Additionally, structural determinants of program choice found in areas like repeat viewing and channel loyalty become “activated” only after audience members are available to watch (Barrett, 2019). Even in the current media environment, where

audiences have more autonomy and countless media options, they are still bound by the fixed amount of time they have for media use (e.g., Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Wonneberger et al., 2011).

In general, audiences with more availability have more time to spend on a variety of media content, and they tend to “like” all programs more (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Goodhardt et al., 1975), while those with less availability use their limited time to watch the most popular programs or content (e.g., Elberse, 2008; Nelson & Webster, 2016; Webster et al., 2014). This often leads to a “winner-take-all” situation, where the most popular media products attract the most loyal audiences. This phenomenon also is referred to as the law of Double Jeopardy, where lesser-known media products suffer two disadvantages: not being chosen because (1) large numbers of people do not know about them and (2) those who know them tend to choose other alternatives (McDowell & Dick, 2005; McPhee, 1963; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Webster et al., 2014).

In the traditional television context, audience availability is not only an important predictor of audiences’ media diet, but also significantly affects television program schedules (Cohenn, 2002; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster & Newton, 1988). For instance, television networks generally schedule the most attractive shows in Prime Time (e.g., 8 to 11 pm) because it has long been the time when the largest number of people are available to watch (Gitlin, 2005). Media platforms also tend to release new programs during the weekend to obtain higher viewership (Alshami, 2016). Other studies found audience availability to be one of the strongest predictors in explaining the frequency of television viewing (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Kim, 2016; Yuan

& Webster, 2006), entertainment (Taneja et al., 2012; Tang & Cooper, 2013), and news viewing (Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Wonneberger et al., 2011).

### **Content Availability and Exclusivity**

Related to audience availability is content availability, which refers to the type of content program creators and distributors make available for viewing. It also is related to when content is available to watch. For instance, in the streaming context (referring to any media that transmit content over the internet for immediate playback, such as Hulu and Netflix), content availability is closely related to when new episodes of a show will be released. In general, an audience member may be more likely to subscribe and consume more content on a streaming platform that has more attractive choices than on a platform that has fewer options (Lotz, 2014; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

Additionally, streaming media audiences are now able to access unlimited options at an affordable price, which not only significantly influences the time they spend on streaming, but also may enhance their viewing experience (Lotz, 2014; Mikos, 2016). As of 2021, more than 80% of American adults subscribed to at least one streaming service (Dabhade, 2021). It is noteworthy that streaming platforms not only produce their own original content but also partner with other content providers to expand their libraries (Lotz, 2014). Beyond general content availability, another important factor that should be considered is access to exclusive content.

In the traditional television context, exclusive content refers to content that is only available on a particular network (Armstrong, 1999; Weeds, 2016). Many traditional

broadcast and cable networks pay high prices for exclusive access to high-profile content (e.g., the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and award ceremonies like the Oscars), partly because exclusive content not only attracts viewers but also helps build media brands (Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Peterson, 2021; Weeds, 2016). There are numerous examples of the importance of exclusive content in the history of television. One of the most noteworthy is the impact of Fox Broadcasting's purchase of the rights to National Football League (NFL) games in 1993 (Sandomir, 1993), which upended the television network/affiliation relationship (Barrett, 1999; Lippman, 1994) and led to the rise of Fox Sports in the following decades (Curtis, 2018). Other examples include Sky and British Satellite Broadcasting's rivalry to obtain exclusive movie rights from Hollywood studios in the 1990s (Armstrong, 1999), as well as China Central Television's collaboration with the National Basketball Association (NBA) to broadcast NBA games (Saiidi, 2018).

In the streaming context, exclusive content refers to content that is only available to subscribers of a certain platform (Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Colbjørnsen, 2021; Lotz & Havens, 2016; Weeds, 2016). Lotz (2017) considered content exclusivity a central component of the subscription model of streaming services, and it also is one of the major reasons audience members subscribe to a platform in the first place and continue their subscriptions in the future (Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Colbjørnsen, 2021; Criteo, 2021; Fagerjord & Kueng, 2019; Forristal, 2022; Lotz, 2014; Lotz & Havens, 2016; Mikos, 2016; Stoll, 2022a).

In general, a streaming platform has to invest in exclusive content to be competitive (Cross, 2021; Emmer, 2019; Jenner, 2017). Over the past decade, various

streaming platforms have strived to differentiate themselves from competitors by providing exclusive content to subscribers (Allbones, 2019; Satell, 2013). For instance, Netflix invested at least \$100 million to be the sole distributor of *House of Cards* (Greenfield, 2013), which solidified the company's leading role in the industry (Satell, 2013). HBO invested more than \$1.5 billion for eight seasons of *Games of Thrones*, which generated \$3.1 billion through HBO subscriptions (Finance Monthly, 2019). More recently, Disney+ paid about \$120 million (per season) to make *The Mandalorian*, which became a huge commercial success (Spence, 2020). By making exclusive, high-quality content available to its subscribers, a streaming service can also earn market share from its rivals (Koblin, 2020; Weeds, 2016).

To date, most studies have looked at the role of content exclusivity from a business or economic perspective (e.g., Armstrong, 1999; Choi, 2010; Dukes & Gal-Or, 2003; Ishihara & Oki, 2017; Peitz & Valletti, 2008; Weeds, 2016). For instance, Ishihara and Oki (2017) investigated the role of exclusive content in two-sided markets (i.e., users on one side and a content provider on the other side), and demonstrated that exclusive supply can be a profitable strategy for content providers. Weeds (2016) examined incentives for exclusive distribution of premium television programs and noted that content exclusivity is the primary means by which distributors can compete for market share. Although exclusive content is widely considered a macro-level structural factor that is out of the control of individual audience members, little is known about how exclusive content may influence audiences' viewing practices. In the streaming era where

audiences have unlimited choices, the exclusivity of content deserves much more scholarly attention.

### **Other Structural Factors**

In addition to the structural factors discussed above, the number of options available to viewers also plays an important role in predicting audiences' viewing behaviors (e.g., Adams, 1998; Barrett, 1999, 2019; Barwise, 1986; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012; Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Webster, 1985, 2014; Webster & Newton, 1988). For example, Webster (1985) found that the size of the earlier program's rating and the number of choices available significantly predicted audience duplication (i.e., the percentage of viewers who watch program A who also watch program B). Other studies showed that the number of options available was a significant predictor of audiences' repeat-viewing behaviors (Barwise, 1986; Cooper 1993). Specifically, findings showed that repeat-viewing levels decreased as the number of options available to viewers increased (Davis & Walker, 1990; Horen, 1980; Walker, 1988; Webster & Newton, 1988).

Several emerging structural factors are worth further attention, including the role of social recommendation systems (Barrett, 2019) and the characteristics of audiences' personal networks (Webster, 2018), both of which reflect a social aspect of television viewing. In the linear television context, many studies have explored audiences' social-viewing behaviors (Lull, 1980; Morrison & Krugman, 2001; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Saxbe et al., 2011; Schmitt et al., 2003; Sparkes, 1983; Webster & Wakshalg, 1982). For instance, Sparkes (1983) and Haran (1995) noted that television viewing was largely a

social activity that was often conducted in groups. Perse and Rubin (1990) found that lonely viewers were more passive and less likely than non-lonely viewers to watch soap operas for social interaction. Saxbe et al. (2011) explored families' everyday viewing practices, and found that parents tend to engage in television viewing as a social activity, but children were more likely to be solo viewers.

Although many studies addressed the social aspect of linear television viewing, the widespread use of interactive media (e.g., social media) has altered audiences' viewing practices (e.g., Cha, 2016; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). For example, the browser extension "TeleParty" (also called Netflix Party) has gained popularity as it provides audiences with a new way to watch streaming content remotely with friends (Desk, 2019). Haridakis and Hanson (2009) explored audiences' YouTube viewing behaviors and found that while people watch videos on YouTube for some of the same reasons identified in studies of linear television use, there is a strong social motivation for YouTube use. That is, the level of audiences' participation in social activities was also a strong predictor of YouTube viewing behaviors.

Additionally, because there is no centralized "TV guide" available for streaming media services, audiences must be able to effectively become aware of and find content to watch. To do so, many audience members often rely on recommendations from multiple sources, including (1) significant others (e.g., friends, family), (2) platforms' recommendation systems, and (3) online recommender sites (e.g., Rotten Tomatoes, iMDB), to decide what to watch (Barrett, 2019; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2011, 2018).



Several studies showed that individuals were likely to consume particular content when the content was recommended by others (e.g., Schweidal & Moe, 2016; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Shim & Kim, 2018). In addition to the word-of-mouth effects, today's audiences often rely on platforms' recommender systems to find out what is available and what is popular (Chhabra, 2017; Krysik, 2021). For example, according to a 2017 report, approximately 80% of the content watched on the platform is based on Netflix recommendations (Chhabra, 2017).

In addition to interpersonal and algorithmic recommendations, the program's score on recommender sites like Rotten Tomatoes may also impact audiences' program choices. Barrett's (2019) study is perhaps the first to incorporate a program's Rotten Tomatoes score to capture the role of a popular recommender system in determining television program performance. The results showed that the relationship between the weighted Rotten Tomatoes score and program share was relatively weak, suggesting that individuals' viewing decisions may be based on other factors like habit rather than score on recommender sites. Despite their importance in influencing audiences' program choices, these emerging structural factors have not been adequately addressed by the extant literature, and are worthy of more scholarly attention.

### **The Role of Habit in Audience Research**

In addition to the structural factors mentioned above, another important component that underlies television audience behavior is habit (Webster, 1998). A significant amount of behavioral research has demonstrated the critical role of habits in influencing people's behaviors (e.g., Ajzen, 2011; James, 1983; Klöckner, 2013;

Klöckner & Blöbaum, 2010; Knowlton et al., 1996; Orbell & Verplanken, 2014; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Wood & Neal, 2017; Wood & Rüniger, 2016; Verplanken, 2006, 2018; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). However, habit has received much less attention in audience research (e.g., Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Tokunaga, 2020; 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; Chun, 2016; LaRose, 2010; Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Wood, 2019). Wood and Neal (2017) 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, 2010, p. 46). Among media users, the habit process usually yields a stable and long-term pattern of frequent use (LaRose, 2010; Goh et al., 2019; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019). For example, we check e-mail 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 (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Wood et al., 2002). Further, 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; James, 1983; Wood et al., 2002).

As a core component of human behaviors, habits have received much less attention in media and communication research than in the psychology field (LaRose, 2010; Wood & R nger, 2016). Social psychology studies not have only focused on the measurement of habits and their consequences, but also explored the underlying mechanisms that drive habit formation and change (e.g., Aarts et al., 1998; Carden & Wood, 2018; Verplanken, 2006, 2018; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood, 2017; Wood & R nger, 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; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; 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; LaRose, 2010; Shin et al., 2018; Wood, 2017; Wood & Neal, 2007). For instance, Shin 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., Gleib, 2012; Matrix, 2014; Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Walton-Pattison et al., 2018; Wood, 2017).

Routine, which is sometimes used interchangeably with habit, generally refers to 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). In other words, a routine is a habitual behavior that people will engage in (e.g., Netflix before bed) if given a certain cue (Duhigg, 2012; Shin et al., 2018; Wood & Neal, 2007).

As another important component in the habit formation process, is reward which refers to the positive reinforcement of a desired behavior, making it more likely the behavior will be performed again (Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Verplanken, 2018; Wood, 2017; Wood & Runger, 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., Gardner, 2015; LaRose, 2010; Limayem et al., 2007; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Tannenbaum, 1985). 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. As Tannenbaum (1985) noted, when an audience member was asked why she/he chose a particular program to watch, the respondent answered, “because it is a funny program.” When asked why she/he watched the same episode again in the same week, the respondent said, “because it was funny the first time” (p. 227). That is, the reward audiences obtained from their media usage

reinforced their viewing behaviors, which further impacted the habit formation process (LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997).

As Wood (2017) indicated, habit formation emerges through reward learning. As habits strengthen, people naturally become less sensitive to rewards, and their behaviors become routinely performed and tend to occur subconsciously (e.g., Carden & Wood, 2018; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Wood & Runger, 2016).

### **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 (Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Adams, 2000; Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Cooper, 1996; Irani et al., 2010; LaRose, 2010; Perse, 1992; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Rubenking & Bracken, 2018, 2021; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Shim et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 1990; Tannenbaum, 1985; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

One of the seminal studies that considered the role of habit in television viewing behavior is that of Rosenstein and Grant (1997), who 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 was 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) includes 12 Likert-type items to measure habit strength<sup>2</sup> (i.e., the degree of automaticity a behavior has in a given stable situation), which has been widely applied to measure audiences' habits in different media contexts (e.g., Ang, 2017; LaRose et al., 2003; Naab & Schnauber, 2016). 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. Several studies also identified habits as one of the strongest predictors of individuals' streaming viewing practices (e.g., Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Rubenking & Bracken, 2018, 2021; Shin et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

In media research, habits commonly are considered an indication of audience passivity (Blumler, 1979; Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Step, 2000; Stone & Stone, 1990). 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 or eliminating boredom (Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Rubin, 1983, 1984; Rubin & Step, 2000; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). However, such conceptualization and operationalization are not appropriate because habit and motivation have fundamental differences, and some uses and gratifications studies often confound these two concepts (LaRose, 2010). Specifically, habits are automatic and unconscious

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<sup>2</sup> SRHI focuses on three characteristics of automatic behavior. These include 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").

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; Lin, 1993; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Step, 2000; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). Given this conceptual contradiction (e.g., habit is passive and unconscious vs. motivation assumes active and conscious), 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, 2010; LaRose & Eastin, 2004), and it is more appropriate for media researchers to consider habits under the structural approach.

As opposed to agent-based researchers, structural proponents pay closer attention to habitual behavior (Adams, 2000; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Rosenstein and 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 (Adams, 2000; Barrett, 2019; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Rubenking & Bracken, 2018, 2021; Shin et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster & Wang, 1992).

### **Familiarity, Certainty, and Media Habit Formation**

In addition to the three components (i.e., cue, routine, and reward) mentioned above, there are several other constructs associated with the habit formation process. These include familiarity and certainty. In the case of television viewing, familiarity means that audiences have some sort of knowledge about a certain program, including what it is about and where and when to find it. Some studies have suggested that network

affinity (e.g., audiences' perceptions of the importance of broadcast networks in their lives) and program affinity (e.g., audiences' perceptions of the importance of programs in their lives) significantly affect audiences' media selections (Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Abelman et al., 1997; Lyn et al., 2002; Rubin & Perse, 1987). That is, an audience member who feels a stronger connection with a particular program or network will be more likely to watch that program or network in the future.

Psychology research has tried for a long time to determine if people prefer novel stimuli or familiar ones. The answer seems to be that it depends on the situation (e.g., Liao et al, 2011; Schacter et al, 2011). Many studies showed that familiarity is a critical factor in determining audiences' platform adoption, program choices, and viewing attention (Cooper, 1996; Heeter, 1985; Piotrowski, 2014; Piotrowski et al., 2013; Rubin & Perse, 1987). For instance, the more audiences are familiar with a platform or channel (e.g., Netflix and Hulu), the more they tend to watch, and the more they watch, the stronger their relationship with the media, so they tend to watch even more. Further, several studies showed that program familiarity significantly impacted audiences' viewing behaviors (Piotrowski, 2014; Schiappa et al., 2007; Tannenbaum, 1985). That is, as audience members become more familiar with and fond of a TV series, it is more likely for them to watch the same series in the following days.

Certainty is another concept that is relevant to habit formation (Tannenbaum, 1985). In the streaming context, certainty refers to the likelihood a program will be available when expected. It is also linked to schedule consistency, which allows audience members to know when and where to find the content they are looking for. Certainty and



familiarity lead to less stress among audience members when they make program choices, which has a positive impact on their habit formation (De Berker et al., 2016; Piotrowski, 2014; Wood & Runger, 2016). For example, if an audience member is pretty sure that the content he/she expected will be available on a streaming platform, he or she is more likely to continue using the platform rather than switch to an alternative.

Furthermore, 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 (Barrett, 2019; Barwise et al., 1982; Cooper, 1996; Tannenbaum, 1985; Webster & Wang, 1992). 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; Webster & Wang, 1992; Wood & Runger, 2016).

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 (Lotz, 2014; Rubenking & Bracken, 2018, 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.

## **Exploring Habits and Structural Factors in the Streaming Context**

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 (Clark, 2020; Raine, 2017; Schweidal & 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). In addition, in 2019, Netflix reported that users on average spent around two hours per day on its platform. However, these numbers grew significantly during 2020, partly because audiences were forced to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen, 2020).

Among streaming services, Netflix is the pioneer and leading company. Founded in 1997, Netflix began as an online-based DVD rental service (Netflix, 2021). In its early years, the major service Netflix provided was to offer video alternatives by delivering DVDs using the mail with no late fees (Keating, 2012). By 2007, Netflix had grown into an online streaming platform and eventually became one of the biggest entertainment and media companies in the world. By adapting to new technologies and user behavior, Netflix established a new watching platform, which significantly altered audiences' viewing practices (Susanno et al., 2019). In 2020, Netflix accounted for 34 percent of streaming time in U.S. homes, followed by YouTube at 20 percent and Hulu at 11 percent (Nielsen, 2020).

Most other streaming services were associated with the television branding infrastructure and provided viewers with re-run shows, while Netflix was the first streaming service to offer its own original content to its subscribers (Jenner, 2016). Its original series helped the company attract considerable subscribers and expand its loyal consumer base. Also, collaborating with television set manufacturers (e.g., Samsung, Sharp, Sony), Netflix introduced the one-click button for remote controls in 2011, which allowed users to instantly access Netflix on compatible devices (Shankland, 2011). As of June 2021, Netflix had over 209 million subscribers in more than 130 countries, including 74 million in the United States and Canada (Stoll, 2021a).

Additionally, 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, 2011). Online streaming 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 audiences' streaming viewing practices. Based on both agent-based and structural theories, this study aims to examine the roles of individual and structural factors in audiences' Netflix viewing, thereby providing new insights about contemporary audience behaviors. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

RQ1: What motivates people to watch Netflix?

RQ2: To what extent do structural factors (e.g., audience availability, the exclusivity of and access to content) affect people's Netflix viewing?

RQ3: To what extent does habit influence people's Netflix viewing?

## CHAPTER 4

### METHOD

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) the installation of the browser extension 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.

#### **Rationale for a Mixed-methods Approach**

Traditional audience research, especially the agent-based approach, relies heavily on surveys to measure individuals' motivations, attitudes, and media usage (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Ha et al, 2015; Moy & Murphy, 2016; Pittman, & Sheehan, 2015; Rubin, 1983; Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 2020; Shao & Benaza, 2018). However, as discussed above, survey research suffers from a number of limitations, which makes it inappropriate for assessing structural factors and audiences' actual media usage. For instance, prior studies found that estimating audience availability and media habits through surveys could be inaccurate (Cooper & Tang, 2009, Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014).

Furthermore, considerable studies have assessed audiences' viewing behaviors based on secondary analyses of Nielsen data (e.g., Barrett, 1999, 2019; Taneja et al.,

2012; Webster & Newton, 1988; Webster & Wang, 1992; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). Although Nielsen ratings data provide reasonable estimates of audiences' viewing behaviors, these data are aggregated, and individual-level data (e.g., an individual's viewing activities) are usually unobtainable.

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, behavior, or situation (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Creswell, 2014). For example, Steiner and Xu (2020) conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to explore why people binge-watch, how they binge-watch, and how they feel about binge-watching. Steiner and Xu's (2020) study demonstrated the strengths of in-depth interviews in examining contemporary audiences' viewing behaviors. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information about an audience member's streaming viewing than what is available through other data collection methods.

Further, unlike surveys and computational methods, the in-depth interview can provide more substantive and robust answers to "how" and "why" questions (e.g., Boyce & Neale, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Weiss, 1994), which makes it appropriate for identifying the roles played by motivational and structural factors when examining streaming behavior (e.g., Eginli & Tas, 2018; O'Brien, Freund & Westman, 2014; Steiner & Xu, 2020). The in-depth interview is particularly useful in the context of the current study, because certain motivational and structural factors, especially those that are latent in nature, would be difficult to access using other approaches. Further, this research

method has seen extensive usage in the social sciences, such as journalism, communication, and psychology (Creswell, 2014; Searle, 2020; Silcock, 2002).

Additionally, measuring audiences' actual viewing behaviors is a critical challenge for media researchers. Although self-reported measures are widely used (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Pittman, & Sheehan, 2015), such an approach suffers from a number of limitations. For example, media usage could be underreported because audiences may not be able to accurately assess their behaviors or be willing to admit how much time they spend consuming media. Numerical scales also can be inexact and subjective. Moreover, recall and social desirability bias can influence results (Antin & Shaw, 2012). Therefore, to obtain a more accurate measurement of participants' Netflix viewing behaviors, this study uses data obtained through screenshot summaries of that behavior collected through a participant-installed browser extension, Netflix Viewing Stats.<sup>3</sup>

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 (<https://www.netflix.com/>). The extension loads all of the viewing activity from a single user's profile and calculates a set of statistics about the user's activities, such as the specific shows (e.g., movies, documentaries, and series) s/he has watched, the number of devices s/he has used, and when s/he began watching (Appendix A). 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

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<sup>3</sup> For more details: [https://medium.com/@h\\_martos/netflix-viewing-stats-unleash-your-data-fa2adb33827c](https://medium.com/@h_martos/netflix-viewing-stats-unleash-your-data-fa2adb33827c)

smart TVs. Although the extension is profile-based, given the extent of password sharing (Spangler, 2023), it is possible that people other than the participants may have been using their profiles to watch Netflix.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval,<sup>4</sup> a two-stage snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants in the United States, both male and female. First, an announcement was posted on Facebook and WeChat and a clear description of the research process was provided to prospective participants (Appendix B). Second, each participant was asked to invite others who might be interested in this study. Only respondents who were willing to complete all three phases were invited to participate.

After respondents expressed their interest in participating, the researcher sent an introductory letter and consent form via email (Appendix C, Appendix D). This letter included the following: the study's objective, anticipated interview duration (up to 60 minutes), details regarding compensation, and assurance that the data would only be used for research purposes in anonymous form. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the study. Participants also were asked to complete a consent form indicating they agree to take part in all three phases of the study. After participants signed the consent form, a short questionnaire was used to obtain basic demographic

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<sup>4</sup> The study procedures were designed in accordance with standards concerning research projects that involve human beings at the Arizona State University. All participants were informed about the study and signed a consent form certifying their willingness to participate.



information, including the participants' age, gender, employment, and educational background (Appendix E). All participants' identities remained confidential.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that some respondents expressed interest in participating in the study but did not respond to the letters of invitation to schedule the first round of interviews. The researcher did not send follow-up invitations to them because a sufficient number of respondents had already agreed to participate.

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.<sup>6</sup> Face-to-face communication allows researchers to observe interviewees' facial expressions and feelings during interactions, facilitating the interpretation process.

This study used open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, allowing the conversations to flow organically (Brennen, 2013; Rabionet, 2011; Steiner & Xu, 2020). Icebreaker questions were designed to build a rapport with interviewees. Next, based on the proposed research questions and previous studies (e.g., Flayelle, Maurage, & Billieux, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020), participants were asked about their Netflix viewing behaviors. Questions included the following: "When are you usually available to watch Netflix?", "How do you decide what to watch?", and "Are there any specific

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<sup>5</sup> To ensure confidentiality, randomized ID was assigned to each participant.

<sup>6</sup> Following IRB approval, the interview data was stored in a secure cloud drive, which is password-protected and accessible only via dual-authorization.

characteristics of Netflix that encourage you to use it?” (Appendix F).<sup>7</sup> At the end of the interview, detailed instructions were provided to participants on how to install the Netflix Viewing Stats extension on their computers (Appendix G). Participants were also instructed to watch Netflix as usual for a week after they had installed the extension.

One week after the phase-one interviews, a follow-up email invitation was sent to respondents asking them to upload their screenshots from the Netflix viewing extension (Appendix H). Along with the email, participants were invited to a follow-up interview that took place in the following weeks. The time span between interviews was individually agreed-upon, depending on each participant’s availability. 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.

As an incentive for participating in this study, each participant received a \$25 Amazon gift card after s/he completed the phase-one interview. A second \$25 Amazon gift card was provided after s/he uploaded the screenshots from the Chrome extension. A \$50 Amazon gift card was provided to each participant after the phase-two interviews. Overall, each participant received a total of \$100 in gift cards as an incentive. All 31 participants who completed the initial interviews also completed phases two and three of the study.

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<sup>7</sup> Before conducting the interviews, all interview questions were presented to experts to ensure validity, and unclear questions were be re-worded.

## **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, stay-at-home parents, health care professionals, university professors, and engineers. In this study, all participants had been using Netflix since 2015.

## **Data Analysis**

Data from about 35 hours of interviews (around 35 minutes for each of the two interview sessions) 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; Seidman, 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). That is, the researcher analyzed the data without trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data analysis for this study included four-steps: data preparation, data exploration, theme identification, and results interpretation (e.g., Hesse-Biber & Leavy,

2010; Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006). All interviews were first transcribed with Zoom's "live transcript" function and then imported into the data analysis software NVivo.<sup>8</sup> Second, the researcher made detailed notes of anything within the transcript that was relevant to the research questions. Third, the researcher identified the major themes from each participant's transcript. Key quotations from the transcripts were placed under their relevant theme(s), thereby capturing core details and information reported by interviewees. The final step involved interpreting the results. The researcher looked for connections and commonalities across the themes that emerged during the third step in the process.

In this study, the first round interviews were coded after completion and preliminary findings were used to guide the follow-up interviews and analyses. To address the research questions, this study linked participants' responses to their actual viewing activities. That is, the researcher analyzed each participant's interview data and viewing activities to identify whether common themes emerged, and to understand how motivational and structural factors interact to influence audiences' particular media choices. Following an iterative process, the researcher moved back and forth over the data, until salient themes emerged (Dey, 2003; St.Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Steiner & Xu, 2020).

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<sup>8</sup> For more details, please see: <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>

## CHAPTER 5

### PHASE ONE RESULTS

As noted in the previous chapters, this study included three phases: (1) pre-test interviews with 31 Netflix users, (2) the installation of a browser extension and submission of screenshots of each participant's weeklong Netflix viewing activities, and (3) post-test interviews with participants to discuss their specific viewing choices. It is worth noting that all of the interview questions were based on the structural and uses and gratifications literatures (Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Castro et al., 2021; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Flayelle et al., 2019; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Taneja et al., 2012; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster, 2018).

All of the participants in this study have been using Netflix at least since 2015, and ten participants have been using the service for more than ten years. 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.

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 and the degree to which their motivations and behaviors align.

#### **RQ1: What Motivates People to Watch Netflix?**

In line with the uses and gratification literature, this study found participants use Netflix for enjoyment, to relax, detach, escape from work, for cultural inclusion, a sense of completion, to catch-up, a fear of missing out, and for information. Based on the

participants' responses and the uses and gratifications framework, these motives fell into one of three themes: hedonic, social, and instrumental (e.g., Flayelle et al., 2017; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Steiner, 2019; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tefertiller & Sheehan 2019; Vaterlaus et al. 2019). In most cases, participants indicated their viewing decisions were influenced by more than one motivation at a time, and many participants said they watched Netflix for a number of different reasons (e.g., for entertainment and to build social connections).

***Theme 1: Hedonic Motivation (enjoyment, relaxation, detachment/escape, a sense of completion)***

Hedonic motivation generally refers to audience members' desires to pursue pleasure, amusement, escape, and fantasy (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011; Stevens & Dillman Carpentier, 2017). Prior research identified the hedonic motive as a key antecedent to individuals' media consumption, aligned with the classic motivational principle that people pursue pleasure and avoid pain (e.g., Higgin, 2006; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Lim et al., 2010).

This study found hedonic motivation (e.g., enjoyment, relaxation, escape, and a sense of completion) was the predominant motive related to participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. Specifically, more than half of the participants said they used Netflix primarily for enjoyment, to relax, and to detach from their daily lives. For instance, when asked why the person chose Netflix, P1 said, "*Probably to take my mind off of things, just to go into a happy place, not have to think about my own stressors, and just go to another mental place.*" Similarly, P2 said the primary reason for using Netflix is "*just to relax.*"

*Chill out...kind of forget about the day's work."* P3 mentioned a similar motive: *"I really enjoyed the content on Netflix. I used it when I felt really bored and was looking for something to entertain myself."*

P4, who has been using Netflix since 2013, emphasized the role of streaming in helping to balance work and life: *"sometimes I don't want to think about, like, my problems, you know, like, school, or whatever, or to procrastinate because I really do not want to read those books, so I just literally turn on Netflix and just start looking around for shows."*

P5 said Netflix was used as a way to recover and detach from daily work: *"maybe motivation is to turn off my mind from what I'm doing currently, and just watch something that I enjoy, makes me happy."* Several participants echoed this point. For instance, P6 said, *"because there's lots of stress in people's everyday lives. And I'm watching a show it is definitely a form of escapism and to try to relax and not think about your own characters for a while."* P7 said, *"I would say it's mostly to relax, take my mind off of worries, maybe learn something new but that's not the primary motivation. If I watch a documentary or something, it's mainly to relax and to, you know, watch a good show and do something relaxing before I get to sleep, and it will have the secondary effect of being informational."*

These conversations demonstrate the pivotal importance of the hedonic motivation in participants' Netflix viewing, which is in line with the existing literature about streaming viewing behaviors (e.g., Nanda & Banerjee, 2020; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Rigby et al., 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan,

2019). During the first round of interviews, participants also consistently said that Netflix's unlimited programs and its on-demand capability help to fulfill their entertainment needs. For example, P8 said, *"my major purpose of using Netflix is to be entertained, finding entertainment that I can't get on regular cable TV and having that real on demand capability."*

Several studies identified a sense of completion as an important reason behind binge-watching behaviors (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Devasagayam, 2014; Merikivi et al., 2020; Pittman & Steiner, 2019; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020). Similar to the feeling one has when finishing a task, a few participants said they have a sense of completion when they finish watching a show or movie on Netflix. Several participants also said they have a list of shows they are going to watch on Netflix, and they were motivated to finish watching a show so that they could move on to the next one on their list. For instance, P4 said, *"I like watching Netflix uninterrupted. I am the type of viewer that I will watch until I finish it. I do not feel accomplished until I finish the whole thing.....Watching a show made me feel that I have completed something, which makes me feel good."* Similarly, P7 said that watching popular shows on Netflix made her feel like she had completed a task. Another participant (P17) also said he felt a sense of relief when he finished watching a series.

### ***Theme 2: Social Motivation***

Numerous media studies also have found that audience members often have a need to interact with others, to engage in a present or future conversation, to be accepted by individuals or groups, or to seek companionship (e.g., Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017;



Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Gros et al., 2017; Kim & Sintas, 2021; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2019). These are referred to as “social motivations.” The current study found that social motivations play a critical role not only in terms of Netflix viewing frequency but also in participants’ program choices.

Although streaming viewing is often considered a solitary activity (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Rigby et al., 2018; Sung et al., 2018), many interviewees said that cultural inclusion and social interactions were important reasons for them to use Netflix. Moreover, several participants said that they watched popular shows on Netflix simply because they wanted to catch up or to be a part of “the cool club.” For instance, when asked why she chose Netflix, P10, who has used Netflix for more than five years, said “*I guess catching up, or just to be a part of the conversation.*” Similarly, P11 said the majority of his Netflix viewing was driven by social reasons, and he watched Netflix in order to talk with friends about what was going on. When asked how he chooses a show to watch, P17 said, “*I would also say just to see why my friends like to watch the show or something.*” P2 echoed this point and said she watched Netflix “*because I am curious about what everyone was talking about.*”

Additionally, interviewees’ participation in various online groups also drives them to watch more Netflix in order to engage in group conversations. Three participants mentioned they were members of several Netflix-related groups on social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Reddit. One participant said she usually checks the Netflix forum on Reddit before deciding what to watch. Another participant

said, *“I have this group chat. In order to engage in that group chat, you have to watch the shows. So, if someone recommends a show, and it looks appealing to me, then I’ll watch it, and then we’ll talk about the characters and the storyline and how we felt about it. So, it’s really just to have that kind of social interaction that drives me to watch different shows, that’s the number one factor.”*

In addition, Netflix also provides users with various recommendation lists (e.g., Today’s Top 10) to increase viewers’ awareness of these programs, which further motivates viewers to catch up or to avoid missing out. As one participant (P12) noted, *“one of the features that I actually like is that they show like the Top 10 names that are being played, so that way it just keeps you informed of like what are people watching right now and then it makes you feel like you’re part of pop culture, because you can talk to people like, oh, ‘did you check out that new show Ratched?’, like you should watch it and you know, it shows the ranks, so I really like that.”*

### ***Theme 3: Instrumental Motivation***

Traditional uses and gratifications theory suggests people sometimes use media to surveil their environment or to obtain informational benefits (e.g., knowledge or practical strategies) (e.g., Baron & David, 2015; Lasswell, 1948; McQuail et al., 1972; Severin & Tankard, 1997; Weaver, 1989; Whiting & Williams, 2013), which are often referred to as instrumental motivations. The current study found that instrumental motivations also apply to audience members’ streaming viewing behaviors.

Although streaming media platforms, like Netflix and Hulu, are widely considered entertainment platforms, informational functions still are important

components. Prior studies found that audience members use streaming services to search for specific information (e.g., Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Groshek & Krongard, 2016; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). In this study, several participants also said their Netflix viewing was driven by informational needs. For instance, a participant, who was a big fan of baking shows, said she watched Netflix in order to improve her cooking skills. Another participant, who had been using Netflix since 2011, mentioned he had used Netflix to learn chess, while a third interviewee said he watched documentaries on Netflix for informational purposes.

Although the instrumental motivation (e.g., information-seeking) was mentioned during the first round of interviews, none of these participants considered information-seeking their primary motive for using Netflix. As one participant said, *“If I watch a documentary or something, it’s mainly to relax and to, you know, watch a good show and do something relaxing before I get to sleep, and it will have the secondary effect of being informational.”* In addition to the motivational factors mentioned above, structural factors also play a critical role in participants’ viewing decisions.

## **RQ2: To What Extent Do Structural Factors Affect People’s Netflix Viewing?**

Structural factors are those at the macro-level (e.g., audience availability, the exclusivity of and access to content, and the number of competing options) that often impact audience members’ viewing behaviors (e.g., Adams, 1998; Adams & Eastman, 1997; Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Davis & Walker, 1990; Eastman, Neal-Lundsford & Riggs, 1995; Goodhardt et al., 1975; Webster & Wang, 1992). However, the academic understanding of the continuing impact of these factors on individuals’

streaming viewing behaviors is limited (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2009; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Taneja et al., 2012; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster, 2014). Therefore, RQ2 considers to what extent structural factors impact people's Netflix viewing behaviors.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2005, 2014), the current study found that, even in the post-network era where audience members have more control over their media consumption, traditional structural factors, including audience availability, content availability, and content exclusivity, still play pivotal roles in determining when and what participants watch.

### ***Theme 1: Audience Availability***

Audience availability generally refers to those periods of time when an audience member is able to use the medium, and has widely been considered the primary structural driver of individuals' media consumption (e.g., Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Ferguson & Perse, 1993; Gensch & Shaman, 1980; Heeter & Greenberg, 1988; Katz et al., 1974; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Perse, 1990; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2014; Yuan & Webster, 2006). Consistent with prior studies, the current study found audience availability to be the predominant factor related to participants' Netflix viewing, not only impacting when and how long they watch, but also exerting influence on their program choices.

When asked when they usually watch Netflix, participants often spontaneously talked about their jobs and other daily routines. For instance, one participant said, “I

*definitely have different schedules cause I'm throughout the day. I go to class so from like 9:30 to about 1 pm or so is taken up by school, so I won't really watch it during then. I would say the prime Netflix watching hours for me would be the weekend that night or during the week, anytime from, like, 2pm to midnight."*

Another interviewee said she only watches Netflix if she has enough time, *"I only watch Netflix only if I know I have like a certain amount of time that I can dedicate to the show. So, if I have like some extra time, 30 minutes to do something, I'll just take a nap rather than like watch Netflix."*

Most participants said that they spent more time on Netflix during the weekend—usually Friday evening through Sunday evening. Many of them preferred watching Netflix during the evening or nighttime simply because they had more time and fewer responsibilities during these periods. For example, one interviewee said *"I do have different schedule between the work day and the weekend...In the weekend, and I do stuff in the evening. You know, even sometimes I'll watch it, like late at night. I'll find myself on the weekends, I'll stay up super late watching Netflix. In the weekdays, I watch a little, at the less amount. I do spend a longer time watching Netflix on the weekend, just because I have less responsibilities."*

Similarly, when asked when he usually watches Netflix, P15 said the most popular time for him to watch is late evening, or during lunch when he watches a short episode of a program. Although this group of Netflix users has countless options and strong motives to watch quite a lot television, their viewing is still primarily dependent on the fixed amount of time they have and on when they are available.

Many participants also said that their viewing schedule and habits differ between weekdays and weekends. For instance, when asked when she usually watches Netflix, P16 said, *“Typically, it’s in the evenings, and if it’s on the weekends that is probably more likely in the mornings.”* Another participant said, *“I don’t typically watch Netflix until after dinner, so around like 7 pm, unless it’s the weekend, then my habits are a little bit different.”* In other words, during the week (Monday to Friday), some participants’ daily routines and responsibilities often take priority over their Netflix viewing.

Moreover, the results showed that participants’ increased availability on the weekends not only influences the amount of time they spend on Netflix, but also impacts their program choices. Several participants said when they have less time available during the week, they prefer shorter programs (e.g., 30-minute episodes); they only watch longer movies or binge-watch shows on the weekends in order to have an uninterrupted and continuous viewing experiences. For instance, one interviewee said, *“if I do watch it throughout the week, it is typically in the evening, but if I know I want to start a show, I’ll probably start it on the weekend, just so I can have more time to binge watch it without any interruptions.”*

Participants’ workloads on different days of the week also played a role in their media consumption. When asked whether her Netflix viewing is different during the week versus the weekend, one participant said, *“Yes, I would say so. I think on the weekend, I’m definitely more likely to watch Netflix, but towards the end of the week, like maybe Thursday and Friday. I might watch it more because I might feel like the week has been really exhausting and I want to just like sit and relax and watch TV.”*

Although many of the participants said they watched more Netflix on the weekend, there were some exceptions. One participant said the best time for her to watch Netflix is weekdays, partly because she has to redistribute the time she allocates to other outdoor activities: *“on the weekends, I actually don’t really watch as much because I’m out with my friends. So it’s mostly during the day, like I like to fall asleep while watching Netflix during weekdays, but on weekends and normally with my friends, and we don’t really watch TV.”*

### ***Theme 2: Content Availability***

Previous studies have found audiences’ program choices are contingent not only on the individual’s availability to watch television but also on the availability of specific programs (e.g., Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Mikos, 2016; Webster, 2018; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983; Weeds, 2016). Compared with linear television channels, video streaming platforms provide audience members with access to content anywhere, anytime, and on many types of devices, which drives individuals’ streaming media consumption (e.g., Davison, 2013; Hayes & Chmielewski, 2022; Jenner, 2018; Perks, 2014; Shim & Kim, 2018).

In the current study, many participants said they were moving away from traditional media viewing because of the unlimited content available on streaming platforms, which provides them with a high degree of control over their media consumption. For instance, when asked why she chose Netflix, one long-time Netflix user said, *“I think their large library has a lot to do with it. I like that, there’s a wide variety of options. If I don’t know what I want to watch, I’ll just go through their home*

*page and look at the suggestions that they have for me... .They also kind of understand what I like.”* Similarly, another participant said she chose Netflix over other services largely because *“as far as content, Netflix has that none of those other streaming platforms have.”*

Further, content includes not only that produced by the service itself, but also that which the platform acquires from others. One participant (P1) said that the diversity and scale of Netflix’s inventory is the major reason she chose the service. Another participant (P12) said, *“I really liked that about Netflix, Netflix has a lot of content, but there’s some stuff that you can’t find on Netflix that’s only on some of the other platforms as well, but just seeing Netflix kind of just take a hold of the industry, you know, especially with their own content, originals.”* Additionally, P7 said, *“Netflix has more shows that I like than on other streaming services, that’s why I use Netflix the most.”* For those participants, the amount of content on Netflix, as well as its accessibility play a critical role in determining their media choices.

### ***Theme 3: Content Exclusivity***

In the media context, an essential asset of linear television and streaming services is the ability to offer audience members exclusive content (Armstrong, 1999; Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Weeds, 2016). Traditional broadcast and cable networks pay high prices for exclusive access to high-profile content (e.g., Iosifidis, 2007; Lippman, 1994; Sandomir, 1993), and today’s streaming platforms also invest considerably in exclusive content to be more competitive (Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Hayes & Chmielewski, 2022). Additionally, the streaming media industry is widely considered to be content-driven



(e.g., Burroughs, 2019; Jenner, 2018; Lotz, 2014; Vorhaus, 2022). Some studies have found exclusive content—that which is only available on that service—is the most important factor impacting a platform’s viability and audience members’ willingness to pay for the service (e.g., Allbones, 2019; Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Fagerjord & Kueng, 2019; Forristal, 2022; Lotz, 2014; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2018; Mikos, 2016; RapidTV, 2022).

In this study, many participants said access to exclusive content is the primary reason they subscribed to Netflix in the first place. For example, one interviewee (P21) said he began using Netflix because of *House of Cards*, and another participant (P17) noted that he subscribed to Netflix because of its original series, *Ozark*. Similarly, when asked why she started using Netflix, one participant (P12) said, “*about senior year of high school, my family had originally got the account was to watch ‘Thirteen Reasons Why’ when it came out. That’s kind of how it started.*”

Another participant (P22), who started using Netflix in 2013, described her first memory of Netflix in detail, “*I was living with my brother at the time, and I think he’s the one that brought it up, and I was like, we could just like order these DVDs, and then we can just start watching it. Like, you know, picking a show to watch. I remember like watching original shows like Orange is the New Black, because they were the only network that had that show and so, you know like, those are the like first memories that I have it when it was going digital and just thinking like oh my gosh these shows are so good, like you don’t see it on like FOX or CBS, so I think it was more cutting edge, because it was much more curated for people who really liked good shows good movies.*

*And then you know like over time they just started really seeing even more original content.”*

P17 said he would not watch Netflix unless the show or movie was only available on that platform, *“I’m really just for their original content. I don’t watch the movies that they put on there unless it’s their own……I use it for a lot of TV shows like Stranger Things Ozarks, The Office, Breaking Bad, and stuff like that.”* When asked what the major differences were between Netflix and other streaming platforms he used, the participant said,

*“I would say, Netflix has way better original content than all of those….so like this streaming platform has this one show, and this streaming platform has this one show, but Netflix has, you know, ten other shows that people are actively talking about. Netflix has so much original content that people want to come back for.”*

Similarly, when asked to compare Netflix to other streaming platforms, P23 said, *“Netflix is just kind of the default there because Netflix provided a lot of original shows like House of Cards, or Tiger King, what I watched usually was those original shows on Netflix.”* P7 echoed this point. When asked what the biggest reason for choosing Netflix was, she said, *“I think the biggest reason is, I guess to watch new content that I think is more unique to Netflix compared to other like streaming services like Hulu or Amazon TV.”*

When asked why she thought Netflix has become so popular, another participant (P18) said, *“Netflix was one of the original streaming services, so in their case, I think being first was really advantageous for them. And then I think their original content has*

*kind of given them more of an edge as time has gone on, because it's gotten to the point where other people can do streaming services. But now you have to have Netflix to watch, such as The Haunting of Hill House. So, I mean. It's definitely their original content at this point that I think makes them so successful."*

From a user perspective, Netflix also has tried to distinguish its original content from its other programs by providing a particular label, which further guides users' program choices. One participant (P24) said, *"It kind of separates itself into a different category. I think some people might view that positively and look at it. Look at that right away because they see that it is a Netflix original."*

When asked about her typical Netflix viewing experience, another participant (P25), who has used Netflix for more than eight years, said: *"they've been doing a good job in releasing original content, that makes it like even today when I logged on to watch a couple of episodes of Girlfriends, there was a doc there, they were running a preview for a documentary about a husband that kills his wife, and I was like, that looks interesting maybe I'll watch that."*

In this study, while audience availability, content availability, and content exclusivity were the most frequently mentioned structural factors, there were several other factors that also were identified. These include the commercial-free nature of the service and scores from diverse recommendation sites.

### ***Commercial-free (uninterrupted viewing experiences)***

Prior studies have addressed the important role of commercial-free content in linear television viewing (e.g., Moriarty & Everett, 1994; Nelson et al., 2009). Regarding

the value of an ad-free service, many media platforms (e.g., HBO, NBC, and Hulu) give audience members the option of paying more to avoid commercials (Hayes & Chmielewski, 2022; Rayome, 2020, 2021). In this study, many participants said they chose Netflix simply because the platform has no commercials. As one participant (P7) said, *“there is no commercials, you can watch it without any interruption.”*

Some participants said the ability to stream content uninterrupted enhanced their viewing experiences, and the commercial-free and on-demand aspects of Netflix also facilitate binge-watching. For instance, several participants said that the lack of commercials allowed them to binge watch for several hours without interruption, and sometimes they were so engaged they lost track of how long they had been watching. A few participants also mentioned Netflix’s auto-play function, which allows the next episode in a series to be played automatically and contributes to a more immersive viewing experience (Jacob, 2020; Steiner & Xu, 2020). 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. I can’t even look over and ask her [the participant’s friend]. Do you want to start the next episode, before it’s even starting, so it’s like, well, then we just keep watching it.”*

### ***Program Scores on Recommendation Sites***

Some studies have suggested a program’s scores on recommendation sites (e.g., Internet Movie Database, Rotten Tomatoes), which are derived from votes submitted by

the site users, are an important indicator of a program's quality (Stegner, 2020; Wilkinson, 2018). One of the major purposes of program scores is to focus audiences' attention and guide viewing decisions (Chhabra, 2017; Frey, 2021; Krysik, 2021; Nielsen, 2022; Webster, 2011, 2018). Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB are two of the most widely used of these websites, and are available for the majority of programs that air on broadcast, cable, and streaming services (Barrett, 2019).

Several studies have found that a program's scores on recommendation sites significantly affect audience members' media choices (e.g., Gavilan et al., 2019; Min, 2019), while Barrett (2019) found that the relationship between the weighted Rotten Tomatoes score and program share was weak, suggesting that individuals' program choices may be based on other factors.

In the current study, participants were asked about their experiences with and opinions about program scores on sites like Rotten Tomatoes. Most participants said that they do not pay much attention to the scores on external sites when they choose a show to watch on Netflix. Several participants said they never looked at the scores. One participant said she reads what the series or movie is about on Netflix and then "*just kind of goes with it.*" A few participants said they will only check program scores and read reviews on external recommendation websites when they plan to watch movies, partially because movie viewing requires a higher level of involvement and a greater time commitment than does watching shorter programs. P17 said,

*"the only time I will check the IMDB or Rotten Tomatoes scores would be if I am going to see a movie in theaters, other than that, no. Because I'm already spending the*

*money for Netflix, so the only thing I'm losing is my time, but if I go to the movie theater I'm spending extra money. So, I don't want be super disappointed and go see a bad movie at a movie theater."*

Another participant (P5) said that sometimes she will check the score on external recommendation websites if she is going to watch a movie. However, for Netflix's TV series, she usually does not do that. When asked whether she would check program scores before deciding what to watch, another participant (P26) said, "*No, I know that there's like Rotten Tomatoes and stuff like that, but it's extremely rare that I check that. I almost never do that.*" Similarly, P12 said the program scores do not influence her program decisions because "*I have to watch the show like first hand, to really get an opinion about it before I read reviews.*" Another (P24) echoed this point and said, "*not usually, if I want something, I have at least some idea of what it is, like maybe I'll stumble upon something that I wasn't going to watch, but decide to. I'll at least have known or recognized it and know a little bit about what it is, and kind of what the quality is before watching it. I don't usually have to go to an external source like that.*"

Instead of relying on recommendations from third-party sites, many participants said they were more likely to trust recommendations from friends or family members, partly because they think friends and family members have a better understanding of their preferences. For instance, P27 said, "*I feel like the people around me influence my decision a lot, so I just trust their judgment because they watch so much TV so they can kind of gauge, what's good and what's not good. I kind of just trust what they say. They are my experts, so I let them weed out what's the good stuff and the bad stuff.*" Another

participant (P7) said she was not willing to spend any additional effort (e.g., searching information, reading reviews) to select content, *“I don’t check that [program scores or reviews] ...If I watch a movie, I read things on IMDB, but because I’m on my [social media] group, that’s where I get all my inspiration. I don’t like to look at ratings that much.”*

Although many of the participants said they do not rely on program scores or reviews to choose a program, others felt differently. For instance, P17 said he does not trust Netflix’s recommendations, and he primarily chooses programs based on their scores and reviews on the Internet. Another participant (P15) also mentioned that he usually Googles the scores of the show first, and then checks to see if it is available on Netflix or any other platforms, partly because his viewing behavior is content-, rather than platform-driven: *“there are a lot of good shows that are, you know, outside of Netflix. So, my search for shows is usually not confined to Netflix. Even if I got a recommendation or something. I usually look at the ratings first. So ratings are something I just Google. And then it just shows which streaming platform the show is on, that’s where I go to watch. I’m not particularly tied to Netflix.”*

Moreover, several participants said they use recommender sites, so they are not wasting their time on content they find objectionable. For instance, P22 said, rather than checking the program scores or reviews in the pre-viewing stage, she will search for program-related information and check external program scores during and after viewing. She said, *“I think I do it after, like if I already clicked on it. And then I’m maybe 10 minutes in and like if I’m not engaged, I’ll Google it and I’ll want to see what the reviews*

*are, so that way I don't waste my time."*

In addition to program scores on recommendation sites, several participants said they would choose a show to watch based on Netflix's internal scores— "Percent Match Score" (Netflix, 2022). Different from program scores on recommendation sites that are based on user votes or critics, Netflix's match score is Netflix's estimation of how well a show fits with the individual user's interests (Jurdy, 2021). Instead of a star rating next to each title, Netflix viewers will see a personalized match score. This score is calculated using Netflix's algorithm, which takes several factors into account: the user's streaming history, previous feedback (e.g., like/dislike) the user has provided, and the combined score of all Netflix members whose tastes are similar to those of the user (Horaczek, 2017).

When asked whether she relied on any recommendations to make program choices, P10 said, *"sometimes if it's like an older movie. I'll go and I'll do like a Google search to see like what the Rotten Tomatoes were or the IMDB. I also look at the ratings on Netflix, they have like the ratings there so I do, I'm a ratings person so I do like to see what other people thought before I watch."* Another participant (P12) said, *"I usually just look at the Netflix rating, if I'm watching it on Netflix."*

Overall, the results showed that this group of participants used a mix of approaches in choosing programs. In line with Barrett et al's (2022) findings, the current study found most participants did not rely on scores on recommendation sites (e.g., IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes) to make program choices, while some participants do use scores on recommendation sites, but only for movies. Other participants rely only on



recommendations from friends, family, or social media, and do not typically use sites like Rotten Tomatoes or IMDB. Several other participants rely on Netflix's recommendations to decide what to watch.

Some participants said they use a combination of approaches for program choices. For instance, one participant said she primarily relies on friends' recommendations and Netflix's match scores to select content. Another participant (P25) said, *"if I'm watching a show, it's either because the preview looks good, or someone recommended it, or it's gotten good reviews outside, like people are talking about it on social media."*

### ***Trailers and Previews***

Prior studies have addressed the role of previews and the promotion a program receives in linear television program performance, and found that many audience members use program previews as an important tool to guide their viewing choices (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Eastman & Newton, 1998; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Gray, 2008, 2010; Schleuder et al., 1993; Tang et al., 2007). In this study, many participants said they would watch trailers, previews of series or movies, to decide whether to watch a particular show. It is noteworthy that Netflix has a default setting to auto-play trailers while users browse on their devices, although users have the option of turning it off (Silva, 2021). For instance, P16 described in detail her experience with trailers, *"I typically get on Netflix, I'll browse through like the trending or popular lists, to see if there are any new TV shows or documentaries movies that are of interest. And you know, watch the trailer kind of read their description to determine if I might have interest in the*

*show. And if I already have a show that I'm watching, then I'll pretty much go straight to that show and watch, probably one to two episodes depending on how much time I have."*

Another participant (P28) said she usually first checks Netflix's recommendation lists and then watches trailers to decide what to watch: *"if I'm looking for a show that will be what I look at the Top List and then I'll watch like the trailer, because they used to play a little bit, or like a trailer when you hover over it with your mouse or something, so I'll spend some time doing that if I'm trying to find a show to watch."*

The role of trailers in the viewing decision-making process was mentioned by another participant (P29), who said *"In terms of decision-making, I think the first thing is that I talked to friends about the show, and so I called them back. And then I'll let go and look at the shows that are available, and like, if I've heard that friends say that one's good. Then I'll take a look at it or if I like the cover article. And then, like, what really makes me watch it or not watch it is watching that little preview and seeing who's in that."*

### **RQ3: To What Extent Does Habit Influence People's Netflix Viewing?**

A habit, which is a behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously, has often been overlooked in contemporary audience studies (e.g., Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Tokunaga, 2020; Webster, 1998). In this study, RQ3 considers to what extent habits impact individuals' Netflix viewing. The study found that participants' Netflix viewing behaviors were, in fact, still largely driven by their habits. Specifically, the findings showed that participants' viewing habits determine not only when they

watch, but also how (e.g., the viewing environment) and what they watch (e.g., program selection). In the first round of interviews, most participants said that they have specific habits or routines when watching Netflix, and several notable themes emerged.

***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; Gohl, 2021; Gradisar et al., 2013), 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 one participant (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, another participant (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 one participant (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, another participant (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. Several studies have investigated the connection between television viewing and eating, and found eating while watching television may increase individuals’ food intake and prolong the individuals’ viewing and eating duration (e.g., Braude & Stevenson, 2014; Collings et al., 2018; Dickinson, R. 2000; Matheson et al., 2014; Mathur & Stevenson, 2015; Schmitt et al., 2003). 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, P9 said, *“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, *“I typically like to watch TV in the evening time, so like use blanket, with pillow on the couch...lights off, ready to go. And then 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.”* Another participant (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., Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Armstrong & Greenberg, 1990; Castro et al., 2021; Dray, 2021; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019), 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). For instance, 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. I mean, I could go read a book, but you know you just kind of naturally*

*gravitate towards like turning your TV on, 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 One Conclusion**

Overall, the results from the first round of interviews showed that participants watched Netflix for a number of different reasons, and many of them primarily used Netflix for entertainment and social purposes. Further, the study found that, even in an era where participants have more content choices and more diverse ways of getting that content (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2018; Matrix, 2014; Webster, 2014), their Netflix viewing behaviors were still largely determined by traditional structural factors (e.g., audience availability, content exclusivity) and viewing habits, not only impacting when they watch, but also how and what they watch. The second phase of this study focuses mainly on participants' specific viewing routines, including what, when, and how often they watched Netflix during the research period, which allows the researcher to compare what participants said about their Netflix viewing in the initial interviews with their actual Netflix viewing behaviors.

## CHAPTER 6

### PHASE TWO RESULTS

In the first round of interviews, participants were asked a number of open-ended questions about their Netflix viewing behaviors. In these interviews, most participants said they preferred watching Netflix in the evening rather than in the morning. Many participants also said that their viewing habits differed between weekends and weekdays, and that they tended to watch more Netflix on the weekends because they have more time and fewer responsibilities. Additionally, several participants said they only watch movies on the weekends in order to have an uninterrupted viewing experience.

As noted above, the primary purpose of the second phase of the study was to ascertain whether participants' actual viewing behaviors match what they said they do. In this phase, participants were asked to install a browser extension (i.e., Netflix Viewing Stats) on their computers, watch Netflix as usual for a week, and submit screenshots of their viewing activities. To ensure the screenshots reflect participants' own Netflix viewing, each participant confirmed that they used their own profile and did not share it with others during the research period.

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 created a separate entry for each show. When the show was a series with multiple episodes, each episode was noted.



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, there was only one type of viewing session, but there were variations within sessions. Some viewing sessions only included a single episode, and other sessions included multiple episodes from the same or different series. For example, if a participant watched a 40-minute episode of *Gossip Girl* and then stopped watching, it was counted as a 40-minute viewing session. Similarly, if a participant watched two 20-minute episodes, the time spent watching was still 40 minutes, but in the analysis, the two episodes were treated separately. 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.

For example, one participant began watching an episode of *The Office* at 3 p.m. and switched to an hour-long drama at 3:15 p.m.; this was one 75-minute session during which the participant watched 15 minutes of an episode of a sitcom and one 60-minute long drama. Additionally, if a participant watched three episodes of *Schitt's Creek* continuously, it was counted as a 66-minute viewing session that included three 22-minute episodes of the show.

This study identified 268 viewing sessions: 118 were single-episode sessions, and 150 were multiple-episode sessions. The shortest viewing session lasted 21 minutes,

which included one episode of *The Office*; the longest session lasted 284 minutes, which included seven 40-minute episodes of the drama—*The Blacklist*.

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; Shao & Benaza, 2018). On average, each binge-watching session lasted 124 minutes. The shortest binge-watching session lasted 63 minutes and included three 21-minute episodes of *The Office*.

### **Daypart Analysis**

In the media industry, a daypart is a core parameter of program scheduling and advertising strategy (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1988; Baldwin et al., 1992; Barrett, 1999; Cooper, 1993; Inghelbrecht, 2020; McDowell & Dick, 2001; Webster, 1985, 2014; Webster & Wang, 1992). Television programmers use various techniques to schedule programs and to match those programs with viewers' daily routines and activities (Beyer, 2004; Cooper, 1993; Eastman & Ferguson, 2006; Ihlebæk et al., 2014; Guo & Sun, 2020; Voorveld & Viswanathan, 2015; Webster et al., 2005). For example, programs like *The Today Show* (NBC), *Good Morning, America* (ABC), and *CBS Mornings* are 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. As such, their attention is likely divided between these activities and watching television. The programs that air during the daytime (12 p.m. to 3 p.m., ET) and early fringe (3 p.m. to 5 p.m., ET) often target stay-at-home parents who are available to watch TV during these periods (Stole, 2003; Webster et al., 2013). Additionally, the traditional broadcast television

networks (e.g., ABC, CBS, and NBC) typically schedule the most attractive shows in prime time (i.e., 8-11 p.m. ET Monday-Saturday, Sunday 7-11 p.m. ET), because it is the period of time in which the greatest number of audience members are available to watch (e.g., Adams et al., 1983; Baldwin et al., 1992; Banks, 1980; Davis & Walker, 1990; Gitlin, 2005; Goodhardt et al., 1987; Krantz-Kent, 2018; Lotz, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 1982).

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; Webster, 1985).

### **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).

This is consistent with prior studies about linear television viewing behaviors (Nielsen, 2013; Krantz-Kent, 2018). For instance, a 2013 Nielsen report showed that traditional television viewers watched close to two hours of TV per day during prime time, which accounted for about 34% of their total viewing time. Krantz-Kent (2018) also found that, from 2013 to 2017, among the US population ages 15 and older who watched TV on a given day, more than half of them watched television between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.

In the phase one interviews, many participants said that their viewing habits differed between weekdays and weekends (i.e., Saturday and Sunday), and they tended to watch more on the weekends than on weekdays because they had more time and fewer responsibilities. The analysis of their actual viewing behaviors did not support this. 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. Moreover, Sunday had the lightest viewing, which may partly be because many participants were spending time on

other social activities, or watching something other than Netflix (e.g., live sports on one of the traditional broadcast networks). Additionally, it is noteworthy that most participants completed the second phase of research during the Christmas season (November to December), and participants may have been engaged in activities (e.g., family parties, shopping) that impacted their viewing behaviors. On the other hand, many people take time off during the holiday, so they may have been available more often.

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



## Program Type Analysis

In the first round of interviews, most participants said they watched more short programs (e.g., 30-minute episodes) than movies on Netflix, partly because watching movies requires a greater time commitment and a higher level of attention than watching short programs. To determine whether what participants watched matched what they reported in phase one, their viewing activities were broken out based on program type. Specifically, program type was coded as a nominal-level variable (0 = No, 1 = Yes) primarily using Nielsen's designations (Barrett et al., 2022).<sup>9</sup>

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. Of all the program types, feature films accounted for 24.7% (n = 21) of the shows. An additional analysis showed that 35.3% of the programs participants watched (n = 30) were less than 30 minutes long, which is consistent with what participants said in the phase one interviews.

Further analysis showed that this group of participants watched 536 unique episodes of programs. *Schitt's Creek* was the most popular (seven participants watched 69 unique episodes of *Schitt's Creek*), followed by *The Office* (three participants watched different 16 episodes) and *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (two participants watched a total of 33 episodes). These 118 episodes accounted for 22% of the total number of

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<sup>9</sup> There are 13 program types. They are: Award Ceremonies and Music Specials; Situation Comedy; General Variety; General Drama; Science Fiction (broken out from General Drama); Action Adventure (broken out from General Drama); Documentary; Feature Film or Made-for-TV Movie; Comedy Variety; Program Variety; Reality Show; Talk Show (broken out from General Variety); Game Shows.

episodes watched, and the remaining 418 episodes were distributed widely across 82 different programs. Talk shows was the least viewed genre among this group of participants. This may partly be because the number of talk shows on Netflix is fairly limited (Koblin, 2019).

Although various reality shows have gained significant popularity among today's audiences and a recent study suggested that about 79% of adults in the United States watch this type of content (Gitnux, 2023), the genre ranked as the fifth most viewed among this group of participants. This could partly be because the genre's popularity varies based on platform offerings and viewer demographics (Manuel, 2023). Participants may tend to watch reality shows on traditional broadcast television networks (e.g., ABC, CBS, and NBC), and the pandemic-related production delays of reality shows might also have prompted participants to choose other genres such as drama and situation comedy (Shevenock, 2021). Table 4 shows the total viewing time by daypart and program type.

In the first round of interviews, several participants said they spent more time watching movies on weekends than on weekdays. The second-phase result is consistent with what participants said. The analysis of participants' viewing activities showed that, on average, each participant spent 0.34 hours per day watching movies on weekends, and 0.22 hours per day watching movies on weekdays.

### **Phase Two Conclusion**

Overall, the results from the second phase showed that participants' actual viewing behaviors were consistent with most of what they said in the phase one interviews. The results from the second phase showed that participants tended to watch

more Netflix in the evening than at other times of the day (e.g., morning, afternoon), and prime time (8-11 p.m., ET) remains the most popular daypart. The second phase results showed that, even in a streaming age where participants have access to content anytime and anywhere, participants' viewing behaviors still followed the traditional television viewing patterns, which are deeply embedded in daily routines (e.g., sleep time, working hours).

Additionally, this group of participants spent more time watching movies on weekends than on weekdays, which is also consistent with what they said in the phase one interviews. Somewhat contradictory to the phase one interviews, the findings from the second phase showed that the length of time participants watched Netflix did not differ too much between weekends and weekdays (Table 3).

The third phase of this study includes follow-up interviews with participants to discuss their specific viewing choices, including how and why they chose a specific show to watch on Netflix.

Table 4. Total viewing time (in hours) by daypart and program type.

Daypart	Situation Comedy	General Variety	General Drama	Science Fiction	Action Adventure	Documen tary	Feature Film	Comedy Variety	Reality Show	Talk Show	Total
Morning News	1.60	0.00	0.82	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.42
Morning	2.72	0.00	13.60	0.00	0.75	0.18	1.67	0.98	0.00	0.00	19.90
Daytime	5.93	0.22	17.73	0.00	3.82	3.63	8.68	0.00	3.83	0.00	43.85
Early Fringe	9.08	1.98	18.70	0.00	0.73	3.60	3.17	0.48	4.98	0.00	42.73
Early News	10.73	0.75	19.48	0.62	1.48	1.03	5.10	0.00	6.95	0.00	46.15
Access	5.25	0.00	9.68	1.27	0.80	1.47	8.23	0.00	1.08	0.05	27.83
Prime Time	30.80	3.63	34.17	5.73	2.80	16.93	24.22	0.00	7.02	0.00	125.30
Late News	8.12	2.45	10.90	5.70	1.70	2.62	1.62	0.00	0.40	0.00	33.50
Late Fringe	4.03	1.00	5.87	1.00	0.23	1.57	2.10	0.00	1.00	0.00	16.80
Overnight	4.95	0.23	1.28	8.12	0.28	0.60	0.00	1.03	1.57	0.00	18.07
Total	83.22	10.27	132.23	22.43	12.60	31.63	54.78	2.50	26.83	0.05	376.55

*Note.* Award Ceremonies, Program Variety, and Game Shows were not found in the dataset.

## CHAPTER 7

### PHASE THREE RESULTS

In the first round of interviews, participants were asked a number of open-ended questions about how and why they watched Netflix. The results showed that many participants primarily used Netflix for entertainment and social purposes, and traditional structural factors (e.g., audience availability, content exclusivity) not only impacted when participants watched, but also how and what they watched. Based on the research questions and previous studies, in the second round of interviews, the interview questions focused on the participants' actual Netflix viewing behaviors, which were captured through the browser extension discussed in the previous chapter.

The interview questions included: Why did you choose this particular show? Why did you watch it when you did? Did you watch it by yourself or with someone else? Did you talk with someone else during or after you watched the show? Can you describe your viewing experience with this show? The specific questions and their order were adjusted based on each participant's actual viewing behaviors and their responses in the initial interviews. The primary purpose of the second round of interviews was to serve as a post-test to help the researcher better understand why participants chose a specific show to watch and to probe why their actual viewing behaviors did or did not differ from what they said in the initial interviews.

#### **RQ1: What Motivates People to Watch Netflix?**

RQ1 considers the reasons why the participants watched Netflix. It addresses the motivational aspects of Netflix viewing, which is closely related to participants' content

choices. Specifically, an important part of the motivation to watch Netflix is tied to the specific content that Netflix offers and the gratification that participants obtain from watching particular shows. In line with the initial interviews and prior literature (e.g., Flayelle et al., 2017; Kim & Sintas, 2021; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Steiner, 2019; Shao & Beneza, 2018; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2019), the conversation with participants in the second round of interviews indicated they largely watched the programs they did for the reasons they cited in the initial interviews. It is noteworthy that while additional motivations arose (i.e., FOMO and forming para-social relationships), the reasons for viewing cited by the participants in the first round of interviews (i.e., for relaxation and enjoyment) held true in the second round. Each of these is addressed below.

### ***Theme 1: Relaxation/Enjoyment***

Numerous audience studies have identified the need for enjoyment and to relax as key antecedents to individuals' media consumption (e.g., Katz et al., 1974; Lim et al., 2010; Lovato & Piper, 2019; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oranç & Ruggeri, 2021; Rubin, 1983, 1984; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tamilmani et al., 2019; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019). The results of the first round of interviews indicated the hedonic motivation (e.g., enjoyment, relaxation, and escape) was an important motive for Netflix viewing among this group of participants. The second round of interviews reinforced this. Twelve participants mentioned they chose specific Netflix shows to relax and/or for enjoyment. Additionally, some of these participants said they watched the shows they did because they found them comforting.

When asked why the person watched *Gilmore Girls*, P26 said, “I’ve been watching that show for years. I’m just kind of like repeating watching it...I think I like the storyline just because, like, it’s super mundane, if that makes sense. So I just like watching that show because it’s calming. That’s like what I watch when I go to bed.”

When asked about watching *Emily in Paris*, P22 said, “I kind of just play it over and over because it’s like a comfort thing, I think it’s just like a chill thing that I know what’s happening next and it’s a relaxing show so I just watch it on repeat...I just like to turn it on and then fall asleep, so I don’t really even actively watch it, it’s just kind of like background noise.”

Other participants echoed this point. For example, when asked why she watched the reality show *The American Barbecue Showdown*, P4 said, “I watched it to rest and to relax.” Similarly, when asked why the person watched *The Office*, P26 said, “I think it is just kind of comforting for me to like, just know what’s always going to happen when I see the shows. So just being like, if I want to watch *The Office* or *Friends* or anything like that, I feel like I literally have those entire TV shows like memorized, like I can quote episodes because I’ve watched them so many times.” When asked why he watched *One Punch Man* (an anime series) again, P31 said, “I will say it is a lot more relaxed when I watch it again. The second time [I watched it], I knew what was going on, [so] I was not too focused.”

When asked about watching *Million Dollar Beach Home*, P16 said, “it is a reality TV show...I watched it pretty quickly and really enjoyed it.” When describing her

experiences selecting *Sneakerheads*, P12 said, “*I am a sneaker collector. When I saw this show come up, I was like, ‘oh, this is something that I am really going to enjoy.’*”

When asked why the person watched multiple episodes of *Outlander* (a historical drama), P1 said, “*I enjoy taking my mind off of the other things in my life, just being able to not think about my day or my responsibilities, so it’s kind of escapism or a normalized way to relax...I watched it to relax and not think about my own characters for a while.*” Several other participants echoed this. P9 said she watched *Ratched* because “*it kind of takes my mind off work. I’m able to just chill and be comfortable.*” When asked why the person watched Netflix on a weekday, P30 said, “*I have some time [during that day] ...that is kind of a way to relax.*”

When asked why she watched multiple episodes of the same series, P28 said, “*It is nice when you have nothing else to do, and you can just sit back and relax for a couple hours. Kind of take your mind off of everything else.*” Similarly, when describing his Netflix viewing experience, P11 said, “*I think it was just a nice way to relax from the school day, just kind of forget about it [daily life].*” When asked why he watched *Community*, P29 said, “*usually after dinner, I have like a dessert and watch it on the couch. It’s just for relaxation.*”

It is noteworthy that while for relaxation and enjoyment were the most frequently mentioned motivations related to participants’ program choices, some of this study’s participants mentioned more than one motivation. These include FOMO and parasocial relationships.



## ***Theme 2: Fear of Missing Out***

A large number of contemporary studies suggest audience members often choose specific media content because of a fear of missing out (FOMO). FOMO refers to a social anxiety that arises from the belief that an individual is missing out on information, events, or experiences that might have potential benefits. It also is often characterized by the desire to stay connected with what others are doing (Conlin, et al., 2016; Maxwell, Tefertiller, & Morris, 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2019).

Although streaming is often considered a solitary activity (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Rigby et al., 2018), the conversations with some of this study's participants suggested that the popularity of various Netflix programs is related to FOMO. About a quarter of the participants said they feel that if they do not watch popular shows on Netflix, they will miss out on pop-culture moments and potential opportunities to participate in conversations about them. For instance, when asked why she watched *Orange Is the New Black*, P9 said, *"I think cultural factors definitely matter. I think Netflix is trying to make a lot of political statements for the new shows, especially [shows] like Orange Is the New Black and Ozark. If you missed out on those, you do miss out on lots of messages that they want to show, and what people are talking about."*

Similarly, P5 said the majority of her program choices were a result of FOMO, and she chose specific shows because of what her friends were watching. When asked why she watched *Schitt's Creek*, P5 said, *"I watched that one because all my college friends were watching it and I wanted to know what they are talking about."* P2 echoed

this point and said she watched the show *Ratched* “because I am curious about what everyone was talking about.” When asked why she watched *Ratched*, P28 said she watched it because her friends had talked about it and “it’s nice to know a few [things] somebody else’s already seen, so you can have somebody to talk to about it after.” When asked why she watched the reality show *Sugar Rush*, P13 said, “because a friend told me it was interesting. And also, I saw a news story [about *Sugar Rush*] the other day.”

Participant 7 said that FOMO and the desire to be included in the conversation influenced not only what platform she uses but also her program choices. She said, “even if you don’t have it [a Netflix account], a friend would just offer a password, they’re like, ‘Oh, just use my account.’ I think it creates a type of community because it’s like something that you could talk about with other people, and that’s again why I like how they started doing like the Top 10, what’s being watched or like what’s trending right now, because you feel like you are part of the conversation, you feel like you are part of what’s going on.”

When asked why she watched the documentary *American Murder*, P10 said, “for that specific show [*American Murder*], they [the participant’s friends] talked about it in the group chat, but then separately, another friend of mine who’s not a part of that group chat. She texted me and was like, ‘oh, have you watched this documentary?’ So, after hearing about it in one chat and then also hearing about it from like a separate friend, I was like, oh, I should probably watch this because everybody’s watching it right now.”

Somewhat related to a FOMO is the need to form parasocial relationships with the characters in a program.

### ***Theme 3: Parasocial Relationships***

A parasocial relationship is a type of psychological relationship experienced by audiences in their encounters with media characters (Kim & Sintas, 2021; Perse & Rubin, 1989;). For instance, if an audience member watches a show and often thinks about and discusses the characters as if he/she knew them in real life, that viewer has a parasocial relationship with the characters (Chung & Cho, 2014; Hassim et al., 2019; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Song & Fox, 2016). Prior studies showed that female audiences (Cohen, 2003; Laken, 2009; Waskie, 2018), teenagers, and young adolescents (Bond, 2016; Gleason et al., 2017) tend to develop parasocial relationships with media personas more frequently than other groups do. Reality shows and dramas are the program types that tend to trigger those relationships (Chung & Cho, 2014; Hassim et al., 2019). Rubin et al.'s (1985) early studies found that parasocial relationships were positively related to television viewing, but only during periods of loneliness. Several other studies also showed that television viewers tend to develop parasocial relationships as a substitute for real social contact (e.g., Jarzyna, 2021; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Schiappa et al., 2007).

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic restricted participants' social interactions with friends and family members, some of them might be more likely to form parasocial relationships with the characters to satisfy their social needs than they otherwise would be. For instance, several studies showed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in feelings of loneliness (Ernst et al., 2022; Walsh, 2021) and uncertainty (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021) among people around the world. Jarzyna (2021) found that, due to the lack

of real socialization during the COVID-19 quarantine, many audiences relied on streaming services and social media to feel connected with others.

During the second round of interviews, five participants (all women) mentioned their program choices were influenced by their perceived relationships with the characters, and said they often formed relationships with the characters simply because they had a similar background or life experiences.

For instance, when asked why a participant decided to watch the show *Emily in Paris*, P22 said, *“I really liked it because the plot is very similar to [my life], like what she does for a living. The main character Emily works in marketing, works at an agency, and so it was just pretty similar to what I go through, except obviously, I’m in LA, but it’s just that, that world that she’s in. I just resonated with it a lot....so I was even messaging some of my friends like you guys should watch this show, because it’s kind of like what we do, except obviously, it’s more of like a comedic romantic version, but the storyline I feel like a lot of us have gone through the same things that she went through.”* Similarly, P4 said the primary reason she watches *Emily in Paris* is *“because I like the character. I recognized her from other shows and movies. And then, I like the story where she’s an American visiting Paris and she’s in advertising and marketing, which is the career that I did before.”*

When describing why the person watched a specific program, P3 said, *“I really enjoy the stories of other people. Sometimes, you know like, I may associate it with an emotion that I’m feeling. I went through a breakup so I want to go watch this show because I remember her going through her breakup, or I may feel very happy and kind of*

*celebratory, so I want to watch something that's going to make me excited and I go back and re-watch it."* P16, who has been using Netflix since 2015, emphasized the role of parasocial relationships in guiding her program choices. When asked why she watched *Ratched*, P16 said, *"I can form a relationship with the characters; I feel like I have a relationship with the characters."*

Another participant said that the Netflix viewing experience is quite emotional because of the connections between the viewer and the characters. When asked why she watched *Outlander*, P1 said, *"I feel like I'm really invested in the characters in a show that I'm watching, and I want to see what happens to them. And for a show like Outlander, my watching [experience] is pretty dramatic, so they have ups and downs, and sometimes it's really emotional for me, and I have to like to take a break, something like I'm too upset about the upsetting things happening to them."*

## **RQ2: To What Extent Do Structural Factors Affect People's Netflix Viewing?**

The current study aims to examine the role of motivational and structural factors in participants' Netflix viewing, thereby providing new insights about contemporary audience behaviors. Distinct from motivational factors, structural factors are the macro-level variables (e.g., audience availability, whether a series is new or established, program type, continuing/non-continuing storyline, and the promotion a program receives) that often impact audiences' viewing behaviors (Adams, 1998; Barrett et al., 2022; Cooper, 1993, 1996; Davis & Walker, 1990; Eastman et al., 1995; Webster, 2014). However, the academic understanding of the impact of these factors on people's specific content choices in the streaming context is relatively limited. RQ2 addresses this.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2018), the current study found that several structural factors, including recommendations from friends, family members, and Netflix itself, audience availability, the cast of a program, as well as the amount of promotion a program receives, play pivotal roles in impacting what participants watched.

### ***Theme 1: Recommendations from Friends and Family Members***

Many media studies have found that recommendations from others are one of the most important factors that determine people's media-related behaviors (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Lull, 1980; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). When audience members know what others are watching, they tend to follow suit (Gros et al., 2017; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Kim & Sintas, 2021).

Although recommendations from friends and family members are linked to participants' social motives, they tend to be more of a structural factor than a motivation. Compared to traditional viewing motivations (e.g., for relaxation and enjoyment), recommendations from friends and family are typically external factors that are social-relations-based and somewhat out of the participants' control (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2015; Webster, 2018). For instance, participants cannot control what programs friends and family recommend, but they can actively choose a specific program for relaxation. In addition, the social structures in which participants are embedded, including their communities and personal background (e.g., ethnicity, language, religion, and community culture), may influence the recommendations they receive (Lull, 1980;

Webster, 2010). Therefore, this study categorizes recommendations from friends and family as a structural factor. Further, it is worth noting that recommendations from friends and family are separated from Netflix's recommendations, which tended to be a type of data-driven structure (Webster, 2018).

In the second round of interviews, about one-third of the participants said that they primarily rely on recommendations from friends or family members when deciding what to watch. For instance, when asked why the person watched shows like *The Office*, P17 said, "*My friends recommended The Office and Friends to me, which is the only reason I watch those shows. Tiger King was recommended; Ozarks was recommended. I would say, the major reason I watch my shows is [because of] a recommendation from a friend or family member.*" Similarly, when asked how he decided to watch *Norsemen*, P24 said, "*This one in particular, it was [because of] my family; they talked about it, and recommended it to me.*" P11 echoed this point and said that he watched the documentary *Challenger* primarily because "*a friend told me about it.*"

In another case, when asked why the person decided to watch *Outlander*, P1 said, "*that was recommended by one of my friends. She said [it is] her favorite and I should check it out, so I actually started watching it on Amazon Prime, because I thought that was the only place to watch it and then I switched to Netflix.*" Additionally, when asked why she decided to watch the documentary *American Murder*, P12 said, "*Some friends recommended it, and it showed up in my queue.*" P7 said she chose to watch *American Murder* because "*my boyfriend told me that he watched it, and then I started doing all*

*this research on the case, and then, beginning of this month, they came out with a movie on Netflix about it, so I had to watch it.”*

P17 described in detail the process he used to decide to watch *The Queen’s Gambit*, “*I was actually at the party the other day. And me and my friend were talking, and he asked me if I’d seen The Queen’s Gambit, and I was like, ‘No.’ He was explaining to me what it was about, and he said it was really good, and I was like, ‘Well, I’m looking for a show right now, so I’ll give it a watch.’”* Similarly, when asked how the person usually decides what to watch next, P11 said, “*basically just anybody I talked to. If it has been a few weeks and I don’t have a show to watch, I will actually reach out to people and ask them, like I’ll ask my parents, my girlfriend’s parents, and my friends.”*

The conversations with several participants also showed that text message is a common way through which they receive recommendations from friends. For instance, when asked why she watched the show *Ratched*, P22 said, “*I watched that one because one of my friends texted me about it.*” Participant 14 echoed this point and said he chose *The Queen’s Gambit* because of a friend’s recommendation. P14 said, “*He [his friend] texted me that I should definitely check that show. I started watching for that reason.”*

In relation to recommendations from friends and family members, when asked about their specific viewing behaviors, most participants said they watched Netflix by themselves, rather than with someone else. However, several participants indicated that they would chat on social media and text their friends about the shows both during and after watching a show. Other participants said they often watched with others, including friends, roommates, or partners. For instance, P29 said he watched the movie *The*



*Princess Switch: Switched Again* with his wife, “I watched it with my wife. We usually have an agreement before we watch, but the agreement is more of, oh, you’re picking out the movie tonight or, or if we’re going through a show together, then it’s like, well, we’ll keep watching this show, but you can’t watch the show without me yet.”

Interestingly, a few participants said they paid closer attention to shows when they watched with someone else. P4 said, “if I watch with somebody else, I pay more attention. It’s a show that I’m more into because I’m able to discuss what happens in the show with somebody.” The type of show also influences group viewing behaviors. P14 said, “I prefer to watch by myself, but it depends on the show. If it’s like a comedy show, then it’s usually more fun to watch it with friends.” P15 said he used to use the screen-sharing function on conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom) to watch with his friends. When asked why he only watched one episode of *Attack on Titan* (an anime television series) and stopped watching it, P15 explained, “the reason why I stopped watching it on Netflix is because, you know, I couldn’t screen share with my friends on Zoom. So that’s why we switched to the other platform to watch the same show.”

## ***Theme 2: Recommendations from Netflix***

Netflix’s algorithmic recommendation system, which uses data from an individual’s viewing history is related to, but different from the recommendations viewers get from friends and family members. Several studies have suggested Netflix’s recommendations system significantly affect audience members’ program choices (Stegner, 2020; Wilkinson, 2018; Webster, 2018). For example, Webster (2018) categorized the algorithmic recommendation systems of media platforms as a type of

“data-driven structure” (p. 97) and an earlier report suggested that 80% of watched content on Netflix was based on Netflix personalized recommendations (Chhabra, 2017). Similar to program scores on recommendation sites like Rotten Tomatoes, one of the primary purposes of Netflix’s recommendation system is to focus audience members’ attention, and guide their choices by offering personalized recommendations (Chhabra, 2017; Frey, 2021; Nielsen, 2022; Webster, 2018).

In the second round of interviews, about a quarter of the participants mentioned they watch a particular show because of Netflix’s recommendations. For example, when describing her experiences selecting shows on Netflix, P10 said, *“a lot of the time when I do view shows on Netflix, a lot of the time, it’s recommendations or things that are trendy. So just to kind of see what the talk is about. I usually do not go on and search and find my own shows, I usually go if I’ve heard about them, you know on social media, or we have like a group chat with my friends where they recommend lots of shows, and so then I’ll watch it.”* Similarly, when asked how the person decided to watch programs like *The Wedding Planner* and *Gilmore Girls*, referring to the Netflix recommendations, P26 said, *“Those were like, some of the really early suggestions they put on like the front screen.”*

When asked how the person decided to watch *Million Dollar Beach House*, P16 said, *“It was a Netflix recommendation; it was really similar to a show that I got into called Selling Sunset.”* P29 mentioned that Netflix often recommended shows based on his past viewing history, which became a key factor that guided his program choices. When asked how he chose the show *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, P29 said, *“it is a*

*Netflix recommendation, because we've watched other superhero shows, and the next recommendation was Marvel's Agents of SHIELD.”* Similarly, when asked why a participant watched the sitcom *The Good Place*, P9 said, *“that show, I think it was just recommended to me on Netflix when I first started watching it like a while ago. That's a Friday. I binge-watched The Good Place. That day, I was packing my last boxes in my room, so I just had it on and I was kind of multitasking while watching the show.”*

When asked why the person watched four episodes of the reality show *The American Barbecue Showdown* on a Friday night, P4 said, *“actually, when you open Netflix, it suggests shows for you, and the day that it came out, it was on my full screen. And so, I just clicked play...A lot of shows I watch is because it's a suggestion from Netflix.”* Similarly, when asked how the person chose the Christmas movie—*The Christmas Chronicles*, P2 said, *“it was a Netflix recommendation. We just saw it [the movie] popped up on our recommended list.”*

Although many participants said they often chose a show based on Netflix's recommendations, there were some exceptions. For instance, P24 said that he found Netflix's own recommendations not very accurate, partly because account-sharing (e.g., multiple users sharing one Netflix account) and group-viewing behaviors that impact the accuracy of the personalized recommendations Netflix provides. Further, given the popularity of account-sharing (Rosenblatt, 2022), a Netflix user who shared a profile with others may also receive inaccurate recommendations, which partly explains why some participants (e.g., P24) did not rely on platform recommendations when selecting a show to watch. P24 said, *“I find that they [Netflix's Recommendations] are not always that*

*accurate. Sometimes it's because if I'm watching a TV show with my girlfriends, it'll be something that will watch together, but I will watch alone, so it will take something like that into account to give me recommendations, and that sometimes influences it away from what I would personally watch...there is a lot of stuff [on Netflix's recommendation] that I have no interest in watching."*

In this study, while recommendations from friends and family members as well as from Netflix were frequently mentioned, there were other structural factors that also were identified. These include audience availability, program casts, and the awards or promotion a program received.

### ***Theme 3: Audience Availability***

Audience availability generally refers to those periods of time when an audience member is able to use the medium (Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2007). In television viewing, audience availability often precedes program choice (Barrett, 2019; Cooper, 1996; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2014). Consistent with the findings from the first round of interviews, the second round of interviews showed that audience availability plays an important role in determining for how long and what participants watched. Even in the streaming age, where participants have more control over their media consumption, their decisions about what to watch and when are still embedded in the routines of their day-to-day lives.

When asked about their specific Netflix viewing activities, participants often spontaneously mentioned their routines, and some participants said their viewing schedules and program choices differ between weekends and weekdays. For instance,

when asked why the person did not watch any show during the week, P2 said, “*During those days, we were really busy. We had a guest at our house, and then I think another night we were at church, so last week we were busy.*” P5 also said she did not watch any show on a weekday simply because she had “*no time to watch during that day.*”

The conversations also showed that audience availability not only influenced the amount of time participants spent on Netflix but also impacted their program choices. Several participants said they watched shorter programs (e.g., 30-minute episodes) during the week simply because they have less time available than on the weekend. For example, in the second round of interviews, when asked why most of the shows he watched were short programs such as *Schitt’s Creek* and *Lady Dynamite*, P6 said, “*I like the 20-minute shows a lot, just because there is less of a commitment there. So, you can kind of breeze through a show or if you just have a little bit of time free, you know that you will be able to get through at least one episode since they are like 22 or 24 minutes long. And it’s also a little bit less of a commitment than a one-hour show, where you really need to dedicate some time.*” P15 echoed this point and said he watched the reality show *Selling Sunset* because “*there is a less time commitment than watching longer programs.*” When asked why the person watched one episode of a *Schitt’s Creek* at noon, P27 said she watched it during the lunch break simply because of the limited time she has during the day.

Additionally, when asked why she watched more Netflix in the evening than at other times of the day, such as the afternoon, P22 said, “*it [afternoon] was a busier time for me, so I didn’t watch too much. I did not leave the TV on often during this period.*”

P16 also said she did not watch many programs during the week because “*this week has*

*been pretty hectic, so I haven't watched too much.*” Similarly, when asked why she did not watch any shows on certain weekdays, P19 said, *“For Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I have to work at least 12 hours on both of those days, so I just don't have a lot of time. I think that would probably be the main reason.”* Consistent with the findings from the first round of interviews and prior literature (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Tang & Cooper, 2022; Webster, 2014, 2018), the second round of interviews suggested that, although this group of participants has countless options with Netflix, their viewing activities are still dependent on the fixed amount of time they have and when they are available.

#### ***Theme 4: Talent Matters***

As one of the most important parts of program production, the cast and director of a show or movie can contribute directly to its success (Stadler & McWilliam, 2020). Fans of stars may choose programs simply because their favorite actor or actress appears in those programs, and some people may be attracted to a program because of its director (Barbas, 2016).

Consistent with prior studies (Heeter & Greenberg, 1985; Wallace, Seigerman, & Holbrook, 1993), the current study found the actors/actresses in a program to be an important factor that impacted many participants’ program choices. For instance, when asked why the person chose the show *The Gentlemen*, P17 said, *“my favorite actor is Matthew McConaughey, so if I see him in a movie or show. I am 100% going to watch it, and then there are actors and actresses out there that I don't like. And if I see them in there, I just won't watch [those programs].”*

Similarly, when asked why the person chose the movie *Hubie Halloween*, P22 said, *“it was just there because it is a new Adam Sandler movie. I like Adam Sandler, so I was like, oh, I’ll just put it on because of Adam Sandler.”* When asked why the person watched the 1992 movie *“Boomerang”* on Netflix, P25 said she watched the movie multiple times, *“Netflix gets a lot of ‘oldies,’ they push out old movies, and Boomerang is one of Eddie Murphy’s movies. And to me, it’s like a classic movie that I love.”*

Several participants also mentioned that the promotion or awards a program received would focus their attention and guide their decision-making. For example, when asked why the person decided to watch *Schitt’s Creek*, P22 said, *“I first heard about it when my brother was watching it, and I think it was probably on like the first two seasons have been. And I remember seeing him watch it one time at his house, but I didn’t think that I would like it. But then recently, in the last Emmy Awards, they won a bunch of awards for the show, and this will be the last season, so ‘oh, let me check it out,’ so I started to watch it.*

### **RQ3: To What Extent Does Habit Influence People’s Netflix Viewing?**

As noted above, a habit generally refers to a behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously. Although habit or routine is a significant component of structuration (e.g., Giddens, 1984; Tannenbaum, 1985), it often is overlooked in contemporary audience research (e.g., Bayer & LaRose, 2018; LaRose, 2010; Shao, 2022; Webster, 1998, 2018). RQ3 considers to what extent habits impact people’s Netflix viewing. The study found that, even in an era where participants have almost unlimited

choice of content with Netflix, their viewing practices are still often driven by their habits.

### ***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 (Barrett, 2019; Barwise et al., 1982; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Sherman, 1995; Tannenbaum, 1985; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983; Wood & Runger, 2016). Aligned with many prior audience studies (e.g., Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Armstrong & Greenberg, 1990; Castro et al., 2021; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Tannenbaum, 1985; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster & Wang, 1992; Wood & Runger, 2016), this study found “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. Like, I know what’s going to happen, but it’s still funny to me, so I’m not like super into it, and it keeps me awake because I just like to have something on in the background.”*



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, so that’s always the show that I go back to.*”

When asked why the person chose to watch the movie *Sleepless in Seattle* at midnight, P22 said, “*that’s one of my favorite movies, so I saw that they had it back again. I’ve actually purchased that movie on Apple TV but because it was on Netflix, I was like, I’ll just play it. I think it is a movie in the early 90s with Tom Hanks, and Meg Ryan. I’ll just play it because it’s like, ‘oh, I just like it, you guys just help me go to sleep.’*”

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.....It's just a way to get my brain to like stop running constantly, so I've been going to sleep with the TV on."*

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.

### **Phase Three Conclusion**

The results from the second round of interviews showed that participants chose programs for a number of different reasons, including for relaxation, a FOMO, and to form parasocial relationships. It is noteworthy that two of these motivations (i.e., FOMO and parasocial relationships) were linked to participants' social interaction needs. For

example, about a quarter of the participants said they were motivated to watch a show to avoid missing out or to be a part of the conversation. Further, many participants said they chose a particular program for enjoyment and relaxation, and because of the comfort of the familiar. Such findings are in line with prior literature (e.g., Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Higgin, 2006; Katz, 1974; Lin, 2001; Rubin, 1983; Tang & Cooper, 2012; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019) and the first round of interviews, which showed that traditional viewing motivations (e.g., enjoyment, to relax, and escape from work) were the predominant factors guiding participants' viewing practices.

In addition to these motivational factors, structural factors also played a role in determining how and what participants watched. The study found that, even in the streaming age, where participants have more content choices and more diverse ways of getting that content (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Webster, 2014), their program choices were still determined by structural factors (e.g., audience availability and program casts) and embedded in the routines of their daily lives. Moreover, the results from the third phase showed that viewing habits still played an important role in determining how and what participants watched, and repeat viewing was very common among this group of participants.

## CHAPTER 8

### DISCUSSION

Building on both agent-based and structural theories in television audience research (e.g., Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Giddens, 1984; Rubin, 1993; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2018; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), this study employed a mixed-method approach that combines data collected via in-depth interviews with that from screenshots captured with a browser extension to revisit the roles of structural and motivational factors in participants' Netflix viewing.

Perhaps this study's most important finding is that, even in the streaming age where participants have almost unlimited viewing options, structural factors (e.g., audience availability) and traditional viewing motivations (i.e. for relaxation and enjoyment) remain critical in determining their viewing practices. In other words, the platforms and devices that people use to watch television may differ from those used in the network era, but why they watch, when they watch, and what they watch are still driven by the motivational and structural factors identified in traditional television audience research (e.g., Barrett, 1999, 2019; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Goodhardt et al., 1987; Rubin et al., 2004; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2014, 2018).

Further, habits, which are often overlooked in audience scholarship (Bayer & LaRose, 2018; Cooper, 1996; LaRose, 2010; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Tannenbaum, 1985; Webster, 1998), played an important role in influencing when, how, and what participants watched on Netflix. The study also found that, although participants had

access to considerable content, repeat viewing of favorite shows was very common. The study contributes to contemporary audience behavior research in the following ways.

### **The Role of Motivations in Participants' Viewing Practices**

#### ***Hedonic Motivation: The Dominant Motive***

The study found that the hedonic motivation (e.g., entertainment-related) played a predominant role in influencing participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. In the first round of interviews, over half of the participants said they used Netflix for enjoyment, to relax, and to detach from their daily lives. This finding aligns with existing audience behavior literature, which suggests that the traditional hedonic motive is the strongest driver for both linear television (e.g., broadcast and cable) (Cooper & Tang, 2009; McQuail, 1997; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Rubin, 1983) and streaming (Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Sung et al., 2018; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

The second round of interviews reinforced this. Many participants said they chose the programs they did for relaxation and enjoyment. Further, in line with prior studies (Cooper, 1996; Heeter, 1985; Piotrowski et al., 2013; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Tannenbaum, 1985; Nielsen, 2019b), this study showed that familiarity is an important factor in guiding participants' program choices. During the second round of interviews, some participants said they chose programs they were already familiar with or watched before, largely due to the comfort of the familiar. Additionally, in line with prior studies (Webster & Wang, 1992; Wonneberger et al., 2009), some participants said they paid less attention but felt a lot more relaxed when they watched a program again.

These results make sense, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when this group of participants completed the study (i.e., August to December 2020). The pandemic not only restricted people's social activities, but also led to an increase in feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty (Jarzyna, 2021; Saladino et al., 2020; Walsh, 2021). These results are also in line with Johnson and Dempsey's (2020) study, in which they found that "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, the comfort factors may have been more important in influencing participants' viewing behaviors during the pandemic than they otherwise would have been.

In addition to the hedonic motivation, which has been the dominant motive related to participants' viewing behaviors, the current study found that social motivations played a subordinate role in determining what participants watched on Netflix.

***Social Motivation: The Subordinate Motive***

Compared with the hedonic motivation, social motivation has received much less attention in traditional television audience research (e.g., Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 1983, 1991; Webster, 1988). However, in the streaming age, some studies found that today's audience members like to use streaming services for socialization purposes, such as to facilitate social interactions and to feel they belong to a community or group (e.g., Panda & Pandey, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2019).

In the first round of interviews, some participants said their Netflix viewing is often driven by social motivations, such as to catch up with friends, to be a part of the conversation, and to feel included in a community of interests. A handful of participants mentioned they were members of Netflix-related groups (e.g., WhatsApp and Facebook Groups) and sometimes decided what to watch based on the discussions in these groups. Consistent with previous studies (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Lu, 2021; Matrix, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Wohn & Na, 2011), several participants said that they would text or chat with their friends on social media during and/or after watching a show.

In relation to building social connections with others, five participants, all women, mentioned parasocial relationships as a motivation that influenced their program choices during the second round of interviews. This is consistent with prior literature (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Gleason, 2017; Waskie, 2018), which suggests that female audiences tend to develop parasocial relationships with characters more frequently than other groups do. The conversations with these participants also showed that watching certain Netflix programs helped them build connections with characters, and these connections might have contributed to a more enjoyable viewing experience (e.g., Hartmann, 2016; Nabi, 2006; Rosaen & Dibble, 2017).

Given the limited number of participants who mentioned parasocial relationships, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on restricting real social contact, it is reasonable to say that while parasocial relationships matter to a handful of participants, they play a much less important role in shaping participants' viewing behaviors compared to other motivations.

### ***Instrumental Motivation: The Least Mentioned Motive***

Unlike hedonic and social motivations, this study found instrumental motivation (e.g., to obtain informational benefits like knowledge or practical strategies) was not an important reason for participants to watch Netflix. Three participants mentioned an instrumental motivation during the first round of interviews, but even among those who did mention the informational function of Netflix, it was not a primary motivator for using the platform.

Further, in the second round of interviews, none of the participants mentioned an instrumental motivation when asked about their specific program choices. These findings are consistent with prior research on television audience behaviors (e.g., Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Castro et al., 2021; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2018). For example, Bondad-Brown et al. (2012) found that the entertainment motive was a significant predictor of traditional television viewing, while informational purposes were more prominent in online video viewing (e.g., YouTube and Vimeo). Similarly, several other studies (Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Castro et al., 2021; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Shao & Beneza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sung et al., 2018) also did not find a significant relationship between information-seeking and audiences' streaming viewing behaviors.

The study's results reinforce the idea that streaming viewing is primarily driven by entertainment. Participants may seek out other types of media, such as traditional broadcasting networks, search engines like Google, and online sharing websites like YouTube, to satisfy their informational needs (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012;



Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Lotz, 2018; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2018; Rubin, 2009; Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019).

### **The Role of Structural Factors in Participants' Viewing Practices**

As noted in previous chapters, much of the literature on audience viewing behaviors has taken the agent-based approach, focusing on audiences' motivations and preferences. However, audience behaviors are not free of structural constraints (Barrett, 1999; Billings, 2011; Giddens, 1984; Tang & Cooper, 2013; Webster et al., 2006).

RQ2 considers to what extent macro-level structural factors impact participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. In line with many prior studies (e.g., Cooper & Tang, 2009; Perusko, et al., 2015; Taneja et al., 2012; Taneja & Webster, 2016; Webster, 2014; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Webster & Phalen, 1997; Wonneberger et al., 2011), the current study found that, although participants have some capacity to make subjective choices on Netflix, their viewing decisions (e.g., when, how, and what to watch) are still embedded in the rhythms of their daily lives and primarily influenced by structural factors. These include audience availability, content availability, exclusive content, and recommendations from friends, family members, and from Netflix itself.

Further, in line with Barrett et al.'s (2022) findings, this study found that the newer structural factors such as program scores on recommendation sites (e.g., Rotten Tomatoes, IMDB) did not play an important role in guiding participants' viewing decisions. Each of these is discussed below.

### *Audience Availability and Its Continuing Importance*

As noted, audience availability has long been seen as the key structural variable in television audience research (Barrett, 1999; Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Webster et al., 2006). In practice, linear television channels (e.g., cable and broadcast television) have to consider audience availability when arranging program release schedules (Barrett, 2019; Eastman & Ferguson, 2012; Webster, 1985). When it comes to the streaming era, in which people can watch their preferred content almost anytime and anywhere (Lobato, 2018; Webster, 2018), audience availability seems to receive much less attention from audience researchers and streaming service providers.

However, in a recent study, Barrett et al. (2022) used Nielsen ratings data for the five broadcast networks (i.e., ABC, CBS, CW, Fox, and NBC) and examined whether the factors traditionally found to impact primetime TV program ratings continue to do so in today's high-choice environment. Their results showed that, even in the streaming age, audience availability remained the strongest predictor of programs' performance (p. 8).

Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Cooper, 1996; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012; Taneja & Viswanathan, 2014; Webster, 2005, 2014), the current study's results underscore the continuing importance of audience availability in today's media environment. Although participants have easy access to content and many of them expressed a strong desire to watch more Netflix, their viewing behaviors are still constrained by their availability and daily routines.

In the first round of interviews, many participants said that their viewing behaviors differed between weekdays and weekends (i.e., Saturday and Sunday), and

they tended to watch more on weekends because they had more time and fewer responsibilities. However, the analysis of their actual viewing behaviors did not support this. The results from the second phase of this study showed that there were no significant fluctuations in total viewing time in terms of the day of the week. Interestingly, Sunday had the lightest viewing. Such findings are contradictory with prior audience research (e.g., Castro et al., 2021; Krantz-Kent, 2018; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Schmitz et al., 2004), which suggests that audience viewing behaviors vary widely between weekdays and weekends, and weekends are usually considered a better time for leisure activities (Johnson & Turnock, 2005).

These seemingly contradictory results might be due to several reasons. As noted, the most important reason could be that the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped participants' daily routines (Dixit, 2020; Johnson & Dempsey, 2020) and made them more available to watch Netflix on weekdays than they had been (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021; Jarzyna, 2021). Additionally, these results might suggest that while the participants were available to watch during the weekend, they may have been shifting to other channels besides Netflix. For instance, many popular sports events (e.g., NFL games) and award shows, are usually broadcast on Sundays (Lynch & Quartz, 2014; Haislop, 2020), and participants may switch to traditional networks when these events are live.

In addition to determining when and how long participants watched (Cooper & Tang, 2009), the current study also found that audience availability might influence participants' program choices, especially regarding what types of programs (e.g., 30-minute episodes vs. movies) they would watch. In the first round of interviews, several

participants said that they would only watch movies or binge-watch shows on the weekends to have an uninterrupted viewing experience. The analysis of their actual viewing behaviors supported this.

Additionally, some participants said they tend to watch short episodes for entertainment and relaxation on weekdays because they have less availability on these days. Such findings are in line with Cooper and Tang's (2009) early study, in which they found that audiences' viewing motivations were closely linked to their availability and daily routines (p. 404). Further, many psychology studies suggest individuals' emotional status and behavioral motivations are influenced by personal availability and the day of the week (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Leung, 2006; Ryan et al., 2010). Further research is needed to continue exploring to what extent audience availability influences viewing motivations and program choices.

In addition to audience availability, content exclusivity and availability have been important structural variables that impacted people's media consumption (e.g., Barrett, 2019; Chiang & Jhang-Li, 2020; Webster, 2018).

### ***Content Exclusivity and Availability***

As participants use streaming services to expand their viewing options and gain more control over when to watch, this study found that content exclusivity and availability play important roles in influencing their viewing behaviors. Over the past decade, Netflix has heavily invested in producing original content. Its original series, such as *Ozark*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *The Queen's Gambit*, and *Stranger Things*, are exclusive to the platform and often have a dedicated fan base (e.g., Bonfiglio, 2023;

Monteil, 2021; Nielsen, 2023). When asked why they watched Netflix, access to exclusive content was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons cited by participants during the first round of interviews.

Many said that access to exclusive content was not only an important reason for them to subscribe to Netflix in the first place, but also why they continue to subscribe. When asked why they thought Netflix has become so popular, some participants again mentioned the availability of exclusive content.

In addition to content exclusivity, in the first round of interviews, some participants said that they watched Netflix because of the diversity and scale of its library, as well as its accessibility. However, as Nielsen (2019b) suggests, “the luxury of choice serves as a double-edged sword” for audiences’ viewing experiences. On the one hand, an audience member is more likely to subscribe to and consume more content on a streaming platform that offers a larger selection of choices compared to one with fewer options (Lotz, 2014). On the other hand, since viewers have limited time to watch television, offering more viewing options is likely to result in audience fragmentation and polarization rather than increasing the amount of time spent viewing (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Webster & Phalen, 1997; Nielsen, 2023). Several other studies also found that too many program choices can be overwhelming for audiences, leading to a lack of interest in watching (Abascal, 2023; Porter, 2022) and declining TV viewership (Bangera, 2022; Busbee, 2021).

For instance, a recent Nielsen report found that about half of streaming users in the United States feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of programming on streaming

services (Porter, 2022). Another report showed that, as of February 2022, there were 817,000 unique program titles (e.g., series and movies) available via streaming services—an increase of about 171,000 titles (26.5 percent) since the end of 2019 (Nielsen, 2022). When dealing with numerous content choices, the platforms’ recommendation systems, as well as recommendations from friends and family, become increasingly important in guiding audiences’ awareness and helping them decide what to watch (Webster, 2017, 2018).

In addition to content exclusivity and availability, there were other structural factors that also were identified. These include recommendations from friends, family members, and Netflix, as well as program scores on recommendation sites.

### ***Recommendations from Friends, Family, and Netflix Itself***

In line with prior studies (Shao & Benaza, 2018; Sung et al., 2018; Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2011, 2018; Nielsen, 2019b), this study found two types of recommendations play a significant role in participants’ viewing choices. These include (1) recommendations from friends and family members, and (2) recommendations from Netflix itself.

For many years, various streaming platforms have been striving to develop better algorithms to identify audiences’ preferences, to make them become aware of what is on the platform and the degree to which other audience members enjoyed particular programs (Chhabra, 2017; Finn, 2017; Frey, 2021; Webster, 2018). Several previous studies also suggested that audiences’ program choices were largely driven by the platform’s recommendations (e.g., Chhabra, 2017; Giesbrecht, 2017).

However, a Nielsen report (2019b) found that when asked about the factors influencing their streaming content choices, 66% of respondents cited recommendations from friends and family, while less than half (48%) cited recommendations from streaming platforms. The present study supports this finding. During both rounds of interviews, more of this study's participants mentioned they watched particular programs because of recommendations from friends and family members than because of recommendations made by the platform. Some participants said that they feel their friends and family members have a better understanding of their preferences and are more likely to make recommendations in line with these preferences than is Netflix's recommendation system.

Additionally, the results showed that recommendations from friends and family members were closely linked to participants' social motivations, and the traditional "water cooler effect," which refers to the phenomenon where people would gather around the water cooler in a break room to talk about a TV show or movie (Feeney, 2013; Putnam, 2001; Nathan et al., 2008), has persisted in the streaming age. For instance, some of the study's participants said they often recommend and discuss popular shows (e.g., *Breaking Bad*, *Emily in Paris*, and *Selling Sunset*) with their friends via text message. As noted, a handful of participants also mentioned they were members of Netflix-related groups, in which they chatted with their friends to decide what to watch next. In line with prior studies, the conversations with the study's participants showed that "water-cooler TV" has evolved in the streaming age (Feeney, 2013; Martin, 2018; Matrix, 2014). Many Netflix shows have caused a lot of attention and discussion among viewers on online

platforms and in person. This type of “water cooler effect” further contributes to the popularity of a show and the platform (Gumeny, 2019).

In line with prior studies (Nielsen, 2019b; Shao & Benaza, 2018; Steiner & Xu, 2020), the study also demonstrated the important role recommendations from friends and family members play in guiding participants’ viewing choices. Streaming service providers should take these less commonly considered factors (e.g., recommendations from friends and family members) into account to better cater to the needs of their subscribers. For instance, Netflix currently does not have a social function for users to connect with each other. However, many audiences, including several participants in this study (e.g., P5, P14), have expressed a strong desire to connect or watch Netflix remotely with their friends, and not have to rely on third-party applications (e.g., Netflix Party, Zoom) to do so (Beck, 2021; Ochani, 2022).

In addition to recommendations from friends, family, and Netflix itself, this study also examined the role of scores on recommendation sites (e.g., IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes) in participants’ viewing decisions.

### ***The Role of Recommendation Sites***

Several studies have found that a program’s scores on recommendation sites significantly affect audience members’ viewing choices (e.g., Gavilan et al., 2019; Min, 2019). However, Barrett et al. (2022) examined the program’s score on recommender sites as a newer structural factor and found a weak relationship between the weighted Rotten Tomatoes score and program share, suggesting that individuals’ program choices may be based on other factors. Consistent with Barrett et al.’s (2022) findings, the current



study showed most participants did not rely on scores on recommendation sites (e.g., IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes) to make program choices, although a few participants did use scores on these sites when selecting for movies. This might be due to several reasons.

First, the results make sense because not all Netflix content is available on recommendation sites, and scores on these sites (e.g., IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes) are often unavailable when a new program is released. For instance, when a participant is unable to find a desired show on these recommendation sites, the sense of non-inclusivity may discourage them from further exploring these sites when deciding what to watch. Further, as noted above, Netflix viewing is primarily entertainment-driven, and some participants did not want to spend the extra time and effort searching for program information outside the platform. For example, when deciding whether to watch a particular program, one participant said she reads what the series or movie is about on Netflix and “*just kind of goes with it.*”

Additionally, the current study focuses on Netflix, and it is worth noting that one of the popular recommendation sites, IMDB, is owned by Amazon (Schubert, 2022), which is competing with Netflix in the streaming space. Therefore, the results might differ if the study examined the audiences’ viewing behaviors on Amazon Prime Video or IMDB TV. Further, the reliability of scores on recommendation sites may have influenced the results. For example, prior studies showed that many audiences felt that the reviews or scores on recommendation sites were misleading and unreliable (Monteil, 2022). This feeling of unreliability could result in participants’ indifference to scores on these sites when making their viewing decisions.

Last but not least, one of the primary purposes of program scores on recommendation sites (e.g., IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes) is to focus audiences' attention and guide viewing decisions (e.g., Frey, 2021; Krysik, 2021; Nielsen, 2022; Webster, 2018). However, this study found that other factors, such as recommendations from friends, family members, and Netflix itself, have taken on that role. Additionally, many participants relied on their viewing habits and tended to choose shows that they were familiar with or had watched before.

### **The Role of Habits in Participants' Netflix Viewing Behaviors**

In addition to motivational and traditional structural factors, this study found that participants' Netflix viewing behaviors were still largely driven by their habits. In line with traditional television audience research (e.g., Abelman & Atkin, 2000; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Wakshlag et al., 1983; Webster et al., 2006; Webster & Lichty, 1991), the findings from the current study showed that participants' viewing habits determine not only when they watch, but also how they watched (e.g., the viewing environment) 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.

In the first round of interviews, most participants said that they have specific habits or routines when watching Netflix, and several notable themes emerged. These include watching Netflix before bed, watching while eating, and streaming as background

noise. Among these themes, 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; Gradisar et al., 2013). 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). The current 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; Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019; Tannenbaum, 1985), 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; Horen, 1980; Walker, 1988; 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 (2019, 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). These included *The Office* (2005), *Friends* (1994), *Criminal Minds* (2005), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), and *NCIS* (2003) (Bauder, 2020). 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.

In summary, 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, 2010, 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.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

Building on two theoretical perspectives in television audience research, the current study advances contemporary audience scholarship by revisiting the roles of structural and motivational factors in determining participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. While the study provides fresh insights into understanding audiences' streaming 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 and entertainment activities (Jarzyna, 2021; Nhamo et al., 2020), and participants may have had unique daily routines and viewing motivations during this period. For instance, when participants were unable to participate in social activities during the pandemic, they might have experienced higher levels of uncertainty and boredom, and turned to the streaming platforms to satisfy their entertainment needs, leading to an increase in the amount of time they spent watching streaming services (Dayal, 2022; Luo, 2020; Tang & Cooper, 2022). When quarantine ended and participants were able to resume some of their pre-pandemic routines, they may have been less available to watch television than they had been. In some cases, while participants may have been available to watch television more than they had been pre-pandemic because of the ability to work from home, they may have chosen to spend their

time reengaging with friends and family rather than watching television after having spent so much time doing so during the pandemic (Luo, 2020).

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 motivations. For example, some of the study’s participants said they subscribed to multiple streaming services and used them for different purposes. One participant mentioned he used Netflix primarily to watch TV episodes, but used Amazon Prime Video to watch movies. It is noteworthy that while viewing motivations may differ based on platforms, traditional structural factors (e.g., audience availability) are likely to continue to be important in influencing audiences’ viewing behaviors.

As the leading platform in the industry, Netflix faces fierce competition for subscribers and content from other industry giants (e.g., HBO Max, Disney+, and Warner Brothers) (Verna & Benes, 2022), and its business model has also undergone significant changes since 2020 (Mehta, 2023). For instance, in the first quarter of 2022, Netflix reported a loss of 200,000 subscribers globally compared to Q4 2021, and its revenue growth had slowed considerably (Maas, 2022). To promote subscribership and revenue growth, Netflix launched paid sharing in many regions of the world and started cracking down on password sharing among users outside the subscriber’s household (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2023; Spangler, 2023). Despite the possible negative effects (Steinberg, 2023), several studies showed that Netflix’s plan to crack down on account sharing is paying off. For instance, in a letter to its shareholders, Netflix indicated that cracking

down on account sharing “increased acquisition and revenue” in markets such as Canada, New Zealand, and Portugal (Fitzgerald, 2023). In May 23, 2023, Netflix began cracking down on account sharing in the U.S. A recent study showed that, after May 23, Netflix “had the four single largest days of U.S. user acquisition,” resulting in the highest number of new subscribers in the U.S. since the pandemic (Brady, 2023).

Another report found that more than 80% of the U.S. respondents who used Netflix through someone else’s account said they planned to purchase their own subscription or had already done so (Aquilina, 2023). These recent studies indicate, at least in the short-term, that Netflix’s password sharing crackdown led to an increase in sign-ups (Aquilina, 2023; Brady, 2023; Fitzgerald, 2023). One possible avenue for future studies is to investigate how these structure-level shifts impact Netflix’s subscribership and revenue in the long term and whether other streaming services (e.g., Hulu, HBO Max, and Disney+) should follow suit in the post-pandemic age.

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; Stoll, 2022b), future studies could explore whether and how audiences’ streaming viewing behaviors differ across different age groups (e.g., Bondad-Brown et al., 2012; Stoll, 2021b). Additionally, the researcher did not send follow-up invitations to those respondents who initially expressed interest in participating in the study but did not respond to the letters of invitation because a sufficient number of respondents had already agreed to participate. To minimize the possibility of non-response bias (Berg, 2005), future studies that take a similar approach



should consider sending follow-up invitations to the potential participants. Given that watching Netflix was a condition for being included in this study, while being a subscriber was not, it is possible that participants who paid for their own accounts watched more Netflix compared to those who used others' accounts. Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that the study's participants may have had a higher interest in Netflix and watched streaming content to a greater extent than the general public. To diversify the sample, researchers could consider recruiting both light and heavy (infrequent/frequent) Netflix users in future studies.

In addition, while the study focuses on the roles motivational and structural factors play in participants' Netflix viewing behaviors, it would also be interesting to examine whether and how their Netflix usage leads to different cognitive and behavioral outcomes. This is important because people's media consumption is not a linear process, and their viewing experiences may have an influence on their future viewing decisions (Charney & Greenberg, 2001; Lin, 1999; Palmgreen et al., 1980). A future longitudinal study could explore whether recommendation behaviors, such as sending recommendations to friends and family members, enhances participants' relationships with others, which further influences their viewing choices. While a handful of the participants were stay-at-home parents, their viewing activities did not include many children's shows. Future researchers could further explore whether parents watch streaming media with their children and to what extent watching with children influences their viewing experiences and program choices.

In addition to the structural and motivational factors found in the study, it is noteworthy that other factors, such as personality traits and subscription prices, may also play significant roles in influencing audiences' viewing behaviors (Shim & Kim, 2018). For example, a survey found that 46% of U.S. respondents considered price as a critical factor when deciding whether to subscribe to a streaming service (Westcott et al., 2021). Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that if audiences pay more for a streaming service, they may consume more content through it (Cooper & Tang, 2009). This becomes more important as Netflix begins to offer an ad-supported tier with a lower price for its subscribers (Porter, 2023; Netflix, 2023). One potential avenue for future research is to use a case study or in-depth interviews to explore how the subscription model change and the inclusion of commercials in the platform influence audiences' viewing practices.

Further, reaction videos, which are a type of video in which people record their reactions while watching television shows or film trailers and upload them to platforms like YouTube, have gained popularity in recent years (Bhatt, 2021; Riverside, 2023). Compared with watching the television show itself, these videos create a group-viewing experience for audiences, providing them with a virtual companion. A future study could delve into the motivations of reaction video viewers and examine whether these videos influence audiences' streaming platform program choices.

To summarize, the study's results underscore the continuing impact of structural factors and traditional viewing motivations (i.e., enjoyment and relaxation) in determining participants' Netflix viewing behaviors. Additionally, the study found that,

in today's fragmented media environment, audiences' viewing decisions (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. As Barrett (2019) indicated, in an evolving media environment, exploring the role of both traditional and emerging determinants in television audience behaviors remains a worthwhile scholarly pursuit.

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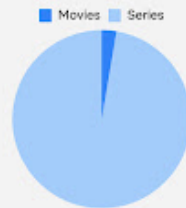
## APPENDIX A

### EXAMPLE SCREENSHOTS OF NETFLIX VIEWING STATS

## My viewing stats



## Time watching movies/series



## Average time per day on Netflix



## Viewing summary

[Summary](#) | [Achievements](#)

TITLES WATCHED	1,270	Since 12/19/15
TOTAL TIME ON NETFLIX	25 days, 21 hours, 39 minutes, 20 seconds	
NETFLIX MARATHON (IN A DAY)	7 hours, 37 minutes, 4 seconds	On 7/6/17
DEVICES USED	7	

## Viewing activity

Search...

Date	Title	Duration	Type
4/8/20 19:05:06	Homeland - Season 3: "Uh... Oh... Ah..."	49:17	
3/24/20 18:18:16	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Checkered Flag"	31:14	
3/24/20 18:10:26	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Blood, Sweat & Tears"	31:36	
3/23/20 20:39:53	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Musical Chairs"	38:12	
3/22/20 23:10:44	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Seeing Red"	32:56	
3/22/20 00:22:43	BoJack Horseman - Season 6: "The Kidney Stays in the Picture"	26:14	
3/21/20 23:57:43	BoJack Horseman - Season 6: "A Little Uneven, Is All"	26:18	
3/21/20 23:32:42	BoJack Horseman - Season 6: "Surprise!"	26:18	
3/21/20 23:07:02	BoJack Horseman - Season 6: "Feel-Good Story"	26:10	
3/21/20 12:19:07	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Raging Bulls"	37:02	
3/21/20 11:43:18	Formula 1: Drive to Survive - Season 2: "Great Expectations"	36:38	

APPENDIX B  
RECRUITMENT LETTER

I am a doctoral candidate in the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a study about how and why people use Netflix. The study includes three phases:

1. Pre-test interviews with participants about their Netflix viewing experience.
2. Installation of the browser extension and the submission of screenshots of each participant's weeklong Netflix viewing activities
3. Post-test interviews with participants to discuss specific viewing activities.

If you are a Netflix user and at least 18 years old, and are interested in participating, please click the link below to complete a short survey. If you are selected as a participant and complete the study you will receive a total of \$100 in Amazon gift cards.

[https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6DNY92Wdnm4QgDz](https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6DNY92Wdnm4QgDz)

APPENDIX C  
INVITATION EMAIL

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a study about how and why people use Netflix. Thank you for your interest in this study.

If you are still willing to participate, please complete the consent form via the following link, which includes the study's objective, anticipated interview duration, and compensation details: [https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0BYk7Svz7FQVh8p](https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0BYk7Svz7FQVh8p)

Please let me know if have any questions about this study. Thank you!

(The Researcher's Name)



APPENDIX D  
CONSENT FORM

My name is Chun Shao, a doctoral candidate in Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. With the guidance of Dr. Marianne Barrett, I am conducting a research study, to better understand why and how people use Netflix. I am inviting you to take part in this study, which has three phases.

- First: an interview about your Netflix viewing. The interview will last about 45 minutes, followed by a 15-minute informal discussion and be conducted via online video conferencing (e.g., Zoom).
- Second: the installation on your computer of a Google Chrome extension, Netflix Viewing Stats, and the use of the extension for one week. The extension will capture your Netflix viewing. At the end of the week, you will upload a screenshot of the extension through a link on Qualtrics. Detailed instructions on how to install the extension and upload the screenshot will be provided following the phase-one interview.
- Third: a follow-up interview about your recent Netflix use. The interview will last about 45 minutes, followed by a 15-minute informal discussion and be conducted via online video conferencing (e.g., Zoom).

If you agree to participate, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card after you complete the first interview, and a second \$25 Amazon gift card after you upload the screenshots of your Netflix viewing. An additional \$50 Amazon gift card will be provided after the second interview. The gift cards will be distributed through email immediately after you complete each phase. Only researchers (Chun Shao and Dr. Marianne Barrett) will have access to your email addresses and will never disclose your contact information to others.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time without penalty. There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, or economic risks to participate in this study. All your responses will be kept confidential. That is, your interview responses and screenshots will only be accessed by me (Chun Shao) and my dissertation adviser (Dr. Marianne Barrett). To protect your privacy, the interview responses and information about your viewing activities will be completely anonymous and used in aggregated form. To ensure anonymity, a randomized ID will be assigned to your response. We will ensure any information we include in the report does not identify you as the respondent. The data will only be used for research purposes.

The interview will be audio recorded. The data will be temporarily recorded on a portable audio device owned by the researcher (Chun Shao). Then the data will be transferred to the ASU secure cloud storage that is only accessible through a password and dual authorization. After completing the transfer, all the recordings will be erased from the audio device.

The results of the study will be included in my dissertation and subsequently published as conference papers and academic journal articles. If you are interested in reading the results of the study, you can email me (cshao9@asu.edu) to request a copy of report. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact us at cshao9@asu.edu or marianne@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- I am 18 years of age and a Netflix user.
- My participation in the study is voluntary.
- I am aware that I may choose to terminate my participation at any time for any reason.
- I agree to participate in all three phases of this study.
- I agree to my interviews being audio-recorded.
- By affixing my digital signature, I am consenting to participate in this study.

I consent to participate in the study.

Digital Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX E  
QUESTIONNAIRE

1-1. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or above
- Prefer not to respond

1-2. I identify as

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Other
- Prefer not to respond

1-3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school diploma
- High school diploma
- Some college
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Prefer not to respond

1.4. Please specify your ethnicity.

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Mixed race
- Other
- Prefer not to respond

1-5. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

- Working 1-20 hours per week
- Working more than 20 hours per week
- Not employed, looking for work
- Not employed, NOT looking for work
- Prefer not to respond

1-6. What is your annual household income?

- \$30,000 or below
- $\$30,000 < \$60,000$
- $\$60,000 < \$90,000$
- $\$90,000 < \$150,000$
- More than \$150,000
- Prefer not to respond

APPENDIX F  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) Which platforms do you usually use to watch media content?
- 2) How long have you been using Netflix?
- 3) Tell me about your first memories of watching Netflix. What was it like? (Do you remember when you first heard about Netflix?)
- 4) Which type of device do you usually use to watch Netflix?
- 5) Please tell me about some of your favorite shows on Netflix.
- 6) When do you usually available to watch Netflix? (e.g., morning, afternoon, evening? weekday, weekend?)
- 7) How often do you watch Netflix?
- 8) About how many hours a day do you watch Netflix?
- 9) On average, how many episodes of a drama would you say you watch in one sitting?
- 10) On average, how many episodes of a half-hour comedy would you say you watch in one sitting?
- 11) Do you watch cable or broadcast television?
- 12) [If 11 yes] Does Netflix viewing differ from viewing through other platforms, such as cable or broadcast television? If so, in what ways?
- 13) What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about watching Netflix?
- 14) What is your favorite Netflix feature? Are there any specific characteristics of Netflix that encourage you to use it?



- 15) Can you describe your typical Netflix viewing experience? (What do you do, how long/what watched etc.)
- 16) Do you have any routines when you get ready to watch Netflix? (Like things you wear or food you eat, lights on/off, phone etc.)
- 17) How do you decide what to watch?
- 18) How many hours in a typical day would you say you spend on other types of media, such as social media, cable television, and video games?
- 19) Where do you (or people who you know) watch Netflix, and who do you like to view it with? (Do you watch by yourself or with other people? How about that experience?)
- 20) Have you ever saved episodes of a show until the season is complete or hold episodes to watch until the next season is about to begin? [If Yes] Can you describe that experience?
- 21) Have you ever watched Netflix in order to catch up or to feel part of the conversation about a “cultural moment”? [If Yes] How about that experience?
- 22) Why do you think Netflix has become so popular?
- 23) Do you and your friends talk about Netflix viewing?

The order of the questions was adjusted according to the flow of the conversation, and an informal discussion will last about 15 minutes.

- 24) Is there anything else you'd like to add about your Netflix viewing?

25) Can you please tell me a little about your feelings on this interview? What could be improved in future interviews?

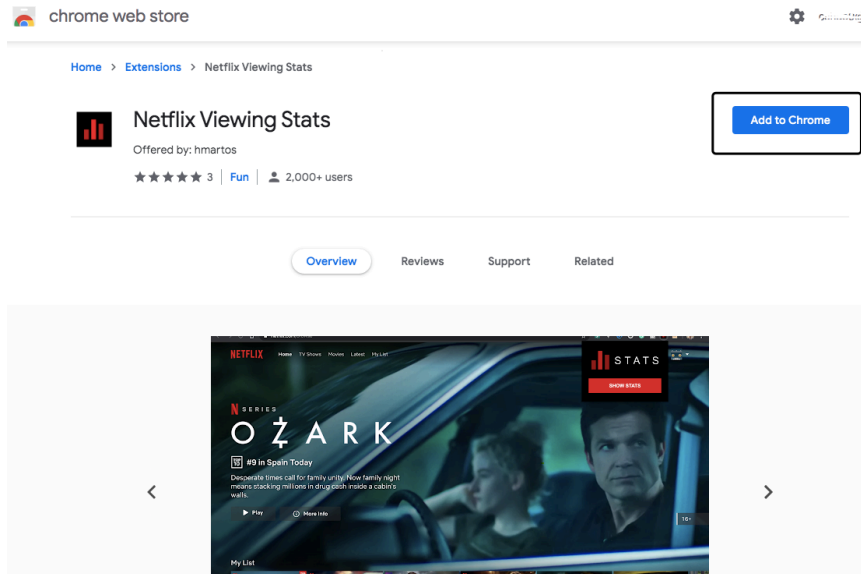
## APPENDIX G

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR INSTALLING NETFLIX VIEWING STATS

1. On your computer, open Google Chrome. If you have not installed Chrome, please download and install it via: <https://www.google.com/chrome/>

2. Open the link below via Google Chrome:

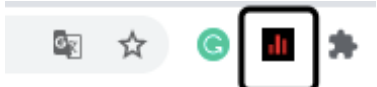
<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/netflix-viewing-stats/bckfpnenhimfckndcceonmkhheinmkob?hl=en>



3. Select **Add to Chrome**.

4. In the confirmation box, select **Add extension**.

To use the extension, please click the icon to the right of the address bar.



For more information about how to install and use the extension, please access via: [https://support.google.com/chrome\\_webstore/answer/2664769?hl=en](https://support.google.com/chrome_webstore/answer/2664769?hl=en)

APPENDIX H  
FOLLOW-UP EMAIL EXAMPLE

Dear (Participant Name),

It has been one week since our first interview. As we discussed during our meeting, please click on the link below to upload screenshots of your Netflix Viewing Stats:

[https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_bg7UBFaYresmiLX](https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bg7UBFaYresmiLX)

In the meantime, please let me know your availability in the next two weeks to schedule a follow-up interview. Thank you for your time and participation!

(The Researcher's Name)

APPENDIX I  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Marianne Barrett](#)

[CRONKITE: Journalism and Mass Communication, Walter Cronkite School of](#)

602/496-5555

[marianne@asu.edu](mailto:marianne@asu.edu)

Dear [Marianne Barrett](#):

On 8/21/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Active in Structure: An Integrated Model of Structural Theories and Individual Factors in Explaining Audience Behavior in the Post-Network Age
Investigator:	<a href="#">Marianne Barrett</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00012327
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consent From_08192020.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Demographic Survey_08192020.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Extension installation guide.pdf, Category: Participant materials (specific directions for them);</li> <li>• Interview_Protocol_08192020.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• IRB Social Behavioral 08192020.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> <li>• Recruitment_script_0813_2020.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li> <li>• Research Participant Compensation Tracking Log.pdf, Category: Other;</li> </ul>



The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 8/21/2020.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at [research.integrity@asu.edu](mailto:research.integrity@asu.edu) to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Chun Shao  
Marianne Barrett  
Chun Shao