
Binge-Watching and Interpersonal Communication Patterns among Solo Raya Students: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

The phenomenon of binge-watching has become part of the rapidly growing digital media culture, especially among college students. The activity is not only for entertainment but also to relieve stress and avoid academic pressure. This study explores how college students in Solo Raya interpret their binge-watching experiences and how these experiences impact interpersonal communication patterns. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, involving three university students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study's results reveal five main themes. First, binge-watching is interpreted as a form of emotional coping with academic stress. Second, the main motivation for students to watch is facilitated by digital platform features such as on-demand and autoplay. Third, students experience ambivalence between the enjoyment of watching and the disadvantages experienced, such as physical fatigue and distracted focus. Fourth, digital content consumption serves as a means to create closer friendships through shared interests. Fifth, binge-watching contributes to increased knowledge and identity formation. With only three participants, the findings reflect individual experiences rather than broader generalizations. Binge-watching is a means of sharing experiences and a social resource in students' lives through digital content.

Keywords: *Academics, Communication Patterns, Digital Media, Students, Relationships*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of streaming services like Netflix, YouTube, Disney+, and Prime Video has made binge-viewing, defined as watching many episodes or films in one sitting, a common way for students to consume media (Mikos, 2016). The ramifications of this activity for fundamental interpersonal communication skills in social and academic contexts remain unclear, despite its widespread recognition as a form of amusement or stress relief. This study asks: how do college students interpret their binge-watching experiences, and how do these interpretations shape their interpersonal communication patterns?

This study's primary theoretical framework is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). According to UGT, people are active media consumers who choose content to satisfy particular psychological requirements, such as enjoyment, relaxation, and a desire to avoid social demands of particular relevance here are emotional and social gratifications mood management, companionship, and identity affirmation associated with streaming

behavior among young adults (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). When it comes to binge-watching, UGT clarifies why students opt for extended viewing sessions when they're bored or under academic stress. UGT, by itself, is insufficient because while it explains the reasons for media consumption, it falls short in explaining how platform design influences behavior and how prolonged media use affects the quality of offline social interactions. This study extends UGT by integrating platform affordance theory and the interpersonal communication framework to construct a more comprehensive explanatory model.

Interpersonal communication is not merely a tool for exchanging information; it is a social structure through which students develop identities, build relationships, and navigate academic life (Lailie, Aryani, Anwar, Aristiawan, & Rahmawati, 2025). Face-to-face interactions, in particular, play a formative role in developing empathy, relational trust, and capacity for cooperation (Aytas & Topatan, 2024). Research shows that increased digital media consumption can replace time previously devoted to direct social interaction, potentially reducing the frequency and depth of peer interactions (Twenge, Spitzberg, & Campbell, 2019). Binge-watching and interpersonal contact do not always have a bad relationship, though; in fact, sharing media can foster discourse and improve social ties (Sundari, Silalahi, & Siahaan, 2024). This ambivalence necessitates a thorough qualitative analysis. It is precisely at the intersection of these two dynamics, media-driven psychological needs and the quality of offline social relationships, that this study is situated.

Although there is a wealth of research on binge-watching, a clear gap remains: existing studies mostly use quantitative designs that focus on psychological outcomes such as stress, addiction, and mood regulation, while the subjective communicative meanings that students associate with binge-watching and how these meanings affect their interpersonal relationships have not received systematic attention. To our knowledge, no study has explored binge-watching and interpersonal communication simultaneously through a qualitative lens among Indonesian university students. This study aims to fill this gap. This study aims to explore how university students in Solo Raya, Indonesia, interpret their binge-watching experiences and how these interpretations influence their interpersonal communication patterns in academic contexts. A qualitative thematic approach was adopted to capture the lived experiences, emotional responses, and social meanings that students construct around media consumption—dimensions that quantitative instruments are ill-equipped to access.

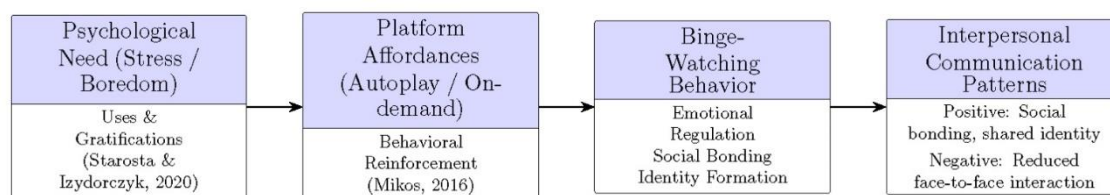


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Binge-Watching and Interpersonal Communication

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication plays a central role in shaping students' development and maintenance of social relationships (Sundari et al., 2024). Based on (Indri Febrianti, Malika Ayumi, Azhari Panjaitan, & Afwan Syahril Manurung, 2024), interpersonal communication involves not only the process of sending the message but also creating meaning, strengthening trust, and improving emotional relationships. In the context of

students, interpersonal communication is very important for building social personality, shaping self-identity, and adapting to academic and social environments through verbal and non-verbal communication (Nurdiarti & Prabowo, 2021).

In today's digital era, the way people communicate has undergone drastic changes. The development of the digital age and tools has expanded the paths of human interaction and activity, but has also created new challenges in maintaining emotional relationships between individuals (Putri Agustina, 2023). College students, as part of the digital-native generation, now communicate not only face-to-face but also engage in indirect interactions through online platforms such as social media, instant messaging apps, and streaming apps. The phenomenon of binge-watching reflects a new form of social interaction driven by shared interest in media content. Although primarily understood as a media consumption practice, binge-watching may influence interpersonal dynamics by restructuring leisure time and social engagement (Syafiqah Fa'im Rosli, Diana, & Mahudin, 2024).

According to Indri Febrianti et al., (2024) interpersonal communication aims to foster and strengthen the social bonds that form the foundation for an individual. However, when a person's time and attention are devoted to media activities such as binge-watching a serial, the dynamics of interpersonal communication can change, with face-to-face interactions becoming increasingly rare and expressions of empathy decreasing (Canet & Sánchez-Castillo, 2024) Also, According to Talal Mahmoud & Abdul Wahab, (2021) this theory, when binge-watching gets more individualized and longer, it may lead to less social engagement

However, under certain conditions, binge-watching can be beneficial. When college students watch the same series or genre, discuss the same plot, or watch together (co-viewing), these activities can strengthen relationships and emotional closeness between them (Anghelcev, Sar, Martin, & Moultrie, 2022). This understanding aligns with research by Sundari et al., (2024) which states that interpersonal communication is not limited to face-to-face meetings but can also occur through shared experiences that create similar feelings, emotions, and meanings among individuals.

Interpersonal communication among students is an ongoing process influenced by technological developments and the ways students consume digital content. The phenomenon of binge-watching plays a key role in shaping how students interact with their peers, both by maintaining friendships through shared experiences and by reducing the time needed to build friendships due to excessive use of digital media. Therefore, this study aims to examine in greater depth how students in Solo Raya interpret the experience of binge-watching and how this phenomenon may influence their interpersonal communication patterns in academic environments.

Binge-Watching

The phenomenon of binge-watching, or watching multiple film episodes in a single session without a break (Tenia & Nugraha, 2023). Typically leads individuals to enjoy the film's plot or become more immersed in it. This phenomenon has grown rapidly with the emergence of various streaming services, such as Netflix, Disney+, YouTube, and Prime Video, which offer video-on-demand (van Es & Nguyen, 2025). These media provide users with options or settings to determine the time and type of content they wish to enjoy without being tied to a specific schedule like television programming. Therefore, binge-watching can be considered a new pattern of digital media consumption behavior that reflects the characteristics of modern society, which demand flexibility, control over their own wishes, and a broader entertainment experience (Reisa & Irwansyah, 2020).

The main key to binge-watching is the total amount of screen time spent watching long films or series, continuous episodes, and autoplay features that can encourage users to feel more enjoyment while watching films, thereby feeling immersed in the storyline (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). These automatic features provide a deeper viewing experience for individuals, which can psychologically trigger stronger viewing behavior. However, the definition of what constitutes "binge-watching" is often subjective or undefined, as individuals differ in their interpretations of duration, number of episodes, or frequency of viewing (Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski, & Pesseau, 2018). This definitional fluidity carries a crucial theoretical implication: binge-watching cannot be adequately understood through behavioral metrics or screen-time counts alone. Rather, what is needed is a phenomenological orientation that foregrounds how individuals actively construct meaning from these experiences and how they interpret, justify, and emotionally process their media consumption in the context of their everyday lives. It is this phenomenological dimension that the present study privileges.

Vaterlaus, Spruance, Frantz, & Kruger, (2019) found that, among college students, binge-watching is conceptualized in terms of viewing time, consecutive episode consumption, and narrative immersion. This research also explains that this behavior is driven by emotional or psychological needs such as play, relaxation, and filling time. The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory provides the primary explanatory framework here, positioning binge-watching as an active, purposive media behavior through which individuals seek to satisfy specific psychological needs (Ahsan Bhatti, Khalid, & Khalid, 2022). This pattern is particularly salient among college students, for whom academic pressure creates a context in which binge-watching serves as a socially legitimate and emotionally functional form of escapism (Yu & Alizadeh, 2024).

Beyond individual gratification, binge-watching is not just about watching television; it has expanded to encompass psychological and social dynamics. The literature shows a productive analytical tension: binge-watching can function simultaneously as a socially isolating practice and as a social bonding mechanism. Social relationships are often formed through shared viewing experiences, whether offline or face-to-face, or indirectly or online through social media (St Syahrah, Mustadjar, & Agustang, 2020). This behavior reflects an important interpersonal dimension and is a key element of binge-watching, as it can serve as a new way to strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of togetherness (Sundari et al., 2024).

From a psychological perspective, binge-watching is more closely linked to emotional attachment to characters and stories in films, as well as a sense of connectedness, both of which can foster intimacy with the fictional worlds they enjoy. Furthermore, excessive media consumption can potentially lead to negative consequences, such as decreased productivity and altered sleep patterns (Srinivasan, Edward, & Eashwar, 2021). The dynamics of marathon viewing as a mechanism for forming social bonds, as well as its potential to disrupt interpersonal relationships, are the main theoretical tensions that this study seeks to explore. Rather than resolving this tension theoretically, this study investigates how students in Greater Solo subjectively navigate and understand these dynamics in their daily lives. This study conceptualizes binge-watching as the nexus of psychological incentives and technical affordances, which jointly shape students' actual media consumption experiences. Students then navigate these lived experiences in interpersonal contexts, which affect how they manage their time, create shared meanings, and preserve social bonds. Binge-watching becomes ingrained in students' relational routines in the Solo Raya academic setting, so it's important to examine both how frequently they binge-watch and how they understand the effects of their media consumption on their relationships.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore binge-watching experiences among university students and their implications for interpersonal communication. A qualitative design was selected to capture the subjective meanings and lived experiences that students construct around media consumption.

Three informants were recruited through purposive sampling from universities in the Solo Raya region. Inclusion criteria required participants to be: (1) currently enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at a university in Solo Raya, one person from Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta and two others from Universitas Sebelas Maret; (2) self-reported engagement in binge-watching behavior, defined as watching two or more consecutive episodes or one or more hours of streaming content in a single sitting, at least three times per week; (3) willingness to participate and provide informed consent. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 22 years, male, and were currently in semester 8 (coded as RAN, NGW, and FN). Although the sample is small, this is consistent with the depth-oriented priorities of intensive qualitative inquiry. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was approached, though the researchers acknowledge this remains provisional given the limited sample size.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 40-60 minutes, conducted offline at locations chosen by participants. An interview guide covered three areas: binge-watching motivations and patterns; perceived effects on mood and daily routines; and the relationship between media use and interpersonal communication. Sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by returning interpretive summaries to participants for verification, and investigator triangulation was applied through collaborative code review between researchers.

The researchers maintain reflexive awareness of their positionality as communication scholars, which may have influenced interview framing and interpretive choices. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout to keep analysis grounded in participant accounts. All participants provided written informed consent before interviews. Identities were anonymized using initials, and all data were stored securely. Research procedures adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Indonesian Social Science Research Association.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents five interconnected themes derived from thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with three informants. Rather than treating each theme in isolation, the findings are interpreted through an integrative lens: psychological escape from stress motivates initial media engagement, which is then sustained and amplified by platform affordances; prolonged engagement generates ambivalence between enjoyment and disruption; yet the same media consumption simultaneously functions as a social catalyst and ultimately contributes to identity formation and career development. This thematic progression reflects a trajectory from individual coping to social and self-actualization functions of binge-watching, consistent with the uses and gratifications framework.

Theme 1: Psychological Escape and Controlling Emotion

The first theme reveals that informants consciously employ binge-watching as a strategy for emotional regulation, particularly in response to academic stressors such as heavy coursework, fatigue, and boredom. This finding aligns with uses and gratifications theory (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020), which posits that individuals are active agents who select

media to satisfy specific psychological needs. In this study, the dominant needs were emotional relief, entertainment, and cognitive disengagement from academic demands. Critically, informants did not engage with media passively; they made deliberate platform and content choices calibrated to their emotional state. RAN, for instance, specifically sought out motivational anime during periods of low motivation, a pattern that suggests metacognitive awareness of media's regulatory potential:

"...Sometimes when I'm feeling unmotivated, I look for anime that gives me motivation. Whether it's about war or something else, it gives me the motivation to study. Sometimes when I'm stressed or have a lot on my mind, I refresh myself by watching anime on Bstation..."(RAN)

Similarly, FN described boredom and physical presence at home rather than acute stress alone as triggers for viewing, suggesting that emotional regulation through media is both reactive and pre-emptive. This parallels Gross's (1998) cognitive change strategy: a deliberate effort to alter one's emotional state through environmental modification, in this case by selecting particular media content.

Genre selection is tailored to specific emotional needs, motivational content for low motivation, light entertainment for boredom, a nuance that aggregate measures of screen time would obscure. While this interpretation is drawn from a limited sample and cannot be generalized to the wider student population, it offers a conceptual foundation for future studies examining the mediating role of content type in the relationship between academic stress and media use.

Theme 2: Features of Platforms as Behavioral Motivation

The second theme addresses how the structural and technical features of streaming platforms actively shape and reinforce binge-watching behavior. Beyond user preference, platforms themselves, through deliberate design choices, create conditions conducive to extended viewing. This resonates with Pradsmadji & Irwansyah, (2020) argument that digital platforms have fundamentally restructured audience agency, shifting temporal and curatorial control from broadcasters to individual viewers.

Three specific affordances emerged from the data: on-demand accessibility, autoplay continuity, and simplified content discovery. Of these, autoplay is theoretically significant because it reduces the cognitive friction required to continue viewing, functioning as what behavioral economists term a 'default nudge' (Schaffner et al., 2025). NGW described this mechanism explicitly:

"...Well, usually on Netflix, for example, when you start watching something, you can skip the intro. So you can go straight to the movie, and at the end, if you're watching a series, there should be a next episode button at the end of the video. I think that makes it easier..."(NGW)

On-demand access similarly dissolved the temporal constraints of scheduled broadcasting, replacing external structure with viewer-controlled consumption:

"...Oh, if it's on demand, that means we can access it anytime, like Netflix, YouTube, or Spotify, right? Just click and it starts playing, that's my definition..."(NGW)

Mikos, (2016) argues that this shift from broadcast to streaming constitutes a broader cultural transformation wherein digital consumer culture displaces traditional media rituals. The present findings support this view: informants showed no attachment to television schedules and treated on-demand access as an assumed norm rather than a novelty. Crucially, these affordances do not merely facilitate pre-existing desires; they amplify them, creating feedback loops that connect emotional need (Theme 1) with prolonged exposure and its consequences (Theme 3). Platform design, in this sense, mediates the pathway from 'I want to relax' to 'I have been watching for four hours,'

making individual behavior partly a product of technological architecture rather than volition alone.

Theme 3: Ambivalence Experienced: Enjoyment and Disturbance

A recurring tension in the data was the co-existence of perceived benefits and experienced harms. Informants simultaneously reported that binge-watching provided relaxation and entertainment while also producing physical exhaustion, sleep disruption, and academic disengagement. This ambivalence is theoretically significant: it challenges both uncritical celebrations of digital leisure and reductive pathologizing of heavy media use, pointing instead toward a conditional model in which outcomes depend on context, content quality, and viewing patterns.

FN articulated the physical toll of extended sessions with notable specificity, connecting long viewing hours directly to sleep difficulties:

...Okay, physically I'm more tired. My eyes are really tired because I usually binge-watch movies for hours. My body also feels sore, and sometimes when I watch late at night, it's harder to sleep afterwards because, like I said, I watch for hours, so it's hard for my eyes to close and fall asleep....(FN).

This account is consistent with Srinivasan et al., (2021), documentation of associations between late-night screen exposure and delayed sleep onset. However, the data also reveal a less-discussed mechanism: attentional displacement, where cognitive resources remained partially allocated to narrative content during subsequent academic tasks. NGW described this effect explicitly:

"...During class, I usually can't focus on what the lecturer is explaining... I should be focusing on taking notes, but instead I'm thinking about movies or TV series..." (NGW)

This cognitive residue effect, in which media narratives intrude on subsequent attention, merits greater theoretical consideration, as it implies that the academic cost of binge-watching is mediated not only by time displacement (hours spent watching versus studying) but also by attentional disruption after viewing has ended. Notably, informants' awareness of these costs was partial: physical symptoms were recognized readily, while attentional residue was described more as incidental than as a recognized problem. The informants' moral evaluation of their viewing time was also conditional: both NGW and FN indicated that a compelling plot retrospectively justified extended sessions, suggesting that content quality moderates guilt and regret responses.

Theme 4: Digital Content Sharing as a Social Bonding

The fourth theme challenges the characterization of binge-watching as inherently solitary and socially isolating. The data indicate that media consumption frequently served as a social catalyst, a shared referential frame that enabled new relationships and deepened existing ones. This is consistent with Sundari et al., (2024) who found that discussions of shared media content generate a sense of communal identity and interpersonal closeness. Socially, shared content operates at two levels. First, it provides common conversational ground that facilitates bonding even across social divides. NGW, for example, described how football fandom mediated through media consumption brought together supporters of rival clubs:

...I am a Manchester United supporter, especially after the last two or three matches against Manchester City and Arsenal. Some of my friends are Manchester City and Arsenal fans, so we have become closer by discussing the matches and joking about the results, such as Manchester United winning..."(NGW).

Second, shared tastes signal interpersonal compatibility, which informants described as being 'on the same wavelength' which facilitated openness and emotional closeness beyond media discussion itself:

"...Well, let's say we watch this anime, and it turns out that my friend and I are watching it together. So it's like we're on the same wavelength, so we talk about it together and become on the same wavelength, and the openness between us makes it comfortable..."(RAN).

This finding points to an important theoretical dimension often overlooked in research on problematic media use: binge-watching is not merely a private experience. Still, it is embedded in social networks, thereby contributing to the formation of relational capital. Watch parties (nobar) further extended this dynamic, transforming individual consumption into a collective ritual. These observations, while exploratory given the small sample, provide hypotheses for future large-scale studies examining the social functions of media consumption among Indonesian university students.

Theme: 5 Media Consumption as Identity Formation and Knowledge Enhancement

The final theme reveals that for some informants, binge-watching served as a site of identity construction and practical knowledge acquisition, extending the function of media consumption well beyond entertainment. This finding expands uses and gratifications theory into a developmental register, suggesting that media use in young adulthood can be instrumentalized toward self-definition and career formation.

Identity formation manifested in two interrelated ways: the adoption of fan identities organized around specific content (football clubs, anime series), and the acquisition of domain knowledge informing professional aspirations. NGW's trajectory is particularly illustrative of habitual consumption of financial content on YouTube, which generated substantive cryptocurrency literacy that translated directly into employment:

"...So far, the effects of binge-watching have been mostly positive for me, because I often watch programs about the world of finance, especially investments, particularly cryptocurrency. Now I even have a job in the crypto world as a marketer at a crypto exchange, so the positive effect is that I want to earn income from it..."(NGW).

This trajectory from casual viewing to occupational identity resonates with Jenkins's (2006) concept of 'participatory culture,' in which media consumption blurs into knowledge production and professional engagement. RAN's case adds a behavioral dimension: exposure to sports anime (Haikyuu!) generated intrinsic motivation to practice volleyball, illustrating that media's formative influence extends to embodied practices. Cross-cultural learning also emerged as a latent benefit: FN's engagement with American content prompted comparative reflection on cultural norms, positioning streaming media as an informal site of intercultural education, a function directly relevant to the development of digital literacy as a critical competency Restianty, (2018).

Integrative Synthesis: A Developmental Trajectory from Coping to Self-Actualization

Taken together, the five themes form a coherent developmental arc that resists reduction to either techno-pessimist or techno-optimist narratives. The arc begins with a psychological need (Theme 1): academic stress and boredom motivate an emotional escape. Platform affordances (Theme 2) respond to and structurally amplify this motivation, making continuous viewing the path of least resistance. The prolonged exposure that results in produces ambivalence (Theme 3): real costs in sleep quality, physical well-being, and academic focus coexist with genuine enjoyment and temporary restoration.

However, the same media engagement that generates these costs also opens social possibilities (Theme 4): shared viewing experiences become relational anchors, and communities of interest coalesce around common content. From these communities, and from the content itself, informants draw material for identity construction and knowledge acquisition (Theme 5), with some successfully converting media-derived knowledge into career opportunities.

This trajectory, Psychological Escape → Platform Reinforcement → Ambivalence → Social Bonding → Identity Formation, suggests that the relationship between university students and digital media is neither simply harmful nor simply beneficial, but developmental and contextually contingent. The key moderating variables, based on this exploratory study, appear to be content quality, the intentionality of use, and the degree to which viewing is embedded in social rather than purely solitary contexts. These observations are exploratory in nature: with three informants, the aim is not to generalize the findings to Indonesian university students broadly, but to develop theoretically grounded propositions that can be examined in future research employing larger samples, longitudinal designs, or mixed-methods approaches.

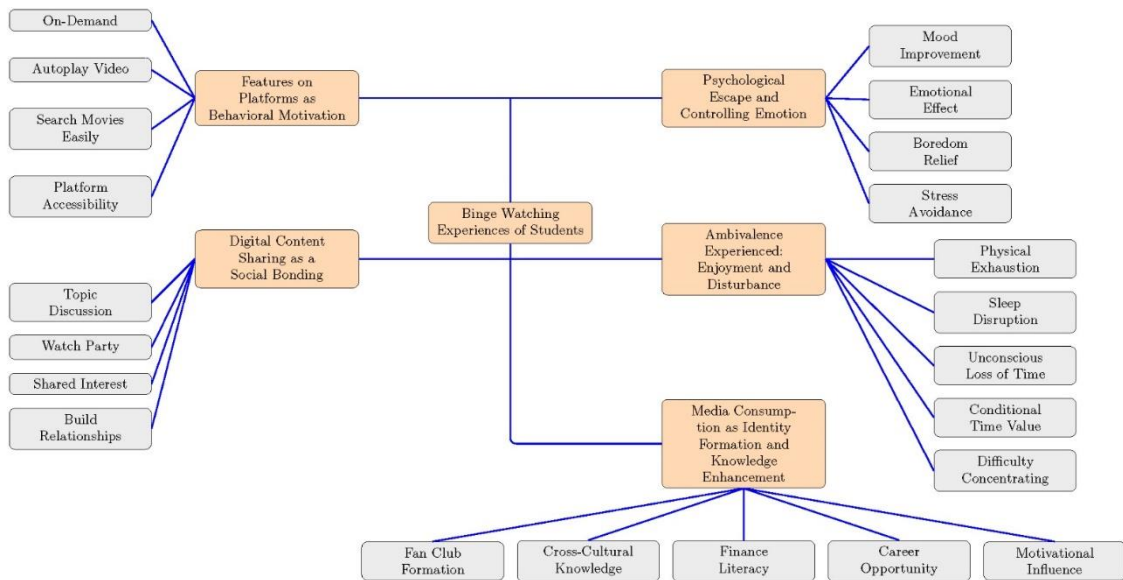


Figure 2. Binge-Watching Experiences of Students

CONCLUSION

Through thematic analysis of interviews with three informants, this study investigates how students understand binge-watching in relation to their interpersonal communication styles. The results show that binge-watching is a multifaceted activity involving identity development, social bonding, platform-reinforced behavior, emotion management, and cognitive and physical costs. These factors indicate that binge-watching cannot be categorized as either disruptive or entirely positive, as they form interrelated pathways from psychological escape to social connection and self-development.

This study expands the ideas of use and satisfaction in two distinct ways. First, it positions technical design as inseparable from personal motivation by highlighting platform features, particularly autoplay and on-demand capabilities, as structural mediators that reinforce emotional needs. Second, it highlights the role of media consumption development in young adulthood that has been insufficiently addressed by typologies of enjoyment primarily focused on immediate outcomes. As a separate mechanism

influencing academic achievement, the concept of cognitive residue, the idea that media narratives continue to consume attentional resources after viewing, also warrants further theoretical development.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The results are theoretically interesting rather than empirically conclusive because the deliberate sample of three informants limits generalizability. Causal inferences are also constrained by the cross-sectional design and the use of self-reported data. To test the hypotheses developed here, future studies should use mixed-method or longitudinal designs with larger samples. Theoretically, to model the recursive relationships among psychological needs, platform capabilities, social context, and identity development, while accounting for contextual moderators such as content quality and usage intentions, an integrative framework that goes beyond static satisfaction typologies is needed.

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