

Why We Binge-Watch Television

Kevin Fallon

In “Why We Binge-Watch Television,” Kevin Fallon, a senior entertainment reporter at *The Daily Beast*, suggests the cause of why so many of us, apparently 61 percent, regularly binge-watch TV. As you read, consider Fallon’s reasoning—how he supports his understanding of the main cause.

We correspond with each other in 140-character bursts. We consume news in sound bites and blog posts. We’re, by all accounts, an increasingly distracted society, with the attention span of a house fly sipping on Red Bull in a room lit by a strobe light while dubstep plays. Knowing that, it makes absolutely no sense that we are also a society that enjoys binge-watching TV.

But we do. Oh, for the love of Walter White, we do.

According to a new study by Harris Interactive on behalf of Netflix, 61 percent of us binge-watch TV regularly, which is to say that we watch at least 2-3 episodes of a single series in one sitting. Or, some of us (many of us), devour 14 in a row with breaks just for bathroom and answering the door for the delivery man. Almost three-quarters of us view binge watching as a positive experience, and nearly 80 percent say that feasting on a show actually makes it better.

Given how many times we’ve heard people use the word “binge-watch” this past year and how many times we’ve alarmed our friends by disappearing from society for a week to marathon a show, it shouldn’t be surprising that the practice is quickly becoming the new normal when it comes to consuming television. But it is remarkable that such a highly fragmented world is actively seeking out—and even preferring—longer form, more complex storytelling at the same time we want everything else in life easy and breezy.

It shouldn’t compute. So why does it?

All of the elements of a perfect storm brewed at the same time, explains Grant McCracken, a cultural anthropologist who worked on the study. More accurately, it’s a storm cycle: TV has gotten better, making viewers smarter, making TV even more complex, making binge-watching more fun. And because we’re living in a world where too many things are constantly competing for our attention, developing a habit of binge-watching is like seeking shelter in the calm eye of that storm.

“I was illuminated to hear people say, ‘Look, it’s precisely because there’s so much distraction that this is a special pleasure,’” McCracken says of the 1,500 streamers he interviewed as part of the study. While TV marathons have always been events, the rise of binge-watching is a byproduct of necessary and sufficient conditions that have only surfaced in recent years, with the easy availability of streaming, season DVDs, and TiVos compounded with the rise in quality of the shows available.

Plus, there’s the undeniably fun appropriation of the word “binge.”