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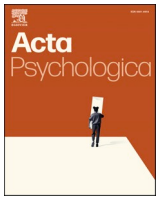

# Boundaries on a binge: Explicating the role of intentionality in binge-watching motivations and problematic outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Binge-watching is often studied in research, and discussed in lay writings, under the assumption that it is a maladaptive and problematic behavior. However, as with all media use, there are circumstances in which binge-watching may be functional for an individual. This paper explores the role of intentionality—defined as the extent to which a viewing session was planned and executed as planned—in differentiating problematic from unproblematic binge-watching behavior. We present results from a survey (n = 180) in which the participants randomly were asked to think about a recent viewing session in which they'd either intentionally or unintentionally watched multiple episodes of television in a row. The results suggest that intentional binge-watching sessions are generally associated with positive mood states and satisfaction, while unintentional sessions often lead to negative outcomes such as goal conflict and guilt. Moreover, motivations for binge-watching, such as social interaction and enrichment, were more pronounced in intentional sessions, while unintentional sessions were driven more by situational factors like cliffhangers and curiosity. Intentionality is thus a useful boundary condition for the definition of binge-watching as a problematic vs. non-problematic behavior when studying its antecedents and consequences.

## 1. Introduction

The term 'binge watching' was first used in online forums in the 1990s and newspapers in the early 2000s (see Steiner, 2023, pp. 45–55 for a detailed overview) and gained widespread usage by 2015, when "binge-watching" was the 'word of the year' (Flood, 2015). However, defining what is meant by binge-watching, or a binge session, has proven difficult for academic researchers. Scholars typically agree that binge-watching involves watching at least two consecutive episodes of a television program, though many claim that a true 'binge-watching' requires consuming multiple (e.g., > 2) episodes of the same series in one sitting. Some scholars include technological affordances (i.e., streaming services, DVD), compare binge-watching with other types of viewing (e.g., media marathoning, appointment viewing), or dwell specifically on effects of binge-watching, either positive (e.g., transportation, enjoyment, identification) or negative (e.g., goal conflict, addiction, and loneliness) (see OSF[1] for a detailed review of the literature). Without a clear understanding of what binge-watching entails, however, and how it relates to users' motivations and goals, it is difficult to understand positive and negative outcomes from the behavior.

This paper argues that the distinction between problematic and unproblematic binge television show viewing can be parsimoniously accounted for by considering *intentionality* as a boundary condition. By intentionality we mean the extent to which the viewing session was planned in terms of its episodes or the duration and was executed as planned. We argue that intentionality will not only help clarifying the distinction between problematic and unproblematic binge-watching behavior but will also moderate the subsequent effects of binge-watching on well-being.

Previous research has begun to address intentionality as part of binge behavior. Riddle et al. (2018) found that some individuals plan ahead to watch several episodes in a row, while others just happen to do so. According to de Feijter et al. (2016) and Castro et al. (2021) studies of small-sample binge-behavior, around every-other binge-watching session is not planned ahead, hence unintentional. Furthermore, literature has pointed out that the subsequent effects of binge-watching varied by

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[1] https://osf.io/qnz6w/?view_only=2e486b2f80804ac09ae772c6d873b13d.

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the level of intentionality and attention (Pittman & Steiner, 2021). Pittman and Steiner (2021) incorporated intentionality into their split of binge-watching into "*feast-watching*" (healthy), which is planned, social, attentive, and linked to positive outcomes for viewers, versus "*cringe-watching*" (unhealthy), which is solo, accidental, and distracted, and linked to negative outcomes. Although Pittman and Steiner (2021) found support for their hypotheses; by combining intentionality with attention, social viewing, and health effects they have made it difficult to parse the role of each of these individual predictors in binging.

In this paper, we suggest that *users' intentionality is directly related to both motivations for and effects of binge-watching* and make the argument that considering intentionality when studying binge-watching can help researchers determine both positive and negative antecedents and consequences of the behavior. Previous research suggests that unintentional binge-watching is often driven by structural factors, such as autoplay features, which draw viewers into extended viewing without prior planning (Riddle et al., 2018). In contrast, intentional sessions are often motivated by personal autonomy and specific needs, aligning with Uses and Gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). Accordingly, these distinct motivations, in turn, influence emotional outcomes, where unintentional binge-watching may result in negative emotions like guilt or dissatisfaction, whereas intentional viewing tends to foster positive emotions and improved well-being (e.g., Pittman & Steiner, 2021; Riddle et al., 2018).

To explicate these relationships, in the next section, we will explore how both intentional and unintentional viewing habits impact viewers' self-evaluation of binge-watching, motivations for media use, emotional states post-viewing, and overall well-being. This exploration aims to further define binge-watching motivations and effects as a result of a more nuanced understanding of users' intentions towards viewing.

### 1.1. Problems with current definitions of binge-watching

Research on binge-watching has looked into various factors defining the experience of binge-watching. In attempts to define binge-watching, researchers have focused on 1) duration (e.g., "multiple sequential episodes" (Warren, 2020)), 2) affordances of the platform (e.g., "with the advent of video on-demand (VOD) services" (Trouleau et al., 2016); "in the age of on-demand media entertainment" (Granow et al., 2018)), 3) content features and types (e.g., tv series (Mikos, 2016; Panda & Pandey, 2017) or movies (e.g., Shim et al., 2018)), 4) the effects of the consumption (e.g., escaping reality, psychological comfort (Shim et al., 2018); rewarding and pleasurable experience (Flayelle et al., 2020), and/or 5) individuals' needs (autonomy; Merikivi et al., 2020; Warren, 2020). Despite this variety of characteristics, most studies operationalize binge-watching by the use of multiple episodes in one sitting.

The approach to reduce binge-watching to its lowest common denominator has not been fruitful enough in understanding binge-watching behavior and its effects on individuals. Instead, studies show that binge-watching is a) rarely an excessive form of media use (Walton-Pattison et al., 2018), b) is only mildly correlated with problematic use (Ort et al., 2021), c) does not consistently predict outcomes in terms of entertainment, well-being, or quality of sleep (Flayelle et al., 2020), and d) is not predicted strongly by personality traits (Flayelle et al., 2020). Therefore, we argue that the definition of binge-watching based on number of episodes or time spent with media is insufficient for psychological investigations into the phenomenon.

More recently, scholars have started to offer further distinction in the definition to understand the effects of binge-watching particularly in regards to user's intentionality (e.g., Merikivi et al., 2020; Perks et al., 2021; Pittman & Steiner, 2021; Riddle et al., 2018). Although intentionality has been captured in the earlier interviews with binge-watchers (Perks, 2015), Riddle et al. (2018) is the first to our knowledge to show the systematic differences between intentional and unintentional viewing. Riddle et al. demonstrated that intentionality, or the lack of it, might be the condition for binge-watching to have a negative effect. In their study, out of 213 participants who had binge-watched in the past, 80 % reported having both intentionally and unintentionally binge-watched, 14 % reported only intentional binge-watching, and 6 % reported only unintentional binge-watching. Castro et al. (2021) investigated intentionality in a Netflix usage tracking study through a browser extension; findings suggest that about half of the time, individuals viewing behavior – including start and stop time for viewing sessions – could be directly ascribed to a priori intentions. Similarly, Merikivi et al. (2020), stress the importance of viewer autonomy in the continuity to differentiate binge-watching from other types of continuous viewing patterns, as do Pittman and Steiner (2021), who separated binge-watching into two categories, *feast-watching* and *cringe-watching*. Feast-watching revolves around a planned and attentive watching session whereas cringe-watching occurs accidentally and does not require attention. Similarly to Riddle et al.'s (2018) study, Pittman and Steiner's (2021) research concluded that feast-watching does not lead to negative outcomes associated with binge-watching while cringe-watching does.

Thus, the combined literature suggests a major role of intentionality in viewing behavior but has rarely focused on the role intentionality plays as a boundary condition on binging. In the next section, we will explicate how intentionality can act as a boundary condition for binge-watching behavior.

### 1.2. Exploring the role of intentionality as a boundary condition

Based on previous work on intentional and unintentional binge-watching (Riddle et al., 2018), we define intentionality in terms of prior planning or having a clear goal. That is, intentional watching is deciding prior to a viewing session how many episodes (or how much time) an individual will watch (spend) and sticking with the plan. Whereas, unlike the previous definition, for unintentional watching, we decided to include not only watching more but also less than planned in order to capture the full spectrum of unintentionality. That is, studying only one facet of unintentionality (such as, more than planned) would create a bias towards the negative effect of binge-watching as the literature has been observing. Watching hours of television unintentionally could cause problems not only due to unintentionality but also because of the length of the activity. Hence, this does not clarify what type of role intentionality plays in binge-watching definition and its subsequent effects. Therefore, unintentional watching is defined as watching more or less than initially planned.

Following the categorization of binge-watching into intentional and unintentional (Riddle et al., 2018), more scholars have included the distinction as a part of their conceptualization and measurements (Flayelle, Maurage, et al., 2019; Viens & Farrar, 2021). Thereby, they have linked the concept of intentionality to the self-perception of a "binge" aspect. Binge-watching can be seen as a highly subjective experience that is defined differently by everyone (e.g., Ferchaud, 2020; Jenner, 2016). Some individuals might view watching three episodes back-to-back as binge-watching while others regard it more vaguely (multiple episodes, or even watching the full season; Trouleau et al., 2016). If intentionality is the core boundary for binge-watching, we should observe individuals' self-evaluation of their television viewing behaviors to be affected by whether the session was intentional or not. Hence, even if individuals may apply different criteria for *how much* one must watch in a binge-watching session, we assume that *how one decides to watch* (intentional or not) affects their evaluations of binge-watching. Therefore, our first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How does unintentional continuation affect viewers' self-evaluation of binge-watching?

To further our understanding of the role of intentionality for binge-watching, it is vital to understand the antecedents of intentional and unintentional binge-watching (as also suggested by Warren, 2020). That is, only by understanding what leads to unintentional or intentional

watching sessions, can we truly understand what makes the two types of consumption unique. To do so, we first look at content-specific factors (such as, curiosity about the content watched, to relieve the negative emotions caused by the content) and then we look at more formal motivations for television viewing. Previous literature on binge-watching and unintentional viewing has shown the effect of suspense or engaging parts of storyline leading to negative emotions or curiosity in audience member that can result in unintentional consumption. Therefore, first we inquire:

RQ2: What content specific factors drive unintentional continuation of a media use session?

Intentionality as a boundary condition emphasizes the importance of audience autonomy during the process of watching multiple episodes. Accordingly, individuals should be choosing what or how much to watch to fulfill their specific needs (Uses and Gratification theory, Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). Literature on television viewing has identified numerous motivations; social interaction, escapism, relaxation, and more (e.g., Albarran et al., 2007; Bantz, 1982; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Vaterlaus et al., 2019). Flayelle, Canale, et al. (2019) have compiled the literature and identified four core motivations for TV series watching in relation to binge-watching: social, emotional enhancement, enrichment, and coping/escapism. Given the established nature of these motivations, the current study seeks to understand whether and how these motivations will differ across intentional and unintentional media use sessions. Accordingly, we inquire the following research question;

RQ3: How do intentional and unintentional media use sessions differ with regard to motivations for media use?

The research on binge-watching has shown that one of the core motivations for binge-watching in general is mood management (e.g., Rubenking & Bracken, 2018). However, emotional regulation is also one of the factors that is found closely related to negative effects of binge-watching (Flayelle et al., 2020). If unintentional binge-watching is the main reason for the addictive and negative binge-watching effects (e.g., Riddle et al., 2018), then it might mean that unintentional continuation might rely on unsuccessful mood regulation more than intentional one. Nevertheless, it does not mean that intentional watching does not affect mood states at all; rather we expect that intentional binge-watching is related to successful mood regulation. Hence, we inquire about the role of intentionality for emotional states after media use.

RQ4: How does unintentional continuation affect emotional states after media use?

Unintentional binge-watching, often driven by situational factors such as engaging storylines or the passive influence of autoplay features, has been associated with adverse health outcomes (Pittman & Steiner, 2021). These include negative emotional states, increased feelings of guilt, and disruptions to normal sleep patterns (Pittman & Steiner, 2021; Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). In contrast, planned binge-watching sessions, where viewers set out with the intention to engage with content for extended periods, tend to be linked to more positive outcomes such as satisfaction and leisure fulfillment (Pittman & Steiner, 2021). This raises important questions about the broader implications of how unintentional binge-watching might differ in its impact on viewers' well-being compared to its intentional counterpart. Hence, we put forward the following question:

RQ5: How is the general tendency to have unintentional sessions related to well-being?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

To answer these research questions, we conducted an online survey. 211 participants were recruited at a large Midwestern US university. After excluding those who did not finish the survey (n = 7), who did not binge-watch ever (n = 15), who reported they binge-watch less than once a month (n = 8), and one person who reported being <18 years old at the time of the study, 180 individuals completed the questionnaire successfully; 75.56 % were female, 22.78 % male and 1.11 % non-binary (0.56 % other), the age ranged from 18 to 29 (*M*age = 19.86, *SD*age = 1.72), 72.78 % were White, 7.78 % Black/African American, 5.56 % Asian, 2.22 % Hispanic/Latino/a, 1.11 % Middle Eastern/Arab, 0.56 % American Indian/Alaskan Native and 11.13 % reported another ethnicity. Participants received research credit for their participation.

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

#### 2.2.1. Intentionality

First, participants were asked if they ever watched more than two consecutive episodes of the same TV show in one sitting. Participants who answered 'no' were excluded from the survey. Next, participants were randomly instructed to think of the last time they watched TV and watched *several episodes of the same show in one sitting* as they intended (*intentional condition*), or to an extent that was more or less than they intended (*unintentional condition*).[2] If participants could not remember such a viewing session, they were forwarded to the other condition (n = 12). They were then asked to indicate the name of the show they were watching in that session (intentional n = 89, unintentional n = 88, missing = 3).

#### 2.2.2. Binge-watching

The subsequent questions referred to this specific viewing session. Participants were asked *how many episodes* they watched, and if they would *consider the session as binge-watching* or not. They were then asked to justify their answer in a comment field. In the intentional condition, participants were further asked to describe how they had decided on the amount they were going to watch (open-ended question). In the unintended condition, participants were asked if they saw more or less than planned and could then comment on the reasons for this deviation (open-ended question).

#### 2.2.3. Emotional states

In a next block of questions, *emotional states before and after the viewing session* were measured with 26 adjectives on a 5-point semantic differential from the scales of subjective well-being (before: $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.74$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$; after: $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$; e.g., *sad – happy*), exhaustion (before: $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.07$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$; after: $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.02$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$; e.g., *mentally exhausted – mentally rested*), and self-evaluation (before: $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.72$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.57$; after: $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.80$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$; e.g., *incompetent - competent*) (Reinecke & Hofmann, 2016). Additionally, we asked participants to describe how they felt before and after the viewing session and how the intentional or unintentional viewing session affected their emotional state in open-

[2] Given the small amount of people ($n = 3$) in the unintentional category choosing "less than intended", we decided to code their intentionality information as missing. Therefore, the comparisons between intentional and unintentional groups were completed by $n = 177$. While, theoretically, we argue that the difference between "less than intended" and "more than intended" is significant, statistically, our results could not detect enough sample size to make any argument about such difference. We encourage future research to identify the reasoning behind it and clarify the theoretical explanation.

ended questions.

#### 2.2.4. Motivations

*2.2.4.1. Content-specific motivations.* Participants were asked to rate three items about their general motivation to continue watching content by "In general, would you say you continue watching to relieve negative emotions, or to sustain positive emotions? Please complete the following sentence accordingly." There were three items; "to relieve negative emotions" ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.20$), "to sustain positive emotions" ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.15$), and "to satisfy curiosity" ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.10$).

*2.2.4.2. Traditional motivations.* The motivation to watch was measured with 31 modified items from the *Watching TV Series Motives Questionnaire (WTSMQ)* by Flayelle, Canale, et al. (2019) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We split some of the original items in two in order to avoid double-barreled statements. For the analysis, we created subscales as indicated by Flayelle, Canale, et al. (2019); social ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.83$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$; e.g., *because most of my friends do it*), emotional enhancement ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.71$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$; e.g., *to feel strong emotions like excitement*), enrichment ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$; e.g., *to discover whole new worlds*), and coping/escapism ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.72$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$; e.g., *to escape from boredom*). Further, we included five items from Pittman and Sheehan (2015) which describe *motivations for binge-watching* compared to regular TV use (e.g., *I feel more engaged when I binge-watch*); these were combined to one index ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.88$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$).

#### 2.2.5. General viewing behavior

In the last block, participants' *general tendency to plan their viewing sessions and stick to this plan* was assessed. This was independent of the specific viewing session reported before, all participants received the same questions. First, we asked them to indicate how often they know how long or how many episodes they are going to watch when they start a viewing session on a scale from 0 % to 100 % of viewing sessions ($M = 31.88$, $SD = 29.87$). If the answer was not 0, we then asked them how often they stick to their initial plans from 0 % to 100 % ($M = 55.06$, $SD = 28.99$). The block also included standardized and open-ended questions about feelings related to unintentional continuation and drivers therefore. *Feelings related to unintended continuation* were first assessed with an open- ended question, and then measured on a 10-point scale from "very negative" to "very positive"($M = 5.38$, $SD = 2.24$) as well as with three items addressing goal conflict, guilt, and autonomy adapted from Granow et al. (2018). *Drivers for continuation* were measured with an open-ended question, followed by three items reflecting dimensions we identified in the literature: relief of negative emotions, sustaining positive emotions, and curiosity.

#### 2.2.6. General well-being

In a last step, all participants were asked about their general state and trait *life satisfaction* (PROMIS General Life Satisfaction; Vaughan et al., 2020, e.g., *In most ways, my life is close to perfect*) on scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($M = 4.21$, SD = 1.37, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

## 3. Analysis overview

To answer our research questions, we performed a series of statistical analyses to assess the relationships between intentionality (intentional vs. unintentional viewing) and the outcomes of emotional states, motivations, and binge-watching behavior. These analyses included descriptive statistics to summarize participants' responses, followed by inferential analyses, such as *t*-tests and ANOVA, to determine whether significant differences existed between intentional and unintentional viewers in terms of emotional well-being and other self-reported outcomes. Correlation analyses were also used to explore associations between viewing motivations and outcomes. In addition to formal testing of our research questions via these quantitative analyses, we also conducted a semi-formal contextual analysis where one of the researchers highlighted the most prominent themes related to unintentional binge-watching behavior reported by the participants under the current research framework. This involved a systematic approach to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data. This mixed-method approach provided a more holistic understanding of the interplay between intentionality and media consumption, enriching our interpretation of the findings.

## 4. Results

RQ1 asks about the self-evaluation of the viewing session as binge-watching. From a descriptive perspective, 50 participants in the intentional condition considered their viewing session as binge-watching, 37 did not, and 2 were unsure. In the unintentional condition, 66 considered their session as binge-watching, 24 did not, and 1 was unsure. However, unintentional sessions ($M = 1.26$, $SD = 0.44$) were more likely to be identified as "binge" compared to intentional ones ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.50$; $t(172) = -2.25$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = -0.34$). To understand these results more in depth, we turned to open-ended results for additional insights. The open-ended answers showed that participants in the intentional condition mostly defined their session as binge-watching based on the numbers of episodes they watched or the duration of the session. Similarly, those who did not consider their session as binge-watching referred to the fact that they only watched two or three episodes in a row, or that the overall duration was not that long.

These open-ended results inspired a post-hoc analysis with the survey questions where we ran a logistic regression with the binge-watching variable in which individuals identified session as 'binge or not' as the dependent variable (0= binge, 1 = not), and number of episodes ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 2.91$) as well as intentionality condition (0= Unintentional, 1 = Intentional) as the independent variables along with the interaction variable between episode and intentionality ($\chi^2(3) = 44.35$, $p < .001$, pseudo $R^2 = .19$). The interaction showed a marginal effect (odds ratio = .59, $z = -1.73$, $p = .08$). More interestingly, a graphed plot showed that there are specific points at which intentional viewers were likely identify sessions as 'binge-watching' or not (Fig. 1). For intentional viewing sessions, 1 and 3 episodes, were less likely to be identified as binge-viewing, while between 4 and 6 episodes viewers were likely to identify a session as a binge. However, for unintentional sessions, identifying the session as binge or not was not as clear.

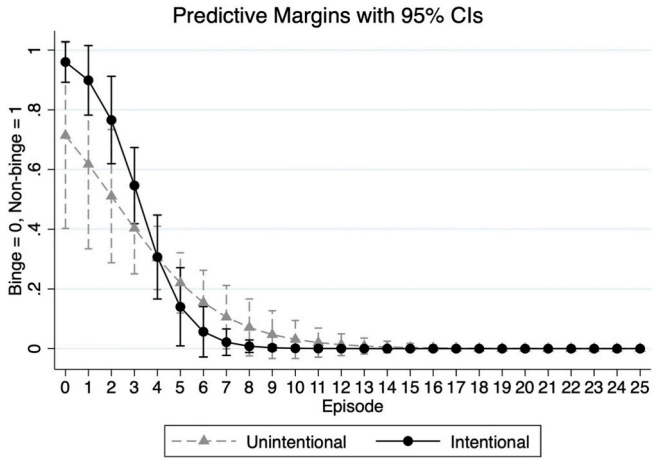


**Fig. 1.** The interaction effect of episode and intentionality on identifying the session as binge-watching or not.

Participants only identified sessions distinctly as binge-watching as the number of episodes increased. Nonetheless, after six episodes, everyone, both in intentional and unintentional group, identified a viewing session as binge viewing. Thus, even sessions with a very low numbers of episodes can be evaluated as a binge when a viewing session was not intentional, but in general, the self-evaluation of binge-watching depends largely on the number of episodes watched.

RQ2 asks about the drivers for unintended continuation. In the general viewing behavior section, all participants were asked to indicate what generally leads them to watch more than intended. Curiosity ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.10$) was the most pronounced reason, followed by sustaining positive emotions ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.15$; $t(179) = -5.12$, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = −0.38) and the relief of negative emotions ($M = 2.84$ $SD = 1.20$; $t(179) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.32). Looking at the open-ended answers for further insights, participants mainly referred to cliffhangers at the end of an episode, as well as their general engagement with the story and the curiosity to know what will happen next. For example, one participant wrote: "Usually when I spontaneously decide to watch more than I intended it is because the show ends on a cliffhanger and I want to keep watching". Another wrote: "Each episode ends on a cliff hanger, so I'm eager to see what happens next." For many respondents, binge-watching was also a way to prolong positive emotions as they reported "I really enjoyed the show" "the show makes me feel comforted". Several responses also indicated binge-watching was being used to avoid responsibilities or relieving negative emotions such as stress or boredom. People reported things like "I was putting off responsibilities" and "I was avoiding other tasks and enjoying the distraction". In addition to our predetermined themes, the rest of the observations could also be grouped into convenience, background viewing or social influence where the sentences like "I had the time, nothing else planned, so I kept watching", "I was doing homework, so the TV just stayed on" or "My friend wanted to watch more, so we continued together". Overall, curiosity emerged as the main driver for unintended continuation, and it is mainly characterized by the engagement with the story and the desire to know what happens next. These results were supported both by quantitative and qualitative data.

To answer RQ3, we examined the motivations that participants reported in relation to intentional versus unintentional viewing sessions. We ran a series of *t*-tests to compare the importance of motivations between viewing conditions. The results show that watching TV series for social motives ($t(178) = -2.45$, $p = .02$, $d = -0.37$) and enrichment ($t(178) = -2.22$, $p = .03$, $d = -0.33$) played a bigger role for intentional compared to unintentional viewing. For coping/escapism ($t(178) = -1.74$, $p = .08$, $d = -0.26$), this was not statistically significant. Only emotional enhancement plays a similar role in both types of viewing sessions ($t(178) = -1.39$, $p = .20$, $d = -0.19$). In general, emotional enhancement was the most important motivation across both viewing conditions ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.71$), closely followed by coping/escapism ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.72$). Enrichment ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.70$) and social ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.83$) were somewhat less important. Also motivations for binge-watching were more pronounced in intentional viewing sessions ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.82$) than in unintentional ones ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.92$, $t(178) = -2.57$, $p = .01$, $d = -0.38$). Overall, these results suggest that common motivations for series use and binge-watching are more strongly related to intentional viewing sessions and less suitable to explain unintentional viewing. We will come back to this in the discussion.

To answer RQ4, we ran *t*-tests to investigate if emotional states before and after the viewing session differ for intentional and unintentional sessions. Emotional states before exposure did not differ between sessions. However, after watching, subjective well-being was higher ($t(178) = -2.03$, $p = .04$, $d = -0.30$). Although non-significant, exhaustion was tendentially lower ($t(178) = -1.89$, $p = .06$, $d = -0.28$[3]), and self-evaluation was tendentially better ($t(178) = -1.78$, $p = .08$, $d = -0.27$) for intentional viewing. Put differently, unintentional viewing had a less positive impact on viewers' mood than intentional viewing. We also conducted paired t-tests to compare emotional states before and after viewing within conditions. Participants were significantly less exhausted after intentional ($t(88) = -4.37$, $p = .000$, $d = -0.46$) as well as unintentional ($t(90) = -3.63$, $p = .000$, $d = -0.38$) viewing sessions. Also, their self-evaluation was significantly better after intentional ($t(88) = 2.04$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.22$) as well as unintentional ($t(90) = 3.34$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.35$) viewing sessions. Subjective well-being was significantly higher after intentional viewing sessions ($t(88) = -4.00$, $p = .000$, $d = -0.42$), but it was not significantly different after unintentional sessions ($t(90) = -1.87$, $p = .06$, $d = -0.20$). Overall, it seems that both intentional and unintentional TV series watching improves emotional states, but this effect is stronger if sessions are intentional.

This is also reflected in the open-ended answers of participants. Those who were asked about an intentional viewing session mainly described positive effects on their feelings or mood. For example, one participant wrote: "It honestly put me in a good mood. I felt like it let me relax and take a break from reality for a little while. I had been really stressed, so taking a few hours to watch multiple episodes of one of my favorite shows was really nice". We observe similar themes across participants (e.g., "I felt more happy"; "It made me happier", "put me in a good mood"). Participants who reported an unintentional session also mostly reported positive effects, but there was a considerable number of comments related to negative effects. One participant wrote "Although I enjoyed the show, taking that much time and cutting into my sleep schedule made me feel unproductive, more tired and a little guilty for not using that time better." This was also a common theme across others (e.g., "It uplifted my mood at the time but after I felt tired and guilty", "I was more stressed and anxious").

In terms of exhaustion, participants in the intentional group were more likely to report relaxed/recharged (e.g., "Relaxed me enough to want to be productive after"; "It gave me some time to recharge and rest and just let my mind relax.") or even when they got tired, they perceived it as positive (e.g., "it made me tired, but it was a good tired"). In the unintentional group, on the other hand, participants focused on being tired (e.g., "I was tired and felt a little unproductive even though I did not have work to do") or unsettled (e.g., "It made me tired but I was still restless"). Lastly, participants in the intentional group did not often provide a self-evaluation. However, when such an evaluation was present, it was positive or neutral (e.g., "it made me recognize my own morals"), while it was heavily negative in the unintentional condition (e.g., "I felt unproductive and guilty"; "I felt like I wasted my day"; "I felt guilty after").

RQ5 addresses the relationship of participants' general tendency to have unintentional sessions and their well-being. On average, individuals reported that for 31.9 % of their TV sessions ($SD = 29.9$) they plan ahead how long or how many episodes they are going to watch; values range from 0 to 100. Most participants never plan ahead how much they watch (n = 44); the second largest number of participants plans every second session (n = 29). In the open-ended answers, participants mainly reported that they plan their viewing sessions in line with the amount of spare time they have. Only a few had a specific goal related to the number of episodes, either to catch up or in order to finish the season/show. Those who do sometimes plan sessions ahead stick to these plans about half of the time ($M = 55.06$, $SD = 28.99$). Watching more than intended is thus common among those who plan their viewing sessions. When asked about feelings related to unintended continuation in open-ended questions, many participants referred to

[3] Negative value on exhaustion refers to higher value of exhaustion due to the nature of the variable.

guilt or feeling lazy.

Furthermore, correlational analyses revealed that enrichment as a motivation to watch TV series is associated with more positive feelings after an unintended viewing session ($r = 0.18$, $p = .03$), while coping/escapism is associated with more negative feelings ($r = -0.17$, $p = .048$). Lastly, when we look at the general well-being and the general tendency to plan ahead, we also observe a positive relationship ($r = 0.16$, $p = .03$). Accordingly, based on the survey results, those who have done unintentional continuation reported high levels of goal-conflict ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.14$) and guilt ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.25$). This is interesting, given that not many referred to this aspect when asked about a specific unintentional viewing session.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to demonstrate that intentionality is an important boundary condition for all researchers who are interested in antecedents of consequences of binge-watching. Intentional sessions were generally associated with more positive mood states and a sense of satisfaction, reflecting a leisurely and recreational approach to media consumption. Conversely, unintentional binge-watching was linked to negative outcomes such as goal conflict and guilt, indicating potential compulsive or problematic viewing patterns. These findings emphasize the critical role of intentionality in understanding the psychological impacts of binge-watching, suggesting that not all binge-watching is inherently problematic. This distinction is crucial for a broader understanding of modern media consumption behaviors.

Looking at antecedents of binge-watching, we found that motivations typically associated with binge-watching (e.g., Flayelle, Canale, et al., 2019) play a more important role for intentional viewing sessions. This demonstrates that we still lack a proper understanding of what drives unintentional binge-watching. While our data suggest that unintentional continuation of a viewing session is largely reactive to media content—driven especially by curiosity and the suspense created by cliffhangers—these results may also be influenced by individual differences in emotional clarity. For instance, viewers experiencing a general negative mood but uncertain of its cause (e.g., boredom, anxiety) may unknowingly engage in TV series as a maladaptive coping strategy, unintentionally continuing the session to meet an unrecognized psychological need. Sigre-Leirós et al. (2023) offer an example of this in their study of binge-watching during the COVID-19 lockdown, where loss of control (a marker of unintentionality) was found to predict an increase in negative affect over time. Similarly, Starosta et al. (2021) identified impulse control difficulties as a significant predictor of problematic viewing behavior in binge-watching literature. These findings align with the compensatory model of Internet use (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014), which suggests that individuals may use media, including binge-watching, to regulate negative emotions.

While previous research found that some general motivations to use media are linked to problematic viewing (Ort et al., 2021), our findings highlight the need for more research that investigates the effect of situational and content characteristics on problematic media use. Additionally, unintentional binge-watching may sometimes lead to unexpectedly positive outcomes, especially when viewers find the content more engaging than they had initially expected. This suggests that shifts in motivation during a binge-watching session, as previously mentioned by Steiner and Xu (2020), could offer valuable insights into the mechanisms behind this behavior. Future research could employ more intrusive experiments or retrospective in-depth interviews to better capture these nuances.

Relatedly, we found that self-evaluations of sessions as binge-watching are not only influenced by the number of episodes, but also by the intentionality of the media use. Future research should therefore also consider self-evaluations as a predictor of negative or positive effects of binge-watching.

Looking at consequences, we found that media users report feeling better after intentional than unintentional viewing sessions. This observation aligns with theories of media use for leisure and enjoyment (Reinecke & Hofmann, 2016) as well as with studies emphasizing the potential addictive nature of unintentional binge-watching (Castro et al., 2021; Riddle et al., 2018). Moreover, our study points out that intentional sessions seem to be seldom; most media users do not plan the exact duration or numbers of episodes they want to watch, and even those who do often don't stick to this plan. Nevertheless, we find that the general tendency to plan viewing sessions is associated with higher well-being. Future research should further investigate predictors of intentional binge-watching and examine interventions that help media users to stick to their planned media use to mitigate potential negative effects of unplanned continuation. Another future direction can be examining the role of content features in shaping the relationship between intentionality and binge-watching outcomes. Specifically, the degree of attentiveness required by different types of content could influence whether unintentional binge-watching leads to more positive or negative experiences. For instance, unplanned viewing of more intellectually engaging or immersive content may yield enriching outcomes, while binging on less demanding content could leave viewers feeling unproductive or dissatisfied (e.g., Pittman & Steiner, 2019). Future studies could explore how content characteristics like complexity or narrative depth moderate the effects of intentional versus unintentional binge-watching.

Our findings also suggest a need for a reevaluation of how binge-watching is understood and studied. While much of the existing literature has focused on binge-watching as a homogenous activity, our study highlights the importance of considering the viewer's intentionality as a key factor in understanding the diversity of binge-watching experiences. From a theoretical perspective, we thus argue that intentionality is a boundary condition that needs to be considered when studying predictors and consequences of binge-watching. We do, however, not argue that unintentionality is a definitional aspect of binge-watching. Rather, we propose to consider binge-watching as a behavior that can be problematic or unproblematic under certain conditions. This nuanced understanding can inform both clinical interventions and media literacy programs, ensuring that responses to binge-watching behaviors are appropriately tailored.

Of course, the present study also has some limitations. Most notably, it is a cross-sectional survey and thus allows no conclusions about the causality of relationships. While we assume that the tendency for intentional binge-watching has a positive effect on well-being, it could also be the case that high well-being leads to more intentional binge-watching, or that both concepts mutually reinforce each other. Second, the results might be influenced by recall bias; when prompted to think about an intentional or unintentional viewing session, participants might remember a very prototypical example of such a session, where they watched a lot more than intended or where they felt exceptionally great for sticking to their plan. This might have emphasized differences between the two scenarios. Additionally, while intentional binge-watching may initially lead to positive emotional states, future longitudinal research is needed to explore whether these effects are only temporary and may later give rise to negative emotional outcomes. Methods such as experience sampling would be valuable for capturing the dynamics between intentionality and well-being over time and in closer proximity to the viewing experience.

Despite these limitations, our study's findings contribute significantly to the existing literature on binge-watching, particularly in understanding the role of intentionality in viewers' experiences and outcomes. Building on previous research (e.g., Flayelle et al., 2020; Riddle et al., 2018), our study demonstrates that the dichotomy of intentional vs. unintentional binge-watching has profound implications for both the viewer's psychological state and their overall well-being.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that intentionality is a useful boundary condition for antecedents and consequences of binge-watching. While the motivations that previous research has found to be relevant for binge-watching are more strongly related to intentional viewing sessions, negative outcomes are more strongly related to unintentional viewing sessions. Accounting for intentionality may therefore help to shed light on contradicting findings in previous research on binge-watching. Further, our study shows that viewers are more likely to characterize unintentional TV watching that continues longer than planned as a binge, and report more negative effects on their mood when watching unintentionally. In this vein, we found that the general tendency for planned viewing sessions is positively related to general well-being. However, our data suggests that not all drivers for unintended viewing have a negative effect on mood. Watching out of curiosity, which was the main reason participants reported for unintended continuation, has a positive effect on mood, while watching for coping/escapism has a negative effect. Whether those attributions are accurate or not - and the extent to which attributions alter the entertainment experience - should be the topic of future studies in this area.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Ezgi Ulusoy:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dominique S. Wirz:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Allison Eden:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Morgan E. Ellithorpe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: DSW is an editor of the special issue, but she has not been involved in the editorial process of this specific manuscript. Other authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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