

Generation STREAM

BEAUTY
IN THE BINGE



hulu



3 Beauty in the Binge



Now that content is no longer confined to timetables or traditional genres - there is more to explore, watch, indulge in - and of course, binge.

4 Birth of the Binge



Binge-watching content is no longer a trend; it has become the definitive way we watch TV.

5 Binge-core



Take a much needed mental health break by rolling into another episode.

8 Balance in the Binge



We are living in a world with exponentially more choices than ever before, and with infinite viewing hours and options, there are no built-in boundaries.

11 The Good Binge



The silver lining of the binge? Original content is surging and diversification is well underway.

13 Seven Deadly Binges



There is usually a little guilt that comes with bingeing, but most of us can't (and won't!) resist.



BEAUTY IN THE BINGE



If television has a dark side, it's how easily a weekend can fly by while working through Season 1 and 2 of *Pen15*.

Pick your poison, but now that content isn't confined to timetables, traditional genres, or—in some cases—commercials, it's a free-for-all. Most of us can't (and won't!) resist. Naturally there's a little guilt that comes with this new TV

terrain, but there's also an unexpected bright side to binge-watching: creation of content has never been more prolific, diverse, and original. TV is pushing entertainment boundaries and expanding the way we see the world and ourselves. ▶

BINGE ON

78%



of Generation Stream has binge-watched at least one show in the past 6 months.

84%



of Hulu's audience has binge-watched at least one show within the past 6 months.

BIRTH OF THE BINGE



While binge-watching is more the norm than not, it is still a relatively new cultural phenomenon. The term was first seen in mainstream use in 2013 when full seasons were released in one fell swoop and bingeing described the act of watching three or more episodes in a row. (But let's be honest—three episodes is nothing). In 2015, the Collins English Dictionary even named "binge-watch" the word of the year. Not even a decade later, bingeing has become the definitive way we watch TV. In fact, the number one way people report watching shows today is to binge-watch several episodes at once (38%). On top of that, 78% of Generation Stream and 84% of Hulu's audience say they have binge-watched *at least* one show in the past 6 months. And when asked to name the biggest way streaming has changed

their viewing behavior, the number one answer was "I binge watch series, which is something I couldn't do before" (42%). Just take it from Jason, 44, in Renton, WA: "Bingeing has allowed people to consume an entire series over the weekend, which was a titanic shift from the weekly release of typical TV shows. From the perspective of a consumer who is eager to consume as much of the content as they want as quickly as they can, it seems like a positive development. Because if something is good, isn't more of something good even better?" The result? Audiences have adopted a binge filter—instead of watching whatever's on, Generation Stream says the most important criterion for a show is its "binge-worthiness," or a show so engaging they just can't stop watching. ▶

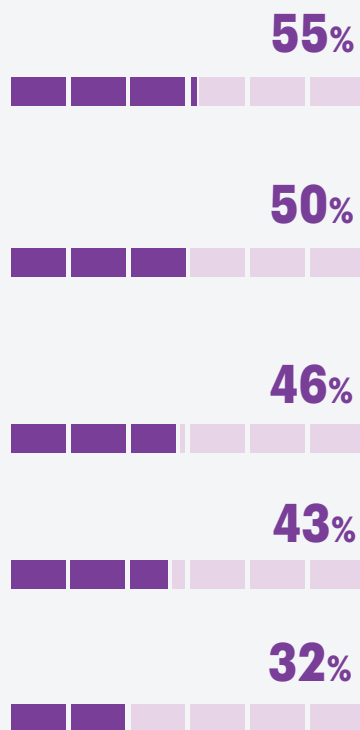
BENEFITS OF THE BINGE

QUESTION

How important are each of the following when you are watching TV shows or movies?

ANSWERS

Top 5 answer choices among streamers



Binge-worthiness

Content that's available all at once that is just so engaging that I can't stop watching.

Comfort

Content that's soothing, helps me decompress, is nostalgic, familiar or predictable in a good way.

Intellectual Stimulation

Content that makes me think, has complex stories or characters, or generally pushes me intellectually.

Relatability

Content with characters that represent me.

Community

Watching content with others and/or being able to discuss it afterward.

BINGECORE

Binge mania shows no signs of cooling down either: 32% of Gen Zs, millennials, and Gen Xers consider themselves to be either “Heavy Bingers: I watch a whole season at a time” (21%) or “Bingeing Addicts: I watch multiple seasons at a time” (11%). Of course, this may not always feel completely voluntary. “The most bingeing I’ve done at once is probably 50 hours. And at that point, it felt like an addiction,” Ben, 32, of Seattle, confessed. “I felt like there was nothing else I could think about besides getting to the end of *Power*. And now that it’s over I’m very wary of anything I watch because that was quite the commitment.” Jenn, 41, in San Francisco, expressed a similar out-of-control sentiment: “Typically at the end of an episode, it’s designed to give watchers a ‘cliff-hanger’ response, something that makes you want to return and watch the next episode. Having the ability to actually shorten the duration of that feeling is like a drug.” In reality, this analogy is not far off. According to clinical psychologist Dr. Renee Carr, bingeing gives your brain a hit

of dopamine—and then it just wants more. “This chemical gives the body a natural, internal reward of pleasure that reinforces continued engagement in that activity,” she told NBCUniversal. “It is the brain’s signal that communicates to the body, ‘This feels good. You should keep doing this!’”

Binge-watching has also sent a ripple effect through the broader entertainment culture. In 2017, “old school” binge-watching evolved into “binge-racing,” or watching a new show the second it drops and not stopping until the final credits roll. Even ads have adapted to the world of bingeing. In late 2019, Hulu launched the binge ad. By harnessing Hulu’s deep, first-party consumer insights, the binge ad experience is tailored to viewing behaviors, and serves viewers a series of relevant messaging throughout a three-episode binge session. But perhaps one of the biggest shifts to come out of this new style of watching content is the content itself. While the TV writers of old had to learn the art of telling a story in chunks, which were satisfying



POWER

BINGERS

32%

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hulu

BINGECORE

and titillating, those who write with bingeing in mind can deliver the whole all at once. “The viewer expects to be in for the long haul,” writer Marc Bernardin explains in *The Hollywood Reporter*, “so the writer doesn’t necessarily have to systematically woo him or her.” But let’s face it—innovation always comes at a cost. And with the golden age of content shining on, we’d venture to guess that Generation Stream and creators alike would say it’s worth it.

Binge-watching has altered more than the course of the lives taking place in the virtual world. Life patterns in the real world have also taken a detour. In fact, one-in-five streamers have actually called in sick to work for the sole

purpose of binge-watching a TV show, according to a survey from *Radio Times*, giving a new meaning to playing hooky. But it’s not all bad. Binge-watching has actually been shown to strengthen relationships by giving couples a shared comfort zone, characters to bond over, and an easy date. On top of that, a good binge can serve as a much-needed mental health break. While we often consider a bad-TV-watching spree to be a “guilty pleasure,” psychology experts agree that indulging in some mind-numbing content could actually be good for us—as long as you can introduce some moderation. So go ahead and lose yourself in *The Last Dance*. Just try to make it to work tomorrow. ▶



“I watch *NCIS* 5 days a week, at least 3 hours a day. I get so involved in solving the cases and characters it’s unbelievable. I purposely do not watch some shows when they air to binge-watch them.” —Deb, 25, Dallas, TX



BALANCE IN THE BINGE

“The old, ‘*are you still watching?*’ appears, and we all think the worst of ourselves.” —Nick, 30, San Francisco, CA

As normalized as binge-watching has become (and as much as our mental health may depend on moments of indulgence), watching multiple episodes or—eek—seasons in a row still comes with a palpable sense of guilt. Just take it from Adam, 30, in Los Angeles: “I feel guilty watching TV anytime before 9 p.m. I think that’s just from having workaholic parents.” Indeed, the pressure to maximize our free time with productivity instead of reruns of *Seinfeld* is still strong in our work-above-all-else culture.

But that impulse just doesn’t match up with the world we live in today. “The old, ‘*are you still watching?*’ appears, and we all think the worst of ourselves. Or we laugh at how foolish the service must be to

think we are done watching,” says Nick, 30, of San Francisco, CA.

If this is the new world order, though, then why do we still feel so bad? The truth is, it runs deeper than fearing we’ve become the proverbial couch potato. Though that’s certainly part of it, we are living in a world with exponentially more choices than ever before—and that puts pressure on us to make the “right” ones, TV-related or otherwise. Consider the fact that 2019 was viewed as the year of ‘peak TV,’ with 532 scripted series in the US alone. That’s the first time we’ve crossed the 500-show threshold, and it represents a 7% increase over 2018. More shocking perhaps is the 153% increase in scripted shows between 2009 and 2019. Channels and timetables are no longer integral parts of the TV equation, giving us more to explore, more to watch, and more to indulge in—and this puts the pressure to set limits squarely on our shoulders and our shoulders alone. With infinite viewing hours and options, there are no built-in boundaries. And that’s created a new-found pressure to feel like we’re using our time well. “Now, when I watch anything, I feel guilty, or unable to enjoy the show because I know my time could be better spent doing something else, so the whole experience is stressful,” says Jess, 25, in Iowa City. “There’s too much to read for me to be watching.”



Seinfeld

Jess may be right, but that's not going to stop our binge culture from bingeing. "Saying 'Don't binge-watch' is like saying 'The only safe sex is abstinence,'" writes Jeff Wilser for *Vulture*. "The question should be: If we can't abstain from binge-watching, what's the equivalent of protection?" The answer may look different for different people, but across the board, many people are coming up with new approaches to balance the binge—and binge guilt is giving rise to mindful TV remedies. Adam, for example, opts out of *The Big Bang Theory* re-watch in favor of something more intellectually stimulating: "I try to be somewhat economical and efficient with the time I spend watching. I want to make sure it will enrich me, entertain me, or empower me to take part in larger conversations. If it doesn't successfully do one of those things, I just feel like I'm kind of wasting my time." In a similar enriching vein, some people have taken to keeping a journal of what resonates with them from a show or have created some other way to actively engage with the content. Others use bingeing as a way to connect with family, friends, partners, or roommates. Fiona, 19, a college sophomore told us,

"I have less time to stream now, so when I do, I want it to be fully worth my time; whatever I watch has to be interesting to me and new, then I feel less guilty about not doing homework or the like. I stream with friends to build more social bonds while at school." Others offset bingeing by building exercise into their viewing (i.e. doing a plank during a commercial break or 10 lunges every time a character on *The Bachelor* says, "Can I steal you for a sec?"). And, going back to separating the "guilt" from the "pleasure," others are recognizing that maybe bingeing is just an opportunity to slow down, accepting that they won't be productive for X amount of time—and that's ok, too. ▶

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“When it comes to lazy Sunday binge-watching, I once watched the entire first season of *Blown Away*—a show about glassblowers in a competition to see who is able to make the most creative work.”

—Gala, 26, Los Angeles, CA



THE GOOD BINGE

Our level of choice (in TV and life, but let's rein things into TV here) is only set to grow. The laws of supply and demand mean that the more hours we spend watching, err bingeing (demand), the more resources will be allocated to creating (supply). Already, innovation is happening. New streaming services such as Peacock, HBO Max and Disney+ are pushing their way into the space, and original content is cropping up across platforms. The result—and true silver lining of the binge? Original content is surging. The number one type of content that audiences say they stream, outside of binge-worthy content (i.e. full seasons released all at once), is original content, or shows that are created by the video streaming service (43%). Initially, this deluge of OG shows may have some not-so-great-side effects, including audience skepticism. “‘Original’ is very much a buzzword to me, and I roll my eyes every time I hear it,” says Jess. “If I’m really interrogating this, I think ‘Netflix Original’ is synonymous for me with ‘could be bad.’” But in general, it’s a good thing. More creators—and outlets for creation—means a more diversified entertainment pipeline. We’ll see more shows representing niche interests, diverse demographics, global cultures, and all the other “others” in need of the spotlight. “I think that it’s really awesome that these platforms are able to create and greenlight shows that are creative, smart, beautiful, and interesting. They seem to be out of the box and more avant-garde,” says Nikol, 30, in Brooklyn. “I feel like network shows just keep

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being formulaic and ‘safe.’ While it’s true that most shows are a basic formula, these platforms have found writers and showrunners who are given complete creative freedom to create interesting, out-of-the-box show concepts and the money to properly execute them.” ▶

ORIGINAL CONTENT

43%

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A hulu ORIGINAL
LITTLE FIRES
 EVERYWHERE

This diversification is already well underway. Take, for example, Hulu’s wildly popular shows *Shrill*, which tackled body positivity and inclusivity, and *Little Fires Everywhere*, which represented a diverse range of experiences, from class and race to sexuality and a woman’s right to choose. Then there’s Netflix’s *Cheer*, which showcased life in small-town Texas, and HBO’s *Euphoria*, which starred a transgender character and dealt with addiction among other demographic and cultural boundaries that never would have shown up on traditional networks. It’s not surprising that TV would swing so far away from binary experiences. After all, TV has long been a representation of current culture—as much as we may cringe at the tone-deafness of *Sex and the City* now, at the time it was a revolutionary looking glass for women’s sexual, financial, and fashion freedom. We reflect upon ourselves and our lives through the characters and settings we see on TV. And we develop empathy for difference (*Atypical*), place ourselves in “their shoes” (*Couples Therapy*), and learn about other cultures and times (*Chernobyl*) through what we watch. Adam, for example, enjoyed watching the Apple TV+ show *Little America*,

each episode of which follows a different American immigrant, because “it did a really great job of showing the breadth of where immigrants come from and all the different kinds of challenges they might face – financial, social, linguistic, cultural, etc.” Ben liked the Starz show *Power* because it “showcases social issues in the world that people deal with,” and

Tim, 33, in Seattle, says HBO’s *Chernobyl* “grabbed [me] from the opening moments right through to the end of the series. The makers of the show used darkened tones, a fabulous script and honest, raw storytelling to create an extremely realistic depiction of the Chernobyl disaster.” This new level of representation and risk-taking is particularly important to Gen Z—aka the next generation of streamers—as they see TV as a chance to reflect and expand upon themselves. This diversification is only set to grow—and we personally think that’s a good thing. So no need for Hail Marys or repenting. There’s salvation—personally and culturally—in a good binge. ■

#1

The #1 aspect of Hulu that
 streamers love: **Great Originals.**

SEVEN DEADLY BINGES

Here are the seven deadly binges of TV. Which is yours?

SLOTH

Basic Binge

A few random hours on a weekend that could have been spent elsewhere, but no real harm done.

LUST

Bingeing Around

You and your partner are committed to a season and are halfway through. Then, in a moment of weakness, you binge the rest alone.

GREED

Day Bingeing

It's just one more show, you tell yourself...but it's also noon on a weekday. It's okay. As the saying goes, it's primetime somewhere.

GLUTTONY

Binge & Cleanse

You've over-indulged and now you need to make things right and repent through a TV cleanse of restricted watching.

PRIDE

Binge-worthy

Bingeing the most popular show is a bragging right. You take a certain pride in getting through it all. If anyone is going to spoil the spoilers, it'll be you.

ENVY

Secret Bingers

You hide your unhealthy obsession for reality TV. You're not proud, but no one has to know.

WRATH

Premeditated Binger

You plan that perfect weekend of complete, uninhibited TV bingeing. There's an art in restraint and a thrill in holding out.

METHODOLOGY



To explore Generation Stream, Hulu partnered with Culture Co-op and utilized the following combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches.

CULTURE CO-OP 

Trend Exploration

Leveraged Culture Co-op's trend research and Hulu's existing data to understand Generation Stream at a high level.

Culturesetter Projects

In-depth projects on TV and movie streaming preferences and behaviors among 20 diverse "Culturesetters," a handpicked group of individuals at the forefront of culture, ages 16 to 44, who only or mostly stream their video content. Culturesetters reflected 12 U.S. markets including New York/Brooklyn, NY; Washington, DC; Burlington, VT; Denver, CO; Iowa City, IA; Atlanta, GA; New Orleans, LA; Dallas, TX; Albuquerque, NM; Los Angeles, CA; San Francisco/Oakland, CA; and Seattle, WA.

Expert Interviews

Interviews with entertainment, tech and generational insiders on the future of streaming and entertainment.

Nationally Representative Study

A 25-minute online study among 2,500 Gen Zs, millennials and Gen Xers, representative of Americans ages 13-to-54, fielded in April 2020.



Generation
STREAM

BEAUTY IN THE BINGE

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