

**The Streaming Service Effect During the Pandemic:  
A Study of Altered Viewing Habits**

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## **The Streaming Service Effect During the Pandemic: A Study of Altered Viewing Habits**

Television has become a staple in many people's lives since its accessibility and popularity started thriving. Although television viewing habits may alter throughout seasons it remains a prominent part of the culture and for some a necessity. When watching television, you can transform into a different world and story where you can learn, stay informed, and be connected. This medium can link values, culture, habits, entertainment, and education in a format that keeps the audience engaged. Viewing television by oneself can be a positive form of self-care when done in a healthy balance and watching television with others can be a form of a subculture where you can connect with others. The pure serotonin television produces is one that never fails to falter with technological advancements and the changing state of the world.

Viewing began when you turned your T.V. on, flipped through the channels, and found something that intrigued you enough to continue watching. Then, cable boxes make it possible to have access to more channels and record favorite shows and movies so you wouldn't miss a thing. Appointment viewing was a curse and a blessing to all, having to wait a week for a new episode of a show and always rushing home to make sure you could watch, giving you something to look forward to. Now, we are taking part in a medium where we are in control of our viewing habits, watching wherever and whenever we want. Streaming services have dominated the television industry by giving access to old and new content through the movement of one click. Audiences have moved from an engagement of viewing together with others to viewing individually on phones, laptops, tablets, and T.V.s.

The past only gave access to television in the form of one channel now the format has changed and begun to dictate the content in itself. When the format changes, the way people think about television changes too. McLuhan and Fiore argue that "Throughout history what has

been communicated has been less important than the particular medium through which people communicate and that technology that transfers the message changes us, society, and more” (1967). Television shapes our view by watching the news, reality shows, dramatic series, sitcoms, and talk shows. The pandemic changed the medium and in return changed our senses influencing our viewing habits.

Before, networks and channels pushed content out, decided what was going to be popular, and relegated old shows to archives. During the pandemic, viewing shifted because networks were unable to push new content out as much as usual giving control back to the audience on decision making. Old shows found on streaming networks were able to make a comeback and viewers were in charge of what to watch next and what became well-liked. Television viewing tastes became strongly dictated by happenings in the pandemic, the stages of 2020 brought new needs for viewing that were decided by individuals instead of media companies. For the first time in a while, we got to see how viewers were no longer pressured by networks to participate in appointment viewing, watch what everyone was talking about, or just have the T.V. on for background noise. Viewers were now looking for fully captivating shows, distracting them from the uncomfortable realness of 2020, and brightening their moods. Audiences find themselves in a time where they have all the content in the world to consume and are learning what they like individually because of the circumstances we faced in the last year and based on our social identity.

Studying this change in viewing habits can help reveal who audiences are today, how they have been shaped, and where they’re headed. It’s vital to understand how the medium controls the message so we can learn how our views are being changed. This study looks at my T.V. viewing habits through the method of autoethnography by looking at my viewing history

during the pandemic and the events that were happening in the real world at the same time. Autoethnography is a type of research that allows an author to use self-reflection to explore personal experiences and connecting them to cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Ellis et al., 2011). Using this form of research will help give insight into how a real viewer's television habits were changed during the pandemic and future implications of viewing habits, streaming services, and audience engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Streaming Services Vs. The Pandemic**

The impact of streaming services slowly pushing out cable television in the entertainment industry has been well researched since the rising popularity of platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Disney+. Although some research findings show an increased desire to cancel cable television subscriptions and solely rely on video streaming services for entertainment a trend known as cord-cutting (Azhar et al., 2021,). To fully understand what makes the perfect audience viewing experience continues to be studied especially during different states of the world like the pandemic. According to Miyake (2021), "In today's world governed by platform services and synchronized technology, we not only want but expect to consume media instantly, continuously, frequently, and in a way that's personalized" (p. 2). One important factor is to look at subscriber counts per streaming service platform which were steadily increasing each year before the pandemic. Even further research shows that since the start of COVID-19, the average number of streaming video-on-demand subscriptions per household had increased by 10% (Azhar et al., 2021, p. 8). The demand for access to content was surging throughout the months of lockdown, isolation, and social distancing.

What sets platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu apart from competitors is the production of their original content. Series like *Stranger Things*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* were exclusive shows that could only be accessed through their specific platform. These special features created a rise in streaming subscriptions providing a new world for audiences to engage with. During the peak of these series' popularity, social media became bombarded with tweets, videos, memes, and thoughts surrounding the show, they became a moment in pop culture. The audience becomes consumed in these worlds because they are offered a whole season of episodes to devour at once instead of waiting for weekly installments. Original content series engross their viewers by providing them with a viewing experience tailored to their needs with fresh, new, productions of captivating series.

Before the pandemic, most of society had a grip on their media consumption and recognizing technology overuse was easily attainable. When streaming services turned into a way of coping for many during quarantine, it became less easy to realize technology burnout and when to take a break. Studies have shown that streaming services customers fall on the younger age groups and during the pandemic increased daily leisure time resulted in increased consumption of entertainment sources (Matrix, 2014, p. 119). The effects of lockdown have increased media fatigue that puts streaming services media dumps in danger. Other research has found an increase in media fatigue for society because of the effects of lockdown and quarantine during the pandemic calling for digital detoxes (Miyake, 2021). Ultimately, research has called for more studies regarding what content is appropriate to show in a society changed by the coronavirus to better understand user experience (Luo, n.d.). The pandemic has changed how we consume media and with a second year of the coronavirus looming it's important to further research the implications.

## **The Dangers of Binge-Watching**

The primary way in which streaming has changed television forever is the rise of “Binge-watching,” which has been defined differently in many studies but generally stands for the watching of several episodes, at least two or more, of a TV series or program in rapid succession. The motivations and dangerous side effects of binge-watching have been well researched throughout past years. Although some research findings outline little correlation between binge-watching and health effects, several studies demonstrate a relationship between excessive watching and depression, social anxiety, and stress (Starosta et al., 2020). A study conducted by Sun and Chang (2021) found “positive associations between problematic binge-watching and depression, social interaction anxiety, and loneliness” (p. 6). This could indicate that many binge watchers may use the practice as a coping mechanism against depression, social anxiety, and loneliness and might be turning to technology as a form of escapism or distraction from everyday issues. Another study conducted by Castro et al., (2021), shares that their results suggest that binge-watching is an individual activity mainly performed at the end of the day to relax, for boredom relief purposes, or escapism (p. 15).

Binge-watching is similar to other immersive forms of technology that are engaging, entertaining, and time-consuming like video games, social media, and internet surfing where they had users obsessed and entranced when they first became popular. According to Starosta et al., (2020), “It can be assumed that symptoms similar to those of behavioral addiction will be characteristic for excessive forms of binge-watching” (p. 2). Symptoms like loss of control, changes in tolerance, withdrawal syndrome, neglect of other interests, and negative social and health consequences can all be associated with binge-watching (Starosta et al., 2020, p. 2). In the context of a global pandemic, it stands to reason, and there is evidence of more binge-watching

by audiences who are confined largely to their homes and defined by mask mandates and lockdowns (Arend et al., 2021). Some initial research has already examined and found that the excessive screen time during COVID-19 related confinements negatively affected young adult's sleep quality and duration, physical well-being, and mental health (Arend et al., 2021).

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

With each new mass communications medium such as social media, streaming services, smartphones, and television comes the need for analyzing the uses, gratifications, motivations, and effects regarding each technology. According to Ruggiero (2000), "An approach was developed to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs early on in communications research" (p. 3). Studying why people seek out certain media for certain needs is an audience-centered approach for researching mass communication. Originating in the early 1940s by Katz and Blumler, the uses and gratifications theory was conceived to better understand people's media choices, their needs for requiring them, and what gratifications they receive from usage (Kasirye, 2021). According to Bagdasarov et al., (2010), "The U&G approach suggests that individuals are aware of their needs, evaluate various channels and content available to them, assess functional alternatives, and select the media, interpersonal channel, or other activities they believe will provide the gratification they seek" (p. 302). Research has also discussed how the needs of the audience in using media content will determine the content consumed as each user has different needs thus making the two bases of U&G framework the motives and activity of the audience itself (Habes, 2019).

Television viewing has become a topic of research using the U&G framework because of rich audience behavior in this evolving industry of streaming services. According to Papacharissi

and Mendelson (2007), “U&G examines the nature of audience involvement and gratification obtained from viewing television, with an emphasis on motives for medium, psychological, and social traits that influence this use, and behaviors or attitudes that develop” (p. 356). Analyzing binge-watching behavior can be difficult as the audience’s needs are constantly changing.

Research explains if an explanation of motives for using can be proven, then behavior such as media selection and content sharing can be further explored along with unintended consequences in media use (Steiner & Xu, 2020). It’s important to examine television viewing habits in light of a pandemic to better understand motivation and effects to recognize the audience’s needs and what shows give them gratifications during excessive watching periods.

### **Surviving A Pandemic**

Viewing habits during the pandemic have become a well-researched topic recently due to its relevancy with most studies looking to analyze its relationship to mental health issues (Eden et al., 2020). With research focusing on watching television as a form of self-care, more studies need to study the short and long-term effects it could have on society. With increased leisure time and an unbalanced mindset, many people had to decide how best to cope with an unfamiliar situation during the pandemic. According to Rubenking and Bracken (2021), “Nine in ten adults watch media content to help them cope, with seventy-three percent watching daily” (p. 2). Many people reported that times they would typically be outside were instead spent indoors consuming media because of Covid restrictions. According to a study done in the U.S. to understand screen time behaviors during the pandemic, “The most commonly reported forms of recreational screen use increases were for TV shows, streaming services, and movies” (Wagner et al., 2021, p. 7). Television shows became an immersive form of entertainment that could transform viewers into a new world. Some research associates binge-watching with mood and sleep disturbances,



fatiguability, and impairment in self-regulation (Dixit et al., 2020), but new research regarding the pandemic is saying the opposite. According to Boursier et al., (2021), “TV series represents an effective coping strategy to deal with emotional distress by allowing viewers to find temporary shelter in the fictional world of a series while experiencing pleasure, and fulfilling self-development and social needs” (p. 7).

The pandemic was experienced all over the world giving audiences different encounters with streaming services, cable television, and digital media according to accessibility. Public broadcasting channels in India decided to capitalize on nostalgia and capture captive audiences by airing television shows that were once extremely popular in the eighties again during the pandemic to promote a positive, motivated, and non-panic environment (Ayedee and Manocha, 2020, p. 375). Going back to the 80s also evoked times when television was a more “family” affair. But, the choice to run reruns of old shows, and the push to re-popularize them indicated another issue – production on many new shows and ongoing ones were halted due to pandemic restrictions. Despite the increased appetite for television, there wasn’t enough new content to satisfy the hungry viewer. While streaming channels like Netflix and Amazon Prime were able to push out original content during the pandemic to keep viewers engaged without hesitation, most channels struggled with new content releases. What this did was affect television viewing tastes. According to Eden et al. (2020), “Early indications suggest that the pandemic altered media use patterns and suggest that viewers were either seeking out pandemic-themed media or turning to reassuring, familiar content” (p. 2). This bears investigation because it could be suggested that viewers were now in charge of their own tastes once again. From a researcher’s point of view, this provides a more authentic way in which to examine audience tastes and motivations in so far as television content is concerned.

## **What is Viewing Identity?**

The effects of watching certain genres of film and television have been researched thoroughly but the reasoning behind why we are more attracted to certain shows over others is still unanswered. Streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime all rely on an algorithm to suggest new content to each user based on previous entertainment choices. There is little research to back our internal choices of certain genres and shows to help us understand our decision-making. According to Rentfrow et al., (2011), “The connections between personality and the entertainment-preference dimensions suggest that people seek out entertainment that reflects and reinforce aspects of their personalities” (p. 12). This research helps to understand basic preferences for entertainment choices but serves no purpose in explaining the psychology behind it. Several studies use the Social Identity Theory to understand television viewing and entertainment usage. According to Mastro (2003), “Social Identity Theory suggests that the groups/categories to which an individual belongs to provide the characteristics that define a member’s self-concept by furnishing the normative attitudes and behaviors associated with membership” (p. 99).

With this theory, the background of how we categorize ourselves in groups can help be explained which leads to the next step of individual decision making. According to Harwood (1997), “Individuals seek out particular messages which support their social identities and avoid messages which do not support their identities” (p. 204). The majority of Social Identity Theory and media usage is outdated because of its old-fashioned views of diverse content and modern technology. This research was relevant years ago to discuss why shows needed to be more diverse and inclusive because it’s so important to be represented in the media, but it still doesn’t explain our individual choices for genre, theme, and dialogue preferences (Rentfrow et al.,

2011). Harwood (1999) also explains how “Scholars examining the role of social identifications in behavior appear largely to have ignored media use” (p. 123). The topic still strikes interest today and calls for fresh literature in the field of communication. With this research, we can learn how viewers use television to engage with shows that are serving as a coping strategy during a crucial time like the pandemic.

## **Methods**

### **Autoethnography**

To examine how viewing habits changed throughout the first year of the pandemic this research will be analyzing a timeline of two lists; specific shows that were watched and examined patterns and themes that connect to what was going on in the world at the time of viewing. All shows, series, and seasons were watched from March through December 2020 and can be found on Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney Plus. This research only studies the effects of viewing habits regarding television shows and streaming services original content series to analyze one type of medium. Without as much new content being pushed out on cable television and a plethora of free time during the pandemic, many people turned to streaming services for entertainment. In this era of technology, viewers have gained all power over when, how, and what to watch. During the pandemic the media wasn't able to decide what was trendy or cool, the viewers were in control to decide for themselves. This research will look at the decision-making process according to one person's experience of viewing.

Each streaming service has an algorithm they use to provide unique recommendations based on previous choices and common genres viewers have watched in the past. What made streaming services stand out from cable television competition was the feature of listing trending now or most popular categories on their interface that influenced viewer's choices when

browsing. Netflix was even more strategic by placing a ‘top ten titles’ being watched right now to encourage viewers to watch what others are watching. For some people, this design proves useful in decision making and for others, it doesn’t make a big difference. During the pandemic, viewing habits were altered due to the lack of new content and heightened accessibility. Some viewers returned to comfort shows and re-watched favorite series while others stepped out of safe choices and took a chance on something different. Regardless, society was looking for a distraction during a high stress, confusing, period and watching streaming services proved useful as a coping mechanism.

### **Netflix: Top Ten Show Recommendations**

At the beginning of March 2020, news of the coronavirus had spread to the U.S. that people in China were starting to become sick and it was possible it could be a danger for the rest of the world. Regardless of the severity showcased on news stations and in the media, the public did not seem to be as worried or prepared for what was shortly about to be a historic year. Initially, memes started to take over the internet trolling users and making a joke about the virus before anyone could fully understand the severity of the situation. The first show to go viral during the pandemic was released at the beginning of the lockdown period when attitudes were still high, and most people thought quarantine would last 2-3 weeks. Tiger King, an American true-crime documentary depicting the life of zookeepers, eccentric characters, and animal rights activists with prominent themes of murder, polyamory, crime, big cats, politics, and LGBTQ representation became an infamous symbol for the beginning of a bizarre year.

It’s hard to not join in on pop culture favorites when you are surrounded by friends, family, and co-workers all talking about the same thing and memes, tweets, and videos flooding your social media page. In fear of missing out, I too watched Tiger King so I could participate in

the conversation with friends and family over Facetime calls, classmates on Zoom sessions, and understand the humor behind all the viral memes and TikToks online. Nielsen reported, “34.3 million people watched the series within the first ten days of its release” (Hargraves, 2020, p. 556). Watching this show was purely just a way to form a connection to other viewers during a time of isolation. As a viewer, the series became popular due to the period that it was released and without the unusual climate to help gain the attention it’s hard to say how successful it would be during a normal environment. Prasad (2020) explains how “Shock and boredom are your viewing companions on the couch as you toggle psychically from an absurd news cycle to an agitated quarantine in a hopeless attempt to Netflix-and-chill” (p. 572).

March 11<sup>th</sup> marks the day that the World Health Organization officially declares Covid-19 a pandemic and society truly becomes affected by the change. Throughout this time schools and businesses begin a work-from-home order with an unclear estimate of when face-to-face will return. The NBA decides to suspend their season and Tom Hanks becomes the first American celebrity to announce they’re positive covid infection. On March 13<sup>th</sup> a national emergency is declared, and social distancing guidelines are set in place with talks regarding lack of medical supplies and hoarding beginning. The public is confused on how to protect themselves without the proper knowledge of how this new virus can be spread. Face masks, eye protection, and gloves can now be seen as essentials when leaving the house. With fear, panic, and uncertainty looming over society, many people struggle to cope with a different routine.

As a viewer, this phase numbed my decision-making skills and left me to watch shows that were recommended by the top ten list on Netflix and whatever was trending online. Starting with Tiger King at the onset of the pandemic, struggling to find the fascination with the series but reluctantly continuing to the end. Without the satisfaction of completing a series feeling

overjoyed and wanting more my next viewing choice encouraged me to choose a show I knew I would like. The new season of *Ozark* was released just at the end of March and was able to occupy me long enough for a short 3-day binge, leaving me feeling more content than before. Distracted again by the current state of the world at that moment I was pressured to watch the shows that everyone was talking about online as most of my time then was spent on social media if not engaging a streaming service. Netflix's original series *Unorthodox* and *Outer Banks* were my next choices made and surprised me with their ability to transport me into their story. Happy that I had chosen to follow the recommendations of strangers online I became inspired to share the same suggestions to people I knew so I could further enjoy the shows with continued discussions.

### **Pandemic Genre**

When people are in distress over the unknown two choices can be made to find comfort; distract oneself through entertainment or indulge oneself in preparation by information. Films and television shows have always served as a medium to inform and entertain. For example, people flocked to the theaters during World War II as a way to be occupied, motivated, and amused. For decades society has turned to movies about tragedies and crises during a time of panic and unknown. It was known that after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, there was an increase in rentals at video stores like Blockbuster about plane hijackings. Films like *Turbulence* (1997), *Passenger 57* (1992), and *Con Air* (1997) were being watched to serve as some sort of look into what plane hijacking would be like for people who were fearful of the current threat of that time. History has since repeated itself and there has been an increase in pandemic and medical emergency genre films and shows during March 2020. Netflix reported that *Outbreak* (1995) a medical thriller was the ninth most-streamed product of the service and also saw an

increase in films like *Contagion* (2011), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), and *28 Days Later* (2002) (Maas, 2020). These films serve as a document to help the audience get a sense of what might happen and how to react like a guidebook for the unknown.

As a viewer, I too indulged in this pandemic genre of films at the beginning of the lockdown. This category for medical emergency movies had previously never sparked my interest enough for viewing until I had experienced parts of it myself. Needing a quick solution to occupy my thoughts of worry during a time of unreliability I decided to watch *Outbreak* (1995), solely based on the fact that it was trending on Netflix. It allowed me the opportunity to be comforted for a moment to see how others acted and handled a situation I was completely unfamiliar with. Watching the film was just enough to soothe away my sense of panic and overthinking but also validated the reality of the current crisis. The movie had served its purpose and I did not feel the need to partake anymore in that specific genre because it is not my usual choice.

### **Disney Plus +**

After receiving what a taste of the pandemic could be like, any kind of anxiety-inducing show or series was something to be steered clear of. The initial 2-3 weeks people had predicted that it would take for the virus to go away was over and it had unfortunately become clear that no one could say when the end would be. For the majority of April 2020 familiarity was needed and that leads to the next category of Disney Plus. During this time most of society was living under stay-at-home orders and only leaving the house for essential needs like work and food shopping. Wearing masks in public was now being recommended and for some businesses required. Disadvantaged and underserved communities were suffering the most with a high need for unemployment aid and medical attention especially for Black Americans who were getting

infected and dying at disturbing rates. Protests began for anti-masks and calls for businesses to reopen all while fatigue started to settle in. With plans and events being canceled for the foreseeable future and the negative media and news coverage becoming overwhelming, there was not much to turn to for comfort.

Disney Plus was a fairly new streaming service that emerged in November of 2019 but boomed subscription services during the pandemic. People at home had more time to kill than they knew what to do with and signing up for another streaming service was a way to occupy yourself with new things to watch. After viewing so much of what other people were watching and engaging in a genre that was painfully realistic it was vital to me to make comfortable choices that were guaranteed to be enjoyed. During April 2020 I spent my time watching old shows that premiered on Disney Channel in the early 2000s that were now available on Disney Plus. Viewing shows like Lizzie McGuire, The Proud Family, Even Stevens, and That's So Raven served as a symbol for security. A safe choice that you could count on to bring nostalgia, innocence, and laughter to brighten your day. Watching these shows that filled my childhood with good memories gave me a sense of security during a time where I felt lost and tired. These feelings could not be replicated with the options that Netflix and Amazon Prime provided because they no longer had the rights to these Disney exclusive shows.

### **Reality Series Not Watched**

While I was choosing to make my path of Disney Plus bliss throughout April and May 2020, everyone I knew was engaging with reality series on Netflix. My social media was bombarded with clips and scenes from these new reality dating series that have never been intriguing to me. Shows like Love Is Blind, Too Hot to Handle, and The Circle were all shows that became extremely popular during this time and were recommended to me by friends and



family. I never thought to give shows like these a chance because they always seemed boring or not entertaining enough for me. Even though I knew I would be disappointed by these choices I still gave them a chance but could not even watch the trailer or sneak peeks without dispirit. They would all make it to my list of shows I could not get into that everyone else seemed to enjoy like *The Bachelor*, *Big Brother*, or *The Real Housewives*.

### **Black Lives Matter Collection**

By the end of May 2020 and the beginning of June, the climate of fear, hostility, and sadness approached a new level. On May 31<sup>st</sup> millions flooded to the streets to protest the killing of George Floyd and police violence against Black Americans. News stations and social media became hotspots for protest coverage spiking places for education, information, and safety. The public had now been corrupted with two tragedies; a deathly virus still spreading rapidly and exhaustion from people of color who still have to face racial injustice in an unforgiving world. Things weren't looking up with increasing rates of unemployment and homelessness leaving many people struggling to pay bills, buying food, and living out of their cars. To boost the economy states tried to reopen, leaving regulations confusing. Curfews are set and nightlife closes upsetting young people looking to travel and stay out late. The summer months start a new chapter for people who are now tired of lockdown and quarantine who begin to travel and vacation or people who still take the virus seriously taking all precautions.

Throughout this period streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime now offer a new feature called the Black Lives Matter Collection, full of series and films showcasing predominately Black voices to educate and inform about history and culture. This surprised me as a long-time subscriber to these services I had never seen collections like this be featured as soon as you signed into your profile. Netflix was able to provide films, documentaries, and series

about racial injustice and the Black experience in America. Overtime my viewing choices had changed and became consumed with features in the BLM Collection and new recommendations. As a viewer, I prefer immersive storytelling that films and series provide to fully engage my attention that documentaries are not able to do. With this preference, I stuck to the series on Netflix and binge-watched *When They See Us*, *Pose*, and *Self Made* in a few short weeks and felt unsatisfied looking for more choices. I then decided to move to Amazon Prime to watch films that they had made free to rent for their BLM collection. I fell into a phase where I only consumed media regarding the history and culture of the Black experience in America. I started with newer films like *Harriet* (2019), *Just Mercy* (2019), *The Best of Enemies* (2019), and *The Hate U Give* (2018) and when that still wasn't enough, I moved on to older films like *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Loving* (2016), *Marshall* (2017), and *Selma* (2014). These series and films were all choices I necessarily wouldn't have made on a normal day as they can be hard to watch and showcase an awful past. Regularly I want to watch something not as serious that is feel-good or heartwarming but instead, I found myself wanting to be uncomfortable to better educate myself. Although it is not enough to just educate yourself by watching films and series, streaming services provided an opportunity to their audience by encouraging viewing of a BLM collection, something people would not have chosen on their own.

### **Dating Series**

By mid-July, leaders continue to push ahead with reopening even though cases are rising, breaking records for single-day reports. On July 11<sup>th</sup>, we see President Trump wear a mask in public for the first time throughout the pandemic even though officials have been recommending it for months. We also see as a country 5 million Americans lose their health insurance from February to May, making it the biggest loss in history (Thebault, Meko, & Alcantara, 2021). The

U.S. continues to break records on July 16 and 17 with recording nearly 150,000 new infections in 48 hours. Many of the southernmost populated states like Texas, Georgia, Florida, Arizona, and California lead the country in the highest number of cases. Fortunately, by the end of July, the final phase of testing has begun for the two coronavirus vaccines, Pfizer and Moderna. With the advancements of vaccinations brightening the future of this dark year, the coronavirus still operates vigorously. The official death toll in America passes 150,000 people on July 31<sup>st</sup> with Latinos and Native Americans representing an increasing proportion of the deaths alongside Black Americans.

With the end of summer months nearing, still living in a lockdown state of mind, practicing social distancing, wearing face masks, and following state and health guidelines was quickly taking a toll on mental health issues. Many people like myself had yet to travel or see anyone outside their home or roommates. Needing something positive, happy, and heartwarming to watch my next pandemic series choice was Love on the Spectrum, a reality show following the lives of adults on the autism spectrum who explore dating, love, and new relationships. Reality series are not my typical show to pick because they tend to be focused too much on appearances, money, status, and usually follow the traditional storyline of heterosexual relationships. Reality dating shows can become repetitive with the consistent themes of drama, fighting, and written lines which can make the series predictable and sometimes boring. Watching Love on the Spectrum was a refreshing take on dating series, showcasing a charming rawness of each character where you find yourself rooting for each person to find love and happiness. This show was entertaining and informative discussing different disabilities, sexualities, and genders all learning how to navigate dating in a world where the media pushes out way too many shows that focus purely on fit, beautiful, men and women falling in love on

TV.

After binging Love on the Spectrum in one sitting, my mindset towards reality series was opened and encouraged me to find another show that followed the topic of love in a way that mainstream media did not cover in America. My next pandemic viewing choice was Indian Matchmaking, a reality show that follows the journey of a matchmaker as she helps her clients in the U.S. and India in the cultural and traditional process of arranged marriage in the modern world. This show intrigued my interest because I am a part of no culture or traditions in my family history, so I am always eager to learn and see how other cultures approach life. This series was again different from the typical reality shows promoted in the media in America like The Bachelor and Bachelorette franchise. Indian Matchmaking depicted the strategic process of dating with the focus on class, status, age, occupation, education, and family history which is very different from the approach many people participate in outside of that culture. This series was a quick watch and further motivated my reality show chapter of love and dating on-screen encouraging me to watch Say I Do next. Say I Do is a reality series following the lives of couples overcoming struggles to celebrate their dream weddings designed by experts. Again, this show promoted a vulnerable side to love and relationships that was refreshing and heartwarming. Shows like these were necessary to watch during a time of boring, repetitive days when many people were certainly struggling to find new love or have a spark in their current partnerships.

### **Teenage Drama Series**

With August comes a new school year, and this pandemic year brought protests by teachers and parents alike. Learning became hybrid with parents having to decide whether or not to participate in online or in-person teaching for their children. The mask mandate was still required and that left a lot of people upset leading some parents to protest and some teachers to

quit under the new terms. August 2020 felt like a weird time where you were unsure if you should be allowed in school or not having to wear masks, sit behind plexiglass barriers, and social distance while seated. Rarely seeing your teacher or classmate's full face brings a new sensation to learning by having to adapt to speaking loudly and explaining facial expressions. Going to school never knowing if you will be moving to remote the next day or have to quarantine due to the fact someone in your class could become infected is a new adjustment some of us had to face. Finally reaching September brought the first plateau of cases in a long time that resulted in a moment of peace.

To feel some sense of security during a time that seemed quite unpredictable the next viewing choices required full attention and distractions from the real world, which left you feeling like you were a kid again with little to no worries at all. The next series that I watched was; *Never Have I Ever*, *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, *Trinkets*, *Emily in Paris*, *Sex Education*, and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. All of these series have in common a theme of youthfulness and excitement where the main characters are naïve, innocent, learning from mistakes, and taking each day as it comes with the reality of life. During this period, it was comforting to watch shows that remind you to stay calm during crazy times and be patient through new journeys. Watching these series proved as a great distraction and a way to cope while navigating through an unsettling and mysterious world.

### **Comfort Choices**

The late fall of 2020 brought tension, restlessness, and a great deal of unease. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, President Trump tested positive for the coronavirus and got the best treatment unlike any other citizen in America would and encourages the public to not be afraid of the virus. Campaign rallies for the next presidential election ensue and cause a spike in covid cases. With the media

consuming every piece of the upcoming election, health officials like Dr. Fauci continue to not be taken seriously while warning the public about the dangers the winter season will bring. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, President Joe Biden wins the election where the U.S. saw the highest voter turnout in years proving the success of all the voters who stood outside for hours waiting to cast their votes and all the people who elected to mail in their ballots. Even though traveling and large gatherings were not recommended during the holiday season, infection rates still surged continuing the spread of the virus.

While it seemed like the nation was overcome with political unrest and the media was obsessed with nothing but negativity, it was important to take a break from the news and engage with content that would improve your mental health. The next choices that were made were ones of pure comfort where I got to watch old and new seasons of shows I loved and knew I would enjoy. Watching series like Grey's Anatomy, The Ozarks, 13 Reasons Why, and Queer Eye was a form of self-care that proved vital in a time where you were surrounded by chaos. Re-watching familiar shows felt like visiting an old friend or going home for the first time in a while, something that many of us had not gotten to do all year and yet still felt just as needed now more than ever. When finding something new to watch just felt like another dispiriting task to achieve, familiar content was easy and comfortable to view. Consumers watched 57 billion minutes of The Office and 39 billion minutes of Grey's Anatomy, ranking the top two acquired series streamed during the pandemic (Tops of 2020, 2021). Many audiences participated in viewing behaviors of familiarity and repetitiveness to help adjust to a new world.

### **British Series**

Usually, the end of the year signifies a time of celebration, rest, gratefulness, and reflection but of course, the end of 2020 felt different. There was hope when the new vaccines

began to distribute nationwide at the beginning of December alongside a new vaccination campaign. Sadly, the new year did not get off to a new start because the consequences of holiday travel began to creep up as records were breaking of the highest amounts of cases in a single day. Although some people could not see how things could get worse alas, they were wrong, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a riot at the U.S. capitol occurred. The tragedy of this event left many people seriously injured, traumatized, and dead releasing any hope the public had for the new year. With a new president in the office, Biden orders a mask mandate, and the realization of another crazy, complicated, and unstable year starts to take its toll on society.

The end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 caused discomfort and pain for many who once again turned to entertainment for escape and distraction. During this time my usual choices of holiday films like Christmas movies filled with family, love, and cherished moments did not feel right to watch. I chose to watch shows I knew I would like for their historical accuracy, morality, and wholesomeness that engage the audience with something different besides money, sex, and drugs that commonly saturates the media and popular television shows. The next viewing choices I made were *The Crown* and *Call the Midwife* both drama series that tell the stories of very important historical events that happened in the United Kingdom. The final viewing choices I made during the pandemic in 2020 were *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*, both period pieces depicting themes of romance, scandal, family, and class. These shows allowed the audience to time travel to a different time to distract them from their current worries, giving them the ultimate form of entertainment. Series such as these are oftentimes not as popular during regular seasons but during the pandemic, many people flocked to watch *Bridgerton* as it was one of the highest streamed shows on Netflix in 2020.

## Discussion

The pandemic changed the medium in which we access television shows, therefore, changing our senses and influencing our viewing habits. The year 2020 forced networks to pause production, leaving them unable to push new content out regularly, giving control back to the audience on decision making. Viewers became responsible for what to watch next, managing what became a trending show, giving old shows a chance to rise in popularity again. Events in the pandemic strongly influenced television viewing tastes. Lockdown, isolation, and quarantine brought new needs for viewing that were decided by individuals instead of media companies. Without networks swaying viewers to participate in appointment viewing, audience behavior transformed into unique independence. The strain of the pandemic caused viewers to look for shows that were fully engaging and captivating where they could be distracted, stimulated, and uplifted.

The pandemic gave us all a chance to hit reset on our viewing habits, reshaping consumer trends and media consumption. With the pandemic continuing into its second year, consumer expectations continue to change, and previous viewing habits are no longer relevant. Future research needs to be done to understand what content is acceptable to view in a society altered by the pandemic, isolation, and quarantine. The purpose of this paper was to analyze my specific viewing habits through an ethnographical study of why certain shows were watched during the pandemic. Further research should be conducted to learn how streaming services can evolve their digital experiences to better fit the needs of their audiences. Without having to keep up with new shows this pandemic gave me the chance to form my own viewing ideas.

In a time where society is overwhelmed by digital content, the pandemic was able to give viewers a chance to tap into their social identity and learn what they enjoy as an individual



and not what is just being targeted at them. Studying this change in viewing habits can help reveal who audiences are today, how they have been shaped, and where they're headed. It's so important to understand how the medium controls the message so we can learn how views are being altered. With this information, we can learn what audiences need and get out of television shows and how to access the appropriate content accordingly. The pandemic evolved television shows and original series into a form of companionship, self-care, and a coping mechanism during hard times. When the audience can recognize what they not only want to see but what they need to see then viewers can call for a new medium where they choose the message. The year 2020 was overshadowed with darkness but shed light on new viewing habits and a call for a new message in the medium.

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