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Binge On: The Phenomenon of Binge Watching

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BINGE ON: THE PHENOMENON OF BINGE WATCHING

ABSTRACT: This paper looks the phenomenon of binge watching. First, the technological advances that made binge watching possible are discussed. Next, the psychological benefits of watching television are briefly summarized. Finally, the element of shows that were considered the most “binge worthy” are investigated. By looking at what they five most recommend shows to binge watch (*Orange is the New Black*, *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Orphan Black*) had in common, there is now a better understanding of what makes certain television shows get binge watched. The appeal of these shows plots, characters, and popularity all play a role in motivating viewers to binge watch them.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new way to spend ones weekend, binge watching. This habit, which was not even around just five years ago has now become a common way for many people to spend their time. By definition, to binge watch a show is to watch more than two hours of content in one sitting (Jenner 2014). However, there are a number of people who find this number to be low. There are people who brag about watching an entire series in a week, finishing a season in a day. Calling the behavior a binge brings up an interesting psychological connotation. Previously, a binge was considered something unfavorable. Binge eating and binge drinking habits are dangerous ones that many people try to break. Like other binging behavior, binge watching has negative effects. People who spend the entire night or weekend watching a show are usually tired when they return to work or school. They also may have put off completing important work. There is also a feeling of exhaustion that comes from spending many hours of staring at a computer or television screen. Despite these consequences, people often brag about their binge watching habits. In today’s culture it is almost a celebrated habit. (Giuffre 2013) This intriguing new behavior is highly talked about and yields many questions. How has the habit of binge watching come about? What would motivate a person to

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spend an entire weekend in front of their computer, watching complete seasons of television shows? What kind of show could be so intriguing that a viewer can simply not stop watching? This paper investigates all of these questions and attempts to provide an explanation for the binge watching phenomenon.

Before one can look at the factors that would make a person become engaged in binge watching, one must look at the environment that supports the behavior. Binge watching would have never been possible had technology not evolved. The limited ways in which people were able to watch television in the past made watching multiple episodes of a show in a day nearly impossible. In fact, in the early years of television it actually was impossible for a person to watch more than one episode in a week. In 1939, after the World's Fair, the first television sets went on sale. However, it took until 1948 for just one tenth of American households to own a television set. At this time, only 42 hours of programming aired every week and these had very low sound and picture quality. Clearly, it would not have been even remotely possible for anyone living in the forties or fifties to engage in any activity that resembled binge watching. There were a very limited number of television shows on the air at this time, and programs were only broadcast at their scheduled times. If a person were to miss a scheduled broadcast, then they would have no chance of viewing it again. Binge watching was nearly impossible at this time since very few people even owned a television set and it was impossible for a person to view a program outside of its scheduled airing time (Hartwig 2015)

By the start of the 1960s, television sets had become a much more common fixture in American households. There were also a greater number of television shows on the air that could be viewed on the three major networks. Still in the early 1960's it would not be possible to view a program outside of its scheduled broadcast time. However in 1965, SONY released an early

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version of the VCR called the CV-2000. This was very expensive when it was first released.

However, the price went down over time. Now, viewers who were not able to watch a television show as it aired were able to record it and watch it at a later time. Video recording did not really become mainstream until 1970 however, and at that time only ninety minutes of footage could fit on one tape. As time went on a VCRs could hold more memory, it became possible for someone to have several episodes of a television show recorded so that they could watch them all in one sitting. (Hartwig 2015) The VCR system made television viewing easier however, there were still many problems with it. Since they had a limited capacity, it would not have been possible for a person to have an entire season on one tape. If a person wanted to have an entire season or series on tape, then they would have to make sure that they recorded every episode as it aired and owned many tapes. In order to record a television program, a person would have to make sure that they accurately set up their VCR. People would often find that they did not record the shows that they wanted because they set up the recording for the wrong channel or the wrong time. There were also cases in which a program would be set to record at the right time, but because of a delay in its airing would get cut off at the end. It was not possible for someone to simply say that they wanted a certain show to record and have their VCR know exactly what time and on what channel the show was on. People who watched recordings of television shows also still had to view commercials. However, they did have the ability to fast forward through the commercials and watch the show in less than an hour. While the invention of the VCR did make television viewing easier, it still did not set up the right environment for binge watching to take place. An inaccurately set up recording meant that one would have missed an episode of their show, disrupting the flow of the series. The fact that there were still commercials on the recording, despite the fact that one could fast forward through them, also lead to the disruption of the flow

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of a show. The limited capacity of a videotape also meant that one could not have more than three episodes of a show on one device. It also would have taken a lot of time, effort, and empty recording tapes to record an entire series or season. With only a VCR available, it would have been impossible for a person to be able to watch an entire season of a television show without having the flow disrupted. This meant that it would not have been very easy for a person to engage in binge watching behavior.

Throughout the later decades of the twentieth century, the popularity and quality of television rapidly expanded. Television sets were becoming much cheaper and therefore many more households owned one. In 1972, the Home Box Office, or HBO, was launched. This was to first network that people had to pay to view and this led to the expansion of paid cable services. These cable networks had fewer restrictions on what kind of content they could air, so they were able to show more quality programs with darker content than was allowed on network television. By 1989, 53 million households were subscribed to cable and could view 79 different channels. (Hartwig 2015) Clearly, by the start of the nineties television viewing had become extremely diverse and popular. Over the next twenty years, the popularity of television and technological growth really began to set the stage for the creation of the devices that would make binge watching possible.

In 1999, TiVo was released which prompted the release of DVR a few years later. These recording devices were similar to VCR in the sense that they let users record television programs that they were coming to miss. (Hartwig 2015) However, these devices were much more convenient than VCRs. Users could now set up recordings based on the show that they wanted to watch, instead of setting it up by having to select the correct time and channel. This meant that there was less room for error and viewers were less likely to miss their favorite shows. TiVo and

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DVR were also more convenient since two shows could be recorded at time, something that was not possible with VCR recordings. They also could store more data. This meant that more episodes of a certain series could be stored and therefore viewers could watch more episodes in a sitting. There were still flaws with these devices since they still had a limited capacity and users still would have to fast forward through commercials. Regardless, TiVo and DVR still could allow viewers to potentially watch more than one episode of a show at a time, leading to behavior that could somewhat resemble a binge watch.

At the beginning of the 2000s, On Demand services also became available. This meant that certain television shows could be viewed at a later date even if they had not been recorded. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, television shows also were able to be watched online through the websites of the networks that aired them. This allowed for a greater number of television episodes to be stored than ever before. Both online and On Demand options would have the past few recent episodes available to watch. (Hartwig 2015) This would allow someone to get into a show that was gaining popularity a few weeks after it began airing. A person could now catch up with the past few episodes of a show that they were behind on in one sitting. This certainly helped set the stage for binge watching, especially with the fact that shows could now be watched on multiple devices. However, viewers who watched television shows online or On Demand still had to watch some commercials and had to deal with only being able to view a limited number of episodes at a time. Binge watching was also still not possible on these devices since early on they only had a few episodes and not entire seasons.

While On Demand and online shows were gaining popularity, DVDs were taking over video sales. DVDs not only had better video quality, but also were able to hold more information on a disc than what could be held on a video tape. This would eventually lead networks to begin

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selling an entire season of their shows in a DVD set. Fans of shows could now purchase a season, or even a complete series on DVD a few weeks after the show finished airing. Watching a show on DVD meant that viewers did not have to watch any commercials and could watch as many as five episodes at a time without ever standing up. A person could binge watch an entire season of a show in a day with only putting energy into changing out the disc every few episodes. This certainly set up a good binge watching environment. The only set back was the fact that a single television show season cost at least \$20. (Hartwig 2015) This often would discourage nonfans of a show from buying, since they would not want to spend money on something that they were not sure they would like. Once viewers had a way to watch almost any show that they wanted for a very low price, the binge watching phenomenon was truly able to take off.

Throughout the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, television technology slowly set up an environment that would allow people to watch several hours of a television show at a time. The true technological breakthrough that made binge watching possible was the creation of Netflix. Without the company, which was founded in 1997, it is safe to say that it is highly unlikely that people would ever begin binge watching shows. In 1999, Netflix was allowing subscribers to access unlimited DVD rentals for a small monthly fee. Once television shows began being put on DVDs, this solved the problems of nonfans of popular shows not wanting to pay too much for something that they were not sure if they would enjoy. If they did not like a show they rented, they could simply return it and get something else. This was simpler than other rental services that were around at the time since it did not involve having to go out to a video rental store. The television show rental process got even easier in 2007, when Netflix began online streaming. This meant that a person would no longer have to wait for the

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DVD that they wanted to be mailed to them, they could simply select what they wanted to watch on the computer and see it instantly. This was an improvement on the other online show watching services since it meant no commercials and therefore the flow of the show was not interrupted. In addition to this, Netflix would automatically go to the next episode without the viewer ever having to lift a finger. Entire seasons and series of numerous television shows were available to anyone who paid the monthly subscription fee. Over the next few years, Netflix became available on more online devices, making it possible to watch television almost anywhere. Binge watching was truly able to come into play in 2013, when Netflix began streaming their own shows such as *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*. These shows had their entire season released in a day, which highly encouraged viewers to watch it all in one sitting. The popularity of Netflix caused other companies such as Amazon Prime and HBO Go to also promote the online streaming of television shows. (Hartwig 2015) Thanks to the wide number of streaming sites allowing users to watch whatever available shows they wanted for a limited fee, playing shows with an uninterrupted flow, and releasing entire seasons at a time; the behavior of binge watching finally had the environment it needed to flourish and become mainstream. Now, the people who have a need to watch several episodes of a television show at a time can watch with complete freedom.

People today now live in an environment that supports the habit of binge watching. However, not everyone binge watches shows. Obviously, those who do not have access to Netflix and other streaming sites do not engage in the behavior. Still, there are people who do have Netflix accounts who do not watch multiple episodes of a show at a time. In order to more fully understand binge watching habits, it is important to try to find out under what

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circumstances a person would find watching several hours of a television show in a day enjoyable.

Research had found that watching television shows can allow a person to build up what is known as a parasocial relationship. Parasocial relationships are often found in the entertainment industry. These are one sided relationships between a person and a celebrity or a fictional character. People form these relationships because they hold very little risk. Since they are one sided, it is not possible to be rejected in a parasocial relationship. Obviously, people do not like dealing with feelings of rejection and would be very content in a relationship that does not hold the possibility of rejection. A television show, and the characters in them, are not going to refused to be watched. The only real disappointment that can come from forming a relationship with a show would come when the show is cancelled or when the show is in between season or episodes. (Derrick, Gabriel, Hugenberg 2009) Binge watching can help ward off the negative feelings associated with the gaps between episodes. It allows the viewer to become fully immersed in their relationship with the show. If a person is watching several episodes a day, they can enjoy the good feelings that come from their parasocial relationship for an extended period of time. This can be seen as an improvement on only being able to watch an hour of a show a week. They can become fully immersed in the show and while binge watching and will have to spend very little time apart from it. It would seem that continuous viewing of a television show would be one of the best ways to form a strong parasocial relationship, even if it means it is only around for a short period of time.

Research has also shown that watching television can help ward off feelings of loneliness. This is due in part because of the parasocial relationship that one forms with television shows and their characters. Obviously, having a one-sided relationship means never

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having to deal with the lonely feelings that come with rejection. Spending time watching television also means that people do not have to deal with the negative feelings that come with loneliness. If a person does not have anyone to actually spend time with, they can use television as a distraction. Being able to view ones favorite television program allows them to take part in an enjoyable activity instead of thinking about their negative feelings. Engaging in an activity that one enjoys, such as viewing a favorite show, can serve as a buffer against feelings of loneliness and rejection. (Derick, Gabriel, Hugenberg 2009) Binge watching can serve as an even better distraction from negative feelings since it can take up a lot of time. If a person is having a bad weekend, they can distract themselves by continuously watching a television series. People also typically do not binge watch a television show that they do not enjoy. Obviously, one would not continue watching a show that do not find entertaining. This further illustrates the fact that binge watching is a good way to distract from negative feelings since television is a better emotional buffer when one is watching a show that they consider to be one of their favorites. Furthermore, binge watching is an excellent way to combat loneliness since one can engage in the behavior anytime that they want because they can watch more than one episode a week and have unlimited access to shows thank to streaming sites. Binge watching fully lets a person buffer out their negative feelings since the behavior can take up an entire lonely time period.

Television shows do not only provide a one sided relationship, they can also help stimulate real life relationships by giving people topics to discuss. Many popular shows end up getting binge watched. This occurs because binge watching is an easy way for a person to catch up on a widely discussed show. If a person hears everyone talking about a certain show and desires to become part of the discussion, they will want to catch up to the current episodes as quickly as possible. The quicker a person can catch up with a show, the quicker they can join

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conversations about it and also avoid spoilers. There certainly is a social aspect to the activity of binge watching.

Watching television can help people form both parasocial and real life relationships. By providing a half hour to an hour worth of entertainment, people are able to “escape” from the real world and enjoy fictionalized content. Thanks to the latest technologies that allow binge watching to occur, people are able to be entertained by a show for more than just an hour a week. They are also able to catch up with shows quickly and therefore take part in the social aspects of television viewing. However, it is important to note that not all shows get binged watched. Part of this may be due to the fact that they are not available on any streaming platform. In order to fully understand the behavior of binge watching, the most popular shows to binge watch must be looked into. The shows that get binged watched are the key to knowing why people are taking part in the phenomenon known as binge watching.

There are hundreds of television shows that are able to be streamed online. While it is essential for a show to be able to be streamed in order for it to be binge watched, not every streaming show gets binged on. Furthermore, some shows get binge watched much more frequently than others. It seems that there are certain elements that a show must have in order to make it “binge worthy”. In order to gain a deeper understand of binge watching, five of the most recommended shows to binge watch were studied. A wide variety of websites compiled lists of television shows that were considered the most “binge worthy”. In total, eighteen different websites’ lists were looked at. These websites ranged from CNN to Entertainment Weekly to BuzzFeed. The lists were typically compiled by the websites staff writers however, a few were made up of the common suggestions of readers. Every show mentioned was tallied, and the five shows that came the most frequently were watched. Netflix’s own *Orange in the New Black*

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(2013-) and *House of Cards* (2013-) were mentioned the most, each appearing on eleven different lists. They were followed by *Game of Thrones* (2011-) which was mentioned nine times. *Game of Thrones* was closely followed by *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) which appeared eight times. The list was finalized with *Orphan Black* (2013-) which was recommended by seven different websites. These shows are all unique serialized dramas with entertaining plotline that can easily pull the viewer in. They all have similar aspects to their plotlines, characters, and popularity which help make them binge worthy. Before they can be deeply discussed, a brief overview of each show's plot should be considered.

Orange is the New Black was one of Netflix's first shows. It was originally only available to be viewed by Netflix subscribers on the Netflix website. It is now possible for people to buy the seasons on DVD or rent them On Demand however, this is more expensive than a Netflix subscription and cannot be done until a few months after the season's release. *Orange is the New Black* certainly lends itself to being binge watched since every episode of the new seasons are released on the same day. The show follows the story of Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling), a women who is sentenced to thirteen months in prison after confessing to taking part in a drug trafficking incident several years before. Her crime was committed while she was in a relationship with a women named Alex Vause (Laura Prepon), who was heavily involved in the drug trafficking ring. While imprisoned at Litchfield Penitentiary, Piper discovers that Alex is also serving time there, along with a wide variety of fascinating characters. The diverse group of female prisoners and their backstories is one of the most intriguing parts of the show. As the series progresses, viewers are able to gain more insight into the character's lives, both past and present.

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House of Cards is another Netflix show that is commonly binge watched. Like *Orange is the New Black*, every episode of the new season is released on the same day and they are only available to Netflix subscribers at first. *House of Cards* is the story of the Democrat House Majority Whip Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey). Underwood, along with his wife Claire (Robin Wright), is very power hungry and disappointed when he is passed over for Secretary of State. Together, the couple manipulates their way into the White House though many deplorable acts. It seems as though the characters will stop at nothing to get their way and become as politically powerful as possible. The series shows the Underwoods work their way into the White House and then follows them as they attempt to maintain their power. Throughout the series, there is constantly a question of whether or not the truth Underwoods deceitful acts will come up and ruin them. *House of Cards* is a truly fascinating political drama.

The most popular non-Netflix show to be recommended was the fantasy series *Game of Thrones*. The very popular show is aired weekly on HBO when it is in season. Viewers can catch up on every past episode online through the HBO Go website, which is free for any HBO subscriber to use. *Game of Thrones* has a very complicated plotline with multiple arcs. The show revolves around the battle for the right to sit on the Iron Throne and be the ruler of the land of Westeros. Several different noble families from Westeros, and the sister of the original overthrown king all want the right to rule the land. While this is occurring, there is a constant threat that the dangers that lie beyond the protective Wall will wreak havoc on Westeros. There are many dramatic battles and death scenes that are able to draw in many viewers every week.

Breaking Bad is also a very popular series to binge watch. The show originally aired weekly on AMC and the entire series is now available on Netflix. It was widely talked about while it was on the air and is still considered to be an excellent series by many, even though it

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ended in 2013. The plot revolves around a high school chemistry teacher named Walter White (Bryan Cranston) who recently found out he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Wanting to assure that his family still has money after he passes away, White becomes involved in making meth. Along with one of his former students, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), White becomes the leader of a meth empire. Throughout the series, he tries to keep his business a secret while avoiding being discovered by the law, or having himself or his family killed by competing dealers. The series is widely praised and often considered to be one of the best television series of all time.

The final show that was investigated was BBC's *Orphan Black*. This science fiction series airs weekly on BBC and is available to BBC America subscribers online in the United States and can be viewed on Netflix in the United Kingdom. The show follows the troubled orphan Sarah Manning (Tatiana Maslany) after she sees a woman who looks exactly like her kill herself. Desperate to improve her circumstances, Sarah steals the woman's identity. She later finds out that she and the deceased women were two of many clones. The living clones must come together to fight off groups that are conspiring against them in hopes that they can go back to living normal lives. The series is enjoyed by fans and critics alike and known for the fact that Maslany plays every one of the widely diverse clone characters.

These binge worthy shows all have strong plotlines that are easily able to draw viewers in. They have strong conflicts, lots of suspense, and many plot twists. Without these things, a television show would be rather boring and therefore would not be something that a person would want to spend hours at a time watching. The exciting elements of these shows' plots quickly grab the viewer's interests. Since the plots of these shows are kept interesting, viewers

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will not want to stop watching and will be likely to engage in a binge so that they can quickly find out what will happen next.

All of these binge watched shows are considered to be high quality. This is important because it is unlikely that a person would want to spend hours at a time watching a show that was lacking in quality. One of the things that make these shows so good and intriguing is the fact that they have interesting conflicts. According to Gregory Desilet “Great drama needs great conflict. Great conflict occurs when forces pull in opposite direction” (Desilet 2014). All of these shows can easily be considered great dramas according to this because they have great conflicts. The shows do not have clear cut answers to which characters are good and which are bad. Also, some of the shows have such deep conflict that it is difficult for viewers to know which characters they want to see succeed. The different sides to conflicts and the motivations of the characters on the binge worthy shows can pull viewers opinions of which side to root for in different directions, making for good conflict. These great conflicts make the shows intriguing enough to keep people interested and watching. Viewers want to see how the conflict will play out since it is not clear what side will win. This means that people are more inclined to engage in binge watching behaviors since the faster they watch, the faster they find out how the conflicts will play out.

While *Orange is the New Black* does not particularly focus on a major conflict, viewers do have conflicted feelings about which characters they want to see do well for themselves. The characters are often at odds against each other. Viewers can feel conflicted over whose side they are on. Because of the diversity and excellent backstories of the cast, it is hard to decide if certain characters are truly bad people or if they are simply misunderstood. When two characters are at odds with each other, it can be hard for the audience to decide whose side they are on. The fact

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that there is no one side to easily hate means that the conflicts that arise in *Orange is the New Black* are interesting and good. Viewers will continue to watch so that they can see which characters will come out on top.

House of Cards also brings up good and intriguing conflicts. Since Frank and Claire Underwood are the lead characters, they are the characters that the viewers know the best and would naturally want to see succeed. Viewers may root for them because they see how badly the Underwoods want power and the White House. However, it is very easy to desire to see the Underwoods downfall because of how manipulative and cruel they are. There are actually several instances of Frank Underwood killing someone who is in his way of getting to the White House. This obviously would be a tremendous turn off for viewers wanting him to succeed in life. Since it is not clear if the viewer should want to see the Underwoods become more politically powerful, the central conflict remains intriguing enough to make people not want to stop watching.

The central conflict of *Game of Thrones* is also very good and intriguing. There are so many characters who want the throne for different reasons that it is hard for viewer to decide who they want to see on the throne. It is impossible to predict how the Battle for the Iron Throne will end because of all the characters involved. Since there is so much going on in the main conflict, viewers are very invested and want to keep watching to see how it all comes out. In almost every episode, the power rankings shift so people will keep on watching the show for hours at a time to try to see who is currently winning.

Breaking Bad is probably the best example of the good conflict that is described. Viewer's opinions of the main character, Walter White, are constantly being pulled in different directions. On one hand, viewers feel sympathy for White since he is just wants to make sure that

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his family will have money after he passes away. He does truly care for both his family and his partner Jesse. Viewers are also sympathetic to the fact that he is dying of cancer. However, Walt is making a very dangerous drug. He also kills or allows for the deaths of people who get in his way. Many of the things that he does are truly despicable. It is not clear to the viewers at all how they want to see Walter White's conflicts turn out, so they keep watching in order to find out what will happen.

It is easier for viewers of *Orphan Black* than viewers of other shows on this list to know which side of the central conflict they are on. It is obvious to viewers that they should want to see Sarah and the other clones defeat the people who are trying to capture or kill them. However, it is difficult for the viewer to know exactly who to trust. The side characters on the show all have unclear motives and it is difficult to tell who will help the clone sisters and who wants to harm them. There are always new characters being introduced, so viewers are excited to continue watching so they can find out in what direction the conflict will go and if new characters will be good or evil.

Another thing that all these shows had in common was the fact that they all have many suspenseful episodes. This suspense can either come from the scenes that occur within an episode or the episode ending in a cliffhanger. Having several cliffhangers is key more making a show binge worthy. Binging a television show allows viewers to immediately go to the next episode. This means that viewers do not have to wait a week to see how the cliffhanger is resolved, they simply have to click on the next episode. This means that the suspense can be relieved quicker. Writers typically want their audiences to stay in suspense for as long as possible so they do not get bored. This is the reason behind keeping suspenseful plotlines going for several episodes or for making season finales end on cliffhangers. Binge watching enables

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viewers to shorten the time spent in suspense since they can get through the plot quicker or because they do not have to wait for new episodes of the show to return. It is much easier to be able to step away from a show after the suspenseful elements have been resolved. Therefore, it makes sense for viewers to binge through suspenseful episodes since it is easier to stop when the show has reached a calmer point. (Hiltunen 2002) The suspense that cliffhangers and certain scenes within episodes build keep the audience interested since it can easily be enjoyed.

Suspense is enjoyed in media because there is little risk associated with it. The suspenseful feelings that come with waiting for something personal, such as a test result, are often negative feelings since there is real risk involved. The outcome of real life suspense can be life altering and have a significant negative impact on a person's life. Suspense that is felt through media such as television is not negative since it carries little real life risk. The only real impact that a person could feel as a result of television show suspense is sadness if the outcome is a character death. (Smuts 2008) Since suspense in television shows do not carry any risk, it can actually be enjoyed. This enjoyment of suspense, and the fact that it is more difficult to stop a show when it is suspenseful is what makes these shows more binge worthy than others.

Orange is the New Black contained many cliffhangers and suspenseful moments. The first season ended with the lead character Piper beating up a prison rival. Viewers did not know what would happen to Piper because of this attack or if the woman she beat up would survive. There was also suspense when Alex was released from jail but was fearing that the leader of the drug ring who she betrayed in court would send someone to kill her. Viewers are also left in suspense wondering if fan favorite Sophie (Laverne Cox) will continue to be forced to stay in solitary confinement because she is being targeted for being transgender. The current intense situation between the abusive guards and the prisoners has also left many of the show's fans

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wondering what is going to happen next. This intensity keeps viewers interested and makes them want to quickly get through episodes so they can find out what is going to happen next.

Viewers of *House of Cards* also are kept interested through many suspenseful plotlines. In the earlier seasons, fans wanted to see if the things that Frank Underwood does will actually get him into the White House. They are also curious to find out if the murders and other crimes that Frank has committed will ever catch up to him. In the most recent season, he is in a coma and viewers feel the need to keep watching to find out if and when he will wake up. This season ended with the cliffhanger of not knowing if the Underwoods will be reelected. The need to see how the Underwoods political careers will play out keep people watching and encourages them to keep clicking on the next episodes so they can see what happens at a faster pace.

Game of Thrones is also considered to be a very suspenseful show. Over the years, it has gained a reputation for killing off characters, even if they play major roles in the series. This keeps viewers in suspense because they never know if their favorite character is going to be killed off. If a well-liked character is in a remotely dangerous situation, fans of the show will be drawn to watch to find out if they survive. Suspense in *Game of Thrones* also comes from the epic battles scenes that occur throughout the series. Again, fans are drawn to the show to find out who will win the battle and to find out who will survive. These suspenseful battles have been fought over both the Iron Throne and between the Night's Watch, who are in charge of keeping Westeros safe, and the threatening Night Walkers. The enjoyment that can come from suspense draws viewers into *Game of Thrones*. They will likely start binge watching the show so they do not have to spend too much time in suspense when waiting to see which characters will live and who will be victorious in battle.

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There were many suspenseful scenes and cliffhangers found in *Breaking Bad*. Several times throughout the series, fans have questioned whether or not Walter White and Jesse will make it out of their current situation. Fans questioned if the duo would be able to get out of their toxic relationship working for the ruthless distributor Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito). Due to their heavy involvement in the dangerous world of meth, there was almost always suspense around the fact that Walt and Jesse could be killed by a competitor. Fans were also kept in suspense wondering if Walt's family will find out what he is up to, especially since his brother-in-law is a DEA agent specializing in meth distribution. Viewers of the show also were kept interested because the lives of Walt's family members were also frequently threatened. Throughout the series, episodes ended in cliffhangers that usually involved a character's life being at risk. Fans are drawn to the show because of all the suspense that comes from the different dangerous situations that the lead characters are in. People will want to binge watch the show so they can quickly find out what happens and so that they do not have to wait to see if the characters whose lives that are frequently threatened in cliffhangers are safe.

Orphan Black also has many suspenseful moments. During several of the show's episodes, two or more of the clones are in the same place at the same time. There is a great amount of suspense in these scenes as the clones try to avoid being seen together by people who do not know about them. Like the other binge worthy shows looked at, there are frequently cliffhanger episodes that involve the lives of the characters being threatened. Viewers often find that clones are at serious risk of being defeated by one of the many groups that are trying to disrupt their lives. There are many times throughout the series where it looks like Sarah or one of her "sisters" are in an impossible situation. Fans of the series watch closely to see if and how the

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sisters will defeat the latest threat to their lives. The need to not be kept in suspense over whether or not the characters will defeat threats motivates viewers to binge watch *Orphan Black*.

In order for a show to be considered binge worthy it needs to have a few plot twists throughout the series. Plot twists have been an important part of storytelling for centuries. In fact, Aristotle first discussed what makes plot twists interesting. According to Aristotle, a good story needs to have “recognition, reversal, and suffering”. The reversal element is the part of the plot that involves the situation that the main character is used to being dramatically changed. These twists often bring suffering to the main character and means that a potential catastrophe is on the horizon. The audience will want to see the character overcome their suffering and avoid disaster. These twists also often involve some sort of wrong that was done to the main protagonist and viewers will want to see that the wrongs are made right again. (Hiltunen 2002) Whenever a new plot twist is introduced to a series, a new interesting element has been added. Audiences are kept intrigued because they want to see that the characters are able to bring their situation back to normal and fix the injustices that they face. All of the binge worthy shows have plot twists, which makes viewers want to speedily watch episodes to see how the twist will be resolved. The changes in plot also allow for the show to stay interesting and makes audiences want to keep watching.

There have been several plot twists in *Orange is the New Black*. Viewers first began watching the show to see how the main character Piper would deal with the tremendous change in her life that occurred when she went to prison. When a new character backstory is told, it changes the way the audience sees a character. Often, the new backstories make viewers want to see the character overcome the obstacles that they have faced because of what has happened to them in the past and what is happening to them while they are in jail. Major plot twists such as

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when Pennsatucky (Taryn Manning) was raped by a guard, when Dayanara (Dascha Polanco) found out she was pregnant, and the recent death of Poussey (Samira Wiley) shocked fans and made them want to see the characters find a way to improve their bad situation. The entrance of new prisoners and guards also dramatically changed prison dynamics. By constantly changing the plotlines of the characters in the show, *Orange is the New Black* keeps viewers interested and make them want to rapidly watch episodes in the hope that they can see the characters improve their current situation.

House of Cards also involves many plot twists. Fans were shocked by the deaths of major characters such as Pete Russo (Corey Stoll) and Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) at the hands of Frank Underwood. After deaths such as these, viewers were eager to go on to the next episode so that they could find out how the deaths would affect the series and if anyone would ever link Underwood to the crime. In the most recent season, viewers were shocked when Frank was shot and put into a comas. Again, episodes were quickly watched to find out if he would recover. Whenever there is a twist in the political climate on *House of Cards*, the audience wants to rapidly watch to learn how it will affect the Underwoods' lives. The shocking twists that occur throughout the show makes fans want to binge watch the series so they can see what will happen to Frank and Claire Underwood next.

Plot twists occur frequently on *Game of Thrones*. There any many shocking changes, mostly character deaths, which dramatically change the course of the series. The first major twist occurred at the end of the first season when the main character, Ned Stark (Sean Bean), is executed by the new young king Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson). This changed the course of the plot not only because a major character was killed but because the dynamics of the Stark family were dramatically altered. Ned's family wanted revenge for his death and many fans were

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further drawn into the series to see if they would be successful in their revenge. Throughout the series, many tragic things have happened to the Stark family, and the audience desperately wants to see them improve their circumstances. *Game of Thrones* is notorious for killing off major characters and every time this happens the plot is changed in a major way and viewers feel the need to keep watching so they can find out what affect the latest death will have on the show. Viewers may also want to see that these deaths are avenged. All of the major deaths and changes that happen throughout the series make it clear why this show frequently gets binge watched.

Breaking Bad also saw many twists in its plot. The initial reversal in the series is obvious, Walter White's normal life as a high school chemistry teacher is quickly changed when he learns that he has terminal cancer. His decision to make extra money for his family by making meth causes him to struggle with his morals and threats to his life and the lives of those he cares about. Viewers who feel sympathy to Walt want to see that he is able to keep his family and himself safe. Like the other binge worthy shows, character deaths often change the way that certain plot lines are progressing. Antagonists in this show are frequently killed, which often means that new ones will soon arrive. The shocking death of Jesse's girlfriend, Jane (Krysten Ritter), forever changes the dynamic between Walt and Jesse since Walt watched her die and did nothing to prevent it. Many of the characters who are killed die in brutal ways and viewers are curious to observe how someone will be killed off next. Viewers of *Breaking Bad* will want to binge on the series in order to quickly see how the latest deaths will affect the show, and to see if the Whites will remain safe.

Like the other shows mentioned, *Orphan Black* also has plot twists. Sarah's normal life is forever changed when she learns that she is a clone. The audience wants to see that Sarah and her sisters are able to avoid catastrophe and go back to living their normal lives. Throughout the

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series, new clones are introduced which frequently changes the course of the plot. New villains also cause plotline to change direction. Like the other shows mentioned, character deaths often serve as a plot twist. These deaths frequently mean that an old threat is taken out, which paves the way for a new threat to form. This usually occurs because a new group begins to lead the charge in anti-clone actions. However, some deaths bring up more personal threats. After clone Alison Hendrix's husband Donnie (Kristian Brunn) accidentally kills the leader of evil Neoution movement, the couple must make sure that they destroy the evidence so that they can avoid persecution. Whenever a new clone is introduced, or when a threat is gotten rid of, viewers want to be able to watch the next episode of the show quickly so they can find out what will happen next.

Obviously, it is important for these shows to not only have good plots, but to also have good and interesting characters. Audiences will not want to spend hours watching a show with characters that they cannot stand. The characters have to be likeable and interesting enough for viewers to care about what happens to them. When the characters are well written and able to develop over time, then viewers can easily form parasocial relationships with them. This will make the viewers deeply care about what will happen to the characters. In fact, these parasocial relationships can be so strong that fans can mourn the death of a character like they would mourn a real person. (DeGroot and Leith 2015) This ties back into the fact that fans feel the need to binge watch more when the plot frequently puts characters at risk or when plot twists involve dramatically changing a characters circumstances. Clearly, characters play an important role in making a television get considered binge worthy. Often times, this means that the main characters of the show must be morally good but not too perfect. They should also be somewhat consistent in their actions and be relatable to the viewers. (Hiltunen 2002)

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Because *Orange is the New Black* has one of the most diverse casts on television, many viewers are able to see things that they can relate to in at least one of the characters. The show features actors almost every race. These characters come from diverse backgrounds, some were very wealthy and others lived well below the poverty line; some come from living in cities and some lived in rural areas; some come from good families while others came from highly dysfunctional and sometimes abusive families. Of course, these characters are not perfect since they have all committed a crime that has landed them in prison. However, the well-written backstories that are given to the characters allow viewers to see the good in them. Since *Orange is the New Black* shows so many backgrounds that are not often shown on television shows, a wider number of people are able to find the characters relatable and therefore are more able to form a parasocial relationship with them. The excellent way in which these characters are written and portrayed allows for viewers to deeply care about what happens to them which makes them want to binge on the show so that they can quickly see how the characters' lives play out.

A number of the characters in *Game of Thrones* can also be relatable to viewers. The members of the Stark family simply want to be together again. The series features many characters who simply want vengeance for loved ones who have been killed or disgraced. Many people can relate to the need to do things for those that they love. There are also a number of characters who want power, which is a concept that some people are able to relate to. While there are many characters who are despised by fans, there is a large number of characters who many fans like and have formed parasocial relationships with. This again makes the audience deeply care about what happens to the characters. Since the show is well known for killing off major characters, fans will want to quickly watch the show to see if the characters they like will survive.

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Orphan Black also features good and relatable characters. The varied backgrounds and personalities of the clones allows for most viewers to find one which they can at least somewhat relate to. The fact that all of the clones want what is best for themselves and their families is also something that many people have in common. Sarah and her clone sisters are all morally good since they truly care about each other and their families. Still, they are not perfect people. Sarah has come from a troubled youth where she took part in illegal behavior and would not often see her daughter. Alison likes to drink too much and come be rash in her decision making at times. Cosima has sometimes made poor decisions. Despite their flaws, viewers can clearly see that the clones care for each other and this causes the viewers to want the best for them. Like with the other binge worthy shows, viewers will want to binge on *Orphan Black* so that they can find out what will happen to the characters that they have grown attached to.

The protagonists of *House of Cards* and *Breaking Bad* are unlike those from the other shows because it can be difficult to see the moral good in them. These characters have committed horrible acts that would make them be considered a villain on another show. These characters are often referred to as antiheroes. Researchers Shafer and Raney believe that the affective disposition theory helps explain why people find antiheroes appealing. It is believed that viewers emotionally react to main characters and want to see them succeed in their endeavors, even if they are immoral. This can occur because viewers form a positive view of a lead character before they start judging their actions. Antiheroes are also often considered to be criminal but redeemable. If a character has very bad morals but can still be considered sympathetic, viewers will still be able to enjoy watching their actions and seeing what happens to them. Since the antihero narrative had become more common in recent years, viewers are able to disengage from the protagonists questionable morals and focus on seeing where the plot goes.

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Being able to predict the outcomes of the antihero plot can give viewers satisfaction. This often means that the viewers want to see the antihero overcome the things that get in their way, even if it means that the antihero has to act immorally. Viewers can still enjoy a main character even if they are immoral and can ignore the immoral deeds if it means that a predicted outcome will occur. (2012) This can mean that audiences will want to binge on an antihero show so they can find out what happens to the main characters and so that they can see if they can get enjoyment out of knowing what the result of the characters' actions will be.

Frank Underwood of *House of Cards* can definitely be considered an antihero. He has done many immoral deeds, such as manipulation and murder, in order to get himself into the White House. However, some viewers may be able to feel sympathy for him because he came from a very poor background. One can easily be impressed by how hard he has worked to finally get the presidency. Viewers could have formed a positive view of him and his dedication before they really started judging him for his actions. Audiences can also enjoy watching to see how he manages to become president. Now that he is president, audiences continue to be curious about what he will do with his power and if he will be able to be reelected. People will want to binge on *House of Cards* so that they can see more of Frank Underwoods dedication to becoming powerful and so that they can see how his presidency will begin and end.

Breaking Bad's Walter White is one of the most notorious television antiheroes. He not only makes highly dangerous meth, but he has killed people who have gotten into his way. His actions have also resulted indirectly in the deaths of many people and has put his family at risk many times. However, many viewers were able to see Walt as sympathetic and redeemable. The only reason that he began making meth in the first place was to assure that his wife and children would have money after he died of his terminal lung cancer. Sympathy can be felt towards both

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Walt's love of his family and his suffering because of his disease. Like *House of Cards*, viewers can also enjoy seeing events play out. After the first few seasons, it is easy to tell that Walter and Jesse will dispose of one threat to their lives only to encounter another one soon after. Viewers are eager to find out how they will defeat the current threat that they are dealing with and to see what the next one will be. Walt's intelligence and creativity when it comes to disposing of those who threaten him and his family make viewers curious to find out what he will do next. This, along with wanting to find out what will happen to Walt and those that he cares about can easily make viewers want to binge on *Breaking Bad*.

These binge worthy shows have also all been widely discussed on social media. This shows that these series are very popular. The large amount of talk online and in person allows for a person who watches these shows to become more socially engaged. Being a fan of a popular show can allow a person to develop a shared identity with other fans. They are able to discuss the characters, plot, and theorize about what will happen next together. The internet has allowed for fanbases to become better connected. People around the world are now able to discuss the same show. (Jenner 2015) As previously mentioned, binge watching allows for a person to quickly catch up on a television series. All the top five most binge worthy shows, with the exception of *Breaking Bad*, are still currently on the air. Since they are still airing, people who binge on them are able to join in fan discussions quicker than someone who is not binge watching. Once a person is caught up on a show, they are then able to take part in show related discussions, both in person and online. Bingeing is very useful since it allows for a person to join in on the conversation sooner. As discussed earlier, all these shows have interesting conflicts. This allows for fans to develop theories about what is going to happen next. These theories are often thought provoking. Fans are also able to have emotional responses to the events that happen on the show.

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Being able to discuss thought out theories and emotional episodes with other lets viewers enjoy the series even more. (Oliver and Bartsch 2010) Clearly, being caught up with a show and therefore being able to talk about it with other fans has many advantages and encourages people to try to be caught up as quickly as possible.

Online and in person discusses of television shows can involve spoilers. Spoilers occur when a person reveals a critical plot point to another person who was not aware of the plot point. This can take away from the shock of a plot twist since the person now knows that it is coming. Since many people talk about the shows studied both in person and online, it can be very difficult to avoid spoilers. A person may want to binge watch a show because the quicker they catch up, the less likely that are to hear spoilers. One a person had finished binging a show, they will be able to watch it live with other viewers and therefore it would be impossible for them to have a plot spoiled for them. Spoilers can certainly motivate a person to binge watch a show. Johnson and Rosenbaum did research involving telling some participants about key plot points in a text before they read it. They found that those who did not have the text spoiled for them ended up enjoying it more. This research gives evidence for that fact that spoilers can decrease the enjoyment of something for some people. (2014) Again, this would encourage people to want to binge watch a show because it could help them avoid spoilers. However, other research has shown that spoilers can actually increase the enjoyment of a program. Knowing that a shocking plot twist is coming up can allow for viewers to process what is going to happen. This allows them to be less shocked and upset when an event such as a character's death occurs. As stated earlier, audiences can mourn character deaths like they would mourn a real person. Spoilers give them time to mentally prepare for this mourning. Since they give viewers insight to what is going to happen, it lets people analyze the plot more. Spoiled viewers can see how character's actions

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and other plotline lead up to a big event. This insight can lead to an increase in enjoyment of a show. (Ellithorpe and Brookes 2016) Whether or not spoilers increase or decrease the enjoyment of a show, the fact that the binge worthy shows are widely discussed and spoiled for non-viewers can definitely help influence a show binge.

Since *Orange is the New Black* and *House of Cards* are Netflix shows, every episode is released on the same day. This means that it is possible for a person to complete an entire season in a day and there are a number of viewers who do this. Social media allows for people to discuss the most recent episodes as soon as they watch them. This encourages people to binge watch these shows as quickly as possible. People who do not watch these shows fast enough run the risk of seeing spoilers online or hearing people talk about them. However, being able to see these spoilers may excite people about the new season. The great social media presence of this show can also encourage people to watch so that they can join in on the conversation. Both *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* are not only discussed when the new seasons come out. They are also widely discussed around awards season since they frequently receive nominations.

Game of Thrones is a highly popular show when it comes to social media. In fact, it is currently the most tweeted about show. ("Tops of 2015: TV and social media" 2015) Many people live tweet the show as episodes are airing. This high social media presence encourages people to start watching the show so that they can be part of the conversation. The quicker that this is done, the sooner they are able to discuss the show. People who want to avoid hearing spoilers will want to binge watch so that they can catch up on the show quicker and be able to avoid live tweeted spoilers. People who enjoy hearing the spoilers may begin watching, and watch quickly, so that that can get to the massively talked about events in the show. People who were spoiled about something such as the death of Ned Stark, will want to quickly watch the

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show in order to get to that part. Since they are spoiled, they can enjoy seeing that actions that lead up to his death. There are many huge moments in *Game of Thrones* that have been widely discussed on social media which means there are a lot of things that spoiled viewers can look forward to seeing. The heavy social media presence of *Game of Thrones* encourages people to binge watch it so that they are able to quickly join in on discussions related to the show. Spoilers also encourage the binging since people will either watch to have less of a chance of being spoiled or because they want to quickly get to spoiled events and see how they happened.

Since *Breaking Bad* ended a few years ago, it has less of a current social media presence than the other shows on the list. However, when it was airing there were a number of people who would, like with *Game of Thrones*, live tweet episodes. The series finale was a widely talked about event that drew in over ten million viewers. (TV by the numbers 2013) Many fans still talk about how much they enjoyed the series and still make reference to it. As recently as last month, Rolling Stone magazine named it the third greatest television series of all time. (Sheffield 2016) The fact that the show is still being discussed would definitely make people want to binge watch it. New viewers would want to try to catch up very quickly so that they can finally discuss the show with others. Since the show ended a few years ago, there is a very small chance for a person to encounter a new spoiler. However, back when the show was still on the air it was possible for a person to have seen something on social media or heard someone discussing it. Again, this could cause a person to enjoy the show more and make them want to quickly watch it so that they could get to the scene that they have heard being discussed.

Orphan Black is probably the least popular show on the list when it comes to viewership and social media presence. However, its small fanbase is very vocal. They discuss the show at length on websites such as Twitter and Tumblr. After lead actress Tatiana Maslany failed to get

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nominated for an Emmy award for the first two seasons of the show, the fans took to Twitter to complain about the snub. When she was nominated for her third season performance, the fans rejoiced. However, they once again had to express their anger on Twitter when she did not actually win the award. The fans were able to truly celebrate this year since she actually won the Emmy. (Acuna 2015) Since the show has a smaller fanbase, non-viewers are less likely to encounter spoilers for *Orphan Black* than for the other shows mentioned. Nonetheless, those who do happen to see the fanbase presence on social media may feel highly encouraged to begin binging on the show so that they can enter the fanbase and join in on the discussion.

Binge watching television shows has certainly taken off over the past few years. The behavior would not even be possible without today's technology. If the shows studied existed in an age before Netflix, they could not have been binge watched. There would be little chance that new fans would get into these shows by either recording every episode or by buying every season on DVD. It also would have been impossible to do via On Demand since every episode that ever aired was not available at once. The fact that Netflix, and now other streaming sites, allow people to watch every episode of a show for a low monthly subscription price is what truly makes binge watching possible. Since watching television shows allows a person to build rejection free parasocial relationships, the behavior of binge watching can bring positive feelings. People who watch television also have a good way to combat negative feelings such as loneliness. By binge watching a series, a person is able to be fully absorbed in the positive feelings associated with television viewing. The show themselves are the most important part of binge watching. By seeing what the five most binge worthy shows have in common, the reasons why people binge become even clearer. Without a good conflict, suspenseful moments, and a number of plot twists, shows would be boring and would not make people want to watch them

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for hours at a time. The fact that all these shows having interesting characters also encourages binge watching behavior since viewers will want become attached to them and watch to quickly watch the show to find out what happens to them. Finally, binge watching is encouraged by the fact that these shows get talked about frequently on social media. Binging lets someone catch up with the show quicker and therefore allows them to reap the social benefits of being able to talk about the show with others sooner. For people who do not like spoilers, binging on show means less time to have it spoiled for them. If a person likes spoilers, then they can enjoy the lead up to the spoiled event more and by binging they can get to the event faster. It clear that the binge watching phenomenon needed to have the right technological environment, enough benefits, and good binge worthy television shows in order for it to truly take off.

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