

Boredom Begets Speed Consumption, Speed Consumption Begets Boredom: The Feedback Loop of Speed Consumption

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, consuming video content at accelerated speeds has become increasingly common. Initially observed among students watching online lectures (Murphy et al. 2022), this behavior has expanded beyond educational contexts to streaming services and podcasts (Sunday Times 2023). For instance, YouTube reported users collectively save over 900 years daily through speed-watching (Youtube 2022). Despite its prevalence, particularly among younger consumers, academic research remains limited, primarily within educational contexts (Chen et al. 2024). Other research has examined media switching due to boredom (Tam & Inzlicht, 2024a) and attentional saturation through media multitasking (Tam & Inzlicht 2024b), but the role of playback speed has been mostly overlooked. We investigate this phenomenon by conceptualizing speed-watching as part of a broader tendency to "speed consume"—experiencing consumption at accelerated speeds. We propose that speed-consumption provides a new way for increasingly bored consumers to seek stimulation. Under-stimulated individuals seek to increase stimulation as they find their optimal stimulation level (Leuba 1955). Stimulation can be achieved diversely, ranging from exploration and risk-taking (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1992) to variety seeking (Menon and Kahn 1995). We argue that in the contemporary media environment, where media multitasking (Segijn et al. 2017), and switching (Tam & Inzlicht, 2024a) are on the rise, consumers show more boredom with regular speed activities and seek stimulation in speed consumption, which requires greater attentional resources. We further argue that habitual speed consumption creates an unfavorable contrast with regular-speed activities. This, in turn, makes regular-speed activities seem boring, elevating baseline stimulation needs, and thus perpetuating speed consumption – both in the watching and non-watching domains. To examine the presence and extent of speed consumption beyond educational contexts, Study 1 asked 500 MTurk participants (Mage = 36, 57.8% male) about their speed consumption habits across multiple domains (movies, TV, YouTube, social media, podcasts, audiobooks, voiced articles, lectures, sports, and news), as well as their relative preferences between several regular speed, enriched activities (e.g. going to a movie theatre) and a less enriched version that allowed for speed consumption (e.g. streaming the film at home). We found that speed consumption is widespread, with prevalence ranging from 27% (for sports) to 51% (for YouTube). Speed consumption was highest among Generation Z, males, and those with higher education, employment, and income levels. We also found significant cross-modal correlations—speed consumption in any category strongly correlated with consumption in others ($r = 0.48-0.71$, all p

