

Worthy of Your Binge: How Media Momentum Drives Satisfaction in Clumped Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Binge-watching—uninterrupted consumption of multiple episodes of serialized media—is embraced by consumers and companies alike, with shows often labeled “binge-worthy.” But what material is truly binge-worthy to consumers—more likely to be binge-consumed and more satisfying when binged? We propose a theory of serial media consumption arguing that the positive interaction of the content’s perceived complexity (i.e., the degree of cognitive effort necessary to follow the plot) and resonance (i.e., the degree of cognitive and emotional involvement the plot offers) creates *media momentum*: an impetus to continue watching that translates in higher craving and higher expected utility from watching an additional episode. Media with these characteristics is both more likely to be binge-consumed and, due to recalling difficulty and unsatisfied craving, more satisfying when clumped rather than temporally separated, as shown in 6 pre-registered experiments and one secondary data analysis.

KEYWORDS: binge-watching, resonance, complexity

TRACK: consumer behavior

Binge-watching – the uninterrupted consumption of multiple episodes of serialized media (Flayelle et al., 2020) – is a part of life for 72% of Americans (Wired, 2021). While having potential negative effects like sleep deprivation (Alimoradi et al., 2022) and mood declines (Schneier, 2015), binge-watching can also enhance viewing pleasure (Pittman & Sheehan, 2021). In an effort to increase customer satisfaction, streaming platforms started to adopt simultaneous-release strategies (Prastien, 2019) and even promote content as “binge-worthy” (Wired, 2021). However, it remains unclear whether binge-watching increases satisfaction: a recent survey by the authors suggests that 58% of consumers feel that many shows labeled as “binge-worthy” are not well-suited for binge consumption, with 53% reporting no greater satisfaction than when they spread out consumption and 26% saying it reduces enjoyment. This suggests that while binge-watching enhances the experience for certain types of content, the effect is not universal. Then, what makes media truly binge-worthy for consumers?

While past research has explored the effects of binge consumption on mental health and life balance (Vaterlaus et al., 2019), the factors that make certain media inherently more satisfying when consumed in a single session – rather than over multiple, spread out, sessions – has yet to be fully explored. Our central thesis is that for media to be binge-worthy, it is not enough that the topic or theme depicted is liked by viewers or that the episodes are thematically interconnected – though both factors are contributors (e.g., Chen & Redden, 2023; Lu et al., 2023). Rather, we theorize that binge-worthy media – more likely to be binge-watched and more satisfying when binged – are those that generate *media momentum*: a repeated and increasing drive to consume an additional episode in a series after a prior episode has ended.

We hypothesize that content creating media momentum displays two distinct properties; it contains enough narrative *complexity* to require significant cognitive resources to process, and it evokes enough *resonance* to pull the viewer into the story, both emotionally, through intense emotions, and intellectually, through curiosity for what happens next. Importantly, we theorize that the degree to which a program possesses these properties predicts the extent to which consumers would prefer to consume it all in one sitting versus spreading it out with temporal spacing between its episodes and the degree of satisfaction with each of these consumption patterns; that is, whether the program is truly “binge-worthy” or not.

Using six pre-registered experiments (n = 2,757) and secondary data analysis, we find that perceived complexity and resonance drive the desire to continue watching and that

satisfaction is higher for high-momentum shows when they are consumed in a clumped rather than spread out manner. This work bridges two research streams: while prior studies have explored the characteristics driving media popularity (Laurino Dos Santos & Berger, 2022; Toubia et al., 2021) or modeled continuation decisions (Lu et al., 2022; Schweidel & Moe, 2016), we examined the media characteristics driving preferences for clumped consumption. Practically, these insights offer media companies a way to pre-test content for binge-worthiness, optimize release strategies, and improve production decisions to better align with consumer viewing preferences. All study materials, data, and code are available at: https://researchbox.org/2388&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=UNJGTP).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Binge-watching is a form of “clumped consumption” (Lu et al., 2022), characterized by uninterrupted consumption of multiple episodes of a tv show in a single session (Schweidel & Moe, 2016). While definitions mostly agree on what binge-watching is (see Flayelle et al., 2020), existing research presents two contrasting perspectives on its valence: one views it as a problematic, addiction-like behavior (Riddle et al., 2018; Alimoradi et al., 2022); the other sees it as an intentional, immersive activity (Lu et al., 2023; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015) that enhances engagement and satisfaction via narrative transportation and completion (Lin et al., 2022; Pittman & Steiner, 2019; 2021). We focus on this perspective, in relation to continuation decisions and overall satisfaction.

Moreover, while previous research examined binge-watching trends – viewers are more likely to continue the longer they watch (e.g., Schweidel & Moe, 2016), especially as a series nears its finale (Lu et al., 2022) – less is known about the specific episode-level factors that drive continuation. Building on these insights, we develop hypotheses about the key factors influencing binge consumption and its impact on viewer satisfaction.

What Leads to a Preference for Clumped Consumption? The Role of Media Momentum

Although thematic connectedness is essential for binge-watching (Lu et al., 2023; Woolley & Sharif, 2022), binge tendencies still vary across shows and genre. We propose that

binge-worthy content possesses "media momentum" – a strong, sustained drive to continue watching arising from the interaction of two factors: perceived narrative complexity and perceived narrative resonance.

Complexity. Narrative complexity – characterized by intricate relationships, non-linear storytelling, and rapid plot progression – sustains engagement (Hoeken & Van Vliet, 2000; Piper & Toubia, 2023; Toubia et al., 2021). While complexity can heighten enjoyment in single-episodes consumption (Bermejo-Berros et al., 2022), experiencing complexity repeatedly over multiple episodes entails an excessive cognitive load that creates fatigue (Flayelle et al., 2019; Larsen et al., 2016). Thus, complexity alone is insufficient for uninterrupted consumption.

Resonance. Narrative resonance refers to a story's ability to pull the viewer in, creating emotional intensity and curiosity (Greenblatt, 1990; Rosa, 2019). Resonance enhances engagement across media in single-episode consumption (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Yiend, 2010). However, repeated exposure to emotionally intense content may lead to hedonic adaptation, reducing its impact over time (Galak & Redden, 2018). The interaction between complexity and resonance is thus crucial to create momentum: while complexity disrupts adaptation, resonance mitigates cognitive fatigue by providing an emotional and motivational anchor.

H1: As resonance increases, perceived complexity in one episode of media narrative will create media momentum, increasing expected utility and craving to watch the next, thereby increasing binge-watching's likelihood.

What Leads to Higher Satisfaction for Clumped Consumption rather than Separated Consumption?

As perceived complexity and resonance reinforce each other to sustain binge-watching tendencies, their interaction might also lead to higher satisfaction when this type of content is clumped rather than separated over multiple, spread out, consumption occasion. Indeed, for high-momentum narratives, separation imposes two primary costs: (1) immediate frustration due to unresolved curiosity and emotional engagement (Litman, 2005), weakening transportation and engagement (Tyng et al., 2017) and (2) future cognitive burden, as complex plots require non-

trivial memory efforts to be recalled (McNamara & Houston, 1987). Binge-watching high-momentum media mitigates these costs by satisfying craving and reducing memory efforts, making clumped consumption more satisfying than separated consumption in this case:

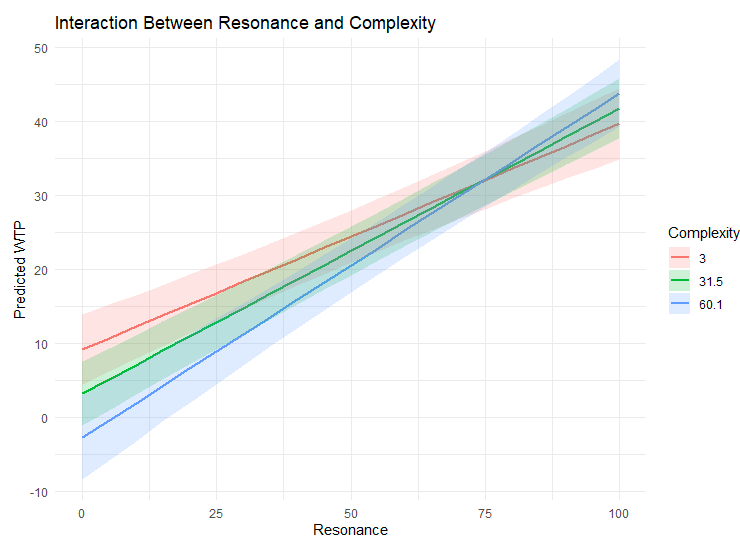
H2: As media momentum increases, a separated viewing compared to a clumped viewing of episodes will decrease satisfaction.

STUDY OVERVIEW

In *Study 1* (n=402), we first replicate Lu et al.’s results about continuity and binge-worthiness of popular shows, finding that, given a show’s sequentiality, when they are categorized as both complex, emotionally intense and curiosity inducing, they are also more likely to be categorized as binge-worthy ($b=.42$, $t(66)=4.41$, $p<.001$).

In *Study 2a* (n=292), we validate that it is the positive interaction of complexity and resonance of one episode that predicts consumers’ expected utility to watch the next. Participants viewed 8 clips of the first episode of a high momentum show (“Gravity Falls”) and rated their WTP (0 to 1\$) to watch the next and the elements of perceived momentum (i.e., complexity, emotional intensity, curiosity; 0-100 sliders). A repeated measured linear regression shows how the interaction of complexity and resonance (i.e., the average of the emotional intensity and curiosity inducing measures) predicts WTP ($b=.004$, $t(2039)=4.77$, $p<.001$) – more results on ResearchBox.

Figure 1. Interaction effect of Perceived Complexity and Resonance on expected utility to watch the next.



Study 2b (n=499) replicates this result across 4 different shows (i.e., “The Chair”, “AfterLife”, “Russian Doll”, “The Good Place”): independently of the overall level of momentum perceived in the show, the interaction of resonance and complexity predicts craving to watch the following episode – results on ResearchBox, Study 2b.

Study 3 (n=500) provides evidence of how the episode-level momentum of the same 4 shows tested in Study 2b drives the likelihood to binge-watch ($\beta=.000003$; $SE=.0000003$ $p<.001$), as shown in *Figure 2* and *Figure 3* (full analyses: ResearchBox).

Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Staying After Clip 3 By Resonance and Complexity Levels

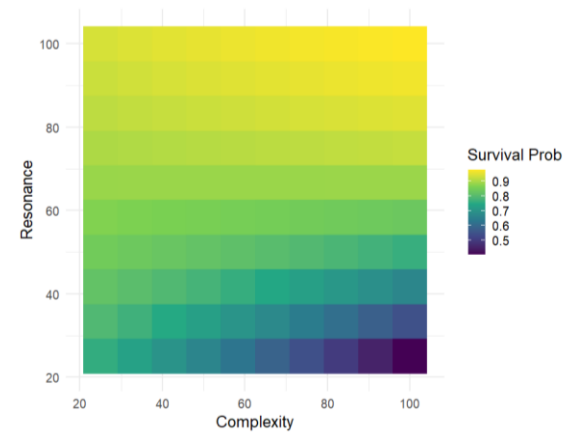
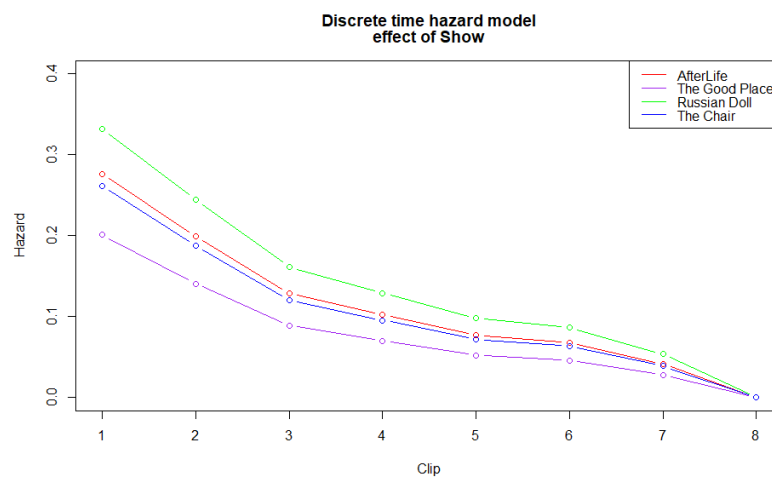


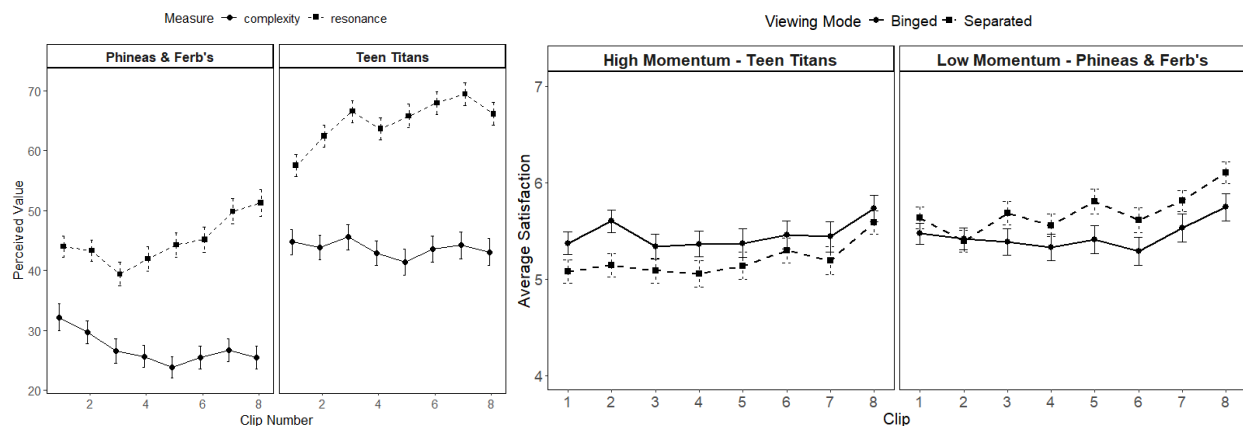
Figure 3. Propensity to Switch by Show.



Study 4a (n=465) is a 2(momentum: high v. low) x 2(viewing mode: clumped v. separated) btw-sbj design testing whether clumping high-momentum shows can increase satisfaction compared to separating them. Participants saw sequential clips of “Teen Titans” (high momentum) or “Phineas&Ferb” (low momentum), either all at once or separated, and rated

their degree of satisfaction after each clip (1-7). A repeated measure linear regression finds that separating high-momentum content lowers satisfaction compared to separating low-momentum content ($b = -.51$, $SE = .23$, $t(461) = 2.24$, $p = .03$), as shown in *Figure 4*.

Figure 4. Complexity And Resonance by Clip (As Pretested) v. Satisfaction After Watching by Viewing Mode and Momentum Level



Study 4b replicates these results, finding evidence of the interruption costs' role in lowering satisfaction (all results on ResearchBox, *Study 4b*).

Study 5 employs field data from the app “myanimelist” to predict users' ratings of a show by its genre and self-reported watching pace. Genres are classified as high vs. low momentum based on *Study 1* results (e.g., thrillers/dramas=high; comedies=low). Viewing pace is categorized as clumped if the ratio of episodes watched per day is >9 (~ 3 hours). A regression using cross-sectional fixed effects for show and user finds that, consistent with our theory, high-momentum-genre's shows have higher average ratings when clumped rather than separated ($b = .34$, $t(296973) = 8.94$, $p < .001$) compared to low-momentum ones.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We show perceived media momentum as an interaction of complexity and resonance that predicts satisfaction-maximizing clumpiness, such that when content is high in momentum, binge-watching can be a rational decision for consumers, being more beneficial than separated consumption. Thus, platforms both can and should identify true binge-worthy content, for the good of consumers, shows, and likely, their own bottom line

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