

Netflix and construction of the viewer

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Practices of watching TV are changing as new modes of consuming TV are developed. Netflix has particularly been exemplary of these new modes of TV, responsible for changing viewing trends and practices. Netflix, started as a transactional video rental service that rented DVDs, gradually changed into a subscription video on demand (SVOD) service. It then moved onto streaming online content and its strategy still consisted of the exhibition of film or serialized content. Online streaming has transformed the distribution and consumption of televised media vis-à-vis cable TV subscriptions. SVOD services such as Netflix have encouraged consecutive watching of episodes/movies, which in turn has promoted a new practice of viewing commonly known as 'binge watching'.

Netflix has made binge watching, which can be defined as sustained period of viewing, into the 'new normal'. This practice of consumption of media content, or rather bingeing has re-casted the viewer's relationship with televisual time. If earlier, people had to accommodate their own time with the television schedule, now they are able to watch whenever they want and for however long. Netflix has been able to reverse the long standing negative connotations of binge watching which had once termed it as 'Acute Television Toxicity'. This reconstruction of binge watching into the new normal has particularly been associated with Netflix's entry into production of original content and its practice of releasing an entire season of a show at once. This practice associates a certain sense of 'liveness' with TV, while also a feeling of missing out if one does not watch the released season as soon as possible. This also feeds into cultural capital because viewers then engage in online forums and platforms to discuss these shows. If cable TV

was associated with ‘passive’ viewing of TV and often invoking images like couch potatoes, ‘Netflix-ing’ as an activity is constantly perceived as ‘active’ consumption of quality content. Bingeing is now seen as demanding more attention and innovation as users are now more aware about minute details because of continuous watching, eventually making users and TV ‘smarter’ and ‘better’. This trend also builds into the construction of a ‘community’ which binges together and then discusses online, in a way promoting a shared sense of collectivity even if this community forms only a minority.

However, this notion of ‘collectivized viewing’ can be flawed, if one considers the way in which construction of a viewer takes place (Jenner, 2014). A continuous construction of a viewer is taking place who binge watches quality content through online streaming, all of which can be found on a single platform called Netflix. But Netflix does more than just promote and normalize binge watching, as viewing practices such as these also play a significant role in identity construction in the post postmodern capitalist era where consumer habits and identity construction are intertwined.

Television can be said to have gone through a number of phases. It shifted from the time when only a handful of channels hegemonised television, to the period when multitude of channels emerged to cater to a larger audience and competed to produce quality television. We have now come to a juncture where Netflix is credited to have started a new era in television as it has changed the notion of choice that can be provided to the users. If broadcast TV seemed to have a responsibility to provide a diversity of

representations, opinions and perspectives, Netflix is perceived to have changed the game by catering to smaller groups of audiences through individuated viewing. There also comes a sense of individuality and autonomy attached with this Netflix model, as the users find themselves ‘deciding’ everything – what, when, how and for how long they want to watch.

Provision of an umpteen number of genres and categories by Netflix not only gives us a lot of choices, but also a space to either identify with an identity or consolidate an already existing identity. This reaches a whole new level by contextually placing Netflix’s recommendation system in picture.

It has been commonly recognized that recommendations on Netflix are not based on demographic factors such as location, gender or age but on a user’s previous viewing patterns. However, in its presentation of recommendations, it has been observed and also argued by Sarah Arnold (2014) that Netflix seems to have adopted a gendered mode of address while proposing recommendations from its content database. Particularly taking an example, Arnold explains how Netflix has come up with different tags such as ‘shows featuring a strong female lead’, ‘shows with strong female characters’, ‘women who rule the screen’ which on one hand can be seen as positive framing of gender but on the other, also points us to the normalizing of the ‘male lead’. Netflix can be hailed as at least attempting to provide a space for content that features and promotes shows/movies with a female lead, but it is also imperative to call out their categorizations as following the norm which see these female leads existing outside of the normative categorization. This in fact does offer a space to women but in

turn also ghettoize women by conventionalizing male representations in shows.