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How do Poles binge-watch? Binge-watching before and during the pandemic – a representative study

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Introduction

The relationship between media and viewers is similar to a system of “communicating vessels”. Changes in the way content is provided to consumers can elicit responses from the public, just like social and technological changes, in general, can affect the shape of media offerings. The addition of new channels in media communication, over time and with advancing technology, has led to consumers choosing preferred forms and content methods for media use. However, the vast array of options available now requires viewers to divide their attention between being a viewer, a listener, and/or a reader. This was true when the radio, cinema, and television first appeared, and it remains true today with the arrival of new streaming platforms and social media. As viewers, we are now choosing what, and how, we want to use these new forms of media. Netflix released the entire first season of *House of Cards* in 2013, making it perfect for binge-watching. As a result, extensive research has been conducted on binge-watching, showcasing the evolution and diversity of the subject’s research approaches.

However, the available publications do not contain much information about the studies conducted on representative samples since the population under study was usually comprised of students and/or series viewers. Therefore, it is worth studying the social scale of binge-watching more closely – the popularity of this form of reception in the population, the demographic features which characterise “a typical binge-watcher”, and changes in interest in binge-watching over time.

There are several issues that can be identified in studies of binge-watching. These include: definition issues, distinguishing between problematic and non-problematic binge-watching, the formal issues related to the study (the choice of the sample) and, in recent years, also the potential impact of the pandemic lockdowns on the intensity of binge-watching. They are discussed in detail in a different paper (Kisilowska-Szurmińska, Jupowicz-Ginalska & Szurmiński, 2022). Here, it is worth distinguishing between non-problematic (e.g. Flayelle et al., 2019) and problematic (excessive) binge-watching (e.g. Riddle et al., 2018; Starosta, Izydorzyc & Lizyńczyk, 2019; Starosta, Izydorzyc & Dobrowolska, 2020; Forte et al., 2021). No representative studies have been conducted so far. The only example is the project carried out by Bridget Rubenking and Cheryl Campanella Bracken (2018) concerning Americans over 25 years old. Most of the others focus on the actual viewers of TV series (e.g. Flayelle et al., 2019; Sigre-Leirós, 2022) or streaming platform users (Song, Hu & Mou, 2021).

Studies of binge-watching during the pandemic have attributed its increasing intensity to being confined to the home and the need to find something to do (Dixit et al., 2020; Arend et al., 2021; Boursier et al., 2021; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022). An excess of free time and social isolation were mentioned as the factors favouring intensification of binge-watching because of the large amount of free time and the high level of stress caused by the pandemic (Boursier et al., 2021), depending, however, on the demographic features and the respondents' housing situation (Arend et al., 2021). The lockdown was shown to favour problematic binge-watching (Dixit et al., 2020; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022). It was also pointed out that there are possible ways of counteracting excessive use of screens, such as implementing a plan of the day (Arend et al., 2021). It was also observed that watching may be a survival strategy in a stressful situation (Boursier et al., 2021), and watching a TV series for social reasons (virtual meetings) may favour overcoming stress and limiting the negative impact of isolation (Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022).

The extent of Internet use by Polish society is an important point of reference to the project in question. In consecutive years, 73%, 68% and 77% of adult Poles used the Internet at least once a week (CBOS, 2022). When it comes to Internet users, 56% in 2020, 56% in 2021, and 57% in 2022 gave a positive answer to the question: Did you watch TV, movies, TV series, or video over the Internet during the past month? (CBOS, 2021, p. 11), compared to 38%, 41% and 44%, respectively, all adult Poles asked during the same years (CBOS, 2022). According to a report by CBOS, in 2021, the percentage of Internet users among the Polish population varied based on the place of residence. Of the residents of rural areas, 68% used the Internet, while 77% of those in small towns, 71% in medium-sized towns,

84% in big cities, and 81% in very big cities had access to the Internet. The figures for 2022 show an increase in Internet usage, with 72% of residents of rural areas, 78% of small towns, 76% of medium-sized towns, 87% of big cities, and 86% of very big cities having access to the Internet.

Aim, research questions, methods

Given the contents of the previous section, the aim of the study was to determine the scale of binge-watching in the population under study on a representative sample. The following research questions were asked:

1. What is the scale of binge-watching in the population under study?
2. Does the intensity of binge-watching depend on demographics?
3. Does binge-watching change over time (in consecutive years), i.e. is it constant, increasing or weakening?
4. Did the pandemic have an impact on the intensity of binge-watching?

The study was conducted on a sample representative of Polish Internet users in three waves: in 2020 – people aged 15+ (in groups: 15–19 years, 20–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years and 55 years or more), in 2021 and 2022 – adult respondents 18+ (in groups: 18–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years and 55 years or more). The sample included 1,050 people in 2020, 1,062 in 2021, 1,053 in 2022. Respondents of the Ariadna research panel took part in this study. The study was carried out with the CAWI questionnaire, whose design was based on subjective knowledge and which was tested in a pilot study in student groups (who potentially often choose this form of spending their free time). The study design and conduct were verified with respect to the ethical rules applied in the Ariadna panel. As mentioned above, there are no reports in the literature from studies with such a social range. Most of them were conducted with young people or those who declared that they use streaming platforms with films and TV series at least intensively. The knowledge of the extent of this phenomenon in a population provides context for potential expanded qualitative analyses.

Results and discussion

The first and most fundamental issue in the project was the extent of binge-watching. The conclusions from the data shown in Table 1 revealed a downward trend. A positive response to this question was given by 74% of respondents in 2020 and only by 43% in 2022. The scale of binge-watching among Polish Internet users reached 2/3 of the population at the beginning of the study period, but it decreased considerably in subsequent years (to less than half of the population). One can conclude that every Polish Internet user who watched video materials on the Internet (according to CBOS data) did some binge-watching at some point.

Data in Table 1 show a different picture than in the study cited above. However, it must be pointed out that the studies described in the literature (e.g. Flayelle et al., 2020; Boursier et al., 2021; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022) were not conducted on representative samples. The causes of the downward trend may include: a modified promotional policy of content providers (less intensive promotion of binge-watching), but also weakened attractiveness of the novelty, being tired of staying online (which was often obligatory) in other activities and spheres of life, in return to “normal”.

Table 1

Scale of binge-watching in 2020–2022

Item	2020	2021	2022
Yes	74%	50%	43%
No	21%	45%	45%
Don't know	5%	5%	12%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
N	1050	1062	1053

The question about the binge-watching intensity was asked in 2021–2022. As Table 2 shows (N is the number of individuals who gave a positive reply to the question about binge-watching), it is an activity with limited frequency – it is done occasionally (irregularly) or several times or once a week. For these two frequencies, it can be assumed that this is mainly a weekend or holiday pastime. However, respondents decide to pursue it less and less frequently, which is confirmed by a decrease in the first three categories and an increase in the other two.

Demographic features such as sex, age, education and place of residence were collected to analyse differences and similarities in the intensity of BW in the population.

Table 2

Binge-watching intensity in 2021–2022

Item	2021	2022
Every day	9%	8%
Several times a week	29%	24%
Once a week	22%	21%
Less than once a week	12%	15%
I don't do it regularly, and the intensity of my binge-watching changes	28%	32%
TOTAL	100%	100%
N	530	583

Differences in the intensity of binge-watching between men and women are small (the difference among the individuals who declare binge-watching was 7% in the first wave and 5% in the last one – see Table 3). It is noteworthy that more frequent binge-watching among women was also observed in other studies (Boursier et al., 2021).

Table 3

Binge-watching in 2020–2022 by sex

Item	2020		2021		2022	
	female	male	female	male	female	male
Yes	77%	70%	50%	40%	45%	40%
No	17%	25%	45%	55%	44%	47%
Don't know	5%	5%	5%	5%	10%	13%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	534	516	530	531	556	497

Table 4 shows data about BW by the respondents' age for two editions of the study (2021–2022). The figures for the respondents in each group who gave a positive answer to the question about binge-watching in 2020 were as follows: 15–19 years – 80%, 20–24 years – 73%, 25–34 years – 79%, 35–44 years – 77%, 45–54 years – 64% and 55 years or more – 68%.

Table 4

Binge-watching in 2021–2022 by age

Item	2021					2022				
	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55+	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55+
Yes	55%	50%	48%	42%	28%	52%	53%	53%	41%	29%
No	37%	45%	45%	56%	69%	32%	35%	38%	47%	60%
Don't know	8%	5%	6%	2%	3%	16%	12%	10%	12%	11%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	149	277	255	191	191	126	218	168	198	343

These data show that a considerable decrease in binge-watching took place between 2020 and 2021 and remained at a similar level in the following year (a slight decrease in groups 18–24 and 45–54 years, and increases in groups 25–34, 35–44 and 55+ years). The lowest interest in binge-watching is declared by people aged 55 years and more. It should be noted that they account for the lowest percentage of Polish Internet users. However, 68% of them declared binge-watching in 2020 and less than 40% in the following year.

It seems that binge-watching as a form of spending one's free time is related to the possibilities and interests specific to a given stage of life. This is associated with the amount of available free time and preferences regarding the ways of spending it. Other factors include habits associated with cultural activities,

including media consumption, the level of digital and media competence, and external circumstances (lockdowns, but the fatigue of living in the online reality). Their impact requires further, more detailed studies. Nevertheless, the phenomenon proved so fashionable and widespread that each age group included respondents who “wanted to at least try”.

The decrease in binge-watching in consecutive years, as seen in Table 5, had an impact on the figures in all the groups by education, but the extent of the decrease varied. About 2/3 of the respondents in all three groups declared that they binge-watched in 2020, and the figure ranged from 41% to 49% in 2021 and from 33 to 51% in 2022. The greatest decrease in interest was noted among people with primary education (by 38% over two years), and the smallest was in the group with the highest education (by 23%). As with respect to the differences between the age groups, these can also be attributable to diverse ways of spending free time, the impact of the pandemic on lifestyle or economic factors.

Table 5

Binge-watching in 2020–2022 by education

Item	2020			2021			2022		
	primary	secondary	university	primary	secondary	university	primary	secondary	university
Yes	71%	74%	74%	41%	42%	49%	33%	39%	51%
No	21%	22%	21%	52%	51%	49%	44%	49%	42%
Don't know	8%	5%	5%	7%	7%	2%	23%	12%	8%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	127	435	488	133	463	465	128	503	422

Regarding the place of residence (Table 6), no significant differences were noted between the behaviours of residents of various locations (in 2021–2022). The data for 2020, as in the case of the age groups, were categorised differently, which is why they were not included in the table. The percentage of positive responses for 2020 were: rural areas – 71% of respondents declaring BW, small and medium-sized towns – 74%, big and very big cities – 76%. As with the categories described above, a considerable decrease in interest in BW between 2020 and subsequent years is visible.

Did the pandemic have an impact on the scale of binge-watching? In 2020, 58% of the respondents replied “definitely yes” or “rather yes” to the question: Did you binge-watch more during the obligatory isolation because of COVID-19? A negative answer was given by 34% of the respondents (N=772). Responses to a similar (but not identical) question about a change in the intensity of binge-watching during the lockdowns in 2021 and 2022 are shown in Table 7.

A decrease in the interest in binge-watching is visible in 2021–2022, i.e. more intensive binge-watching was declared by 32% of the respondents, while 44–46% did not considerably change their habits in this regard (Table 7).

Table 6

Binge-watching in 2020–2022 by place of residence

Years	Place of residence*	Yes	No	Don't know	Total	N
2020	Village	71%	7%	22%	100%	405
	Small town	71%	7%	22%	100%	129
	Medium-size town	77%	2%	22%	100%	200
	Big city	79%	5%	16%	100%	198
	Very big city	71%	7%	22%	100%	118
2021	Village	40%	53%	7%	100%	393
	Small town	41%	55%	4%	100%	127
	Medium-size town	47%	48%	5%	100%	212
	Big city	50%	48%	2%	100%	202
	Very big city	52%	43%	4%	100%	128
2022	Village	40%	47%	13%	100%	333
	Small town	43%	45%	12%	100%	119
	Medium-size town	41%	47%	11%	100%	234
	Big city	47%	42%	10%	100%	213
	Very big city	48%	42%	10%	100%	154

*small town: population under 20 thousand; medium-sized town: 20–99 thousand; big city: 100–500 thousand; very big city: over 500 thousand

Table 7

During the lockdowns caused by the COVID 19 pandemic
(respondents – binge-watchers; years 2021–2022)

Item	2021	2022
I binge-watched more intensively compared to the pre-pandemic period	32%	32%
I binge-watched less intensively compared to the pre-pandemic period	7%	6%
The scale of my binge-watching did not change compared to the pre-pandemic period	46%	44%
Don't know	15%	18%
TOTAL	100%	100%
N	530	583

The authors of other studies revealed more intensive binge-watching – however, this was during the first lockdown (Dixit et al., 2020; Arend et al., 2021; Boursier et al., 2021; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022). It can be assumed that the first lockdown was quite a shocking experience for society, involving a change in attitudes and behaviours with respect to various issues, including BW, while switching to a different mode of functioning, but also greater challenges (e.g. free time). Subsequent years and lockdowns were the time of functioning in familiar conditions.

Conclusions

These results allow for the cautious conclusion that the stage of relishing the possibility of binge-watching TV series is already beyond us. Currently, it is one of the few accepted forms of watching (Rubenking & Brucken, 2021; Turner, 2021) and is chosen rather occasionally. The advantages of the project presented here include the representativeness of the sample for the population of Internet users in a country, which broadens the study perspective (focused so far on younger respondents and declared TV series viewers). An analysis of binge-watching according to various demographic characteristics did not reveal any considerable differences (slightly more women, as in Boursier et al., 2021) and place of residence.

The intensity of binge-watching decreases with age. A considerable decrease in the percentage of people who declare binge-watching was observed in the group of people aged 55+ (although – comparing the data from the study with CBOS data – it would be worth further splitting the category). When it comes to age, a slight decreasing trend is observed in groups of older people, which may be affected by the specificity of later stages in life. However, interestingly, the differences are small, which means that binge-watching is sometimes (occasionally, sporadically) popular among people who work and/or who are involved in family life. It is worth determining whether it depends on how much time they have or on the offer of content suppliers.

Against the general background, there are interesting differences that depend on the education level, including higher activity of individuals with a university degree. It would be worth determining whether the differences in activity as a consequence of the educational background are associated with the general data on a higher cultural activity of people who have graduated from a university or if they are a consequence of other factors, such as the level of income and more freedom in using paid access. This is suggested by the data on the activity of Polish Internet users, according to which only 20% (2020), 25% (2021) and 27% (2022) of them consumed paid content on the Internet (e.g. newspapers, photographs, video, paid membership in services, games) (CBOS, 2022). This was done by 17%, 18% and 21% of adult Poles, respectively.

An increase in binge-watching during the pandemic was observed only during its initial period, i.e. in 2020. These data were consistent with the findings of the cited studies (Boursier et al., 2021; Rubenking & Bracken, 2021; Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022) – all of them dealt with the same period, i.e. the first lockdown (although the dates varied slightly in different countries). Undoubtedly, the pandemic, especially its initial period (2020), was a surprising, or even shocking, situation, making one want to escape and hide from the difficult reality in the world of fiction of movies and TV series. At the same time, lockdowns – more or less restrictive – gave people more time to watch – individually or with family. New seasons of TV series were, and still are, a popular topic of conversation.

There is currently no literature available that reports on binge-watching during consecutive months of the pandemic. Therefore, there is no data to compare

with the current study. The study shows that the years 2021 and 2022, which were consecutive periods of isolation and a relaxed sanitary regime, were not periods of such intensive binge-watching as observed in 2020. This suggests that people may have adapted to the new situation, reconciled with it, and may have had enough of spending time in front of a screen due to work from home and home education. It is also possible that there were difficulties in accessing the screen or a reduction of available free time, which would require further studies. This outcome may confirm that people have become accustomed to a new form of watching, as mentioned above.

This study has some limitations. These undoubtedly include its declarative character and diverse categorisation of age groups between the first wave of the pandemic and subsequent ones. There are also no comparative data for similar study groups and populations to compare the population under study to similar populations in other countries. It would also provide a broader perspective for further in-depth studies, including qualitative ones. It seems necessary to observe the trend – will binge-watching remain at a level of 2021 and 2022, or will it change, and in which direction? What factors will affect this? To gain deeper insights into the extent of binge-watching in relation to the decision to immerse oneself in fictional stories, qualitative studies are necessary.

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Summary

Binge-watching is a relatively new form of consuming media content, which has found a permanent place in the set of viewers' media consumption behaviours. The aim of this project was to identify the scale and diversity of binge-watching among Polish Internet users. The study was conducted using the quantitative method (CAWI) on a representative group of Polish Internet users in two cycles – in 2020 and 2021. The respondents were asked, for example, whether they binge-watched, and if they did, what they watched and whether the pandemic had an impact on their behaviour as viewers. The results indicate the scale of binge-watching, the preferred types of content and the potential impact of the pandemic on the behaviour under study. Thus, the first full, representative picture of binge-watching among Polish Internet users was obtained.

Jak bingują Polacy? Binge watching przed pandemią i w czasie jej trwania – badania reprezentatywne

Streszczenie

Binge watching to stosunkowo nowa forma konsumpcji treści medialnych, która jednak znalazła stałe miejsce w repertuarze zachowań odbiorczych widzów. Celem prezentowanego projektu było poznanie skali i zróżnicowania binge watchingu wśród polskich

internautów. Badanie zrealizowano metodą ilościową (CAWI) na reprezentatywnej grupie polskich internautów w dwóch cyklach – w latach 2020 i 2021. Respondentów pytano m.in. o to, czy i jakie treści bingują, a także czy pandemia wpłynęła w jakiś sposób na ich zachowania jako widzów. Wyniki pozwalają określić skalę bingowania, preferowane typy treści, a także potencjalny wpływ pandemii na badane zachowania. Uzyskano tym samym pierwszy pełny, reprezentatywny obraz zjawiska binge watching w społeczności polskich internautów.

