



Sophie G. Einwächter & Thessa Jensen

## Exploring Viewers' Experiences of 'Series Fatigue'

### ABSTRACT

Streaming services may be thriving, but some viewers become increasingly critical of serial content and the way it is presented and distributed. This article addresses the phenomenon of 'series fatigue,' which has become common with recipients who encounter an unmanageable abundance of consumable material online. Despite the positively perceived emancipation from linear television, opaque platform dynamics create new requirements for self-organization and management of leisure media consumption. Accordingly, overwhelmed viewers state that watching TV and streaming-based series has started to feel like *work*. Many also criticize that the premature cancellation of series has become an all too regular experience, while others feel patronized by the platforms' experimenting with no-binge release schedules. The traditionally strained fan-producer relationship is thus further complicated by powerful third parties: platforms that act as distributors and curators and thus ultimately gatekeepers of content.

This qualitative, exploratory, and collaborative study from Denmark and Germany brings to light various facets of 'series fatigue,' drawing on qualitative interviews with a sample of students and scholars in which their experiences of series fatigue as well as their coping strategies come to light. It also extrapolates possible consequences for fan cultural media consumption in the age of platform capitalism: The sheer amount of available content may lead to people falling out of love with series more quickly or not becoming fans in the first place but rather sticking to a more superficial or distracted viewing mode associated with non-fans. As recommendation-based streaming platforms seem to encourage individual binge-watching (cf. Lickhardt 2024) and "cyclical fandom" (Hills 2005) rather than socially-oriented and ritualized viewing practices, the future of fandom as a collective activity and experience seems to be called into question.

### KEYWORDS

series fatigue, series avoidances, streaming platforms, practices of watching series, challenges to fandom, platform capitalism, fandom and non-fandom, viewer disenchantment

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## Exploring Viewers' Experiences of 'Series Fatigue'

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over the last years, it has become increasingly difficult to invite friends to watch a new series with you. Why? Because many instantly fear that it will be just one more series which ends after the first season, never to receive a proper ending; or one that lets viewers wait so long for the next season they cannot remember where they left the characters. Just another one to suddenly disappear from the streaming service. One more promising narrative that forces viewers into signing up with yet another costly streaming platform. If you take anecdotal evidence as a first indicator, viewers' apprehension seems to have built up after many bad experiences and frustrated feelings of not being able to catch up, of not feeling respected as a viewer and paying customer.

When researching the phenomenon of unfinished series and their fan cultural afterlives, Einwächter and Cuntz-Leng (2021) had expected to find out that many fans were highly engaged with activism addressing producers to continue certain series which had been cancelled. However, what they did not expect was how frequent and almost common the experience of premature cancellations had become. It seemed to be caused by an unprecedented mass of new series per year being released, which viewers considered too much, too overwhelming to keep up with (cf. Einwächter/Cuntz-Leng 2021, p.422). Some viewers reported they quit watching series altogether, not only because they found it unlikely that they would receive a proper ending, but also because the sheer volume of serial content available pushed its audience to its limits. German blogger Sophia Rosenberger (2019) states feeling paralyzed when trying to choose from the available material: "I often end up watching nothing at all [...]. I ignore recommendations [...] out of sheer overload. At the same time, I often forget to continue series that I was actually looking forward to. For example, I regularly forget that a third season of *Jessica Jones* and a second season of *The Frankenstein Chronicles* await me. When did that happen?" (Rosenberger 2019).<sup>2</sup> The cancellation of a series may thus no longer be met by protests and campaigns but only receive a tired shrug from certain viewers as the experience of too many serial narratives being available has become a problem of its own. In today's media culture, it seems easier not to become too attached and also to move on when a media product does not fully satisfy.

To put Rosenberger's quote into context: between 2009 and 2019—the date from which the quote originates—the number of scripted original series more than doubled in the USA alone. The majority of these offerings were commissioned by streaming providers such as Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon; the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) indicates global figures, which recorded a total of 6,855 series releases

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to express their gratitude towards the anonymous reviewers of this article whose feedback to an earlier version they considered very helpful.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from German or Danish are provided by the authors.



for 2019 (cf. Rodriguez 2018a; 2018b). And the development did not stop there. IMDb.com lists 8,824 newly released series worldwide for the year 2023 alone. Considering the almost unbelievable amount of consumable material that is created, it is also becoming increasingly unlikely that series will find their intended conclusion or finale. According to Fröhlich and Scheurer (2021), unfinished and cancelled series now represent “a large, if not the largest part” (p.3) of the series landscape.

We understand this first and rather anecdotal evidence as indicative of the fact that although streaming platforms are powerful infrastructures that provide a wide range of opportunities, they can also trigger feelings of powerlessness and fatalism in those who have to orientate themselves in this environment. In order to gain a deeper understanding of why viewers feel tired of or quit watching series altogether, we will present results from explorative qualitative interviews we conducted with 14 informants in Germany and Denmark. Discussing our findings, we will also take a look at the media environment that this phenomenon is situated in and see if the situation really is as historically unprecedented as it may feel. With the introduction of cable television we find an interesting historical parallel to our phenomenon. Based on our interviewees’ statements, we will then provide a description of the various nuances and aspects of what we provisionally called ‘series fatigue’ as well as what users report as common coping strategies to counter it.

This article is complemented by a separate [data and methodology paper](#) in the same journal issue, which describes the research process from first observations to interviews and coding. The latter is linked to a data set of [full interviews](#) and the [codebook](#) with code descriptions, published via the Open Access repository [media/rep/](#). Both papers can be read individually but contain important information on the research project. For those who want to delve deeper into the topic, we recommend the following order for reading: 1. Research article (this document), 2. [Data and Methodology Paper](#), 3. [Data Set](#).

## Methodology

The sample discussed in this article includes qualitative interviews with 14 people, which have been pseudonymized, translated to English, and partly reproduced here, via quotation (for full interview transcripts cf. the related data set). It is important to note that our interviewees all came from the field of media and communication studies, which constitutes a non-probability, convenience sample (cf. Bryman 2016). The authors directly accessed participants through professional networks, teaching, and research.<sup>3</sup> The participants were invited to take part in the study based on a single criterion: that they watched or had watched series regularly and felt addressed by the term ‘series fatigue’ in one way or another. Because of Jensen’s and Einwächter’s background in media studies and fan studies, where series

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<sup>3</sup> Participants were recruited through personal contact with colleagues and students, via seminar mailing lists at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany, and Aalborg Universitet, Denmark, and the mailing list of the Germany-based Participation and Fan Studies Workgroup of the German Society for Media Studies. The project originated in 2023 at Marburg, under Einwächter’s leadership, who recruited informants via said mailing list. It is important to note that the group’s members are not all based in Germany but also in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Denmark, Poland, Austria, and Switzerland. A number of scholars from different career levels and national backgrounds responded, among them Jensen, who first joined the project as a volunteer informant and who also forwarded the call for participants to her students and colleagues. After recruiting informants for Einwächter’s study, Jensen later joined in the research as well. The pool of participants finally included informants from Denmark, Germany, and Brazil—countries that the authors of this paper consider underrepresented in fan studies. Informants were interviewed via in person focus groups and individual interviews (in person, via conference call, and via email).

consumption plays a major role, it was easy to get access to informants who were familiar with watching series on a regular basis. This study remains qualitative, exploratory, and also, non-representational. Before the interviews, every interviewee signed a detailed consent form, which informed of the aim and method of the research as well as the storage and use of any data collected and the possibility for any interviewee to withdraw consent at any time.<sup>4</sup>

As expected, the explorative sample was not very diverse in terms of educational backgrounds and thus could only provide insight into the rather privileged viewing patterns of people who also deal with media in their study and work environments and may be used to consuming rather large quantities of media. However, the long-term engagement with series played an important role for all interviewees for very different reasons, and the respective situation of reception was also well mixed, just as there were different backgrounds regarding the occupations of the participants. Despite the small sample size as well as every participant being in some way or other connected to media studies, the practices of watching series and the formats discussed were surprisingly diverse and the reasons for frustration with series proved to be rather diverse, too. While we acknowledge its limitations (cf. a more thorough discussion of the sample in the [data paper](#)), convenience sampling remains a straightforward and legitimate method for gathering initial data in a project (cf. Sedgwick 2013; Emerson 2015). The convenience sample was successfully used to gain an initial overview of relevant aspects of the phenomenon of series fatigue and to create a first categorization of the phenomenon. The latter was achieved by two coding processes, one manual and one software-assisted, ultimately producing a codebook with 55 codes that could be divided into three conceptual groups (1. Individual Experiences, 2. Social Conditions, 3. Media Conditions and Contexts) with five parent codes (Coping Mechanisms, Media, Negative Feelings, Positive Feelings, Social Matters) with 5-14 child codes each. The codebook thus covers a wide range of aspects related to 'series fatigue' and has proven to be very useful in establishing a working definition of our phenomenon, which can be found at the end of this article.

We asked our interviewees to explain their idea of series fatigue: which conditions and situations they associated with it, which negative feelings they generally associated with watching series. We also inquired, inspired by the information we had gathered from blog posts and online discussions about the subject, whether the number of available seasons of a series played a role in how they dealt with the material and which roles their own expectations, the factor of time, and the increase in available series material played in their reception. We asked participants to describe their own reception behaviour and whether they had developed certain practices in dealing with serial media formats. We did not provide a definition of what we understand by the term 'series' but rather left it to the informants to decide, which aspects of seriality and which formats they wanted to discuss.

## Findings

With the aim of finding an understanding and also a definition of series fatigue from the material, a first coding process focused on the dominant negative feeling that the interviewees described. The informants' statements covered an interesting range of affects, from overwhelm and exhaustion due to too

<sup>4</sup> The media studies department at Einwächter's university, where the study originated, does not work with an ethics committee. Overall, the topic of the study was considered to not be very sensitive, but anonymization of personal information and pseudonymization of interviewee's names was used throughout. All participants took part in the study voluntarily after signalling interest in the topic and have signed a detailed consent form.



much available content to boredom with repetitive content, and sadness and anger about premature series cancellations. Furthermore, they reported alienation with a series (e.g., due to character death, due to ideologically charged or problematic content) or with other viewers, feelings of being financially exploited or manipulated into platform dependency but also disappointment with or even contempt for a product lacking in quality. In their reports, there were also rather pragmatic aspects like actual physical fatigue (tired eyes from too much screentime) or frustration and impatience with the technical handling of a badly organized streaming platform. Interviewees also mentioned difficulties to adapt to media and interface changes.

Contemplating this wide spectrum of negative feelings and looking for evidence about their causes in the material, we noted that there was always a lack of something, a scarce resource, that was at the root of the problem, and that it often corresponded with an excess of something else. People were overwhelmed because they did not have the time, attention, and capacity to watch hundreds of hours of series. People were bored or disappointed because a series lacked novelty or the good quality they had expected. They felt alienated because of a lack of connection, and they felt manipulated or insulted because platforms did not show enough respect for their needs. Lack and excess were usually mutually dependent: a perceived excess of available media material on streaming platforms resulted in a lack of available time for reception. Too much patronizing behavior from producers or platforms was at the same time perceived as representing too little respect for the customer.

In another category, we noted all reactions or coping mechanisms that were mentioned, because people's reactions were quite different when they were dealing with too much content (e.g., they found ways to track and manage their consumption, they binge-watched) in comparison to when they were confronted with bad content (e.g., they temporarily discontinued or stopped watching the series altogether or they replaced the flawed series with a new one or with a shorter format, in case season length was a problem). Interviewees avoided content they had fallen out of love with or which they had heard bad reviews of. Some did not pay full attention to series that had a slower pace and kept themselves busy with second-screening or other activities. If scarcity was a problem and a desired series was not available to them, informants mentioned that piracy and accountsharing helped them get access to the desired content.

We also took down external factors, cultural and media contexts, which we considered relevant for an understanding of the respective negative feeling or scarce resource which ultimately lead to a state of 'series fatigue'. For example, to contextualize people's physical fatigue when watching series, it is important to situate the phenomenon in a mediatized society and work life in which screens predominate already. This negative reaction is partially connected to discussions surrounding screen fatigue. This has a physical but surely also a psychological dimension to it: the more viewing digital content becomes associated with work, the more enjoyment wanes. Another example of a relevant cultural and media context are the market conditions within the creative industries in which the success of a product almost always remains unpredictable. A common strategy to deal with this uncertainty is to produce content that follows already known patterns, which have proven successful before, which necessarily leads to a lack in novelty, easily detected and criticized by a viewer well versed in popular culture.

After this first categorization, we went on to code all interviews using the qualitative data software Nvivo (cf. coding process/[data paper](#)), first expanding our set of codes, then cleaning them up considerably. The resulting codebook consists of three main groups of codes describing relevant aspects and factors of series fatigue: 1. Individual Experiences, 2. Social Conditions, 3. Media Conditions and Contexts.

## Individual experiences

While we had anticipated the mentioning of negative feelings, we were surprised by the multifaceted aspects discussed. For instance, we deliberated whether it was worthwhile to differentiate between anger and annoyance, given that their underlying causes often differed. Ultimately, we categorized them together as a combined code. Additionally, we identified a specific form of displeasure that warranted separate consideration. Although it typically coexisted with annoyance or anger, informants reported feeling controlled and undesirably manipulated by producers or distributors, but also feelings of 'boredom' and 'impatience.' (The latter two we recorded separately because impatience could arise from both the story's slow progression, leading to boredom, and the anticipation of eagerly awaited continuations in products that were anything but boring).

Furthermore, we differentiated 'emotional strain,' 'overburdening,' and 'grief'—which requires further clarification: By 'emotional strain,' we refer to situations where interviewees felt emotionally burdened by what they had watched. For instance, this could occur due to a challenging topic within the respective series. Occasionally, specific causes of grief emerged, such as the death of a beloved series character (referred to as 'grief'), even if the overall series theme itself was not burdensome. In contrast, cognitive overload (referred to as 'overburdening [mind]' in codebook) presented an entirely different form of stress. This occurred, for example, when series worlds became too extensive and complex for interviewees to follow all the storylines. Alternatively, an abundance of options sometimes left informants unable to make decisions.

Additionally, the need to master large amounts of material in order to follow a story or participate in public discourse about series was frequently associated with a sense of work (referred to as 'feels like work' in codebook). This observation aligns with findings from journalist accounts on the topic (cf. Rosenberger 2019) who also expressed that watching/binging series "has become yet another digital task to be endured" (Miyake 2021) or a "time commitment [that] doesn't feel worth it" (Al-Heeti 2022). Many informants' statements expressed frustration over a lack of time (referred to as 'lack of time [feeling devoid of]'), often due to the competing demands of work, social obligations, and leisure time allocated for watching series (in such cases also coded under social matters/social demands and duties). Informants also mentioned that watching series and thus spending too much time in front of screens can lead to physical symptoms of fatigue or eye strain (referred to as 'tiredness [body]').

Negative feelings towards series were also associated with uncertainty, stemming from unclear continuation conditions. Additionally, unmet expectations (referred to as 'disappointment') and challenges in connecting with the serial product (referred to as 'lack of connection') elicited negative sentiments. Related to the latter, some interviewees expressed a feeling of being unable to adapt to contemporary reception contexts, particularly those based on platforms: "I held on to my VHS collection for a long time, later to DVDs and even now I find it difficult to move away from streaming services and towards Twitch and Youtubers, for example" (Jennifer).

Interestingly, positive feelings were mentioned despite our initial expectations. These positive sentiments were primarily evident in discussions about the overall motivation for consuming series. Interviewees reported experiencing a sense of meaning and closure when successfully engaging with series content. Additionally, series narratives and character development piqued their curiosity, prompting interest in further exploration: "How does the series end? That is certainly as much fun today as it was yesterday!" (Peter). Furthermore, series consumption provided entertainment and relaxation, while



also serving as a valuable source of knowledge. For instance, participants learned languages and gained insights into relevant social contexts through their engagement with series content, e.g., “I see it as a positive thing that you can watch—and binge-watch—series in the original language” (Martha).

### Social conditions

The interviews included several comments that could be situated at a social level. These comments pertained to interactions with others within a social framework, in addition to personal experiences with series. For one informant, it was public discourse and his friends talking about shows that made him want to watch a show in the first place: “if there is something I really, really need to watch, like everyone is talking about it, I will probably take my time out of my day and watch it. But it is only really if everyone is talking about it” (Magnus). The statements revealed that series viewing did not always occur with undivided attention or as the sole activity. For instance, viewers sometimes watched content alongside their partners while engaging in other smartphone-related activities. Series consumption could also cause friction. Partnerships and friendships were tested by the need to reach a consensus on which series to watch as Thessa stated in her interview: “You can do it together, but you really have to decide with whom/when/where/what you’re going to watch and when you’re going to sit together afterwards to talk. I mean, that’s ... (sighs).” Successful consensus, however, led to celebratory and community-enhancing forms of consumption, such as in-person watch parties—“Then they come to our house, and then we’re like four peeps just having fun watching it” (Ellie)—or thorough online discussions: “I remember hearing a decent discussion by some fans of a particular anime [...], where they said, [...] let’s just all agree to only watch one episode per week to keep the conversation going for longer” (Emil). Individual series consumption also had social implications, often competing with social obligations within friend circles, families, or workplaces.

Forms of discourse about series—such as recommendations or discussions of content—we also coded as socially situated because common exchanges about current series formats created social pressure for viewers to watch series promptly or to carefully avoid spoilers shared by others: “it took so much effort not to get any spoilers, actually” (Alma). Others stated they missed watching series as a communal or socially bounded practice: “You don’t have this community thing [with streaming]. You’re sitting alone on your lovely sofa watching this movie. Of course, you may have arranged to meet someone. You can still watch a series together and do it online and then comment on it while you’re watching. But that’s also something that has to be arranged first” (Thessa). When a series disappointed, some informants found solace in alternative endings provided by fan fiction, others decided to avoid not only the series but also anything connected to it: “Currently, the best choice is avoidance. Avoid continuing to consume a production, avoid being part of fandoms, avoid emotionally engaging. I prefer to focus on other types of fictional material, other media” (Victoria).

The social frictions reported by our informants are consistent with the findings of Feiereisen et al. (2019) in their investigation of TV consumption practices.<sup>5</sup> The authors emphasize the social element

<sup>5</sup> The authors’ focus is on ‘emerging adults,’ which are consistent with the students in our interviews and focus groups. Through the use of a practice-theory-based lens, Feiereisen et al. (2019) investigate how the transition to digital networks affects the consumption patterns of emerging adults, highlighting the misalignments in the practice configuration of TV consumption caused by digitalization. This theory emphasizes how objects, meanings, and practices change in digital consumption.

of TV consumption, with TV historically acting as a shared experience (e.g., communal watching, water-cooler discussions). In the digital age, this socialization becomes fragmented, with viewers watching at different times or engaging more asynchronously in online communities. In our research, the decline in shared ritualistic viewing practices is echoed. This could be seen as a breakdown of the social fabric of TV consumption—where individuals no longer gather to watch the same series at the same time, and instead experience series alone or as part of isolated digital interactions. In this context, series fatigue could be understood as partly due to the loss of structured, social rituals, which were historically mediated by linear TV. Fans and non-fan viewers are forced to realign their social practices— and some successfully do so, for example, by joining livestreams online, which do allow for synchronous viewing experiences and a sense of community by means of a shared digital space. But others do not manage to stabilize their social practices, leading to experiences of frustration and disengagement as described in our research.

### Media conditions and contexts

Many interviewees made statements about the functioning and characteristics of media, which we assigned to the media level. In this context, both the media contexts in which reception occurred and specific instances to which the informants related or with which they expressed dissatisfaction became evident. For instance, reflections highlighted that the platform-based media landscape promotes individualized reception practices and shapes these practices through technical means. However, these technical mechanisms were often perceived as opaque. The challenging-to-navigate interfaces of streaming platforms and social media platforms were frequently cited as significant points of contact and sources of discontent: “It would help me [...], if the streaming services changed something about their interfaces, offered more information and were easier to navigate, and if the recommendations worked more reliably. This would also increase the perceived value of the items” (Jennifer). Numerous statements also engaged with reflections on distribution channels and models. These discussions included considerations of successive release processes or en bloc releases: “Because if it is like a weekly thing, it is a continuous thing, you are excited, you are watching it. Whereas if you have this batch release, as it is called, you have a lot to talk about right at the beginning and then it just flatlines” (Emil). Additionally, program television served as a comparative reference point in descriptions, either as a dreaded or nostalgically preferred reception environment that lightened the burden of decision-making: “I click back and forth between different channels, but it’s just FlowTV and I don’t have to do anything other than put my feet up and watch” (Thessa). It’s worth noting that this emphasis may be influenced by the sample of informants from media and communication studies backgrounds.

Nearly all informants mentioned the (often excessive) abundance of available content as characteristic of the current series landscape on streaming platforms: “And in the end it’s almost too much. Or it IS too much, I think. There’s too much to choose from” (Ellie). This abundance was accompanied by an almost inevitable repetition of narrative patterns or formats: “I’ve almost given up because I think it’s [all] the same. And there is no creativity in it” (Viggo). Notably, in the context of franchises, several informants discussed serialization as an economic strategy. Interviewees also emphasized that serial formats often faced disruptions due to production delays or outright cancellations, so they already expected series to be cancelled: “When I hear, oh, there’s this new Netflix series, it’s really great, and stuff like that. Well, it’s Netflix, it’ll never be finished” (William). “There are a lot of cancellations. I have a hard time



with that. Especially lately” (Kim). Consequently, many perceived a fleeting quality in the content they could access. This transience was partly linked to short availability but also evoked a sense of meaninglessness.

## Discussion: Watching series in an age of abundance

Most series viewers nowadays consume their favorite shows online. Borrowing a term from film theory, this is a significant change in the *dispositif* (cf. Foucault 1978; Baudry 1975), namely the arrangement, social embedding, and technical requirements of the medium, which is still partly, but no longer predominantly, distributed by broadcasters. This change of *dispositif* strongly impacts the reception behavior towards series. As streaming providers have long been producing and providing their own media formats, these new media frameworks also give rise to new media practices and cultural consequences that are linked to series consumption. This is reflected in our sample: navigating the offer across several platforms; finding a convenient time for reception, selecting the product and the quantity of the consumed good (individual episodes or season binge?), coordinating with others who should also watch and with whom exchange is wanted—all these are new, time-consuming requirements that do not hold any gratification other than setting the stage for consumption.

The reasons, factors, and affects of series fatigue mentioned by our informants cover a wide range; at the same time, certain statements can be found in different forms among many, sometimes even all, interviewees. For example, all interviewees described the aspect of being overwhelmed by series in combination with decision-making problems and a certain capitulation in one form or another: “There is too much to choose from. You just sit and look back and forth: And I can watch that, too, I can watch that, too. But then you end up not watching anything because there is a sea of choices” (Viggo). Another interviewee confirms this but frames avoidance as a more positive decision: “Watching a series is something very important to me, something that requires attention and time. [...] Within a world of possibilities, sometimes not choosing anything makes it much easier” (Victoria). Yet another one also stresses feeling overwhelmed and even alienated by the availability of material that visibly took decades to be produced but could now be consumed at once: “The moment when I saw on Disney+ that there are now 18 seasons of [*Grey’s Anatomy*] was a very strange one. Both seeing the actors in the same place, young and noticeably older, and the impression that I, too, would be investing at least a significant part of my life here [...] it was a bit of a shock. I was literally overwhelmed by the number of seasons and can’t bring myself to start” (Sophie).

### Dealing with too much content

The interviewees had developed or adopted concrete practices meeting these new excessive demands the streaming landscape confronted them with. According to the participants, there are apparently relatively established strategies for managing series consumption, and these are dependent on technical aids, namely apps and lists: “I have a Google Keep Notes where I put different genres and where it comes from and all that stuff. Then I have a list at the bottom which series [...] I have watched” (Saga). One person reported that they often followed several series in parallel: “And then I also have a word document where there are both which series I am currently watching, and which series I would like to watch next. Because that watchlist on IMDb got way too big. [...] So there I have made a smaller watchlist, which is a

watch-soon list. And then I have a ranking [...] of 150 series I've watched at least one season of. [...] And then, in addition to that, I also have an app [trackt.tv] where it tracks one's progress, so that when a new episode comes in, for example, it comes in, then there is a small checkbox, that you can check: I have watched it. And then it updates when there are new episodes and stuff like that" (Erik). Another person who also used an app to keep track of their series was stunned when they realized how many series they had started watching but never finished: "When I look at my series app, which I use to know where I am in each production, I am startled by the number of series I started and never finished" (Victoria).

As a second interesting coping mechanism and in comparing our own and the reception practices mentioned by the interviewees, we noticed 'vicarious viewing' or 'viewing by proxy'. What we mean by this is that you ask others to tell you (in detail) what they have watched so that you are in the picture yourself and can either join a discussion based on this knowledge or decide whether you might start watching a series yourself after all: "I've just realized that retelling series plays a bigger role than it used to. Sometimes it's a kind of vicarious viewing—you're informed, you know enough about it to be able to pass on the recommendation yourself, if necessary, but you haven't invested the time of watching it yourself" (Sophie). Viewing by proxy implies a lack of personal viewing because the knowledge of the other person is sufficient to satisfy one's own curiosity or to get a basic overview of the respective content. It is noteworthy that media scholars were particularly familiar with this reception mode—to us it seemed to be comparable to reading academic reviews when you want to get an overview of the research landscape.

### The scarce resource of time

An important factor in the rejection of long-running serial formats was the viewers' age and their respective life situation. The older and employed people in the sample, particularly those with care responsibilities, stated that they were less intensely involved with series than they had been in the past, and were also less engaged in fan cultural follow-up communication. Peter mentions: "The older I get [...] I have become much more selective with the time I invest in watching series for many good reasons." Others prioritise—"Now that I'm working, I want to use my free time as efficiently as possible and really only watch series that I'm passionate about. My life or my spare time is too short" (Martha)—or limit further engagement after consumption: "I haven't read or even written fan fictions for more than 10 years, for example" (Jennifer). While watching series was also mentioned positively by these respondents, for example as a particularly valuable leisure time or 'reward' in the evening, there were clearly more competing activities or obligations to which they attached more importance: family time and time with friends and partners were strong priorities, which also often led to compromises or decisions in favor of shorter and more self-contained formats such as feature films or mini-series when making reception decisions. This observation is also confirmed outside of our sample, with German director Christian Petzold describing his own fatigue with the serial format in an interview with the German Press Agency dpa, also referring to the reference value of a limited lifespan as well as to a lack of novelty and quality in the content produced. Although he had welcomed that series had made it possible to do novels more justice when filming them, he has nevertheless since grown tired of series: "It's no longer about telling a novel but about extending a short story over and over again. And that takes up too much of my life" (dpa 2020). He specifically criticizes the economic calculation of series



production and the flattening of content that went hand in hand with it, often too many seasons were produced.

This artistic value judgement is contrasted by the pragmatic reasons of the interviewees, some of whom simply cannot find room for series with their everyday organization. Thessa, for example, stated that an exciting series always meant that she has to watch it in one go, a mode which she could not integrate into her everyday life during the week. Two episodes in the evening simply would not suffice and she would not be able to stand the suspense until the next evening. Alternatively, this meant that nothing else could take place at the weekend because then was the only time she could binge-watch a whole season, which had to be carefully considered and coordinated with others. In times of media overload, streaming offerings suggest (even more than the DVD box sets of the past) the binge-watching mode of reception, not only as an excessively pleasurable cultural practice but also as a strategy to be able to follow the abundance of material at all (cf. also Miyake 2021; Al-Heeti 2022).

### Feelings of patronization and exploitation

Many statements reveal an implicit or explicit criticism of the platforms' organization or design. Several respondents expressed the wish for a simplified offering—there are simply too many providers and the respective interfaces are not convincing: “The amount of platforms is also suffocating. Until today, I haven't been able to watch all the MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe] series on Disney Plus because when I think about opening the Disney app, I already give up because there's a lot of information on the display, [...] the navigation leads me in a way that I get lost in a big metaphorical hyperlink” (Victoria). Furthermore, there were several informants commenting on their discontent with platform algorithms as self-determined consumption has been challenged by the implemented recommendation algorithms of the platforms offering media products: what seems available only represents what has been chosen for you.

A frequent criticism was also that watching series felt like *work* as there were new requirements for self-organization and management of leisure media consumption. When entertainment has to be paid for in both money and time, annoyance and fatigue become much more likely. The article by Rosenberger quoted at the beginning also criticizes the exploitation of subscribers, as viewers “have to subscribe to entire services just because they have *one* interesting format there, for reasons of exclusivity and money” (Rosenberger 2019).

Similarly, transmedia narrative strategies, from which platforms benefit greatly, were also criticized; the impression arises that narrative universes all too obviously only serve to prolong consumption, which thus loses its voluntary nature, as one informant states: “The ultra serialization of the MCU, for example, is distressing because people no longer watch it for pleasure but rather because the level of seriality forces people to be updated or they won't be able to understand a production they really like. For example, I watched the series *Wanda Vision* and that's why I was able to understand Wanda's plot on *Doctor Strange 2*” (Victoria).

One aspect was met with ambiguous feedback: Interviewees showed frustration with some platforms' decisions to artificially shorten the supply of material, by releasing it on a weekly basis or building in waiting periods, for example by delaying the release of a series finale, contrary to the actual on-demand concept. They perceived this as a financially motivated and rather patronizing act. However, while most informants appreciated that watching content was no longer dependent on the rules of linear television, where episodes are released week-by-week, a significant number of them experienced watching series

in a platform environment as too exhausting as it required the mentioned new and quite extensive techniques of (self-)organization and administration. This group even became nostalgic of linear television, as it helped them with decision-making by limiting choices. Another reason they became rather pro-TV again was that they were annoyed by the fact that they hardly ever found people with whom they could talk about what they had just watched. For them, losing contact with a community of other viewers was a big downside to binge-watching content online.

However, all too often, interviewees had the feeling that they must *watch in a certain way* within the platform logic, namely as soon as possible after the release of a product so that the ratings are good enough to justify a continuation of the series. However, the fact that many series are still cancelled after the first season leads to a mode of cautious viewing that anticipates the cancellation. For this reason, one interviewee only gives a series a chance for two episodes: "If I feel that the show is not good enough in the first or second episode, I will not keep watching, because I will think that the show will be cancelled" (Victoria).

Fans' strategies of dealing with the incompleteness of a serialized text or with the dissatisfaction with a serial text have been analyzed and conceptualized by Rebecca Williams (2015) in her groundbreaking work on 'post-object fandom.' From a comprehensive cross-fandom analysis of user comments online, Williams worked out the predominant reactions of fans to the cancellation of a series or the death of a series character: here, fans often reassured themselves of the significance of their fan object for their own development and identity through repeated reception rituals and acts of public mourning (cf. Williams 2015, pp.79-101); others, however, in what Williams calls the 'rejection discourse,' turned away from the serial text (cf. Williams 2015, pp.103-123), ultimately becoming non- or anti-fans (cf. Gray 2003). With our informants, it seemed that the space for such mourning rituals was shrinking because people hardly became invested in the first place, to avoid disappointment later. And as time is getting scarcer and scarcer, even antifandom seems to require too much energy from the overwhelmed viewer.

As Paul Tassi describes in *Forbes Magazine*, Netflix is causing a 'self-fulfilling loop' of cancelled products precisely through such suggested behavior and is thus damaging its own project of a good series catalogue on demand: "since you *know* that Netflix cancels so many shows after one or two seasons [...] you hold off watching new shows, even ones you might otherwise be interested in, because you're afraid Netflix will cancel them. *Enough* people do this and surprise, viewership is low! And the show ends up cancelled. The loop is closed, and reinforced" (Tassi 2023). In the same article, Tassi informed his readers that Amazon intended to make Prime customers pay extra for not being shown adverts from 2024 on, which has now been implemented. The company, known for its brutal treatment of workers and massive obstruction of trade union work, clearly demonstrates the power relations on the market for cultural goods: according to Maren Lickhardt (2023), "cultural artefacts are not only offered by the film and television industry, the cultural industry, but are simply owned by them and can therefore be withdrawn or modified at any time" (p.34). Here, the autonomy lies entirely with the providers, and subscribers are dependent on the offer.

## Historical parallels

The fact that an increase in media offerings leads to irritation among users is not a completely new phenomenon and is not only to be found in digital, platformed contexts. Rather, it has historical predecessors that convey similar conflicts to us and thus may provide important clues for the interpretation



of our phenomenon. One of these should be highlighted here in particular: the gradual worldwide introduction of cable television, which enabled a significant broadening of the range of programs on offer. The introduction of cable television (in the form of the provision of additional program) took place in the USA in the years 1966-1972 (cf. Engelman 1990). It took a little longer until it was available in European countries, e.g., in Denmark, it was only in the 1980s that it became the preferred method of television reception, and it was not introduced in (West-)Germany until 1984.

In 1981, Peter Herrndorf, General Manager of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, described with concern what he saw happening in the United States spilling over into Canada: soon viewers would have 70 to 80 channels to choose from. In general, the industry was moving towards “user pay” and “convenience television,” with “pay TV and the advent of video disks being good examples of this trend” (Herrndorf 1981, p.1052). Herrndorf predicted a “tremendous growth in viewer choice,” but was worried that the market would only be flooded with American content (p.1051). His, of course, was an industry perspective, and it would take at least a decade until there would be scholarly assessments of what this change meant for audiences (cf. e.g., Becker/Schoenbach 1989). In 1989, Joseph Mallory Wober from the Independent Broadcasting Authority (London, UK) concluded that it was now more difficult for individual series to become really successful: “A multiplicity of channels certainly makes it more difficult for series to achieve the kind of pre-eminence of the past. Such a status is aided by the greater visibility afforded when there are but a few channels from which to choose” (p.106).

While there was a lot of market uncertainty, there were also lots of advantages for viewers. In a 1993 study, Sug-Min Youn positively pointed out that the new availability of larger amounts of media through such program expansions was also accompanied by viewer empowerment, which aligns well with cultural studies viewpoints from the early 1990s: “As more and more programs become available through the development of cable, television viewers tend to move from being passive, uninformed viewers of what is offered to active, informed viewers, presumably to cope with the increasing complexity” (Youn 1993, p.21). However, this empowerment did not come without a price: cable TV’s offerings inspired more activity from the viewers’ part because it confronted them with a new organizational (and potentially tedious) task. Like our informants with their tracking apps and lists, cable television viewers got help from (then) new technology in managing their task of navigating more and more content: they were assisted by teletext, by new devices like VCR recorders, and by new print media, like elaborate TV guides, which often highlighted recommendations and provided programming codes for video recorders (e.g., ShowView numbers) (cf. Chamberlain 2011). VCR recorders also served the purpose of giving viewers “greater control over when to watch television programs and films” (Gunter 1989, p.84). Jenner (2019) stresses the cultural importance of a new device like the remote control in this context:

[T]he 1980s saw an extension of available channels and remote controls that enabled viewers to switch easily between vast numbers of channels as well as between technologies like VCRs and video game consoles. Channel-surfing, or a version thereof, was possible before the 1980s and of course is technically possible without a remote control. Yet, the RCD arguably helped it to become a common, even necessary, media practice to manage an ever-increasing number of TV channels. RCDs were originally introduced as a way to subvert commercial television by allowing viewers to change channels during ad breaks. [...] Nevertheless, in popular discourse, RCDs quickly lost their disruptive qualities and became symbols of subjugation rather than subversion [...]. (Jenner 2019, p.299)

This example inspires us to reflect upon the subversive or subjugating technologies and practices that are assisting users with the navigation of nowadays' masses of serial content. While apps tracking serial consumption, like the ones mentioned by our informants, may be helpful tools not to miss out on any important content, in the future they may also be regarded as indicators of users losing pleasure and getting increasingly into an administrative role managing their leisure time.

In addition to the obvious advantages that arose for users from the expanded range of cable TV programming, such as a greater possibility of individualization, there were also a number of difficulties that arose from the new setting: viewers had to make decisions much more frequently than before as more content vied for attention. Films and series were no longer scarce resources but the viewer's availability at the time of broadcasting became a challenge; content could be missed all too easily, and there was often at least one other interesting program running at the same time. The introduction of video stores, private video and DVD libraries, and DVD box sets for series may be interpreted as a solution to one of the problems of cable TV as they created a synchronicity between medium and user that was finally more in line with the needs of the viewer. However, they also produced their own challenges, as in the well-stocked premises of many a video store, viewers found themselves facing myriad options, just like today when navigating the interface of a streaming platform. Gunter states that the "most serious problem people had with their home videos was lacking the time to view all of the programs that they had taped" (1989, p.84). At least—much different than today—people who built their own tape libraries did not have to fear that access to the content they had recorded could be denied. The latter can only be achieved by forms of piracy today as streaming platforms only license access to content and usage is only allowed within the platform environment.

What the current and the historical situation have in common is that a) a new abundance of consumable media creates unforeseen forms of competition over the scarce time and attention of viewers, b) this creates a necessity for viewers to make decisions considerably more often than before, and c) that viewers—despite their many options—do not only feel independent and empowered in their choices but also overwhelmed.

### Decision frequency and decision fatigue

It may not come as a surprise that reviewing psychological literature about situations in which decision making leads to stress or other discomfort brings to light a number of concepts that can also be used to describe aspects of series fatigue. These include "decision fatigue" (Pignatiello et al. 2018), "choice fatigue" (Wang et al. 2023), "choice overload" or "decision avoidance" (Anderson 2003), as well as "choice deferral" (Dhar 1997), each of which addresses the aspect of *decision frequency* as problematic. These concepts and terms were coined in very different contexts—for example in the healthcare sector, where nursing staff often have to make quick decisions under precarious conditions, but also in the context of voting behavior or—most relevant for us—in the context of consumer or purchasing decisions. A laboratory study (with people making decisions over consumer goods or college courses) showed that having to make many decisions in a row impairs a person's general well-being: "Making choices led to reduced self-control (i.e. less physical stamina, less endurance in the face of failure, more procrastination and lower quality and quantity of arithmetic calculations)" (Vohs et al. 2008, p.883). Here, the authors speak of a special capacity that humans have developed to control decisions but which is limited ("Our results suggest that the formation of the human self was about finding a way to create an energy resource that



could be used to control actions in this advanced and expensive way. Given the difficulty of these types of action control, the resource is shared and limited” (Vohs et al. 2008, p.897). This idea fits well with our observation of series fatigue and suggests that in many cases its occurrence could be at least partly due to decision fatigue or a lack of the necessary energy to control decisions.

## Conclusion

Most of our respondents have not completely stopped watching series, but they regulate, manage, and select them to a much greater extent than at an earlier point in their lives. When a series that they had begun watching proved disappointing, viewers took different approaches: some permanently discontinued watching it and replaced it with another series. Others temporarily interrupted viewing, possibly resuming later if positive reviews from others emerged. Voluntary breaks were also mentioned, allowing time for content processing despite the availability of additional material. If the series experience became overly negative, some participants avoided certain types of series or turned to alternative media formats, such as mini-series or films. These alternative formats were perceived as more contained.

There were also a number of discontents with the *dispositif* of platform-based series watching. Several informants expressed difficulty in finding like-minded individuals for stress-free discussions about series. To address this, some viewers participated in live broadcasts, which relieved them of the burden of decision-making and allowed them to synchronize their viewing experience with a reception community. Regarding perceived manipulation by platform operators to encourage subscriptions, some viewers responded with deviant behavior, such as piracy and account sharing. Reading fan fiction served as a coping mechanism for some: when dissatisfied with a series outcome, they sought alternative narratives through fan-created content.

Based on our explorations we would like to propose a provisional definition of series fatigue:

*Series fatigue is a mode of strong selection, reduction, and sometimes complete avoidance of series consumption (often in favor of shorter, non-serial, or live media formats). The phenomenon is not to be understood exclusively but primarily against the backdrop of an excessive number of series offered via streaming platforms, which causes recipients to feel overwhelmed, oversaturated, disappointed with, or even resistant to common distribution patterns and market players.*

For many, streaming-based viewing implies the mode of binge-watching. Some of the criticism levelled at series, such as the observation of physical fatigue or conflicts with a social environment, can thus be categorized as part of a general criticism of binge-watching, and as such it has recently been comprehensively and illuminatingly discussed by Lickhardt (2023). Beyond this aspect, however, there is a complication of fandom that seems to be caused by platform-based offerings and availability as streaming-based individual consumption is characterized above all by its de-ritualization. And the social gatherings for sharing a common series of choice are fleeting and purpose-driven, often purely digital, hashtag-based at best but without memberships or other markers or places of belonging. Some of the interviewees stated that they deliberately no longer engage in a strong passionate involvement with products—as represented by fandom—in the long term, especially if the outcome of a series or its continuation is still unclear. They often consume several series in parallel and are generally used to moving on to new cultural products when others are unavailable due to production or distribution reasons.

In 2005, Matt Hills described a similar kind of 'product nomadism' in detail. It is significant that the first time this kind of individual fan cultural behaviour became apparent, it was linked to the recommendation-based sales platform Amazon that suggested products based on earlier purchases. Hills described how this environment stimulated short but rather intense engagements with cultural products, like a series of fan cultural encounters with different objects. Hills called it *cyclical fandom* because the fan he interviewed went through a number of stages over and over again, from discovery to purchase to indulgence, and then again following recommendations and hunting for new discoveries. The individualized recommendation mechanism stimulated enthusiasm for media products entirely without a community as this consumption mode was way too fast and too individual for community building or fan cultural exchange to happen. It is difficult to prove, but it seems reasonable to assume that today's series fatigue could reflect the exhaustion of such a nomadic, ultimately algorithm-based fandom that is not shared with a group of likeminded peers. Perhaps an individualized and de-ritualized fandom lacks community in the long run?<sup>6</sup>

We thus understand this first and exploratory evidence as indicative of users' discontent with platform-oriented media distribution. The abundance of available series online cannot distract from the fact that viewing conditions have changed in a way that makes watching them less enjoyable for some (we'd very much welcome a quantitative study to back up this claim with numbers). While our data show that the reasons for fatigue or avoidance are quite diverse, we think it important to stress that while streaming platforms may have been successful at intensifying the individual viewing experience, they clearly have not yet managed to stimulate or support shared fandom due to a number of isolating factors: asynchronous but excessive viewing practices on too many different platforms actively hinder community.

"The ultimate ending," reflects Kristina Busse (2018), "may indeed not be the moment a producer angers, a writer disappoints, a music or sports star misbehaves, a character dies, or our community shatters into pieces, but rather the moment we stop caring about it" (p.218). It also makes sense to return to Brennan's idea of a 'television-as-lover' fandom (in which the fan-text relationship is discussed as similar to a relationship with a person, based on trust and at least a perceived degree of reciprocity) and to consider the disillusionment that goes hand in hand with the marketisation of the relationships on offer that characterises the current series landscape (cf. Brennan 2018). A comparison with the situation of online dating, which promises countless new encounters but calls into question the long-term nature and reliability of the relationship entered into, seems quite fitting.

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<sup>6</sup> However, it goes without saying that companies such as Netflix or Amazon prefer their subscribers dependent on *them* and thus possibly also without too strong a connection to *each other* because this could easily lead to organized boycotts or other severe backlash to production or distribution practices. Notorious for their obstruction of union work, these corporations constantly raise prices and fight against account sharing in an increasingly dominant way—it does not seem to be in their interest that the spaces for criticism and organization that are traditionally found in fandom will emerge.



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