In a time when the health and safety of global populations depends on a shared willingness to #StayTheFuck-Home, practices of binge-watching have taken on a series of strange new resonances. Amongst these is a surprising logic that has cast binge-watching as a form of civic duty in the context of COVID-19. The reinvention of the televisual binge as an expression of social solidarity has taken shape within a wider ecology of networked media forms and practices, which have similarly reinforced a relationship between staying home, staying connected, and staying safe. At the heart of this new assemblage of networked viewing practices is the thorny problem of lockdown boredom. The popular short-form video social platform TikTok in particular has been constructed as the ideal antidote for COVID malaise, widely embraced as the...
“perfect medium for the splintered attention spans of lockdown.” Moreover, TikTok has managed to position itself as the paradigmatic model of what good, responsible media engagement might look like in the context of a global health crisis. It has done so, in part, by tapping into the pleasures associated with the televisual binge model and repurposing them for the strange temporalities and persistent tedium of #LockdownLife.

**Bingeing in the Time of COVID-19**

Back in March 2020, one sentiment that was echoed across a range of media contexts was a sense of thinly veiled delight at the prospect that #stayhome restrictions had freed some students and nonessential workers to indulge in epic stints of binge-watching hitherto incompatible with the rhythms of daily life. In many internet memes that circulated in this context, the pleasures of binge-watching were routinely imagined as the silver lining of the cloud cast by the pandemic. One popular quarantine meme establishes a tongue-in-cheek parallel between an older generation who were called to war, and a new generation of conscripts who have been “called to sit on the couch” to selflessly perform their patriotic duty through binge-watching Netflix. In another, The Office’s Dwight Schrute—a character frequently mobilized by meme creators for his “realist and survivalist” worldview—appears alongside the caption “I don’t need the Government to tell me to stay at home all day watching TV.” Binge-watching works so well in this context because it responds to a uniquely distressful situation of stickiness and constraint felt en masse during quarantine by providing a feeling of comfort and safety, and an incitement to embrace the freedom from restrictions on viewing time normally imposed by routines of work and school.

What this pandemic has exposed and intensified is the pivotal role that the paradigm of binge-watching plays in the wider policing, management, and control of bodies and minds in the context of what philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls “digital psychopolitics.” Han suggests that power in this regime passes through neoliberal “performance subjects” who have internalized the demand to constantly manage and optimize their emotions, well-being, and general health. Crucially, this psycho-power is underwritten by an ethos of positivity, an incitement to continuous pleasure through digital consumption, and a fantasy that offers freedom from limits and constraints of any kind. Such fantasies of limitless freedom have been brought into jarring contrast with the newfound restrictions and negatives of #LockdownLife. The concept of binge-watching helps to assuage these feelings by producing the illusion of unfettered freedom—to move through space and time, to binge without limits—from within the cramped space-time of lockdown.

Later, however, this secret glee would shade into a creeping anxiety about whether there is enough TV to stave off the boredom of lockdown, as exemplified in a series of quarantine-related memes that congratulate viewers for having “completed Netflix.” These and similar memes poke fun at the dread of exhausting all binge-worthy media by recasting the streaming platform as a game-based challenge that the dedicated viewer has regrettably completed. As the pandemic has progressed, the initial sense of veiled contentment has slid into exhaustion, boredom, despair, and the realization that the vaunted freedom to binge-watch is perhaps not all that it was imagined to be. A Family Guy meme, “Coronavirus Quarantine—Day 23: Skin Fused to Couch,” offers a playful but grim recognition of the limits of bingeing as a long-term strategy, calling attention in particular to the state of abject inertia that the practice of binge-watching both demands and aims to assuage.

This point in the lockdown, when the pleasure of bingeing collapses into desperation and burnout, maps onto what Han calls the “violence of positivity,” a state that emerges not only when there is “too little” freedom—for example, the freedom of choice and time that binge-watching implies—but also when there is “too much.” The “positivity of the ability to do everything” transforms freedom into compulsion. Heeding this incitement to limitless pleasure, the performance subject of digital capitalism “exploits itself until it collapses completely,” leading to burnout, depression, and more boredom.

**Bingeing’s Bored Body Problem**

While the paradigm of binge-watching is in some senses tailor-made for the situation of lockdown, at some point, it eventually comes up against what I am calling “the bored body problem.” At stake here is not just the issue of what to do with one’s own body when freedom of movement has been severely curtailed, but, more pointedly, the problem posed by any human body’s threshold for sustained attentive engagement. This bored body problem is heightened within contexts of spatiotemporal restriction, as McKenzie Wark suggests:

> Boredom is not doing nothing. Boredom is something a body does when space will not let the body enter it in a way that transforms the body into something else,
so that the body can forget itself. . . . If the triggers in space always point toward the same possibilities, just under different signs, then boredom inevitably returns.  

Moral panics around the paradigm of bingeing have long called on the dangers that protracted bingeing might imply for physical and mental well-being. This bored body problem becomes even more intractable in the context of lockdown, though, because it is the central problem of lockdown: how should individuals organize their daily routines to optimize themselves physically and mentally for the hard task of days, weeks, and months spent in quarantine?  

Media reports have regularly speculated that the bored body problem might motivate mass flouting of lockdown restrictions and spark subsequent waves of the pandemic. During the height of the third lockdown in the United Kingdom, for instance, news headlines such as “Covidiots Drive 150 Miles Because ‘Lockdown Is Boring’ and Get Car Seized by Police” presented lockdown breaking as a criminal offense as well as an act of egregious stupidity, with a clear tone of derision aimed at those unable to properly manage the tedium of lockdown life. Boredom management has thus been framed as a major problem in the context of COVID-19, not only an issue of individual well-being but suddenly a matter of public health and the public good as well.  

Social-media platforms such as TikTok thrive alongside traditional video-streaming platforms in such a moment because they offer a means of working through a series of thorny tensions that speak to the condition of lockdown: tensions between limitation and freedom, between staying put and staying entertained, and between the collective labors of civic duty and the solipsistic pleasures of digital connectivity and performative play. As one of the most frequently downloaded and used technologies of the pandemic, TikTok has played a key role in shaping the embodied and affective experience of lockdown, working

The limits of long-term binge-watching, in Family Guy.
as a privileged site through which the feelings of stuckness and restriction that boredom indexes are acknowledged and worked through.

TikTok is best known for its hashtag-propelled participatory challenges, which encourage TikTokers to perform their boredom. A prime example is the “Bored in the House” TikTok that was uploaded to the platform on March 4, 2020, by Detroit-based musician and TikToker Chris Roach. Described as “the perfect anthem for lockdown,” the track has been used in over 4.1 million videos and counting since Roach’s original upload, due in part to the track’s selection as the inspiration for TikTok’s official #BoredVibes hashtag challenge on April 3, 2020. While there are variations across these #BoredVibes TikToks, a common denominator is that they picture people, mostly in domestic settings, performing or poking fun at lockdown boredom. What TikTok offers through its #BoredVibes challenge is a means of releasing the cramped stickiness of boredom into the rhythms and flows of contagious memetic participation.

**Binge-Scrolling: TikTok and the Rhythms of Pandemic Time**

Beyond an incitement to shake off the lethargy of lockdown through dance and stunt challenges, TikTok has also sought to address the bored body problem through an appeal to the concept of the social-media binge. While scholarship has tended to emphasize the performative aspects of content creation on TikTok, it is also vital to explore how the platform has sought to position itself in relation to the pleasures of content browsing. As Shreya Sudarshana and Jonathan Zhou note, a key component of TikTok’s success is “its ability to cater to lurkers—silent users that consume but rarely create content. Lurkers play a critical role in the success of social applications and TikTok has been able to solve lurker challenge is a means of releasing the cramped stickiness of boredom into the rhythms and flows of contagious memetic participation.

As one indication of TikTok’s success in this endeavor, it is noteworthy that in July 2020, Netflix listed TikTok as a major competitor in a letter to its shareholders, and that this is the first time that the streaming platform has singled out any social-media platform as a competitor. What this suggests is that binge-watching operates across a spectrum of media forms and practices, encompassing diverse speeds and rhythms of engagement, absorption, distraction, and immersion. As Susanna Paasonen points out, in a digital-media ecology, “[o]ne can move restlessly within and between sites in search for something to momentarily alleviate boredom, enjoy intensive marathon-like sprees of binge-watching entire seasons of series on Netflix, spend hours crafting a perfect mash-up video to be shared on YouTube, or engage in online multiplayer gaming sessions of Fortnite requiring hours of sustained, repeated attention.” Within such a continuum, binge-scrolling represents one specific way of managing boredom, organizing attention, and interfacing with the strange temporalities of lockdown.

During the pandemic, TikTok has increasingly aligned its brand with the pleasures of scrolling, drawing on the nascent concept of the social-media binge as a means of explaining and selling itself to users. For example, during the global quarantines in May, June, and July 2020, TikTok’s US Community newsroom began to compile lists of trending hashtags and videos with the headline “TikTok’s Monthly Trends to Binge.” These newsletters capitalize on the binge model to promote the pleasures of scrolling during lockdown as central to the app. Referring to the trends that have allowed users to “stay active and express themselves by using the daily tasks of staying home, watching TV, and playing videogames as the source of inspiration,” these press releases emphasize binge-scrolling as both a form of collective social solidarity and a source of pleasure: the pleasure of watching each other—and of watching each other binge-watching—via TikTok.

Similarly, the popular press has consolidated the TikTok binge as a vital lockdown coping mechanism. Vulture writer Rebecca Alter writes about the pleasures of getting “lost in the endless scroll for hours, maybe days on end. . . . Maybe you’ll try to teach yourself how to do the Renegade if you’re feeling up for it, or do the ‘walk a mile in these Louboutins’ meme where you put oven mitts on your feet and pretend like they’re designer, because, look, it gets boring when you’re cooled up at home.” At stake in TikTok binge-scrolling is the desire for a shared structure of feeling that is also an important appeal of pandemic television.

Endless scrolling as cultural practice does not just fill the tedium of pandemic time, for it also plays a vital role in providing access to a collective experience of the lived everyday of lockdown in which binge-scrolling is always potentialized as action, even if it isn’t acted upon. A TikTok binge thus addresses the body problem in a multiplicity of ways, synchronizing both bodies and eyeballs to the strange new rhythms of #LockdownLife.

In order to compete with on-demand entertainment, social-media companies such as TikTok have repurposed
televisual flow into the infinite scroll or stream. In a very direct way, the idea of such infinite scrolling echoes the apparent endlessness of on-demand television, but upgrades it into the limitless flow of social-media content. In this move, the fear of exhausting bingeworthy shows, of “completing Netflix,” is replaced by a fear of missing something from the never-ending stream. As Ludmila Lupinacci notes in her work on compulsory continuous connectedness, the infinite scroll operates “under the pressure that, at any time, something worthy of attention—something eventful—might happen, and that social media are the best available resource for us to keep track of this informational flux.”

This demand to remain connected is internalized not only as individual responsibility, but also as a sense of social duty, a need to stay informed and to react in real time.

Perhaps because the allure of a social-media platform like TikTok is based in large part on providing access to the ordinary lives of its community of users, it has been able to structure a relationship to the pandemic around a promise of making even the most boring moments of daily life under quarantine worthy of collective attention. In the context of COVID-19 lockdown, TikTok made boredom eventful through the promotion of boredom-specific hashtag challenges that potentialized the scroll as a set of scripted actions that might—or might not—propel the bored body into action. But it also made boredom eventful by framing binge-scrolling itself as a gesture of social responsibility in the context of the pandemic.

Through the #HouseOfTikTok and #HappyAtHome campaigns in the United Kingdom and the United States, the platform specifically tethered the goal of remaining entertained in the home to the wider effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. Both campaigns involved the launch of live-streaming content featuring a range of celebrities and creators to “entertain our users stuck in isolation.”

This shift involved a repositioning of the platform not just as an outlet for creativity, but as a streaming-entertainment provider and source of authoritative information—in other words, as a responsible partner in the battle against the coronavirus. The platform has thus linked the idea of compulsory TikTok scrolling to the collective values of staying home, staying connected, and staying safe in the context of the pandemic. By framing the user as both performative player and always-vigilant spectator, TikTok mobilizes boredom to contribute to the global effort to contain COVID-19, modeling examples of what idealized #StayHome citizenship looks like in an age of digital psychopolitics.

Notes


4. Han, 1.


7. Han, 89.


17. TikTok.


19. See Tanya Horeck’s essay elsewhere in this “Special Focus”


21. Lupinacci, 284.
