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UK Families Experiences of Film and TV... ...COVID and Beyond



Authors

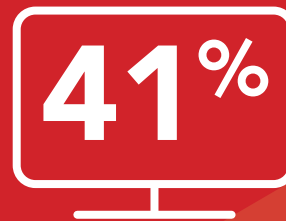
R.Clayton, C.Clayton and M.Potter



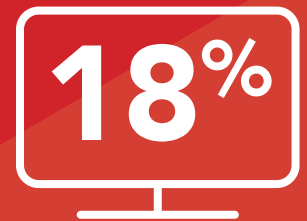
KEY FINDINGS

- Some parents and families considered streaming services as an essential aid to maintaining positive mental health during the lockdowns and beyond.
- Families often enjoyed new shared viewing experiences together, which they had not done prior to lockdown.
- Families sought new streaming options for various viewing reasons including: Replacing the cinema experience, wanting to watch more sport; wanting to occupy children's attention; wanting to create a social focus for the family; providing education [for all ages]; and also, to generally relieve boredom through more choice.
- Family members found that accessing and watching content on mobile devices was very common and convenient.
- Some children would explore streaming services unsupervised and binge watching became a concern.
- Some adults thought the amount of screentime they had become accustomed to during lockdown was very unhealthy. There was no government guidance on limits.
- Following lockdown it has emerged that people from lower social grades and people from the North are disproportionately using television screen more.

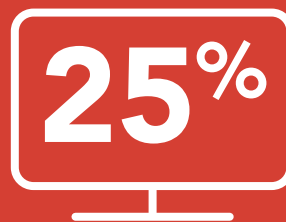
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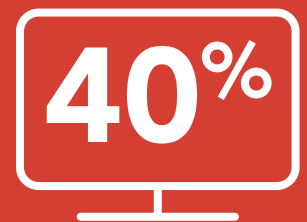
of those from higher social grades are considered light users of television screens and look at a television screen around 2 hours or less each day.



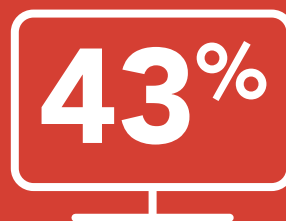
of those from lower social grades are considered light users of television screens and look at a television screen around 2 hours or less each day.



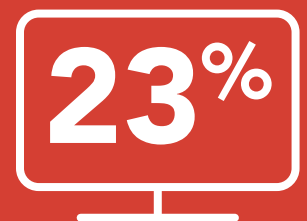
of those from higher social grades are considered heavy or extreme users of television screens and look at a television screen around 5 hours or more each day.



of those from lower social grades are considered heavy or extreme users of television screens and look at a television screen around 5 hours or more each day.



of Northerners are considered heavy or extreme users of television screens and look at a television screen around 5 hours or more each day.



of Southerners are considered heavy or extreme users of television screens and look at a television screen around 5 hours or more each day.



INTRODUCTION

Due to government restrictions, cinemas were closed in March 2020 and this rapidly accelerated the advancing trend of moving-image consumption taking place online (Gupta & Singharia 2021). Living under lockdown conditions and with the majority of British people [and many worldwide] having no option to watch movies other than within the home, the movie industry was unable to release its films through the normal theatrical channels (Sterritt 2020), leading to a significant pause in global production and distribution of movies (Stolworthy 2020; Ritman & Szalai 2021). British families surveyed as part of the British Families in Lockdown study, found themselves often watching film and TV that had been released before the pandemic. Some would look for cinematic entertainment by revisiting their personal DVD or Blu-Ray collections, however the majority made use of online services to access content. As a combined result, usage of online platforms and streaming services increased (Sweeney 2020).

STUDY INFORMATION

This report has been created through collaborative research between the University of Leeds and Leeds Trinity University across two national research studies in the UK.

The 'New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain' (NUSPB) study led by the University of Leeds investigated the current lived experiences of British people and how screen technologies may or may not have become more permanently integrated within their day-to-day lives as a result of the pandemic. Funded by Research England, NUSPB conducted a survey of 500 British adults who were purposively selected to be nationally representative in terms of age, gender, marital status, presence of children in the household, socio-economic group, ethnicity and region.

Based on a UK population of 67.22 million adults, our selection of 500 respondents ensured a 95% confidence level. The research builds upon a wider body of data collected during the pandemic as part of the 'British Families in Lockdown' study.

'British Families in Lockdown' (BFiL) is a Research England funded study led by Leeds Trinity University which investigates the day-to-day experiences of British families during the pandemic. Research started in March 2020 during the first national lockdown and is ongoing. Sixty parents from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in the first wave of semi-structured interviews, with purposively selected families being revisited to allow for follow up research. Family members have shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children's schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use during the UK three national lockdowns and beyond.

CONTEXT

Subscription-based video demand/SVOD services such as Netflix, transaction-based video on demand/TVOD services such as iTunes and advertisement-based video on demand/AVOD services such as YouTube are sometimes all collectively referred to as 'over-the-top' media/OTT. OTT is delivered to audiences via the internet as opposed to the historically dominant routes of public service broadcasting/PSB [such as BBC, ITV and Channel 4] and cable or satellite [such as BT, Virgin and Sky]. Global reports suggest that the coronavirus led to a direct impact on OTT, with increased use during imposed government lockdowns (Batool et al. 2020). Media consumption across all platforms increased during the pandemic (Vlassis 2021) which produced both positive and negative outcomes relating to individual's mental health and well-being. Whilst on the one hand, Covid-19 related information such as daily updates, health advice and prevention/intervention strategies were viewed as both reassuring and positive by individuals, and led to a reduction of disease transmission rates (Sahni and Sharma 2020); on the other hand, potential misinformation and conflicting messages around Covid-19 found within various media sources caused stress and uncertainty for individuals, with the potential to exacerbate negative mental health outcomes (Chao et al. 2020; Ebrahim et al. 2020; Liu 2020; Moreno et al. 2020). Social media was utilised to reach out to others for social support and connectedness when physical social contact was restricted, which combatted feelings of social isolation (Neill et al. 2021), however higher levels of social media use was also associated with an increased risk of anxiety and depression developing amongst individuals, particularly those with pre-existing conditions (Gao et al. 2020).

NEW PRESSURES FROM LOCKDOWN

The dominant message from the sampled families was that without streaming services, the lockdown experience would have been significantly more difficult, particularly since so many faced new and additional pressures.

Not only were people facing severe restrictions preventing them from leaving their home, travelling and meeting others, which led to social isolation and feelings of disconnection and entrapment, there were additional concerns about the health risks of being infected with coronavirus, job security, access to food, access to medication, well-being of others, children's education and for some, domestic conflicts. For those parents who were considered to be critical/key workers, they were permitted by the government to continue working outside of the home (Clayton et al. 2020b) and their children were offered school places. For these families there were often exceptional pressures and concerns including heightened fears of becoming infected with coronavirus and increased workloads.

The BFIL study found that UK families had dichotomic responses to being 'locked down', particularly during the initial restrictions, and families were either having largely positive experiences or largely negative experiences. The majority of families coped well, and in a significant number of cases they even thrived. However, a small number of families struggled, and this led to sometimes very negative outcomes including domestic violence and separation. The families that struggled most were those who had pre-existing support needs within the home, not least because the majority of social support stopped abruptly (Clayton et al. 2020c) at the start of the lockdowns. To exacerbate matters, some employers were unsupportive of parents who were now having to home school their children. In the worst cases, employers expected their workers [even those who had additional support needs] to increase productivity.

During the second lockdown, children were able to attend school, and this led to some employers again expecting an increase in productivity from their home working staff.

However, many parents found their children were being sent home for two weeks at a time due to coronavirus outbreaks at school. This led to children being in the home at the same time as parents who were being expected to work full time. Employer's expectations during the third lockdown seemed to increase again as more people became classed as critical/key workers. More school places were offered; however, the most vulnerable families were often left inadequately supported to balance work commitments and childcare (Clayton et al. 2020c). The pressures on parents having to work long hours coupled with their immediate childcare responsibilities, led to many families using streaming services to occupy, entertain and educate their children, often unsupervised. Throughout all three lockdowns, these trends continued and streaming services took on a variety of roles within the home for all the family, ranging from being an educational tool, to a therapeutic tool, to a childcare aid.

“Netflix? I don't think anyone could survive lockdown without it”

(Wesley, father, early twenties).





HOW ADULTS USED STREAMING SERVICES

A number of BFiL participants made the distinction between what they called 'normal TV' and streaming services/OTT. 'Normal TV' as a term appeared to refer to the national/domestic television public service broadcasters such as BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, but in some cases also included the additional channels received as part of an internet or cable connection package through Sky, Virgin, BT and similar. Other families did not seem to make a distinction between the sources of moving image content available to them and film and TV content providers were grouped together as one whole; irrespective of their PSB or OTT status.

None of the BFiL participants were watching less than before the lockdowns, and the majority of participants reported that they were watching more on both televisions and other screen devices. These findings were broadly consistent with the NUSPB survey data undertaken after the lockdowns, which identified that 51% of adults were using screens for leisure more than they did pre-pandemic. Specifically in terms of television screens, the NUSPB survey indicated that in 2022: 30% of UK adults looked at televisions for around 1-2 hours or less, 34% for around 3-4 hours, 21% for around 5-6 hours and 12% look at television screens for 7 hours or more. These figures are largely in accordance with average viewing times published by OFCOM over the past 20 years which indicate average viewing times of 3-4 hours per day.

The majority of BFiL participants felt they were watching television more, but statistical data from the NUSPB study suggests that any increase in use during the lockdowns has not impacted post-lockdown television viewing behaviours to any significant extent beyond those observed by OFCOM. It may be that increases in the consumption of films and TV have increased on smartphones, computers and tablets, but there is no reliable data on how TV and film consumption is experienced across different devices at present.

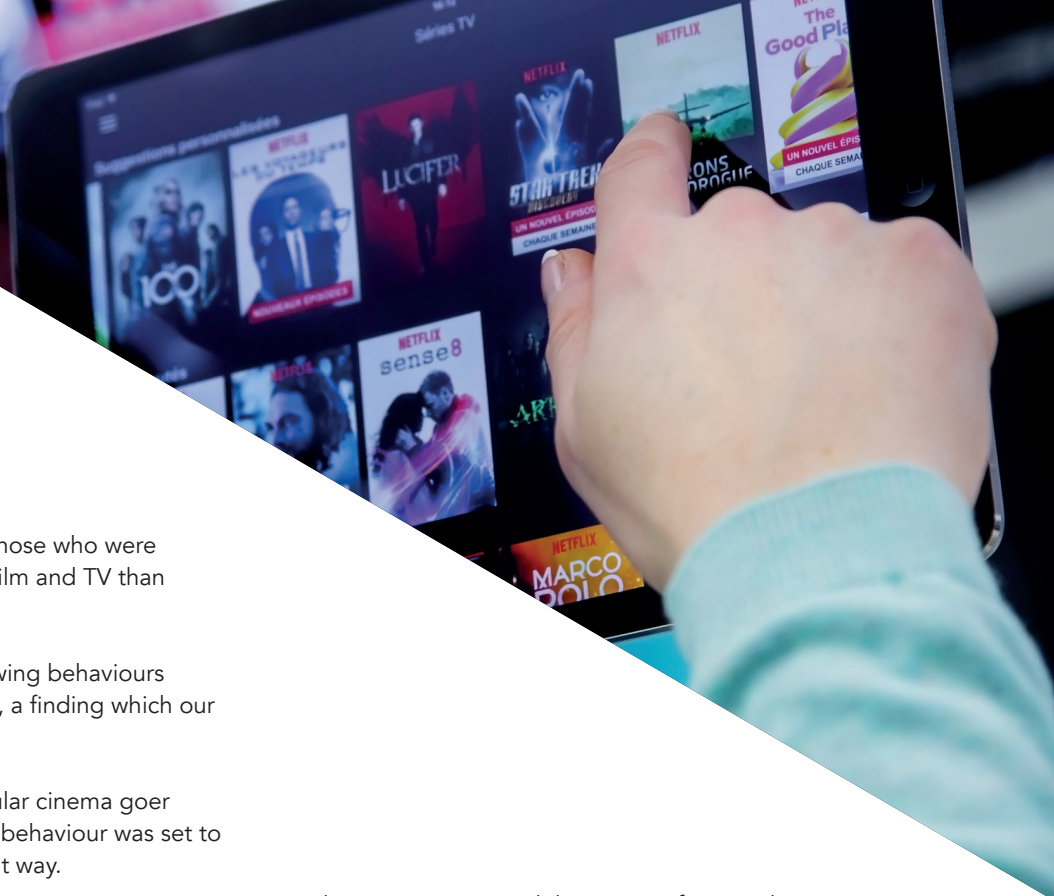
Generally, we found that within our sample there were three broad adult responses to questions about the amount of film and TV they were consuming:

- 1- Adults who felt they were watching the same amount of film and TV as before lockdown.
- 2- Adults who felt their consumption had increased but had not changed their existing [pre-lockdown] subscriptions.
- 3- Adults who felt their consumption had increased and had also invested in upgrading subscriptions or purchasing new subscriptions.

For the majority of the BFiL sample, there were two adults living in the household who were married or in a long-term relationship. From their accounts, we learned that viewing experiences were often shared between them and often seemed to reflect their working lives. Those who were considered to be key/critical workers and those who were expected to maintain productivity levels whilst working from home, seemed to watch the least TV and film.

“We use Netflix, and that’s what we’ve been using really, but that’s it. Usually on a weekend, usually in the evenings. I’m just shattered and just want to go to bed”

(Libby, mother, late twenties).



Whilst those who were out of work or those who were furloughed, they were watching more film and TV than those who were working.

Other studies have suggested that viewing behaviours increased during lockdown (GWI 2020), a finding which our data broadly supported.

One of the participants who was a regular cinema goer prior to lockdown felt his consumption behaviour was set to change permanently and in a significant way.

We also found that a small number of people felt lockdown had not increased their film and TV consumption. This was mainly due to lack of time [as described above with work priorities] or interests in other areas such as hobbies and other activities [e.g. exercising more]. Others were spending more time with those within their immediate household, playing traditional boardgames, going for family walks or using online media to facilitate regular contact with those outside of the home.

Each lockdown provided a slightly different national experience as restrictions changed, which subsequently had impacts on family dynamics and home structures. For example, in the first lockdown [the most restrictive of all], families without gardens were limiting themselves to an hour outside each day, with some families even choosing not to go outside at all, particularly for those from minority ethnic backgrounds, who were concerned about harassment from others given the news reports around COVID at the time (Clayton et al. 2020a).

Social isolation was a significant negative experience and as people adjusted to new ways of meeting and interacting with friends and family online through video conferencing, they also looked for further stimulation and positive experiences from within the home. Often this was through screens and the internet, but we also saw family members turning to each other more for support and interaction than had been the case prior to lockdown. Our study identified that many families experienced closer relationships forming with others in their household as they invested in shared bonding experiences including parents and children spending more time with each other.

When we interrogated the reasons for people consuming more moving-images during lockdown, boredom, bonding, a desire to be entertained and convenience seem to have been the key influencing factors. Those who expressed a lifelong love of films spoke about how Netflix had replaced the gap in their life caused by cinema closures. The buzz usually created around cinema releases in the media shifted towards a buzz over new releases on streaming services.

In the second lockdown, when children were still attending school, some parents found they had a lot more time on their hands. Whilst some viewing choices were shaped by peer influence and the media, others were led by the streaming service themselves.

However, most of our participants spoke of their moving-image consumption during lockdown as being closely connected to interpersonal relationships and often choices were born out of seeking mutually beneficial bonding experiences. Some parents now only watched TV and films that were suitable for their children to also enjoy as part of their family time and bonding experiences.

“I go on to Netflix and I look at the top ten trending films in aisle 10 or box sets, shall we say? And I will tend to immerse myself in one of those. And so I’m kind of fed what I watch”

(Mark, father, early forties).



BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS

Relationships between parents, between parents and children, and between siblings largely benefitted from them being able to share viewing experiences.

- These were usually spontaneous, collective family moments which participants recalled, although at other times these family moments were pre-planned and became regular events in the weekly calendar.
 - Some of these shared viewing experiences were considered to have had positive impacts on well-being and happiness by bringing the family closer together.
 - In a family where relationships had previously been strained between the parents and one child, they were able to find a common ground during lockdown by watching the child's favourite show on Netflix.
 - The child then reciprocated and took more interest in the parent's viewing choices.
- For some families, collective viewing became a ritualised event, in a way in which it was not before lockdown. Parents would recreate favourite take-aways [as a result of restaurants and take-aways being closed during the first lockdown] or buy in special snacks and drinks.
 - For couples who prior to lockdown saw comparatively little of each other due to long working hours, they found new ways to share not only the present, but also the past.
 - Family viewing experiences encouraged open dialogues between family members as they would reach agreement about what to watch. Arriving at shared decisions encouraged each member of the family to become more considerate of the others.
 - Parents also expressed concern about the impact that certain film content may have upon children. This did not always stop children watching challenging content but it presented parents with dilemmas of how they could contextualise what the children had been exposed to.
 - Not all families used moving-images for bonding, some did prefer to watch content separately from each other. Some adults allowed children to watch content on their own [unsupervised] in order to provide the adults with some personal time.

“A Bollywood movie. Which she’s taken interest in kind of Indian history and that’s close to my heart. Maharaja stories, before the moguls and you know”

(Solomon, father, early forties).

“On like a Saturday night, we’ve got it [Netflix] as a family thing... I’m making tea... we’ve been trying to like to make our own take away.... [our daughter] might do a bit of baking for it”

(Ariana, mother, late thirties).

HOW CHILDREN USED STREAMING SERVICES



Many parents experienced changing behaviours and attitudes towards their children's use of screen time as a direct result of their lockdown experiences. Screens became a more common feature of the households in general. Face-to-face communication was replaced by video conferencing, interactions with teachers were replaced by interactions with computers (Stauffer 2020), even sporting activities such as the Joe Wicks fitness classes were directed by people on screens. During the first lockdown with families spending so much time inside, it was particularly difficult for families and children to engage with the wider world unless it was through a screen.

- Whilst the majority of parents enjoyed spending more time with their children and undertook non-screen related activities such as baking, board games, walks, experiments, reading books, playing out in the garden and reading books, we did not experience any families who did not rely on screens to a significant degree.
- With children spending an increased amount of time in the family home and with the television taking a dominant and influential position in many front rooms, children have been reported as having engaged with streaming services often and sometimes without supervision. This was exacerbated if children had TVs or computers in their own rooms.
- Some children found themselves binge watching series on streaming services. This caused concern for some parents, particularly regarding the nature of the content and impacts on health.

- Children during the first and third lockdowns were generally spending much more time with their parents than they did before the pandemic. For many families, the parents began to work from home and as a result, children were more exposed to the day-to-day behaviour of adults as they work and interact with other adults. For some parents, they perceived that their children seemed to have matured in their attitudes and outlooks, but they were unsure if this had been caused by lockdown, or was a natural process of ageing.
- Parents who found themselves spending more time with their children, sometimes yearned for more adult content in regards to film and TV and this also impacted some family viewing behaviours.

“My son is relying on the computer more for contact with his teachers, getting work done, using resources, YouTube and certain videos for educational purposes and relying on that”

(Lexi, mother, late thirties).

“The kids watching TV was a particular bugbear of mine before lockdown, but uh, yeah. I mean, I’m guilty of it ... [during lockdown] I immediately went out and got a Disney subscription, and one of those fire sticks, we had Amazon as well”

(Nathan, father, early forties).



CONCLUSIONS

From our findings, it is clear that the coronavirus lockdowns significantly changed the ways in which many British people thought about moving-image use and related screen technologies. Video conferencing had been a rare experience for many people prior to the lockdowns, however through the lockdowns it became commonplace. Screens were an essential tool for helping people navigate through moments of isolation for both communication and for entertainment purposes. As such people investigated more into the potential film, video and TV opportunities that were available to them. Smartphones and tablets cemented themselves as great personal spaces for private and intimate viewing experiences, whilst larger screens in the heart of the family home became portals for engaging in group bonding experiences, both for entertainment and communication.

Other participants have suggested long-term changes to their viewing behaviour as a result of their experiences during lockdown. Some households have invested into their home entertainment set-up, improving their screens, speakers, seating and added more streaming packages. The streaming services and online providers have enjoyed more popularity (Batool et al. 2020) and so the knock-on impact on the cinema industry is uncertain.

For children, who have been exposed to the increased use of screens during their formative years, some parents have observed that their sense of normality and their future expectations may now also be different.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lockdown has shown how valuable film and television can be in supporting well-being. The potential positive health impacts of film and television and other screen-based media could be more widely discussed and researched within clinical debates.
- Equally important, the negative impacts of extended screen use on the health and well-being of adults and children needs more clarity. 59% of people in the NUSPB survey reported experiencing negative health impacts from screens.
- Currently adults are not supported by guidelines on screen use and guidance for children lacks consistency and clarity. All study participants felt they would benefit from guidance when asked and so this urgently needs addressing.
- Parental concerns about children accessing age appropriate content appears to be poorly addressed by regulators and companies. OFCOM must do more to ensure appropriate content is available for parents and children to access.
- Families were not well supported during the lockdown (particularly those with additional needs) and this led to film and TV content being used to occupy children for extended periods of time. This counters World Health Organisation advice about limits to children's screen time. This needs to be better addressed in the possibility of any future lockdown events or similar.
- Parental concerns about screen addiction and binge watching were common and professional services can do more to support families to understand and help mitigate the potential risks.

AUTHORS

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