

An Analysis of Choice Overload Effects on the User Experience of Subscription-based Streaming Services

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to provide an overview of choice overload research, and to investigate whether the effects of this psychological phenomenon could be detected in the context of subscription-based streaming services, in order to explore the managerial and strategical insights that this perspective could unfold for the players in this industry.

The assumptions developed by Barry Schwartz throughout his work and collected in his book “The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less” (2004), that examined the causes and consequences of choice overload in great detail, were applied through a survey research modeled on the scholar’s theories, specifically aimed at subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) users. After an initial screening of primary data and further research aimed at collecting secondary data that helped contextualize the phenomenon, the focus of this study was purposely narrowed to a younger demographic, as it was found particularly subject to the prerequisites that cause the occurrence of choice overload.

Therefore, this work investigated three main variables for the identification of the choice overload phenomenon – namely, maximization tendencies, post-choice regret and user dissatisfaction – in a sample of Italian SVOD users below 40 years of age. Furthermore, some mitigating factors identified through literature research – namely knowledgeability in terms of content, preferring TV series over movies and following the suggestions of taste communities – were also evaluated as resources that users could exploit in order to cope with the negative effects of decision fatigue.

The results of the analysis underlined a significant, positive correlation between the three main variables, confirming the occurrence of choice overload among the sample of SVOD users considered, while all the secondary hypotheses that attempted to identify mitigating factors for this phenomenon were rejected. On the basis of these results and after a critical assessment of the outcomes, a series of strategic recommendations were formulated with the aim of starting a discussion to identify alternative content discovery systems that SVOD providers might put in place to help ease the negative outcomes of choice overload.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract | 2 |
| 1. Introduction | 4 |
| 2. Literature review | 7 |
| 2.1 A brief overview of choice overload research..... | 7 |
| 2.2 Critical aspects of choice overload theory..... | 11 |
| 3.3 Choice overload in media studies..... | 16 |
| 3. A case for choice overload in subscription-based video streaming platforms | 23 |
| 4. Methodology | 30 |
| 4.1 Philosophy of science | 31 |
| 4.2 Research design..... | 33 |
| 4.3 Research hypotheses..... | 35 |
| 4.4 Survey design | 38 |
| 4.5 Limitations | 42 |
| 5. Analysis | 45 |
| 5.3 Sample analysis | 45 |
| 5.3.1 Age | 45 |
| 5.3.2 Younger SVOD consumers and choice overload..... | 47 |
| 5.3.3 Country of origin | 51 |
| 5.3.4 Gender | 52 |
| 5.3.5 Streaming services used | 57 |
| 5.4 Descriptive analysis and hypotheses verification | 60 |
| 5.4.1 Reliability analysis | 61 |
| 5.4.2 Main variables descriptives | 62 |
| 5.4.3 Minor variables descriptives..... | 64 |
| 5.4.4 Correlation analysis..... | 66 |
| 6. Implications and discussion | 69 |
| 7. Conclusions | 78 |
| 8. Bibliography | 81 |
| 9. Appendix | 89 |
| 9.1 Appendix A: English survey | 89 |
| 9.2 Appendix B: Italian survey..... | 94 |
| 9.3 Appendix C: Correlation Table (Schwartz et al., 2002)..... | 99 |

1. Introduction

The concept of choice overload in overabundant option arrays has been investigated in consumer choice research since the mid-20th century, but its insights have drawn new attention in the post-digital revolution era. The overwhelming disclosure of possibilities that new technologies unfolded has affected the most disparate industries, and these changes have often gone hand in hand with a boost in supply and product variety. Media industries are among those that have experienced this tendency more prominently, with an exponential increase in content production and assortment. Among the implications of these changes on the behavior of media users – viewers, readers and listeners – figures a prominent shift in the way content is accessed and consumed, but the full long-term impact of these alterations is still to be wholly identified and weighted.

The aim of this work is to take into account some of the insights of choice overload theory and to apply them to the context of subscription-based video streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV+, Hulu, Disney+ and the like. The decision to concentrate on such content aggregators fulfilled the aim of narrowing down the focus of this paper to what might be defined as a fitting example of options overabundance according to choice overload theories. Indeed, what all these platforms have in common could be defined as a main prerequisite for the occurrence of the phenomenon itself, i.e., a massive array of content, whose vastness makes it fairly impossible for a single individual to properly evaluate the validity of each alternative in rational terms. Nonetheless, this same content abundance is also supposed to work as a main source of attractiveness for SVOD users.

The main reference for the development of this work were the findings of scholar Barry Schwartz, a very prominent advocate and exponent of choice overload research. His theories will be applied to the specific field of subscription-based video streaming services in an attempt to verify whether the same outcomes and implications that the author identified in general terms could be confirmed also for this specific industry. The literature research carried out underlined a general tendency of applying choice overload insights to consumer goods through an experimental approach, examining the decision-making process with respect to physical

products, with objectively identifiable features and a strong utilitarian component that could be easily assessed. However, the industry studied in this paper deals with products that are not equally easy to evaluate with straightforward, objective parameters. In this specific case, the product in question is audiovisual content in the form of movies and TV series, that fall into the category of *hedonic goods*. As Clement et al. (2006) pointed out, such goods have extremely different characteristics than products that have a more utilitarian focus. Indeed, hedonic goods have a more experiential identity, and differently from utilitarian goods, which have objective attributes, they are bounded to the subjective taste and interpretation of the individual that consumes them. Such goods imply a much higher emotional involvement, and this component is also at the basis of product valuation and purchase motives. Moreover, the quality uncertainty of hedonic products is high compared to utilitarian items, since their experiential connotation makes it almost impossible to judge their value before consumption. This further level of uncertainty, which is a defining characteristic of such products, adds an ulterior degree of complexity to the decision-making process.

Media studies are also investigating the content saturation that they have been experiencing recently, and the consequent issues that it has raised. However, no specific contribution has been found to examine the perspective of choice overload research within the specific subfield of SVOD platforms. Nonetheless, this industry seems particularly fit to study a context of demanding decision-making caused by a huge array of options, with a degree of complexity that is further increased by the hedonic nature of the products considered. Moreover, this challenging choice process is also exacerbated by the ever more crowded SVOD market, extending the issue of deciding from the micro level (within the platform) to encompass also a macro level (i.e., identifying the platform that best suits the customer's needs).

Starting from the gap highlighted by the literature research, and given the interesting perspective that this study subject could unfold, the following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- **RQ1:** To which extent do Schwartz's theories on choice overload apply to the context of subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) services?
- **RQ2:** Literature research identified some theories that could provide easily accessible mitigating factors in the form of coping mechanism for the users that are subject to the negative effects of the choice overload phenomenon. To which extent do they prove effective?

The first research question deals with the main focus of this work, namely the attempt to understand to which extent the findings of Schwartz fit the issues of this specific industry, which seems to display all the characteristics that the scholar identified as prerequisites for the occurrence of choice overload (i.e., an overabundant option array and customers' undeniable attraction for such vast assortment).

The second research question aims at testing some factors that could effectively help users to handle the complexity of decision making within streaming platforms. As this work will later address, the main answer of SVOD providers to the difficulties of decision-making in their platforms is related to their algorithmic recommendation systems. However, as literature review has highlighted, although algorithms still prove to be the most effective way to allow users to navigate such massive amount of content, their efficiency is undoubtedly in question. Nevertheless, on the users' side, it is also important to identify existing resource that SVOD customers can easily access, that might help them deal with content discovery in an overabundant context. Some of these resources were highlighted by the literature, and the aim of this study was to try to test to which extent accessing them sorts some positive effects.

Determining whether choice overload is an actual phenomenon in streaming services could help re-contextualize and improve the user experience within platforms, to consider alternative ways for viewers to engage in content discovery, and potentially to reflect on what a real competitive advantage might entail in the foreseeable future of this industry. In case of the opposite result, there would still be interesting implications to analyze, mainly concerning the reasons why this theory would not apply to what appears as a canonical context for its occurrence.

After an initial review of choice overload literature, its critical aspects and its application in media studies, this work will focus on verifying and contextualizing some theories, like Barry Schwartz's maximizer/satisficer spectrum and its correlation with feelings of post-choice regret, as well as other studies that tried to identify some factors that might reduce choice overload effects (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Perks, 2015; Pertierra and Turner, 2012). The research will be carried out with a quantitative approach through a survey among users of video streaming platforms, but secondary data will also be considered in order to contextualize the findings and the patterns that this research will unfold. The aim of this study will be to define to which extent the assumptions of choice overload literature align to the behavior of video streaming services' customers, which managerial implications can be drawn, and which potential changes could be made to improve consumer experience in the usage of streaming platforms. Finally, some suggestions will be made both in terms of repercussions for viewers and service providers, as well as some possible future research developments.

2. Literature review

2.1 A brief overview of choice overload research

Choice overload theory starts from the debunking of one of classic economics' most relevant assumptions, namely the rational choice model, and the consequent attempt to provide a systematic account of how agents choose among alternative options in a given context. (Vanderschraaf, 2013) The idea of consumers conducting a rational cost-benefit analysis every time they make a choice has been a main paradigm in economic theory for years. However, as Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) pointed out, a more thorough understanding of consumer behavior can only be reached through a consideration of how hedonic and rational motives conjointly influence decision-making. The adoption of this holistic approach has allowed for the inclusion of behavioral sciences in economic research.

Overall, what might be defined as classic choice overload theory deals with the reaction of consumers in front of a vast amount of options. Individuals find themselves attracted to vast option arrays (Chernev, 2006), but this huge number of alternatives impedes a careful

comparison of all the available information that rational choice prescribes, and instead, this overabundance has a problematic impact on decision makers and the outcome of their choices. (Diehl & Poynor, 2010) In their meta-analysis of choice overload research, Scheibehenne et al. (2010) named some of the choice overload effects that have been identified by the literature, namely:

- A decrease in the willingness to make a choice and commit to it (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Iyengar et al., 2004);
- Lower preference strength and post-choice satisfaction (Chernev, 2003; Iyengar and Lepper, 2000);
- A boost in negative emotions, such as disappointment and regret (Schwartz, 2000).

Studies on the difficulties encountered when facing choices with equally attractive and mutually exclusive alternatives date back to the 1940s and 1950s (Miller, 1944; Lewin, 1951; Festinger, 1957), but it is only later that research introduced the idea that an increase in the number of options could make for a more tedious, challenging and in some cases even unattainable decision process (Lipowski, 1970). At the beginning of the 21st century new studies tried to investigate this notion: for instance, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) attempted some experiments with consumer goods to see how choice overload influenced their purchasing decision. A first experiment concerning jam jars demonstrated how individuals were more likely to actually make a purchase out of a smaller assortment (6 items) compared to a larger one (24 items) even though they were more attracted by the vastest array. A second study showed that students were more likely to conclude an essay assignment when they chose the topic on a list of 6 options, rather than a larger list of 30 titles. In a third experiment, participants were offered chocolates, but they had to decide whether to pick their favorite among an assortment of 6 or 30 items, and the test demonstrated once again that people who chose from the largest selection were more entertained by the decision process, but they also found it more frustrating and complex. On the contrary, people who chose from the smallest array seemed to be more satisfied with their

decisions, and they were almost four times more likely to accept chocolates as a reward at the end of the experiment instead of money.

The initial attraction that people feel towards vast assortments of alternatives is at odds with the negative emotions that they experience during and after the choice. This contradiction has been underlined by researcher Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (2004). The author condenses in this work the results of his and other scholars' research in terms of choice overload and its implications not only on consumption experiences, but also on other aspects of life. The book starts with a display of the immense amount of choices and options that the average American faces, from food, fashion, beauty, technology, media, entertainment, sports, free-time activities to more life-defining matters, such as education, career, religion, romantic life, as well as real estate, medical care and retirement plans. After pointing out how vast this array of complex choices is, Schwartz presents an outline of the rational choice decision-making paradigm. He identifies six steps of what he defined as "good decisions" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 47):

- 1) The identification of an individual's goals;
- 2) Evaluation of the importance of each goal;
- 3) Consideration of the array of options;
- 4) Assessment of how each option meets the individual's goals;
- 5) Decision for the winning option;
- 6) Analysis of the consequences of the choice in order to re-evaluate the individual's goals for the future.

This decision system is challenged by the claim that each step in the process is virtually impossible to carry out in real life. Schwartz argues that goals are not always easily identifiable, and that the quality and quantity of information individuals collect is generally not appropriate to take a good decision. Moreover, he introduces some cognitive biases that make this rational choice process virtually unattainable. For instance, *availability heuristic* causes individuals to believe that the more a piece of information is easy to recall to mind, the more we must have

encountered it. However, this proves to be wrong: some memories stick to mind due to salience and vividness, not frequency. Due to this bias, many consider personal suggestions and anecdotes more salient than statistical facts when making a choice. *Anchoring* is another bias that binds each decision to the characteristics of the alternatives available for comparison. For instance, a certain item could seem extremely expensive within a certain price range, but quite cheap within a different one. A last example of bias is *framing*, i.e., how a different phrasing of the exact same concept causes totally different reactions on the individual who listens to them.

Concerning his debunking of rational choice theory, in a study preceding the book, Schwartz identified three main problems with the choice process that often cause choice overload effects, namely the difficulty in gathering suitable information before choosing, the rising standards for acceptable decisions when options increase, and an intensification in the sense of guilt, since a wrong decision outcome when many alternatives are available makes choosers believe they are the ones to blame for the negative result. (Schwartz et al., 2002)

After challenging the concept of rational choice, the scholar starts to discuss his argument, namely that choice overload hinders the decision process and causes a decrease in satisfaction and well-being. Schwartz introduces the concepts of *maximizer* and *satisficer*, first theorized by Simon (1955). The aim of these notions is to exemplify different approaches that individuals undertake in decision-making. *Maximizers* are subjects that, in order to be satisfied with their choice, need to be assured that they made the best possible decision. *Satisficers*, on the other hand, settle for an option that is good enough for the standard they set for themselves, and once they reach it, they look no further. These two concepts are presented as a spectrum, and each individual is positioned on the basis of a psychological test. Moreover, Schwartz stresses that these two different attitudes are context-specific: generally individuals tend to have maximizing tendencies in some fields and to adopt a more satisficing mindset in others. According to Schwartz “the goal of maximizing is a source of great dissatisfaction, that [...] can make people miserable – especially in a world that insists on providing an overwhelming number of choices, both trivial and not so trivial.” (Schwartz, 2004, p. 78)

According to the author, a maximizing mindset has many collateral effects on the chooser, including regret and frustration over missed opportunities. These burdens on happiness and post-choice satisfaction are caused by opportunity cost, and by the way the human brain processes hypothetical thinking, which often pushes individuals to imagine nonexistent options that might have been a better alternative than the chosen one, corroborating a feeling of discontent.

Finally, Schwartz dedicates a section of his book to suggesting some strategies for turning decision-making into a less psychologically daunting process. First of all, individuals should “choose when to choose”, namely force themselves to make some daily choices by default, in order to concentrate their energy only on those decisions that really matter to them. Moreover, everyone should strive to think as much as possible as a satisficer, and less as a maximizer. He also advises to become aware of some unfavorable psychological biases and actively work to prevent them. For instance, he suggests fighting regret and opportunity cost frustration, striving to avoid social comparisons, making non-reversible decisions, controlling for unrealistic expectations and rationalizing the quick adaptability of human beings to new situations, that often makes individuals easily bored. He also encourages readers to focus on the positive outcomes of their choices instead of the negative ones, trying to practice an attitude of gratitude.

2.2 Critical aspects of choice overload theory

The previous section has presented some of the conclusions that researchers advocating for this theory have reached through their studies, with a specific focus on the work of Barry Schwartz. However, it is important to stress that the choice overload phenomenon requires some necessary preconditions to manifest the effects that most previously named researchers have identified. (Scheibehenne et al., 2010)

This evidence has been documented by most of these same scholars: for instance, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) highlighted that lack of familiarity with the range of options and scarce knowledgeability of the product category is required in order to observe the dissatisfaction and regret outcomes that are often linked to choice overload. In his choice overload experiments,

Chernev (2003) addresses this matter introducing the concept of *ideal point availability*, i.e., a situation where consumers face a decision with an already-defined set of preferences, which prevents strenuous information gathering and spares some decision costs. Obviously, this result depends on how strong the chooser's likings are, and whether he/she has a clear favored alternative in mind or just a set of features preferred over others. Normally, consumers have the hardest time taking decisions when they are not familiar with a certain product category, or when they have blurred ideas on what characteristics to favor over others. As Chernev (2003, p. 172) exemplified: "[...] consumers without an ideal point face the structurally more difficult task of simultaneously forming their ideal attribute combination and searching for the option that best matches their ideal point." The availability of an ideal point tones down the impact of choice overload on the individual: having clear preferences in mind, a large assortment does not seem to excessively hinder decision-making. On the contrary, in this case a smaller range of options might be detrimental: the smaller assortment might not include what this type of chooser is looking for, therefore making him/her worse off.

These considerations bring an interesting perspective in the choice overload discussion: it seems that the way individuals faces a decision-making scenario is not only related to how they makes decisions – in Schwartz's terminology, how much they show maximizing or satisficing tendencies – but also to what the attitudes of that person are with respect to the act of choosing. Some individuals display a more innate predisposition for setting preferences, making comparisons and defining what they want. A recent study by Mathmann et al. (2017) refers to this concept as customers' *assessment orientation*, namely the tendency to be motivated to make evaluations and comparisons to make the best choice possible. The study conducted by these authors demonstrates that customers with a strong assessment orientation seem to benefit from a decision made from a larger assortment, since it increases the perceived value of the chosen product.

People with strong assessment orientation are subjects who enjoy the decision process for itself: they like to compare as many viable alternatives as possible, and most of the final enjoyment in their consumption comes from the reassurance that they know they have picked the best

possible alternative. This is an aspect that is not explicitly tackled in Schwartz's research, i.e., the fact that some individuals might enjoy the experience of choosing in and for itself. The only consideration he makes that partially relates to this idea is the distinction between *choosers* and *pickers*. The former are individuals who have a more rational, thought-out approach to decision-making, and often end up satisfied with the alternative they select. The latter are overwhelmed by the complexity that a thorough decision process entails, and therefore decide to go impulsively for a casual alternative, hoping for the best. The scholar suggests that an overload of alternatives is likely to turn choosers into pickers. (Schwartz, 2004)

Schwartz sees decisions as tasks, often demanding and overcomplicated, and he considers the proliferation of choices in modern life as a major source of distress and anxiety. Even though he recognizes the fundamental validity of the act of choosing to grant human well-being and freedom (Schwartz by no means advocates for a world where individuals cannot make decisions), he still does not contemplate a hedonistic dimension to the realm of choice.

Another important aspect to consider is that choice overload effects seem to neutralize when, among the given options, one is blatantly superior to the others, and therefore choosers go straight for it without any need for comparisons or post-consumption re-evaluation. Dhar (1997) discovered that choosers are more likely to opt for a no-choice scenario when the difference in attractiveness among the available alternatives is smaller. On the other hand, when there is a dominant alternative, the decision process becomes much smoother. This concept can be linked to a phenomenon called *inaction inertia*: sometimes, when a choice is extremely demanding due to the trade-offs that it entails, individuals prefer to avoid it. This avoidance has an impact also on future decisions: once an opportunity has passed, individuals tend to bypass similar ones, since they regret missing the previous chance, especially if it was better than the current one. (van Putten et al., 2013) Obviously, this bias might have substantial economic implications: if customers are faced with overcomplicated choices, they will likely decide not to purchase, and this initial decision might also make future buys less likely.

Other interesting remarks on choice overload theory are presented by Roets et al. (2012) in a study that investigated the link between maximizing/satisficing tendencies and well-being, controlling for the societal background of the individual. Researchers noticed how in Western societies maximizers experienced lower well-being scores than satisficers, whereas this tendency was missing in China. They concluded that people with a propensity for maximization would probably be better off in a society that does not place excessive importance on individual choice, and does not openly correlate freedom of choice and choice overabundance to the identity and self-determination of the individual.

Aside from these afore mentioned considerations that aim at contextualizing the theory, there are other research outcomes to analyze that led to a more explicit questioning of choice overload findings.

Firstly, behavioral studies have extensively demonstrated that, when deprived or hindered of the possibility to choose from themselves, individuals experience extremely negative emotional states. This phenomenon is expressed in the psychological concept of *learned helplessness*. (Peterson et al., 1993) When individuals learn that they do not have control over something, the consequences on human psychology are extremely detrimental: once people assume that they do not have decision power, their future motivation to act might be permanently inhibited, up to the point of leading subjects to clinical depression. Therefore, freedom of choice is a necessary prerequisite to human well-being. Referring to this concept, Schwartz stresses how choice is undeniably needed, and it is only an excessive number of decisions that makes individuals worse off, generating what he calls “tyranny of freedom” or “tyranny of choice”. (Schwartz, 2000; 2004) Schwartz equals this notion to the utility function, identifying an optimal number of choices that maximizes individual’s well-being, above which any extra choice would be detrimental rather than beneficial. However, the author admits that he has no idea on what that optimal level would be, neither how to find a way to measure it. (Schwartz, 2004)

Furthermore, there are also claims that challenge the whole choice overload rationale in a narrow sense. In their article "*The Lure of Choice*", Brown et al. (2003) demonstrated how most individuals prefer situations that entail further choices rather than those that do not. It seems that this phenomenon originates from individuals' recondite desire to postpone choice and commitment as much as possible, in order to make the most accurate information gathering viable (Bastardi & Shafir, 1998) or to postpone a likely disappointment. (Elster & Loewenstein, 1991)

Some studies have also demonstrated how, when faced with a large number of options, individuals were more inclined to make a purchase. Among these, Berger et al. (2007) demonstrated that, when providing a larger product variety, offering even slight variations among the alternatives had a positive influence on the brand, which was perceived from consumers as having more expertise in its market.

Overall, also the meta analytic reviews of literature (Scheibehenne et al., 2010; Chernev et al., 2015) have come to different results on whether there are definitive findings concerning choice overload research. Scheibehenne et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 experimental studies that investigated the supposed negative outcome of choice overload situations. They calculated the mean effect size of choice overload across studies, finding out it was zero. The result indicated that the study was not able to identify a sufficient condition as a prerequisite for the choice overload phenomenon to occur. This study determined that there is not enough evidence to conclude that negative outcomes due to choice overload are a definite occurrence, or at least the conditions for a reliable occurrence of choice overload effects have not been identified yet.

Nonetheless, another comprehensive meta-analytic study by Chernev et al. (2015) came to a radically different conclusion. Their meta-analysis of 99 choice overload studies identified four key factors that could allegedly predict the occurrence of choice overload based on the assortment size, namely:

- 1) Difficulty of the decision task;

- 2) Complexity of the choice set;
- 3) Consumer's preference uncertainty;
- 4) Consumer's decision goal.

According to the researchers, a higher or stronger connotation of each of these factors has a favorable impact on choice overload. Moreover, the authors also identified some outcomes of choice overload, and they verified how satisfaction, choice deferral, switching likelihood and regret counted for a similar impact, and could therefore be used interchangeably. To conclude, Chernev et al. (2015) disputed the findings of Scheibehenne et al. (2010), stating that their different results were probably related to the fact that they used different models, and to their different way of conceptualizing the effects of assortment size on choice overload. However, it is important to notice that Chernev et al. (2015) considered more studies than Scheibehenne et al. (2010), that they included only published, peer-reviewed studies (differently from the latter, who took into account also 16 unpublished ones) and that the dataset of Chernev et al. (2015) included almost 78% of the observations of Scheibehenne et al. (2010), i.e., all the observations reported in published articles.

Overall, there is no clear uncontested understanding of the effects and causes of choice overload yet. The occurrence of this phenomenon, as well as the effects that it has on the decision-making process are still quite circumstantial. Nonetheless, it is important to notice how further research in this field is highly encouraged, since a better understanding of its causes and effects might prove incredibly impactful for consumer experience research, as well as its managerial implications.

3.3 Choice overload in media studies

This paper will now provide a brief overview of the impact that content overabundance had on media studies, and which research perspectives it unfolded.

First of all, it is interesting to notice that Schwartz (2004) briefly touched upon the matter of choice overload in media when he described how the consumption of entertainment was affected by an exponential increase in options. He considered how, before the introduction of

cable TV, US viewers had the possibility to choose among three main networks (NBC, CBS and ABC), and a maximum of six additional local stations only if they lived in a big metropolitan area. He then stressed that, at the time he was writing *The Paradox of Choice* in the early 2000s, he had more than 200 channels to choose from. He concluded his brief reasoning with the following consideration: “[T]he TV experience is now the very essence of choice without boundaries. In a decade or so, when these boxes are in everybody’s home, it’s a good bet that when folks gather around the watercooler to discuss last night’s big TV event, not two of them will have watched the same shows.” (Schwartz, 2004, p. 18) At the time, Schwartz had fully experienced only the first great change in television history, namely the passage from network to multichannel era, enabled by the advent of cable TV. However, he was probably starting to sense what the digital post-network era would have brought to the table in terms of content and device variety for the consumption of audiovisual entertainment.

As Jenner (2018) stressed, throughout the whole history of television, new technologies allowed viewers to gradually gain increasing control over their experience in front of a television set starting from the 1980s, thanks to the commercial spread of Remote Control Devices, VCRs, VHSs and later DVDs, which allowed consumers to have a more active role in the choice of what to watch, as well as helping them to avoid or skip advertisement. Soon after, the early 2000s marked a drastic change in television consumption, especially due to the convergence of all the functions of personal technology to a limited number of devices, that made the analog TV sets seem outdated. (Lotz 2009)

With all this evidence and these gradual changes happening, slowly leading to television becoming a hub of media convergence, experts were starting to forecast what they called “the end of television”, that was considered the inevitable logical outcome of this digital transition. According to Katz (2009), “[t]he television of “sharedness” — of nation-building and family togetherness — is no longer with us, having made room for a television of hundreds of channels, of “niche” broadcasting, of portability, one that is part of a system that integrates with the Internet and the other new media.” (Katz, 2009, p. 7) It might be stated that this concept was formulated with reference to the so-called “classic TV”, namely a form of technology offering

a limited number of broadcasting channels, publicly regulated, made with the effort of professionals that intended to inform, educate and entertain national audiences. In this initial phase of television history, viewers knew a “television of scarcity”, where choices were extremely limited, and the whole family gathered around the only TV set available in the household, whereas, after the advent of satellite and cable, a significant increase in options gave rise to a “television of plenty”, where family members could watch what they wanted wherever and however they wanted. (Ellis, 2000)

Television consumption has become much more of an individual phenomenon compared to what it used to be when it first started, and the advent of internet-based streaming platforms has accentuated this tendency drastically. As stated by Pertierra and Turner (2012), the audience that consumes television content through the internet is both global and individualized. In the past, the aim of television was to build and reinforce a national shared identity, while the advent of streaming platforms made it possible to cross national borders in terms of language and content access, shifting control and power in the hands of the viewer. As Jenner (2018) pointed out, Netflix, the quintessential streaming service, could be defined as both a transnational broadcaster and a vehicle for cultural exchange, but at the same time it domesticates itself to the specific national market that it enters. Katz (2009) provides a very incisive description of this changes, stating that television has evolved along two different axes, from “same” to “differentiated” in terms of content, and from “together” to “alone” when it comes to consumption modality and cultural sharedness. Nonetheless, the usage of digital media is not pervasively individualizing, but instead it offers an interactive dimension that is enabling the formation of online communities constructed around taste subcultures, far away from the communities bounded to geo-linguistic regions allowed by classic broadcasting, that shared a homogeneous cultural and national background. (Pertierra and Turner, 2012)

The digital post-network era was characterized by new possibilities disclosed by the internet in the early 2000s, that empowered viewers to take a more participatory role, increasing audience fragmentation and re-legitimizing quality TV content, whose consumption was starting to shift from the TV set to the personal computer. (Jenner 2018)

After the increase in relevance that YouTube was acquiring since its founding in 2005, in 2007 BBC iPlayer and Hulu were created, not as mere catch-up services for television content, but as first actual content aggregators on their own right, available on the Internet. These pioneering platforms represented a prompt reaction to consumer's desire to gain more control over the content they watched (as testified by increased DVD consumption), as well as an effort to contrast online piracy. As stated by Jenner: "these technologies tend to tie in with neoliberal discourses that put increased choice and control over these choices in a direct relationship with responsibilities of self-care." (2018, p. 103)

However, it was the rise of Netflix as an online streaming service that caused the greatest disruption in television consumption. A new feature that online television brought was the exponential increase in the available content options. This tendency is what enabled the "narrowcasting" effect, namely the focus of post-network era TV on taste cultures rather than mass audience. (Pertierra and Turner, 2012) When attempting to understand how consumers navigated through the virtually endless possibilities offered by the US media landscape, Pertierra and Turner (2012) interrogated their students about their television consumption habits, finding out that most of them perfectly mirrored the individualistic, internet-based and customized way of consuming media in the post-network era, especially among the younger generations. Nonetheless, they also discovered that most students were watching exactly the same content, regardless the immense array of choices they had available. From these findings the scholars hypothesized the existence of "taste communities", which they defined as the new system that media consumers have put in place in order to navigate this unmanageable amount of choices. The researchers highlighted the paradox of this new media scenario: viewers have been motivated and drawn towards television formats that enabled them the vastest array of possible options, but as soon as they got it, they immediately needed a reference point that guided them and helped them to select content. Moreover, the "individualized" choices that people make within a certain taste community are largely analogous. Basically, the taste communities have substituted the role of the broadcaster: viewers think that they have more say

concerning the content they watch, but in fact most of them are still drawn by their community's guidelines. The only difference is that this time the surrender is voluntary.

However, it is impossible to provide a proper overview of viewers' experience with content overabundance without a proper consideration of the role of platforms' recommendation systems. Researchers have made some interesting remarks concerning the Netflix recommendation algorithm, and the role the company assigns to data mining for simplifying consumers' choice within the platform. The Netflix algorithm is undoubtedly the first one that comes to mind when considering recommendation systems in streaming platforms. Perks (2015) stresses the prominent role of algorithms to keep a high *entrance flow*, i.e., to engage subscribers with new content as soon as they have finished what they were watching. The main purpose is to keep the viewer engaged and individualizing the consumption experience, while taking into account the inevitable limitations of the catalogue. Nonetheless, the algorithm plays a central role also in defining the brand identity. Netflix explicitly addresses viewers, underlining how the suggested options were explicitly selected for their specific consumption pattern: with sentences like "because you watched...", "because you added [title] to your list", Netflix attempts to address the viewer, as if the platform was directly talking to the user and making verbal recommendations, which is a common practice that platforms and social networks use to capture and retain subjects' attention. (Chun, 2016) The approach of the company is to stress how it personally knows the customer and its preferences, and therefore it knows best what to suggest.

Netflix also strives to keep a high *insulated flow*, which is the condition at the basis of the binge-watching phenomenon: for instance, the post-play function in streaming services channels viewers in a flow where they do not have to make the decision whether to watch the following episode each time the previous one is over, but rather to opt out of the flow if they do not want to continue watching. (Perks, 2015) Netflix has used this system to structure viewer experience very early on, enabling binge-watching to become a facilitator in a context of choice overload: rather than making a choice to select a new episode every time the previous one ended, viewers have only one decision to make, i.e., when to stop. This might also be the reason why Netflix

makes it a priority to continuously offer new serialized content, since this format is necessary to allow the algorithm to mitigate decision fatigue.

As Rouvroy (2012) states, having a well-functioning recommendation algorithm is not only necessary to help viewers navigate through the available options, but it is also a good compromise between nudging viewers towards what Netflix considers the most appealing content available, and at the same time maintaining the perception of choice and agency. Arnold (2016) emphasizes how Netflix, thanks to the analysis of huge amounts of user data, aims at providing the personalized media experience that customers desire, enhancing audience autonomy. Nonetheless, this effort risks to go too far, aiming at predicting, even to the point of nudging, audience consumption. This concept was defined by Rouvroy (2012) as *algorithmic governmentality*, namely the usage of data for profiling and controlling the consumption pattern of every individual, with the result of exercising an influence over the individual's agency, autonomy and identity. According to the scholar, Netflix ends up "producing knowledge about future preferences, attitudes, behaviors or events without considering the subject's psychological motivations, speeches, or narratives, [instead] relying on data." (Rouvoy, 2012, p. 143) The problem with recommendation systems on Netflix is that, the more the user spends time on the platform, the more he or she is provided with suggestions that are self-fulfilling, based on preceding recommendations that originated from the first, unconditioned choice that the consumer made the first time he/she used the platform. However, from that very first choice on, the recommendation system became increasingly deterministic rather than generating from a genuine, independent interaction between the user and the platform. The risk with relying so much on the predictive power of data is that the algorithm becomes unable to predict the actual preferences of the viewer, and the effectiveness of its suggestions are doomed to decline.

Moreover, Arnold (2016) adds that the big data mindset that Netflix shows is made quite explicit based on the way they conceive and use data: the company distinguishes between user behavior (what the viewer actually watches) and user expression (the user's explicitly expressed preferences through ratings and wish lists). They consider the former a more relevant source of

information than the latter, stating that what people say they like and what they actually watch are not necessarily the same, and the company believes that constructing their recommendation algorithm with the aim of prioritizing what viewers decide to watch is the key to keep them satisfied. This obviously stimulates a reflection on the actual effect of this recommendation system, and whether its approach is efficient or rather patronizing.

In regard to this matter, other researchers have theorized that what viewers end up watching in streaming platforms is not necessarily something they enjoy. Gui et al. (2017), stressed how current media research is not fully capable of providing a comprehensive overview of the motives behind consumer choice in an increasingly overabundant media landscape. These researchers theorized a shift in preference towards sensational content in this new media context, but they also identified an inverse relationship between this kind of consumption and viewers' satisfaction. This premise goes one step beyond the common choice overload hypothesis, correlating the occurrence of this phenomenon and the consumption of a certain type of content (seductive, immediate, heavily publicized, often focusing on sexual and violent images, and with a "clickbait" characterization), which stimulates an impulsive response in the viewers, that unconsciously sees it as a potential quick fix in a situation of choice overload. As reported by Levine et al (2012), research has demonstrated that the copious use of mobile media causes non-productive multitasking, distraction and impulsivity, all outcomes that generally assert a detrimental impact on post-consumption satisfaction. Impulsivity is often one of the main causes of choice inconsistencies, which might explain why Netflix notices a discrepancy between what its subscribers state they want to watch, and what they finally do consume. Moreover, some scholars have also pointed out that individuals often make use of media content when they face a situation where resources are depleted (namely, the viewer is tired and uses content as a form of escapism), and in that case, experimental studies have shown that subjects tend to choose impulsively. For instance, Novemsky et al. (2007) have proved that when it came to picking a movie, students who had been studying for hours were more likely to pick a lowbrow movie rather than students that had just started studying. Other studies demonstrated also that the desire for media consumption is extremely powerful. In a research concerning

desire and self-control, Hofmann et al. (2012) discovered that beyond the most basic needs, namely desires to eat, sleep and drink non-alcoholic beverages, media usage ranks fourth in the list of the most frequently experience desires, over leisure, social contact, hygiene-related activities, tobacco use, sex, work, coffee, alcohol, engagement in sports, and spending. With this type of contextualization, it is not hard to see why Gui et al. (2017) consider impulsivity a realistically viable justification for viewers' dissatisfaction with their decisions.

Overall, media studies are for sure starting to take into account the undeniable effects of content overload on consumers, with different theories and studies that attempt to consider the causes as well as the consequences it implies. Nonetheless, as Gui et al. (2017) pointed out, there is a need for a comprehensive, shared theoretical framework on choice inconsistencies in the media landscape, as well as a better understanding of choice overload and the impact of this new, unavoidable feature of digital television consumption that is content overabundance. The authors stressed how future research should focus on the impact of these factors on users' satisfaction, and how it should work to identify the type of situational, personal and social characteristics that lead to suboptimal choices in overabundant environment. Moreover, they state that scholars should investigate whether there is a link between content characteristics (especially genre and quality) and impulsive decision-making, and whether there are strategies that viewers put in place to face this issue while consuming content in streaming platforms.

3. A case for choice overload in subscription-based video streaming platforms

The reason for this research is grounded in the evidence discovered by the literature in the last few decades, i.e., the great attraction caused by vast content assortments, and the dissatisfaction and regret generated from choices based on these same large arrays, especially for those individuals who do not manage to cope with the demanding decision-making process required in overabundant environments. Besides, research has also highlighted a drastic shift in the post-digitalization media consumption patterns, as well as an increasingly larger content supply. The whole idea of Schwartz's "Paradox of Choice" (2004) is based on the notion that individuals *think* they want vast choice ranges, but then they cannot cope with the consequences of wide

options assortments in terms of decision costs. Moreover, Schwartz considers how maximization tendencies might be amplified in a society that emphasizes the role of choice – especially consumption choices – in defining an individual’s identity. This circumstance is ulteriorly accentuated by the fact that movies and TV series are cultural products, and as such, their role in defining an individual’s self-identity and self-determination is particularly pronounced. This section will present some secondary data that offered some useful insights to gain a clear understanding of the current trends that characterize the SVOD market.

The consumption of subscription video on demand (SVOD) seems to check all the boxes for a canonic choice overload case study. The abundance in content is undeniable, and it is only expected to rise with the increasingly more crowded streaming service market. To understand concretely how huge the amount of available content is, it is sufficient to stress that Netflix alone offered 5932 titles in its US platform in 2019, and in the same year it produced 371 new titles worldwide (Statista, 2019a). If someone wanted to watch each new title that the company produced for the year 2019, with the very inflated assumption of watching a new one each day, the whole solar year would not be enough to go through everything that was produced, let alone to dig into the over 5000 titles of licensed and older original content already available in the catalogue.

Moreover, industry forecasts show how all major media providers are on the process of embracing direct-to-viewer streaming services, and that this tendency is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Therefore, since the market is becoming extremely crowded with service providers, companies need to deploy their resources to find an effective way to attract and retain customers. As reported by Deloitte’s *2020 Telecommunications, media and entertainment outlook*, the discriminating factor that is considered as the main source of competitive advantage in the industry right now is the outpace of other competitors in terms of quantity and quality of the content provided. Big studios are currently withdrawing their best content from third-party SVOD providers to offer it exclusively in their own streaming services, with the effect of increasing customers’ frustration, due to the need to subscribe to a lot of different services to watch all the titles they are interested in. (Deloitte, 2020a)

It seems clear that SVOD providers are striving to attract and retain subscribers by offering the best, eye-catching content, whether that is licensed or produced by them. The great advantage of content that is self-produced is that it becomes a permanently owned asset, that sure requires big investments, but that can ultimately become a strong motivation for subscriptions, if the final result is good.

In this regard, the role that Netflix – the current SVOD global market leader – attributes to content production to gain competitive advantage is pretty apparent: over the last few years, the hours of first-run original content available in the platform increased exponentially, starting from 8 hours in 2012 (with *Lilyhammer*, the very first Netflix original series) and reaching 2769 hours in 2019. (Statista, 2020a, p. 31)

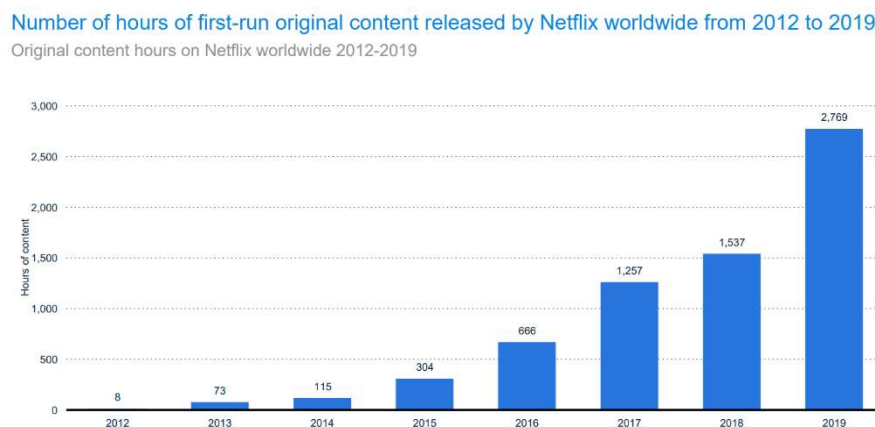


Figure 1: Statista (2020a, p 31)

This strategic outlook is clear: Netflix aims at providing subscribers with a copious and constant flow of novelty, while at the same time increasing its reliance on original rather than licensed content. For instance, in 2016 Netflix's content asset worldwide consisted in 1.38 billion dollars in produced content, and 9.6 billion dollars in licensed content, which means that only around 13% of its whole library was produced and owned by the company. In 2019, Netflix's total content asset consisted in 14.7 billion dollars in licensed content, and 9.8 in produced content, bringing the percentage of company-owned and produced titles to roughly 40% of its entire catalogue. (Statista, 2020a, p. 28) The economic effort in content production is obviously massive. As stated by Netflix in their 2019 Annual Report, investments in original content required the company to have more cash upfront compared to what usually happens with

licensed content, since production costs are paid when content is created, much earlier than when it is made available on the platform, and consequently amortized. Nonetheless, they stated: “we expect to continue to significantly increase our investments in global streaming content, particularly in original content, which will impact our liquidity and result in future net cash used in operating activities and negative free cash flows for many years.” (Netflix Annual Report, 2019, p. 25) In general, the yearly content budget for the company kept increasing significantly throughout the years, and the investment has mirrored an increase in subscribers. This trend can be recognized from the following graph (*Figure 2*) constructed on the basis of data from Netflix’s Annual Reports (2016, 2019, 2020).

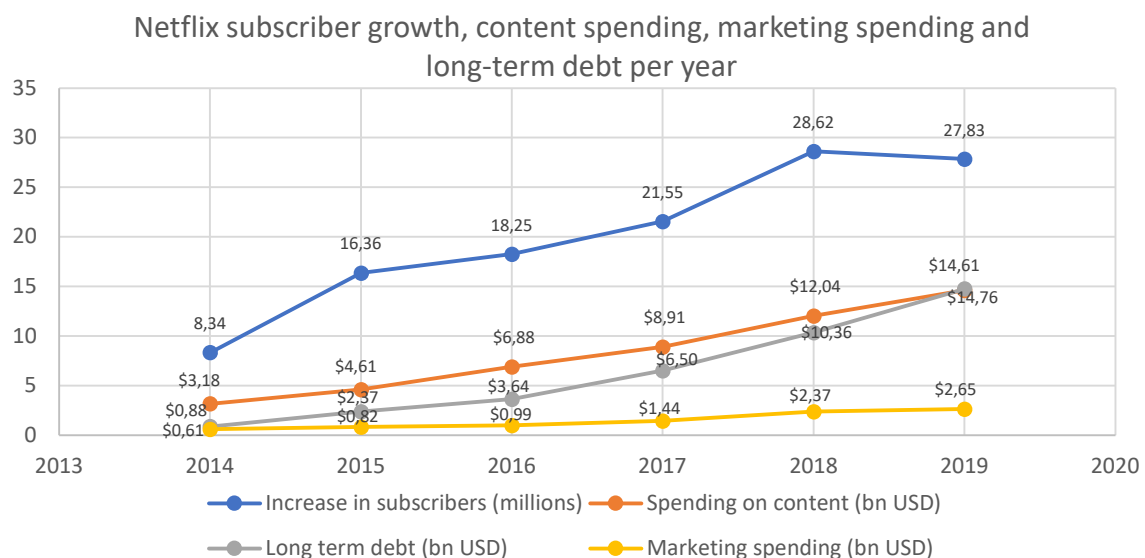


Figure 2: Data from Netflix Annual Reports (2016, 2019, 2020)

To finance this huge investment on its library, the company was forced to imposed a rise in subscription prices (going from \$10.99 to \$12.99 for its standard tier in the first quarter of 2019) and it experienced an inevitable increase in debt. As stated by the company in their 2019 Annual Report (p. 11): “We have a substantial amount of indebtedness and other obligations, including streaming content obligations. Moreover, we expect to incur substantial additional indebtedness in the future and to incur other obligations, including additional streaming content obligations.” The increase in long-term debt is visible in *Figure 2* as well, and the curve shows an analogous slope to the one measuring content spending. At the same time, the company’s marketing expenses have also been increasing recently. In the last few years Netflix’s global marketing

costs went from 1.44 billion USD in 2017, to 2.37 billion in 2018, and they reached a peak of 2.65 billion USD in 2019. This effort on marketing seems justified by some main factors: first of all, this huge investment needs to be backed up by an equally well-structured effort to let actual and potential viewers know about the new content produced, and secondly, since the effort on producing new titles is so massive, the best titles (i.e., those the company thinks have more potential) need to be made as visible as possible. This increase in marketing efforts is also perfectly in line with the attention economy discourse (Purdy & Reznik, 2019), which stresses the need to strive to attract customers' scarce attention in an overcrowded media context where it is coveted by many different actors, within and outside the industry.

Overall, the Netflix strategy implies a strong focus on content supply as a critical success factor to stay in the market: since most studios are opting for taking back the content they licensed in order to keep their best titles exclusively to their own platforms, it is clear that, if an SVOD provider cannot get their hands on all the best content available, they will have to strive to produce the next big thing in order to keep subscription rates up.

As of June 2020, Reelgood reported the share of licensed and original titles available on the main streaming services in the US. (Santos, 2020) Netflix offered original titles for around 72% of all the TV shows and 49% of all the movies available, while the same trend was around 21% of TV shows and 12.5% of all movies for Amazon Prime Video. Other platforms were polarized as well with respect to this content dilemma: for instance, Apple TV+ has been offering only exclusive titles for both movies and TV series (even though it seems they are recently undertaking a change in strategy, with a less radical approach with respect to licensed content). Disney offers 12% of exclusive movies and 26% of exclusive TV series. The pattern is similar for Hulu's TV series (22%), but the platform offers less exclusive movies (only around 4%), whereas HBO Now offers around 2% in both exclusive movies and TV series. (Statista, 2020b)

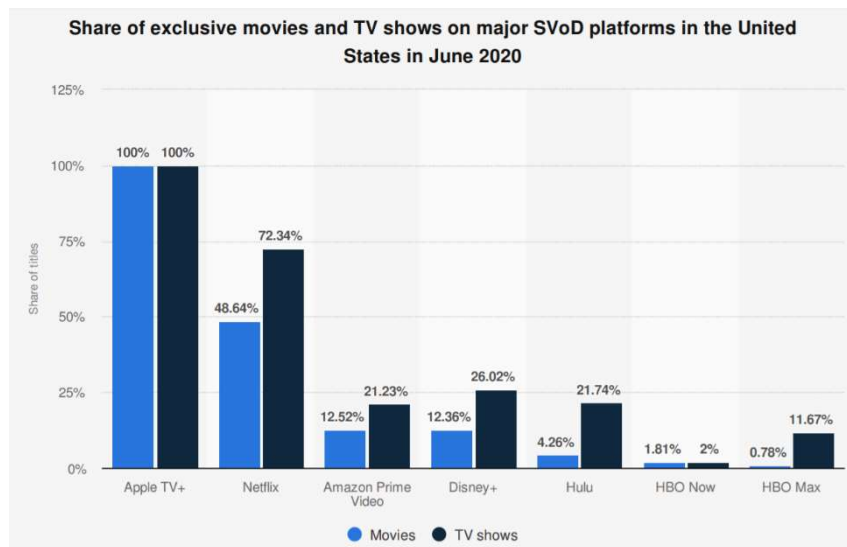


Figure 3: Statista (2020b), data from Reelgood

With this in mind, it must be stressed that if every streaming platform on the market has that iconic, massively popular, rewatch-worthy series that most viewers would want to have access to (whether that is a recent, heavily-acclaimed original series like *Stranger Things* or a big timeless classic like *Friends* or *The Office*), each consumer would need to subscribe to a number of different platforms to access all the content they likely desire to watch. This tendency is causing forecasts that suggest content reaggregation of streaming offerings, providing customized bundles of content for the viewer's specific needs, just like Amazon is doing with *Amazon Prime Video Channels*. (Deloitte, 2020a)

Amazon is still the biggest Netflix competitor, with a massive catalogue available, but it also deploys a different strategic outlook: aside from the titles available for Prime Video subscribers, the platform allows users to rent content from third-party providers paying extra, working in an optic of content reaggregation with Amazon Prime Channels. Thanks to this approach, already in 2018 Amazon Prime Video provided access to an immense pool of content, that reached 50,782 titles in the US, 27,392 in Germany, and 20,492 in the UK. (Statista, 2018) Obviously, such a massive catalogue heavily relied on licensing and renting rather than original content production.

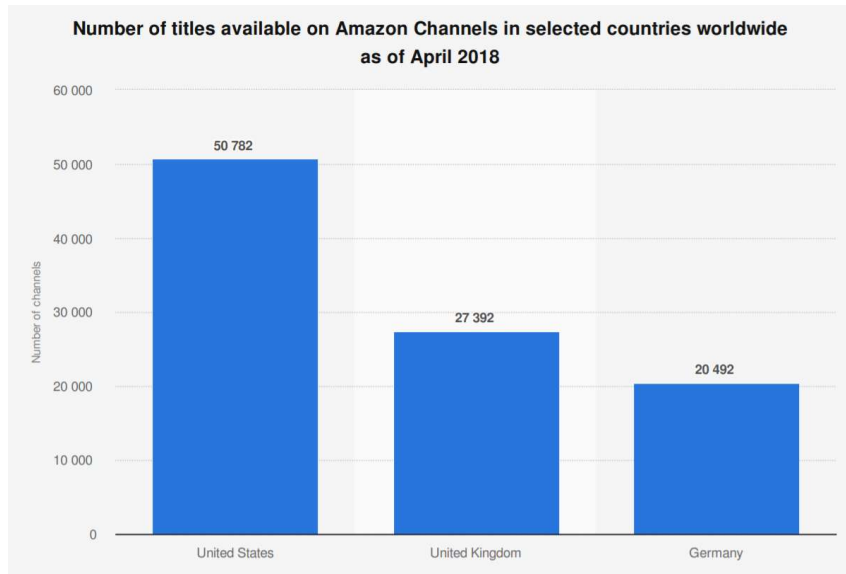


Figure 4: Statista (2018), data from Ampere Analysis

Nonetheless, Amazon still invests on original content: in 2019, the company produced 70 original titles, which is not much considering the 371 produced by Netflix in that same year, but it's still a significant increase considered the 40 original titles it produced in 2015 or the 56 in 2017. (Statista, 2019b, p. 23) Amazon is not ignoring the relevance of providing unique subscription-worthy content, however its strategy is not solely relying on that, but rather on the potential of content reaggregation. Nonetheless, even though the emergence of this super-aggregator might help customers reduce the number of different platforms' subscriptions, it would not necessarily do much to diminish the amount of content customers deal with. Contrarily, it would just re-aggregate titles under the same big umbrella.

Number of original content titles produced by Amazon Prime Video worldwide from 2012 to 2019
Original content titles launched by Amazon Prime Video 2012-2019

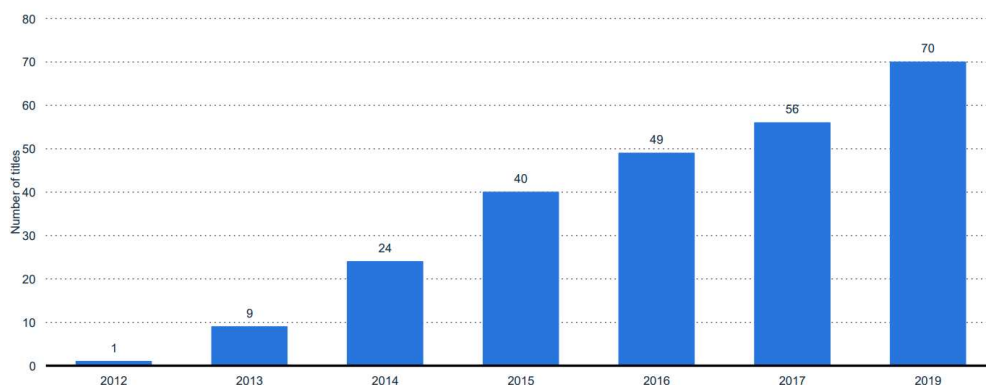


Figure 5: Statista (2019b, p. 23)

However, even simplifying the number of different platforms to access to look for the right title is not to be underestimated. This is mirrored in customers' increasing need for streamlining the decision process in streaming platforms: OC&C (2019, p.10) stressed that the demand for simplification of streaming services is significantly rising, with 40% of under-35 surveyed in 2016 that agreed with the sentence "There are too many services out there – I find the choice confusing", and 75% of the same age group agreeing to the same sentence in 2018.

At this point, it is clear that choice overload for contemporary streaming service consumers unfolds on two different levels: on a macro-level, they need to choose to which SVOD provider to subscribe among the ever wider array of alternatives available, whereas on a micro-level, they need to choose which specific title to consume within the single platform.

All the previously presented evidence aims at proving that, theoretically, the SVOD services industry seems the ideal context for the choice overload phenomenon to unfold. Not only is the content massive within each platform, but the number of platforms available keeps increasing, and valuable original and exclusive titles are offered by each alternative. As Peter Katsingris, SVP Audience Insights at Nielsen, stated in their 2019 Total Audience Report, the decision purgatory bears great costs not only for consumers, but also for programmers, content owners, brands and marketers, and he stressed the importance of content discovery in an era when the average US media consumer is faced with a huge amount of alternatives, accessed through different devices. Furthermore, he highlighted the role of recommendation algorithms, network marketing efforts, playlists and interpersonal suggestions as key factors to keep in mind to navigate the complexity of the current unbounded media landscape. (Nielsen, 2019)

4. Methodology

Contextualizing the framing of this work, it could be stated that this paper finds its rationale in consumer behavior and user experience, but in order to conduct this study in the most comprehensive way possible, instruments and knowledge from psychology, media studies and economics were also consulted – and in some cases applied – in order to have a more holistic understanding of this multilayered topic. Therefore, the outlook of this work could be defined

as interdisciplinary, even though its main perspective, and especially the final conclusions and implications, are prominently business-related. The industry that is the subject of this study – i.e., subscription-based video streaming services – is cultural in nature, therefore the perspective of cultural management studies was also particularly prominent during this research.

4.1 Philosophy of science

This work will now provide an outline of the methodological outlook that has been adopted to carry out this research. This paper will refer to philosophy of science in order to provide a brief contextualization of the methodological approach selected, elaborating on the epistemology and methodology of science undertaken, and the consequences that they implied for this research.

First of all, it is relevant to contextualize the position of this work with respect to the two main paradigms that characterize social science research, namely positivism and interpretivism. Although, as Byrne (2017) states, the divergences between these two are often inflated and over-simplified, they still represent the two main philosophical positions in terms of research outlooks that social scientists refer to. In general terms, positivism in social sciences entails a rejection of metaphysics, and a particular focus on measurable and observable phenomena, both in nature as well as in social contexts. (DiVanna, 2012) In this sense, it could be stated that positivism is an “application of the empiricist model of natural science to the study of society.” (O'Reilly, 2009) The strong focus on the production of knowledge that is as objective and trustworthy as possible generally links positivist outlooks to the adoption of a quantitative approach in research.

On the other hand, as Shea & Yanow (2020) stated, interpretivism designates a methodological approach which concentrates on how individuals make meaning of the world that surrounds them, with reference to phenomenology and hermeneutics. Overall, “empirical social science research in this tradition comprises researchers’ interpretations of the various interpretations made and used by actors in the research settings being studied, with and through which those actors express what is meaningful to them.” (*id.*, p. 2) This type of paradigm is usually at the basis of a qualitative approach to social science research.

The outlook that this work will undertake is more in line with the positivist approach, but it could be better identified with post-positivism. As argued by Clegg (2008, p.156): “a post-positivist view would argue that while the nature of reality is unequivocally real - it is ‘out there’ - our ways of knowing it as such are somewhat more contestable. While we have highly elaborated codes for making sense of phenomena - such as the methods of empirical science - we should recognize these for the codes they are.” In a post-positivist research context, the classic positivism assumptions of its foundational epistemological nature, namely that there should be some logical or empirical facts that are unquestionably true, are not considered to subsist. This realization implies that, from an epistemological point of view, all knowledge is expected to be conjectural in nature (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014a). Post-positivism holds the same ontological stance as critical realism, namely the idea that the objective world can only be known and measured in an imperfect way, encouraging critical examination of any assertion concerning reality. (Leung & Shek, 2018) Taking that into consideration, this paper embraces the claim that there is no such thing as an infallible logical system, and that any research is biased to some extent by the perspective, education and background of the subject that conducted it, even when striving to be as objective as possible. (*id.*) For this reason, the hypotheses formulated for this research, and the consequent findings and conclusions, need to be interpreted with the awareness of the adoption of this point of view.

Therefore, the outcomes of this research do not have the pretension to *be true*, but rather to *be likely to be true*. (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014b) That being said, it follows that the arguments of this study are based on evidence that resulted from observations and data collected within the limitations that naturally occur with the use of a certain method. This method and its limitations will be discussed later in this section, but for the moment it is relevant to stress that the use of a different methodological approach, and the consequent collection of different data, might have led to different arguments or might have brought in a different perspective on the subject of choice overload in streaming platforms. In the next subsection, an argument for the use of the chosen method will be provided, together with an outline of the research design at the basis of this study.

4.2 Research design

As stated by McGregor (2019), research design defines the strategy that researchers put in place in order to structure their work in a compelling, coherent way, making sure that the knowledge they elaborate actually manages to properly address the research question formulated. As reported by the author, research design differs from methods, since the latter refers to precise techniques and procedures enacted to collect or analyze data, whereas the former is a more general plan, that entails both logic and logistics.

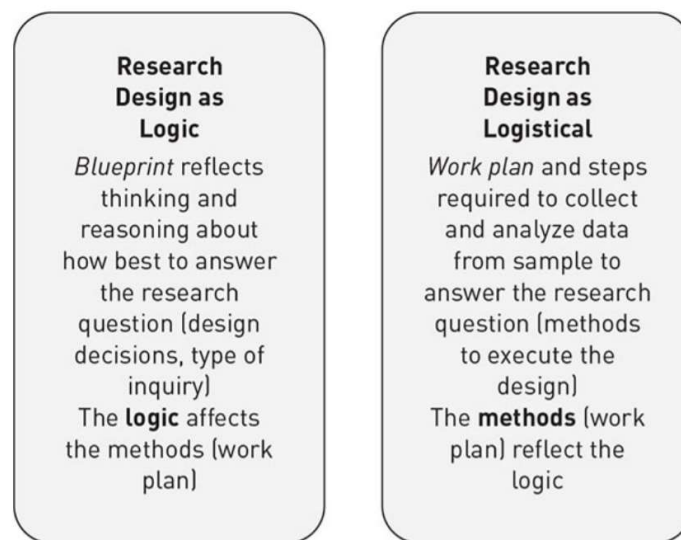


Figure 6: McGregor (2019), "Research Design as Logic and Logistical"

Taking into account the two research questions at the basis of this work, namely:

- **RQ1:** To which extent do Schwartz's theories on choice overload apply to the context of subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) services?
- **RQ2:** Literature research identified some theories that could provide easily accessible mitigating factors in the form of coping mechanism for the users that are subject to the negative effects of the choice overload phenomenon. To which extent do they prove effective?

a series of considerations were made to outline the logic that would affect the development of this work. The logic of this paper is influenced not only by its methodological approach – in

this case, the post-positivist outlook – but also by the type of inquiry that is about to be conducted. In this sense, it is useful to analyze into detail the formulation of the research questions. Both RQ1 and RQ2 aim at investigating whether some established theoretical knowledge can be confirmed in an area where it was not explicitly applied before. In this sense, RQ1 aims at exploring whether the constructs of choice overload theory postulated by Schwartz apply to a context that seems ideal for their occurrence. In the same way, RQ2 evaluates whether some media studies' theories could help identify possible quick fixes that users could easily access to cope with the negative effects of choice overload. In this sense, the general purpose of this work is to *detect the occurrence* of a certain phenomenon among the users of a certain type of service, but also to *evaluate its extent*, and possibly to *determine some coping mechanisms* on the users' side, once again evaluating their effectiveness. The identification and evaluation of choice overload in SVOD platforms could help formulate some suggestions to improve user experience, and it could inspire further research that more directly focuses on finding concrete solutions to the issues that choice overload generally causes. The aim of this paper, however, is not to strictly focus on the solutions themselves, but rather to detect the phenomenon, and to start a discussion on finding solutions to the issues that it likely causes to SVOD users. In this sense, this research could work as a starting point for elaborating concrete strategies to face its negative consequences.

When it comes to the logistical aspect of research design, the work plan formulated was a direct consequence of the logic of this research, as well as the research questions that are at its core. In line with the post-positivist outlook, the approach adopted for this paper was quantitative exploratory, and the method used was a survey research. RQ1 and RQ2 are both formulated in *quantification* terms: the aim of this research is not to define if Schwartz's theories apply or not, but instead to define *to which extent* they apply. They could function perfectly, or not at all, but what is far more likely is that they will work *to a certain extent*. In line with this purpose, descriptive statistics, and more specifically correlation analysis, was considered as the proper method to address these questions, considering the objective of their inquiry.

In order to carry out this type of research, it was necessary to investigate these correlation patterns on a large scale, relying on the generalizing validity of statistical analysis. Hence, quantitative methods were evaluated as more fitting compared to the qualitative alternative, which is generally adopted to discover and investigate underlying patterns and motives that explain certain behaviors, occurrences and practices, in accordance with an interpretivist rationale. Nonetheless, in this case, individuals' behavioral patterns are not to be discovered: they are already explicated by the choice overload theories, and the scope of this work is to define whether and to which extent they can be detected among streaming platforms' users. However, a new research question, with an interpretivist rationale, might arise from this work in order to further investigate the reasons and circumstances of the results drawn, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes and motivations that are at the basis of users' behaviors and attitudes with respect to SVOD platforms.

Once the quantitative approach was adopted, the research questions were further considered in order to structure the following work plan:

1. Defining the research hypotheses, on the basis of the two research questions;
2. Working on survey design, making sure that each set of questions was formulated to test each specific hypothesis, carefully evaluating the survey techniques adopted;
3. Distributing the survey to a population of individuals that make use of SVOD platforms;
4. Collecting the results and proceeding with the data analysis.

4.3 Research hypotheses

As stated in the previously mentioned work plan, before working on defining which type of survey research could best address the research questions, a series of research hypotheses had to be formulated. Based on the insight presented in the review of the literature and the previously described methodological stance, as well as the secondary data collected (illustrated in paragraph 3), the following hypotheses were formulated (*see Table 1 below*). The hypotheses

were divided into two main subcategories: “Main Hypotheses”, which address RQ1, and “Minor Hypotheses”, which address RQ2.

| Table 1. Hypotheses |
|--|
| <p>Main Hypotheses</p> <p>H1: Respondents consider the wide content variety as a compelling reason to use streaming platforms.</p> <p>H2: There is a significant, positive correlation between maximization tendencies and post-choice regret tendencies.</p> <p>H3: There is a significant, positive correlation between maximization tendencies and dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage.</p> <p>H4: There is a significant, positive correlation between post-choice regret tendencies and dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage.</p> |
| <p>Minor Hypotheses</p> <p>H5: Knowledgeability in terms of content might justify lower dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage.</p> <p>H6: The preference of TV series over movies, limiting the amount of choices to be made, might justify lower dissatisfaction with streaming platforms usage.</p> <p>H7: Following the suggestions of taste communities might justify lower dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage.</p> |

H1 is a mere confirmation to the presupposition of the paradox of choice, namely the idea that consumers are enticed by vast arrays of options regardless of the consequences. This has already been proven extensively by previously mentioned choice overload studies (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Berger et al., 2007), as well as by evidence in industry analyses – for instance, in its 14th *Digital media trends* survey, Deloitte found out that the most indicated reason for subscribing to a streaming service was the “broad range of movies and TV shows”: it was selected by 51% of respondents (2020b, p. 9). Nonetheless, this presupposition needs to be confirmed also for the sample in question.

On the other hand, H2 to H4 are strictly based on Schwartz’s theories, applying them to the context of subscription-based video streaming services. Overall, they aim at confirming the scholar’s assumptions, which entail a positive correlation between maximization tendencies and regret, as well as a positive correlation of both of these with users’ dissatisfaction during the decision process.

All the other minor hypotheses (H5-H7) were formulated on the basis of evidence from the literature consulted during this research, and they could potentially work as mitigating factors that might help justify a reduction in the dissatisfaction caused by choice overload.

H5 refers to the idea that individuals with an expertise in audiovisual content are more likely to take an educated guess when navigating the vast number of alternatives available in a streaming platforms. Therefore, when someone states that they are knowledgeable on content, they should be less likely to experience frustration in the usage of a streaming platform. This concept was explored by Iyengar and Lepper (2000), who stated that when the chooser is familiar with the item category he/she has to select, choice overload might be reduced or even completely avoided. The reason behind this idea refers to the fact that, if consumers are knowledgeable about a certain product typology, they will likely have defined preferences, or they can easily form them, and as Chernev (2003) pointed out, this might simplify consistently the decision-making process. In the same way, it is probable that respondents who state that they are knowledgeable about movies and TV series might experience lower levels of decision fatigue and dissatisfaction in the process of choosing what to watch on a streaming service.

The following hypothesis, H6, refers to a theory by Perks (2015), who stated that the emphasis placed on serialized content by most streaming platforms (Netflix in particular) is a purposeful strategy used to reduce decision fatigue through binge-watching. In fact, once a viewer makes the decision to commit to a certain series, he/she does not have to deal with content discovery for a while, whereas watching movies imposes a new choice, and consequently a new information gathering and content discovery session, around every two hours, or even less.

Finally, H7 is based on the idea expressed by Pertierra and Turner (2012) that the conformance to taste communities (often represented by family members, friends and acquaintances) might provide guidance in the extremely variegated streaming service universe. Sticking to the recommendations of people they trust might help viewers navigate choice, thus simplifying the decision-making phase.

4.4 Survey design

In practical terms, it was crucial to formulate a survey that managed to grasp the attitudes of SVOD users regarding their experience using the platforms they subscribed to. To do so, the Likert scale was evaluated as particularly fitting for this study, as it is one of the most endorsed attitude measurement systems for survey research, and the focus of this survey is exactly to figure out the attitudes of respondents with respect to maximization tendencies, post-choice regret and dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage.

Therefore, the core part of this survey research is a Likert-type attitude questionnaire with seven categories, divided into three sections. Schwartz's Maximization Scale and Regret Scale (Schwartz et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2004) were used to determine if the correlation the scholar discovered between them in his research could be detected even in the sample considered in this case. Then, the relationship between the two scales and the dissatisfaction caused by the negative outcomes of choice overload within streaming platforms could be scrutinized, and to do so, another scale needed to be formulated. The Likert scale employed in this research included seven categories, based on Schwartz's own scales. There is strong evidence in the literature that shows that a high number of categories is helpful in increasing reliability in responses in cases in which score variability is low, and it keeps the result unvaried when score variability is higher. (Masters, 1974) When considering the advantages in the use of a Likert scale for survey research, it can be stated that one of the main positive aspects is related to how easily they can be constructed and read by respondents, provided that the items are formulated correctly – namely, as Horst and Pyburn (2018) state, in a concise, understandable and unambiguous way, and keeping in mind that they should always refer to attitudes and values of the respondent rather than facts.

Starting from the research hypotheses, the survey was developed and structured in four main sections. Table 2 below displays all the questions included in each part. The survey was developed through the Qualtrics software, and it was available in both Italian and English. Both versions are available in *Appendix A* and *Appendix B*. The questionnaire was anticipated by a

brief message that explained the purpose of the data collection and that assured respondents about anonymity and the use that would be made of the information collected.

| Table 2. Survey structure |
|---|
| <p>Section 1: DEMOGRAPHICS Q1: What is your age? Q2: What is your gender? Q3: Please select your country of origin. Q4: Please select the streaming platform(s) that you use. Alternatives: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Apple TV+, NowTV, Hulu, HBO Max, Other: [gap to fill].</p> |
| <p>Section 2: USER EXPERIENCE and DISSATISFACTION SCALE The following sentences will refer to your experience as a streaming platform user. Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).</p> <p>Q5_1 I use a streaming platform because it provides many movies and TV series to choose from. Q5_2 I feel knowledgeable about movies and TV series. Q5_3 I generally prefer to watch TV series rather than movies on a streaming platform. Q5_4 I generally watch contents recommended by friends/family. Q5_5 It is often hard for me to choose which movie or TV series to watch on a streaming platform. Q5_6 I have often experienced dissatisfaction after watching something that I spent a lot of time selecting. Q5_7 I feel like I often spend too much time choosing what to watch on a streaming platform. Q5_8 I have often experienced closing a streaming platform before watching anything because I could not make a decision. Q5_9 I have often experienced frustration in the process of selecting what to watch on a streaming platform.</p> |
| <p>Section 3: MAXIMIZATION SCALE The following sentences will refer to how you feel in certain daily situations. Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).</p> <p>Q6_1 When I watch TV, I channel surf, often scanning through the available options even while attempting to watch one program. Q6_2 When I am listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I'm relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to. Q6_3 No matter how satisfied I am with my job/study path, it's only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities. Q6_4 I often fantasize about living in ways that are quite different from my actual life. Q6_5 I'm a big fan of lists that attempt to rank things (the best movies, the best singers, the best athletes, the best novels, etc.). Q6_6 I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend. Q6_7 When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I really love. Q6_8 No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself. Q6_9 I never settle for second best. Q6_10 Whenever I'm faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment.</p> |

Section 4: REGRET SCALE

The following sentences will refer to how you feel in certain general situations in your life.
Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).

- Q7_1 Whenever I make a choice, I'm curious about what would have happened if I had chosen differently.
Q7_2 Whenever I make a choice, I try to get information about how the other alternatives turned out.
Q7_3 If I make a choice and it turns out well, I still feel like something of a failure if I find out that another choice would have turned out better.
Q7_4 When I think about how I'm doing in life, I often assess opportunities I have passed up.
Q7_5 Once I make a decision, I don't look back.

The first section of the survey (Q1-Q4) dealt with demographic questions (age, gender, country of origin) and it required respondents to select the video streaming platforms used. In this last question, they had the possibility to pick one or more preferences in a multiple choice list. The list of platforms included the biggest players in the market, however it was possible to eventually write missing options filling the gap "other".

The following three sections were all formulated as Likert-type scales from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree). All items in each section were verbalized as affirmative statements, and respondents had to declare how much they agreed with each of them. The second section (Q5) touched upon satisfaction with streaming platforms, usage habits, and user experience with content selection. This section included the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9), as well as all the other items that were addressed from H5 through H7. The scale was constructed to measure dissatisfaction during and after the choice, outlining the type of situations and emotional responses that users might experience in a context of choice overload.

Respondents had to rate how hard they usually found the content selection process, how often they experienced discontent after watching something they selected, how much they felt like wasting time while using streaming platforms, if they frequently decided to close a streaming platform before watching anything, and how often they felt frustrated in the process of choosing. Overall, the scale measured dissatisfaction throughout the whole user experience with content selection, and after adding the score of the five single items, respondents were positioned on a spectrum that ranges from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 35.

The third and the fourth sections were respectively the Maximization Scale (Q6) and the Regret Scale (Q7) (Schwartz et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2004). The Maximization Scale was created by Schwartz with the objective of assessing the maximization attitude of individuals in various hypothetical scenarios that depicted a maximizing behavior, and respondents had to state how much they agreed with each of them. The sum of the scores of all the items allowed the researcher to position the respondent in the maximization spectrum. Low scores mean that the individual has prevalently satisficing tendencies, whereas high scores mean that the individual was inclined towards maximizing. Schwartz's scale was reduced of three questions for the purpose of this survey (going from a thirteen to a ten-item section). The decision to reduce the Maximization Scale was dictated by a series of reasons. First of all, two of the eliminated questions were considered a bit outdated for current respondents, since they related to habits that are not considered common practice anymore, such as renting videos and writing letters to friends. The third question that was left out referred to romantic relationship habits, a topic that might have been considered sensitive and intrusive by some respondents, discouraging them from completing the survey. Moreover, the decision to reduce the Maximization Scale was also related to the need to keep the survey as concise and immediate as possible, in order to maximize the likelihood of getting a complete response. Therefore, the Maximization Scale used for this study ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 70.

The Regret Scale was also formulated by Schwartz, with the aim of assessing whether respondents have an attitude towards post-choice regret, and how likely they are to look back on opportunities they have passed by making a certain decision. According to the scholar, people with strong maximizing tendencies are likely to experience this form of regret. This scale consisted of five items, and it was kept unvaried for the purpose of this study. Respondents could score a minimum of 5, which defines them as individuals who do not suffer from post-choice regret, to a maximum of 35, meaning that they are extremely subject to this phenomenon.

The following table (*Table 3*) represents a reformulation of the hypotheses presented in Table 1, using the variable names corresponding to the specific survey items listed in Table 2, in order to make the forthcoming analysis clearer.

| Table 3. Hypotheses reformulation |
|---|
| Main Hypotheses H1: The mean of Q5_1 > 5, and the scores for this item are heavily skewed to the left. H2: There is a significant, positive correlation between the Maximization Scale (Q6) and the Regret Scale (Q7). H3: There is a significant, positive correlation between the Maximization Scale (Q6) and the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9). H4: There is a significant, positive correlation between the Regret Scale (Q7) and the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9). |
| Minor Hypotheses H5: There is a negative, significant correlation between Q5_2 and the single items of the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9). H6: There is a negative, significant correlation between Q5_3 and the single items of the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9). H7: There is a negative, significant correlation between Q5_4 and the single items of the Dissatisfaction Scale (Q5_5 to Q5_9). |

4.5 Limitations

This section will describe the limitations entailed in this work, with the aim of providing a critical evaluation of its reliability, describing the constraints of the methodology, techniques and research choices that were undertaken, but also offering reasons as to why they were still accepted and evaluated as not crucially hindering for the execution of this research.

First of all, a brief overview of the challenges of quantitative methodology will be provided, referring to the analysis carried out by Coghlan & Brydon-Miller (2014a). The authors identified the main problematic aspect of this research methodology in its apparent uncriticizable status, granted by the illusion of neutrality and precision of a statistical approach. Nonetheless, this impression of perfect objectivity is extremely misleading: the decisions that are made, even while carrying out a quantitative research, are arbitrarily undertaken by individuals that decides what to include or exclude, what method works best for them, and how to interpret the results obtained. In line with a post-positivist rationale, there is no such thing as an analysis that manages to perfectly grasp an objective truth. Another important aspect to consider is the limited ability of quantitative methods to exhaustively grasp the layered, articulated nature of social and psychological phenomena: in this sense, quantitative methods

lack the ability to capture the nuances of meaning that characterize human behaviors and interactions that characterizes a qualitative approach. Nevertheless, once these critical aspects are taken into account, quantitative research becomes an instrument that allows a critical evaluation of the phenomenon studied, and a mean to gain insights with larger-scale validity.

Another critical aspect to evaluate is the nature of the sample that was analyzed in this study. Even though the survey was administered in the most unbiased way possible, by sharing the link to the questionnaire in different Facebook groups that encompassed variegated age groups and social contexts, the ability to apply random sample technique was hindered by practical limitations, i.e., the lack of resources to access a wider population to extract a random sample, as well as the inability to randomly administer the questionnaire in public spaces due to the Covid-19 regulations that were present at the time of this research. Moreover, the research focused mainly on Italian respondents, therefore it must be specified that the results of this study apply to this specific population. However, these circumstances offered an interesting result, since respondents self-selected themselves, providing a situation where most-respondents belonged to a specific age group, i.e., users below 40 years of age. Before considering sample stratification, further secondary data collection was conducted to try to make sense of this occurrence, providing interesting insights on the strategic relevance of that population for the purpose of this study, that brought to the decision to re-define the target of this research. A deeper discussion on this topic will be provided in paragraph 5.3, that treats sample analysis, but it must still be highlighted that the results of these study are necessarily representative of the specific demographic characterization of the target investigated. Nonetheless, the survey was never administered to direct individuals selected by the researcher, it was instead always shared to virtual collective spaces where individuals could freely decide to respond. The population of interest were SVOD users, which was specified in the survey introduction, but it was further ensured by the fact that, in order to proceed with the survey, respondents were compelled to select the platforms that they used.

However, limitations are not only constrained to the quantitative methodological approach, there are also some issues raised by the typology of survey selected, i.e., the Likert-type

questionnaires. For instance, a discussed topic is the inclusion or not of a midpoint in the scale, the so-called *neutral option*, which is allowed when the number of categories on the scale is odd. As explained by Gracyalny (2018), some researchers state that the midpoint should be included, since it depicts a real attitude that respondents might have, and not considering it might force them to take a stance that does not reflect their actual beliefs. The risk to exclude a midpoint is to oblige individuals to provide answers that do not reflect what they really feel, therefore compromising the credibility of the results obtained. On the other hand, others prefer to use an even number of categories in the scale, so as to create a forced choice design, in order to have a more visible pattern in the responses. Furthermore, the midpoint is often used by respondents when they feel uncomfortable expressing an opinion with respect to a topic that they perceive as sensitive: this is also one of the main reasons why the neutral option is often eliminated, so as to compel individuals to express an opinion even when they are reluctant. (Gracyalny, 2018) Nonetheless, in the case of this study, the scale was deliberately odd, allowing respondents to have the chance to be neutral with respect to some answers. This decision reflected the consideration that, since the questions are not sensitive in nature (they do not touch delicate topics like political opinions, religion, ethics, etc.), the neutral option should not be abused by respondents, but rather selected when they really feel impartial with respect to a certain statement.

Moreover, there are also other limitations to take into account when applying this survey technique, that relate to the way individuals behave when facing a Likert-type questionnaire. For instance, respondents might experience the so-called *acquiescence bias*, namely the tendency to agree with a declarative statement, due to a natural propensity to reluctance when expressing disagreement. (Gracyalny, 2018) Furthermore, *social desirability bias* should also be considered when evaluating data from a Likert-type questionnaire, since individuals are inclined to hide their true beliefs in favor of what they think is socially desirable (Horst & Pyburn, 2018). Anyhow, in this second case it might be stated that, given that the attitudes considered for this survey refer to either general choice-related situations or streaming platforms usage, social desirability bias could be milder due to the rather neutral and

unprejudiced nature of the subject covered. Nevertheless, these biases need to be kept into consideration, since they might have a significant impact on data quality and the validity and reliability of research results.

5. Analysis

5.3 Sample analysis

The survey was administered online through Facebook groups, and resulted in a total sample of N=302 valid complete responses, with no missing value for any variable because it was set to compel respondents to complete each section before moving to the next one.

5.3.1 Age

Considering the demographic connotation of the sample, when it comes to the age variable, the average of respondent was around 27, the median was 24, and the age range went from 13 to 68 (see *Table 4*). Nonetheless, the sample was heavily skewed to the right (Skewness>1), which is also visible from the quartiles, all below 30. Moreover, around 88% of respondents had an age inferior to 35 (See *Figure 7* and *Tables 4 and 5*).

Table 4. AGE

| | | |
|------------------------|---------|---------|
| N | Valid | 302 |
| | Missing | 0 |
| Mean | | 27,1291 |
| Std. Error of Mean | | ,55265 |
| Median | | 24,0000 |
| Std. Deviation | | 9,60412 |
| Skewness | | 2,028 |
| Std. Error of Skewness | | ,140 |
| Kurtosis | | 4,106 |
| Std. Error of Kurtosis | | ,280 |
| Minimum | | 13,00 |
| Maximum | | 68,00 |
| Percentiles | 25 | 22,0000 |
| | 50 | 24,0000 |
| | 75 | 29,0000 |

Figure 7. AGE HISTOGRAM

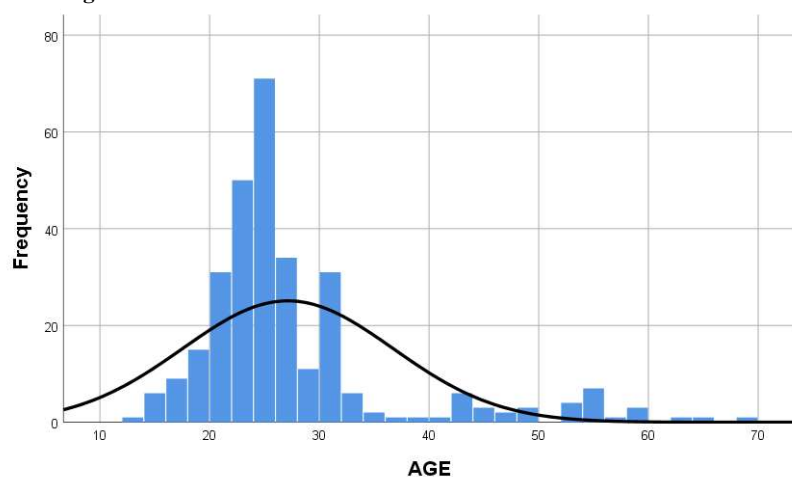


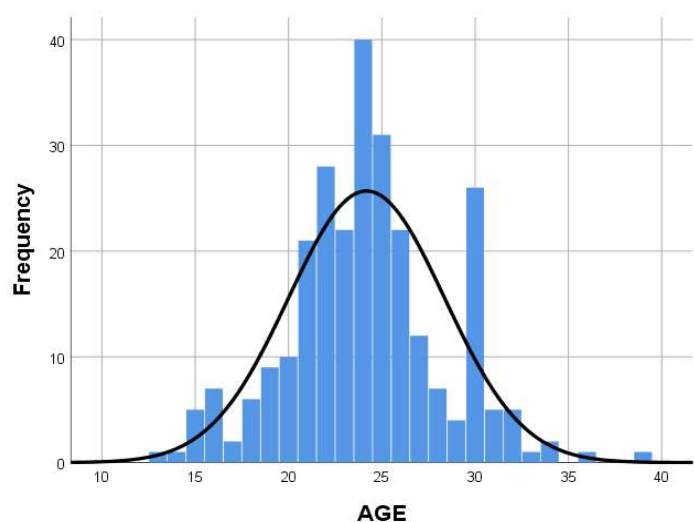
Table 5. AGE RANGES (N=302)

| | | Cumulative | | | |
|-------|----------|------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Percent |
| Valid | below 18 | 16 | 5,3 | 5,3 | 5,3 |
| | 18-24 | 136 | 45,0 | 45,0 | 50,3 |
| | 25-34 | 115 | 38,1 | 38,1 | 88,4 |
| | 35-44 | 11 | 3,6 | 3,6 | 92,1 |
| | 45-54 | 14 | 4,6 | 4,6 | 96,7 |
| | 55-64 | 8 | 2,6 | 2,6 | 99,3 |
| | over 65 | 2 | ,7 | ,7 | 100,0 |

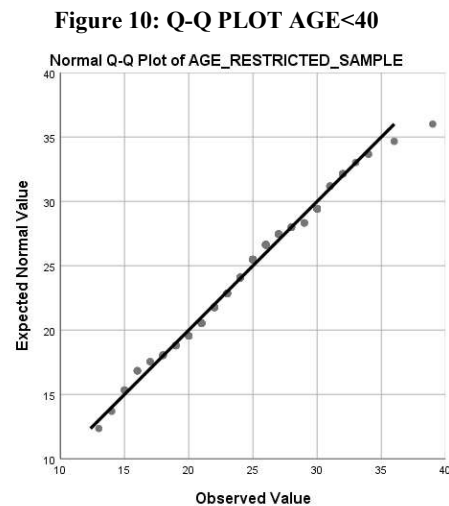
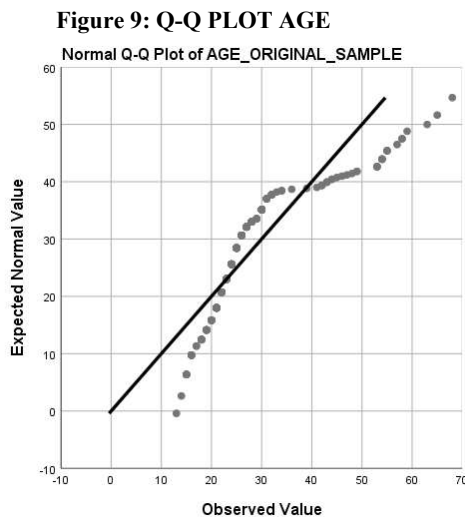
From the data presented above, it seems pretty visible that most respondents were either members of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2006) or Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996). When restricting the sample only to respondents born after 1981, the number of cases was reduced to N=269, but it was possible to verify from the histogram that the distribution appeared much more normal (which was confirmed by the Skewness and Kurtosis values as well).

Table 6. AGE<40

| | | |
|------------------------|---------|---------|
| N | Valid | 269 |
| | Missing | 0 |
| Mean | | 24,1784 |
| Std. Error of Mean | | ,25472 |
| Median | | 24,0000 |
| Std. Deviation | | 4,17769 |
| Skewness | | ,133 |
| Std. Error of Skewness | | ,149 |
| Kurtosis | | ,424 |
| Std. Error of Kurtosis | | ,296 |
| Minimum | | 13,00 |
| Maximum | | 39,00 |
| Percentiles | 25 | 22,0000 |
| | 50 | 24,0000 |
| | 75 | 26,0000 |

Figure 8: AGE<40 HISTOGRAM

For further confirmation, a Q-Q plot of the age variables of both samples was constructed, which confirmed the normality distribution of the variable once the original sample was limited to AGE<40.



5.3.2 Younger SVOD consumers and choice overload

After these first results in terms of data screening for the age variable, further research on this demographic was conducted with the aim of investigating their SVOD consumption habits and choice overload tendencies. The results of this research underlined how this specific demographic cohort actually makes up for an extremely strategic segment among streaming service consumers. Statista conducted an analysis of SVOD service users in 2019, and reported a worldwide segmentation divided in the following age groups: 18-24 years old accounted for 21% of the global market, 25-34 accounted for 36%, and 35-44 accounted for another 24%. These three age segments roughly account for a cluster of Gen Z and Millennials. Individuals 45-64 accounted for 19% of the market, against the 81% represented by consumers below 45. (Statista, 2020c)

| Users by age in percent | | | |
|-------------------------|------|------|-------|
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| 18-24 years | | | 21.00 |
| 25-34 years | | | 36.00 |
| 35-44 years | | | 24.00 |
| 45-54 years | | | 14.00 |
| 55-64 years | | | 5.00 |

Figure 11: Statista Digital Market Outlook: Video Streaming (SVoD), 2020c

As reported by Deloitte, Millennials and Gen Z are a very significant demographic in the streaming SVOD market, and the first represented a fundamental driving force in the shift in content consumption, embracing streaming services through multiple devices. (Deloitte, 2015)

Another important aspect is the tendency of younger generations to be particularly inclined to deal with a very significant amount of digital services and subscription, and the consequent access to a huge bulk of contents. Younger media consumers are still the demographic group that signs up to the most digital platforms: a survey conducted by Deloitte in early 2020 showed that the average US media and entertainment consumer paid subscription to 12 different services. This data are even more impressive when considering the generational differences: Baby Boomers subscribed to an average of 8 entertainment platforms (including SVOD, music, videogames, audio books, magazines and newspapers), Generation X subscribed to 13, Generation Z subscribed to 14, while Millennials were at the top of the list, with an average of 17 subscriptions. (Deloitte, 2020b)

As Nielsen pointed out in their Total Audience Report 2019, this age group is often the main focus of marketers in this industry, since they represent an incredibly invested segment, and the company suggests that spending should be allocated keeping in mind the key role that they play in the market. Moreover, it is safe to assume that, given their ingrained habits in SVOD consumption, and their relatively young age, at the moment they likely display the highest expected customer lifetime value, one more reason to consider them accurately when making investments and strategic decisions.

A research carried out by Leichtman Research Group found out that in June 2019, the age group 18-34 represented 51% of the share of all US households that used an SVOD service every day. (Statista, 2020d) Leichtman Research Group reconfirmed this trend also in August 2020, stating that, among the 78% of all US households that have a SVOD service, more than half of them are aged 18-34. (Leichtman Research Group, 2020)

Share of households streaming an SVOD service daily in the United States as of June 2019, by user age group

Share of households streaming SVOD daily in the U.S. 2019, by user age group

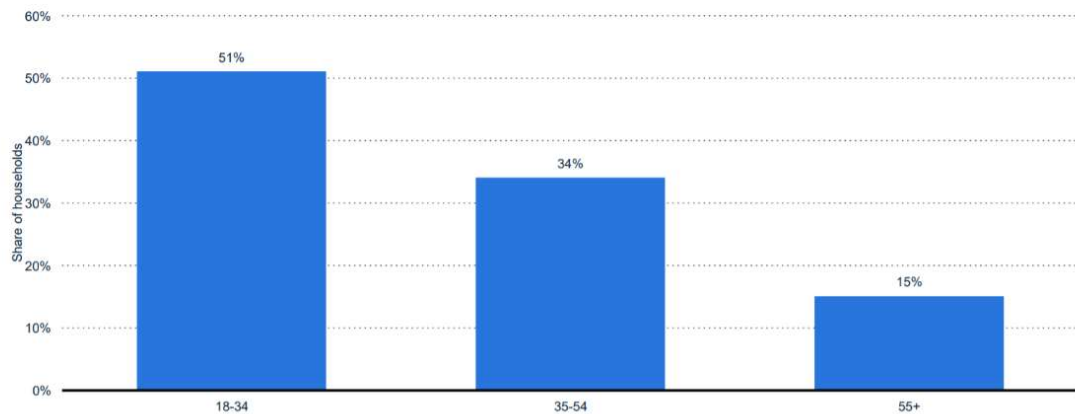


Figure 12: Statista (2020c, p. 15), data from Leichtman Research Group

Besides, despite the segment's proven relevance for this industry, there are also data that show that this age group is the most likely to experience strong choice frustration. According to the *Nielsen MediaTech Trender*, a periodical survey conducted by the company, the age group 18-34 is the most likely to not know what they want to watch before entering the streaming platform: 30% stated they had no idea what to watch at all prior to accessing the platform, and 40% had just a rough idea, compared to an average of respectively 22% and 33% for the whole sample. Moreover, users in the age group 18-34 were also the least likely to state that they knew exactly what to watch on a streaming service. (Nielsen, 2019)

VIEWING PREFERENCES AMONG STREAMING SERVICE USERS

Thinking about all of the occasions you watch TV or videos, how often do the following happen?

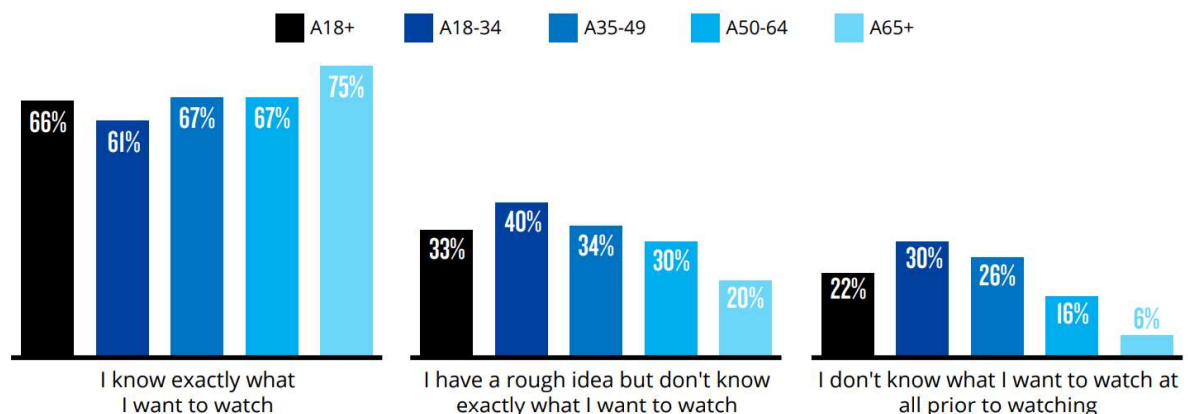


Figure 13: Nielsen Total Audience Report (2019, p. 5)

Overall, they are also the age group that needs the most time to make a selection once they enter the platform: it takes them an average of 9.4 minutes, considering that the mean for the whole sample was 7.4 minutes, and that older adults (with an age older than 50) abandon the search if they did not manage to make a decision after about 5 minutes. The age group 18-34 is also the most likely to browse menus of subscription services (45% does), and they are the ones with the highest probability to give up the search and decide to do something else (28%). (Nielsen, 2019)

AVERAGE TIME MAKING A SELECTION AMONG STREAMING SERVICE USERS

When looking for something to watch, how many minutes would you estimate you spend browsing before making a selection?



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Figure 14: Nielsen Total Audience Report (2019, p. 5)

The same pattern witnessed for US consumers unfolds also for Italian Millennials: YouGov Italy reported that 63% of them considers content abundance a relevant reason to use streaming platforms (compared to 55% of respondents of any age), but they are also the most likely to state that content overabundance is a reason not to use streaming platforms: 27% stated this, compared to the 21% of the whole sample. Moreover, 24% of Italian Millennials declared that the waste of time that streaming platforms often cause is a good reason not to use them, compared to an average of 17% for all age groups. (YouGov Italy, 2020)

Hence, considering the previously reported evidence, as well as what emerged from the descriptive analysis of the age variable, the following analysis will be carried out on the restricted sample with AGE<40 (N=269), in order to have sharper results when it comes to this critical demographic, given its role as key segment for the industry, as well as its inclination to experience the decision fatigue that characterizes choice overload.

5.3.3 Country of origin

When it comes to provenience, around 88% of respondents came from Italy, while 12% listed a different country: among these, 7,3% originated from the European Continent, 2% from South America, 1% from Asia, 1% from Africa and 0,3% from North America. It should be kept in mind that since a vast majority of respondents were Italians, the data should be read as a representation of the streaming service usage and decision-making behavior of this specific demographic. When restricting the sample to only respondents with AGE<40, the percentages are almost unvaried, with 87% of respondents still coming from Italy. Table 7 below displays the countries of origin and the respective percentages of the AGE<40 sample.

Table 7. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN (AGE<40)

| TABLE 1. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN (Q32-13) | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|-----------|---------|---------------|------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative |
| | | | | | Percent |
| Valid | Albania | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | ,4 |
| | Armenia | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | ,7 |
| | Brazil | 2 | ,7 | ,7 | 1,5 |
| | Canada | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 1,9 |
| | Colombia | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 2,2 |
| | France | 6 | 2,2 | 2,2 | 4,5 |
| | Germany | 7 | 2,6 | 2,6 | 7,1 |
| | Italy | 234 | 87,0 | 87,0 | 94,1 |
| | Luxembourg | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 94,4 |
| | Mexico | 2 | ,7 | ,7 | 95,2 |
| | Poland | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 95,5 |
| | Republic of Korea | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 95,9 |
| | Russian Federation | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 96,3 |
| | Serbia | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 96,7 |
| | South Africa | 2 | ,7 | ,7 | 97,4 |
| | Switzerland | 2 | ,7 | ,7 | 98,1 |
| | Turkey | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 98,5 |
| | Ukraine | 3 | 1,1 | 1,1 | 99,6 |
| | Venezuela, Bolivarian Republic of... | 1 | ,4 | ,4 | 100,0 |
| | Total | | 269 | 100,0 | 100,0 |

5.3.4 Gender

As for gender, the analysis of the original sample showed that 66,6% of respondents were females, while 33,4% were males.

Table 8. GENDER (N=302)

| | | Cumulative | | |
|-------|--------|------------|---------|---------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Percent |
| Valid | Male | 101 | 33,4 | 33,4 |
| | Female | 201 | 66,6 | 100,0 |
| | Total | 302 | 100,0 | |

Considering these data, there might be an assumption for gender bias, given that the sample is not close to a 50/50 ratio as it would be required to completely avoid this risk. However, when checking the boxplots of the three main variables that will be considered during the analysis – i.e., TOTAL MAXIMIZATION (the Maximization Scale, Q6 section), TOTAL REGRET (the Regret Scale, Q7 section) and TOTAL DISSATISFACTION (the Dissatisfaction Scale, Q5_5 to Q5_9) – controlling for GENDER, it is clear that no substantial difference can be noticed in terms of minimum, maximum, median and upper and lower quartiles for any of the main variables mentioned above. The only variable that presents slightly higher values for females rather than for males is TOTAL DISSATISFACTION, but the difference is so slight that it does not seem noticeable (see Figures 15, 16, 17).

Figure 15: TOTAL MAXIMIZATION BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), original sample

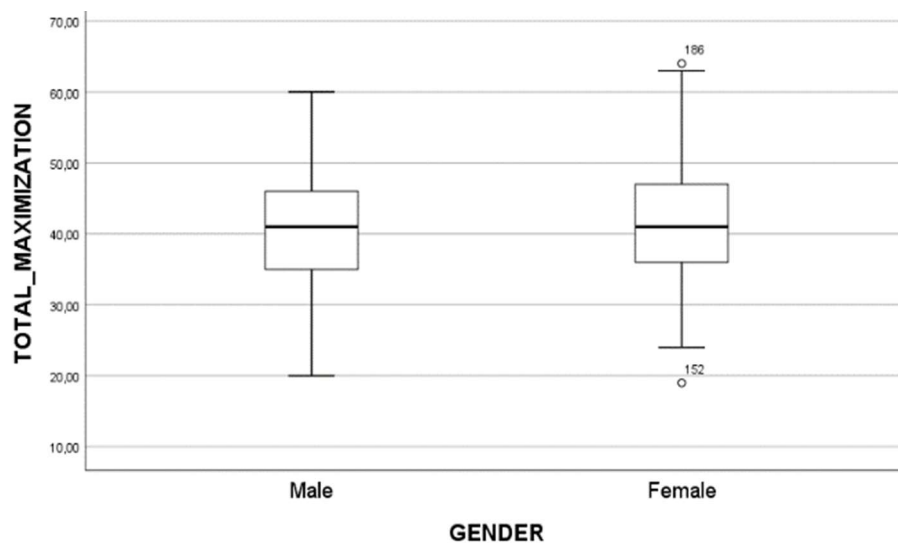


Figure 16: TOTAL REGRET BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), original sample

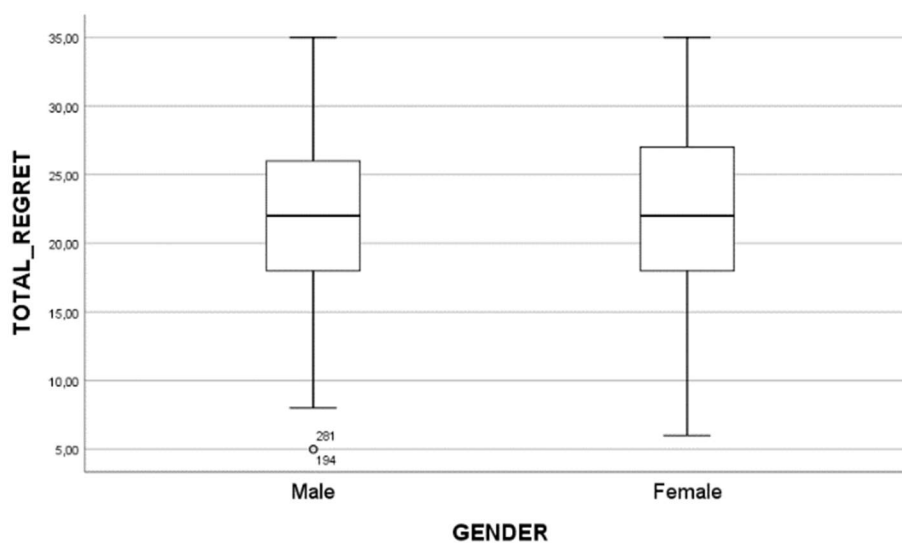
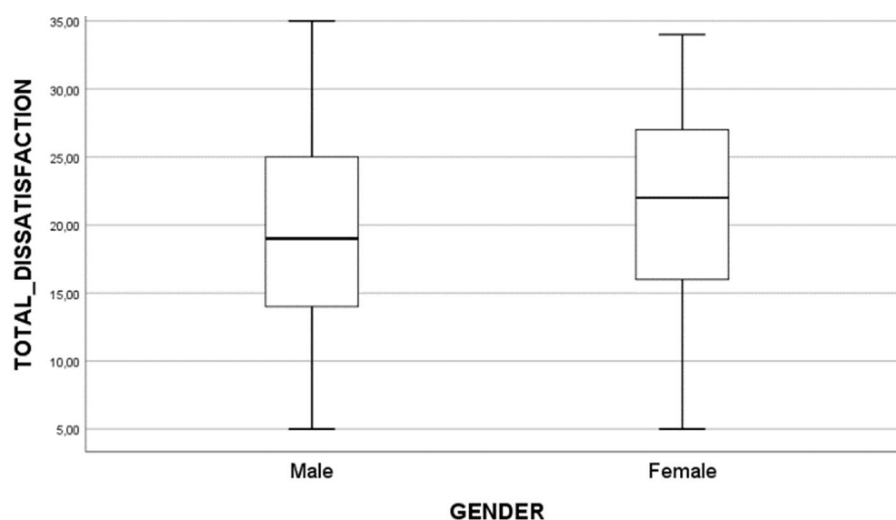


Figure 17: TOTAL DISSATISFACTION BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), original sample



When restricting the sample to people with AGE<40, the female to male ratio seems slightly more unbalanced, with 69% of respondents being females and 31% being males.

Table 9. GENDER (AGE<40)

| | | Cumulative | | |
|-------|--------|------------|---------|---------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Percent |
| Valid | Male | 83 | 30,9 | 30,9 |
| | Female | 186 | 69,1 | 100,0 |
| | Total | 269 | 100,0 | |

Nonetheless, once the boxplots of the three main variables are re-analyzed controlling for gender, it is still possible to notice that the differences between the female and male populations are once again not pronounced. As for the original sample, the most noticeable difference is that female respondents seem to have a slightly higher tendency to dissatisfaction (*see Figures 18, 19, 20*).

Figure 18: TOTAL MAXIMIZATION BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), AGE<40

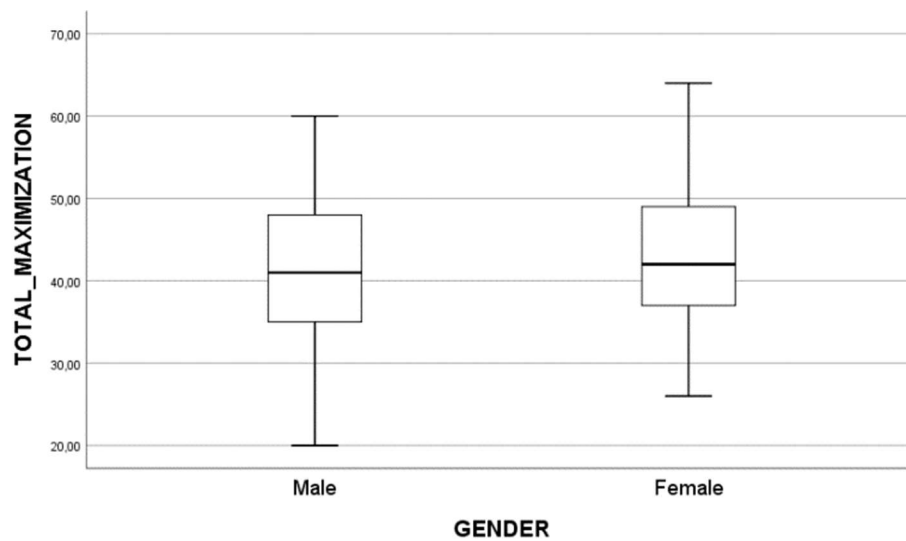


Figure 19: TOTAL REGRET BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), AGE<40

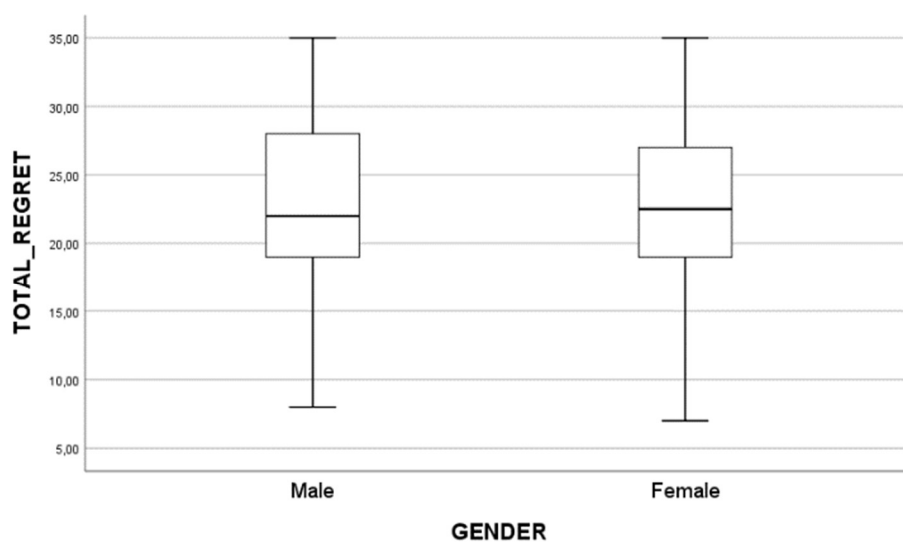
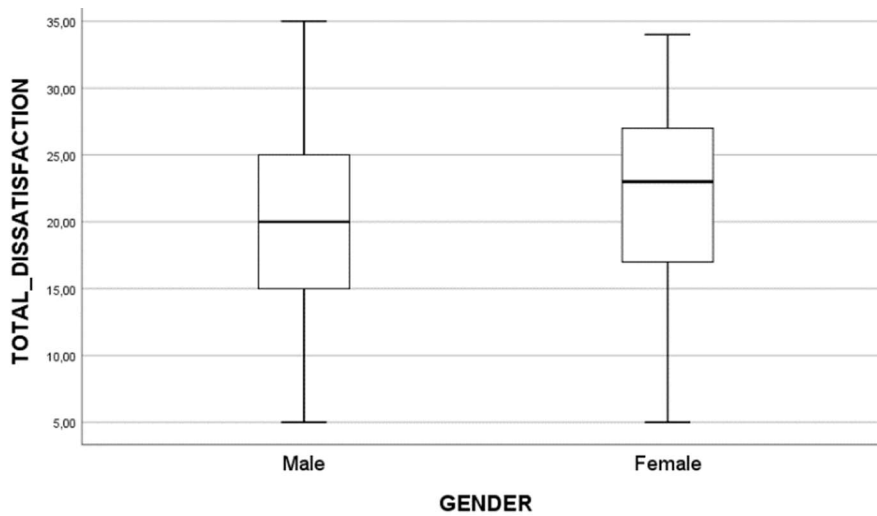


Figure 20: TOTAL DISSATISFACTION BOXPLOT (controlling for GENDER), AGE<40



However, in order to assess whether there is any significant difference among the means of a variable in two populations (in this case, male and female respondents), it was necessary to carry out an independent t-test on the sample that will be used for the analysis (i.e., the restricted AGE<40 sample) in order to confirm that the difference in means of the three principal variables is not significant for the two gender groups.

Starting from a confirmation of the normal distribution of the three main variables (for details, see paragraph 5.4.2), and after ensuring that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was respected – given that the p-value for the Levene’s test was greater than 0.05 for all the three tests conducted – the hypothesis of the independent t-test that the means of the given variable is not significantly different for the male and female populations was accepted in all three cases, since the significance level is above 0.05 for all three tests, as it is possible to assert from Tables 11, 13 and 15 below.

Table 10. Group Statistics: TOTAL MAXIMIZATION

| | GENDER | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------------------|--------|-----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| TOTAL_MAXIMIZATION | Male | 83 | 41,3976 | 8,60224 | ,94422 |
| | Female | 186 | 42,5376 | 7,99805 | ,58645 |

Table 11. Independent Samples Test: TOTAL MAXIMIZATION

| | | Levene's Test for | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|----------|---------|
| | | Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval | | |
| | | | | | | | | of the Difference | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| TOTAL MAXIMIZATION | Equal variances assumed | ,481 | ,488 | -1,055 | 267 | ,292 | -1,14004 | 1,08088 | -3,26817 | ,98809 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -1,026 | 147,722 | ,307 | -1,14004 | 1,11152 | -3,33657 | 1,05648 |
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 12. Group Statistics: TOTAL REGRET

| | GENDER | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------------|--------|-----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| TOTAL_REGRET | Male | 83 | 22,8434 | 6,35242 | ,69727 |
| | Female | 186 | 22,6398 | 6,54501 | ,47990 |

Table 13. Independent Samples Test: TOTAL REGRET

| | | Levene's Test for | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|------------|----------------------------|----------|---------|
| | | Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of | | |
| | | | | | | | | the Difference | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| TOTAL_REGR ET | Equal variances assumed | ,206 | ,651 | ,238 | 267 | ,812 | ,20359 | ,85623 | -1,48223 | 1,88940 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | ,241 | 161,977 | ,810 | ,20359 | ,84646 | -1,46793 | 1,87510 |
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 14. Group Statistics: TOTAL DISSATISFACTION

| | GENDER | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-----------------------|--------|-----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| TOTAL_DISSATISFACTION | Male | 83 | 20,0482 | 7,22952 | ,79354 |
| | Female | 186 | 21,7581 | 7,23808 | ,53072 |

Table 15. Independent Samples Test: TOTAL DISSATISFACTION

| | | Levene's Test for | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | | Equality of Variances | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | | | | Lower | Upper |
| TOTAL DISSATISF ACTION | Equal variances assumed | ,069 | ,793 | -1,790 | 267 | ,075 | -1,70987 | ,95509 | -3,59035 | ,17060 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -1,791 | 157,771 | ,075 | -1,70987 | ,95466 | -3,59543 | ,17569 |
| | | | | | | | | | | |

When considering the scale introduced in this work, the Dissatisfaction Scale, even though it seems that female respondents experienced slightly higher dissatisfaction with streaming platforms, the difference is not pronounced, and not significant according to the independent t-test. Regardless of these small differences, it seemed that the option to restrict the sample to reach a 50/50 ratio was not justified by these minor incongruences between female and male respondents, and the results of the independent t-tests confirmed this resolution. In fact, restricting the sample in this specific case would mean to lose at least one third of all the collected answers (since the female to male ratio is around 2:1), and given that the boxplot and the descriptive statistics of the three main variables seemed to show very close results among female and male respondents, as well as the independent t-tests' results, the decision to lose a substantial bulk of data for the sake of a 50/50 ratio did not seem justified.

5.3.5 Streaming services used

Turning to the variable evaluating the streaming services used, Netflix was the most selected option, picked by 85% of the total respondents, while the second largest option was Amazon Prime Video, chosen by 66%. The third most used platform, Disney+, was significantly less popular than the top two alternatives, with only 20% of the people surveyed selecting it from the available list, even though this trend is likely justified by the fact that Disney+ was made available in Italy only since March 2020. However, after the first three alternatives, the gap becomes even more significant: the fourth most used platform was NowTV, selected by 5% of

respondents, then Apple TV+ (2%), and finally HBO Max and Hulu were selected by less than 1% of respondents, but this result seems predictable since these platforms are not available in the Italian market yet. Around 9% of the surveyed selected also “Other” as an option, but the platforms indicated were very variegated, resulting in a significant fragmentation of that 9%: among these, the most frequently indicated options were Sky Go (around 1/3 of the “Other” category, so about 3% of the total sample) and Infinity (which, overall, counts as 1% of the whole sample). All the other indicated options were minor in terms of representation within the sample (less than 1%).

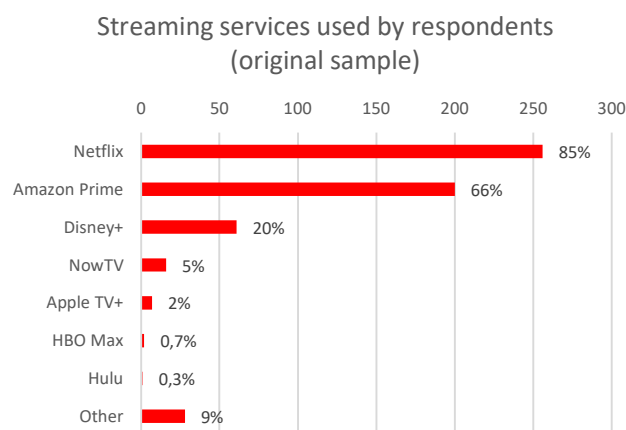


Figure 21: Data from survey research

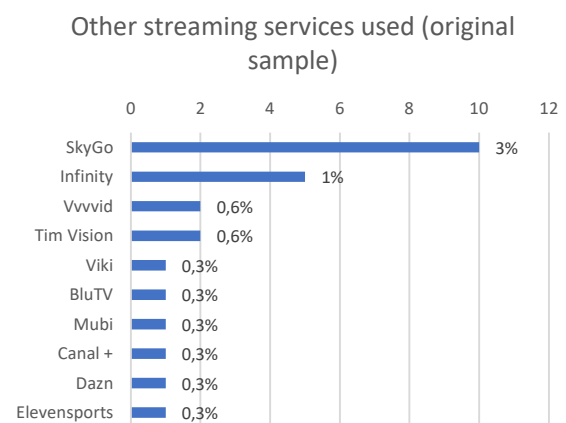


Figure 22: Data from survey research

An interesting aspect to consider is that, when comparing these results with those reported by YouGov Italy from an online questionnaire carried out in January 2020, the data of respondents 18-34 seem to mirror our survey results quite closely (*see Figure 20*). The main noticeable exception is that Disney+ was not present in the YouGov research (since it was not available in Italy yet), and the data collected for this work portray a slightly inferior representation of Infinity and Tim Vision, as well as the absence of Chili Cinema. Nonetheless, the overall data seem to be in line, keeping in mind that the heavily skewed sample of this survey in terms of age aligns the result with a younger population. In fact, when checking the third bar of the graph below, it seems clear that, when reducing the sample of this study to AGE<40, the data show only minimal changes.

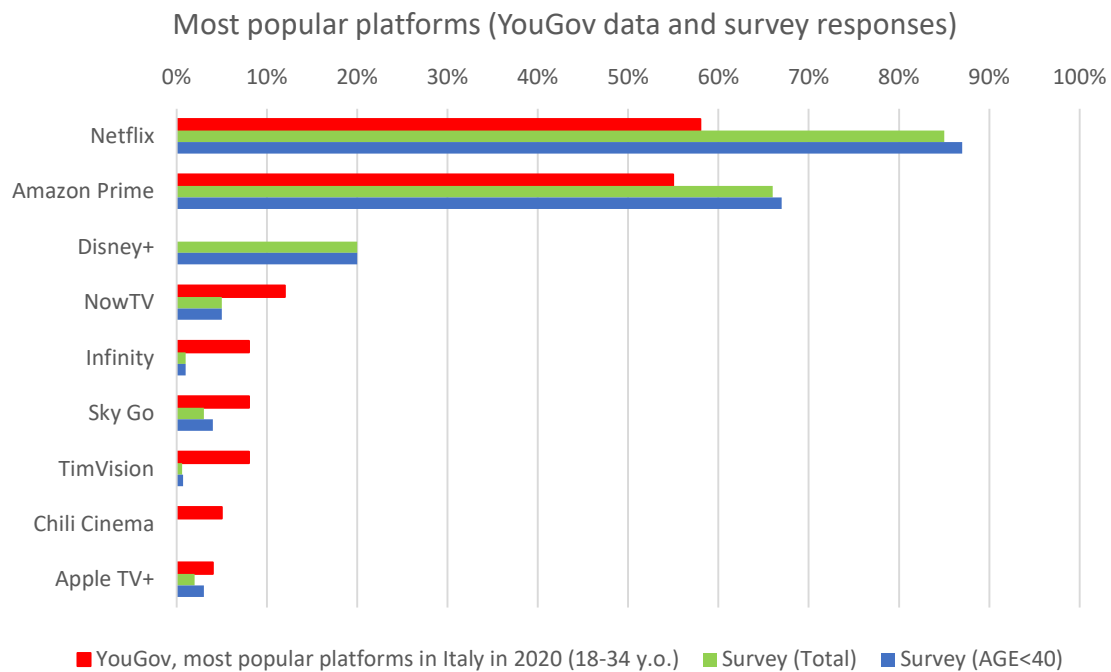


Figure 23: Data from survey research and YouGov (2020)

The same thing is visible when checking the number of platforms for each respondent: AGE<40 respondents were somewhat more likely to have two platforms rather than just one compared to the whole sample, but the difference is understandably minimal. Nonetheless, it seems that in general most respondents subscribed to two platforms, the second most consistent option was to have just one, while around one fifth of the whole sample had three. Having more than three platforms was unlikely.

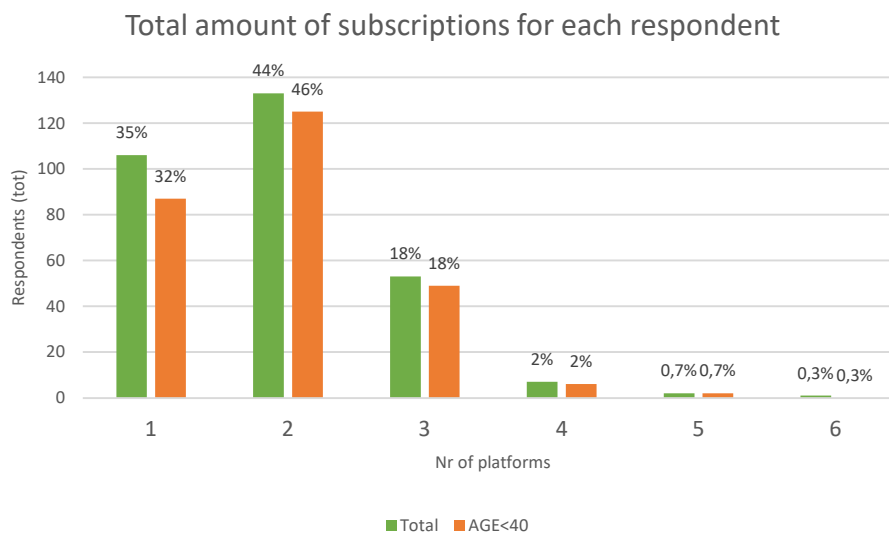


Figure 24: Data from survey research

On the whole, the analysis of the demographic variables has revealed that the sample is representative of a predominantly Italian, younger than 40 audience. The sample is unbalanced in favor of female respondents, but the gender characterization was not found influential in the variables under examination for the purpose of this study. Therefore, the results following this analysis should be considered representative of the consumer behavior of this specific demographic, i.e., Italian SVOD consumers belonging mainly to Generation Z and the Millennial Generation. Finally, the two most popular platforms within the sample (Netflix and Amazon Prime Video) are significantly more represented than any other alternative listed.

5.4 Descriptive analysis and hypotheses verification

The analysis will now proceed with the screening of the main variables TOTAL DISSATISFACTION, TOTAL REGRET and TOTAL MAXIMIZATION as well as the minor variables Q5_1, Q5_2, Q5_3 and Q5_4. Successively, this analysis will concentrate on the correlations required to verify the hypotheses previously listed.

There is a point to make before proceeding: all the variables considered were collected on a Likert-type scale, and therefore they are formally ordinal categorical variables. However, the analysis that will be conducted will treat the three main variables (TOTAL DISSATISFACTION, TOTAL MAXIMIZATION and TOTAL REGRET) as numerical for a series of reasons. First, all the three main variables assume a consistent range of values, since they are the sum of a series of ordinal variables, i.e., the single items. In fact, TOTAL DISSATISFACTION and TOTAL REGRET can range from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 35, while TOTAL MAXIMIZATION ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 70. Secondly, their role as ordinal variables allows for values to be ranked in a numerical order, since they constitute a scale. Furthermore, the use of parametric methods is accepted as a common practice for the statistical analysis of this type of variables (Norman, 2010). Schwartz et al. (2002) themselves correlated their variables from Likert-type scales using Pearson correlation, a coefficient generally employed for numerical, continuous variable. This work will

adopt the same point of view, also with the aim to keep the results comparable to the work just cited.

However, when it comes to the minor variables and the single items that will be considered in this analysis (Q5_1, Q5_2, Q5_3 and Q5_4), they will be treated as categorical variables, since they assume a much more limited range of categories (from 1 to 7) compared to the variables that result from the sum of Likert scale items. For this reason, the correlations between the single items will be analyzed using non-parametric methods, such as Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient.

5.4.1 Reliability analysis

Proceeding with the analysis, it was first necessary to measure the reliability of each of the scales used, and this was carried out running the Cronbach's alpha test for the Dissatisfaction Scale, the Maximization Scale and the Regret Scale. As can be noticed in the following tables, Cronbach's alpha scored very good for the Regret Scale and extremely good for the Dissatisfaction Scale, since they were both well above 0.7. The Maximization Scale scored lower, but still at an acceptable level for an exploratory study like this one, where the acceptable level is generally 0.6-0.7, and good is >0.7 . (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1995) Overall, these results mean that all the scales used proved reliable.

Table 16. Reliability Statistics: Maximization Scale

| Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized | | |
|--|-------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | Items | N of Items |
| ,695 | ,696 | 10 |

Table 17. Reliability Statistics: Regret Scale

| Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized | | |
|--|-------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | Items | N of Items |
| ,776 | ,776 | 5 |

Table 18. Reliability Statistics: Dissatisfaction Scale

| Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized | | |
|--|-------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | Items | N of Items |
| ,855 | ,857 | 5 |

5.4.2 Main variables descriptives

Starting from TOTAL DISSATISFACTION, the descriptive analysis of this variable highlighted the normality of the data, which is easily deduced inspecting the curve displayed in the histogram, the Skewness and Kurtosis measures (both between -1 and 1), as well as the linearity of the Q-Q Plot (*see Figures 25 and 26*).

Table 19. TOTAL DISSATISFACTION

| | | |
|------------------------|---------|---------|
| N | Valid | 269 |
| | Missing | 0 |
| Mean | | 21,2305 |
| Median | | 22,0000 |
| Std. Deviation | | 7,26516 |
| Variance | | 52,783 |
| Skewness | | -,226 |
| Std. Error of Skewness | | ,149 |
| Kurtosis | | -,728 |
| Std. Error of Kurtosis | | ,296 |
| Minimum | | 5,00 |
| Maximum | | 35,00 |
| Percentiles | 25 | 16,0000 |
| | 50 | 22,0000 |
| | 75 | 27,0000 |

Figure 25: TOTAL DISSATISFACTION HISTOGRAM

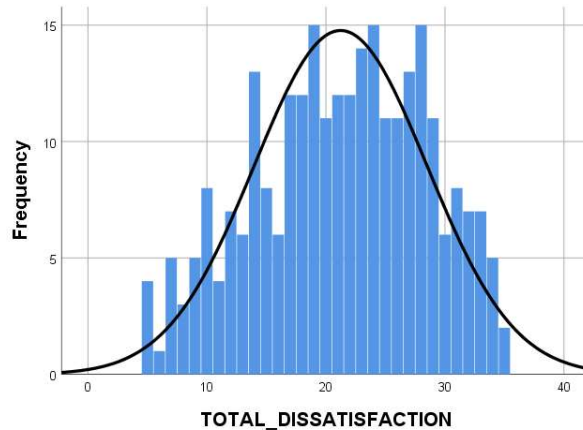
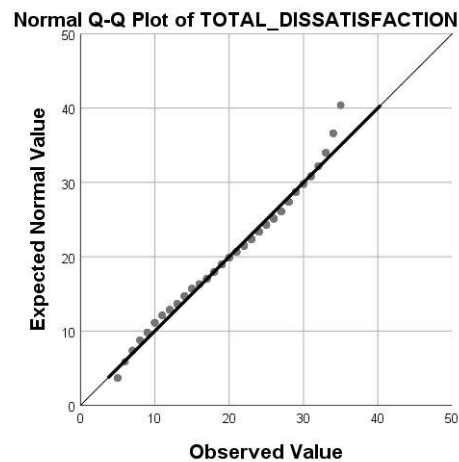


Figure 26: Q-Q PLOT TOTAL DISSATISFACTION



The range of the variable goes from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 35. The more individuals polarize towards the higher scores, the higher levels of dissatisfaction they experience. The curve seems slightly shifted towards the highest values (the median value is 22, which is 2 points higher than the exact half of the scale). The two other main variables constructed – i.e., TOTAL MAXIMIZATION and TOTAL REGRET – also exhibited a distribution that is close to normality (see Table 20 and Figures 27, 28, 29, 30), and both have a median that is around 2 point higher than the middle point of the scale (which is 40 for TOTAL MAXIMIZATION and 20 for TOTAL REGRET).

Table 20. TOTAL REGRET and TOTAL MAXIMIZATION

| | | TOTAL | |
|----------------|---------|--------------|--------------|
| | | TOTAL REGRET | MAXIMIZATION |
| N | Valid | 269 | 269 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 |
| Mean | | 22,7026 | 42,1859 |
| Median | | 22,0000 | 42,0000 |
| Std. Deviation | | 6,47504 | 8,19007 |
| Variance | | 41,926 | 67,077 |
| Skewness | | -,162 | ,140 |
| Std. Error of | | ,149 | ,149 |
| Skewness | | | |
| Kurtosis | | -,461 | -,340 |
| Std. Error of | | ,296 | ,296 |
| Kurtosis | | | |
| Minimum | | 7,00 | 20,00 |
| Maximum | | 35,00 | 64,00 |
| Percentile 25 | | 19,0000 | 36,0000 |
| s | 50 | 22,0000 | 42,0000 |
| | 75 | 28,0000 | 48,5000 |

Figure 27: TOTAL REGET HISTOGRAM

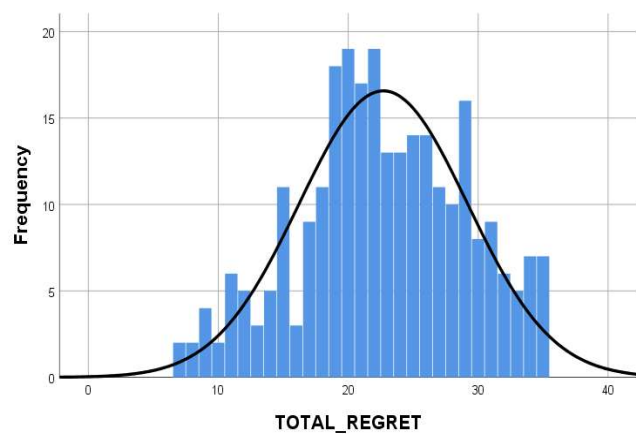


Figure 28: TOTAL MAXIMIZATION HISTOGRAM

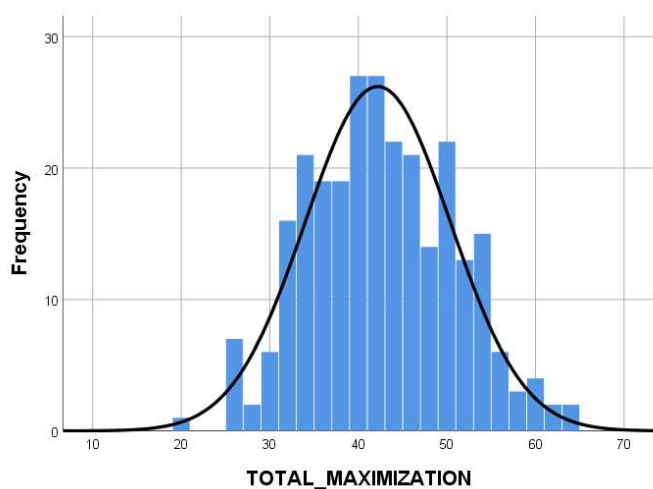


Figure 29: Q-Q- PLOT TOTAL REGRET

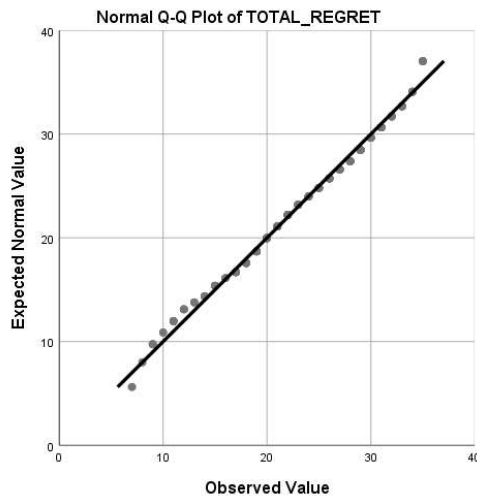
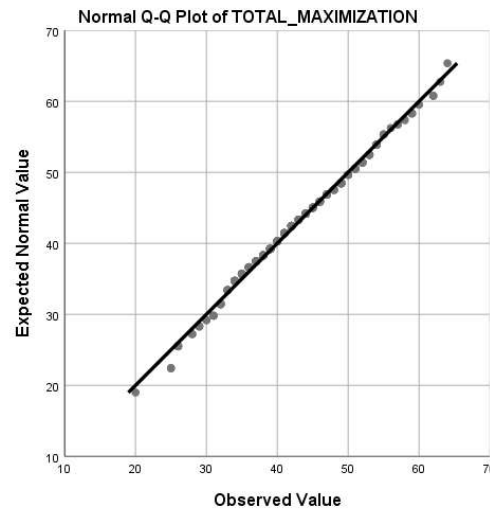


Figure 30: Q-Q PLOT TOTAL MAXIMIZATION



5.4.3 Minor variables descriptives

The univariate analysis of the other four minor variables, which are all ordinal categorical, allows for a general understanding of whether respondents have a pronounced tendency to strongly agree or disagree with each statement, or whether their responses are less polarized, and most answers tend to converge towards the center, portraying more neutral inclinations.

From the bar charts and from the statistics table below can be evicted that, in the case of Q5_1 (*I use a streaming platform because it provides many movies and TV series to choose from*), scores have a pretty pronounced tendency towards the upper levels of the scale, which means that a lot of respondents answered with high categories for this item. Moreover, for this variable the average is well above 5, and the median value is 6. The fact that Q5_1 has a mean of 5,71 is actually the confirmation of H1: this fact proves that the vast majority of respondents identified the abundance of content as a reason to use streaming platforms, confirming the precondition of choice overload, namely that consumers find a vast range of options attractive, and that they are drawn towards it. Considering the other three variables, the results are much less straightforward: Q5_2 (*I feel knowledgeable about movies and TV series*) and Q5_4 (*I generally watch contents recommended by friends/family*) have a more normal-like distribution, with most answers grouped in the central values (both have a median of 4 and an average slightly over 4), whereas Q5_3 (*I generally prefer to watch TV series rather than movies on a*

streaming platform) displays a slightly more pronounced tendency towards higher values (it has a median of 5 and a mean of 4,51).

Table 21. Statistics

| | | Q5_1_Overabundanc | | | | Q5_4_Recommende |
|------------------------|---------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|-------|-----------------|
| | | e | Q5_2_Knowledge | Q5_3_TVseries | d | |
| N | Valid | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Mean | | 5,71 | 4,25 | 4,51 | 4,34 | |
| Median | | 6,00 | 4,00 | 5,00 | 4,00 | |
| Std. Deviation | | 1,327 | 1,481 | 1,826 | 1,553 | |
| Variance | | 1,760 | 2,193 | 3,333 | 2,411 | |
| Skewness | | -,934 | -,193 | -,293 | -,325 | |
| Std. Error of Skewness | | ,149 | ,149 | ,149 | ,149 | |
| Kurtosis | | ,540 | -,462 | -,975 | -,470 | |
| Std. Error of Kurtosis | | ,296 | ,296 | ,296 | ,296 | |

Figure 31: Q5_1_Overabundance

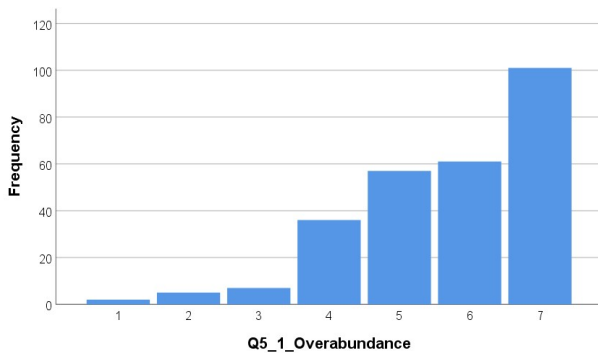


Figure 32: Q5_2_Knowledge

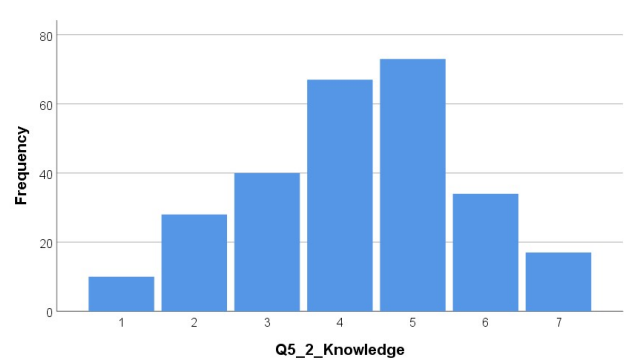


Figure 33: Q5_3_Tvseries

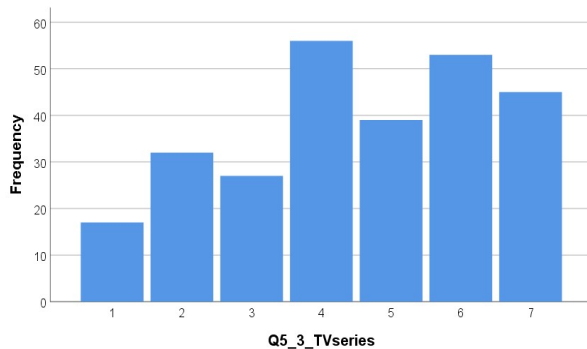
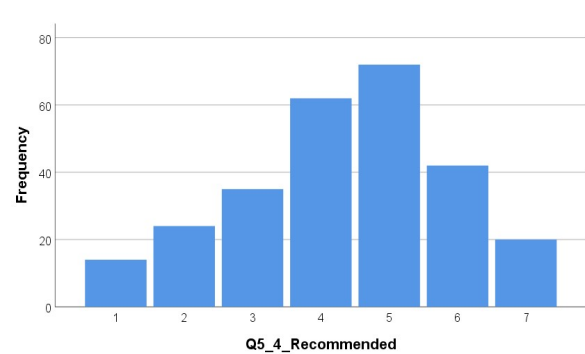


Figure 34: Q5_4_Recommended



5.4.4 Correlation analysis

Moving on to bivariate analysis, we will now evaluate the correlation of the three main variables through the Pearson's correlation coefficient. First of all, it should be stated that the literature reference consulted to interpret the results will be the most commonly used for behavioral sciences, namely Cohen (1988). This system of interpretation takes into account that, when measuring hard-to-define parameters such as attitudes or feelings, it is harder to obtain clearly defined correlation patterns as with quantitative, objectively measurable variables. According to Cohen (1988, p. 82), when it comes to Pearson's correlation coefficient in behavioral studies, 0.1 represents a small effect size, 0.3 is moderate, and 0.5 is large. With these references in mind, the results of the next table (*Table 22*) can be evaluated. First, it can be noticed that the three correlations are all significant with $p < 0.01$. The strongest correlation noticeable is the one between TOTAL MAXIMIZATION and TOTAL REGRET at 0,391. This value is above a moderate correlation, and it confirms that, as Schwartz et al. (2002) proved in their study, there is in fact a positive correlation between the tendency to be maximizers and post-choice regret. The correlation table from Schwartz et al. (2002) is available at *Appendix C*, where it is possible to compare the correlation results of this study with the samples that Schwartz and his colleagues analyzed. As it is possible to infer from that table, except for the first two smaller samples that showed a higher correlation coefficient, samples 3 through 6 displayed correlation coefficients that were very close to the result of this analysis. This result is the confirmation of H2, demonstrating that there is in fact a significant, positive correlation between the Maximization Scale and the Regret Scale. Furthermore, considering the correlation between TOTAL MAXIMIZATION and TOTAL DISSATISFACTION, a coefficient value of 0,331 can be noticed, determining a moderate correlation between the two, and confirming H3: there is a positive, significant correlation between maximizing tendencies and a propensity to be dissatisfied of streaming platforms.

Finally, H4 is accepted as well: the correlation between TOTAL REGRET and TOTAL DISSATISFACTION is slightly below the moderate value, but a coefficient of 0,232 is still

well above the small effect size of 0.1, therefore it can be said that there is in fact a significant positive correlation between the two variables, even if it is not as strong as the others.

Table 22. Correlations

| | | TOTAL | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | | TOTAL REGRET | DISSATISFACT ION | TOTAL MAXIMIZATION |
| TOTAL_REGRET | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,232** | ,391** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | ,000 | ,000 |
| | N | 269 | 269 | 269 |
| TOTAL_DISSATISFACTION | Pearson Correlation | ,232** | 1 | ,331** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,000 | | ,000 |
| | N | 269 | 269 | 269 |
| TOTAL_MAXIMIZATION | Pearson Correlation | ,391** | ,331** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,000 | ,000 | |
| | N | 269 | 269 | 269 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, in order to verify hypotheses H5-H7, the correlations among the single items of the Dissatisfaction Scale and the three minor variables (Q5_2, Q5_3 and Q5_4) will be taken into account. The correlation coefficient used will not be Pearson, which is generally used for numerical variables with an assumption of normal distribution, but instead Spearman, since it is the recommended correlation coefficient when dealing with ordinal, ranked variables such as Likert scales, as explained at the beginning of section 5.4.

Considering H5 to H7, each of the three hypotheses states that dissatisfaction with streaming platform usage could be reduced by one of the following factors: knowledgeability in terms of movies and TV series (Q5_2), preferring TV series over movies (Q5_3) and following content recommendation by friends and family (Q5_4). To make the comparison straightforward, using the exact same scale, the variable TOTAL DISSATISFACTION was not considered as a whole, but separated in its five items, namely: the difficulty to select the content to watch (Q5_5), post-consumption dissatisfaction after a long decision process (Q5_6), perception of excessive time

spent making a decision (Q5_7), likelihood of closing a streaming platform before selecting what to watch (Q5_8), frustration experienced during the content selection process (Q5_9). The first correlation matrix that will be considered refers to Q5_2, i.e., the item measuring knowledgeability in terms of content.

Table 23. Correlations

| | | | Q5_2 | Q5_5 | Q5_6 | Q5_7 | Q5_8 | Q5_9 |
|----------------|------|-----------------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Spearman's rho | Q5_2 | Correlation | 1,000 | ,024 | -,074 | -,008 | -,056 | ,088 |
| | | Coefficient | | | | | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | ,698 | ,229 | ,895 | ,360 | ,151 |
| | | N | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As it is easy to deduce from the p-values reported in the table above, none of the correlations between Q5_2 and items Q5_5 to Q5_9 was significant. H5 can therefore be rejected, since there is no proven significant correlation between high levels of knowledgeability and lower levels of user dissatisfaction with streaming services.

When the same analysis is carried out for Q5_3 (preferring TV series over movies), similar results can be observed: there is no significant correlation between a preference for TV series over movies and any of the items that are part of the Dissatisfaction Scale, as can be evicted from the table below. Therefore, H6 is rejected as well.

Table 24. Correlations

| | | | Q5_3 | Q5_5 | Q5_6 | Q5_7 | Q5_8 | Q5_9 |
|----------------|------|-----------------|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| Spearman's rho | Q5_3 | Correlation | 1,000 | ,014 | ,018 | ,012 | -,079 | ,013 |
| | | Coefficient | | | | | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | ,813 | ,772 | ,846 | ,196 | ,829 |
| | | N | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, when conducting the same analysis for Q5_4 (following the suggestions of friends and family), there are some statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.01$), namely the correlations

with Q5_5 (difficulty to choose), with a Spearman coefficient of 0,214, the correlation with Q5_6 (post-consumption dissatisfaction) with a coefficient of 0,178, and the correlation with Q5_9 (frustration during choice), with a coefficient of 0,159. Regardless of the fact that the coefficients range between a low and medium value, there is a more important thing to notice, namely that all these correlations have a positive sign: this means that for this sample, the more a respondent stated that they were likely to watch content suggested by friends and family, the higher decision fatigue, post-consumption dissatisfaction and decision process frustration they experienced. For this reason, since H7 stated that a significant, *negative* correlation had to hold between the two, this hypothesis is rejected as well.

Table 25. Correlations

| | | | Q5_4 | Q5_5 | Q5_6 | Q5_7 | Q5_8 | Q5_9 |
|----------------|------|-----------------|-------|--------|--------|------|------|--------|
| Spearman's rho | Q5_4 | Correlation | 1,000 | ,214** | ,178** | ,111 | ,084 | ,159** |
| | | Coefficient | | | | | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | ,000 | ,003 | ,069 | ,168 | ,009 |
| | | N | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 | 269 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

6. Implications and discussion

Evaluating the results of the analysis, the following considerations can be made concerning the occurrence of choice overload in SVOD user experience. When it comes to the examined sample of mainly Italian, below-40-years-old platform users, it can be stated that:

- 1) This demographic experiences the attraction to large option assortments that is the prerequisite of choice overload;
- 2) Schwartz's choice overload hypothesis is confirmed, i.e., there is a significant, positive correlation that holds between maximizing tendencies and post-choice regret;
- 3) The usage dissatisfaction experienced by respondents is positively correlated with both their maximization tendencies and their post-choice regret.

This falls in line with what other industry reports have highlighted, especially when considering younger demographics: streaming service users do consider the vast catalogues as the main reason to subscribe, but once they are caught in the attractivity of overabundance and they are consequently faced with the more demanding decision-making that it implies, they have to deal with the negative consequences of decision fatigue.

When it comes to the possible mitigating factors for this phenomenon, the hypotheses formulated on the basis of the literature (H5-H7) were all rejected: no relevant correlation was found with the single items of the Dissatisfaction Scale and knowledgeability in terms of content (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000), preferring TV series over movies on streaming platforms (Perks, 2015) and following the suggestions of friends and family (Pertierra and Turner, 2012). Obviously, this study did not aim at investigating each of these theories in depth, instead it merely referred to them to test whether they provided plausible alleviating factors to the negative outcomes of the choice overload phenomenon in the context of this research. However, none exhibited any significant negative correlation with the insurgence of dissatisfaction related to choice overload in streaming platforms.

Further research would be needed in order to investigate these results properly, but there are still some plausible justifications that can be formulated concerning the rejection of each of these hypotheses.

When it comes to H5, the presupposition that people who defined themselves as knowledgeable in terms of movies and TV series should be less inclined to experience dissatisfaction related to choice overload was based on the idea that experienced viewers should be more equipped to navigate through the catalogues and pick exactly what they want to watch. However, the great relevance given to algorithmic recommendations might work against these experienced users: in fact, they might find themselves faced with recommendations based on past preferences that do not reflect what they want to see in the moment, and they could be nudged towards popular content that they might not be interested in. For these reasons, it could be assumed that this type of customers might benefit more from well-curated content sections, subsections and playlist

that they could explore themselves rather than the algorithmic suggestions that most streaming platforms use as their main recommendation systems.

Considering H6, there are also some considerations that can be made addressing this hypothesis rejection: Perks (2015) stated that the use of serialized content is a strategy put in place to reduce the number of choices that an individual is forced to make when using a streaming service. Nonetheless, it should be noticed that nowadays TV series are consumed much more intensively than they used to. As it is possible to notice in Figure 35, most SVOD users watch all the episodes of a TV series at once, and this tendency is particularly pronounced for younger age groups (18-29 and 30-44): more than half of them states that they binge-watch TV shows all at once. (Statista, 2020d)

Share of adults who binge-view television shows on streaming services in the United States as of October 2019, by age group

Online TV series binge viewing in the U.S. 2019, by age group

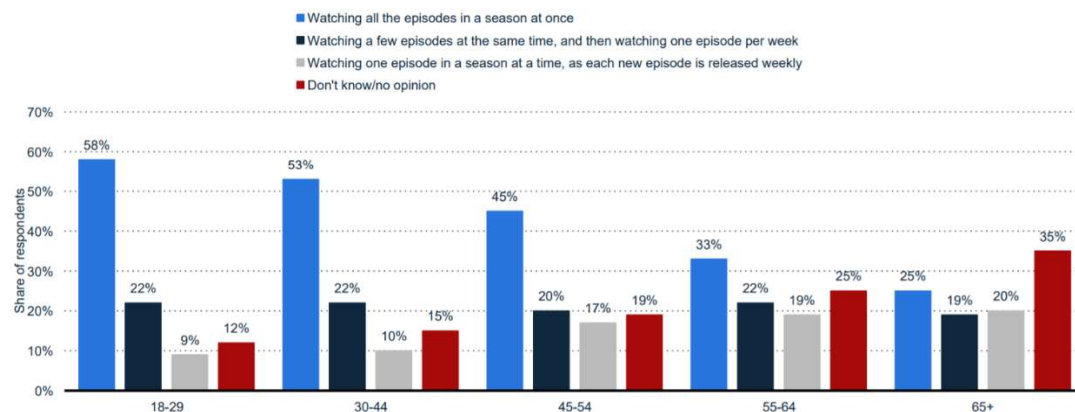


Figure 35: Statista (2020d, p. 20), data from Morning Consult; The Hollywood Reporter.

Considering these consumption habits, it could be conjectured that watching a TV series in a SVOD platform is not a commitment that is as long-lasting as it used to be in network TV, and in this sense, the effects on decision fatigue reduction are probably not as meaningfully perceived as expected.

A similar reasoning could be made for H7: following the suggestions of friends and family might not be effective and consistent enough to keep the pace of the consumption speed of the

single user. Moreover, acquaintances are often not content experts, and they might run out of recommendations, or offer valid suggestions only once in a while: this could be a plausible interpretation of the fact that some medium-low positive correlations were found between this variable and those representing difficulty to choose, post-consumption dissatisfaction and frustration during the decision process.

Nonetheless, even though these considerations might provide plausible explanations for these results, they should all be evaluated with proper research methods, perhaps with qualitative analysis that would allow to carefully investigate the motivations behind consumer behaviors in these circumstances.

What can be deduced from the results just presented is that, even though choice overload is indeed experienced by the streaming service customers surveyed, it is such a complex phenomenon that it is not only hard to define the psychological causes behind it, but it is also very complicated to find a way to reduce it without lowering the attractiveness of overabundant option arrays. It is, in itself, a *paradox*, just like Schwartz described it, and its contradictory nature is particularly evident in the streaming service industry: here, offering a vast array of options is key, but the same vast assortment that attracts viewers is also a source of distress and frustration. Indeed, there is no denying that currently providing vast arrays of good content is a necessary condition to thrive in this industry – or at least to survive the streaming wars. What the industry analyses mentioned throughout this paper are underlining is that this market is increasingly more overcrowded with offerings that are similar in terms of digital interface, recommendation systems and content format, and are differentiated mainly by the content itself – literally, the titles that each platform is able to offer. Moreover, the SVOD market is becoming so harshly competitive that it is getting increasingly more difficult to penetrate, especially if the new player does not have access to a great content library: the experience of Quibi, that just recently announced its shutdown, could be partially evaluated also from this perspective. (García-Hodges, 2020)

All the industry trends described throughout this work have made it clear that the forecasts for this market predict that it will be ever more populated with supply, and that the content production rates will necessary keep increasing consistently, because the demand for content, especially among the younger consumers, keeps increasing. Indeed, the binge-watching habits introduced with streaming services have drastically changed the speed and modality of content consumption. In line with this tendency, Apple recently announced a change of strategy concerning its streaming service: the company first wanted to approach the philosophy of offering few but original and exclusive titles available only on Apple TV+, but around May 2020 they decided to shift their strategic resolution and start to offer also licensed content to their subscribers. (Katz, 2020) The reason for this move is likely the disproportionate gap between their library and other competitors who, alongside original programming, can also offer a vast assortment of licensed titles, and this makes the subscription to the Apple TV+ service seem less convenient. Moreover, as mentioned before, it should be stressed that the investments in terms of new content are rising each year, Netflix in particular is taking huge financial commitment in terms of new original content investments, and its main competitor, Amazon Prime Video, is also increasing the number of original productions, even if at a much slower pace.

Therefore, considering the strategic outlooks of the main industry players, it would be very simplistic and misleading to assume that the solution to choice overload in streaming platforms would be to cut the options, and maybe to focus on a lower amount of high quality content. For a company in this industry, cutting the number of options in the current media context would be an incredibly risky move. Customers do look for vast catalogues: this study confirmed this, with around 82% of the responses to the question measuring content overabundance attractiveness (Q5_1) being above the neutral value of 4, but also Deloitte's 14th *Digital media trend survey* (2020b) indicated the broad range of content as the first reasons why individuals subscribed to streaming services.

So, how is it possible to diminish choice overload without reducing, but rather increasing the amount of content made available to subscribers? The question seems aporetical, and it is for

sure still open, but a reflection could be made concerning a set of strategies to enact in order to limit the insurgence of this phenomenon. The following suggestions should be interpreted as educated considerations on this very complex issue, but they would for sure require further research to prove whether they might actually work in practical terms. Still, they might serve as a starting point for tackling this issue.

The first step to outline these suggestions would be to focus on the current recommendation algorithms that each streaming platform uses to help viewers navigate the content options. As the literature has demonstrated, streaming platforms' algorithms are far from being perfect, and beyond the ethical questions regarding whether it is right that platforms nudge viewers towards the contents they want to promote – as stressed through the concept of *algorithmic governmentality* (Rouvroy, 2012) – there are also more practical remarks concerning the self-fulfilling connotation of recommendation systems, that are not based on authentic, unbiased decisions, but rather feed themselves on past choices that were already conditioned by the algorithm itself, hindering the capacity of the system to provide honest, fitting suggestions.

The Nielsen Total Audience Report (2019) provided an interesting remark concerning this subject. Indeed, it stressed how consumers still seem to exhibit the same habits that they acquired with linear TV when using streaming services: the practices of tuning into their favorite channel and scanning through TV channels are deeply ingrained, and viewers seem to have internalized these behaviors that they associate with the familiarity of linear TV. As stated in the report: “Judging by respondents’ sentiment, streaming platforms looking to dislodge these ingrained consumer habits with their algorithmic title suggestions based on previous subscriber choices still have a long way to go.” (Nielsen, 2019, p. 6) According to the report, 21% of the interviewed streaming users stated that they ended up not watching anything and doing something different. In the same way, within the Dissatisfaction Scale created for this research, around 42% of respondents chose a value above the neutral value of 4 for item Q5_9 (*I have often experienced closing a streaming platform before watching anything because I could not make a decision*). The Nielsen Report emphasized that only 26% of their respondents stated that they watched content recommended by the platform, which is just 5% more than the

respondents who chose to exit before watching. According to Nielsen, streaming platforms should work to adapt their recommendation systems to fit them to the tastes of their users, who still display network TV consumption habits.

For this reason, a promising path to take would be to try to implement alternatives alongside the recommendation systems based on past decision patterns, trying to draw inspiration from the search habits acquired from network TV. In this regard, the example of Peacock might offer some interesting insights. Differently from its competitors, the streaming service offers a “Channels” section that aims at emulating traditional live TV, with an outlook that resembles a cable package, where each channel addresses a different content interest (for instance, true crime, unsolved mysteries, reality TV, cooking channels...). However, these channels are not actually live: they just constantly play a certain type of content available on the platform in a thematic channel that streams it as if it was live. However, the feeling of browsing through channels when not knowing what to watch is familiar and comforting for individuals who grew up with live television, and might be a possible solution to avoid having a long, frustrating scroll through the streaming service menu with no final resolution. (Alexander, 2020)

The Vulture reviewer who wrote an article on Peacock expressed the exact same idea: “It can take me 10-15 minutes to settle on something I want to watch on Netflix; within 90 seconds of scrolling on Peacock, I had decided to keep the SNL Vault channel on for a bit while I read through some emails.” (Adalian, 2020) Obviously, as he himself admits, his experience cannot be generalized to all the Peacock users, and other reviewers (including Alexander in the previously mentioned article by *The Verge*) had a much less enthusiastic view of the “Channels” section, which was found not well thought-out.

Nonetheless, if the further development of Peacock’s Channels proves successful, this occurrence could offer an interesting point of reflection on the idea of “the end of television”, since this statement would overlook the importance of the deeply ingrained consumption habits developed through decades of linear TV, and the role that they still play even in the streaming world.

This reasoning seems particularly fitting for Millennials: this age group is the one that was born on the verge of the explosion of the digital revolution. Children born in the 80s and 90s were raised consuming network TV, they watched VHSs and later DVDs, and they learned to use remote controllers and browse channels while growing up, internalizing these behaviors at a young age. However, at the same time they were the first generation that fully adopted the technological advances brought by the digital revolution. The source of their particular propensity to choice overload probably lies in this contradiction: they were raised with the instruments of linear TV, but now they are fully ingrained in new technologies and the different consumption systems that they generated. Millennials, and partially even Generation Z, are not the digital natives of Netflix and streaming platforms: that role will be reserved for Generation Alpha, the children who were born since 2010 and who will realistically experience TV consumption through streaming services since day one. Even though this generation is still too young to make predictions on how they will behave as SVOD consumers, in the future it might be interesting to investigate whether, being born within a context of choice overload, they will be more equipped to face the complexity of making decisions in overabundant environments.

Nonetheless, for the previously listed reasons, inserting a feature like Peacock's Channels on a streaming service could work as a way to help out viewers who experience decision fatigue through a mechanism that they know very well. As Adalian expressed it: "[Peacock is] betting audiences are tired of having to find something to watch and sometimes would prefer to have their content curated for them." (Adalian, 2020) This quote highlights another aspect that is often overlooked by SVOD providers, namely the possibility to offer curated, human-designated content selections: what traditional broadcasters did with their programming work is almost completely absent on streaming services, or it is done only marginally. Streaming service users are able to choose what they want to watch and create their own playlists, but offering an alternative to those who lack the energy or the interest to engage in this form of content discovery might prove helpful.

Channels might work as an attempt in this direction, but they are not the only alternative. Curated playlists that explore a certain theme could be a good way to offer content selections

that are put together following patterns that recommendation algorithms cannot detect. In this regard, Netflix confirmed that it was conducting some A/B tests in 2019 to evaluate content themed lists put together by creative experts from the company, called “Collections”. (Welch, 2020) The fact that Netflix was experimenting with alternative recommendation systems could be interpreted as an ulterior sign that algorithms are not an infallible solution when it comes to content discovery, and experimenting with alternative suggestion mechanisms might work in favor of the platforms. An interesting alternative to content collections could also be to create playlists with content selected by individuals that various demographics look up to (actors, directors, critics, influencers, etc.). This might also work as a way of getting viewers to explore new content on the basis of recommendations from individuals that they admire or identify with.

Other alternatives to ease the frustration caused by choice overload might include inserting interactive features that would guide consumers through the decision process. Increasing interactivity is also encouraged by media industry analysts as a good strategy to cope with the attention economy issue. (Parrot Analytics, 2019) Interactions could be implemented in the content discovery process: for instance, the platform could ask users easy questions (that could be answered with yes or no, or a limited number of alternatives) to help them restrict the options available in the platform. For instance, if the platform asked users “how do you feel today?” and consequently “what do you want to do about it?”, it could help guide them through the catalogue, and at the same time allow them to figure out what they are actually looking for. For instance, if the user answered “sad” to the first question, the platform could then, in the second question, ask whether they want to laugh and cheer up, distract themselves by learning something interesting, or sink in their sadness to get it off their chest. Based on the answer, the system might direct the viewer to a comedy selection, a documentary selection or a drama selection. This feature might seem superfluous to people who know what they want to watch, but for those who are indecisive, being asked a direct question might help them discern what they are actually needing in that specific moment.

Another feature that could be included is a random selection type of recommendation system, that picks a casual title (maybe within a certain genre, a certain playlist, or other restriction parameters that could be selected by the user). Reelgood offers this type of randomizer mechanism for Netflix, called “The Netflix Roulette”, but this system might prove useful also within the platforms themselves. This could work for individuals who do not want to stress themselves with any type of decision process, and therefore are fine with a random option that eases them out of the whole decision process.

Overall, the previously mentioned suggestions might work as an outline of some strategies to improve the user experience of subscribers that are faced with choice overload, since the phenomenon appears relevant, especially among younger users. Even though the prominent role of content in the SVOD industry is confirmed, a player that could provide an innovative, effective content discovery system, alongside a vast and excellent catalogue, might develop a strong competitive advantage in this very complex and ever-changing market. Content is extremely expensive to produce, and often users cancel their subscriptions after binge watching the few hit series that they were interested in. However, by helping viewers to better explore the whole catalogue, streaming services might optimize their immense content libraries to keep retention rates up.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this work was to offer an overview of choice overload research, and at the same time to investigate whether these theories could be applied to the SVOD industry, since evidence seemed to indicate it as a canonical environment for the occurrence of this phenomenon. After an overview of the literature, with a special focus on the work of Barry Schwartz, a series of hypotheses were formulated on the basis of his work, as well as the research of other scholars. The main objective of this study was to test whether the main choice overload theories could be verified, namely the attraction to overabundant option arrays, a positive correlation between maximization tendencies and post-decision regret, and a positive correlation between both of these variables and an experience of dissatisfaction within

streaming platforms related to a difficulty in making decisions. Moreover, a series of elements were tested as possible mitigating factors to user dissatisfaction, such as content knowledgeability, the preference of serialized content over singular movies, and the guidance of trusted acquaintances when deciding what to watch. The first set of hypotheses was confirmed, while the second was rejected, proving that choice overload is in fact experienced by SVOD consumers, but the inherently complex nature of this phenomenon makes a definition of its solution very difficult to identify. However, on the basis of the findings of this analysis, a series of implications were formulated in order to offer a strategic pathway to deal with the negative aspects of choice overload, without losing the attractiveness of large content assortments, which is an undeniable source of competitive advantage in the SVOD industry at the moment. Thus, a series of alternative content discovery mechanisms were presented as possible complementary features alongside the traditional algorithms to try to ease the negative effects of indecisiveness and decision fatigue. There is for sure no quick fix to a phenomenon that is as complex and as contradictory as choice overload. Nonetheless, addressing it properly, and investing in content discovery and recommendation systems' innovation, might offer a strategic advantage that should not be underestimated in a context as harshly competitive as the SVOD market.

To conclude, there are some final considerations to be made concerning the research perspectives that this work might inspire. There are some particularly significant angles that could investigate interesting aspects of the choice overload phenomenon with respect to the SVOD industry. For instance, the causes of the occurrence of choice overload in this industry are unknown, and probably a key element to identify them would be to consider the hedonic nature of SVOD products, that, for various reasons that were briefly hinted in this study, could act as an enabler of choice overload occurrence. In this regard, an explanatory approach that attempts to investigate a possible casual link between the products' hedonic characterization and choice overload could offer some interesting insights. Another interesting research that could follow this work would be to investigate the motivations and rationale behind the behaviors and emotional responses of SVOD users facing choice overload effects, with a

descriptive outlook that aims at gaining a deeper understanding of their decision-making frustration. In this sense, in-depth interviews and focus groups could be helpful to uncover some intrinsic dynamics and behavioral patterns that quantitative research is unable to grasp. Finally, the results of this work could be further investigated with the type of experimental research approach that has characterized many choice overload studies: with access to adequate resources, the behavior of individuals selecting content within a platform could be studied through an experiment that aims at evaluating their levels of frustration during and after the decision-making process.

Overall, choice overload research provides a very useful outlook on the type of difficulties that discourage individuals in their decision-making process in an overabundant context, like SVOD platforms. Considering the findings of choice overload research and implementing a practical application of its insights will likely prove beneficial for optimizing user experience, and gaining a better understanding of some nuances of consumer behavior that are not easy to detect. In this sense, research that will explore this intriguing psychological phenomenon will continue to offer useful insights on the most complex aspects of human behavior in decision-making contexts, helping us to better understand the psychological mechanisms that we put in place when facing difficult choices.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Appendix A: English survey

Start of Block: Introduction

INTRO

Hi!

I am a Bocconi University and Copenhagen Business School Double Degree student. I developed this survey for my thesis research. If you use streaming platforms (such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Hulu...) it would help me a lot if you could take a few minutes (max 6) to answer a few questions.

Your answers will be completely anonymous, and they will be used only for my thesis.

Thanks a lot for your help!

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: GENERAL INFORMATION



Q1_AGE What is your age?



Q2_SEX What is your gender?

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Other: (3)



Q3_COUNTRY Please select your country of origin:

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)



Q4_PLATFORMS Please select the streaming platform(s) that you use:

- ☐ Netflix (1)
- ☐ Amazon Prime Video (2)
- ☐ Disney+ (3)
- ☐ Apple TV+ (4)
- ☐ Now TV (5)
- ☐ Hulu (6)
- ☐ HBO Max (7)
- ☐ Other: (8) _____

End of Block: GENERAL INFORMATION

Start of Block: STREAMING PLATFORMS



Q5_SATISFACTION The following sentences will refer to your experience as a streaming platform user.

Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).

| | 1 (totally disagree) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totally agree) (7) |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| I use a streaming platform because it provides many movies and TV series to choose from. (Q5_1_Overabundance) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel knowledgeable about movies and TV series. (Q5_2_Knowledge) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

I generally prefer to watch TV series rather than movies on a streaming platform.
(Q5_3_TVseries)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

I generally watch contents recommended by friends/family.
(Q5_4_Recommended)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

It is often hard for me to choose which movie or TV series to watch on a streaming platform.
(Q5_5_HardChoice)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

I have often experienced dissatisfaction after watching something that I spent a lot of time selecting.
(Q5_6_PostDissatisfaction)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

I feel like I often spend too much time choosing what to watch on a streaming platform.
(Q5_7_Time)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

I have often experienced closing a streaming platform before watching anything because I could not make a decision.
(Q5_8_Closing)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

I have often experienced frustration in the process of selecting what to watch on a streaming platform.
(Q5_9_MidFrustration)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

End of Block: STREAMING PLATFORMS

Start of Block: MAXIMIZATION SCALE



Q6_MAXIMIZATION The following sentences will refer to how you feel in certain **daily situations**.

Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).

| | 1 (totally disagree) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totally agree) (7) |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| When I watch TV, I channel surf, often scanning through the available options even | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| while attempting to watch one program. (Q6_1_SurfingTV) | | | | | | | |
| When I am listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I'm relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to. (Q6_2_SurfingRadio) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| No matter how satisfied I am with my job/study path, it's only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities. (Q6_3_JobLookout) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I often fantasize about living in ways that are quite different from my actual life. (Q6_4_Fantasizing) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I'm a big fan of lists that attempt to rank things (the best movies, the best singers, the best athletes, the best novels, etc.). (Q6_5_Lists) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend. (Q6_6_Gift) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I really love. (Q6_7_Clothes) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself. (Q6_8_HighStandards) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I never settle for second best (Q6_9_SecondBest) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Whenever I'm faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment. (Q6_10_UnrealAlternatives) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: MAXIMIZATION SCALE

Start of Block: REGRET SCALE



Q7_REGRET The following sentences will refer to how you feel in certain **general situations in your life**. Please rate from 1 (= totally disagree) to 7 (= totally agree).

| | 1 (totally disagree) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totally agree) (7) |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Whenever I make a choice, I'm curious about what would have happened if I had chosen differently. (Q7_1_Curious) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Whenever I make a choice, I try to get information about how the other alternatives turned out. (Q7_2_Information) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| If I make a choice and it turns out well, I still feel like something of a failure if I find out that another choice would have turned out better. (Q7_3_Failure) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| When I think about how I'm doing in life, I often assess opportunities I have passed up. (Q7_4_PassedOpportunities) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Once I make a decision, I don't look back. (Q7_5_NoLookBack) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: REGRET SCALE

9.2 Appendix B: Italian survey

Start of Block: Introduction

INTRO Ciao!

Sono una studentessa Double Degree dell'Università Bocconi e della Copenhagen Business School. Ho sviluppato questo questionario per la mia tesi di laurea. Se utilizzi piattaforme streaming (come Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Now TV...) mi aiuterebbe moltissimo se potessi dedicare qualche minuto (max 6) a rispondere ad alcune semplici domande.

Le tue risposte saranno completamente anonime, e verranno utilizzate solo ai fini della mia tesi.

Grazie mille per l'aiuto!

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: GENERAL INFORMATION



Q1_AGE Quanti anni hai?



Q2_SEX Qual è il tuo genere?

☐ Maschio (1)

☐ Femmina (2)

☐ Altro: (3) _____



Q3_COUNTRY Per favore seleziona il tuo paese d'origine:

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)



Q4_PLATFORMS Per favore seleziona le piattaforme streaming che utilizzi:

- ☐ Netflix (1)
- ☐ Amazon Prime Video (2)
- ☐ Disney+ (3)
- ☐ Apple TV+ (4)
- ☐ Now TV (5)
- ☐ Hulu (6)
- ☐ HBO Max (7)
- ☐ Altro: (8) _____

End of Block: GENERAL INFORMATION

Start of Block: STREAMING PLATFORMS



Q5_SATISFACTION Le seguenti affermazioni si riferiscono alla **tua esperienza nell'utilizzo di una piattaforma streaming.**

Per favore, dimmi quanto sei d'accordo da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 7 (= totalmente d'accordo).

| | 1 (per niente d'accordo) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totalmente d'accordo) (7) |
|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Utilizzo una piattaforma streaming perché mi offre una vasta gamma di contenuti tra cui scegliere. (Q5_1_Overabundance) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Sento di intendermene in fatto di film e serie TV. (Q5_2_Knowledge) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Di solito preferisco guardare serie TV piuttosto che film sulle piattaforme streaming. (Q5_3_TVseries) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Di solito guardo contenuti consigliati da amici/familiari. (Q5_4_Recommended) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Faccio spesso fatica a scegliere quale film o serie TV guardare su una piattaforma streaming. (Q5_5_HardChoice) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Mi è capitato spesso di provare insoddisfazione dopo aver guardato un contenuto che ho impiegato molto tempo a selezionare (Q5_6_PostDissatisfaction) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Spesso mi sembra di impiegare molto tempo per scegliere cosa guardare su una piattaforma streaming. (Q5_7_Time) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Mi è capitato spesso di chiudere una piattaforma streaming senza aver visto nulla perché non riuscivo a scegliere cosa guardare. (Q5_8_Closing) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Mi è capitato spesso di provare frustrazione mentre scelgo cosa guardare su una piattaforma streaming. (Q5_9_MidFrustration) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: STREAMING PLATFORMS

Start of Block: MAXIMIZATION SCALE



Q6_MAXIMIZATION Le seguenti affermazioni si riferiscono a come ti senti in certe **situazioni di vita quotidiana**. Per favore, dimmi quanto sei d'accordo da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 7 (= totalmente d'accordo).

| | 1 (per niente d'accordo) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totalmente d'accordo) (7) |
|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Quando guardo la TV faccio zapping cercando altre opzioni, anche se sto cercando di seguire una trasmissione. (Q6_1_SurfingTV) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quando ascolto la radio faccio zapping tra le varie stazioni, anche se sono abbastanza soddisfatto di ciò che sto ascoltando. (Q6_2_SurfingRadio) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| A prescindere dalla soddisfazione che mi dà il mio lavoro/percorso di studi, mi guardo sempre intorno per opportunità migliori. (Q6_3_JobLookout) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Fantastico spesso di vivere in modi diversi rispetto alla mia realtà quotidiana. (Q6_4_Fantasizing) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Mi piacciono molto le classifiche (film, libri, album musicali, atleti...) (Q6_5_Lists) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Spesso faccio fatica a scegliere un regalo per un amico. (Q6_6_Gift) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quando faccio shopping faccio fatica a trovare vestiti che mi piacciono veramente. (Q6_7_Clothes) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sono una persona che ha standard molto alti su se stessa. (Q6_8_HighStandards) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Non mi accontento mai di una seconda scelta. (Q6_9_SecondBest) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Quando devo prendere una decisione considero tutte le alternative, anche quelle non attuabili nel presente.
(Q6_10_UnrealAlternatives)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

End of Block: MAXIMIZATION SCALE

Start of Block: REGRET SCALE



Q7_REGRET Le seguenti affermazioni si riferiscono a come ti senti in certe **situazioni generiche della tua vita**. Per favore, dimmi quanto sei d'accordo da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 7 (= totalmente d'accordo).

| | 1 (per niente d'accordo) (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 6 (6) | 7 (totalmente d'accordo) (7) |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Quando prendo una qualsiasi decisione, penso a cosa sarebbe successo se avessi scelto diversamente. (Q7_1_Curious) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quando prendo una qualsiasi decisione, mi informo comunque sugli esiti di alternative che ho scartato. (Q7_2_Information) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Se prendo una decisione che ha un buon esito, provo comunque un senso di fallimento se scopro che un'altra opzione ha avuto esiti migliori. (Q7_3_Failure) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quando penso alla mia vita, rifletto spesso su opportunità passate. (Q7_4_PassedOpportunities) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Una volta presa una decisione non ho ripensamenti. (Q7_5_NoLookBack) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: REGRET SCALE

9.3 Appendix C: Correlation Table (Schwartz et al., 2002)

Available at: Schwartz, B., Ward, A., Monterosso, J., Lyubomirsky, S., White, K., & Lehman, D. R. (2002). Maximizing versus satisficing: Happiness is a matter of choice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, p. 1183.

Table 2
Pearson's Zero-Order Correlations Among Variables in Six Samples

| Variable | Max | Regret | SHS | BDI | LOT | NR |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Sample 1 (<i>n</i> = 82) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .61*** | | | | | — |
| SHS | -.21 | -.15 | | | | — |
| BDI | .24* | .03 | -.46*** | | | — |
| LOT | -.28* | -.07 | .54*** | -.51*** | | — |
| Sample 2 (<i>n</i> = 72) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .45*** | | | | — | — |
| SHS | -.34** | -.40** | | | — | — |
| BDI | .44*** | .46*** | -.55*** | | — | — |
| Sample 3 (<i>n</i> = 100) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .36*** | | | | | |
| SHS | -.17 | -.51*** | | | | |
| BDI | .27** | .47*** | -.66*** | | | |
| LOT | -.25* | -.35*** | .74*** | -.54*** | | |
| NR | .16 | .35*** | -.58*** | .49*** | -.50*** | |
| SWLS | -.27** | -.54*** | .71*** | -.68*** | .59*** | -.48*** |
| Sample 4 (<i>n</i> = 401) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .39*** | | | | | |
| SHS | -.10* | -.27*** | | | | |
| Sample 5 (<i>n</i> = 752) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .46*** | | | | | |
| SHS | -.28*** | -.40*** | | | | |
| BDI | .31*** | .39*** | -.66*** | | | |
| Sample 6 (<i>n</i> = 220) | | | | | | |
| Regret | .50*** | | | | | |
| SHS | -.17* | -.22** | | | | |

Note. Dashes indicate that data were not collected for this measure. Max = Maximization Scale; Regret = Regret Scale; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale; BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; LOT = Life Orientation Test; NR = Neuroticism; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.