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Exploring multi-homing behavior: user perceptions of subscribing to multiple streaming platforms

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Abstract

Multi-homing refers to using two or more technologies that satisfy similar needs. In recent years, this specific behavior can be observed in the context of Streaming Video on Demand (SVoD) platforms, such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Hulu. However, subscription to multiple streaming services has been understudied in literature. To address this gap, this research explores users' perceptions of multi-homing in this context. A qualitative methodology was utilized because this topic's novelty is the SVoD arena. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with people subscribed to multiple platforms. The results showed five factors that influence this behavior positively and negatively. Multi-homing was promoted when users perceived more complementarity between platforms. Contrarily, the overload from a large amount of content leads to possible abandonment. In addition, users avoided subscribing to more services when they anticipated feeling guilty about not using them enough. Also, the variety of content provided by multi-homing was particularly beneficial for people sharing their subscriptions with family, friends, or partners. Lastly, the need to be up to date with popular movies and series, and be able to talk about them with others, was a motivator for this behavior. At the end of the article, practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Keywords: multi-homing, streaming platforms, streaming video on demand, complementarity

Introduction

Streaming Video on Demand (SVoD) platforms are essential today in the global entertainment market. It is estimated that by 2023 more than 1.2 billion people globally will subscribe to at least one service (Statista, 2022). Particularly in South America, a more significant increase in streaming consumption time has been observed between 2020 and 2021 (Conviva, 2022). It is worth mentioning that this market is constantly changing; that is, new platforms are created while others decline in popularity. For example, Netflix, the dominant service, is at risk due to the wide range of options presented to consumers (FinancialTimes, 2019).

A particular aspect of this market is the high percentage of consumers using multiple streaming platforms. By 2022, around 83 % of users living in the United States were subscribed to two or more platforms, mainly Netflix, Prime Video, and Hulu (Activate, 2022; MorningConsult, 2022). The average American household is subscribed to four or more services (Westcott et al., 2021). This behavior is called multi-homing (Wu & Chiu, 2023).

Grasping the concept of multi-homing is paramount for service providers and companies. Several studies underscore the need to modify existing strategic models or develop new ones to compete effectively in a market where multi-homing is prevalent (Barua & Mukherjee, 2021; Jiang et al., 2019). In the context of streaming platforms, multihoming practices significantly shape competitor firms' responses, driving them to either intensify competition or foster service compatibility (Wu & Chiu, 2023). Consequently, a

comprehensive understanding of multi-homing serves as a roadmap for streaming service managers, assisting them in devising strategies and tailoring their platforms to thrive in a highly competitive market.

The phenomenon of multi-homing is defined in the literature as using two or more technologies that satisfy similar needs (Gu et al., 2016; Mital & Sarkar, 2011; Sun et al., 2018). It differs from switching since services are not abandoned but used simultaneously (Singh et al., 2022). Access to more than one service is expected to increase utility (Anderson et al., 2017).

Multi-homing has expanded from the field of economics and has recently been studied within the field of information systems. For example, in the research of Sun et al. (2018), the phenomenon was explored in hosting platforms. Likewise, Gu et al. (2016) focused on the competitive context of social networks. On the other hand, Hu et al. (2017) worked on understanding this behavior in mobile apps. Finally, in this line, Chopdar et al. (2022) focused their analysis on mobile shopping apps.

These studies have frequently related multi-homing to certain variables. First, they have proposed complementarity as a recurring aspect to explain the phenomenon. The research by Sun et al. (2018) defined this construct in the field of users' perceived benefits, specifically, information complementarity and decision complementarity benefits. Similarly, under the uses and gratifications theory, Gu et al. (2016) suggested the complementarity of four needs: interpersonal communication, self-presentation, information, and entertainment. The study by Hu et al. (2017) contemplates function and information complementarity as factors external to the individual, mediated by hedonic and utilitarian values.

Likewise, the authors consider the social influence variable another vital factor for using multiple technologies. In the study by Sun et al. (2018), social influence had a predominant impact on behavior, while Gu et al. (2016) assessed it as a control variable, understanding its central role in behavior. Finally, perceived costs (time and effort) and how they affect multi-homing intention have also been studied (Sun et al., 2018).

The realm of multi-homing within the streaming platform domain is underrepresented in the literature. While a few studies, such as that by Barua and Mukherjee (2021), do touch upon SVoD services, they overlook the market's unique characteristics. The research most closely aligned with our proposed topic is the work of Wu and Chiu (2023), which delves into the profitability of two competing streaming platforms amidst consumer multi-homing. However, their study is not empirical but focused on creating a theoretical model.

The present research responds to this gap in the literature. Specifically, it seeks to identify the factors that favor or hinder the multi-homing of streaming platforms by exploring users' experiences with more than one subscription.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen because it has proven effective in researching phenomena that have not been studied in depth (Barker & Pistrang, 2021). This approach focuses on exploring, describing, and understanding participants' subjective experiences (Levitt et al., 2018).

For this purpose, semi-structured individual interviews were implemented. This mode of qualitative interviewing involves a conversation in which the researcher directs the emerging themes to obtain detailed information about the interviewee's experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). Specifically, the researcher follows a flexible and adaptable interview guide, which includes the fundamental aspects of the research; however, the researcher also decides how to formulate and modify the questions according to the development of the conversation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). In this way, the qualitative methodology allowed for examining in detail what was obtained during the interviews, recognizing the unique aspects and particularities of the

participants (Barker & Pistrang, 2021). Consequently, the information collected was classified into thematic categories that facilitated the organization and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Levitt et al., 2018).

Participants and data collection

The participants were 10 adults from Lima between the ages of 20 and 60, of which 7 were women, and 3 were men. The only requirement was that they were subscribed to more than one streaming platform at the time of the interview. The questions consisted of their opinions about multi-homing. Specifically, they were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of such behavior. Upon completion, the interviews were transcribed in their entirety.

Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, identifying common participant experience patterns (Barker & Pistrang, 2021). Specifically, the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012) was used to carry out the analysis. First, the researcher became familiar with the data. It involved actively reading and rereading, analytically and critically, the transcribed information. Next, initial codes were generated, which allowed the information to be organized into sections. Subsequently, relevant parts of the data were identified concerning the research objectives, grouping several codes around specific themes. The previously identified patterns were then reviewed to assess their consistency with the data, facilitating their definition and naming. During this process, each theme's distinctive characteristics were highlighted, making it possible to interpret and connect the data with the research questions. Finally, a report was prepared that recounts the information analyzed.

Results

The interviews showed that all participants deemed multi-homing as beneficial, despite some drawbacks. Therefore, five elements shaping this viewpoint are highlighted: platform complementarity, choice overloads, anticipated guilt, shared consumption, and a sense of belonging. This section elaborates on these factors and how they impact the decision to hold subscriptions with multiple streaming platforms.

Factor 1: Platform complementarity

The variety of content provided by having access to several platforms was an advantage mentioned by all interviewees. They perceived a greater likelihood of finding desired series or movies, thus mitigating feelings of boredom that may arise from not getting content. Also, such products can satisfy viewers' tastes, even if they vary over time.

[Quote 1.1]: I have the whole spectrum. I want to be able to choose [...] because if I don't find something on one, I immediately go to the other. Or if someone recommends [a movie or series], I ask them what it is, and the likelihood of having that platform that movie or series is on will be very high. (OF)

In addition, for 5 of the 10 participants, access to more series and movies exclusive to specific platforms increased the perception of variety. Thus, through multi-homing, non-repetitive content is accumulated.

[Quote 1.2]: For example, I subscribe to Netflix, Disney, and Star, and there are some things that, for example, I know I want to watch on Disney that I know are not on Netflix. [...] There's content that Disney provides that I can't find on Netflix, for example. So, if I want to alternate, I can go to Disney or Star, not always staying on one. (YB)

All of the above reflects that most participants (8 out of 10) consider streaming platforms complementary, as they provide unique content.

[Quote 1.3]: Each platform is already known for having unique content. For example, on Netflix, you will find movies for teens, the whole family, and Christmas, and they bring out Halloween themes on Halloween. So that's what Netflix is for. Amazon Prime has series you don't find elsewhere, which are pretty old and mostly comedy. Or really, like, American series. HBO has more cult movies, or like Hulu, like that. So, having multiple platforms means you have more content to watch for all tastes. (PV)

This was considered particularly beneficial by participants who share their subscriptions with others (6) since it makes it easier to satisfy different customer tastes.

[Quote 1.4]: Some have some programs more oriented toward children, and I can watch it sometimes with my nephews or, if not, with my brother. And on the other hand, others have more horror content, which I like. So, sometimes, I use Prime more with my brother and HBO with myself. (CR)

Factor 2: Choice overload

Conversely, for 6 of the 10 participants, variety could also generate feelings that detract from the multi-homing experience. Specifically, many options make the search process difficult, leading to saturation and overwhelm. In fact, on several occasions, this culminated in inaction; they could not decide what to watch and abandoned the search.

[Quote 2.1]: It overwhelms you because you have so many options. Sometimes when you just want anything and say, "Oh, what application should I use?" you stand there thinking and looking. And so, well, you lose time too. (AC)

Factor 3: Anticipated guilt

In the statements of half of the participants, there was evidence of the need to use the platforms a certain amount to justify their subscription. Notably, the interviewees considered the time they had available as a determining factor when deciding whether to purchase, maintain or cancel their access to the platforms. Feelings of anticipated guilt accompanied this if they perceived they were or would be wasting their money.

[Quote 3.1]: If I had more platforms all of a sudden, I don't know if it would do much good because I don't know if I would have the time to see everything they offer. [...] The disadvantage would be, well, suddenly not having the time in my case to be able to explore and make the most of the platform. (EA)

They also expressed their willingness to cancel their subscriptions if any platform no longer provided them with the desired content.

[Quote 3.2]: I had already watched the series and movies I wanted, and I didn't feel like Disney was putting out new projects. And we already had HBO and Prime. So I talked it over with my brother because he was also accessing my account, and we decided that was it. (CR)

Factor 4: Shared consumption

Although several participants acknowledged that the price of multi-homing can be high, those who shared the service with others (6) did not see this as a drawback. This did not only include payment splitting but also mere access to content on the platforms.

[Quote 4.1]: I also see the advantage of sharing [the platforms] with my daughters. So, not only do I consume them, but my daughters consume them. (MM)

Indeed, two interviewees specified that they would subscribe to only one platform if they had to pay alone.

[Quote 4.2]: I have all those platforms because my dad pays for one, my aunt pays for one, and my boyfriend pays for one. So I have access to all of them. But if it were up to me, I would only have one. [...] But since the economic responsibility is not on me, I don't have any problem. (AC)

Factor 5: Sense of belonging

Additionally, according to two participants, having access to many series and movies generate a social advantage. This happens because popular content can be consumed to stay in the conversation.

[Quote 5.1]: Having this variety of content for me is a bit advantageous socially, right? Because it's something that I can then share with others. For example, it's like being trendy and up-to-date with the series topic. The advantage of the variety, I see it a little bit in that. In that social advantage of sharing. (EA)

The above is related to previous factors, such as shared consumption since there is a high appreciation of other people's experiences.

Discussion

This research had two significant findings. On the one hand, there was a consensus on the positive nature of multi-homing. All participants confirmed that access to multiple streaming platforms satisfied their needs and preferences, even when they perceived certain disadvantages. On the other hand, five factors affected participants' opinions about multi-homing: platform complementarity, choice overload, anticipated guilt, shared consumption, and sense of belonging. Two of these (platform complementarity and choice overload) arise from the services' characteristics. The third factor (anticipated guilt) depends more on individual perceptions and emotions. Finally, the last two factors (shared consumption and sense of belonging) demonstrate social elements' role as multi-homing promoters.

The subsequent section delves into each factor highlighted in the results, examining its role in shaping multi-homing behavior. Relevant academic work is cited to substantiate our analysis. Finally, testable propositions are offered after the corresponding argumentation for each factor.

Factor 1: Platform complementarity

The variety-seeking refers to consumers' preference for a greater diversity of available products (Kahn, 1995). Thus, more options increase the possibility of finding products that satisfy viewers' preferences, even if they fluctuate (Boyd & Bahn, 2009; Chernev, 2003). Regarding the present study, all interviewees considered variety a determining factor in the decision to subscribe to more than one platform. Specifically, they stated that it allowed access to desired content, mitigated boredom, and allowed adapting to different tastes.

Previous studies considering the impact of variety on service selection uphold these results. For example, concerning shopping mall selection, Wakefield and Baker (1998) identified that store variety had the most significant influence on consumer arousal, consequently promoting visit frequency. More related to the technology context, in an exercise where participants were asked to choose a cable service, a preference was evidenced for services that offered flexibility for possible future decisions (Kahn & Lehmann, 1991).

However, the perception of variety does not necessarily arise from a more significant number of products; these should also be seen as distinctive rather than similar (Chernev, 2012). In this line, each streaming platform provides certain exclusive content that cannot be found in others (Willcox, 2023). Thus, as evidenced in this study, consumers tend to subscribe to more than one service to have a broader range of original series and movies (Westcott et al., 2019).

Platform complementarity arises from such content exclusivity. Specifically, two services are complementary when they share some attributes, but their most notorious aspects are differentiated (Park et al., 1996). Also, when used together, they are expected to increase their benefits (Gu et al., 2016). Consequently, a group of products perceived as complementary is more attractive than another group of similar or unrelated products (Harlam et al., 1995). This preference is evident in the participants' statements, given that streaming platforms provide unique content and can be employed to respond to different circumstances and needs (Koukova et al., 2012). In particular, as the subscription is often shared with others, complementarity satisfies all tastes. Thus, this is a feature that benefits subscriptions to multiple platforms.

The relationship between complementarity and multi-homing has been explored in other contexts. Regarding social networks, Huang and Chang (2020) found that these have specific attributes that differentiate them from each other, which motivates the simultaneous use of more than one. In this line, Gu et al. (2016) identified that the perceived complementarity of social networks in the gratification of consumers' needs promoted this behavior. On the other hand, in the case of accommodating platforms, when these were perceived to provide complementary information, the likelihood of multi-homing increased (Sun et al., 2018). Ergo, the following proposition arises:

Proposition 1: Platform complementarity positively influences multi-homing.

Factor 2: Choice overload

More options can impair decision-making, as it becomes a process with a high cognitive cost (Chernev, 2003, 2012). This negatively impacts consumers' perceptions, decisions, and behavior; specifically, motivation is reduced and can even lead to discontinuance (Beneke, 2015; Chernev, 2003; Maier et al., 2015). Concerning this study, more than half of the participants expressed feelings of saturation and being

overwhelmed by the content search process. They often could not find a suitable product, so they abandoned the activity. Therefore, it is concluded that too much variety can cause discomfort for consumers, specifically when searching for content, which decreases multi-homing satisfaction.

This phenomenon has been previously observed in studies focused on other technologies. For example, regarding social networks, Maier et al. (2015) found that feelings such as fatigue when using a service increase discontinuance intention, leading to the behavioral response of abandoning the platform. Additionally, Sun et al. (2018) analyzed the simultaneous use of multiple accommodating platforms. They identified that multi-homing was negatively viewed when the time and effort spent on usage was perceived as too high. Based on the above, the following relationship is posited:

Proposition 2: Choice overload negatively influences multi-homing.

Factor 3: Anticipated guilt

Emotions anticipated to arise from behavior influence the decision-making process (Hur & Jang, 2015). One such emotion is guilt, which emerges when users perceive that their consumption contradicts self, social, or moral standards (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Saintives, 2020). Specifically, guilt in the financial context arises from expenditures that are difficult to justify; for example, when buying very expensive or unnecessary products (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). Using anticipatory emotions in decision-making makes decisions more careful and less impulsive (Baumeister et al., 2007). In the current study, the interviewees showed a need to take advantage of their subscriptions to justify their expenditures. A significant variable was time, given that they considered it a determinant in the purchase decision. Thus, feelings of anticipatory guilt, triggered by the idea of not taking advantage of the platforms, lead to the decision not to increase subscriptions.

This more careful analysis of spending and its impact on decision-making has been studied in several articles. Generally speaking, there is a global trend toward more skillful management of the streaming market by consumers, with a greater awareness of costs and benefits (Arkenberg et al., 2021). For example, in the context of social networks, when users felt that apps no longer provided them with sufficient inputs, they were likely to abandon their use (Akdim et al., 2022). In this regard, the study by Gu et al. (2016) concluded that consumers rationally evaluate the costs and benefits of adopting more services; specifically, they analyze whether multi-homing would provide additional value. Ergo, based on the results and literature analysis, the following is proposed:

Proposition 3: The sense of anticipated guilt for not taking advantage of platforms negatively influences multi-homing.

Factor 4: Shared consumption

The concept of shared consumption consists of jointly purchasing and using services by two or more people (Liu & Min, 2020). Specifically, decisions are usually made to generate mutual benefit for all relationship members (Brick et al., 2022). This is most significantly observed in relationships with interpersonal closeness, characterized by perceiving the other as a significant part of one (Tu et al., 2016; Wight et al., 2022). In the context of the present study, the people with whom respondents share their subscriptions play roles that traditionally signal closeness, such as parents, siblings, children, and partners (Wight et al., 2022). Their behavior demonstrates an interest in mutual benefit, specifically payment, as they share the cost of a service that all customers will enjoy. As evidenced in the case of two interviewees, without this type of consumption, subscriptions could eventually lose their attractiveness, thus culminating in abandonment. Therefore, it is concluded that this behavior is a favorable element for multi-homing.

Shared consumption has been explored in depth in other settings. For example, in product selection, Menasco and Curry (1989) observed that couples tend to seek a balance of benefits, usually through negotiations. More recently, Tu et al. (2016) identified that same tendency to seek total consumer benefit, notably when consumers presented a close relationship. Along these lines, the study by Brick et al. (2022) demonstrated a positive relationship between the participation of all members of the relationship in decision-making and the level of satisfaction. For all these reasons, the following is proposed:

Proposition 4: Sharing platforms with others positively influences multi-homing.

Factor 5: Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging is a psychological construct that refers to the experience of feeling included, valued, and integrated into a group or environment (Liu et al., 2018). It is a significant motivator and can lead to adopting and rejecting certain behaviors (Wang et al., 2018). Specifically, this is observed in the phenomenon called Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which consists of the perception that, by not consuming certain products, one may be excluded from the social conversation, whether with people close to them or at a more macro level (Conlin et al., 2016; Tandon et al., 2021). Streaming platforms mainly promote FoMO because they facilitate the rapid consumption of series and movies (Maxwell et al., 2022). Regarding the present study, there was evidence of a tendency to value the social, also manifested in shared consumption. Likewise, multi-homing allows consumers to “be fashionable and up to date,” thus reducing the possible anxiety of being excluded (Good & Hyman, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2022). Thus, the search for belonging contributes to the willingness to subscribe to multiple streaming platforms.

FoMO and sense of belonging have been studied in depth in entertainment contexts. For example, Conlin et al. (2016) concluded that chatting with close people about some product and finding oneself included in the cultural conversation is a significant element in enjoying watching TV series. Additionally, another study identified the desire to belong as an effective motivator, given that participants stated that they consumed specific programs after witnessing colleagues or friends talking about them (Steiner & Xu, 2020). Finally, Good and Hyman (2020) found a positive relationship between FoMO and willingness to purchase a product, specifically concert tickets. Based on all of the above, the following relationship is posited:

Proposition 5: The need to consume content to stay in the social conversation positively influences multi-homing.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Implications

Multi-homing in the context of streaming platforms is an understudied subject, despite SVoD consumption being on the rise globally (Statista, 2022). In this research, this behavior was explored qualitatively through semi-structured interviews to analyze what was perceived as the advantages and disadvantages of being subscribed to more than one platform. That way, certain pre-existing constructs belonging to different research fields were identified as relating to multi-homing. From that discovery, five propositions were developed to facilitate understanding the findings: platform complementarity, choice overload, anticipated guilt, shared consumption, and sense of belonging.

This study contributes to the literature by incorporating, to our knowledge, the first empirical study that examines multi-homing behavior specific to streaming platforms. Previously, it had been studied in other areas, such as economics. Only recently had it expanded to the field of information systems but had focused mainly on mobile apps and social media (Gu et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2018). Also, this study highlights how the services' characteristics, individual emotions, and social elements all play a role in the

perception of multi-homing. It had to borrow constructs from different research streams to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, qualitative interviews identified five factors that users perceive to influence their multi-homing behavior. Thus, this study is the first step toward future research regarding multi-homing and streaming platforms.

The main limitations of this study are the size and composition of the sample, meaning that several groups were underrepresented; therefore, external validity is limited. Second, the generalizability of results would be restricted, as they belong to a specific context, even within Peruvian society; they all lived in the same region and had similar economic and educational levels. This also means that other factors influencing multi-homing could not have been manifested. Hence, more research must be done in different settings with different participants.

Practical implications can also be mentioned. This study can help SVoD service providers function effectively in a market with prevalent multi-homing behavior (Activate, 2022). First, they must consider whether they want to promote or mitigate multi-homing in their users. For instance, a way of taking advantage of multi-homing could be the promotion of service compatibility. The streaming platform could develop a concrete brand so that its contents rarely overlap with other platforms' content. That way, consumers would be compelled to subscribe to access that specific content. In contrast, if they want to decrease said behavior, they could diversify their content to satisfy different tastes. This is especially useful considering that subscriptions are often shared by people that vary in preferences, age, and gender.

Nevertheless, some factors play a role regardless of whether the service seeks multi-homing or negates it. Regarding content, the release of new and unique media at a regular pace could mitigate possible discontinuance. This is related to the anticipated guilt that users manifested when they perceived that they were not using their platforms enough. If they had a motivator to keep entering the website or app because they expected new content to watch, their subscriptions would not be seen as wasted. In addition, advertisers should encourage dialogue about their movies or series in social spaces. For example, promoting interaction between users in social media could influence their sense of belonging, thus making them more invested in the platforms' content.

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