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Video content consumption during the pandemic: developing an innovative SVOD aggregator and communal viewing experience for the UK market

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Background and relevance

The last few years have seen an unprecedented global growth in Video-on-Demand usage, changing the way video content is consumed. More viewers than ever are choosing online services over traditional methods of media consumption. The UK's Video-On-Demand market is one of the most developed in the world, with local and international services competing in an increasingly saturated arena (Ofcom, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant driver behind the rise of SVOD (Subscription Video-on-Demand). Lockdowns imposed on the public caused a spike in popularity of in-home entertainment, as consumers did not have access to cinemas or similar leisure distractions. An estimated three million British consumers accessed a SVOD service for the first time during the first lockdown in 2020 alone, with users spending around one hour and eleven minutes a day on services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Disney+ (Mintel, 2020). For young adults, that time increased to nearly two hours a day on average. This increased media consumption is likely to be sustained even beyond the pandemic, with over 50% of people planning to maintain their high levels of online video content consumption (Clapp, 2020a). With these increased and changing ways of consumption, entrepreneurial opportunities for business innovations arise in terms of managing, consolidating and enhancing the SVOD experience.

According to BARB (2021), a third of UK households who pay for SVOD services have two or more subscriptions, the most popular combination being Netflix with Amazon Prime Video. This represents a rise of almost 20% since 2017. Additionally, the number of people who *only* access Netflix has decreased significantly until 2020 (Clapp, 2020b), emphasising an overarching trend of accessing content from multiple sources. There appears to be a high interest amongst consumers in a stand-alone service that would aggregate multiple video streaming services (Mitel, 2020). 87% of SVOD users who are subscribed to more than two streaming services are either 'somewhat' or 'extremely' interested in such a service.

Additionally, the number of communal viewing services has also been growing since the start of the pandemic, with both first- and third-party-applications courting the audience's favour, such as My Disney Pal, Teleparty and GroupWatch (Mintel, 2020; The Drum, 2020). Nonetheless, as of early 2022, there is no one online platform on the UK market that aggregates content from SVOD services while also allowing its users to create and join watch parties. Our paper presents research into market needs and consumer expectations regarding such an innovative application.

Research approach

A two-step approach was employed for this study: Step one featured comprehensive secondary market research, analysing the state of the art of aggregation currently available for UK consumers, as well as communal viewing behaviour and services in the market. Written expert and customer reviews (N=714) were analysed, using qualitative content analysis.

Step two entailed semi-structured interviews with young adults aged between 20 and 29 years based in the UK (*N*=61), who have shown an affinity for the idea of an aggregator and/or communal viewing in the past. The aim was to refine the market gap via consumer expectations. Data collection took place in summer and autumn 2021. Each interview was transcribed and consequently analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Results and discussion

State of the art

At the time of this research, over 20 third-party apps on the Chrome Web Store and two streaming services implemented a native feature. Although third-party apps and native features within streaming services were seemingly easy to use and provided users with a good shared experience, the lack of convenience was a pronounced setback for consumers. With too many services offering different sets of perks, this seemingly created frustration amongst users. Any future platform would greatly benefit from a more consolidated approach—that is, giving consumers access to a watch party feature that can be used within a content aggregator, thus creating a more seamless user experience.

Consumer expectations

There was an overwhelming interest amongst participants in a platform that would aggregate content from multiple video streaming services, whilst also offering a social viewing experience; primarily driven by the consumers' desire for a 'hassle free' all-in-one solution. In terms of expectations, consumers appeared to look for a more personal experience compared to what current services were offering. *Hyper-personalisation*, optional *targeted contextualisation* and *enhanced inter-personal communications* were the core expectations expressed by consumers that should drive the development of any future offering.

Based on these findings, we ideated a conceptual prototype and creative brief that will be tested with experts and the target audience going forward.

Conclusion

With a clear gap in the UK's SVOD market in terms of content aggregators that also offer a social dimension, consumers are seeking convenience and embracing shortcuts that make their lives easier. Combining the highly in-demand content aggregation with the increasingly popular feature of watch parties might provide a unified streaming experience to users that could make for a sustainable business innovation born from the pandemic.

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