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Navigating OTT Choice Overload: Cognitive, Behavioural, and Emotional Effects

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The OTT service industry in India is expanding exponentially. As of August 2024, there are 547 million OTT users and 99.6 million active paid OTT subscriptions in India. OTT is considered convenient in many ways due to its widespread content availability in genres, content availability in different languages across the world, anytime access, affordability, and it has significantly transformed content consumption patterns, offering viewers an extensive range of choices. While this accessibility enhances the user experience, it also introduces the phenomenon of choice overload, where an overwhelming number of options complicates decision-making. This study explores how choice overload during the content selection process impacts the viewer experience. The study proposes that a viewer's intention to watch OTT content leads to a content selection process, which triggers choice overload. The study identifies three key outcome effects: (1) Cognitive effects, manifesting as decision paralysis; (2) Behavioural effects, including avoidance and binge-watching as coping mechanisms; and (3) Emotional effects, influencing satisfaction with the selected content. Using a quantitative research approach, the study assesses the choice overload experience, measuring indicators such as perceived choice complexity, preference uncertainty, and decision difficulty that affect the outcome. The findings will contribute to understanding digital consumption behaviours in high-choice environments and provide insights for OTT platforms to optimise content release and recommendation strategies, mitigating the negative consequences of choice overload. By addressing decision-making challenges on digital interfaces, the research offers insights to optimise user experience and engagement in complex, high-choice digital platform environments. **Keywords:** OTT platforms, Choice overload, Decision Paralysis.

1. Introduction

India has one of the fastest-growing media and entertainment industries in the world. The mediums of entertainment are advancing each day due to the demand amongst the media consumers. The media and entertainment industry in India has become a multi-billion-dollar industry that is expected to grow from $2616.7 billion in 2024 to $2833.22 billion in 2025 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.3% (The Business Research Company, 2025). The emergence of digital media platforms have shown a drastic change in consumption patterns and viewing behaviours amongst audiences. They have started transitioning from traditional media to digital media due to several reasons, the significant one being convenience. One of the most successful mediums growing at a massive rate is the OTT platforms with an approximate of 547 million users and 99.6 million active paid OTT subscriptions in India as of August 2024. OTT revenues have reached INR 17,496 crore ($2.1 Bn) by December 2024 and is estimated to double by 2028 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.9 per cent (Outlook Business Desk, 2024). With the growth of the industry and the investment on the industry, the content available on the media platforms have also been rapidly increasing to meet the growing demands.

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The content available on OTT platforms spans different genres, countries, cultures, languages giving audiences a diverse set of options to choose from (Jain, 2023). But this widespread availability of content have started leaving audiences in distress, with researches proving that they are facing difficulties in choosing what to view. 69% of the OTT users are facing frustrations as they struggle to choose the content they want to see (OTTPlay, 2023). The options are becoming limitless, and very frequently new releases also reach OTT platforms. Algorithms also play an important role in suggesting the content that a user might like based on their previously watched content and preferences. However, the struggle to find the right content is so real that it ends up leaving people in stressful situations (Bangera, 2023). This phenomenon can be demystified by understanding the concept introduced by Schwartz (2004) in his work, *'The Paradox of Choice'*. He states that when choices increase, it has the potential to lead to anxiety, indecision, paralysis, and dissatisfaction. A saturation point arises among viewers that makes them feel indecisive, experiencing choice fatigue. The content saturation on platforms leads users feel saturated. In the case of OTT, choosing which content to view comes as the second issue, where choosing a platform in the first place is a difficult task by itself.

The effect of extensive choices is essential to understanding the outcomes of an individual who faces choice overload. It will evaluate the effects to understand the phenomenon deeply. The effects of choice overload have been previously proved in a framework by Chernev et al. (2014). It has been discussed in relation to the concept of OTT. However, there is no research that looks into the phenomenon and evaluates the result with relation to content on OTT. Therefore, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:.

RQ1: Do individuals undergo a content selection process experiencing choice overload after having an intention to watch content on OTT?

RQ2: What are the effects of experiencing choice overload during selection of content on OTT?

The study aims to demystify some of the effects that are associated with the content selection process, where an individual experiences choice overload. The study expands the understanding of choice overload and applies it to the context of content on OTT platforms. The study measures four potential affects that are cognitive, behavioural, and emotional in nature that a person can end up facing after experiencing choice overload while choosing content to view on OTT platforms.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1 Choice overload

Choice overload is a cognitive phenomenon referring to the tendency to have difficulty making a choice if presented with numerous options. It is the complexity of the decision problem faced by the individual. It leads to decision fatigue, dissatisfaction, or avoidance (Chernev et al., 2014). In the context of OTT content selection, users face an overwhelming variety of content across multiple genres, languages, and platforms. This abundance often complicates the decision-making process, making it challenging to commit to a single option (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that intention is a key determinant of behaviour. However, in digital environments like OTT platforms, intention alone may not directly translate into content consumption due to the complexities of choice overload. Research indicates that higher levels of choice complexity increase perceived difficulty in decision-making, thereby affecting the overall content selection process (Schwartz, 2004).

exceeds the individual's cognitive resources. Therefore, the intention to watch content on OTT leads an individual to a content selection process, and the following hypotheses is proposed in the context.

H1: There is a relationship between intention to watch OTT content and the content selection process experiencing the choice overload.

2.2 Cognitive effect

Cognitive effects of choice overload primarily manifest as decision paralysis, where individuals struggle to make a selection due to excessive options. Decision paralysis occurs when users fear making the "wrong" choice, leading to delayed or abandoned decisions (Scheibehenne et al., 2010). The work by Schwartz (2004) highlights that a higher number of choices causes negative consequences, leaving audiences more prone to paralysis than making them feel delightful about the number of choices available, as the effort required to choose is greater when the number of

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choices are higher. OTT platforms, which present an extensive content library, often induce such cognitive overload, forcing users to spend prolonged periods scrolling without finalising a decision (Mogilner et al., 2008). Studies on media consumption show that excessive content availability negatively impacts user engagement, with users either postponing their decision or experiencing dissatisfaction after making a choice (Kahn, 1998). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been proposed.

H2: There is a relationship between the content selection process experiencing choice overload and decision paralysis in choosing the content.

2.3 Behavioural effect

2.3.1 Avoidance

When faced with overwhelming choices, individuals often engage in choice deferral or avoidance to escape decision-making stress (Dhar, 1997). In digital consumption, research has shown that when users experience high cognitive load, they either revisit familiar content or exit the platform without making a selection (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Upadhyay (2022) states that having higher choices brings users to a position where they are unexpectedly demotivated. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to OTT platforms, where users frequently re-watch familiar shows rather than explore new content due to the burden of excessive choice. They exhibit their tendency of avoiding new content to ensure that they do not have to undergo the choice overload experience. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been proposed.

H3: There is a relationship between the content selection process experiencing choice overload and avoidance due to difficulties in selecting content.

2.3.2 Binge-watching

Binge-watching, defined as watching multiple episodes in a single sitting, can be an adaptive or maladaptive response to choice overload (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Instead of navigating numerous content choices, users may resort to binge-watching a selected series to minimise decision-making stress (Flayelle et al., 2018). Studies suggest that OTT platforms reinforce this behaviour by auto-playing episodes, reducing the need for repeated content selection (Granow et al., 2018). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been proposed.

H4: There is a relationship between the content selection process experiencing choice overload and binge-watching to complete viewing preferred content.

2.4 Emotional effect

Emotional responses to choice overload vary, with some individuals experiencing post-decision regret while others report satisfaction in their final choice (Botti & Iyengar, 2006). Research suggests that satisfaction is dependent on the perceived effort involved in making a choice (Chernev, 2003). While excessive options can lead to frustration, some studies argue that individuals feel a sense of accomplishment after successfully navigating complex decisions (Kahn, 1998). In the context of OTT content selection, satisfaction may arise if users feel they have made an informed choice, despite initial difficulties. However, satisfaction levels may decline if decision-making took too long or if users feel they missed out on better content (Schwartz, 2004). Upadhyay (2022) states that viewers tend to end the content selection process by finding something that is merely satisfactory, rather than optimal, that does not bring satisfaction to them after viewing. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been proposed.

H5: There is a relationship between the content selection process experiencing choice overload and satisfaction from choosing the content.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Research model
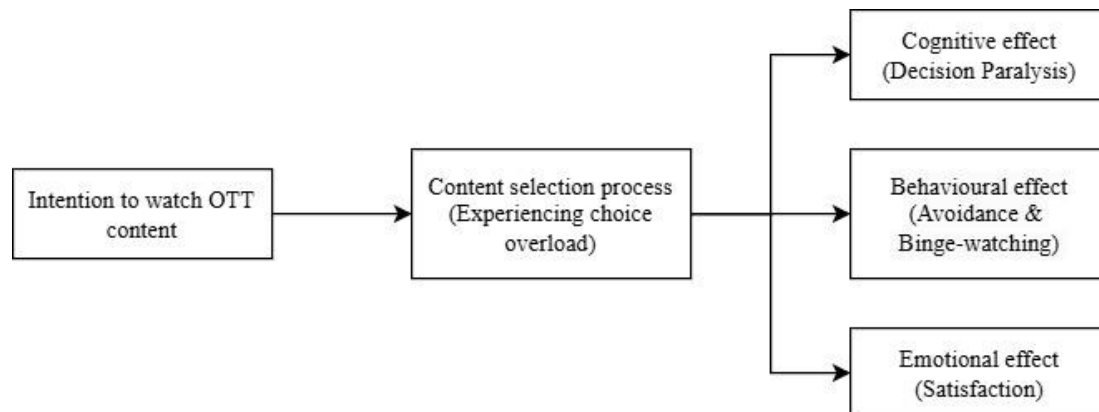
Conceptual model

Figure 3.1

The study employs a quantitative research design to examine the impact of choice overload during the OTT content selection process on cognitive, behavioural, and emotional effects. A conceptual model (Figure 3.1) has been created based on the hypothesised relationships and the variables in the study. A survey-based approach is used to collect data from OTT platform users regarding their decision-making experiences and its effect. A questionnaire is used as the instrument to collect the data. The target population for the study are frequent OTT users aged 18–25, who are young adults in Tamil Nadu actively engaging in content selection and viewing on streaming platforms. A non-probability purposive sampling technique is used to recruit participants who have access to more than two OTT platforms and use them on a regular basis, which makes them experience difficulty in selecting content due to an overwhelming number of choices. The questionnaire was circulated to over 600 individuals, out of which 453 responses were received, and 434 responses were considered to be valid and were used for subsequent analysis.

3.2 Measurement Items

The measurement items for the variables in the conceptual model were adapted from established and validated scales and were modified based on the study. 18 measurement items were adapted in the questionnaire. The variables were carefully defined while adapting it to the study. Intention to watch OTT content (3 items) refers to an individual's motivation to engage in OTT content consumption, measured using the scale by Ajzen (1991). Content selection process (3 items) in which individuals experience choice overload refers to cognitive strain caused by excessive content options on OTT platforms measured using the scale by Chernev et al. (2014). Decision paralysis (3 items) as a cognitive effect refers to how choice overload affects decision-making ability measured using the scale by Schwartz (2004). Avoidance (3 items) as a behavioural effect refers to the process of avoiding content selection due to the difficulties measured using the scale by Iyengar and Lepper (2000). Binge-watching (3 items) as a behavioural effect refers to the individuals resorting to binge-watching due to choice overload measured using the scale by Tukachinsky and Eyal (2018). Satisfaction (3 items) that arises as an emotional effect refers to the level of satisfaction experienced after selecting and watching content measured using the scale by Oliver (1993). The measurement items are listed in Table 3.1. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was anchored to strongly disagree and 5 was anchored to strongly agree.

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Table 3.1 Measurement items

Variables	Code	Item
Intention to watch OTT content (Ajzen, 1991)	IWO1	I intend to watch OTT content in the near future.
	IWO2	I plan to watch OTT content whenever I have free time.
	IWO3	I think about watching OTT content.
Content selection process (Experiencing choice overload) (Chernev et al., 2014)	CSP1	I feel overwhelmed by the large number of content choices available on OTT platforms.
	CSP2	I find it difficult to make a decision because there are too many options.
	CSP3	I spend a long time browsing before choosing what to watch.
Cognitive effect (Decision paralysis) (Schwartz, 2004)	CED1	I often delay making a choice because I feel uncertain about what to watch.
	CED2	I sometimes end up not watching anything because I cannot decide.
	CED3	The abundance of content leads me to overthink my selection.
Behavioural effect (Avoidance) (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000)	BEA1	I avoid selecting new content because the options feel overwhelming.
	BEA2	I prefer re-watching old content instead of choosing something new.
	BEA3	I sometimes exit the OTT platform without watching anything because I couldn't decide.
Behavioural effect (Binge-Watching) (Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018)	BEB1	I watch multiple episodes in a row to avoid making another content selection.
	BEB2	I continue watching a series even when I don't necessarily enjoy it, just to avoid searching for new content.
	BEB3	I start watching a new show impulsively without much consideration due to feeling overwhelmed.
Emotional effect (Satisfaction) (Oliver, 1993)	EES1	After choosing the content, I feel satisfied with the content I end up watching.
	EES2	After choosing the content, I feel confident that I made the right selection.
	EES3	I enjoy the content I select, despite the difficulty in choosing.

4. Analysis and results

4.1 Demographic profile

The demographic information of the survey participants is outlined in the table 4.1 along with the frequency and percentage.

Table 4.1 Demograhic profile of the participants

Category		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	230	50.80%
	Female	223	49.20%
Age	18 years	59	13.00%
	19 years	54	11.90%
	20 years	63	13.90%
	21 years	70	15.50%
	22 years	60	13.20%
	23 years	64	14.10%
	24 years	45	9.90%
	25 years	38	8.40%
Location	Urban	109	24.10%
	Semi-Urban	230	50.80%
	Rural	114	25.20%
OTT Usage (Hours/Day)	Below 1 hour	57	12.60%
	Below 2 hours	83	18.30%
	Below 3 hours	186	41.10%
	Above 3 hours	127	28.00%
OTT Platform Access	2 Platforms	136	30.00%
	3 Platforms	189	41.70%
	More than 3 Platforms	128	28.30%

Source: Primary data

Gender distribution is nearly equal. Most respondents are aged between 20 and 23 years, with 21 being the highest (15.5%). Semi-urban respondents form the majority (50.8%), followed by rural (25.2%) and urban (24.1%). Most users (41.1%) watch OTT for less than 3 hours per day. A significant 28% spend more than 3 hours daily, indicating heavy OTT consumption. Less than 1 hour users (12.6%) form the smallest group among the respondents. Most users (41.7%) have access to 3 OTT platforms, indicating diverse content consumption habits. A significant 28.3% subscribe to more than 3 platforms, showing a trend toward multi-platform usage.

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4.2 Measurement model

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the central tendency and variability of the observed demographic and key variables. The Shapiro-Wilk test reveals that the data does not meet the assumptions of normality (p > 0.001). Therefore, the data is not normally distributed.

4.2.1 Internal consistency and convergent validity

As the data is not normally distributed, ML or Maximum Likelihood Estimation method has been applied to estimate the parameters in the measurement and structural model. The Table 4.2 shows the internal consistency and validity of the scale. The factors measured along with their indicators, the factor loadings. Cronbach's α, Average Variance Extracted and Convergent Validity are presented.

Table 4.2 Results for measurement model

Factor	Indicator	Factor Loading	α	AVE	CR
IWO	IWO1	0.712	0.81	0.54	0.83
	IWO2	0.765			
	IWO3	0.891			
CSP	CSP1	0.721	0.77	0.54	0.815
	CSP2	0.803			
	CSP3	0.691			
CED	CED1	0.735	0.785	0.55	0.825
	CED2	0.819			
	CED3	0.711			
BEA	BEA1	0.902	0.88	0.71	0.91
	BEA2	0.935			
	BEA3	0.899			
BEB	BEB1	0.705	0.765	0.525	0.805
	BEB2	0.742			
	BEB3	0.689			
EES	EES1	0.812	0.855	0.62	0.88
	EES2	0.885			
	EES3	0.797			

Source: Primary data

All factor loadings are above 0.7, ensuring strong indicators. The Cronbach's Alpha (α) > 0.7, confirming internal consistency. AVE > 0.5 for all constructs denotes good convergent validity and CR > 0.7 indicates that constructs are reliable. The model fit indices were analysed before proceeding with the structural model assessment. The fit statistics are presented in the Table 4.3.

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Table 4.3 Model Fit Statistics

χ2	Df	Sig	CMIN/df	RMSEA	RMR	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	AIC	CAIC
Recommended Cut-off			< 5	<.05	<.08	>.8	>.8	>.9	>.8	Lowest for Default model	
2671.835	1334	0	2.887	0.079	0.0376	0.835	0.898	0.915	0.842	3045.735	3071.308

Source: Primary data

The fit indices like CFI, NFI, GFI and AGFI found more than the threshold levels and CMIN, RMSEA and RMR were observed less than the tolerance levels (Byrne, 2001) (Hair et al., 2009). These results positively signal to proceed with the hypothesis testing.

4.3 Structural model and hypothesis testing

Structural model has been assessed and the results are presented in the Table 4.4 that shows the path, standardised β value, z value, p value and the status of the hypothesis.

Table 4.4 Results of hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Path	Standardized (β)	z-value	p-value	Hypothesis Supported/ Not Supported
H1	CSP	IWO	IWO → CSP	1.016	2.99	0.003	Supported
H2	CED	CSP	CSP → CED	1.009	3.31	< 0.001	Supported
H3	BEA	CSP	CSP → BEA	0.271	2.12	0.034	Supported
H4	EES	CSP	CSP → EES	0.167	1.39	0.164	Not Supported
H5	BEB	CSP	CSP → BEB	0.168	1.32	0.188	Not Supported

Source: Primary data

A strong and significant relationship exists between intention to watch OTT content and experiencing choice overload during the content selection process. Therefore, the H1 is accepted as p = 0.003 and β = 1.016. Experiencing choice overload during the content selection process significantly increases decision paralysis, as indicated by a strongly significant p value, p < 0.001 and β = 1.009 and H2 is accepted. The choice overload effect leads to avoidance behaviour as indicated by a significant p value, p = 0.034 and β = 0.271 and H3 is accepted. No significant relationship was found between choice overload and binge-watching behaviour as p = 0.188 and is not less than 0.05. Choice overload while choosing content to watch does not significantly create satisfaction levels after choosing the content as indicated by the p value, p = 0.164. Therefore, the hypotheses H4 and H5 are rejected.

4.4 Path diagram

The path diagram represented in Figure 4.1 shows a clear visual representation of the relationships between the variables.

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Figure 4.1 Path modelling
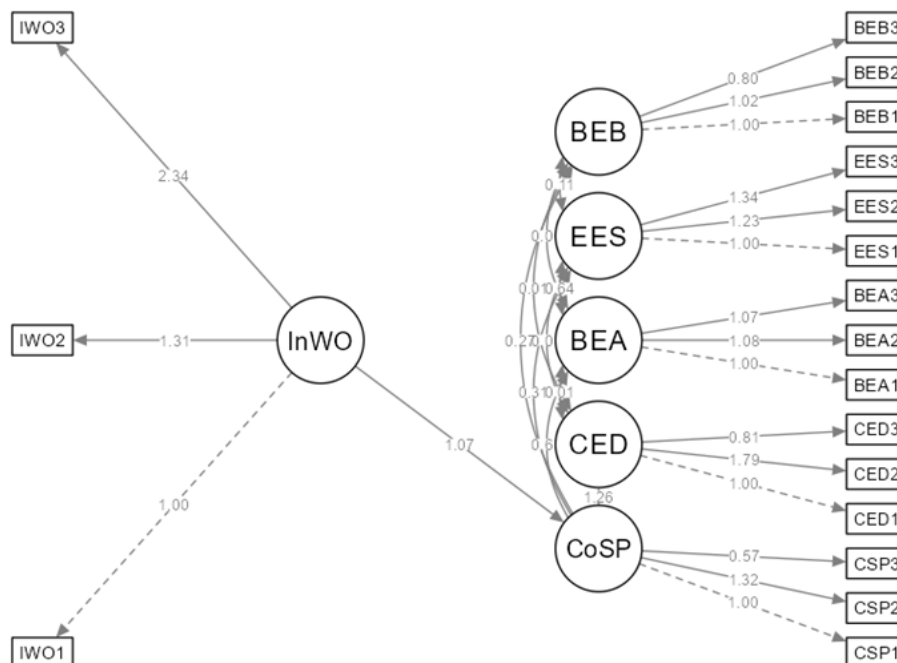
Source: Author's own work

Intention to watch content on OTT brings leads users into a content selection process where they experience choice overload. The effects of choice overload is observed in the path diagram. Strongest influence is observed between experiencing choice overload and decision paralysis, a cognitive effect experienced by the users. Non-significant effects are observed on the effect on binge-watching and feeling of satisfaction from choosing content.

5. Findings and discussion

Choice overload has effects on an individual's behaviour (Chernev et al., 2014) and positioning choice overload to the OTT context posits that specific behaviours may arise when an individual undergoes the experience. The results of the study reveals that individuals undergo the process of experiencing choice overload very commonly when they intend to watch some content aligning with the existing perspectives that link choice overload to content on OTT platforms (Bangera, 2023; Jain, 2023; OTTPlay, 2023). This experience leaves an effect on the individuals. The effect may be cognitive, behavioural and emotional. The results of the study shows that the potential effects of choice overload is observed in all the three levels. When the number of choices increases, decision paralysis is experienced leaving an individual unable to make a decision. The behavioural effect of avoidance is also experienced where an individuals avoids watching content on OTT altogether due to the overwhelming experience faced when a decision of what to watch has to be made. Even if the individual ends up choosing a content, there is no optimum satisfaction enjoyed as an emotional effect from content as the individual feels that he could have taken a better decision by choosing some other content. The findings of the study are in line with the existing researchers except for the binge-watching behaviour. The study reveals that binge-watching is not a behavioural effect that arises from content overload and there could be other reasons why an individual engages in binge-watching behaviour.

Addressing choice overload not only benefits viewers by improving decision-making ease but also helps streaming platforms optimise user retention and content discoverability in an increasingly competitive market.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for OTT platforms, content creators, and digital media strategists. By identifying choice overload as a critical factor influencing viewer decision-making, this research highlights the need for platforms to enhance their content discovery and recommendation systems. Personalised

algorithms, AI-driven content curation, and simplified navigation interfaces can help mitigate decision paralysis and improve user experience. Additionally, offering features such as preview clips, ranked suggestions, and category-based filtering can assist users in making more confident choices, thereby reducing avoidance behaviours and enhancing overall engagement. Platforms can experiment with staggered content releases, adaptive recommendations based on past viewing behaviour, and interactive elements to encourage more intentional content consumption.

From a broader perspective, this research contributes to digital consumption behaviour studies by demonstrating how an excess of choices can shape cognitive, emotional, and behavioural outcomes. The insights can be extended to other high-choice digital environments, such as e-commerce, online education, and digital news consumption, where users often struggle with overwhelming options. For marketers and content strategists, the study emphasizes the importance of balancing variety with ease of selection to enhance user satisfaction and long-term engagement. Ultimately, optimising content selection processes can lead to improved viewer retention, increased subscription rates, and a more satisfying digital entertainment experience.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

The study measures only four effects on three levels that could arise from experiencing choice overload while selecting content to view on OTT platforms. While these are commonly expected effects, there could be several other effects that arise from the experience. The study focuses on a limited target population and can be expanded for different demographic cohorts. The study examines the self-reported potential effects and does not focus on the actual behaviour after the experience. Future research can explore interventions that help users navigate choice complexity, such as nudging techniques, user-driven content personalisation, and psychological strategies that reduce decision fatigue.

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