

**A consumer perspective on Netflix's recommender system**

**A qualitative analysis**

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## **Netflix's Recommender system: A consumer perception**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Netflix has dominated the subscription video on demand for the past decade. Platforms like Netflix specifically offer an unlimited access to catalogues of movies and series for monthly subscriptions. The market for SVOD services is projected to reach US\$ 71,237 million by the end of this year (Statista, 2020). The key to its success revolves around the personalization of the service that was reached through recommender systems which have been growing in cultural industries and lead to user friendly platforms endowed with tailored experiences. The motive behind this study revolves around understanding the consumer perception of SVOD recommender systems and more particularly that of Netflix. There are plenty of studies regarding the way recommender systems work and their accuracy but little to no study understand the effects these personalization's have on shaping customers preferences and choices. To understand how consumers are affected, a select sample of millennials and generation z having a personal Netflix account was gathered and engaged through to in-depth interviews. The data from these interviews was analyzed through a constructivist grounded theory process.*

*The findings of the study highlighted four different themes: first, viewers were found to be ambivalent regarding their use of the platform and showed different expectations. Second, they overall found accuracy in the way the recommender system operated. Third, the participants described a process of mutual domestication towards the platform as they described an interdependent relationship. Finally, the findings of this research underline the limitations coming from the recommender system regarding an excess of personalization. The findings led to an interesting discussion that led to the main theoretical framework. Profiling, digital nudging, personalization paradox and mutual domestication were not used directly by the interviewees during the interviews but the concepts were described leading to a better understanding of the way Netflix shapes their consumption.*

*This study indicates that these Netflix's subscribers have a strong attachment to recommender systems and valued its improvements as it helped them get a better experience and showed appreciation for personalized platforms. One of the drawbacks of these recommendations was seen as group experiences, given that SVOD platforms were often used with family or friends, which did not fit to their recommender systems. This created struggles for Netflix to understand group personalization. Further research could look at how recommender systems shape consumer tastes and how Netflix could improve its algorithms to make a better experience out of it.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Recommender systems, Netflix, Personalization, consumer perception, SVOD market*

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of the proposed study is to understand how personalization shapes Service-Video-On Demand's (SVOD) customer's viewing choices. With over 640 million users worldwide, SVOD services are part of our daily lives, especially since the world was put on lockdown back in March 2020. This analysis will be based on Netflix, the number one streaming platform created in Los Gatos, California by Reed Hastings and Marc Radolph that began streaming back in 2007 (Netflix, 2020). With over 203.67 million paid subscribers worldwide as of the fourth quarter of 2020, Netflix faced an exponential growth of users, gaining approximately 50 million paid subscribers in one year (Statista, 2021). The platform can be found on top of the list before its main competitors Amazon Prime video, Disney plus, HBO +, Hulu and many more (Statista, 2021).

Looking back at history, cable TV has had its own constraints where people had to be in front of their television at the right time to be able to watch the content they desired. On top of that, they had little to no choice about what would be broadcasted and depending on the country restrictions the availability of content did not have the same airing date. Accompanied by cable TV was the use of DVDs that each family would buy. As almost every decade, new technologies come into our daily lives trying to improve our daily lives and change some of our old habits. Indeed, the rise of SVOD platforms has given some freedom to users by removing time constraints, by letting subscribers choose when they would want to watch their content, and removed language constraints by allowing for almost unlimited subtitling and voice over, which was not always possible with cable TV. Some of the technicalities used by SVOD platforms have made the experience user friendly with the added value of being able to 'skip the trailer', 'skip the resume' for example. But overall, the revolution comes from the diversity of Netflix's catalogues for a monthly subscription that has increased the circulation of content around the world. Although Netflix already had a personalization embedded in its DVD rental services, a step forward in personalization was taken when SVOD services started adapting their content to their subscribers by allowing a personalized experience done through technological advancements (Maddodi & K, 2019). These personalized experiences have allowed for people to save time picking movies or series but also to discover content based on their own tastes. Therefore, platforms like Netflix, have launched their algorithms content to improve the experience and their recommender system, which leads to improvements every year. There are multiple studies regarding how these recommender systems work and how they achieve personalization.

Netflix uses profiling so as to create personalized spaces for each member's experience. Profiling on its own represents "the recording and the analysis of people's psychological characteristics and behaviours in order to assess or predict their capabilities in spheres or to assist in identifying categories of people" ("profiling",2021) When doing so Netflix can achieve what we call personalization, which represents "The process of making something suitable for the needs of a particular person " ("Personalization," 2021).

Little research can be found on how consumers perceive Netflix's recommender system and play a role in influencing their choices in regard to their consumption on the platform. Represented as one of the pillars of Netflix, profiling and personalization are facing an increase in many SVOD platforms, leading to a better and clearer understanding of subscribers' preferences in terms of movies, series and documentaries present on their platforms. Although both profiling and personalization may increase the concept of a bubble on the platform leading to rather little challenge nor discovery. Netflix does not encourage nor show other options to its viewers, and subscribers' default to this without recognizing the availability of an alternative. There is no prevention available for subscribers from going beyond their top preferences, as Netflix is directing this and testing their limits in terms of tastes, leaving them with little freedom of choice. As such, many customers may become frustrated from a perceived lack of freedom in choice or profiles that do not fit them well. As a consequence, Netflix may play a role in shaping what their subscribers watch on the long run as personalization extends to suggested videos, rankings, artwork displayed for each video and their placement on the homepage (Netflix, 2020). Along with the public's appreciation for personalization, a competition between all the different SVOD services for the best algorithm in line has become a priority. Some strategies like minimizing the number of interactions a subscriber needs in order to match in terms of movies or series is important as it meets with the passiveness criteria that most subscribers are looking for. Therefore the SVOD platform is aiming to find the best algorithm through machine learning, text analytics as well as natural language processing (Netflix 2020).

At present, 80% of Netflix's stream time is achieved through its recommender system with "trending now" ranker, "continue watching" ranker and "video similarity" ranker that generates personalized recommendations thanks to its algorithm (Netflix, 2020). The focus of analysis within this research will be placed on the consumer experience aspect in order to understand the amount of trust and loyalty subscribers have with Netflix, as well as identifying their consumer preferences. Actually, understanding subscribers' tastes and consumption is key to understanding the effects of recommender systems. Hence, this project aims to examine this area and to produce an insight into the process of using platforms endowed with personalization techniques.

### 1.1. Research question

In order to conduct this study, the following research question was used:

RQ: How do Netflix's customers perceive the service's personalization system in relation to shaping their viewing consumption?

This research question was chosen to understand consumers' point of view, as previous studies focus primarily on the company's views and objectives on this matter rather than subscribers' feelings about their experiences with personalization. Their experiences were interesting to analyse as our society has seen a shift in the way movies, series and documentaries are consumed with the decreasing

importance of more traditional media such as TV and DVDs. Therefore, SVOD platforms such as Netflix have determined a way to understand how subscribers consume these types of media and how they could offer them a more personalized experience. Personalization was analysed by focusing on the algorithms as well as the recommender systems which represent the technicalities that allow to understand the impact, whether positive or negative on viewing consumption. Through our analysis and interpretation of data, we were able to answer the following question in our conclusion.

## 1.2. Outline of the thesis

In order to answer the research question, first the theoretical framework discussed the main theories and previous research that supports and helps understand the critical issues and concepts surrounding this research question. These main theories focus on the recommender systems such as personalization, profiling, mutual domestication, and recommender systems. The focus was on the understanding of how these theories had previously been applied to the context of SVOD services like Netflix and recommender systems but first to understand how they apply in general and in other sectors so as to get the bigger picture.

Second, the methodology section outlines the qualitative approach that was conducted. This focuses on the choice of methodology as well as the sampling process, and the 10 in depth interviews that were be conducted. Following the data collection, the analysis of the data was done through constructivist grounded theory analysis. This section is accompanied by an appendix of probes used during the interviews, in depth interview semi-structured guide and consent forms that were given to the interviewees.

Third, the result section follows the methodology indicating the analysis of the 10 different interviews and the themes and codes that emerged. The major themes were kept in order to better answer our research question explained earlier. The first theme that was identified was the recommender system's accuracy, the second one was viewers' ambivalence, followed by the third theme identified as mutual domestication and finally, the fourth and final theme outlined the limitations of recommender systems. This result section were accompanied by the discussion section and each result was be clearly discussed.

The fourth and last section of the thesis will conclude the research and respond to the research question that was outlined in the introduction and once again critically discuss the findings. A limitations section will be written at the end to discuss the limitations of the study as well as drawing recommendations for future research about the current topic of discussion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Subscription-based Video on Demand

Subscription-based Video-on-Demand services (SVoD), e.g. Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ and HBO+, offer unlimited access to their content libraries for a monthly subscription fee. Movies, documentaries and TV series can be streamed to various supported connected devices (Statista, 2021). The SVoD market does not include ad-supported services, pay-per-view offerings or services that require a pay-TV subscription, e.g: HBO Go. (Statista, 2021). Rizzuto & Wirth (2002) build on this definition stating that Subscription-based Video-on-Demand services key players are interchangeable by the consumer, in regard to their rates and predetermined use.

As one of their key distinguishable features Cable TV (CTV) markets, SVOD services have opted for a Personalized experience that is fueled by recommender systems allowing profiling and personalization techniques. SVOD are recognized for their diversity and catalogues that are a database of many available resources and that are the result of Netflix's success on top of personalization. Indeed these services offer top 10 movies lists to all of their subscribers as well as recommendations based on their previous findings and researches.

In fact, service personalization is at the core of the product at Netflix and aims to get the right movie or series titles in front of the subscriber at the right time (Amat, et al., 2018). Therefore, the platform's homepage is their biggest personalized tool, always looking for improvement. Although the personalization takes a step further with its personalization by changing each title's artwork depending on the subscribers tastes and therefore highlighting a movie with a picture of their favorite actor or a dramatic scene to appeal to the consumer (Amat, et al., 2018).

In order to understand the SVOD market, we need to understand how the market operates, which results in being a very hard task as there is not one definition for media markets but as many as there are services (European commission, 1997). It is undeniably important to understand Subscription-based-Video-on-Demand and its limitations to be able to understand Netflix's consumer perceptions. Based on the fact that Netflix is the SVOD service with the most subscribing users (Watson, 2019a).

Although there are some limitations to the understanding of SVOD services such as privacy concerns that have been arising. In fact, video on demand services collect much private information to provide their tailored services which has led to some consumers fearing the use of their information as well as the impact on decision making that is minored with personalized services.

### 2.2. Recommender systems

As one of the main features of Netflix, the recommender system is another important key term to define in order to understand better their business model. According to Resnick. Et al, (1997), the recommender system assists and augments the natural social process in order to provide subscribers with their best options and recommendations for movie consumption. Subscribers submit their



recommendations as “inputs”, leading to the system’s processing and redirecting to the right recipients. Recommender systems were brought to the table in the early 1990s and have seen an exponential evolution since then as the web 2.0 has faced more and more information overload and made it harder for target audiences if not for recommender systems and performance analysis (Bennett & Lanning, 2007).

In order to further understand recommender systems and its relevance it is crucial to understand how streams of data are collected (e.g., ratings, memberships, browse, search words) through algorithms that help personalize the service and how they perceive their customers (Amatriain, 2013). As a matter of fact, classic recommender systems have had to evolve, one of the concrete results is the Tagging Recommender System in order to deal with the overload of information. This method discovers potential tags in a domain to later expand and find other tags from the original ones and later use user profile refactoring in order to build user profiles (Pan et al., 2020)

Netflix has understood the constant evolution of the recommender system and has developed the ‘Netflix Prize’, an Entrepreneurship competition that helps generate new algorithms and better its recommender system in order to face the competition as research shows that the length of their service of subscribers has a direct correlation with the amount of movies that are seen and enjoyed by the viewers (Bennett & Lanning, 2007). According to Bennett & Lanning (2007), back in 2007, Netflix offered a database of 1.9 billion ratings, 85 thousand movie titles amongst 11 million subscribers to analyse the ratings and make automated personalized predictions and recommendations to their subscribers. All of that is done through the Cinematch recommendation system and its accuracy is calculated thanks to RMSE. In conclusion the prize helped improve the accuracy of the recommender system by 10 %.

In order to understand how Netflix’s customers perceive personalization, it is important to understand that the recommender system is at the forefront of this aspect and its functioning. In fact their viewing consumptions are shaped by them and the company makes sure to adapt it as much as possible to fit to their tastes (Bennett & Lanning, 2007). Studying recommender systems is the first step to our research since it will lead to understanding personalization paradox, tailORIZATION and profiling. Although research has shown that there are some limitations as it is very hard to know which algorithms Netflix’s recommender system uses and that recommender system raise some privacy concerns (Resnick. et al., 1997). Nonetheless, Li et al, (2010) Sees personalization as a trade-off between quality and privacy. Hence, user’s willingness to disclose personal information can be a concern although most of them are ready to risk it for a tailored service. This will help in answering the research question as recommender systems are the essence of Netflix’s personalization and therefore, when judging their experience with Netflix, subscribers judge its recommender systems.

### 2.3. Profiling

The definition of profiling is the ‘Recording & analysis of a person’s psychological & behavioural characteristics so as to assess or predict their capabilities in a certain sphere or as to assist in identifying categories of people’ (Oxford, 2021). It is important to understand the general definition of profiling as it gives us a broad view on the subject, but we will focus on a definition related to subscriptions as our objective is to understand subscribers point of view. As mentioned by Ferraris & Bosco (2013), profiling has multiple meanings arguing that this technique automatically processes personal and non-personal data to develop knowledge that is predictive from the data in order to create profiles that will be applied to a model in order to achieve decision making by the brand. Hence, this process helps discover unexpected patterns and specific information to identify specific groups that will help understand subscribers (Ferraris et al., 2013).

According to Ferraris et al., (2013) the purposes of profiling can be of help whenever information comes into masses, to organize the data into different categories as databases volumes keep increasing. Profiling helps create order and produce new knowledge that come from existing data and therefore to create future behaviours in commercial fields such as SVOD services (Ferraris et al., 2013). Ferraris et al.’s findings on profiling have led to different discussions on behavioural profiling such as targeted advertisements and services. This helps encourage actions from the company that will be rewarded, therefore aiming to provide tailored and personalized services regarding their profiles (Ferraris et al., 2013). All of it is based on the personal information that is provided by the users e.g. age, gender and many more (Netflix, 2021).

Looking at the broader picture, profiling can have issues such as consumer’s unwillingness to disclose private information about themselves (Olivero & Lunt, 2004). This phenomenon can be present in most of the industries as some consumers may fear data collection or extraction and therefore showing distrust in the company that practices profiling (Olivero & Lunt, 2004). Consumers are dubitative due to the lack of privacy regulation that reduce their willingness to disclose information to companies (King & Forder, 2016).

Not all the phenomena about security is replicated with behavioural profiling that has a strong relationship with our topic. Indeed, when looking at Netflix’s use of profiles we understand that the platform allows up to five profiles for each household (Netflix, 2021). As a personalized platform we need to understand group and non-group profiling, which shows how Netflix can have several accounts affiliated and create profiles and recommendations for each of them. As a matter of fact understanding profiling will help understand the different propositions offered by the platform depending on each person which will be helpful for conducting the interviews. As a matter of fact, according to Siles et. al, (2020) profiling helps create an identity and feel identified to the content from the platform. Therefore, Netflix’s subscribers do not share the privacy concerns explained by King & Forber (2016) as they are willing to disclose private information to get better profiles.

The previous definitions secured a better comprehension of the profiling present in SVOD services as it allowed to understand its relationship within a specific sector. Therefore, profiling has been associated by researchers to Binge watching. Indeed, this practice helps advertise tailored services and has proven to increase the amount of time spent on the platform and watching series or movies as the platform fits their tastes (Tryon, 2015). This will be interesting to analyse as well in interviews as it will help understand the point of view of consumers on that aspect and how they think of Netflix's personalization impacting their viewing habits positively or negatively.

Profiling has some limitations as there is little open information on Netflix's techniques and some other concepts such as mutual domestication may be important to understand to understand better profiling (Siles et. al, 2020).

#### 2.4. Digital Nudging

Digital nudging as per called by Wilkinson (2012) captures the use of modern social science to steer people's behaviours and to use details to have an impact on consumer behaviour and were seen to be successful in changing behaviour (Wilkinson, 2012). On top of Wilkinson's definition, Schneider et. al, (2018) argue on another definition of digital nudging which states that 'with its focus on the design of choice environments, digital nudging can be viewed as a subset of persuasive computing technology which is generally defined as technology designed to change attitudes or behaviours and includes aspects of human-computer interaction beyond interface design' (Schneider et. al, 2018).

Again, Consumers' decisions are influenced by their environments by looking at how things are presented, such as user-interfaces that are designed to guide user's choices by influencing their behaviours on apps or websites (Schneider et. al, 2018). Indeed, according to Schneider et. al (2018) what is picked is often part of what is offered, leading brands to automatically offer choices that will lead to decision making they want their customers to choose. Services such as Netflix have shown to condition even the smallest moves with automated recommendations such as the "skip intro" button that gives the option to the viewer to go directly to the movie or the episode without having to watch the introduction or the previous episode resume.

Furthermore, according to Jesse (2021), digital nudging represents making better decisions without being forced to, hence the recommender system uses nudging to function. Understanding digital nudging means understanding how choices are guided, as a matter of fact, online decision making is often affected by biases and heuristics which come from highlighting markdowns and presenting reviews (Schneider et. al, 2018). Digital nudging is always crucial for decision making and tends to play a big part there even when really small details are changed or applied (Schneider et. al, 2018). Their findings lead to the discussion of how digital nudges function and how they are built in a constantly evolving environment. As a matter of fact, first comes the part of the goal which needs to be set (e.g.: more views on a movie), after comes the part where users need to be understood (e.g.:

understand their decision process or their goals), with the design (e.g. selecting an intervention to change a conduct and designing the nudge for it to work) and finally testing the nudge by selecting the experimental design and tracking the behaviour. This process is extremely important as it usually leads to different effects. Indeed Scheider et. al (2018) have seen that digital nudging often leads to the decoy effect which increases an option's attractiveness as well as the scarcity effect.

Digital nudging really applies to the research question of this thesis given the aim to understand what drives consumers manners and their perceptions, and more specifically how digital nudges are seen and influences choices indicated to customers. It is also very interesting to see how digital nudges try to fight on-size-fits-all approaches and understand if they succeed in doing so.

## 2.5. Personalization Paradox

The main focus of this study will be to understand consumer perception in regard to Netflix's personalization. Drawing attention to algorithmic experience (AX), it is clearly lacking a design framework in terms of movie recommender algorithm, therefore the interfaces are constantly changing and improving (Alvarado & Vanden abele, 2019). Hence the relationship that is built between the users and platforms may not always be perfect as users may not find personalization fitting their preferences and tastes and these platforms may need to rethink their algorithms to achieve better profiling and personalization (Siles, Rojas & Naranjo, 2019). After looking at theories that would be useful regarding Netflix's personalization, it is interesting to connect the personalization paradox to the research question as it will help understand how consumers feel about it and their behaviours. As a matter of fact, to achieve personalization, brands such as Netflix need to get as much information about their customers in order to improve their services and their designs (Awad & Krishnan, 2006).

This collection results in questions raised about the central paradox for firms that focus on personalization and raises the issue of transparency from firms that participate in it (Awad & Krishnan, 2006). Indeed, consumers are not always willing to disclose personal information to firms as their fear firms will later release this information or sell them as we have seen in many scandals over the past years (Awad & Krishnan, 2006).

According to their findings, Awad & Krishnan (2006) found that personalization and data collection show a few dilemmas for both firms and customers and that firms need to accept that privacy sensitive minority of consumers will not be willing to share their data and therefore get as much personalization as others and that they should focus on the other customers without forgetting the sensitive ones. Indeed

On the other hand as stated by Aguirre, Roggeveen, Grewal & Wetzels (2016), personalization can have two different effects on customers, first of all it could enhance their engagement with the firms, but the effect could also be the opposite and diminish the engagement. In fact as maintained by their

findings Aguirre et. al, (2016) insist on firms using information collected in a strategic manner to find the balance between personalization and the privacy paradox. In addition, in their other journal called *Unravelling the personalization paradox*, Aguirre, et. al, (2015) assert personalization increases the vulnerability of customers and lowers adoption rates. The vulnerability of customers will be used to understand in the study how subscribers can react to the use of their data. Although they found that the effects of data collection on paradox are quite unclear and there is little research on these effects or these could also be minimized (Aguirre, et. al, 2015). Although the little findings led to understanding that the vulnerability occurs when personalization leads to a discomfort due to the sudden realization of the quantity of data collected by the customers leading to lower clicks and lower presence on the app or websites (Aguirre, et. al, 2015).

Understanding the personalization paradox is important to our study as it has a strong link to personalization and on the effect it has on customers, it understands the behavioural effects of personalization and their intentions.

## 2.6. The mutual domestication

In the media and technology industry, the concept of ‘domestication’ has been used to describe how media technologies are either accepted, rejected, or used by its users (Hartmann et al., 2010). Domestication often happens at the beginning of the relationship between both the platform and the users and is integrated in their daily lives or not (Hartmann et al., 2010). According to Brause & Blank (2020), domestication’s centre of attention used to be on customers’ homes’, although with the appearance of ‘new information and communication technologies’ domestication has found new concepts that are adapted to devices and platforms.

Siles, Rojas, Naranjo & Tristan (2019) examine the mutual domestication of users and algorithmic recommendations on Netflix. As claimed by Siles et. al, (2019) mutual domestication represents the relationship between their users and its platform, and the domestication is usually mutual. They therefore analyse how algorithmic recommendations embrace cultural codes such as spatial and temporal of everyday life.

According to the researchers Siles et.al, (2019) algorithms have ‘reached a privileged status in contemporary digital ecology although various have expressed concerns about the rise of algorithmic procedures in daily lives of users’. Despite these accusations there is little research on the effect algorithms have on the life of users and their preferences due to the opacity of these algorithms. There is knowledge about the fact that cultural concepts are inscribed in them although we ignore how users incorporate them as audiences and their consequences (Siles et. al, 2019).

Netflix’s mutual domestication of users and recommendations is a cyclical process that is divided into five different dynamics. Within these dynamics, first is the personalization that builds individualized relationships between the users and the platforms (Siles et. Al, 2019). Second them is the integration which represents the combination of criteria that users take into consideration to

choose their content (Siles et. al, 2019). Third, the rituals as domestication is perceived through routines that take place at certain places and times. Fourth is resistance, which is the critical aspect of the domestication coming from the user's that complain about the opacity of the platform, with a non-understanding of how algorithms work therefore leading to being surprised about some recommendations or not positive about them. Resistance can also show that some users expect clearer and wiser recommendations. Finally

cultural biases showing stereotypical recommendations to certain 'users' e.g.: LGBTQ recommendations or Latino only recommendations (Siles et. al, 2019).

Siles et. al, (2019) argue that the last dynamic observed in mutual domestication is 'conversion'. This represents the transformation of private and personal viewings on Netflix into what could be considered public issues (Siles et. al, 2019). Silverstone (1994) defines conversion as turning media technologies into the cause and the product of conversion itself to others (Siles, et. al, 2019). This helps users build an identity and get into conversion by sharing their throughout on their consumptions usually through social media networks therefore having users converting other users on their own without being done by the app and turning Netflix into a shared object of attention based on cultural references (Siles et. al, 2019). Understanding the conversion aspect of mutual domestication will help understand how viewers feel about being influenced by other subjects but also how they have the power to shape their viewing consumption.

All in all the concept of mutual domestication connects the topics mentioned above such as personalization and nudging for example. This concept described for Netflix by Siles, et. al (2019) is undoubtedly important for our study as it allows us to get an insight on a study about users' perspective on the influence of Netflix's personalization algorithms. We also get some comprehension into how users themselves can play a role of conversion and influence other people's choices as well as their perception on the algorithms.

## 2.7. Conclusion

By understanding the complexity of Netflix's Personalization system and looking at previous studies will allow us to understand the customer's selection process and have an overview on what the brand wants and how the consumers perceive Some of the theories mentioned earlier are key such as the concept of 'mutual domestication' as well as 'digital nudging' that sum up different theoretical frameworks used in the previous part. Furthermore, this will shape the interview questions on the way they are influenced by Netflix's recommender system on their choices. It will also help direct interviewee towards certain themes of interest and explain concepts more in depth and seek to understand if Netflix really knows their subscribers individually and succeed in representing them regarding their algorithm.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research design

The preparation for conducting this research and answering the research question relied on a qualitative research methodological approach. This helped gain insights into consumer perceptions on the topic of personalization and profiling of Netflix. This methodology was used to answer the research question as this approach was useful when it came to having a relatively small sample which results in a time-consuming type of research (Boeije, 2010). Moreover, this methodology helped getting into depth in certain aspects as well as understanding behaviours and answering “why” and “how” questions (Boeije, 2010).

Qualitative research was used to collect written findings to analyse satisfaction and the motive behind why the participants agree or disagree with Netflix’s method of using its algorithm. Qualitative research design did not only help understand opinions but also manners and emotions that were very important to understand satisfaction in personalization and profiling (Boeije, 2010). Besides, it was also important to understand that qualitative research was portrayed as very subjective with its findings, which is why it was not used to generalize but rather to understand different perceptions and analyse them (Flick, 2017).

#### 3.2. Data collection

In order to collect the data for this research, in-depth semi-structured interviews was the qualitative method conducted to answer our research question. Actually, in-depth interviews allowed for capturing more in-depth information as it was done in a one-to-one setting to draw out thoughtful responses (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). This led to a better understanding of lived experiences and perspectives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Surprisingly, in-depth interviews were used to learn specific individual perspectives of a certain theme or topic that has been carefully defined by the interviewee.

#### 3.3. Key concepts & operationalization

The planning and preparation for the in depth-interviews were done in advance to aim for the best outcomes. First of all, came the selection process of the interviewees that was done through social media platforms, e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram. A message in English was posted on university Facebook groups, Instagram stories and LinkedIn posts to make sure we reached our target, English speaking millennials. The message presented my study in a few sentences, gave a few details about what was expected from them and invite them to reach me via personal messages to participate in my study. succeeding the selection process, potential interviewees were specified that no compensation was given for the study. Following that, 10 to 15 candidates that suit best for the study were selected making sure they have their own Netflix account, to respond to the questions.

Now moving on to the interview, once the candidates selection was over, the second part of the preparation was to make sure the conversation went as smoothly as possible. Therefore, I will had to do some mandatory preparation and read about the topics, preparing the main topics of discussion. This was beneficial for the course of the interviews to meet with practicalities and emotions as well as to be able to get the best outcome possible from my interviewees (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

The interviews were conducted via zoom due to the unforeseen circumstances of covid-19. Aiming to create the atmosphere of a face-to-face interview, both cameras were switched-on and the sound was on. When starting the interview, it was made sure to begin with a more general discussion in order to build and gain the interviewees trust (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). This phase was very important as I got an overview of how the respondent reacted or spoke to get used to it (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

### *Sampling*

For the purpose of this research, 10 to 15 candidates were approached but, in the end, we reached a sample size of value of 10 participants that were given an insight of their own Netflix experience with profiling and personalization throughout the method of In-depth Interviews of about 45 minutes to an hour. The unit of analysis regarding the demographics was English speaking European millennials between ages of 25 to 35. Were targeted both men and women. Focusing on English speaking people was important as our research was done in English and translation would take a lot of time. We decided to focus on millennials since Netflix is considered to be their most indispensable TV and video source (Statista, 2021). Moreover, the choice of European is simply because Netflix has different markets and the European one is one of the biggest. In addition, the participants had to be Netflix users and own their own profile on the platform to understand better personalization. During the selection of the interviewees, we will made sure to look at the credibility to maximize reliability and validity of our results to answer our research question (Brounéus, 2011).

**Table 1**

Description of sample

Name of the interviewee	Age	Gender	Date of the interview
Agathe	26	<b>Female</b>	<b>11.05</b>
Amelie	25	<b>Female</b>	<b>17.05</b>



Caroline	25	<b>Female</b>	<b>15.05</b>
Esther	26	<b>Female</b>	<b>15.05</b>
Jessica	25	<b>Female</b>	<b>11.05</b>
Lorenzo	25	<b>Male</b>	<b>18.05</b>
Melanie	27	<b>Female</b>	<b>11.05</b>
Patrick	26	<b>Male</b>	<b>18.05</b>
Pierre-Guillaume	26	<b>Male</b>	<b>16.05</b>
Sian	25	<b>Female</b>	<b>25.05</b>

*Semi-structured Interview guide*

A semi structured interview guide (Appendix B) was conducted as a means to introduce the main topics to the interviewees and make sure not to forget anything during the interview. The purpose of the interview guide was also to make sure that the interview had a structure and that all interviews had the same base, and no topics were forgotten when finishing the interview. This allows for better comparison of the findings when coding the interviews. The interview guide was chosen as semi-structured as in-depth interviews need some freedom in the discussions and let the subjects flow without guiding too much the interviewees and their responses.

### *Introduction*

I started the interview by thanking the interviewees for taking the time to answer my questions and participate in my study (Brounéus, 2011). Sentences such as “thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study in order to better understand Netflix” were said at the beginning of the interview. As well as talking out loud about agreeing to sign the confidentiality agreement for this study and asking the interviewees if he/she felt confident about recording the interview to simplify our study (Gutmann, 2014). If the interviewee refused to do so, we would have not been able to proceed to the interview as we needed very detailed notes that cannot be achieved by taking handwritten notes as we will need to code later on.

### *Introduction questions & main questions*

Every interview started with an ice breaker right after agreeing to the main formalities, such as questions about the background of the interviewee, questions about their everyday life for example. These questions were crucial as they helped gain confidence between both the interviewer and the interviewee before getting into more serious conversations. This set the tone of the interview and it is important for the interviewee not to feel unconfident and powerless and feel listened to without any judgement.

As a matter of fact, each interview started with an introduction question to the topic as well as a definition of the topic if needed, interviewees were specified that they could ask questions whenever they wanted in order to clarify details if needed (Brounéus, 2011). Another important aspect was not to mention the theoretical framework such as the words ‘recommender system’, ‘personalization paradox’, ‘nudging’, ‘tailorization’ and ‘mutual domestication’ and keep it open to not discuss it directly. Instead, we asked questions related to these topics in order to get the interviewees incentives without telling them directly what we wanted from them (Gutmann, 2014). Although if one interviewee specifically mentioned the terms indicated above from our theoretical framework, it allowed us to use them in the interview from that point onwards. In that way we did not influence or help them understand our topic without them taking the time to think about them (Brounéus, 2011). After the introduction question and an ice breaker, the interviewees were given four different main questions during the interview as well as sub-questions that were prepared under each main question to flow the interview in a nice and specific way. That was the only preparation done as the surprise effect and conversation flow are very important in in-depth interviews (Brounéus, 2011). During the interview, it was crucial to keep the interview on track in order to get answers on our topic which helped answer the research question as well as making sure to have the right follow up subquestions (Brounéus, 2011).

### *Finishing the interview*

The end of the interview had the same format as the beginning of the interview as it focused on simple questions in order to round up the and release the pressure. It was made sure to summarize the interview with the interviewee to make sure he/she understood correctly what everything meant as well as to ask about additional comments. Therefore, each interviewee was asked if he/she wanted to add anything to what was said and was finally thanked for his time and consideration (Gutmann, 2014).

### *Examples of questions:*

- How do you think Netflix sees you? What do they think you are like or enjoy watching?
- Could you please show me on your screen how you look for a movie on Netflix?
- Do you think many people see the same thing as you?
- Do you think your homepage represents you?
- Do you know what Netflix's personalization is based on?
- Do you think it is appropriate for Netflix to study your attitudes and preferences to lead you to content?

*Examples of visuals that were shown during the interview. Interviewees had to share their screen with their Netflix page on showing their homepage and Netflix list to understand personalization and profiling.*

### **Visual 1**



## Visual 2



## Visual 3



### *Transcriptions*

Transcriptions were important for the data analysis. For this purpose, sound was recorded to allow reviewing and analysis of the interviews. Indeed, all ten different interviews were completely transcribed. As a matter of fact, everything was transcribed from minute 0 up until the end of the interview not to miss anything for the analysis of the data. Automated transcription was done through “otter.ai”, a website that has an extension that can be put directly into zoom and record and transcribe directly from there (Otter, 2021). Of course, the transcripts were verified and adjusted to make sure they were accurate. When transcribing, all our attention was kept on including every single sentence, even incomplete sentences or parts of words, words alone, sounds and phrases that were not completely understood. This was done as it could give us other information about the participant and the way the interviewee thinks. On top of that the interviewees’ reactions such as laughs, sounds were used and indicated as: (laugh) for example. If a sentence or words were impossible to transcribe the following was written on the transcription: (...). Every interview was included with time codes that

help find some information on the audios if needed and gives a clearer structure to the conversation on paper. Therefore, every time a different person spoke whether it was the interviewee or the interviewer, a time code was added next to the name.

*e.g: interviewee – 00:00:31.*

As we can see, the time codes included the seconds, the minutes, and the hours of the interview in order to be as precise as possible. The only chunks that were not included in the transcripts are some unnecessary sounds for the findings such as computer noises, paper noises or outside noises for example.

#### 3.4. Ethical considerations & confidentiality agreements

It was crucial to understand the ethical issues of in-depth interviews and helped conduct them in the best way possible. That way we focused on: transparency, consent, confidentiality, consequences, and roles of researchers (Brounéus, 2011). Considering the nature of our research it was made sure to consider how interactions were made with the interviewees as well as how their confidentiality were kept (Brounéus, 2011).

First of all, in order to receive consent from the ten different interviewees, that were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) to get their authorization to interview them, recorded the conversation and included some of the interview in our research findings for this thesis (Brounéus, 2011). This consent form (Appendix A) included a confidentiality agreement where their identity was not revealed to the public under any circumstances and only their initials and gender have been kept from the consent form (Appendix A). Therefore, ethically informed decision making was taken into consideration (Brounéus, 2011).

Another important aspect that was made sure to take into consideration was the sensitivity of the interviewees and therefore gave them beforehand the main topics that were discussed in the interviews in order to make sure they were comfortable with them and did not feel insecure or forced to say anything (Brounéus, 2011).

On top of that when preparing our interviews, were chosen wisely the choice of the place where the interview took place as well as smaller details such as the way the interviews were conducted and questions were formulated to consider all the potential scenarios and options, as well as potential dangers for both the researcher and the interviewees (Brounéus, 2011).

‘Research fatigue’ which represents the situation where the researcher is tiring interviewees with as many questions as possible which can lead to unethically and meaningless research as the findings can be biased or making people answer according to what they have learnt researchers want to hear to finish the interview as fast as possible (Brounéus, 2011). Ice breakers were used to avoid this situation at the beginning of the interview and make sure that the interviewees were all comfortable with the interviewers and would say something in case they did not (Brounéus, 2011).

Finally, not many details about the study were revealed, just enough to briefly to explain our intention in order to protect the results and hope for spontaneous interviews and conversations.

### *3.5. Data analysis*

#### *(Constructivist) Grounded Theory*

The processing and analysis of the data was done through a constructivist grounded theory as it needed to analyse text and the specific themes found in them (Appendix D). Constructivist grounded theory helped identify implicit and explicit ideas within text, which were of use to understand how the interviewees feel about personalization and profiling of Netflix (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Therefore, it was needed to make sure to interpret our research data and acquire ideas and most importantly themes from them (Boeije, 2010). Compared to thematic analysis, constructivist grounded theory does not focus on the theory directly but on building from the ground and developing themes according to the data itself and not already existing ones. Therefore, during the analysis process Glaser and Strauss's rules were carefully followed. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) there are two main rules that we used during the analysis, the first one stating that categories must emerge on their own from the data and should not be forced and the second rule that theoretical sensitivity should be used to create these categories and analyse them. The beginning of the analysis was used to segment the data and unite them in order to transform them into interesting findings which later helped us answer our research question (Boeije, 2010)

Strauss and Corbin coding process was used for the analysis as they studied how their coding process would work more effectively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We began our coding process There are three main steps to achieve constructivist grounded theory: Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, but first we will need to set rules and define what will be coded, in our case the whole interview will be coded each time (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Open coding is the first step to constructivist grounded theory which represents the process of "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Reading the document, to later read each line of the text again and trying to identify present fragments is the first part of open coding (Boeije, 2010). It was later determined whether these fragments were significant and relevant to the research that we conducted (Boeije, 2010). When the fragments were identified, names were made up for each one of them which represented a code (Boeije, 2010). A specific code was assigned to each fragment and the entire document was read and coded with fragments. Our last step to open coding was the comparison between different fragments (Boeije, 2010).

Now moving on to the second step of constructivist grounded theory. Axial coding represented the action of "determining which elements in the research are the dominant ones and which are less important ones" (Boeije, 2010). Therefore, from all the codes found during the phase of open coding,

came to light different themes and categories that formed an axis and themes that were more abstract were found (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). After similarities and differences between the different codes appeared and focused on main codes and subcodes (Boeije, 2010).

Finally in axial coding it was important to compare all the similar codes within a category or theme and if some were too different new themes/categories were created (Boeije, 2010).

Finally, selective coding was applied to reflect on the connection linking the dominant themes and point out the key concepts or key themes. According to Boeije (2010), the selective coding part revealed repeated themes as well as understanding the main message in the data and finally comprehending how emerging themes were related (Boeije, 2010). There are often one or a few core themes or categories in selective coding that link to other categories but are at the heart of the analysis and appear frequently. This allowed for theoretical sampling of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2007).

#### *Interpretation and report of the results found*

By building on the previous section, it was important to understand that coding frame (Appendix C) and coding schemes will be the material of the constructivist grounded theory and part of it will be included in the appendix. The writing process of the constructivist grounded theory is the opposite of how the analysis was done, therefore the result part began with the selective codes, then the axial codes and finally the open codes. After those results from grounded theory were written, they were analysed in the following section by comparing all the results and making assumptions to answer our research question.

#### 4. Result and discussion

As previously mentioned, this study seeks to understand how SVOD platforms personalization affects viewers tastes and shapes their consumption. Accordingly, this study makes use of Constructivist Grounded Theory so as to understand the recommender systems effects and functioning as well as understanding the way consumers see them shaping their choices. In consequence, this chapter analyses through four different themes that were found during the analysis.

First, the result and discussion section focused on understanding viewer's ambivalence which includes the viewers that enjoy passive watching, recommender system discrepancies. Secondly, the findings led to explore how recommender accurate viewers perceive their recommender system by experiencing a tailored platform, being grateful for their recommender system as well as impressed and finally understanding engaging tools such as thumbnails. Thirdly, the results showed that the relationship between the platform and its users could be considered as mutual domestication especially when understanding how it shapes consumer tastes, hides options from customers but at the same time shows accuracy in the personas and a trust in the collection of data from the viewers as long as it is for personalization. Last but not least, will be identified the limitations of recommender systems such as excess of recommendations, the perceived limitations of the tools in Netflix's recommender system as well as its addictive viewing habits.

##### 4.1. Viewer's ambivalence

The first section of the results chapter aimed to understand how viewers explore and use the platform by analysing their habits. Indeed, in this part we will try to understand how habits such as passive watching encourage some viewers to watch more or how for some viewers personalization can be seen as boring and even frustrate subscribers. Acknowledging these conflicting reactions towards Netflix's recommender system will guide the rest of the research and contribute to representing Netflix's audience. Viewers expressed to have different relationships with the platform, with the vast majority enjoying the practicalities of its recommender system and some of them that are surprisingly not expressing their attachment to what defines and differentiates Netflix from other platforms.

##### 4.1.1. Enjoying passive watching

While exploring viewers watching habits and ways of choosing their movies or series, a recurring theme has emerged which showed a strong admiration for Netflix's recommender systems user friendly platform. Indeed, most interviewees suggested that they were inclined to use Netflix on a regular basis as they knew they could be passive watchers and not spend too much time searching for their ideal content. When asked about how Netflix encourages and convinces them to watch more or less shows during the day, many respondents mentioned how passive watching was a factor that convinced them by mentioning tools that were put in place by the platform. On top of that, they



mentioned when asked about how they decide what to watch, how much they liked to let Netflix choose for them instead of making efforts to find content.

Therefore five main themes were strongly present in the different interviews. First interviewees insisted on how the tool skipping the trailer when starting a movie or a series affected their viewing time. Second, they mentioned how the functionalities of the homepage convinced them to watch more and finally most respondents agreed with the fact that when entering the platform they were looking to be influenced and to let Netflix choose for them.

### **Skipping the trailer**

One of the main tools used by Netflix that came out the most from the interviews when asked about what led to increase their viewing time was the option to skip the trailer that was introduced by Netflix:

Skip the trailers exist for people like me that don't really have an interest in trailers, and that just want to have a TV show that is just being continued so I don't want to be interrupted. I just want to see what's next. I don't care about who, who is the actor? Or who did the music? Because if I want to watch that, I just want to have to, I just ask Google. (Agathe)

Moreover, even if some of them ensured that the trailers were interesting to watch the first time, they agreed with the fact that it was time consuming for them and that trailers could be interesting when choosing a series but not when having started a series. Indeed they insisted on that tool and not on the tool 'skip the resume', that can be more useful to keep up with series. This quote reveals the importance of the tools created by recommender systems as they create the whole experience.

### **Convince to watch more**

As mentioned above, nine out of twelve interviewees insisted on how some tools convinced them to watch more. Although on top of skipping the trailers they talked about how the platform was made in a way that would increase their chances of clicking and starting to watch shows or movies:

The functionality when you're on the Netflix homepage, and you kind of like hover your mouse over, like one of the thumbnails and it goes bigger, and it makes a bunch of noise all of a sudden, like, sometimes the clips are like, really good and like, and you'll keep watching it and I actually think that sometimes it even starts it's like, if you watch enough seconds, it'll just like open up. (Esther)

These functionalities include details like putting your mouth on a thumbnail and the zoom effect that comes with it. Five different interviewees described the phenomena and said that trailers would start playing whenever they would put their mouse on the thumbnail which captivated their attention and led them to click and watch the whole show. Although it influences them to watch more it is also a way for them to choose what they will be playing and gives the interviewees a sense of control over their decision making.

### **Letting Netflix choose**

Another detail that was explained by most interviewees was how they were looking to be influenced by the platform when it came to their choices as for them SVOD platforms are there to offer a maximum amount of content but for it to be tailored as well and therefore having to do a minimum of effort. Lorenzo, one of the interviewees explained his intentions when opening his Netflix and assured that he was never sure of what he was going to watch:

So usually, I go on the platform, I'm never 100% sure of what I'm going to watch. I'd say be influenced by it and where something else is. (Lorenzo)

Hence, the interviewee explained his way of letting Netflix choose his content and insisted on the trust he had for the platform and its tailored recommendations that often lead to him feeling a 'vibe' that will lead to opening a movie or a series having let the platform make 90% of the work.

So usually what I do, I scroll down a little bit and then thumb the thumbnail, it's going to catch my eye. I'm just going to put the mouse on it. And you know, I'm going to watch the little 10 second 10 second clip. Exactly. And usually that's how I do it. Like, if I feel the vibe, I'll just click on it. I'll keep watching it. If I don't, I won't. But that's how I've always been doing it. (Lorenzo)

Peleja, Dias, Martins et al.(2013) argue that viewers are no longer passive elements as they give us enough information to recommend them. They insist on how viewers can now rate programs, comment, and suggest to friends which make them active users and viewers on SVOD platforms (Peleja, Dias, Martins et al.,2013). Although in our interviews, nine out of the ten interviewees suggested that being passive was one of the main advantages of using platforms like Netflix:

You don't need to press play or next or whatever, you just sit there and it naturally does it for you. (Jessica)

The interviewee explained how she usually let's Netflix choose what she will watch, especially if it means being passive behind the screen and doing the minimum of efforts.

Research on binge watching on Netflix describes the phenomenon of skipping trailers and resumes as incentives to binge watch and to remove control set out by users (Jenner, 2018). These techniques dictate how content should be watched and have become a mode of viewing that pleases the consumers (Jenner, 2018).

In other words, Perks' 'model of flow' explains the strategy behind Netflix's passive watching (Jenner, 2018). The model is structured by two different concepts 'entrance of flow' and 'insulated flow' as the recommender system persistently introduces its viewers with new series of movies which will represent the 'model of flow' that comes right to the point of Netflix choosing content for you (Jenner, 2018). The second part of the 'model of flow', 'insulated flow', plays the convincing part, as the 'entrance' has been set. Features like 'skipping the intro' or 'skipping the resume' as well as 'post-play function' generate a flow from one episode to another for example, leading to watching 'insulated flow' as the main way of consuming content on Netflix (Jenner, 2018). This concept clearly explains how viewers are letting Netflix's recommender system choose for them as well as convincing them to watch more.

#### 4.1.2. Recommender system discrepancies

While interviewing on different practices of Netflix, three respondents came up with a few discrepancies concerning Netflix's recommender system. While most of them were positive about personalization insisting on its 'accuracy' as a solo consumer of the platform, two interviewees insisted on the fact the group personalization was nowhere to be found on Netflix. As a matter of fact they argued that when on the platform alone they did not struggle to find content fitting their tastes but that if they were with family or friends, there was no way to let Netflix know and change its recommendations. Another interviewee insisted on the fact that personalization was not as mandatory as choices can still be done the old way by word of mouth or knowledge for movie and series specialists.

#### **Difficulties of group personalization**

When it comes to the difficulties of group personalization, Patrick and Jessica, two interviewees said during their interviews that some of the blurry sides of personalization were the fact that Netflix could be considered a platform to be used by many people at once. Therefore, to enjoy the service with relatives some interviewees ensured that Netflix could let you say whether you are watching alone or in groups to change or remove personalization. Some argue that watching Netflix in groups takes a lot of time due to the time spent looking for your choice:

It takes less time when you're alone for sure [...] Oh, I want to start Benjamin Button? And do that person is going to be like, no, I don't feel like it's so okay, so you keep scrolling and the other one is going to be like, oh, what about Titanic? And I'm not in the mood? And yeah, it's like, back and forth. (Jessica)

Additionally, one of the interviewees saw group personalization as the way multiple people interact with the same account or how people's recommendations and following friend's advice can affect your Netflix's recommender system:

I mean there's like one list that says it's recommended for you, for example, so that's, I think he's always had very good choices. [...] Very often I have recommendations from friends as well. So they kind of tell me all you should watch the series and then I go and check it out, but it does happen quite often then I kind of just watched like one or two episodes and then I'm like, Yeah, I actually don't like this and then I kind of get rid of it but then been saved by Netflix kind of keeps on bringing that back and saying hey you didn't finish this series like finish it or. Yeah, like in general is just really scrolling and kind of wasting time [...] I mean It could be a more efficient way that would be pretty cool, but we spent so much time just looking for something that you want to watch before we watch it that takes up quite a bit of time and effort. (Patrick)

Patrick the interviewee emphasizes on the fact that Netflix's recommender system is still lacking in a few different aspects when it comes to watching Netflix in group or trying to follow on different accounts. The interviewee requests tools that would enable to say when a movie was watched outside of the specific account to help personalization even more and do not show the same recommendations over again.

### **Personalization is not necessary**

A key concern that emerged, related to the recommender system's discrepancies revolves around the idea that personalization is not mandatory for some users:

So, for Netflix not really important, but it's not something that bothers me at all. So, like, the better it would be personalized if I'm fine with it, it makes it such an easier experience. But it's not something that's very important, either, because most of the time, I will have an idea of what I want to watch and what I want to watch on Netflix. (Melanie)

Indeed, as Melanie says, personalization can be useful but isn't the essence of her relationship to Netflix, instead she prioritizes the catalogues size instead of the personalized choices and often opens

the platform knowing what she wants to watch and therefore is only on Netflix to find specific choices or explore categories:

As Berry, Fazio, Zhou et al., (2010) expressed, recommender systems were created so as to make meaningful suggestions individually. Their goal is Predicting user preferences in selection of content by using the method of profiling (Takacs, Pilaszy, Nemeth et al., 2008). Nevertheless, were identified 'power users', subscribers that are less inclined to following Netflix's recommender systems. As expected, Netflix has zero to no recommendation based on multiple users as well as no profile merging (Berry, Fazio, Zhou et al., 2010). The study conducted by Berry, Fazio, Zhou et al. (2010) showed that Netflix users were in demand of such features like group personalization for social contexts as well the possibility for discussing movies or series in groups afterwards on the platform ( Berry, Fazio, Zhou et al., 2010). Based on these needs, Yu, Zhou, Hao et al., (2006) have come up with recommendations based on user profile merging that would benefit multiple people when using the platform and instantly change their recommendations based on the people they are with. Netflix has been improving its recommender system for individuals each year however recommendations for groups that may not have similar tastes is still a difficulty (Amer-Yahia, Roy, Chawlat et al., 2009). Thereby, Netflix users may not be as keen on personalization as it does not combine the prerequisites they need or may not require an important part of their user experience.

#### 4.1.3. Personalization as boring

The sentiments shared by some interviewees around Netflix's personalization resulted in the lack of surprise effect that subscribers had when opening their account as personalization is at the centre. While most were pretty happy about that, some found it boring, and thought about improvements that could be made by the platform in order to make personalization more interactive or exciting. Indeed respondents were asked how Netflix could improve it's personalization as well as if they were satisfied with the amount of personalization.

#### **Improving personalization**

Interestingly, some interviewees agreed with the fact that Netflix' personalization could improve. In fact, 'categories' present on the main page were often criticized as 'menus' are not always used since they may not always be relevant to all users. One interviewee insisted on creating more categories that could be specific to each person, instead of the basic categories like 'top 10s', 'most watched in your country':

Maybe create more new categories, like more? Yeah. categories, or more specific for you, not just the top 10 of whatever country you're in, or, or most watched? or? Yeah, create some new

categories. Fun, more fun categories like that are more, even more personalized for you. Yeah, yeah. (Melanie)

For improving its personalization, the interviewee insists on the fact that new categories should emerge in order to bring more fun out of the platform and increase its personalization.

### **No surprise effect**

Along with improving personalization another point that respondents felt was missing was the lack of surprise effect on the platform. Thus, another respondent claimed feeling bored when opening the main page where the magic is supposed to happen, as most recommendations are often the same and are very expected.

On the main page, well, I, I usually think that they are meeting too much. I explain my expectations, there is no surprise effect. And I see that, because you saw this TV show, etc, etc. I just want to be surprised. And sometimes when I'm not pleased with the list I have on the main page, I go to the loop. Yeah. Search bar, and then I just go to the categories. And well, I'm looking at the titles, the actors and everything, but not trailers. Sometimes I just close the page and open another platform. (Agathe)

As explained above, the effect to the respondent remains important as it is an incentive to keep opening the platform, she instead explains how she acts when not surprised or pleased by the recommendations on the platform. The interviewee depicts how important the surprise effect is to her eyes to convince and motivate to watch content which could lead to opening the competitor's platform.

Along with the 'Netflix prize', Bennett & Lanning (2006) explain how recommender systems have been consistently developing to provide the sharpest recommendations. In 2007 Netflix organized a contest where anonymous would present their work based on databases of user preferences and data that would help them create the best algorithms for the recommender system. Since then, Netflix has given the permission to use the dataset for non-commercial research purposes in order to keep improving its recommender system (Bennett & Lanning, 2006). These improvements could also indicate side effects like the lack of surprise effect as Netflix indirectly 'hides' content that will not be tailored to one's specific tastes and therefore removing the surprise effect of having to choose (Pariser, 2011). The filter bubble which represents ideas that conform with our beliefs reinforce the phenomenon where subscribers can't find content and not find that surprising spark anymore (Pariser, 2011).

#### 4.1.4. Frustrated choices

Relating to discrepancies of Netflix's personalization, interviewees expressed their frustration when it came to making choices and picking what to watch. Actually, 3 interviewees explained how recommendations and ads were frustrating their choices and that they would try not to listen to them.

##### **Ignoring recommendations**

First Esther, a respondent explained that ignoring recommendations was her go to when on her profile as Netflix has been recommending the same over and over again as they may be a good fit for her, although she is not that interested in them anymore:

But I have definitely felt like I get a lot of the same things pushed around like in my profile. And I mean, a bunch of these shows like they've been recommended to me so many times. And some of them I've never even clicked on. But I guess it's because they're a good fit with other stuff that I've watched before. (Esther)

On the other hand Melanie talks about recommendations post movie in order to keep watching more and says she will not even bother watching the recommendations:

When you finish a movie or even when you finish, let's say a whole TV show, they will recommend another one. That's kind of like what you just finished. [...]I won't. I won't play it. Unless I think it's. Yeah, no, I won't even bother. Yeah, it's annoying. (Melanie)

Both these quotes are interesting as they highlight how Netflix recommends new TV shows or movies to its subscribers, by picking a selection that fits a particular profile and repeat these options continually.

##### **Ads not influencing**

Secondly, a respondent argued that ads didn't influence her viewing consumption as she is free to make her own decisions about what and when to watch instead on being influenced on other platforms to switch to Netflix and watch some content:

So definitely when I see an ad on other social media platforms or elsewhere, I'm not. They're not going to push me to watch it. It's not going to influence me to watch it. Just because I saw an ad. I will go on by myself on Netflix, because I decided to watch Netflix, but because a friend told me about a TV show and, and stuff like this. (Melanie)

Approximately three of our interviewees explained their frustration with recommender systems as they chose to use the platform without trusting its recommendations and not letting ads influence their decision making. These interviewees demonstrate an unwillingness to succumb to ‘digital nudging’, something which Schneider, Weinmann & Brocke (2018) explain as how interface design guides user’s choices online. By presenting choices in different settings such as ads on social media platforms following you or digital tools such as ‘keep watching’, Netflix tries to push help in its customers' decision making without letting them notice the influence (Schneider, Weinmann & Brocke, 2018). Furthermore, interface designers take into consideration nudging when designing an interface or choosing an environment for its ads for example (Schneider, Weinmann & Brocke, 2018).

#### 4.2. Recommender system’s accuracy

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is ‘recommender system’s accuracy’. We previously stated that viewers had an ambivalence although most of our interviewees agreed with the fact that the recommender systems used by Netflix were quite precise. In addition recommender systems have become a tool for many domains of activity such as SVOD services make use of them. In this section the interviewees detailed their experiences with a tailored platform, expressed being grateful and impressed by the recommender system as well as engaged by tools such as thumbnails that changed their experience on the platform and convinced them to watch certain types of content.

##### 4.2.1. Experiencing a tailored platform

While exploring the recommender system’s accuracy during interviews, the personalization of the platform came up by the ten different interviewees more than once. Actually, users were asked about how they choose their content as well as their experience with Netflix’s recommendations. Subscribers came up with details from their experience stating that Netflix was good at understanding emotions and proposing adapted choices depending on moods or tastes. Another point that was told by eight out of ten interviewees was that personalization could save some time for users. Finally, they agreed that experiencing a tailored platform meant having personalized experiences.

### **Personalized experiences**

One of the interviewees, Melanie, explained the personalization behind the platform, saying that when entering the platform, she did not have to tell the platform what she didn’t want to see as it was removed from her catalogue on her main page:

Probably because of the personalized experience like they won't put it well I don't like horror movies so they will not put it in the catalogue. That is because they know from what I've seen



and what I haven't watched they know that I don't like horror movies, or they know that I like a certain genre. (Melanie)

This personalization can be explained by saving her habits and data from previous times on the platform and transforming them into recommendations for a personalized experience. This is highly appreciated by the interviewee who concludes a positive experience of personalized experiences on the platform.

### **Netflix understands emotions**

As mentioned earlier respondents agreed with the fact that Netflix understood their tastes, here two of the interviewees clarified that they felt like Netflix could understand their emotions in order to convince them to watch certain types of content by changing how the thumbnails look like. Lorenzo explains how he Netflix understands his emotions and how they accurately introduce him to shows or movies by doing so:

They know what I want to take off from the show, because as I was saying, I'm watching a show on my time off. So when I really just want to be myself with myself. So that means that they know what gets me going and to meet action. So for every show, and now I even understand why. Why I don't have a problem finding anything. You know, it's because those thumbnails really show me what I want. And I can really tell you that it's what it's like, they understand they even understand my emotions in a way, you know? (Lorenzo)

This quote explains the appreciation from the subscriber that is impressed at how Netflix personalizes the choices depending on the emotions he is experiencing.

### **Personalization saves time**

Finally, when asked about tailored platforms, one of the most valued options was the time saving of personalized services. As a matter of fact interviewees described that they were impressed by the little amount of time they would spend looking for a movie or a series when they were alone and when their Netflix was personalized enough:

I usually find something in the top four menus. I don't scroll down too much. I used to do it before when my Netflix was less personalized. So I would really look for something special. But nowadays it is a lot more personalized. Like in the in, I always find something in the first four menus. (Lorenzo)

As a motive to root for personalization, Lorenzo explained that Netflix saves time when it comes to the selection process and it seems to be highly appreciated.

According to Amat, Candrashekar, Jebara et al., (2018) Netflix's beginnings with personalization were focused on getting the good title in front of subscribers at the right moment. Although with time Netflix's personalized experience creates intuitive interfaces that offer a simple way for users to watch movies or television shows (Amat, Candrashekar, Jebara et al., 2018). Its personalization in Web Design creates an efficient website that strongly reduces the time spent searching for content (Amat, Candrashekar, Jebara et al., 2018). Categories and menus help organize and display the titles of the content and become recognizable. In addition to offering personalized experiences, Netflix has a moody web-design that gets into cinema mode and that convinces users to use the platform and watch certain types of content (Amat, Candrashekar, Jebara et al., 2018). Some more personalization aspects such as thumbnail personalization based on tastes creates a feeling of being understood by the platform. According to Schneider, Weinmann & Brocke (2018), personalization is smooth and seamless for user experience, creating once again 'digital nudging'.

#### 4.2.2. Grateful for recommender system

Looking back at the interviews, when asked about the advantages and the drawbacks of recommender systems, several interviewees showed appreciation for recommender systems and detailed the advantages that its personalization came with more than the disadvantages that they had. Almost eight out of ten interviewees were grateful for Netflix's recommender systems and the experience they were able to have compared to other platforms. Most interviewees agreed with the fact that they paid to be influenced and to entrust the platform.

#### **Advantages of personalization**

In addition, Melanie, like nine other participants, balanced the drawbacks and advantages of the personalization and found that Netflix simplified the experience and that they could turn into lazy modes on the platform as it could choose for them.

I see more. More advantage than disadvantage, because it's just as I said, it just makes it easier. And the experience makes it easier. And yes, when you're lazy, and you don't want to take hours and hours to find a movie that you know, is going to be good for you. It's easier, and, and a disadvantage, or a drawback could be honestly, I don't see any bad thing about it. Because they don't have, surely they have personal details, personal information, but it's not going to affect anything. Or anything bad. So, it's just a watching experience. And yeah, I think it's a good thing. (Melanie)

Here the interviewee reacts to how her experiences have been simplified thanks to personalization and that she would be willing to give as much information possible to improve it, to the point where she does not see any drawbacks in personalization of the platform.

According to Zhang, Yao, Sun et al., (2019), recommender systems are based on deep learning which allows for high volumes of information to be processed and to avoid information overload. Indeed by learning, recommender systems adapt and expand to new horizons by simplifying experiences and making them more accurate (Amatriain & Basilico, 2015). By using 'Root mean squared error (RSME)' as a recommender system evaluation metric, Netflix has been able to lead in the recommender system industry where every detail becomes recommendations on the platform, even 'ranking systems' are made personal, explaining the why behind interviewees being grateful for recommender systems (Amatriain & Basilico, 2015).

#### 4.2.3. Engaging thumbnails

While completing the interviews, participants were asked to show their screens in order to identify the different thumbnails Netflix proposed them depending on the content. By sharing my screen to compare the findings and images, ten out of the ten respondents were impressed by the accuracy of the thumbnails but mostly about how far personalization was taken by adapting thumbnails to each person's tastes or by how far a subscriber is in the series in order to incentivize to watch more.

#### **Personalized images appeal**

When looking at thumbnails one of the participants expressed being appealed to how thumbnails matched and appealed to her.

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I like the colours. The colour scheme, for instance, is very, very nice. And it's just like, you want to know, what are they looking at and why are they looking like stones or something. (Melanie)

The respondent mentioned the ambient created in the pictures was what attracted and led to clicking on it.

#### **Personalized thumbnails effectiveness**

Jessica a female participant said personalized thumbnails influenced how she would choose her content on Netflix:

Yeah, it's effective. And in a way, because you're, I mean for them, because you're going to click on it, and you're going to watch the show. You're going to see what it's about. I don't think it's a good thing. Yeah. (Jessica)

The previous quote shows the how the personalization of small items such as thumbnails can have an effect of your decision as it plays a role to convince you to watch certain shows or continue watching them by trying to match your tastes in terms of thumbnail pictures.

### **Thumbnails adapt to episode**

On top of that, a male respondent shared that the reason why thumbnails were that appealing was because they could adapt to the stages of the show or movie. In fact, as Netflix know how far someone is, they would put suspense and incentives to watch more in the thumbnails to make people click on them and watch:

I mean, first of all, I'm going to open the Maybe that's the main justification I would say, but I don't mean, pure hypothesis. (Pierre-Guillaume)

Pierre-Guillaume here explains how he usually looks for a show and what changes the thumbnails of that exact show whenever he decides to only watch an episode or the trailer but not to continue. By looking at how it adapts, the interviewee analyses the way Netflix's thumbnails adapt to each episode you're watching.

Tsao, Lou & Chen (2019) studied thumbnail image selection for Service video on demand platforms like Netflix. In their study they argue that there is an immense number of available thumbnails as each content present on the platform has many thumbnails to adapt to different people or tastes (Tsao, Lou & Chen, 2019). For them 'representativeness' acts as the main actor for the selection of the thumbnail image which would explain why they appeal to the subscribers (Tsao, Lou & Chen, 2019). On top of that, thumbnails have another function when shows or movies have been started by subscribers but not finished (Tsao, Lou & Chen, 2019). Netflix's recommender system will place engaging and intriguing pictures in order to convince subscribers to keep watching the content (Tsao, Lou & Chen, 2019). This technique is called 'two-stage method' and selects the different thumbnail images for movies or television shows (Tsao, Lou & Chen, 2019).

### 4.3. Mutual domestication

The third theme that came out from the 10 different interviews was mutual domestication between the platform and its users. Users were asked about the way the platform convinced them to watch content as well as how they shaped their tastes. First of all, participants highlighted that they did trust Netflix

with their data if it led to more personalization. Therefore, the interviewees in this study suggested that recommender systems shaped their consumer tastes by providing options based on ratings. But they also concluded that the platform hid options that they would not be keen on looking at. These techniques reinforced the fact that it shaped their consumption. They put forward that by using profiling Netflix did get their personas but that sometimes they were not as accurate.

#### 4.3.1. Shaping consumer tastes

Three of the respondents agreed that Netflix was shaping their consumer tastes by using different types of strategies, such as marketing strategies and persuasive strategies by using tools to convince them to click on certain types of content.

##### **Shaping consumer tastes**

Other than the fact that they adapt to their subscribers' tastes, Lorenzo a male respondent stated that the recommender systems kept him from seeing all the options available in the catalogue and may always be stuck in the loop which could be a problem if the subscriber wanted to change types of content or expand his genres:

And I am now so I think they have adapted to my viewing choices. So this is how it's personalized. But now I feel like I might be stuck with these choices. Because it is what they offer me. You know, like what I see on the front page. I don't have time to go look at the entire platform, I'm just going to think that that's what they are for me. So I do think that yes, I'm satisfied with the personalization. (Lorenzo)

The interviewee says that although personalization can be good it can also shape consumer tastes to the point where they may be stuck in a loop and shape their tastes.

##### **Netflix's persuasive strategy**

The strategy used by the platform includes using tools such as 'skip the trailer', 'skip the resume', 'watch more', 'watch similar content' that incentivize binge watching. These techniques are highly appreciated by subscribers that often feel lazy to find more content or to watch trailers that are never changing therefore making their experience on the platform easier and user-friendly:

It's, it's the way it works. You want to just buy the story. The events that happened in the end, we just want to watch next. What's next? Then on the screen, you are just reminded of something that is written in the next episode. They just switched to the trailer. The trailer, skip the trailer, and then you go next. So you just have to push one button and you say, oh, okay, well. (Agathe)

Talking about the tools available on the platform, Agathe explains the practicality of the tools and how persuasive they are for binge watching.

### **Marketing for views**

Finally, another respondent asserted that Netflix was using marketing strategies called ‘push marketing’ as well as ‘pull marketing’ to create a phenomenon around rankings and top 10s and to create a buzz around their original content for example to convince to watch new content make more views:

My theory is that the way they work is they do a lot of push marketing. They will advertise a show that it's number one, when it's not, but they can do it, because it's their platform, then because everybody sees them, number one everybody will watch it, and then everybody will speak about it. And then it becomes number one. (Pierre-Guillaume)

The point of view of this respondent is less expected as we can clearly see that Pierre-Guillaume tries to understand the structure behind Netflix’s top 10 lists and how it is able to use marketing to generate views and bring popularity to its own shows.

As maintained by Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo et al. (2019), mutual domestication of users play a role in recommender systems on Netflix. This phenomenon occurs when personalization relationships between users and its platforms occur (Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo et al., 2019). By reviewing the way algorithms and culture coexist by using the information that is given by subscribers and using them to create more views and increase time spent on the platform (Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo et al., 2019). Therefore marketing and convincing tools are used as a conversion technique, but this information was previously given by the subscribers which could sometimes create a personalization paradox but that is most of the time welcomed by users as they usually insist on having more personalization available which is a concern for the interviewees (Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo et al., 2019).

#### 4.3.2. Personalization hiding options

Being ‘stuck in a loop’ is what personalization could bring according to three different respondents, although it does not seem to be very disturbing to them:

### **Personalization restricting options**

In the opinion of three respondents specifically, Netflix is hiding content options from their users due to recommender systems. Respondents may have thought this as they do not have directly access to the entire catalogue on their homepage and may only see the same recommendations over again.

Lorenzo argues that by having only tailored choices he is restricted from opening up to new choices that are available on the platform such as new genres but is happy with it as personalization still outreaches everything:

I do like action movies and he does recommend most of those kinds of shows and movies. But there's things that I will watch because I see the thumbnail, because I see the clip. And now that I don't see those clips, who knows, there may be a reason why. I'll never watch other shows, if I don't hear about it, if I don't watch it with someone else. I do think that I'm not seeing. I actually know that I don't have the whole catalogue. (Lorenzo)

As explained above, Lorenzo feels like he does not have access to everything, he assumes he does not have the entire catalogue. Lorenzo's opinion is widespread across three interviewees.

With regard to the different effects of digital nudging and recommender systems, Jesse & Jannach (2021) analyse mechanisms of this relationship such as 'inherent mechanism'. These mechanism show an Increase the salience of information: Hiding information are the results of filters and ranks options available for consumers on platforms with recommender systems like Netflix (Jesse & Jannach, 2021). Nudging mechanisms increase the 'salience of attributes' as well as 'change ease and convenience' (Jesse & Jannach, 2021). Although within the 'inherent nudging mechanisms', 'hiding' is present (Jesse & Jannach, 2021). As a matter of fact, when recommended on SVOD platforms, various options are often presented to viewers with attractive visual items, as a result, there is an emphasis that is put on movies or series that fit with viewers preferences (Jesse & Jannach, 2021). Leading to less emphasis on other options and therefore hiding of content can sometimes lead to 'partition of options and categories' (Jesse & Jannach, 2021).

#### 4.3.3. Mixed accuracy persona

When subscribing on Netflix each account can have up to five different accounts. Participants were asked whether the personas they 'created' or were created on their account represented them. They were also asked to understand how Netflix perceives them and how accurate they are. According to the 10 out of the respondents, personas are good as much as they are bad. As a matter of fact, they usually fit although they seem to lack in sophistication.

#### **Netflix not sophisticated**

As maintained by one of the respondents believes Netflix knows how to interact with her and give her content that she could watch although she pleads the 'easy watcher' card and argues that Netflix doesn't know exactly her taste or her persona:

You just try to find the right thing that will make them buy your product. Yeah. I don't think that Netflix is so sophisticated that they will just find a way to please meet. (Agathe)

The respondent explains that she thinks Netflix knows her tastes but does not know her, which is why they will never be able to please her completely.

### **Persona good and bad**

As stated by Lorenzo, a respondent that analyses his persona, Netflix analysed very well who he is and what his tastes are including his daily habits as the platform knows when to propose relaxing content when needed after work or studying. But sometimes the respondent feels like it does not reflect his personality, especially when opening Netflix when he usually doesn't:

This is very well done. In a sense, it's actually making me think about myself. And also it probably shows how well done it is. I would say that, okay, the part where they get it right is because as I told you, I watched Netflix to relax after work after studying. What I think about his actions and sports, and that's what he offers me so because I watched Netflix in you know, in that part of my day, then he does reflect my personality. You know, for that part of my day, then obviously there's times where I want to watch something else. And I totally understand that. It may not get it, but usually it's pretty good at capturing whatever. (Lorenzo)

The respondent Lorenzo states that the personas analysed by Netflix can be as good as they can be bad, in a sense that Netflix will identify some patterns and reproduce them in the recommendations but may not be able to learn everything from the subscribers as it is not giving him everything.

Pajkovic (2021) analyses Netflix's recommender system's operational logics by analysing taste and decision making. The author maintains that the concept of 'taste personas' best describes Netflix's personas. As a matter of fact he looked at how each person's tastes were personalized accurately and that viewers often did not have to pass the third row of propositions in order to find content that fit. Pajkovic (2021) also argues that 'feedback loops' play a role in reinforcing each individual's preferences which shows that accuracy in the recommendations increases with the engagement of each subscriber. This could explain why some of them feel like they do not have as sophisticated platforms as 7 out of the 10 users explained that they did not rate movies or series on Netflix. Pajkovic (2021) concludes by stating that Netflix's Recommender system is not as relevant for all its users therefore personas can be more or less accurate.

#### 4.3.4. Trusting data collection



Data collection is part of Netflix's strategy for personalization. Respondents were asked about their trust levels of Netflix's data collection. All ten of them agreed that if it meant more personalization they would trust the platform as all platforms do acquire their information.

### **Data helping personalization**

One of the respondents agreed that data helped him personalize his account and even argued that he would improve his data if creating a new Netflix account as he considers it as added value:

Well, now that I see how accurate it is? Yes. Sometimes he would maybe because I opened up my Netflix a while ago when maybe I didn't know that much about personalization. So maybe if I knew about it now, when I opened a new account, I would maybe be careful about what I put so that he doesn't get me wrong, you know? So I'm not shocked from the beginning in a totally different way because I do that I am not. And now that I see how precise it is. I understand that even just by giving you a little info on you know by recurrently watching, watching they'll get what you want. I could even think that maybe they may know when I started some shows or some movies, and then when do I stop watching them? Maybe because that wasn't what I was looking for. And that's how they may know what I like as well.  
(Lorenzo)

This quote shows how accurate data collection can be at personalization, especially when the subscribers are aware of it as they can make sure to respond correctly as much as possible and not say wrong things to not personal data.

### **Data policy trust**

Esther one of the interview participants even explained that she was conscious about the fact that data was being collected but does trust the platform with her data:

But it's interesting, because on Netflix, I kind of feel like it's a, like, I am very conscious that my data is being collected, but I'm not really bothered by it - And I think it would be one of The least harmful platforms on which my data can be collected. (Esther)

There is a pattern that comes back here in Esther's interview, which is the fact that the interviewee does not mind giving her information to a subscription-based platform as there will be no use to send publicity on platforms to buy products.

In the opinion of Pajkovic (2021), Netflix works with a monthly subscription base which completely changes its relationship to data collection compared to other platforms which could explain the trust

of its subscribers. Indeed their personalized catalogues and recommender systems are the only ways for them to 'attract' and 'retain' users on their platform therefore users believe that their information is collected for the purpose of improving their personalized experience (Pajkovic, 2021).

#### 4.3.5. Rating reinforcing personalization

When asked about their rating experience on Netflix, our 10 different participants agreed on the fact that they would not automatically rate what they watch, some of them have never even rated and would not know how to do it. Although they guessed the effects of ratings or are against the effects of ratings.

#### **Rating precisising personalization**

According to Lorenzo, ratings could precise personalization as they would know even more what subscribers are looking for:

But I do think that let's say I have a lot of action and I also like sports, more action in sports. So, I'm watching Formula One. I'm watching a few football documentaries. So, I feel like maybe if I put a thumb, put some thumbs up on those more of those are going to show up, then actually now, so I think it would be, you would bring more precision to my personalization. (Lorenzo)

Although he does not do it, Lorenzo thinks that by giving information to Netflix about what he likes and rating, his personalization will improve.

#### **Rating too personalized**

Although another respondent said he was against rating as it would become too personalized. He insists on how Netflix's puts it in evidence and makes it easy but no one uses it in comparison to other streaming platforms like Spotify for example:

Yeah. I mean, that I think that's the thing they want people to do. So it's probably expected they would put in evidence. So if you wanted to rate it would not be hard to rate? No, it's basically the thumbs up and the thumb down. (Pierre-Guillaume)

On the other hand, compared to Lorenzo in the previous paragraph, Pierre-Guillaume thinks that rating will keep you in a loop.

According to Amatiain (2013) ratings is one of the main components of recommender systems on top of what members play, research, or browse on their Netflix accounts. Amatriain,

Pujol & Oliver (2009) evaluated user ratings in recommender systems and concluded that most recommender systems relied on ratings but that users were not as consistent in giving feedback. This assumption can be seen with our respondents that do not have the habit of rating and that fear may be too much personalization for some of them. Amatriain, Pujol & Oliver (2009) even question the power of ratings due to the inconsistency and struggle in identifying 'noise in user ratings'.

#### 4.4. Limitations of recommender systems

Recommender systems according to four of the ten respondents, face limitations regarding an excess of recommendations, limitations of the tools in the interface. As well as some addictive viewing habits which was stated by ten out of the ten interviewees.

##### 4.4.1. Recommender excess

Algorithms need limits as it is feared they will know too much about you and that personalization will exceed its needs. This aspect can be found through excess of personalization.

#### **Excess of personalization**

The respondent explains that the excess of personalization comes from the fact that algorithms learn on their own by analyzing how we behave on the platform that we look for and browse. Therefore slowly creating a personalized loop that is almost impossible to get rid of as recommendations will keep adding on and there will be no ways to explore:

But the real question is, to what extent more personalization is good as well. I think it's good, it's good to have a certain level of tailoring. But it's also good to not have it. So if I started writing, because of a five star rating, things that I don't like, I will only have things that I think I like that will be proposed as maybe the negative aspect of the algorithm that will be stuck in a loop. And then you only see what you think you like, and you don't explore, and then you become you become stupid, by the way of seeing it, you know, but what I mean is, then you have less to discover things that are different from your point of view.

(Pierre-Guillaume)

Here, Pierre-Guillaume explains that there can be an excess of personalization with Netflix that can lead to being too passive and discover way less. Therefore, seen as a mutual relationship, it is clear to him that by giving more information to the platform links responding to the rating tools, the excess of personalization increases.

As a content streaming platform, Netflix has a quantity of data that gives the platform advantages compared to traditional broadcasts (Nathalie, 2017). There is the urge between SVOD platforms to create the most personalized experience for its subscribers, although some subscribers may find it too much. Firstly, an excess in personalization results in the ‘rabbit hole problem’ described by Nathalie (2017) that creates an overload of content and subscribers end up getting lost or stuck with the same content all over again.

#### 4.4.2. Perceived limitations of tools

During the course of the interviews Netflix users were asked to identify the tools that helped their time on the platform and that increased or decreased their viewing time consumption. From this came several different themes that showed that interviewees perceived limitations of certain tools such as doubting the ratings and not rating, finding ineffectiveness in the thumbnails, as well as a subscriber even being dissatisfied with the platform’s menu.

##### **Viewers not rating**

When it comes to rating, Esther, a female interviewee mentioned how she was not used to rating as the objective behind Netflix’s ratings was not clear to her, whether it was for her own personalization or just for ratings in general and creating top 10s:

I don't even know, I know I've clicked like on the thumbs up thing or like do I like this a couple times, but I'm not sure whether this feeds into ratings or whether it's like fits into more my own recommendations. (Esther)

As Esther notes, the platform is not very clear on the way the ratings and therefore the algorithms of the platform works, making its subscribers doubt of its effects and not participating in the ratings.

##### **Doubting of ratings**

When asked about the way he would rate, one of the respondents agreed with the fact that he was not used to rating like the previous respondent but emphasized on the reason behind by stating that he doubted of the effects of ratings as he feared they would remove some options:

I do trust them in a way because I wouldn't be now that I know about the rating, I would, but then the reason why I would maybe not trust them. It's because I like judging on my own. So I like doing my own thing, I want to make my own choices. I like spending maybe five minutes also sometimes watching thumbnails, to really choose what I want. Because who knows, I may not want to watch this now. But I may want to watch it next month. So that's what I would say. (Lorenzo)

On the other hand, Lorenzo says that he trusts Netflix for certain aspects of the rating but doesn't with others especially the part where he will be stuck and his options will be his generic choices.

### **Thumbnail's ineffectiveness**

Surprisingly, Pierre-Guillaume, a respondent argued about the fact that thumbnails had no effect on his long-term viewing decisions as he may be inclined to click on the pictures and start watching but that because they were not always accurate, Netflix would not always win:

I don't know if I would watch it. But I will at least I mean, I would, I would, I will launch it for the first five minutes. And then it is there, watch it, if I have time. And if it fits into my mindset, where like, it's not that easy. Because, for example, older shows on the right, like Final space, Tokyo Ghoul, etc. These shows are just clicking to watch them after one minute quit it, but it stays there. It's not because you click on it that you have won.

(Pierre-Guillaume)

As Pierre-Guillaume noted, thumbnails are not effective to everyone. Here he explains that the first step is to click on the thumbnails to start watching but that if thumbnails focus on attracting you they may not focus on the most important part the 'conversion' part where you would stay and watch it.

#### 4.4.3. Addictive viewing habits

As maintained by our 10 different respondents, Netflix tends to lead to what is called binge watching. They included that Netflix kept its consumers in a consumption bubble that was tailored to watch more and that most subscribers had the same addictive viewing habits.

### **Binge watching**

Most of the respondents described 'binge watching' as their way of being on Netflix at least a few days a week, especially during the weekends or during times that are meant to be relaxing:

I think that's definitely binge watching. But yeah, that's what it is. This way it is then the kind of watching and then also watch sports on streaming platforms, such as a dazn, for example. So that's more whenever there's a game. I will, I will, take the time to watch it. So it's kind of different than when I'm on Netflix or a platform like that, where it's more like okay, I'm just gonna relax now. I don't watch that. So I do enjoy it with relaxation. (Lorenzo)

The concept explained by Lorenzo determines how both Netflix and the viewer shape their relationship with the platform. Therefore by using all the tools offered binge watching is what

happens to subscribers but by looking to be passive and to enjoy Netflix choosing for you, mutual domestication is at the heart of the conversation.

### **Consumption bubble**

One of the respondents included that Netflix's recommender system kept its consumers in a consumption bubble that is hard to leave and to break:

I don't think I ever considered how much I was in the bubble of my own consumption.  
(Esther)

Esther highlights the concept of 'consumption bubble' which shows how consumers can find themselves trapped in their own world within Netflix as there is little information about what other Netflix accounts look like, therefore it is easy to be in its own little world and not get information about what is happening elsewhere and therefore missing out on a lot of content.

In his Introduction to binge-watching study, Jenner (2018) defines the concept as 'a practice where several episodes of a serialised programme are watched on a medium other than linear television, has become the viewing mode of Netflix'. Jenner (2018) argues that Netflix has shaped the way the content is supposed to be watched by releasing entire series at once with entire seasons on top of tools that make the experience easier and effortless. Jenner (2018) also insists on the fact that stating binge-watching as excessive can be hard as it has become the new norm and a viewing habit.

## 5. Conclusion

By understanding the complexity of Netflix's Personalization system and looking at previous studies in-depth, we can understand the customer's selection process and have an overview on what the brands want and how the consumers perceive it. Furthermore, this shaped the interview questions as it geared the interviewee towards certain themes of interest and explained concepts more in depth to seek to understand if Netflix really knows their subscribers individually and succeeded in representing them in regard to their algorithm. The four main points found in the analysis suggest that viewers are attached and satisfied about the platform and that the way it shapes their viewing consumption can be referred as mutual as SVOD platforms provide the necessary tools for an easy and personalized experience while most customers provide data without constraints, therefore leading to the 'mutual domestication' between the user and the platform.

### 5.1. Answer to the research question

A general understanding how recommender systems functioned as well as the analysis of our data helped understand the way subscribers and Netflix interact. One of the main findings was that Netflix creates passive subscribers that are appreciative of the way they engage with the platform. This raises another question which is the understanding of how we consume the medias nowadays.

By understanding how people take part and engage with Netflix, we were able to understand what place they are creating when viewers engage this way. Therefore, the relationship is a relationship that involves passive viewers that pay for their monthly subscription and enjoy the personalization they are offered. This led to understanding the autonomy of people with their own interests and tastes where only a small percentage of people were active on the platform. It also raises the question of how people used to engage before SVOD platforms were on the market and how they engage now. Are we leaning towards a society where basic decision making will be given to a platform? Where entertainment will be personalized to the point that we will not need to search for content anymore? This always refers to the kind of people we would like to become.

Netflix's role is to understand how it could improve personalization without trapping its customers into a filter bubble and encouraging them to have access to more recommendations.

### 5.2. Limitations to the study

In this section we will be looking at the limitations of the study and the challenges that were faced during the study. One of the main challenges of this study was the lack of information on consumer perception. The theoretical framework came obviously when it came to practicalities about recommender systems, algorithms or even personalization tools. But when it came to understanding whether consumers tastes were shaped and finding concepts that would describe it, that became much more complicated. Another limitation of this study was during the data analysis process. Some of the respondents were good enough to engage in depth and some of them did not supply as many

information as wanted which is something that could be improved for further research, by increasing the number of interviewees to have more material for data analysis.

### 5.3. Further research

This research has led to findings about how individual tastes are affected by Netflix's recommender systems and the way it shapes their everyday consumption. To take this research further it would be of interest to examine how Netflix recommender systems affect groups. An interesting target group would be either mononuclear family that could include up to 5 members and including the 2 parents. This could be interesting as it could investigate different age groups at the same time and try to understand how an algorithm could work for groups watching Netflix together as it is one of the main disappointments that subscribers explained during the interview process. Another target group that would be interested to look at would be a group of friends, presenting 20–30-year-olds. These findings could generate questions around how people really use the platform and how it affects their tastes or habits when watching in groups. Another interesting research method would be to look at different methods and maybe use mixed methods as quantitative analysis could bring details such as, how many times they open their Netflix account each week, what movies they watch and focusing on deeper questions during the in-depth interviews. Further research could also investigate would be to look at the relationship between past services like TV channels, or DVD stores and the way recommendations and ratings shaped viewing consumption and compare them to Netflix's recommender systems and their relationships to their subscribers, although this research has enough material to build on.



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## **Appendix A**

### **CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH**

#### **FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:**

Cannella Gerber, 581448cg@eur.nl, +33 603 210 010

Calle Panorama, E86C, Malaga 29018, Spain

#### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research about Netflix's personalization and recommender systems. The purpose of the study is to understand how Netflix's viewers think personalization done by the platform through different means such as recommender systems and algorithm, shape the way they watch platform.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be. In general terms, the questions of the interview will be related to your viewing habits and general use of Netflix, good experiences with personalization and bad experiences with personalization.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape or video recorder for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

#### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information such as gender, date, age or not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by pseudonym.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take 45 minutes to an hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

### **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— [contact person in the dept., faculty or university]

### **SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus,

you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi structured Interview guide**

This guide has been designed for in-depth interviews taking place in May 2021, for the purpose of a Master thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

#### **Introduction**

“Good morning/afternoon, my name is Cannella, I am a student at Erasmus University Rotterdam and I am currently finishing my master’s in Media and business which is why I will be conducting this interview. I am specifically interested in Netflix’s recommender systems. “

“If you agree, I will record this conversation so that I can get all the details needed about our conversation in order to analyse everything at the end. I of course assure you that our exchange will remain strictly confidential. The information will be used but your name will not be displayed. If you agree with all the information stated I invite you to sign the consent for that I have just sent you by email.”

**\*\*Ice breaker\*\***

#### **Main questions & subquestions**

1. Looking at entertainment, how do these fit in your daily routine?

How much time do you spend on social media platforms such as Tik-tok or Instagram each week?

How much time do you spend on streaming services?

Which streaming services do you use ?

How much time do you spend on Netflix each week or each day?

How do you think Netflix encourages you to watch more or less shows or movies during the day?

2. When you go on Netflix, how do you decide what to watch?

How do you feel they could improve the options you are given on your Netflix?

How are the menus on Netflix a part of this?

Could you please share your screen and show me your Netflix homepage?

Do you usually contribute to Netflix ratings? If so how and when do you do it ?

Do you feel like after rating movies or series, the movies proposed to you are more relevant?

How much of Netflix’s full catalog do you think you usually see when you log on ?

How do you feel this it limited or restricted in some way based on you profile



3. Based on your Netflix profile, what categories do you think Netflix identifies you as being within

What kind of person do they think you are?

Diff thumbnails

Does your Netflix represent you?

Do you feel secure giving your information to Netflix?

4. How do you feel about Netflix's different platforms such as app, TV, and laptop view?

Have you ever looked at your friend's homepage and wondered why the images were not the same? If so, why do you think that is?

5. How do you think Netflix convinces you in watching certain types of content?

6. What are the advantages or drawbacks to personalization?

### **Conclusion**

"Thank you very much \*name\* for taking part in this conversation and helping my research out! I hope everything was clear to you."

"Is there anything else I should know about our discussion or anything that you would like to add? "

"Goodbye and have a nice day/evening"

### **Materials and supplies for interviews**

- Consent forms by e-mail
- Record device
- Notebook for note taking
- Semi structured interview guide

## Appendix C –Coding Frame

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
<b>Viewer's ambivalence</b>	Enjoying passive watching	Skipping the trailer Convince to watch more Letting Netflix choose Autoplay making decisions Continue watching efficiency Following Netflix's recommendations Influence of Autoplay Influential Top 10 is Looking for influence Netflix influencing choices
	Personalization as boring	Difficulties of group personalization Personalization is not necessary Improving personalization No surprise effects Pick movie before opening platform
	Recommender system discrepancies	Difficulties of group personalization Personalization is not necessary Recommendations as a group hard to find
	Frustrated choices	Ignoring recommendation Ads not influencing Neglecting ratings Not following recommendations unsubscribing from ads
<b>Recommender system's accuracy</b>	Experiencing a tailored platform	Netflix Adapting services Netflix understands emotions Personalization saves time Personalized experiences Adapting services to schedule Comfort zone Finding movies scrolling Netflix Loyalty Personalized trailers Platform accessibility Satisfied with personalization Selection is personalized Series time adapted
	Grateful for recommender system	Good recommender system Grateful for taylorization Amazed by personalisation Advantages of personalization
	Impressive recommender system	Accuracy of algorithm Accuracy of thumbnails Algorithms on point Improved algorithm Right amount of recommendations Spot on algorithm Relevant recommendations
	Engaging thumbnails	Mood oriented visuals Personalized images appeal Personalized thumbnails effectiveness Thumbnails adapt to episode

		Thumbnails influence choice
<b>Mutual domestication</b>	Shaping consumer tastes	Tailoring consumer choices Marketing for views Netflix's persuasive strategy Shaping consumer tastes Marketing strategies Push marketing and algorithms Tailoring consumer recommendations Taylorization of choices Taylorized homepage
	Personalization hiding options	Personalization as restricting Personalization restricting options Personalization restricts choices Personalization traps in tastes
	Mixed accuracy persona	Identifying people well Mixed accuracy persona Netflix creating personas Netflix doesn't know us Netflix not sophisticated Persona persona good and bad Persona nor good nor bad
	Trust in data collection	Data helping personalization Data policy trust Netflix selling data Personal data collection Trusting data collection
	Rating reinforces personalization	Rating precising personalization Rating reinforces personalization Rating shows Rating too personalized
<b>Limitations of recommender systems</b>	Recommender excess	Algorithms need limits Algorithms restricting options Excess of taylorization Excessive personalization
	Perceived limitations of tools	Doubling of ratings Doubling ratings Thumbnails ineffectiveness Viewers not rating Menu dissatisfaction Doubling ratings effect Menu's search limitation Not rating Netflix Recommendations not always right Scrolling as search tool Thumbnails not representative Unconvincing personalized Thumbnails Useless menus
	Addictive viewing habits	Binge watching Consumption bubble Going beyond algorithm Netflix's addictive loop Taylored to watch more Viewing habits

