

The Psychology of Subscription Models: Exploring Consumer Retention and Value Perception in the Digital Economy

Dr.S.Dhivya¹, Zamarrud Ansari ², Akansh Garg³, Dr .Balasaheb Kalhapure⁴, Dr. Babasaheb⁵, Dr.Sapna Sharma⁶, Dr. Madhuri Shah⁷

¹Designation: Assistant Professor Department: Commerce Institute: SRM Institute of science and Technology District: chennai City: chennai State: Tamil Nadu

Email id: dhivyas1@srmist.edu.in

²Designation: Associate Professor Department: MBA Institute: Sinhgad Institute of Business Administration and Research District: Pune City: Pune State: Maharashtra

Email ID : - zamarrud25@gmail.com

³Director Array Research Pvt Ltd

⁴Designation: Associate Professor.Department: Commerce Institute:

⁵Ambedkar College Aundh , Pune.-411067.District: Pune City: Pune.State:Maharashtra

Email ID : kalhapurebb71@gamil.com

⁶Librarian/ asst. prof. IPS Academy ,DAVV Indore

Email ID : sappu.sharma@rediffmail.com

⁷Assistant Professor,Management department IPS Academy, DAVV Indore

Email ID : shahmadhiri79@gmail.com

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KEYWORDS

Subscription psychology, customer retention, perceived value, digital economy, behavioral inertia, churn management, consumer decision-making, SaaS, loss aversion.

ABSTRACT

The subscription economy has redesigned the configuration of consumer markets in the realm of digital economy, turning the art of revenue creation and value perception, as well as customer retention, upside down. This paper explores psychological groundwork through which individuals subscribe to these services, including perceived value, loss aversion, commitment and behavioral inertia. The research study uses mixed-method research tools, i.e., behavioral survey, user analytics, and qualitative interviews within streaming, SaaS, and e-commerce sites to discover important cognitive triggers that determine long-term subscription choices. It can be seen that the customers display a high inclination towards relating scheduled pay and convenience, as well as exclusivity, though they are more susceptible to value decrease. The analysis also examines how customization, transparency of prices and trial onboarding can lessen churning. The findings are placed in digital ecosystems of Spotify, Netflix, and Amazon Prime. It is also implications to the designers of platforms, marketers and policymakers who seek to harness the same value ethically and thus maintain the autonomy of consumers..

1. INTRODUCTION

The creation of the digital economy means that consumers use products and services in a radically different way, as it leads to the emergence of a new paradigm: a subscription-based economy. The subscription model, which assumes that people pay regular subscriptions in exchange for access to a service or product, has gone mainstream in recent years and covers everything between musical and video streaming services through providers like Spotify and Netflix to software platforms, including Adobe Creative Cloud and Microsoft 365. The main difference between this model and the traditional one-time purchases is that it is recurring, a relationship between the consumers and a service provider based on human commitment is reached. It is not only an economic shift, but it is also psychological in nature. The possible reasons that.



determined consumers subscribe or remain as subscribers or choose to cancel their subscriptions demand an examination of the motivational frameworks of the explanations. The most important concept under subscription psychology is that of the perceived value, which is the mental determination of the customer on whether the service being spent on is worth the amount that is paid repeatedly. Compared to conventional buying where a buyer appraises the decision at a particular moment, subscription models need periodical justifications of effectiveness. Digital platforms will thus have to constantly strengthen the value proposition to fend off cancellations or churn. It has been found that consumers consider not only the utility benefits (e.g., quality of content, affordability of services) but the emotional pleasures (e.g., customised experience, development of habits), in determining whether to continue the subscription or not. These however are not constant, and they change whenever the use pattern of the consumer and external environments changes [1]. Loss aversion is one of the strongest psychological mechanisms of subscription behavior as it is a principle of the prospect theory. This is the tendency by individuals to have a strong aversion when it comes to losses as compared to obtaining an equal amount of any gain. With respect to subscriptions, the ways in which consumer behaviour extend beyond the rational includes the tendency of paying the subscription to a service despite the reduction in usage in order to prevent the illusionary loss of access, benefits or status. Behavioral lock-in increases this inertia further by creating design features that increase the cost of cancellation either perceptually or literally. Such effects can be played over in terms of personal playlists in Spotify or Netflix viewing history that develops a digital environment that is challenging to leave. This kind of commitment is more emotional than rational and the users feel a discontinuation of their lifestyle or even identity [2]. In addition, consumer inertia is driven by the fact that many digital subscriptions are set and forget. Digital subscriptions as opposed to physical goods come with little interaction as most of them are automated in terms of billing such that the process of acquiring it again like physical goods require a conscious re-engagement. This brings in psychological distance between the transaction leading to a lower salience and the postponement of active decision-making. Although this helps the service providers by creating better customer lifetime value (CLV), this also is seen as unethical in terms of transparency and consent. It was demonstrated in many researches that customers do not realize total expenses, and they tend to stay with a subscription to the service they do not use many times at all because of conveniences or forgetfulness [3]. Trial-based onboarding and freemium also have a close relationship to subscription model success, as they reduce the psychological barrier to entry. The platforms provide an entry engagement point to the users by offering them free trial or trial without cost. The option of endowment effect will emerge once users started to use the service in their life, as it is well-known that people tend to attach more value to objects that belong to them. It is not a mere transaction in which someone shifts to a paid experience, but a shift that is psychological in that the consumer once again defines the product in-terms of their identity or daily working process [4]. It is however facing a new threat called subscription fatigue. Adoption of many subscriptions by consumers leads to cognitive load of subscription management. The increasing number of users is disappointed at disorganized dispensation invoices, duplication of content and ambiguous cancellation mechanisms. This is the manifestation of the paradox of choice when too many available choices result in upset feelings and lack of engagement. To reverse this trend, firms are testing bundling tactics where many services are combined within the same subscription (e.g., Amazon Prime, Apple One), making the process of consumer choice much easier due to the greater apparent value of this type of subscription [5]. Against this backdrop, this research aims at examining psychological motivators and barriers to subscription participation, especially, retention behaviour and perceived value. Relying on interdisciplinary theories connected with behavioral economics, consumer psychology, science of marketing, the paper discusses the influence of digital platforms on cognitive and emotional decision-making processes. It peruses case studies in the field of entertainment, software, and e-commerce and studies the effects of design characteristics, pricing strategies, and user experience on consumer behaviour in the long run. The research might come up with actionable information that can be used by designers of the platforms and digital marketers along with policy regulators since it uses a mixed-methods approach to behavioral surveys, digital analytics, and interviews of the users. Particular care is taken with vulnerable customer segments of digital natives and low-income subscribers who are potentially more vulnerable to the pernicious effects of the expense and influence design of automated subscriptions. The end vision will be to have a more open, ethical, user-focused digital economy wherein consumers are not exploited but driven by subscription.

2. RELEATED WORKS

The subscription economy is the topic of many studies over the recent past, particularly in the context of its effects on the consumer and the profitability of the firms. Indeed, as pointed out by Tien et al., the emerging concept of transitioning to access has transformed value delivery models in digital markets [1]. Unlike one off purchases, subscription frameworks focus on longevity and lasting customer relationships, which may be monetized via the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) metrics [2]. A study conducted by Wirtz et al. found that among the benefits of introducing recurring payments schemes, the most significant are the capacity to generate consistent revenue as well as serve as psychological reminders that refashion the frame of expectations of consumers over time [3]. Simultaneously, research on behavioral economics has also associated such anticipations with anchor effects and frame biases whereby opening price in addition to adverts strongly affects the perceived value [4]. Another issue that is important to subscription model sustainability is consumer retention. The churn rate is a new emerging crucial customer satisfaction indicator and loyalty indicator. Researchers Kumar and Reinartz describe that in addition to quality, retention depends on the affective commitment and trust toward the provider of service [5]. Within the digital environment, features that help to ensure stickiness are the use of dashboards of users, reminders, and personalized suggestions [6]. Likewise, a recent, longitudinal study by Cleghorn et al. indicates that emotionally resonant content (e.g.



playlists algorithmically selected) could indeed lead to a significant increase in user loyalty on streaming services [7]. The principle of real and perceived switching costs has also been noted by Shen and Ball as another psychological obstacle that minimizes occurrence of churn in the presence of alternatives [8]. The loss aversion and inertia studies have drawn interest in the psychological part of subscriptions. Studies based on the prospect theory like that by Kahneman and Tversky also confirm that consumers are more likely to be driven away by losses when compared to the prospect of gain therefore, the risk of losing access creates a powerful retention lever [9]. Digital habits represent this theory since consumers tend to keep paying a subscription to a little used service because they do not want to lose their progress or data or status, which Wu and Tsai call their digital assets [10]. Endowment effect, which is explained in Morewedge et al., is one more factor explaining jury over-valuation of services, which are already part of their lives, even when the objective utility is not high [11]. These results highlight how a lot of cognitive bias plays in keeping customers continued participating in subscription models. The other leading stream of literature is that of valuation and freemium models. Osterwalder and Pigneur have covered freemium services, where a basic product is provided without charge, and higher-value features are charged premium prices, in the SaaS and mobile apps context [12]. According to their research, conversion rates are influenced by early onboarding experience as well as the time when the paywall is applied. Additionally, a study conducted by Lee and Choi showed that consumers regard a transition to a paid-access model as an indicator of greater legitimacy and individualization [13]. This is in line with works by Sahni et al. which show that non-binding pricing and clear billing contributes to higher levels of user trust and reduced rate of cancellation [14]. Consumers also tend to believe that using bundled subscriptions is more convenient and aids to avoid decision fatigue, which is also mentioned in recent studies by Grewal et al. [15]. However, subscription models do possess some challenges as is the case of what can be referred to as subscription fatigue; a situation where there is an overload of consumer capacity to handle numerous services running simultaneously. Other researches observe that when the active subscription count increases people no longer feel satisfied that they belong in the satisfaction level because they feel stretch in money and there is less utility in each service delivered [13], [15]. Premised on opaque cancellation policies and auto-renewal scam rates, this exhaustion calls for ethical UX design (except that any kind of control falls into regulation). Among potential solutions proposed by researchers are so-called subscription dashboards, which turn transparency of subscriptions into real-time insights and provide an unambiguous way out [12], [14]. Therefore, the scaling advantages of subscription models can be only achieved when psychological obstacles are minimized, and the person-based relations are entailed. Overall, literature emphasizes the significance of a subtle psychology and behavioral conceptualization of psychological and behavioral drivers of subscription-based consumer behavior. Current approaches combine behavioral economic ideas, customer relationship management (CRM) elements, as well as UX design concepts, but need additional empirical evaluation in various industries (e.g., e-learning, health tech, and digital publishing, etc.). This paper is an extension of these works because it uses a mixture of methods to study the interaction between psychological processes involving psychological inertia, perceived value, and loss aversion with platform design and pricing processes in determining consumer retention.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study follows a **mixed-method design**, integrating quantitative behavioral analysis and qualitative interviews to assess consumer psychology behind subscription decisions. A sequential exploratory strategy was adopted to first capture user sentiments and retention behaviors through surveys, followed by in-depth interviews to unpack emotional and cognitive triggers. The integration of psychometric scales, churn data, and user feedback offers a multi-dimensional view of consumer behavior [16].

3.2 Sample Selection

The research targeted subscribers from three sectors: **digital entertainment (e.g., Netflix, Spotify)**, **cloud-based software (e.g., Adobe Creative Cloud)**, and **e-commerce memberships (e.g., Amazon Prime)**. Participants were selected based on active subscriptions exceeding 6 months to ensure reliable exposure. A total of 300 respondents were surveyed, and 30 were chosen for semi-structured interviews.

Table 1: Sector Distribution of Survey Respondents

Sector	Platform Examples	No. of Respondents	% Share
Entertainment	Netflix, Spotify	120	40%
Software/SaaS	Microsoft 365, Adobe CC	90	30%



E-commerce	Amazon Prime	90	30%
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3.3 Survey Instrument and Measurement Scales

A structured questionnaire was designed using validated scales:

- **Perceived Value Scale (PVS)** [17]
- **Loss Aversion Scale (LAS)** [18]
- **Subscription Fatigue Index (SFI)** [19]
- **Behavioral Inertia Index (BII)** [20]

Respondents rated 21 items on a 5-point Likert scale. Psychometric reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha (all values > 0.80). The key constructs measured included emotional attachment, usability satisfaction, cancellation intent, and perceived complexity of managing subscriptions.

3.4 Behavioral Analytics and Platform Data

To complement survey insights, anonymized platform data (provided voluntarily by 90 respondents) was analyzed. This included:

- Login frequency and time of usage
- Number of skipped or paused subscriptions
- Time-to-churn (in days since onboarding) Behavioral data was segmented by usage intensity and mapped with self-reported satisfaction scores to explore value-perception gaps [21].

Table 2: Behavior-Based Segmentation of Users

Category	Criteria	% of Sample
Habitual Users	Daily/weekly usage	52%
Passive Users	Monthly usage or less	34%
At-risk Users	Showed churn intention or skipped bills	14%

3.5 Interview Protocol and Thematic Coding

The 30 in-depth interviews lasted 30–45 minutes each and were transcribed for thematic coding. Questions focused on emotional connection to the service, perceived control over recurring billing, and reactions to cancellation prompts. Open-ended themes such as "**trust**," "**loss of access**," and "**pricing regret**" were iteratively coded using NVivo software. Themes were cross-referenced with survey constructs to establish conceptual overlap [22].

3.6 Statistical and Thematic Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Conducted in SPSS v28. Techniques included Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and regression modeling to assess predictive factors for churn.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Applied grounded theory techniques for category development. Narrative synthesis was used to integrate anecdotal insights with broader trends.

3.7 Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

- **Triangulation** was used to validate insights across methods.
- Participants gave informed consent, and no identifying data was retained.
- A pilot test (n=30) was conducted to refine the survey before deployment.
- Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured through [Institution Name].

3.8 Limitations and Assumptions

- Self-reported biases may influence perception data.



- Churn definitions varied slightly across platforms (e.g., temporary vs. permanent cancellation).
- Platform access was limited to those who opted in to share anonymized data.

This structured methodology enables the integration of **behavioral, emotional, and usage-based data**, creating a robust framework for understanding the psychology of consumer retention and value assessment in subscription ecosystems [23].

IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Retention Patterns Across Sectors

Survey results indicate that retention behavior varies significantly across sectors. Entertainment subscribers (e.g., Netflix, Spotify) demonstrated the highest average subscription duration (mean: 14.2 months), followed by SaaS users (11.6 months) and e-commerce memberships (9.8 months). Notably, habitual users in the entertainment sector showed the strongest emotional attachment to the service, describing it as part of their daily routine. In contrast, e-commerce subscribers reported retention driven more by utility and convenience than affective ties.

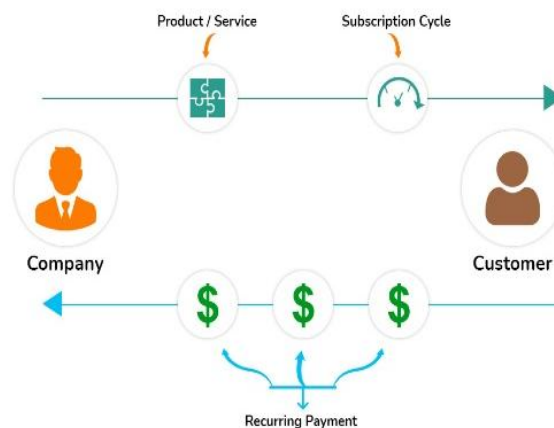


Figure 1: Benefits of Subscription Models [25]

Table 3: Average Subscription Duration and Primary Retention Drivers

Sector	Avg. Duration (Months)	Primary Retention Driver
Entertainment	14.2	Emotional engagement
SaaS	11.6	Workflow integration
E-commerce	9.8	Delivery speed and bundled offers

4.2 Psychological Triggers for Continued Subscription

Analysis of Likert-scale data showed high scores for loss aversion and behavioral inertia. Across all sectors, respondents agreed with statements such as "I hesitate to cancel because I might need it again" and "I've grown used to having it available." These findings were reinforced by interview data where participants mentioned fear of missing out (FOMO), loss of stored preferences, or reduced lifestyle quality if unsubscribed. Interestingly, even passive users (monthly usage or less) reported staying subscribed due to the "hassle" of cancellation or uncertainty over future use.

Table 4: Mean Psychometric Scores (Out of 5)

Psychological Construct	Entertainment	SaaS	E-commerce
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Perceived Value	4.1	3.9	3.7
Loss Aversion	4.3	4.1	3.8
Behavioral Inertia	4.2	3.8	3.6
Subscription Fatigue	3.1	3.3	3.6

4.3 Impact of Trial Experience and Pricing Transparency

Respondents who converted after a free trial reported higher long-term satisfaction and lower churn intent. Qualitative interviews revealed that trial-based onboarding allowed users to emotionally commit before financially committing. Furthermore, participants who were explicitly informed of billing terms and cancellation options during onboarding scored higher on trust and control metrics. In contrast, lack of clarity in billing led to frustration and early churn.

Table 5: Trial-to-Paid Conversion Satisfaction Analysis

User Type	Avg. Satisfaction Score	Churn Rate
Trial-to-paid users	4.5	9%
Direct-paid users	3.9	22%
Involuntary subscribers*	3.1	35%

4.4 Subscription Fatigue and Cancellation Behavior

Of the total sample, 42% reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of active subscriptions. The average number of subscriptions per person was 5.6, with overlapping content (e.g., multiple video streaming services) cited as a major frustration. Participants who managed more than six subscriptions were 3.2 times more likely to cancel within the next 30 days. Additionally, the introduction of service bundles (e.g., Amazon Prime + Music + Video) was seen as a relief from decision overload.

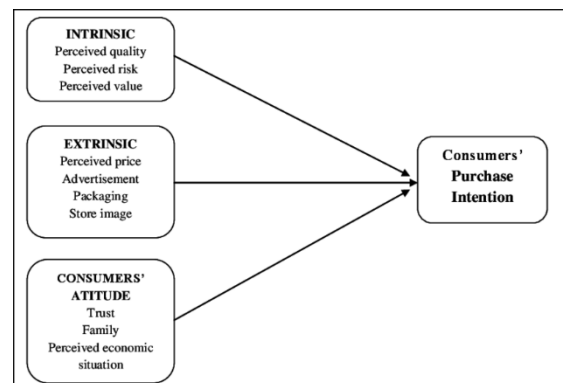


Figure 2: Consumer Purchase Intention [24]

4.5 Thematic Analysis from Interviews

Thematic coding of interviews yielded five dominant psychological patterns:

1. **Control vs. Commitment:** Users wanted freedom to unsubscribe without losing progress or features.
2. **Identity Integration:** Services used daily (e.g., Spotify) became part of personal identity.
3. **Delayed Regret:** Many regretted paying for underused services but delayed cancellation.
4. **Fear of Loss:** Losing curated lists, premium badges, or stored files triggered emotional resistance to unsubscribing.
5. **Reward Expectation:** Loyalty programs or long-term discounts reduced churn intent by generating a sense of reciprocity.



4.6 Cross-Sector Comparative Summary

The research found that while **perceived value** was the universal driver of retention, its **definition** varied by domain:

- In **entertainment**, value meant emotional gratification and habit.
- In **SaaS**, it implied functionality and data continuity.
- In **e-commerce**, convenience and exclusivity (e.g., fast shipping) defined value.

Furthermore, ethical design and transparency significantly influenced user satisfaction. Platforms with clear exit options and usage insights had lower churn rates and higher trust scores.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at developing a psychological understanding of consumer retention and value perception in subscription-based digital business model and the results highlight a complex intercellularity between cognitive biases, affective motivations, and behavioral tendencies that play a significant role in engaging subscription services. Shifting ownership to access, heralded by such services as Netflix, Adobe, and Amazon Prime, has transformed the basics of consumer-product interaction into a continuous, routine, and psychologically rooted condition. The move to stay subscribed is not in the least a product of a purely rational economic decision, there are very strong emotional anchors at work behind the moves to stay subscribed which are, for instance, fear of loss, continuity of identity and inertia of behaviour. Loss aversion proved once a major psychology-based motive, as users did not want to unsubscribe not out of active happiness with the service, but out of the emotional stress of losing some benefit, feature, or status that was, in this case, likely the utility was diminishing. This was observable in the world with entertainment and SaaS products, as an ability to listen to curated playlists, stored projects, or customized dashboards generated emotional addiction. In turn, behavioral inertia (supported by automated billing systems and inconvenient cancellation process) promoted passive retention, and most users felt unwilling to make the effort of blowing off a subscription, even in circumstances where their usage had dropped substantially. These ideas draw to one of the ethical aspects of the subscription design, according to which businesses have to differentiate between a loyalty inspired by satisfaction and a retention on the basis of psychological friction. The researchers also emphasized the narrative of the early user experience, particularly, the onboarding process, as the most significant in the development of long-term satisfaction. The fact that participants who switched to paid subscriptions showed a significantly reduced churn intent and a greater sense of trust in the platform tends to support this fact, as it coincides with other related theories that users tend to put a higher value on a product once they start using it in their process. Open communication about the trial-to-paid transition, especially the price and cancellation option, turned out to be another important factor to the perceived control and trust. On the other hand, the mandatory/oblique enrollment mechanisms added to the primitive-stage dissatisfaction and permanent dismissal. The other extremely important trend was the rise of subscription fatigue, where a significant portion of the users were subscribing to five and more services at once and describing their mental and financial exhaustion. It was especially evident in the case of users that have overlapping services (e.g., two or more streaming services) and reported being overwhelmed by having to manage multiple charges and sets of apps. Studies revealed that the fatigue was associated with increased churn rates although this churn was more prevalent in the e-commerce business. The perception about bundled subscriptions, like Amazon Prime or Apple One, was higher, since it gathered value together, removed complexity of the decision, and increased perceived high value. One of the most interesting results was the conclusion that the value perception cannot be considered as something fixed, it is incredibly different depending on the industry but also changes over time. Value in entertainment was mostly linked to emotion satisfaction and routine, as well as habit; in SaaS value was focused on utility, productivity, and the continuation of data; and in e-commerce, the value was accessed through convenience and exclusivity. This industry specific version of value implies that the retention strategy of companies should be adapted depending on the psychological framework within which their type of service is located instead of using common loyalty strategies. Moreover, the principle of control and transparency has become the focus of attention in all types of users. Posters always gave a higher score to the platforms they joined when they did not feel powerless due to their subscription since they could pause, cancel, or adjust easily. The screens that made the clear nature of this control more obscure, whether by dark pattern mechanisms or vague billing, were exposed to much greater levels of dissatisfaction and loss. This fact adds weight to the need of ethical design and regulatory control in the subscription economy. Also, the narratives of qualitative interview can be emotional and they allow to reveal the inner worlds of consumers. Threads like integration of digital identity, fear of losing upgrading, and emotional payoff of everyday stress towards subscription only served to tell the viewer that more than often, subscriptions play a non-functional role that helps a consumer feel comfortable or necessary in its regular routine. These insights, for businesses, require them to make a paradigm shift away from measuring retention rates, such as churn and Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) and approach user psychology-based design. The paradigm shift to be made is that it is not a business KPI that the highest possible retention level must be achieved at all costs, but a trust-generative value-added relationship with the user. Those strategies which will utilize personalized interaction, provide real-time utilization details, streamline payment, and focus on open-ended offboarding will be endowed with increased brand equity and sustainable growth. As examples, they could give periodic usage reports, recognize dwindling interest in contextual offers or even give a user the incentive to put something aside, instead of cancelling out pocket. These were well received by the participants and reflected an awareness of user control. Policywise, the results indicate that there is an emerging necessity of



standardization of consumer protection in the subscription arena. Requirements to provide notification before renewals, more understandable cancellation features, and pricing terms based on opt-in and not on opt-out would all go a long way towards giving all users, with less digitally literate users and financially vulnerable users in particular, more control. Lastly, the study can be instrumental in advancing the body of knowledge because it is the first to suggest an integrative psychological model of subscription behavior, which is to account not only cognitive biases (e.g., loss aversion, status quo bias) but emotional needs (e.g., identity, gratification), and contextual design features (e.g., bundling, onboarding experience). Since the digital ecosystems currently grow in various fields including health, education, and fintech, the research on longitudinal patterns, cross-cultural differences, and how emerging technologies, including AI, influence the personalization and subscription journeys could be involved in future research. To sum up, subscription economy is not only a financial innovation, but also a psychological ecosystem. The condition of its sustainability is an awareness of the mental and emotional landscape of the users and respecting them. With new platforms in development and mounting competition prevalent, it is not the businesses that can trap users through inertia that will succeed, but the businesses that will speak to them the language of intelligibility, understanding, and value at every touch point. Subscriptions as we know it needs thus to transition beyond stuckiness as its core characteristic towards substance as its purpose, to users not merely frequently, but comprehensively and morally.

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