

User Acceptance of Leisure and Hobby Subscription Services – a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Digital subscription services have become an ubiquitous presence in various sectors, including entertainment, news, music, gaming, and software. Despite their growing significance and impact, particularly within leisure and hobby areas, the problem of user acceptance of these services has not yet received a comprehensive explanation. To address this research gap, a systematic literature review has been carried out. The literature items were extracted from the largest academic databases, i.e., Scopus and Web of Science. Then, using Bibliometrix and AI-driven ASReview software, 35 items concerning leisure and hobby subscription services were selected for a full-text analysis. Research reveals a noticeable concentration of academic discourse in the last five years, coinciding with the onset and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analyzed papers investigated user acceptance of Internet subscriptions, with particular emphasis on leisure and hobby realm, exploring, e.g., willingness to pay for subscription services and IT infrastructure influence.

Keywords: user acceptance, leisure and hobby, subscription services, literature review

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced digital landscape, the way consumers access and engage with content has undergone a profound transformation. There has been a notable surge in digital subscription services that cater particularly to leisure and hobby interests, especially media consumption [3]. Subscription services differ from traditional models, offering users access to a wide range of content for a fixed recurring fee. Originating as a response to the digital revolution and changing consumer habits [33], digital subscriptions have become ubiquitous across various sectors, including entertainment, news, music, gaming, and software.

Powered by the proliferation of Internet-connected devices and the increasing digitization of content, subscription services have become synonymous with convenience and choice for consumers. Starting with YouTube in 2005, which introduced video streaming to daily life, and followed by Netflix, Spotify, and digital news outlets like The New York Times, various platforms have transformed media habits and overall consumption behaviors by providing unprecedented access to vast content libraries [5]. This shift has not only revolutionized the way media are consumed, but also reshaped the business models of content creators and publishers, offering them a more predictable revenue stream compared to traditional advertising-based models [25].

The idea of subscription services being part of information systems has already been raised in literature, as they play a substantial role within the information systems' framework by serving as platforms for the delivery and management of digital content and services [28]. They also leverage technology to deliver personalized, on-demand access while ensuring efficiency, security and user satisfaction. Subscription services were made possible only through advanced infrastructure of information technology. However, due to their content-delivering function, some of them have already evolved into integral components of information systems [27].

As subscription services continue to evolve and proliferate, their impact on media consumption habits, business practices, and societal discourse emerges as an important research problem. However, despite the widespread adoption and growing significance of digital subscriptions, particularly within the areas of leisure and hobbies, user acceptance of these services (i.e., the willingness of users to use them [11]) lacks a systematic investigation and a comprehensive explanation. Addressing this research gap is critical to uncover the dynamics underlying consumers' adoption of leisure and hobby subscription services and to explore the determinants of continued user engagement with subscribed content. Moreover, even though subscription services are commonly available, there is still potential for their further development. For example, Spotify, formerly a platform meant only for streaming music, has now expanded its offer by incorporating music videos [8]. The need to explore growth opportunities for subscription-based solutions makes another rationale for conducting studies in this under-researched area.

The objective of this paper is to identify gaps in current research with regard to subscription services in the hobby and leisure sectors. This study also suggests avenues for future research exploration within this domain. Moreover, it synthesizes existing literature to explore user acceptance of Internet subscriptions, aiming to enhance understanding of digital service adoption, especially in leisure and hobby contexts.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 details the methodology for collecting scientific sources from databases. It is followed by Section 3, where the results of a systematic literature review on leisure and hobby subscription services are depicted. In addition, the results of the research are accompanied by a discussion, which is presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper, outlining practical implications and study limitations.

2. Methodology

To streamline the current situation on matters related to the approval of subscription services, a literature review has been carried out with a systematic approach. Relevant literature items were extracted from the largest indexing databases of high-quality peer-reviewed scientific sources, i.e., Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). The effectiveness of their use is confirmed in numerous scientific publications, as they are widely applied in the field of professional literature studies [40]. This research follows the guidelines outlined in the PRISMA statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [26]), which is used in a variety of realms, with particular emphasis on consumer behavior research (e.g., [30]).

The scientific sourcing process took place on March 12, 2024. The methodological approach used in this study is based on four subsequent stages: (i) identification, (ii) duplication removal, (iii) automatic screening, and (iv) manual screening. The following phrase was used to identify sources in Scopus and WoS: ("subscription" AND "acceptance"). The preliminary search process showed that this query returns a relatively small number of documents, and hence it was decided that narrowing down the subject of the study to leisure and hobby subscription services be done at the manual screening stage. In the process of obtaining sources from the Scopus and WoS databases, 345 sources were identified based on the assumed search query. After eliminating duplicates using the Bibliometrix tool [4], 260 sources remained for the analysis. Only sources written in English and representing either scientific articles, conference proceedings papers, or chapters in scientific monographs were assumed to be analyzed. The timespan of search was

limited to items published after 2005, i.e., the year YouTube began operating as a video streaming service. Implementing these filtering criteria resulted in obtaining 192 records.

Then, using an AI-driven tool to help assess the relevance of bibliometric sources called ASReview [34], 53 sources were selected based on title, abstract, and authors' keywords, which were further reduced to 35 items after in-depth full-text analysis. The ASReview tool with the assistance of machine learning (Naïve-Bayes classifier) enabled the arrangement of titles and abstracts of the analyzed documents with respect to their relevance. The guiding principle, which lead the exclusion process both in ASReview-driven and manual screening process, was that the scientific paper should primarily address the acceptance of leisure and hobby subscription services (such as music streaming apps/services or video-on-demand services), rather than considering the word "subscription" merely as a context to highlight another unrelated issue. As consumers are presented with a multitude of subscription options, it is vital to note that not all subscriptions are entertainment-focused. Some subscriptions provide scientific information or access to the mobile network. However, this paper specifically examines hobby and leisure-oriented subscription services, which was the primary focus when selecting the document to be analyzed after reading its abstract or, ultimately, full text. For example, students tend to lean toward purchasing entertainment subscriptions, while relying on institutions to provide access to a multitude of other types of service. Therefore, papers related to, for example, mobile network subscriptions, satellite TV subscriptions, or academic journal subscriptions (in the context of access to scientific information) were not covered in the further research stages. The source acquisition flow is represented in detail in the diagram (Fig. 1.) to formulate a process model that synthesizes the arguments posed.

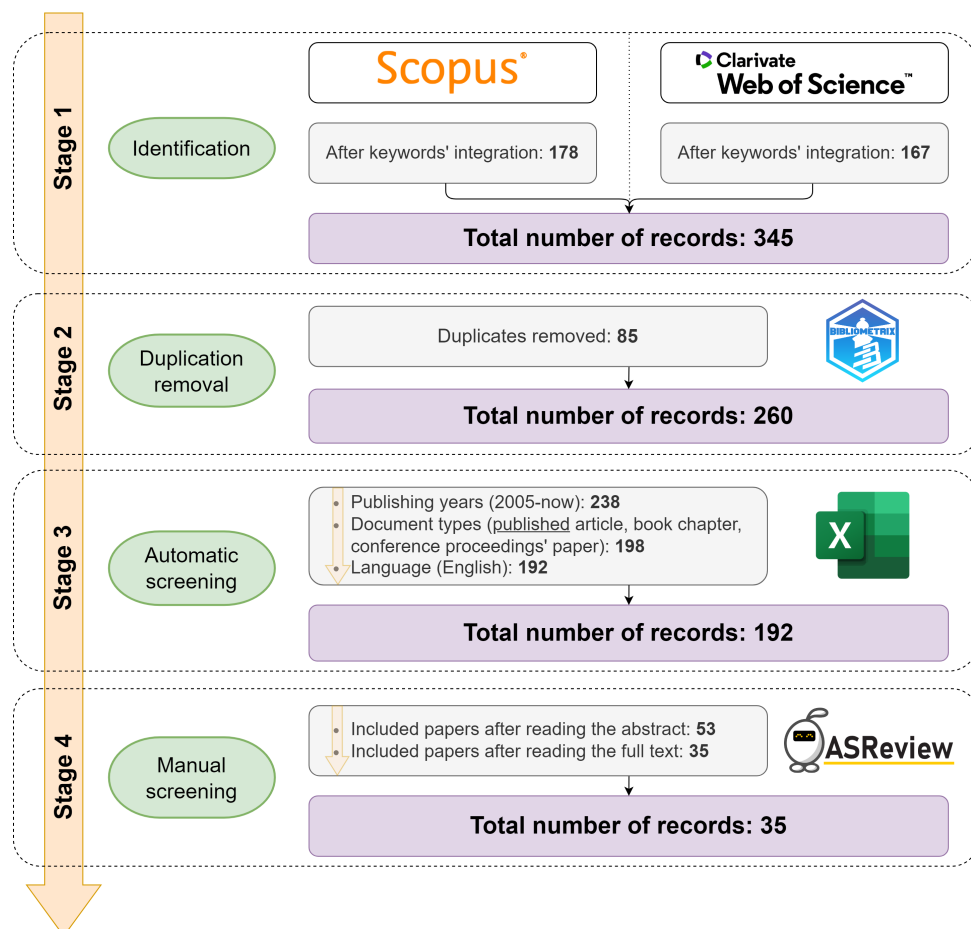


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of literature sources' retrieval. Source: own elaboration

3. Results

At the final stage of the literature sources' retrieval process 35 documents written by 87 authors retrieved from 35 sources were analyzed. The document references, which were utilized for the analysis, can be found in an Appendix [13]. This signifies that the dataset is characterized by dispersion in terms of publication venue, i.e., none of the particular journal titles (or conference proceedings' names) predominates. However, the dominance of the type of publication source is noticeable. More than two-thirds of the analyzed papers (23 out of 35) were scientific articles in journals, while the remaining were papers published in conference proceedings. There were no book chapters among the sources analyzed.

Considering the temporal characteristics of the final set, the first paper was published in 2006. It is clear that the topic analyzed is relatively new, as the average age of the included papers is 6.26 years, and emerged with greater intensity in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. A downward trend (-3.78%) in the number of publications can be observed. This, however, does not imply a lack of relevance or timeliness of the topic, especially given the high citation rate, with an average of 15.8 citations per document. Rather, this negative increase is because the data for 2024 cover only 2.5 months of that year, and also some 2023 publications may appear late in the databases. Table 1 presents selected information on the analyzed dataset, while Fig. 2 shows the number of documents published annually over a period considered.

Table 1. Selected information about the collected dataset

Timespan	2006:2024 (*)
Sources / documents	35 / 35
Annual growth rate	-3.78%
Authors	87
References	1595
Average citations per doc	15.8
Document average age	6.26

Note (*): Data are current as of 12.03.2024.

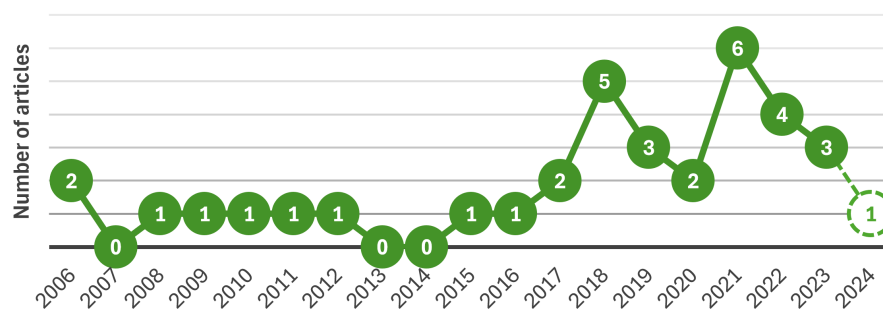


Fig. 2. The annual publication count regarding leisure and hobby subscription services.

Note: Data are current as of 12.03.2024. Source: own elaboration

After illustrating the basic information about the analyzed data set, it was decided to present the relationships between the occurring keywords to highlight the essence and co-occurrence of the given notions. It was decided to present these relationships using the so-called “thematic map” and “co-occurrence network,” which prove their feasibility in terms of presenting changes and trends in the conceptual network and spotting patterns [32]. Bibliometrix package [4] was used for this purpose, which, on the basis of the “keywords plus” parameter, captures the keywords relevant to the scientific paper (found in the title and abstract of the paper), even if they are not explicitly indicated as “keywords” by the authors of the paper. As in the case with authors’

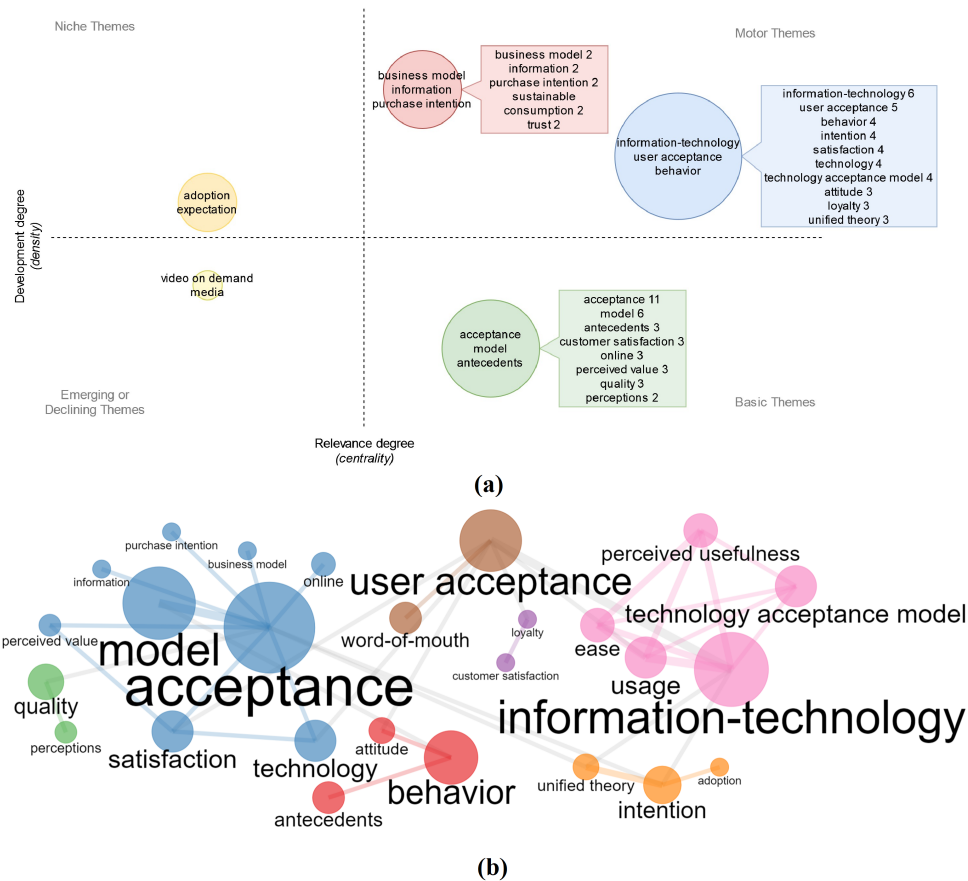


Fig. 3. Thematic map (a) and co-occurrence network (b) for the retrieved documents based on “Keywords plus” parameter. Source: own elaboration based on [4]

keywords, one document can have more than one “keywords plus” assigned to it. Within the thematic map, which clusters keywords based on keywords, five clusters were created, two of which were identified by the Bibliometrix package as “motor themes” that are characterized by a high degree of relevance and development. Co-occurrence network complements the thematic map, indicating the relationships and links between keywords and their frequency, and within this framework 7 different-colored clusters were established.

The most common keyword in the collection in question is “acceptance,” which is not surprising given the query used. This term (including its expanded version “user acceptance”) is related to the term “information technology,” which is also confirmed by the assumptions of the study. It can be seen that the main areas under the “information technology” cluster were: perceived usefulness (cf. [9]), as well as ease and use of Internet subscription services. On the other hand, acceptance in research is linked to satisfaction, as well as to the very acceptance models (which is discussed more thoroughly in the next section), but also to value and quality. Among the underexplored issues in this respect there is a purchase intention, but also loyalty, hence one might recommend that further research be conducted in this area. Fig. 3, depicting the thematic map and co-occurrence network of keywords retrieved from the analyzed dataset, shows that the cluster with the highest degree of relevance is combining papers on trust, purchase intention, and sustainable consumption. This also confirms the suggestion that these notations should be addressed together. The most niche theme (i.e., one that shows the least development, with a high level of relevance at the same time) is one that deals with adoption and expectations among users of Internet subscription services. These aspects represent an eminent research gap and as such they should be a point of consideration that can be exploited in subsequent studies.

An analysis of the most frequently locally cited works was also conducted, which revealed the essence of user acceptance frameworks in the works addressed. Among the top 10 locally cited documents, 8 cover various user acceptance approaches to technology (including information systems). The most frequently referenced for analyzing leisure and hobby subscription services are Davis's Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) [9] and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [1, 2], each cited 13 times. Ajzen's TPB explores situations where users lack full control over their choices, influenced by non-motivating factors ("subjective norm" and "perceived behavioral control") related to the accessibility of specific needs and requirements, while Davis's TAM model emphasizes the choice and attitude of the individual while utilizing information technologies, commencing with two impacting factors: "perceived usefulness" and "perceived ease of use." The augmented TAM model (TAM2, which extends the original TAM with social influence processes and cognitive instrumental processes; [38]) and Fetscherin and Lattemann approach on user acceptance in virtual worlds, incorporating construct variables along with socio-demographic moderating variables into TAM [12], have 5 local citations each. The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT, which assumes the existence of four factors – expected performance, expected effort, social impact and favorable circumstances – that affect a person's inclination to utilize a certain technology; [39]) also garnered 5 local citations. Additionally, comparative analyses of user acceptance models by Davis et al. [10] and Taylor and Todd [37] are among the most cited, each with 5 local citations.

4. Discussion

The history of Internet subscription services can be traced back to the emergence of YouTube, which revolutionized the landscape of video streaming. However, a notable surge in scholarly attention towards subscription services is evident following the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected by the increased volume of academic papers addressing this topic in the post-pandemic period (18 out of 35 published in 2020 and after). As the pandemic led to widespread subscription use among consumers, the subsequent surge in academic interest is unsurprising, reflecting the growing scholarly attention to understanding and analyzing the dynamics of subscription-based models in response to evolving consumer behavior during the pandemic [35].

A number of papers pertaining to Internet subscription services referred to user technology acceptance, using acclaimed and widely used approaches, including TAM, TPB, TRA and UTAUT, as well as frameworks being an extension of above. Consequently, considerable attention is being paid to issues related to the personal relationship to a particular service and its technical functioning, influencing the formation of the IT infrastructure, which is linked to the advancement of the service itself (cf. [28]). Research indicates that factors like self-efficacy, innovativeness, and user characteristics significantly influence subscription intention and usage of Internet services [21]. Given that subscription services are inherently technology-dependent and rely on the technological infrastructure for their operation, adopting such an approach is not only logical but also imperative.

Only papers pertaining to hobby and leisure subscription services were included in the analysis. Among these, most of the articles (13 in total) concentrated on user acceptance of subscription services that provide access to video content, including video streaming platforms. Among the subscription services examined, Netflix emerged as the focal point of the analysis, with a notable emphasis on understanding user acceptance dynamics within the realm of video content streaming. The papers examined delved into various aspects, including user satisfaction (e.g., [29]), willingness to pay [17], and the dynamics of effective competition within the domain of subscription services (e.g., [18, 28]).

Seven papers focused on audio streaming platforms, with five focusing on music and two on podcasts. These articles explored subscribers' intentions to engage with digital music (e.g., [19]), offered suggestions for enhancing current offer [7], and even provided information on

the potential educational applications of such services [20]. Their findings yielded numerous practical implications for the enhancement of audio streaming services. A few studies (4) focused on subscription retailing services, particularly beauty and fashion boxes. They were presented as a potential avenue for academia to explore the challenges of user acceptance within the circular economy, using popular fashion boxes as a case study (see, e.g., [6]). These papers primarily aimed to understand consumer acceptance of subscription retailing models. Additional works examined (1) e-book, and (2) video game subscription services, analyzing platform management strategies [16], and the role of social influence in fostering greater consumer acceptance [31]. The remaining nine papers examined broader themes surrounding premium subscription content, including subscriptions to social networking sites or mobile apps. They explored the factors that influence usage and purchase decisions (e.g., [14, 22]), as well as the intentions or usage habits of users [36] and the willingness to pay [15]. Additionally, these papers investigated the integration of social media into contexts beyond social interactions [24].

It is noteworthy that while many papers extensively analyzed user acceptance and willingness to pay, fewer explicitly addressed user experience, which is quite surprising. Only one paper [18] mentioned user experience and proposed enhancements to it. User experience serves as an important determinant of user acceptance, as positive user experiences tend to enhance acceptance [23]. Consequently, ensuring favorable user experience remains a significant challenge in the implementation of new technologies, including the framework of subscription services. The lack of existing literature is perplexing, as user experience should be deemed the cornerstone of subscription services, given that users are the ones consistently engaging with these platforms. Therefore, more comprehensive research focusing on user experience studies is recommended.

5. Concluding remarks

The topic of user acceptance of Internet subscription services has garnered significant attention among academics, particularly focusing on leisure and hobby subscriptions. The topic gained significant interest during the COVID-19 pandemic as subscriptions became a popular way to access home entertainment. Analysis reveals a noticeable concentration of academic discourse within the past five years, coinciding with the onset and aftermath of the pandemic. However, a systematic review of the literature uncovered a relative scarcity of research addressing user acceptance of Internet subscriptions holistically, highlighting a notable research gap.

Papers that were taken under scrutiny predominantly focused on video and audio subscriptions, as well as subscriptions unlocking premium features on social networking sites and mobile apps. The papers investigated user acceptance of Internet subscriptions, shedding light on consumer dynamics and willingness to pay for subscription services. However, the user experience was generally overlooked. Considering the pivotal role of user experience as a determinant of user acceptance, this signifies a potential notable area for future research emphasis. Further studies could investigate the impact of design and user experience on subscription usage, possibly using surveys to identify areas for enhancing subscription services.

The limitations of the present study primarily pertain to its scope, which focused exclusively on leisure and hobby subscription services. Other categories of subscription services, such as mobility and utility subscriptions, were not considered during the analysis. Furthermore, there might be a post-pandemic temporal bias, as the increased scholarly focus at that period of time may influence findings towards trends specific to that period, potentially overlooking long-term patterns in subscription service usage and acceptance. Since study relied solely on the Scopus and WoS databases, further research should also consider an expanded list of bibliographic databases. This could encompass platforms like EBSCO or ProQuest, which offer a more diverse selection of academic literature in various disciplines. Additionally, considering databases with a distinctly engineering-technical focus, such as the ACM Digital Library or IEEE Xplore, would provide valuable insights into the technological aspects of Internet subscription services.

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