Gender, COVID-19, and Streaming Services: Retaining Women Subscribers on Netflix

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April 2023

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In the highly saturated streaming service industry, the competition has intensified (Proulx, 2022). Streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Hulu, Peacock, Discovery+, ESPN+, Apple TV, and YouTube TV have surged in popularity (Azabal, 2022). This market saturation is justified by increased consumer demand; Azabal (2022) asserts that consumers tend to find streaming services more convenient than visiting movie theaters because they have more freedom and flexibility. For example, consumers can pause a movie as many times as they like for any reason, such as using the restroom (Proulx, 2022). According to Forrester's Consumer Energy Index And Retail Pulse Survey, 54% of adults in the United States who use a streaming service would prefer it over a movie theater because theaters cost too much money (Proulx, 2022). This change in viewing preferences demonstrates the integral role streaming services play in society and substantiates further studies on how to refine them.

Moreover, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly increased the demand for streaming services. Due to safety concerns while being in shared, public spaces, such as in a movie theater, consumers have been more inclined to watch movies and shows from the comfort of their own homes (Proulx, 2022). To meet the greater demand for streaming services post-pandemic, several new streaming services joined the market over only a few years (Brumley, 2022). Due to the resulting abundance of streaming options available to consumers, companies face increasing pressure to remain successful and distinguish themselves from the competition (Proulx, 2022).

Beyond facing a saturated market, all streaming services are experiencing high churn rates; companies are struggling to attract new subscribers, and when they do, it is difficult to retain them (Brumley, 2022). For example, since the beginning of 2022, 1.2 million Netflix subscribers canceled their subscriptions. Also, the debut streaming platform CNN+ was discontinued after a few weeks (Azabal, 2022). According to global streaming data via NASDAQ, "a record-breaking 32 million U.S. consumers canceled their streaming service" in three months (Brumley, 2022, para 10). As 32 million subscribers were lost, 37.2 million subscribers were gained; Brumley (2022) explains that while this indicates growth, the substantial number of cancellations demonstrates streaming companies' struggle to persuade consumers to keep their subscriptions.

Although Netflix has been number one in consumer attraction and retention, the intensified competition and churn rates threaten its continued success (Brumley, 2022). According to company executives, Netflix's rate of subscriber acquisition has significantly decreased since COVID-19 and is not rising (Proulx, 2022). To increase subscribers, Netflix attempted to prevent password sharing but faced severe backlash because 54% of users share Netflix accounts (Mackenzie, 2023; Jay, 2023). Furthermore, Proulx (2022) shares that Netflix used to be a unique platform due to its original content and that 54% of women in the US who use streaming services claim they are loyal subscribers due to having access to exclusive shows and movies. However, Netflix no longer has this advantage over other companies because providing original content has become an expectation of all streaming platforms.

Considering Netflix's failed attempts to improve its service, it may be useful to focus on a certain demographic of subscribers and investigate how this trend may be gendered. A study by Pew Research Center found that men tend to stream more than women, while women tend to watch cable TV more often than men (Jay, 2023). Despite this trend, 75% of Netflix's subscribers are women, which makes them a crucial market for Netflix (Stoll, 2022). However, 44% of the users who have canceled their Netflix subscriptions are women (Moonshot.news, 2022). Therefore, the possibility of women leaving Netflix is a serious concern.

Given that an alarming amount of women are leaving Netflix during the pandemic and post-pandemic, it is useful to investigate COVID-19's impact. COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on women, specifically concerning their employment and finances, which contributed to the surge of Netflix cancellations (Peck, 2020; Loucks, 2020). Before the pandemic, women were already earning 80% of what men earned (Peck, 2020); single women made 32% of the money single men made (Torres, 2019). Research finds that the pandemic worsened women's financial situations. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, women (16.2%) were unemployed at higher rates than men (13.5%) in April 2020 (Peck, 2020). This supports Proulx's (2020) finding that more women (48%) than men (39%) in the US claim they want to pay less for streaming services and would tolerate advertisements interrupting their viewing experience if it means that the streaming service would cost them less money. Because women were the main victims of COVID-19 layoffs, they have become more conscious of their money, specifically with regard to streaming (Loucks, 2020). Research suggests that the economic burden placed upon women because of COVID-19 will continue to negatively impact women over men (Azcona et. al, 2020). This demonstrates the severity of women's economic struggles and how it impacts their engagement with Netflix.

In addition to gender, there is an age component to Netflix's loss of subscribers, as well. Jay (2023) reports that a majority of Netflix's users are Generation Z (Gen Z)—between 11 to 26 years old in 2023—and they are more likely to be college students. Researchers Peck (2020) and Buono (2022) further specify that the key demographic unsubscribing from Netflix is Gen Z women who are under financial stress. These trends concerning gender and age lend themselves to further investigation as to why Gen Z women, specifically, constitute the largest decline in Netflix's user base and how to retain them (Peck, 2020; Buono, 2022).

To further understand how to maintain its dwindling user base, Netflix can leverage its knowledge of the particular demographic that is terminating its subscriptions: Gen Z women (Peck, 2020; Buono, 2022). The data suggesting that the majority of Netflix's lost subscribers are Gen Z women enables Netflix to focus its investigation on how to retain them better. As Bender (2021) argues, a streaming service is only viable in the increasingly saturated market if it can effectively distinguish itself from rival companies. It is challenging for streaming companies to pinpoint exactly how to prevent a loss of subscribers and outshine competitors. With a deeper understanding of Gen Z women's viewing preferences and constraints through a gendered lens, Netflix can sustain its business, maintain its popularity, and stay ahead in the competitive market (Oliver, 2000; Banerjee et al., 2008; Greenwood, 2010). Towards this end, this paper seeks to investigate the following research question:

RQ1: How can Netflix retain its Gen Z women subscribers post-pandemic?

Literature Review

Generation Z

Gen Z, also known as the Internet Generation or Post-Millennial generation, refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Ellenberg, 2022). This generation is the first to have grown up entirely in the digital age, and their experiences and attitudes are shaped by unique circumstances (Gabrielova & Buchko). According to a survey by Deloitte, 98% of Gen Zers own a smartphone and spend an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes per day on their phones ("Global Generational Survey," 2022). Gen Z, also referred to as iGen or the Internet Generation, is recognized for its status as digital natives, having been born and raised in a world where internet and mobile technology have been ubiquitous since their formative years (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). As a result, they have a strong affinity for technology and are proficient in utilizing it for communication, socialization, and entertainment (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Additionally, their upbringing with advanced technology has also influenced their behavior and communication patterns that set them apart from previous generations (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Due to their upbringing in a technologically advanced era, Gen Z has had instant access to information and knowledge through the internet, resulting in their aptitude for and comfort with technology. Their proficiency with technology has manifested in various aspects of their daily lives, including their use of social media platforms and streaming services. Their expertise in utilizing these platforms has made them savvy and discerning consumers of digital content (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021).

Gen Z and Diversity

Studies have also found that another key characteristic of Gen Zers that distinguishes them from previous generations is their attitude toward diversity and inclusion (Edwards & Fay, 2010). Unlike previous generations, diversity and inclusion tend to be at the forefront of Gen Zers' minds. Based on a survey of over 500 high school students, the authors find that Gen Z is more open-minded and accepting of diversity than Millennials and Gen Xers. Due to their open-mindedness, Gen Zers are more likely to embrace diversity in all forms, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion (Edwards & Fay, 2010). This is supported by a study published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence that found that Gen Zers are more liberal and progressive than previous generations, with higher levels of support for social justice issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and climate change (Bacevich et al., 2021). Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) add that Gen Zers feel most comfortable engaging in activities that promote social awareness. Another study published in the Journal of Social and Political Psychology found that Gen Zers are more likely to value diversity, equality, and social justice, and are less likely to hold authoritarian and nationalist views than previous generations (Kende et al., 2020). In fact, in addition to being more accepting of diversity than previous generations, Gen Zers themselves are a more racially and ethnically diverse generation (Twenge, 2019). In the United States, Gen Z is the most ethnically diverse generation, with 52% of Gen Zers being non-Hispanic whites (Fry, 2020). This suggests the major role diversity plays for Gen Z subscribers of streaming services, such as Netflix.

Gen Z and Financial Concerns

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant job-related concerns for Gen Zers. Even before the pandemic, due to the economic climate, Gen Zers were likely to face unique challenges in the labor market, including increased competition for jobs, financial instability, and technological disruption (Twenge, 2019). However, the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, and one consequence is the accelerated shift toward remote work and automation (Twenge, 2019).

According to a survey conducted by Deloitte, 26% of Gen Zers are concerned about their job prospects due to COVID-19 (2020). Another study published in the Journal of Vocational Behavior found that the pandemic has caused significant financial strain for Gen Zers, leading to increased levels of financial anxiety and decreased financial well-being (Choi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic has caused economic instability globally, leading to pay cuts, job losses, and reduced work hours (Sonnentag et al., 2020). A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on young people's employment, with youth unemployment rates expected to increase from 13.6% in 2019 to 18% in

2020 (“COVID-19 and the world of work,” 2020). The majority of Gen Zers are just starting their careers or are in college, and the pandemic has caused significant job market uncertainty ("Global Generational Survey,” 2022). According to a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, Gen Z is the most educated generation in history, with 57% of Gen Zers enrolled in college or university (Hurst et al., 2021). With layoffs and hiring freezes across many industries, finding a job or internship has become much more challenging. This instability has caused significant stress for Gen Zers, who may already be struggling with student loans or other debt (Sonnentag et al., 2020).

Research has shown that the pandemic has caused significant financial stress for Gen Zers with regard to expenses on life’s necessities (Lee et al., 2021; Zahedi et al., 2021). The pandemic has caused expenses such as housing, groceries, and healthcare to increase, and the magnified burden of paying for rent, food, and care has become a primary concern for Gen Zers (Lee et al., 2021). With many people working from home, expenses such as internet bills and home office setups have also increased (Zahedi et al., 2021). This increased pressure to find and maintain a job in order to survive in the insatiable economy and job climate may be affecting Gen Zers’ Netflix streaming habits.

Gen Z and Work-Life Balance

Furthermore, the pandemic has also had a significant impact on the work-life balance concerns of Gen Zers (Rees et al., 2021; Tavares, 2021). It blurred the lines between work and personal life and resulted in Gen Zers struggling to balance their work responsibilities with their personal lives (Rees et al., 2021). According to studies published in the Journal of Vocational Behavior, remote work has made it more challenging to separate work and personal time (Tavares, 2021). It has led to increased work-family conflict for Gen Zers, leading to higher levels of burnout, stress, emotional exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and declined job performance (Rees et al., 2021; Tavares, 2021). As a result of the pandemic, Gen Zers have increasingly emphasized their desire to maintain a positive work-life balance (Twenge, 2019). This may have informed their priorities to shift from binging Netflix to wanting to spend more time working or with family.

Gen Z and Value for Money

Several more studies have been conducted examining Gen Zers' financial concerns, and the consensus is that Gen Zers are more focused on getting value for their money than previous generations (Carlson, 2018). For example, they are more likely to use coupons, compare prices, and seek out deals when shopping (Carlson, 2018). In terms of spending habits, Gen Zers are more likely to prioritize experiences over material possessions and are willing to spend money on experiences that provide them with social connections and personal growth (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). In addition, due to their concern for financial stability, as established earlier, Gen Zers are taking steps to ensure they are financially prepared for the future. For instance, they are more likely to save money for the future and invest in stocks (Barwise & Meehan, 2020). Understanding Gen Zers' priorities with regard to spending money may be helpful for Netflix's dilemma in discerning why Gen Zers may be terminating their subscriptions and choosing to spend their money elsewhere.

Gen Z and Streaming Habits

Nevertheless, Gen Z is known for its heavy usage of streaming platforms for entertainment, and this trend has been studied by researchers in recent years (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, Gen Zers are more likely to use YouTube than any other social media platform or streaming service, with 95% of Gen Zers reporting that they use the platform (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Although Netflix is regarded as the most popular streaming platform, it ranked second to YouTube in terms of its popularity amongst Gen Zers, with 73% of Gen Zers using it (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Brumley, 2022). Another study published in the Journal of Consumer Marketing found that Gen Zers are more likely to use free streaming services than paid ones, with YouTube being the most popular (Barwise & Meehan, 2020).

Furthermore, a study published in the Journal of Business Research found that Gen Zers have a shorter attention span than previous generations, which impacts their viewing habits on streaming platforms. Gen Zers are more likely to watch short-form content, such as YouTube videos or TikTok clips, than longer-form content (Khamitov et al., 2021). Another study published in the Journal of Advertising Research found that Gen Zers are more likely to watch content with diverse casts and storylines (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2020). This is supported by Bacevich et al.'s (2021) argument that Gen Zers value diversity, equality, and social justice. This research suggests they enjoy content that upholds the values of diversity and inclusion and enables marginalized groups to be represented and heard. In addition, Gen Zers are more interested in behind-the-scenes content and social media engagement with the shows or movies they watch. This is not surprising as Gen Zers are the generation characterized by their reliance and attachment to their devices and digital media (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). The above findings provide an overview of how Gen Zers use streaming platforms and their content preferences, which is useful for Netflix's investigation into their loss of women subscribers who are specifically Gen Z.

Women's Streaming Preferences and Concerns

Focus Group Findings

To better understand the concerns and preferences of female Netflix subscribers, this researcher conducted a focus group of Los Angeles-based women. The focus group findings aligned with the broader research on women's streaming behaviors, revealing that their decisions were significantly influenced by financial concerns, the impact of COVID-19, available free time, and the demand for diverse content. Many participants cited the importance of affordability, expressing a willingness to watch ad-supported content if it meant lower subscription costs. Diversity in representation was also a key factor, as respondents preferred content that reflected their identities and social values. Additionally, the disruption caused by the pandemic changed their viewing habits, with some reporting a decline in leisure time due to increased professional and familial responsibilities. These insights provide a qualitative dimension to the research, reinforcing the broader trends discussed in the literature.

Women's Lifestyles and Viewing Habits

Women's viewing habits are often influenced by their daily responsibilities, work schedules, and personal preferences. Studies indicate that women tend to favor genres such as drama, romance, and true crime, as well as content that provides escapism or relaxation after a long day (Jay, 2023). Women with families may prefer content that accommodates co-viewing with children, whereas single women or working professionals might opt for shorter, easily consumable series due to time constraints. Additionally, women are more likely than men to engage with content that includes strong female leads and meaningful social narratives, aligning with Gen Z's preference for inclusivity and diversity (Bacevich et al., 2021). Understanding these lifestyle-driven viewing habits can help Netflix curate its content and marketing strategies more effectively.

Why Women Choose Competitor Streaming Services Over Netflix

Netflix's dominance is being challenged as women subscribers explore alternative platforms that better meet their needs. Competitor platforms such as Hulu, Disney+, and HBO Max attract women by offering exclusive, high-quality content that resonates with their preferences. Hulu, for instance, provides a variety of ad-supported, lower-cost plans, making it more financially accessible. Disney+ benefits from strong franchise loyalty (Marvel, Star Wars, Pixar), making it particularly appealing to families and younger audiences. Additionally, HBO Max has gained traction with its commitment to diverse and high-quality storytelling, catering to women's interests in drama, documentary, and socially relevant narratives. Many women also appreciate the bundling options offered by these platforms, which provide added value for their investment.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Streaming and Lifestyles

COVID-19 significantly reshaped the way women engaged with streaming services. At the height of the pandemic, streaming usage surged due to lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings. However, as the world transitioned back to in-person work and social activities, many women found less time for binge-watching. Economic strain also played a role in subscription cancellations, as financial pressures forced budget-conscious consumers to cut back on non-essential expenses. The pandemic also emphasized the importance of mental health and work-life balance, leading many women to seek content that was either comforting or informative. As routines continue to normalize, streaming services must recognize these behavioral shifts and adapt their offerings accordingly.

Industry Trends Affecting Streaming Services

The streaming industry is experiencing rapid evolution, with competition intensifying among platforms. The proliferation of streaming services, including Disney+, Amazon Prime

Video, and HBO Max, has forced companies to continually innovate to maintain subscriber interest. One major trend is the shift toward ad-supported tiers, allowing consumers to access lower-cost streaming options. Additionally, platforms are increasingly investing in regional and international content to appeal to diverse audiences. Personalization algorithms have become more sophisticated, ensuring that viewers receive content recommendations tailored to their preferences. Another significant trend is the integration of social media engagement strategies, where streaming services leverage TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to promote their content through short-form videos, influencer collaborations, and interactive features.

Recommendations for Netflix's Social Media Strategy

To retain Gen Z women subscribers, Netflix should implement a data-driven approach to social media content and audience engagement.

Leveraging Short-Form Video Content

Since Gen Z women are highly active on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, Netflix should create engaging, short-form content that highlights upcoming shows, behind-the-scenes footage, and interactive challenges to maintain audience interest.

Personalized Content Promotions

Using AI-driven analytics, Netflix can curate personalized recommendations and push notifications tailored to women's viewing habits, reinforcing engagement and reducing churn.

Ad-Supported Affordability Campaigns

Netflix should emphasize the affordability of its ad-supported tiers, clearly communicating the value proposition to budget-conscious users.

Diversity and Representation-Focused Marketing

To align with Gen Z values, Netflix should promote its commitment to diverse storytelling by spotlighting underrepresented voices in its content and creating social media campaigns that celebrate inclusivity.

Community Engagement Features

Implementing interactive watch parties, fan-driven discussions, and exclusive Q&A sessions with actors and creators can help deepen viewer attachment to Netflix's content.

Enhanced Customer Loyalty Programs

Netflix could introduce loyalty-based incentives, such as discounts or exclusive early access to content, to encourage long-term subscription retention.

By integrating these data-driven strategies, Netflix can more effectively engage Gen Z women subscribers, ensuring that its platform remains a top choice despite increasing competition in the streaming industry.

Keeping Gen Z Women Watching: A Blueprint for Netflix's Future

In conclusion, Netflix stands at a crossroads where understanding and embracing the nuanced preferences of Gen Z women can shape its future in an increasingly competitive streaming landscape. The insights gathered from industry trends, COVID-19's impact, shifting financial priorities, and evolving content preferences underscore the need for a strategic pivot. By leveraging data-driven social media strategies, diversifying its content offerings, and reinforcing its commitment to affordability and inclusivity, Netflix has the opportunity to redefine engagement and loyalty. Rather than merely reacting to change, Netflix can pioneer it—transforming challenges into opportunities and securing its place as the go-to streaming service for the next generation of viewers. The stage is set; now, Netflix must decide how to direct its own blockbuster future.

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