MetaBroadcast

Understanding and combating viewer 'Paralysis of Choice'

How metadata aids discovery when streaming TV and film

The streaming state of play

The past ten years have represented a massive boom in online content. From the rise of Netflix, YouTube, and other streaming services like Disney+ and Hulu, it's clear that the next era of entertainment is upon us.

At first, this was generally seen as a positive by most consumers. But as time has gone on and the number of streaming platforms has increased dramatically, audiences seem to have a sense that things have reverted. Once again, consumers are swamped with countless options that are confusing, frustrating, and costly to navigate.

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>
> All of a sudden there will be too much streaming content available for people to watch and that could lead to severe "Choice Paralysis".

In this whitepaper, we're going to explore this immense jump in options and how that can lead to a "paralysis of choice". We'll also cover studies on the subject and get into **metadata strategies you can use** to help audiences make sense of the wealth of options available to them.

What to expect from this guide

» Understanding the "paralysis of choice"

- The paradox of choice explained
- The theory of "overchoice"
- How overchoice is impacting the digital media industry

» **The Jam Experiment:** a scientific look at the paralysis of choice

» How metadata can alleviate choice paralysis and introduce new content to audiences

- Metadata makes it easy for audiences to discover new content
- Metadata helps audiences differentiate between similar pieces of content
- A metadata strategy brings all of the decision-making information together in one place

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- Improving the discovery process
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# Understanding the "paralysis of choice"

Put simply, "paralysis of choice" is the idea that when someone is presented with too many options, they end up not making any decisions at all.

This has become a growing issue in the entertainment industry as the options available to consumers have increased exponentially in a very short amount of time.

Rewind just 50 years and audiences were only able to watch whatever film was playing at their local cinema. 25 years ago, they had more options in the form of movie tapes and discs that they could take home. Still, even at a video store, shoppers rarely had more than a few hundred choices at their disposal.

Today, audiences have innumerable options presented to them. Looking at UK Netflix's catalogue alone, there are more than 3,000 titles to choose from (not including individual episodes). Once you factor in the other streaming platforms — which all have distinct catalogues and only some duplication — a person is presented with more content than could ever be consumed in a lifetime.

With so many options, it's not unusual for consumers to end up overwhelmed and disengaged from the entertainment being presented to them.
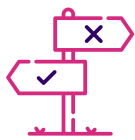
The paradox of choice explained

We can draw an interesting parallel between TV and film streaming and another browsing environment in which customers have learnt to deal with choice over-load: the supermarket.

In-store, supermarket shoppers are faced with 100,000 different product lines. And while supermarkets do all they can to organise the selection, categorising and using signage, most consumers purchase habitually and fall back on the same brands and SKUs each time. Why? Because although more options *may* equate to more freedom, excessive options add difficulty to the decision-making process. Eventually, the shopper takes the path of least cognitive effort.

And we bet you do the same.

That's because we're easily overburdened by choice. If someone has to choose between 100 different sauce flavours, they may walk away empty-handed after all. But if someone only has three choices, then one choice is likely to grab their attention above the other two and land the sale.

Herbet Simon's 1956 concept of '**satisficing**' helps us understand this paradox better. Simon states that if someone is presented with a few options, they'll be happy with finding one that's good enough. But when presented with excessive options, they will have a harder time making a decision they're happy with. This is true even when the larger batch of options contains more perfect options than the smaller batch.

In other words, it's less important that a person is presented with the right options and more important that the options are presented in the right way.

"Overchoice" is an inverted U

Another associated theory content publishers and creators need to understand is that of overchoice: the relationship between the number of choices a person has and the satisfaction associated with those choices has an inverted U curve.

This means that a person with no choices is unhappy. As more choices are presented, that person's satisfaction increases. At a certain number, however, their satisfaction peaks, and after that, we're back to dissatisfaction.

Overchoice seems to be particularly potent in situations where the differences between choices are unclear or minimal. For instance, a person will feel less overwhelmed by an abundance of options if those options are distinct.

Someone presented with 20 exposé documentaries focused on different industries will feel less overwhelmed than someone presented with 10 rom-coms with similar artwork.
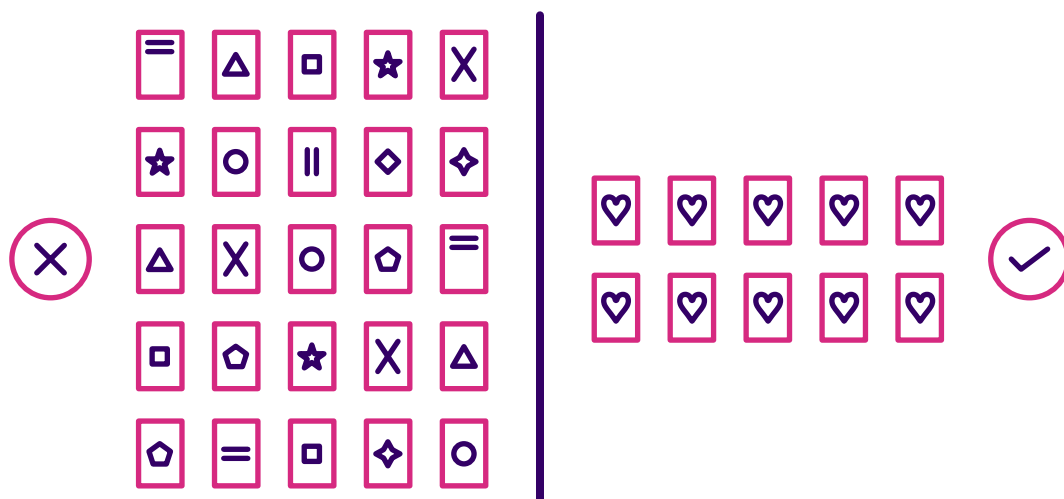
It's important to note that research on the theory of overchoice and the paradox of choice is ongoing. We don't have all the answers right now, though there does seem to be a relationship between more choices leading to decreased satisfaction in the decision-making process.

And that relationship is worth exploring from an entertainment perspective.

How overchoice is impacting the digital media industry

So far, we've largely been looking at the paralysis of choice through the lens of products on the whole. Now, let's turn our focus to the digital media industry.

In the UK, a household that watches video on demand has **2.3 streaming subscriptions on average**. That jumps to 3.1 streaming services per household in the US. Based on the average number of movies alone on each streaming service (~1,500), that's upwards of 3,500 movies to choose from at any given time.

Let's say a viewer is struck with the desire to watch an old film or has heard of a new title through friends, they could have two, three, or even four services to search through first. Lack of content aggregation causes lost time and a poor user experience.

And if your audience isn't sure of what to watch at all, the number of results can be more overwhelming still. Settling on a genre still only narrows the selection process down to hundreds or thousands of films... and then there's the multiple services to look through too.

These extreme levels of overchoice impact audiences and content distribution alike:

It makes it harder for lesser-known content to be discovered, as audiences are less likely to take risks when pressed to make a decision.

It can make it harder for groups (friends/families) to decide on a film.

It becomes more likely that audiences will feel less satisfied with the content they're watching, leading to a reduction in watch-time.

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The Jam Experiment:
a scientific look at the paralysis of choice

Conducted in 2000 by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper, The Jam Experiment was a straightforward look at how you might solve the challenge of overchoice.

In the study, a display table selling different jams was set up at a supermarket. Sometimes, the table held 24 different kinds of jams. And other times, only 6 kinds of jam were sold.

Consistently, more sales were made when only 6 kinds of jam were presented to shoppers. The stand selling just 6 jams landed 30% of their sales, while the table with 24 landed only 3%.

What's more, the table with 24 jams had 60% of passersby stop to check out the product, while the more limited table only grabbed 40% of passersby. This means that the limited options not only outperformed the extensive options but did so with a smaller pool of customers.

This lends credibility to the idea that intelligently curated and limitable options will outperform an abundance of options. So let's unpack that further...

How metadata can alleviate choice paralysis and introduce new content to audiences

Content publishers and distributors can reduce a viewer's choice paralysis by leveraging a tighter metadata strategy.

For those who don't know, metadata refers to any data attached to your content that isn't the content itself. That includes programme name, episode title, posters, thumbnails, reviews, synopses, genre tags, age rating, series number, episode number, and more.

Metadata is extremely powerful as an organisational tool. This makes it particularly effective when it comes to setting up algorithms and curating your content. Below are some of MetaBroadcast's favourite methods for improving an audience's decision-making process.

⊘ Metadata makes it easy for audiences to discover new content

One of the primary benefits of metadata is its ability to aid in the curation and suggestion of content. There are nearly infinite ways to use metadata in this process, so no two platforms will use the same approach.

Regardless, metadata can play a pivotal role in helping you decide which content to put before your audience. This is especially important when you're displaying a limited amount of options — in a 'Your Recommendations' list, for example — as you want to ensure that the majority of those options are quality suggestions.

✓ Metadata helps audiences differentiate between similar pieces of content

Another way that metadata can alleviate the paralysis of choice is by differentiating similar pieces of content.

This is one of the key reasons choice paralysis persists. A person is presented with several options that aren't very distinct from one another, and so the person, struggling to understand the differences, ends up scrolling and scrolling before giving up entirely or reverting to a film or show they've watched before.

Metadata can help you find and present the finer differences between content. Maybe that's presenting sub-genres, including trailers or reviews, more detailed synopses, or simply using metadata to prevent too-similar content from being displayed adjacently.

Whatever route you choose, metadata can help you increase the chances of a user deciding on a movie to watch.

✓ A metadata strategy brings all of the decision-making information together in one place

Lastly, it benefits your platform greatly to have as much information available in one place as possible. There are a few reasons for this.

First, this reduces the chances that a user will visit an alternative platform to learn more about your content. If everything, including the trailer, cast list, IMDb score, and reviews, for a TV show or film is available on your service, then there's no reason for a viewer to click away.

Second, the more information a person has on each piece of content, the easier it will be for them to weigh them against one another and make an informed decision. This speeds up the decision-making process as well as improving their viewer's user experience (creating a positive perception of your product and brand).

Metadata in action: how YouTube keeps users engaged with new content

Although overchoice is a growing problem in the digital entertainment sector, some platforms have effective solutions in place. YouTube, for example, has done an excellent job at adjusting to the abundant choices consumers are facing.

YouTube: a metadata case study

YouTube has an indescribably large collection of content. And yet, this doesn't seem to impact users ability to discover and engage with content every day.

How? The YouTube algorithm — a powerful tool used to display content to users via infinite scroll but in a limited rotation.

If you go to the homepage of your YouTube account and start scrolling, you'll notice that no matter how many videos scroll by, the variety of content is relatively minimal. You'll see a few options from channels you're subscribed to, videos from channels you've watched recently, some random videos related to your interests, and then the loop repeats.

The options are limitless, but the repeating loop of content is tight. This means that users see a broad range in content after a few swipes, and if nothing catches their interest, they see that same range repeated with different options.

For a streaming platform's film list, that scrolling loop might look like this:
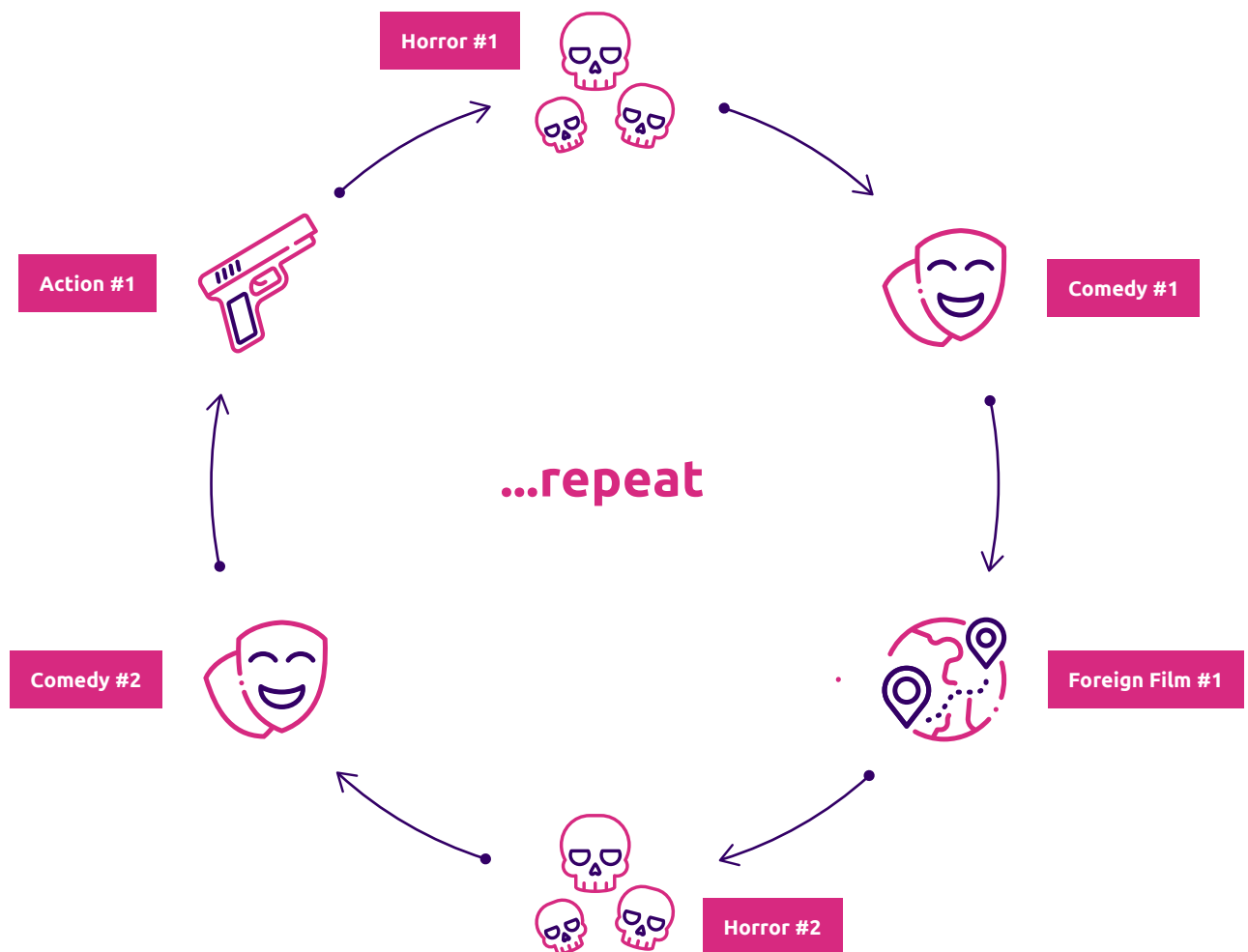
This, paired with a highly effective search feature, makes YouTube an incredibly successful video streaming platform — one that benefits viewers and content creators equally. From a commercial standpoint, the number of YouTube channels earning six figures per year grows more than **40% year on year**.

And much of that is down to aiding discovery and getting viewers' eyes on published content.

Getting started with a metadata-centric approach

YouTube may be the biggest content platform on the planet, but that doesn't mean you can't apply similar techniques to your platform.

MetaBroadcast is a firm believer in the power of metadata to transform the way you curate and present your content to audiences. Here are some of the ways we incorporate a metadata-centric approach to digital entertainment.

What metadata is essential?

First things first, it's crucial that you identify which metadata should be prioritised for your platform and viewers. It will vary from one platform to the next. For instance, Netflix prioritises thumbnails, previews, and genres, while YouTube favours thumbnails, view counts, and recommendations.

Improving the discovery process

Second, you need to take the metadata that has the highest impact on your platform and use it to improve your discovery process. As we've covered throughout this whitepaper, improving the discovery process means presenting options as distinct from one another and piquing the viewer's interest.

Metadata can help you organise your content and present it to your audience through these metrics.

Draw more sophisticated conclusions between varying pieces of content

Third, metadata can help you draw intelligent conclusions between varying pieces of content. It's the reason why an off-the-wall suggestion from Netflix, YouTube, or even Spotify might end up resonating with the user.

Netflix in particular has invested in this idea, launching its new 'Play Something' feature earlier this year. **In its launch announcement**, Netflix appealed to over-loaded viewers, saying: "*When finding your next story, let the story find you.*"

A great way to accomplish this is by recommending content to users with overlap-ping interests. For instance, if **User A** likes **ABC**, and **User B** likes **ABD**, you can suggest **D** to **User A** and **C** to User **B**.

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Partner with **Meta**Broadcast to use your metadata to boost the performance of your content service

Now that you know how the paralysis of choice can affect your users and have insights into how you can alleviate this challenge, you might have a plethora of ideas you're ready to start working on.

If you aren't sure where to move forward from here, though, MetaBroadcast can help. We're experts when it comes to capitalising on metadata in the digital entertainment industry and we can help you do the same.

Reach out to our team for more information.

Contact Us