

# Researchers Examine the Hidden Expenses of Netflix's Autoplay Feature.

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Courtesy of SynEvol  
Credit: Department of Computer Science at University of Chicago

Autoplay, a function that starts the subsequent episode or film without user interaction, has become a standard feature of contemporary streaming services such as Netflix. However, what is the actual price of this convenience regarding our control over time and decision-making?

A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago's Department of Computer Science, which expands on earlier research, highlights the unforeseen effects of autoplay functions, showing how this seemingly harmless feature might discreetly affect user habits and consumption trends.

The study, published on the arXiv preprint server and slated for presentation at the Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Computing later this year, investigates the consequences of disabling autoplay on Netflix and the wider ramifications for user independence. The research provides intriguing perspectives on how this element could be altering our connection with streaming services.

"Services such as Netflix aim to reduce friction, ensuring that chances for users to stray from the activity they are passively involved in are limited," stated lead author and fifth-year Ph.D. candidate Brennan Schaffner. "The 5-second autoplay timer offers barely sufficient time for viewers to reflect on, or even reconsider, their initial reasons for using the platform."

The research involved 76 participants who had already indicated moderate to heavy use of Netflix. Half of the participants disabled autoplay, whereas the control group kept it enabled. The researchers examined the viewing habits of both groups throughout the study duration, along with the six months leading up to it.

The research revealed that disabling autoplay resulted in participants watching significantly less time on Netflix. Participants who disabled Netflix's autoplay spent more time between episodes, giving them the opportunity to contemplate their viewing choices and consider the content they were watching with greater awareness.

The reduction in viewing session duration—approximately 18 minutes per Netflix session—can probably be attributed to the heightened "friction" required to keep watching content, which promotes more deliberate choices regarding when to cease viewing.

A participant mentioned, "It made me aware of how many episodes I was viewing... I hadn't focused on it as much previously." Now I thought, "Oh right, I need to do this three times, so this is the third episode."

Although autoplay is heavily promoted as a user-friendly function that keeps viewers engaged with their preferred content, this study highlights the possible drawbacks. The function eliminates barriers, allowing Netflix viewers to continue watching seamlessly. Nonetheless, the authors of the study noted that this ease of use could have drawbacks—users might lose track of time, watch more content than planned, and unintentionally engage in harmful behaviors like interrupted sleep or other unhealthy viewing habits.

Earlier studies have indicated that autoplay could serve as a type of "dark pattern" design, discreetly influencing users' focus to favor participation on the platform instead of user welfare.

"The term 'dark patterns' describes a group of interconnected digital design strategies that impair a user's capacity to make choices that favor their own interests," Schaffner clarified. "They are often referred to as 'platform tactics' that steer users towards choices they might not normally make."

Once autoplay was disabled, participants in the study were requested to consider their experience and if they might reactivate the feature. The outcomes were varied: Approximately half of the participants noted they would reactivate autoplay for its practicality, claiming that it would be simpler than having to rise and actively interact with the platform to access the next content they desired. A participant mentioned, "I appreciate that it automatically plays the next episode, so I can remain in my cozy bed."

Conversely, around one-third of participants indicated that they intended to maintain autoplay disabled after realizing the extra time they had to consider if they wished to continue viewing or not.

The results highlight the necessity for streaming services such as Netflix to reconsider the incorporation of autoplay within their user interfaces. By providing finer controls over autoplay options, such as disabling this feature by default or giving users a selection during account setup, platforms can enable users to manage convenience alongside independence, resulting in a more personalized experience.

For instance, future enhancements could involve allowing users to determine how many episodes should be queued for autoplay before asking for their input or providing extended countdown periods prior to automatically starting the subsequent episode.

These design modifications are crucial—particularly for children—due to the wider ethical and regulatory consequences related to autoplay functionalities. As platforms focus more on user engagement, the possibility of autoplay affecting decision-making and compromising autonomy brings forth significant worries.

As regulatory oversight intensifies, particularly from entities like the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), there is an increasing acknowledgment of the necessity to safeguard users against features that could influence their actions.

This involves analyzing how autoplay and comparable design features affect user wellness and independence—particularly regarding children's access to content that could promote harmful usage, considering that automatically playing content might not have been deliberately selected by the child or their guardians.

"This research is among the initial efforts to distinguish and evaluate the influence of a specific attention-capture dark pattern—namely, autoplay—and its effects on viewing habits," stated Assoc. Prof. Marshini Chetty, the primary author of this study.

"We require additional research of this nature that offers measurable indicators of online manipulation to assist regulators, platform creators, and researchers in improving consumer safeguards and to guarantee that designs do not produce adverse effects on society."