Subtrackr

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Problem and Solution Overview:

Recently many services have been adoption or moving over to the subscription model. This has created some challenges for users because it abstracts the cost of the service and making it harder to evaluate the actual cost of maintaining a subscription. Moreover, companies often make it difficult to unsubscribe from a service by automatically renewing your subscription at the end of a pay period forcing you to end the subscription explicitly. This is challenging for users as it requires that they set up reminders to remember that a service is about to end and to cancel early. Our proposed design would address these issues by both tracking the use of a service, making the costs and benefits less obscure to the user, and by automating the renewal process eliminating the need for users to track it manually. Our design would make use of these two features to take better advantage of the free trials offered by many services. Giving users a concrete way to evaluate their product trial and eliminate the concern of accidentally paying for a service they decided not to continue using.

Design Research Goals, Stakeholders, and Participants:

Liz, our first participant, is an oceanology PhD student at UW. She has subscribed to both Netflix and Amazon Prime for more than 3 years and never considered unsubscribing from either of them. The interview happened in a coffee shop.

Leah is an experimental physics PhD student at UW. The interview happened in a coffee shop where we sat down for a chat over coffee. She is sharing the Netflix and Amazon Prime account with her whole family and her parents paid for both services.

Alice is a recent graduate. She is currently looking for a job and does not have fixed income yet. She is sharing a Netflix account with her boyfriend and his family. We spoke with her in person.

Christine is a senior at UW. She has a scholarship and a part-time job to support herself. She has subscribed to both Netflix and Amazon Prime free trial and ended up continuing Amazon Prime and dropping Netflix. She has subscribed to Amazon Prime for 2 years since. The conversation happened over a coffee.

We have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, due to the time constraint. The questions in the interviews are designed to provoke the thought process that goes along with calculating whether or not a subscription is worth the money a user pays for it, and find out how participants manage and use the services. Also we want to open the options of follow-ups for the possibility of further ideas and brainstorming. In a way, it's similar to contextual inquiry, with the difference that the interview questions are designed to spur on the process of deciding, rather than waiting for it to happen naturally.

We chose Liz, Leah and Alice because they are all self-sustaining and in charge of the decision of subscribing to services while having limited income, which might prompt them to consider micro-management and evaluation of the service in order to save money. We oriented our interviews around Amazon Prime and Netflix. And thus it was important that all participants have subscribed to Amazon Prime and Netflix. In the other way, we want our participants are representative of different household situations. We talk to Liz because she could provide perspectives as a professional woman living with her housemates. And Leah's and Alice's experience in sharing services within the household are very beneficial in the same sense. We chose Christine for further exploration on evaluating free trial because she has an experience with both continuing and discontinuing a service after free trial and we want to know her perspective in that.

We chose Liz for follow-up interviews on tracking across multiple subscription categories because she maintains a wide range of subscriptions from utilities to offline entertainment subscriptions, such as magazines.

Design Research Results and Themes:

Based on our initial three interviews there were a few common themes that we observed. We presented participants with the idea of subscribing and unsubscribing from a service with the goal of saving money when they weren't expecting to be using it. Despite the potential to save money, all participants were opposed to the idea. Even though they recognised that their usage could vary greatly month to month, they would rather accept the loss to avoid having to micromanage their various subscriptions. In fact, the consistency of paying via a subscription fee was something that was highly valued by our participants. They all liked knowing that they had had unlimited access rather than using a pay-per-use model and having to consider the cost of every purchase. The alternative to Netflix being renting movies through Google, or paying for shipping on each purchase through Amazon. Even when it was mentioned that they could be losing money through the subscription model Participants said that they would be fine with that loss. They enjoyed the peace-of-mind and the ability to think of each transaction as being free having already paid the subscription. Even in cases where we presented the participant with their usage history, and found that it fell short of their expectations, the monetary loss was not enough for them to consider unsubscribing from the service.

This characterized another theme we found among participants is none of them seemed particularly concerned with the idea of saving money. Nobody who owned a Netflix subscription considered it as an alternative to renting movies. Instead, they chose to subscribe either to have access to their library, or because they heard of other people doing it. One participant even admitted that this was their reason for subscribing to Amazon Prime. These results were likely biased though because among participants interviewed, two of them were sharing Netflix accounts with others and were not personally responsible for the bill. Another participant had been using free trials to Amazon prime for a year and was not currently paying for the service. but had been using free trials. This was interesting because it highlighted a technique that people were willing to use to maximize the value of a subscription. While they weren't interested in canceling their subscription or changing their personal viewing habits, it was common to use a shared account. Generally, this might be thought of as maximizing breadth rather than depth.

During the user research, our interview questions mainly focus on Netflix and Amazon as they are very typical and the most commonly used online subscription services. However, later in our design process, this focus increased the chance of designing functions that were specifically for Netflix and Amazon subscribers. As we realized our project only met part of the intended audience's needs, we adjusted the functions that were too specific about certain services. For example, one of our tasks was managing when each of the person in a group sharing an account should use the service, which is only applicable to Netflix or similar services that limit the number of screens. We found the user's' common but not specific needs of tracking free trial usage, which was brought up but not further extended in the research. Thus, we conducted a follow-up user research with a concentration of free trial and some other general but essential aspects of our product, such as tracking across multiple subscription categories.

Task Analysis:

1. **Who is going to use this design?**

   - People who want to keep track of when a pay period ends
   - People looking to share subscription service with others
   - People who find difficulty decomposing service and picking out the most suitable option
   - People who explore and evaluate new services

2. **What tasks do they now perform?**
   We have observed that people have a fairly mental idea of how much they are using certain services (usually services related to watching television), and that people are generally prompted to try a service by hearing a lot about it. Often they would either perform calculations to see how much they would have to the service to make it worth it or try to get a vague impression of whether they use the service enough.
   Another task that occurs is the sharing of these services. Some people share subscription benefits within their families or housemates, while others share passwords with their friends so that many people can use the same account.
   In addition, people tend to have a good knowledge of subscription services across different categories.

3. **What tasks are desired?**
   While it seemed easy for some to mentally figure out how much they used certain services, for others it was much more difficult. One possible desired task could be evaluating whether a service fulfilled a user's expectation by tracking over the user's usage and comparing the data to the user's expectation.
   Another desired task is knowing when a subscription is about to be renewed. Many people we talked to seem to be interested in knowing when this is coming up so they can unsubscribe if needed and not pay for an extra pay period's worth of service.
   Also different options in a service and the composition or benefits for a service could become confusing for customers, especially those who are not tech savvy. So decomposing a service and presenting more fitting options could be beneficial.
   For services with recurring charges across different categories, though people understand what they are subscribed to quite well, it seems that they don't necessarily have a clear idea of how much they spend on each category. So tracking those spendings and reporting them in categories could be a possible task and beneficial for people to understand their spending in subscriptions.
   In terms of sharing services, we learned from interviews that people tend to share the services within the family, but feel constrained from sharing it among friends due to the possible cost split. So initiating and facilitating sharing management could be a potential task.

4. **How are the tasks learned?**
   People learn about these services by word of mouth for the most part, and attempt to follow the instructions in the service website. People tend to subscribe on things that people they know are subscribed to as well, so they learn what to subscribe to based on social interaction.

5. **Where are the tasks performed?**
   Physically, these tasks can be performed anywhere as long as someone has access to a computer, cell phone, or other Internet device.

6. **What is the relationship between the person and data?**
   What makes subscription services so appealing is that much of the data is obscured. It's fairly hard to find exactly when you're paying, exactly how much you are paying, and how much you are using the service on the website for the customers, despite the availability of all these data. Customers seem to enjoy this obscurity of data. They like the fact that they don't have to purchase something each time they use it and have the illusion of no cost. However, access to this data is essential to evaluate cost and worth, as described in the tasks above.

7. **What other tools does the person have?**
   People can use calculators and excel sheet to track and evaluate their usage data on the services to do most of the tasks described. People have access to communicate with their friends for information on what their friends are currently using or willing to share.

8. **How do people communicate with each other?**
   Since many of these services are very widespread in use (such as Netflix, for example) people interact with each other about these services all the time, without necessarily knowing that they're doing so. People's opinions on these services are shaped by how often they hear about them, and how they're described. For example, Netflix is so widely used that many people (including those we interviewed) seem to deem it as something that's merely essential to their lives. Also people tend to keep sharing service within the household to avoid the cost split.

9. **How often are the tasks performed?**
   People tend to think about things right before they are committed to the service, which often happens during free trial or the first couple months of subscription and sometimes when they choose to subscribe for a small period of time.

10. **What are the time constraints on the tasks?**
   The time constraints on getting value in for a service that they have subscribed to is a single pay period. Users also have a pay period (particularly free trial) to decide on whether or not they will subscribe to the service again, but there is more information on how much they've used the service throughout the pay period the farther they are towards the end of the pay period. For sharing among people, it highly depends on the users' situations with respect to pay period.

11. **What happens when things go wrong?**
    One example of something going wrong is when someone didn't realize their subscription automatically renewed or they were using options that were not suitable for them. In this case, there's a chance that they wanted to unsubscribe for the now-current pay period and have not, meaning that they just lost the money they wouldn't have spent on that service. Also situation such as someone subscribing to a service that they barely use could be on example as well.

Proposed Design Sketches:

Design 1- Tracking Free Trials: The focus is on people's usage data at free trial and evaluating the value of the service. The goal is to help people understand the value of the free trial considering their expectations and find services that can fulfill their expectations. This design tracks user data and presents users with a page of calculated statistics based on their data that could help them decide whether or not to subscribe to this service in the future. This design also has a feature that allows users to find new services with trials that they can try out.
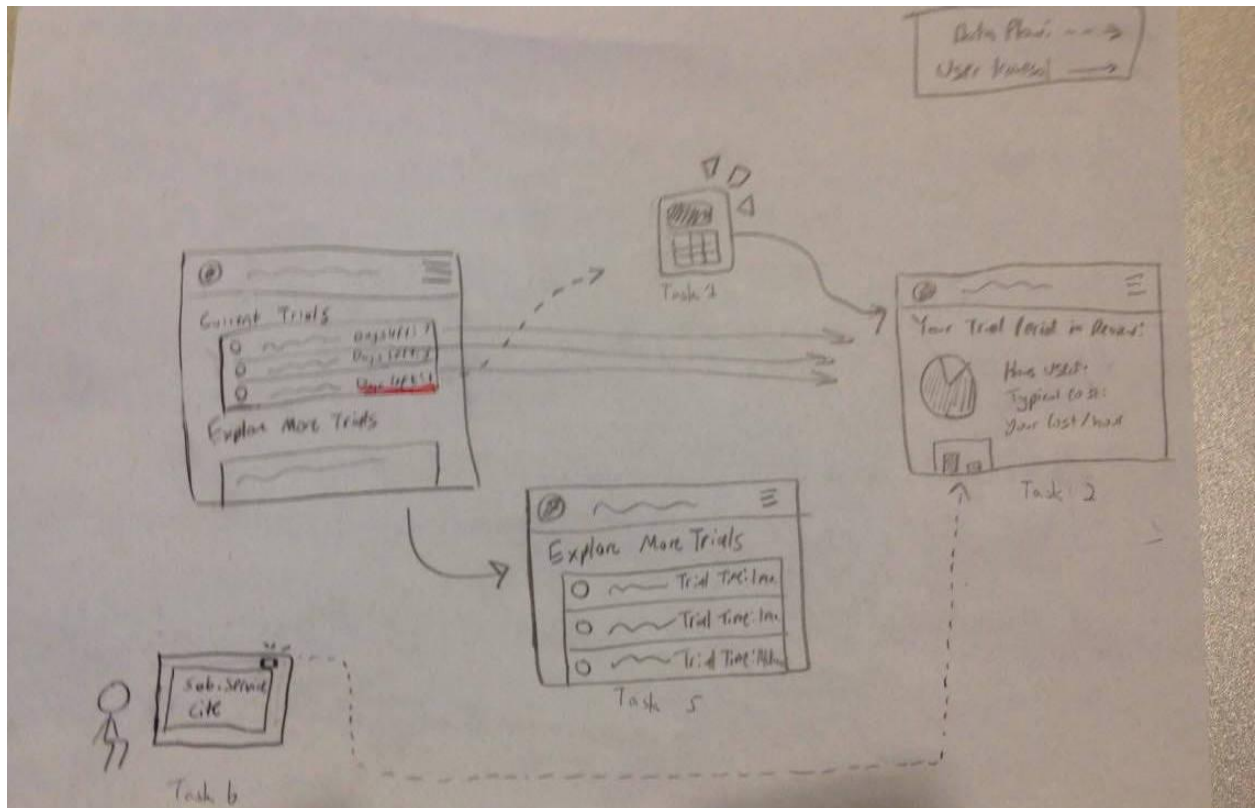
Design 2- Finding New Subscription Services: This design focuses on finding new services for users to use. It does this by tracking their current behaviors with their subscription services and finding out what new services they might want to use. It also connects them with their friends to find new services that their friends are using and to possibly find friends to use services with.
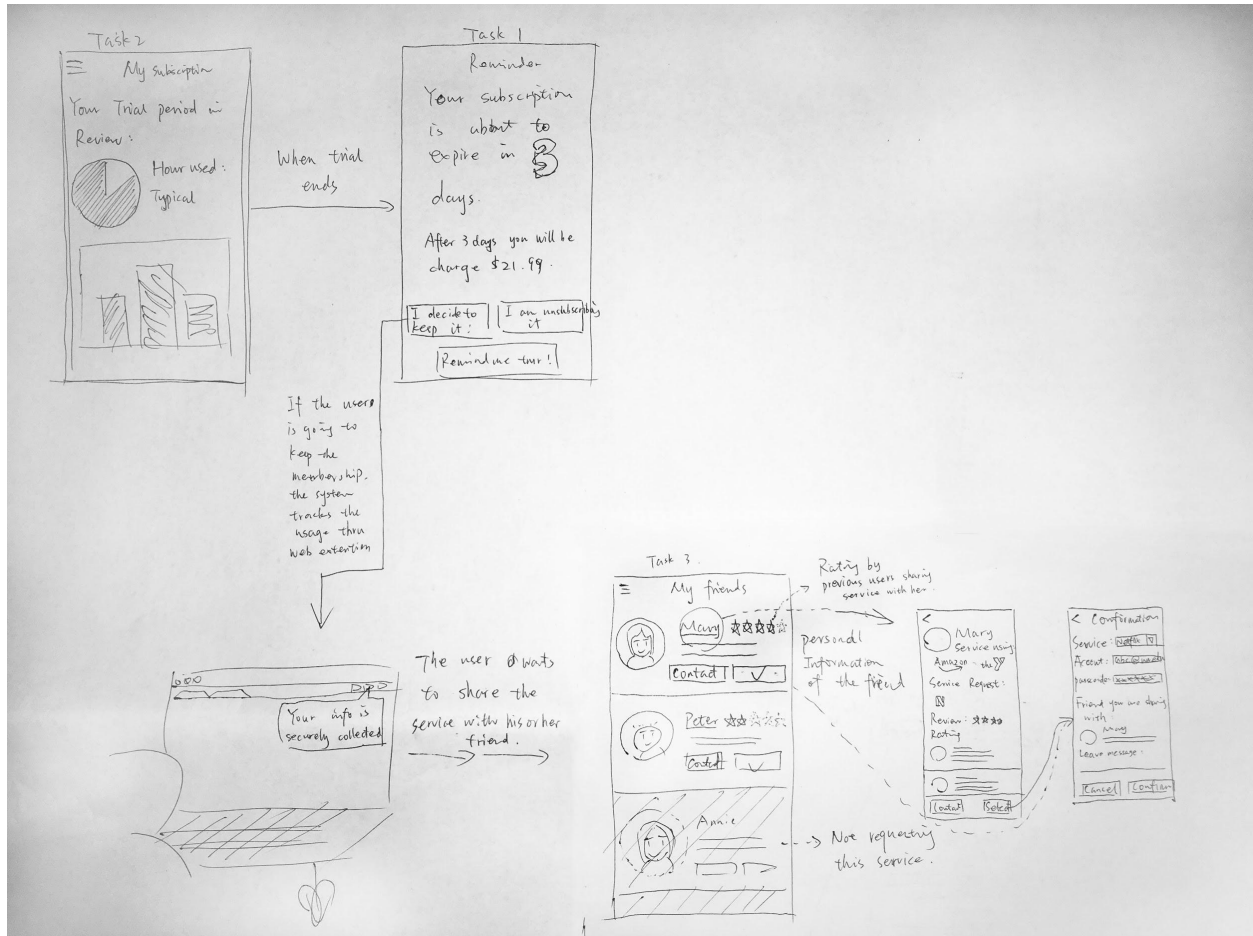
Design 3- Managing Subscription Service Sharing: This design revolves around managing several people's use of the same subscription together to save money. In this design, people can find each other and manage their usage so that multiple people only have to get one subscription. One of the key aspects of this design is showing how much each user uses the service and allowing users sharing the service to decide how much each person should pay.
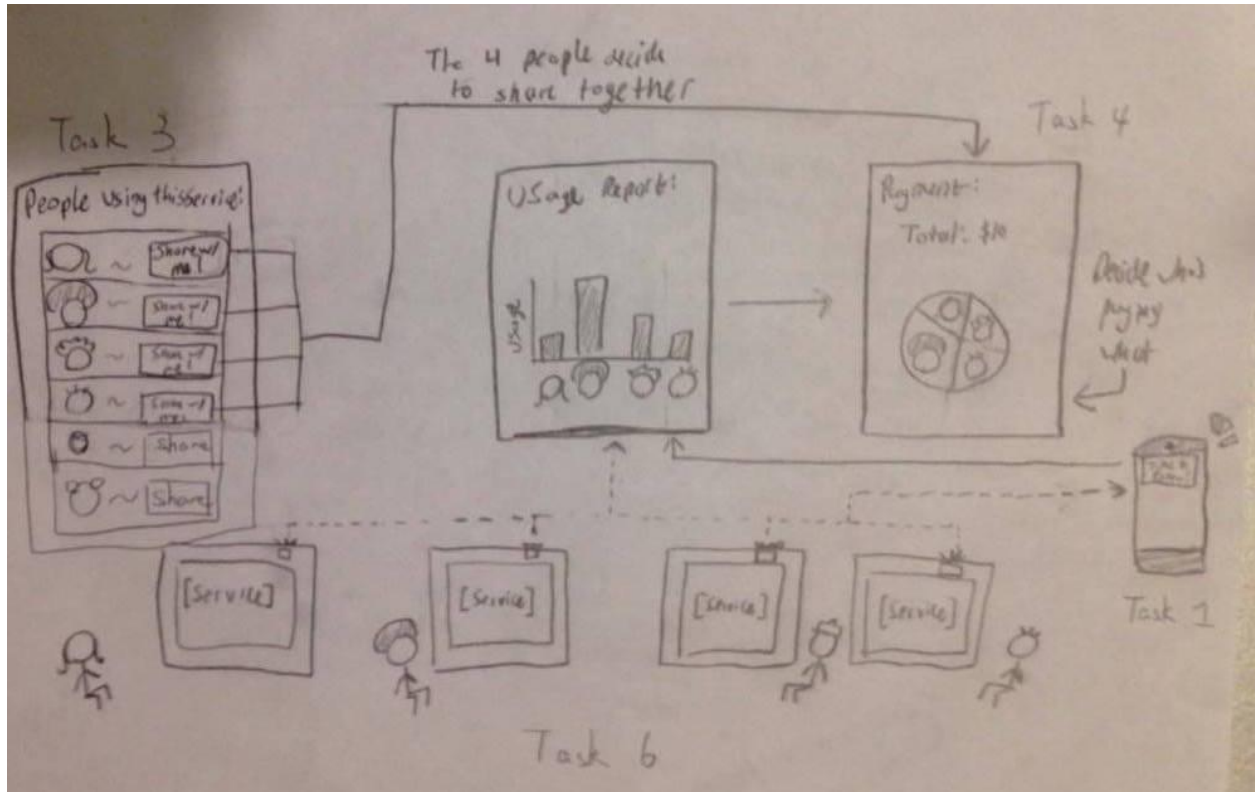
Design Choice- Design 1: We chose to move forward with design one because the tasks it focuses were best supported by our design research. We began to discover that most people put things that they subscribe to into two categories: things that they deem essential and won't unsubscribe from any time soon and things that they are just using for a limited amount of time to gain temporary benefits. By focusing on the latter, our design can actually change how people use these services, rather than being a nuisance obstructing them from using something they don't want to give up on. While this design originally just focused on free trials, we've decided now to expand it to any sort of use of subscription services on this sort of contingent basis.

Finding new services isn't incredibly helpful since people mostly use what their friends use or what they've heard about the most and don't really care to branch out. Facilitating a relationship between people sharing a device isn't totally useful either because most people share devices with those that they are very close to or those that they live with. Because of this, using an application as a form of communication would most likely just hamper and obstruct communication, rather than helping connect people that would have trouble communicating otherwise.

An Alternative Design:

Some of the feedback on our 3x4 design write-up was, although our 3 designs covered different design space, they ended up being very similar in practice because the tasks they included were all very similar. In an effort to explore new design space we came up with a fourth design that we could consider over our second and third designs. After focusing on the unique aspects of design 2 and 3 we found that design 2 didn't offer much over existing social media apps and design 3 had a lot of potential legal issues since it encouraged breaking the terms of service of many subscription services.

We decided to approach the definition of subscription services from a much broader perspective by breaking them down into 6 major categories:

- Entertainment - Includes movies, TV and games

- Food - weekly/monthly food delivery services

- Gift boxes

- Club memberships

- Utilities

- Reading material

We tried to find think of a design that would cover all of these different categories but couldn't go beyond tracking use of service vs cost. Although in our group found the idea of having access to that information in an organized format, we didn't have the user research to support this idea. Among the people we interviewed, there wasn't much concern about the overall amount of money spent on subscriptions once someone was already subscribed to a service. We did a single, short follow-up interview about this idea with one of our interviewees, but didn't find much interest in the idea.

Written Scenarios:

Scenario 1 (see storyboard 1): Robby has heard that a lot of his friends like the show Westworld on HBO. He wants to watch through the show so that he can understand what all the praise is for, but he doesn't have HBO. He goes onto HBO's site and sees that he can get a one month free trial for HBO's streaming service. Robby knows that he can probably watch Westworld (which only has one season) during a month so he begins his free trial. However, Robby has to give his credit card information to HBO and notices that there's no way to turn off automatic renewal without cancelling his free month as well. To help him remember, Robby enters information about his trial into SubTrackr. Later, before his trial expires, he gets a notification from SubTrackr telling him to unsubscribe. This lets him cancel his free trial without incurring any extra payments.

Scenario 2 (same task as scenario 1, but a different situation): Roger knows that the holidays are coming and that he's going to be doing a lot of online ordering. However, he doesn't order things online very often when it isn't the holiday season. Because of this, Roger wants to subscribe to Amazon Prime to get free shipping benefits, but only for a few months. Roger has already used a free trial for Amazon Prime, so he has to pay for this subscription. He gives information about when he is starting his subscription and how many pay periods he wants to keep it for to SubTrackr. When it comes to be the time when he decided he wanted to unsubscribe from Amazon Prime, he gets an alert from SubTrackr and cancels his subscription before he pays for an extra pay period.

Scenario 3 (see storyboard 2): Linda's friends have all been telling her to get Hulu, but Linda is unsure of how much she would use Hulu. She goes online to check out Hulu's website and sees that they offer a free trial. She signs up for the trial, but also enters her information into SubTrackr. Later during her trial, she checks out her statistics on SubTrackr. She sees that if she was paying for Hulu, she would be paying about $0.24 per episode that she watches. Linda decides that this is a pretty good deal, so she decides to stay subscribed to Hulu. A few months later, Linda checks her statistics again. It turns out that after finishing the how that she subscribed to hulu to watch, her usage went way down. She decides at this point to cancel her subscription.

Storyboards:

Storyboard 1:

Storyboard 2: