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ECONOMIC RESISTANCE AND THE FREE-CONTENT ECOLOGY: WHY UZBEKISTAN CONSUMERS RESIST PAYING FOR ONLINE SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Abstract

This article examines economic resistance as a barrier to online subscription service adoption in Uzbekistan. Drawing on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of 206 open-ended survey responses from non-adopters, three analytically distinct sub-themes are identified: hard budget constraints driven by low disposable income, the perceived sufficiency of free and informal content alternatives, and low perceived value for money. Together, these sub-themes constitute what this article terms the "free-content ecology" — a competitive landscape in which informal digital content channels exert gravitational pull away from paid subscription models. The findings extend UTAUT2 (Venkatesh, Thong and Xu, 2012) by situating the price value construct within a specific competitive ecology shaped by income constraints, piracy norms, and the structural availability of free alternatives. Practical implications for subscription providers, policymakers, and the Digital Uzbekistan 2030 agenda are discussed.

Keywords: subscription services; economic resistance; price value; free-content ecology; non-adoption; digital piracy; UTAUT2; Uzbekistan; emerging markets.

ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОЕ СОПРОТИВЛЕНИЕ И ЭКОЛОГИЯ СВОБОДНОГО КОНТЕНТА: ПОЧЕМУ ПОТРЕБИТЕЛИ УЗБЕКИСТАНА ОТКАЗЫВАЮТСЯ ПЛАТИТЬ ЗА ОНЛАЙН-ПОДПИСКИ

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается экономическое сопротивление как барьер для принятия онлайн-подписок в Узбекистане. На основе рефлексивного тематического анализа (Браун и Кларк, 2006) 206 открытых ответов нон-адоптеров выявлены три аналитически самостоятельных субтемы: жёсткие бюджетные ограничения, обусловленные низким уровнем располагаемых доходов; воспринимаемая достаточность бесплатных и неформальных альтернатив цифрового контента; низкая воспринимаемая ценность по соотношению цена/качество. Совокупность этих субтем образует то, что в статье обозначается как «экология свободного контента» — конкурентная среда, в которой

неформальные каналы распространения цифрового контента оказывают значительное конкурентное давление на платные подписочные модели. Результаты расширяют рамки UTAUT2 (Venkatesh, Thong и Xu, 2012), помещая конструкт ценовой ценности в специфическую конкурентную экологию, формируемую ограничениями доходов, нормами пиратства и структурной доступностью бесплатных альтернатив.

Ключевые слова: подписочные сервисы; экономическое сопротивление; ценовая ценность; экология свободного контента; непринятие; цифровое пиратство; UTAUT2; Узбекистан; развивающиеся рынки.

IQTISODIY QARSHILIK VA BEPUL KONTENT EKOLOGIYASI: NIMA UCHUN O'ZBEKISTON ISTE'MOLCHILARI ONLAYN OBUNALAR UCHUN TO'LASHDAN BOS TORTADI

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Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola O'zbekistonda onlayn obuna xizmatlarini qabul qilishga to'siq sifatida iqtisodiy qarshilikni o'rganadi. Braun va Klark (2006) refleksiv tematik tahlil metodidan foydalanib, 206 ta ochiq javob asosida uchta alohida sub-mavzu aniqlandi: past daromad darajasidan kelib chiqadigan qattiq byudjet cheklovlari; bepul va norasmiy raqamli kontent alternativlarining yetarliligi hissi; hamda pul evaziga olinadigan qiymatning past ko'rinishi. Ushbu sub-mavzular birgalikda maqolada "bepul kontent ekologiyasi" deb nomlangan hodisani tashkil etadi — norasmiy raqamli kontent kanallari pullik obuna modellaridan chetlashtiruvchi kuchli raqobat muhiti. Natijalar UTAUT2 (Venkatesh, Thong va Xu, 2012) nazariy doirasini kengaytiradi, narx-qiymat konstruktini daromad cheklovlari, piratlik normalari va bepul alternativlarning tarkibiy mavjudligi bilan shakllantirilgan o'ziga xos raqobat ekologiyasiga joylashtiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: obuna xizmatlari; iqtisodiy qarshilik; narx-qiymat; bepul kontent ekologiyasi; qabul qilmaslik; raqamli piratlik; UTAUT2; O'zbekiston; rivojlanayotgan bozorlar

Introduction

The global subscription economy has reshaped how consumers engage with digital services across entertainment, software, health, and information. In markets where digital financial infrastructure is mature and card-based payments are routine, the subscription format has become economically normalised. In lower-income emerging markets, however, the economic logic of recurring payment encounters a fundamentally different reception. Consumers face hard budget constraints, operate within informal digital ecosystems where large volumes of content are freely available, and harbour scepticism toward value propositions that require ongoing financial commitment.

Uzbekistan exemplifies this tension. With a rapidly expanding digital sector — internet penetration reached 87.2% by early 2025 (DataReportal, 2025) and the e-commerce market was valued at \$1.2 billion in 2024 (KPMG, 2023) — the country nonetheless records very low uptake of subscription-based digital services. Average monthly salaries of approximately \$320

(Djumaev, 2024), deeply entrenched cash-payment habits, and a thriving informal digital content ecosystem together create a structural environment in which paying for subscriptions is not simply unattractive — for large segments of the population, it is economically irrational.

This article investigates the economic dimension of non-adoption through the lens of Theme 3 from a larger qualitative study on subscription adoption barriers in Uzbekistan, based on reflexive thematic analysis of 206 open-ended survey responses. Three analytically distinct sub-themes emerge: cost aversion and budget constraints; the perceived sufficiency of free alternatives; and low perceived value for money. Together, these sub-themes illuminate what this article terms the "free-content ecology" — a competitive environment in which informal, free, and often unauthorised digital content channels exert powerful gravitational pull away from paid subscription models.

Literature Review

Technology adoption research has extensively theorised the role of economic factors in shaping consumer decisions about digital services. UTAUT2 (Venkatesh, Thong and Xu, 2012) incorporates price value — the cognitive trade-off between perceived benefits and monetary costs — as one of its central constructs. Empirically, price value has been shown to be a significant predictor of adoption intention across a variety of digital service contexts, including mobile banking (Alalwan, Dwivedi and Rana, 2017), e-commerce (Kabanda and Brown, 2017), and platform-based content services (Mallinson et al., 2020).

The structural dimension of economic resistance in emerging markets has received increasing scholarly attention. Basarir-Ozel, Turker and Nasir (2022), in their thematic analysis of smart home adoption barriers, found that financial constraints were identified by every single expert informant as a primary barrier — with several noting the irony that subscription models, elsewhere proposed as a solution to upfront cost barriers, can themselves become the barrier in income-constrained settings. This irony is directly applicable to the Uzbekistani context, where the recurring payment structure of digital subscriptions conflicts with the irregular and cash-based income patterns of a significant portion of the population.

A second dimension of economic resistance concerns the competitive ecology within which subscription services must operate. Rogers's (2003) Diffusion of Innovations framework identifies relative advantage — the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes — as a key driver of adoption. In markets where high-quality digital content is freely accessible through unofficial channels, the relative advantage of paid subscription services is structurally undermined. Laukkanen (2016) and Talwar et al. (2020) have both noted that innovation resistance is not simply the mirror image of adoption motivation; it involves active evaluation of competing options, and the outcome of that evaluation depends critically on the competitive ecology in which the innovation is embedded.

Despite these theoretical resources, the specific combination of hard income constraints, free alternative sufficiency, and low perceived value for money — as experienced by non-adopters in Uzbekistan — has not been examined as an integrated thematic cluster. This article addresses that gap.

Research Methodology

This article reports findings from the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study on online subscription adoption in Uzbekistan. The qualitative data derive from open-ended survey responses collected as part of a broader study (total quantitative sample: 372 respondents). Participants who indicated non-adoption or non-intention to adopt were invited to explain, in their own words, their reasons for not engaging with online subscription services. After removing non-substantive responses, a corpus of 206 analytically usable entries was retained.

Responses were received in three languages: Uzbek (in both Latin and Cyrillic scripts), Russian, and English. All non-English responses were translated by the principal researcher, who holds native-level competency in both Uzbek and Russian, and were reviewed for semantic fidelity before coding commenced.

The analytical method is reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022). RTA was selected for its capacity to generate interpretively rich, theoretically grounded accounts of subjective experience — qualities particularly valuable when the phenomenon of interest involves implicit economic reasoning and value judgments that are unlikely to surface through structured survey items..

Results

The economic resistance theme consolidated a range of responses in which financial and value-based reasoning drove non-adoption. What unifies these responses is the centrality of the payment moment — the point at which the consumer must commit recurring financial resources — as the site of resistance. Three analytically separable sub-themes are identified below.

Sub-theme 3a: Cost Aversion and Budget Constraints

A substantial cluster of responses cited direct financial limitations as the primary barrier to subscription adoption. These responses did not involve a weighing of value against cost; they reflected a hard budget constraint in which subscription expenditure simply exceeded the threshold available for non-essential digital spending. Student respondents were notably prominent in this cluster, often explicitly naming their economic status as the explanation for non-adoption:

"I am currently a student and do not earn money, so I do not allocate funds to these things" (Respondent 60)

"I do not have enough money; besides, the free versions provide sufficient benefit" (Respondent 101)

"No spare money" (Respondent 47)

Sub-theme 3b: Free Alternatives Perceived as Sufficient

A related but conceptually distinct sub-theme concerns respondents who had made an explicit comparative assessment: free alternatives met their content needs well enough that paying for a subscription carried no marginal benefit. These responses are not primarily about budget constraints — several respondents in this cluster indicated they had some disposable income — but about perceived sufficiency:

"It is possible to get the same thing for free" (Respondent 1)

"I have alternative free sources that can be used with the same quality" (Respondent 188)

"There are free options everywhere" (Respondent 73)

Several responses in this cluster acknowledged, with varying degrees of explicitness, that the free sources in question were of questionable legal status, without this acknowledgement serving as a sufficient motivation to pay. This is consistent with research on digital piracy in developing market contexts: where intellectual property norms are still evolving and enforcement is minimal, the moral inhibition against using unofficial free content is considerably weaker than in high-income settings.

Sub-theme 3c: Low Perceived Value for Money

A third sub-cluster of responses concerns consumers who made an explicit comparative value judgment, positioning subscription payments unfavourably against alternative uses of the same money or against the perceived worth of the digital content on offer:

"I think it is better to spend my money on other things" (Respondent 102)

"Spending money for nothing" (Respondent 64)

"Not worth paying for" (Respondent 31)

This sub-theme is price sensitivity in a different register from budget constraint. The respondents here are not reporting the absence of money; they are reporting the absence of a compelling value proposition. This is the closest of the three sub-themes to the standard UTAUT2 price value construct, and it is the most tractable through product and marketing interventions.

For these consumers, the persuasion challenge is not to lower the price but to change the perceived value equation — to communicate what subscriptions offer that neither free alternatives nor other expenditure categories can replicate. The strategic implication is that value communication must be specific and demonstrable, not generic. Abstract claims about quality or convenience will not move consumers who have already concluded that free alternatives are sufficient. What is required is a compelling account of the unique, exclusive, or superior value that justifies ongoing payment.

Discussion

From a practical standpoint, the findings point toward several strategic directions. Localised, income-benchmarked pricing and student or youth tiers address sub-theme 3a. Exclusive content, superior user experience, data security, and reliability that informal channels cannot provide address sub-theme 3b by constructing a meaningful relative advantage. Targeted value communication — moving beyond abstract claims toward specific, demonstrable benefits — addresses sub-theme 3c. None of these interventions alone is sufficient; the free-content ecology requires a coordinated response across all three dimensions.

The findings also carry implications for the Digital Uzbekistan 2030 agenda. State-level engagement with digital intellectual property norms, consumer education about the risks of informal content channels, and regulatory frameworks that create a stable and trustworthy environment for digital commerce are all conditions that enable paid subscription markets to develop. These are governance challenges that individual providers cannot address unilaterally.

Conclusion

This article has examined economic resistance as a barrier to online subscription adoption in Uzbekistan through reflexive thematic analysis of 206 open-ended survey responses from non-adopters. Three analytically distinct sub-themes were identified: hard budget constraints driven by low disposable income; the perceived sufficiency of free and informal content alternatives; and low perceived value for money. Together, these sub-themes constitute the "free-content ecology" — a structural competitive environment in which the default option is free, informal digital content, and the burden of justification falls entirely on paid subscription services.

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