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Experiencing film: Subjective personal introspection and popular film consumption

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ABSTRACT

How and why audiences consume films is a much-researched yet inconclusive area of film marketing. Film is an experiential product and qualitative research methods are a suitable way of gaining insight into how people choose between different film offerings and how they assess their film viewing experience. Before we can understand others' choices and experiences, we first must understand ourselves. We therefore begin our investigation by taking a snapshot of our experiences facilitated by Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) to gain insight into how the lead author makes sense of his film consumption. The key findings complement and advance current debates in film and experiential consumption. Indeed, the theoretical contribution is two fold; the development of a film consumption experience model based on three-interrelated classification dimensions (*film characteristics, viewing environment, situational environment*), which collectively impacts the lead author's consumption behavior, and our expansion of Schmitt's (1999) SEMs model.

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1. Introduction

For over a century the film industry has been one of the world's most commercial and successful industries (Ravid, 1999), creating strong relationships with audiences worldwide. In light of the increasing availability of affordable, high-end film production technology and new opportunities to distribute films, competition for audiences has become fiercer. Moreover, digital disruption has led to an increasingly competitive marketplace, particularly with regard to film distribution. Film production and distribution companies are in stronger competition with companies like Netflix and Amazon, as well as with private persons who, legally or illegally, use new streaming technologies to reach film audiences at home and while on the move (Veitch & Constantiou, 2012). Coupled with a financial crisis that has left many people economically poorer, these developments in the film industry have led to a drop in film theater attendance figures while, at the same time, the time people spend watching films has grown (BFI Statistical Yearbook, 2014).

In light of this growing competition in the film industry, marketing and consumer research scholars have shown an increasing interest in people's reasons for watching films, both in film theaters and elsewhere. Studies using survey methods and interview techniques to elicit information about film audiences' motivations offer post-hoc accounts for decisions about the selection of a particular film. These have focused on consumers creating hierarchies of effects in order to simplify understanding of such consumer decision-making and focus their analysis on measuring the effect of specific factors on consumer choice, rather than considering film consumption as a holistic process, where a variety of factors influence film selection.

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Taking a snapshot of a period of film consumption and interaction with film marketing communications, allows us to access wider influences and experiences, which informs our film consumption practices. While we know quite a lot about how cast, genre and release pattern impact on success at the box office, as consumers are increasingly monitored and profiled, (becoming what Pridmore and Lyon (2011) describe as consumers who are seen as ‘collections of data’), more fine-grained research is required to understand film consumption from a more naturalistic and holistic perspective. We are concerned with how consumers respond to marketing materials as well as other film related information, how prior film consumption influences how they make sense of such information, how this influences choice and decisions to watch or not, with whom and when. As such, our approach considers film consumption as a holistic process, where prior experiences influence sensemaking in relation to future film consumption activities.

Thus, the aim of our study is to understand what influences our decisions to choose to watch (now or later), with whom and in what environment, or to reject a film. Previously dominant research methods, while providing a valuable overview of how different elements influence our decision-making, fail to grasp the holistic nature, and how many of the processes and decisions that contribute to film consumption decisions are taken in private or contingently while people go about their daily routines. For the consumer, therefore, it is often difficult to remember in a survey or interview when, where and how they have come across information about a film they decided to watch. For that reason, we use a modified version of Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) as a research method, which offers us full access to what happens when we make sense of information we encounter about films, how that influences the choices we make, what expectations this sets, and how that feeds into the overall viewing experience. For the purpose of this paper, we will examine the lead author’s documentation of his film consumption within a particular period (a snapshot) of time in order to at least begin to understand the various influences on people’s film consumption decisions.

We thereby follow Gould (1991, 1995), who argues that before we can hope to understand others, we first must understand ourselves. By using Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) as a data collection tool, the lead author provides us with documentation of his own mental and emotional processes during this snapshot of time that we, the author team of this paper, can jointly analyze. Rather than providing an autobiographical essay (Brown & Reid, 1997) by the lead author, the authors analyzed the document containing the lead author’s transcription of his reasoning when making decisions about and assessments of films. Thus, the lead author and the document of his consumption experiences became the primary data analyzed for the purpose of this paper. The study demonstrates the contribution that introspective techniques can make to our understanding of film consumption. In examining the sensemaking process underlying film consumption from the perspective of SPI, we complement and expand upon existing studies on film consumption (the introduction of a film consumption experience model based on three classification dimensions) and experiential consumption (such as Schmitt’s SEM model), through our focus on understanding film consumption from a collective and holistic perspective. The following section reviews existing film consumption literature in order to identify the research gap we are addressing and highlight the contribution which our study makes before outlining the methodology and discussion of key findings.

2. Audience film consumption literature

2.1. Overview of past studies

Two significant considerations within film marketing are the concepts of *marketability* and *playability* (Kerrigan, 2010). *Marketability* indicates how attractive a film is to its intended target audience; comprising key marketable and commercial elements to consider when taking a film to market. Significantly, these marketable components formulate a presentation of clues to consumers, which may or may not initiate interest when making sense of new (and old) films. These elements may consist of, but are not limited to: actor(s), creative team (behind the film), genre, age classification, release strategy, and so on. *Playability* relates to the film itself in terms of production value, quality of script, acting and so on. Following viewing, consumers consider the playability of the product by comparing their pre-expectations of the film (based on the above marketable elements or other outside factors) to the consumption experience itself. The concept of playability ties in with seminal work on satisfaction by Oliver (1980, 2010) who defines satisfaction as; “the consumer’s fulfillment response... a judgment that a product/service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over fulfillment” (Oliver, 2010: 8). Pleasure connects with Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982) conceptualization of experiences as derived from fantasies, feelings and fun. Fantasies can play a role in pre-selection of films, where imagining the watching experience is related to fantasies conjured up by communications clues. Fantasy can also relate to feelings provoked by film marketing materials. Fantasy or escape can also take place during viewing, where feelings such as fear, excitement, and so on occur. Fun can be derived from the contents of the film itself, as well as the collective nature of film consumption. A pleasurable experience is likely to extend the consumption experience, such as initiating positive word-of-mouth, as well as influencing audiences’ future decisions and perceptions regarding similar films (Kerrigan & Yalkin, 2009). Indeed, according to Addis and Holbrook (2010), playability (and film satisfaction) has previously been measured in relation to favorable critical reviews, awards and nominations, and positive word-of-mouth. These can all be seen as proxy measures for playability, as all relate to approval of the film itself on viewing from the perspective of professional critics, industry professionals and the viewing public.

To date, a number of quantitative studies have explored the impact of marketability and playability on film consumption choices with box-office performance as the dependent variable. From a marketability perspective, studies have considered the role of the actor (Wallace, Seigerman, & Holbrook, 1993; Albert, 1998; De Vany & Walls, 1999), genre (Litman, 1983; Litman & Kohl, 1989; Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2014), age classification (Austin, 1980; Ravid, 1999; Leenders & Eliashberg, 2011), and release strategy (Kridler & Weinberg, 1998; Radas & Shugan, 1998; Elberse & Eliashberg, 2003; Eliashberg et al., 2009) in relation to box-office performance. To measure playability, researchers have considered film reviews (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997; Holbrook, 1999; Hennig-Thurau, Marchand and Hiller, 2012), awards (Dodds & Holbrook, 1988; Addis & Holbrook, 2010), and word-of-mouth (Dellarocas, Zhang, &

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