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Everyone's a critic: The power of expert and consumer reviews to shape readers' post-viewing motion picture evaluations



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ABSTRACT

With the advent of online consumer reviews, research into the way consumer and traditional reviews relate to mainstream popularity of entertainment media has been predicated on aggregate results, such as box-office figures for movies. The current study adds to this field by proposing an exploratory model that charts the influence of both types of review on individual readers' post-viewing evaluations. A controlled experiment was performed, observing credibility, trait empathy and viewer involvement with content. Results indicated that polarized, negative reviews lower enjoyment through reducing involvement. Moreover, credibility of reviews did not play a role in the effects found, with the least trustworthy review exerting the biggest influence. Recommendations are made from the data to develop a confirmatory model that can unite findings and theories from psychological, sociological, and market research.

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1. Introduction

From an instrumental perspective, the consumption of experience products such as motion pictures is entirely unlike that of other goods. Their uses and worth are subjective and idiosyncratic for each member in their audience and are difficult to predict prior to consumption (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006). For movies, specifically, predictions of quality are made even more difficult by the manner in which they are produced. Directors and producers, though often having preferences for certain actors and crewmembers, are usually not bound to the same staff for different productions, and productions are often created by a company that was established for the purpose of one movie (or a series of movies) and disbanded following completion (Hadida, 2009). Combined with the emotional nature and the ubiquitous desire for each movie to offer a unique experience, this lack of consistency in production staff means potential viewers cannot rely on 'brand' names beyond the vague indication of production quality offered by Hollywood studios to ensure they will receive the experience they pay for. Modern society offers a service that attempts to guide consumers towards more qualitative experiences: reviews written by critics (Holbrook, 1999). These reviews are often regarded as expert reviews, and the emphasis that the internet has begun to place on user content generation has meant that these are now joined by the works of pundits voicing their opinions on media and are being labelled as consumer reviews (Gao, Gu, & Lin, 2006). This has resulted in changes in how media criticism is used (Verboord, 2010), necessitating a re-evaluation of how reviews affect their readers.

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The current study compared the expert and consumer styles of criticism in their effect on film viewers' opinions. In order to accomplish this, a two-factor experiment was performed where individual subjects in four conditions were presented with reviews differing on two points – review valence and reviewer style – prior to watching the movie in question. Post-viewing movie evaluations formed the dependent variable for this study. Since professional reviews have existed for a longer period of time than consumer reviews and have acquired more attention from researchers, evidence on the effects exerted by the former were mostly garnered from studies with theatrical box-office revenue as a dependent variable. Since those studies were extensively covered by, for example, [Hadida \(2009\)](#), [Eliashberg and Shugan \(1997\)](#) and [Desai and Basuroy \(2005\)](#), they will not be discussed here. By using box-office revenue as the outcome measure, it is difficult to disentangle effects of reviews on the factors that could be said to increase moviegoer numbers. The current article remedies this by taking a micro-perspective, focusing on post-viewing evaluations for individuals who have read a review.

The few studies that tested for such effects of reviews on enjoyment and evaluation are discussed in the following section. Secondly, the increase of user-generated content trends is examined and previous publications comparing the two styles of review are inspected. After reviewing the background of this field of study, theoretical models for influences of review are outlined, followed by an examination of potential moderators of review effects specifically on post-viewing evaluation.

2. The influence of reviews

2.1. Impact on evaluations

A question that has received continued attention from researchers is whether correlations between professional reviews and movie performance are indicative of critics' influence on their readership or simply their like-mindedness if a movie is worth seeing or not (e.g. [Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003](#); [Reinstein & Snyder, 2005](#)). To provide a more multifaceted answer to this question [Eliashberg and Shugan \(1997\)](#) proposed to perform individual level experiments that would result in moving away from box office revenue as a dependent variable. Unfortunately, significantly less attention has been paid to the possible influence that critics might play in the generation of consumer enjoyment during a screening and their subsequent opinions about a movie. Correlational evidence linking critics' review verdicts to viewer ratings was provided by [Boor \(1992\)](#). [Burzynski and Bayer \(1977\)](#) conducted an experiment whereby waiting movie patrons were made to overhear negative or positive comments from confederates seemingly coming from a previous screening. Consequently, patrons who overheard positive comments awarded the movie with a more positive evaluation than patrons who had overheard negative comments. Differences between either of those two groups and a group that was not presented with prior information did not indicate any significance. [Burzynski and Bayer \(1977\)](#) reported that the movie patrons 'conformed' their evaluations to what they overheard. The fact that moviegoers' evaluations can be altered by strangers simply voicing their unfettered opinions within earshot lends credibility to influences exerted by an expert review. A laboratory experiment performed by [Wyatt and Badger \(1984\)](#) provided evidence for such an influence. Comparing three reviews for the same movie that differed in that they were positive, mixed, or negative while they were identical in structure and information presented, results showed significant contrasts between the positive and negative reviews in readers' own post-viewing evaluations.

2.2. Reviews in the information age

In recent years, internet culture has increasingly been customized to the creation of content by each individual user, leading to the rise of social media ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#)). The new emphasis on user-generated content, vastly different from traditional media that only allowed a select few to voice their opinions, has upset the previous 'cultural hierarchy' ([Holbrook, 1999](#)) and has had major consequences for the creation, as well as the consumption, of reviews ([Gao et al., 2006](#)). The greater number of reviewers combined with the ease with which data can be aggregated (like the data used in [Holbrook, 2005](#)) has led to a greater focus on numerical and ordinal ratings such as the ubiquitous one to five 'stars' ([Tsang & Prendergast, 2009](#)). The price paid for the usefulness of reviews is that nuances accompanying the rating in the reviews' text are lost during aggregation. [Tsang and Prendergast \(2009\)](#) noted that, even though consumers at least partly base their intention to see a movie on a reviewer's rating, this effect can be overridden by its text. The text influences perceived trustworthiness, especially for positive ratings, hence the need for individual reviews explaining why a movie is (not) recommended.

Now that the dust scattered by the advent of user-generated content and consumer reviews has started to settle, several shifts in hierarchy and culture have become apparent. After having helped hoist film up to the level of art ([Baumann, 2001](#)), professional critics seemingly act as gatekeepers for high-brow content such as art-house, while their opinions do not correlate as strongly with more mainstream content ([Desai & Basuroy, 2005](#); [Gemser, Van Oostrum, & Leenders, 2007](#)). In literature, professional critics jostle for attention alongside consumer reviewers especially with younger audiences who read voraciously and are not confined to a single genre of books ([Verboord, 2010](#)). However, these critics lose ground when it comes to readers who stick to a single genre, who prefer instead to look for online consumer reviews. Possibly in reaction to this, professional critics are altering their style of writing from a purely distanced, elitist perspective to a hybrid style that incorporates both artistic as well as more inclusive tones in hopes of addressing (or indeed keeping up with) a more diverse crowd ([Kersten & Bielby, 2012](#)).

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