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Hallmarks of Quality of Motion Pictures

Abstract

Most research into the film industry focuses on aggregate level market analysis of a range of devices used by the industry to ensure the success of its films. In contrast, this paper describes an experiment to analyse how individual cinema-goers are influenced by two variables that have aroused considerable interest in the literature: critical reviews and the role of box-office stars. As regards the former, our results indicate that negative reviews by film critics are cues that affect cinema-goers' pre-film assessment of a film yet fail to exert any effect on post-film assessment. As regards the latter, a cast of box-office stars is not seen to be an indication of quality *per se*. Nor do box office stars help to mitigate the potential effects of negative reviews.

Key words: Motion pictures, star power, critics

As with all experience goods, there is an inherent difficulty in assessing the quality of a motion picture prior to viewing. This confers a high degree of risk on the cinema industry for all concerned. Producers and directors are hard pressed to gauge how the takings for a film will evolve (De Vany and Walls 1999; Walls 2005). Production and marketing costs have rocketed but astronomic investment in promotion of film premieres is no guarantee of success, for it may not coincide with a high quality rating amongst consumers (Ravid 1999). This is particularly serious in an industry whose very survival depends on the incessant premiering of new films with a very short life cycle (Jedidi et al. 1998). Similarly, the fact that the cinema-goer cannot take film quality for granted also complicates film choice and decision making.

The increasing importance of these issues has sparked ever more research into the cinema industry in recent years. Much of this research propounds models that either predict or explain

the box office success, or otherwise, of a film (Basuroy, Chatterjee and Ravid 2003; Eliashberg et al. 2000; Holbrook 2005; Jedidi et al. 1998; Putler and Lele 2003; Sawhney and Eliashberg 1996; Swami, Eliashberg and Weinberg 1999; Walls 2005) and it has been welcomed open-arms by the cinema industry for obvious reasons: a single film can mean the difference between million-dollar profits and million-dollar losses (Simonoff and Sparrow 2000). However, despite attempts having been made to establish models that can predict spectator response at an individual level (Eliashberg and Sawhney 1994), most research is based on information sources that only enable aggregate behaviour, that is, the sum of many individual behaviour patterns, to be studied (for example, www.baseline.hollywood.com; www.imdb.com; ACNielsen; www.variety.com; www.worldwideboxoffice.com). In contrast, this paper is an attempt to understand the extent to which a range of film quality indicators influences individual cinema-goer's behaviour both before and after seeing the film. The paper makes a distinction between these two phases -pre- and post-viewing - as both are of major importance in the field of leisure products.

Though the quality level of a film cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, there are nevertheless a number of hallmarks of quality that may well affect spectator behaviour, including a film's tangible and intangible attributes (Neelamegham and Jain 1999). Films have very few tangible attributes (Eliashberg et al. 2000). What is more, as is the case for all performing arts, the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept of film quality blurs the relationship between quality and tangible technical factors (Tobias 2004). One of the tangible hallmarks of quality in which this blurring effect is particularly evident is the cast and the presence of big stars, which are an indication of quality on a number of levels (Ravid 1999): including major box office figures in a film indicates a commitment towards the film on the part of cinema studios and external funders. The fact that a big star chooses to figure in a film can also be seen as an indication of his or her confidence in the quality of the film. A paradigm of this kind of commitment is Rodrigo García's opera prima *Things you can tell just by looking at her*, which had a budget of a mere two million dollars yet attracted actors of the calibre of Glen Close, Cameron Díaz and Calista Flockhart, who all agreed to take part in the film for the minimum salary stipulated by the actors' trade union. It would therefore be of great interest to understand the true value that the market assigns to this particular benchmark of quality. Research has already determined the effect of a big box-office cast on films' aggregate results and has come up with contradictory findings, as will be shown.

This paper helps to explain this contradiction by analysing the superstar effects on individuals that are the basis of results observed at an aggregate level.

A cast of superstars may not in itself be sufficient to guarantee a film's quality because, as with every other experience good, in the case of films there are a number of sensorial attributes that are completely unrelated to tangible attributes. The opinion of third parties is one way of gaining at least second-hand knowledge of such attributes (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). This endows the film critic with a fundamental role in the cinema industry (West and Broniarczyk 1998). This paper therefore sets out to compare the effect of a tangible sign of quality (a cast of cinema stars) with an intangible sign of quality (critics' reviews) on cinema-goer behaviour. Using research that has already analysed the link between these two variables and box-office takings as its starting point, the paper goes on to put forward hypotheses relating to the way film critics and box-office stars each affect the individual behaviour of the cinema-goer. We are aware that the importance of both factors has already been the focus of research. However, we also believe that our study is the first attempt to model the effect of the two variables on the individual behaviour of the cinema-goer during different phases of the film viewing experience. The paper divides into four parts: the first provides an overview of some key literature on the subject and established the hypotheses for the research; the second provides the data that was used in this study; the third describes the main empirical results coming out of that data; the final section draws a number of conclusions from the research and describes how they relate to the theory and practice of marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The effect of film reviews

Film reviewing plays a key role in the world of art because it is a way-station between both production and distribution and between distribution and reception (Maanen 2002). Most early research on the role of the critics focused on literature and was only later applied to the performing arts (Boorsma and Maanen 2003). Critics have a number of different roles, apart from

their obvious function of informing: they can forge reputations; they produce a utility when their reviews are read, and they function as promoters, to name just some of their roles (Cameron 1995). Many studies have analysed the influence of the critics on box-office takings in the film industry. All of these studies fall into one of two broad categories: they either study the critics' effects on a film's results (Jedidi et al. 1998; Litman and Kohl 1989; Prag and Casavant 1994; Ravid 1999; Sochay 1994; Wallace et al. 1993) or they look into the underlying processes explaining why the critics' reviews have had a particular effect (Basuroy et al. 2003; Eliashberg and Shugan 1997; Holbrook 2005). The latter approach builds upon the former approach, as it not only specifies whether there has been an influence but also *how* this influence was exerted. Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) proposed that film reviewing can function as both an influencer and also a predictor. Exerting influence endows the film critic with the role of being an opinion leader, whilst a forecasting capacity sees the film critic as mirroring public opinion. Research has surprisingly demonstrated that film reviews are linked to box-office takings in the final weeks of a film's run and with overall takings, yet fail to be related in any major way with takings from the first weeks after a film has premiered. This spawned the view that film reviewing has a prediction capacity but not an influencing capacity, which implies that the film critic merely reproduces and synthesises market reactions. In consequence, we propose that:

H1a: As the critic is assumed to be a predictor, there will be a significant concordance between critical review and the public's assessment of a film.

Another hallmark of film-goer demand is its feedback capacity (Walls 2005). There is a marked tendency for people to talk about and share personal views on a film (Eliashberg et al. 2000), and so the claim could be made that:

H1b: If film reviews are predictors, the opinions they express will coincide to a great extent with word-of-mouth.

Basuroy et al. (2003) highlighted how difficult it is to tease apart the roles of influencer and predictor, as well as showing that when reviews are negative, their impact tails off with the passing of time, which might be seen as evidence of the influencing role of film reviewing. The

varying impact of film reviewing depending on the type of review, a phenomenon that has been described in a number of papers, is a spin-off of a more far-reaching phenomenon: people as a whole are more susceptible to unfavourable than to favourable information (Bone 1995; Mizerski 1982). A number of explanations of this phenomenon have been put forward, one of which is the Theory of Accessibility-Diagnosis, which states that information has an effect when it enters the customer's mind and serves to help solve a problem. Negative information has more of an impact and is less ambiguous, so has a greater capacity to wield influence. The 'loss-aversion' phenomenon is another alternative explanation; the consumer is more sensitive to potential loss and, by extension, to information that forewarns him of it than to potential gain, and thus to information announcing it (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1991). The greater effect of negative criticism might also be attributed to it being seen as more objective, independent information (Basuroy et al. 2003). Whatever the case may be, the asymmetric effect of criticism according to whether it is positive or negative leads us to propound the following effect on individual behaviour:

H2: If negative criticism has an influencing, or leverage, effect, it should spark a marked drop in spectator expectations.

The 'star effect'

The quest for a formula for success leads the cinema industry to exploit resources that diminish the risk involved in film premiering. One of these is using box office stars. However, such is the complexity of films as a product that success can never be ascribed to any particular factor. Some studies have demonstrated the positive influence of box-office stars on film results (Litman and Kohl 1989; Simonoff and Sparrow 2000; Sochay 1994; Wallace et al. 1993), yet others have found that there is only a weak relationship between the two factors (Jansen 2005; Prag and Casavant 1994; Ravid 1999). De Vany and Walls (1999) attributes these contrasting outcomes to the peculiar nature of the distribution function of box-office revenues, which diverge over all scales instead of converging to an average. The audience determines the fate of a film and film stars per se are not enough to guarantee good results. Film goer opinion and the dissemination of that opinion whilst the film is on at the cinema are the key factors.

However, a number of functions can be ascribed to film stars that provide a rational explanation for exploiting an asset in which major resources are invested but which does not in itself guarantee success. Firstly, super-stars are an indication of the quality of a film. The acting skills of a handful of actors warrant their higher salaries (Rosen 1981) so that the ex-ante popularity of actors entails non-linear effects on a film's total admissions (Bagella and Becchetti 1999). Thus:

H3: If film stars are an indication of quality, the fact that they figure in a film will increase spectator expectations.

An alternative hypothesis is that big stars may be an informational signal for the film in which they appear. The fact that a star is in a film reflects spectator consumer patterns and allows them to track successful films (Albert 1998). A star's popularity is only an indication of earlier success. The superstar phenomenon does not exist because of the higher quality of its stars; it exists because the utility that a film-goer perceives in a film increases in line with the information available about the cast in the film. According to this theory, the more people that know about a film actor, the more a film-goer is likely to be able to engage in conversation about that artist. Therefore, the utility of watching a film lies not only in the act of watching *per se* but also in its ability to foster social relations (Deuchert et al. 2005). Thus:

H4: If film stars are informational signals, the fact that a film star is in a film will significantly increase the intention of recommending that film.

A final point is that super-stars counteract the impact that negative indications of a film's quality may have. In particular, film stars cushion the effect of markedly negative criticism (Basuroy et al. 2003). If this is indeed the case, it should hold true that:

H5: Film-stars cushion the effect of negative criticism on pre-film and post-film attitudes.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Information was obtained by a laboratory experiment involving three film reviews – one positive, another neutral and a third negative – and two films, one with and one without big film stars. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of the six possible scenarios. The film star variable was measured as dichotomous, which is consistent with previous research and enables cleaner manipulation of this variable (Mizerski 1982; Neelamegham and Jain 1999). Most research uses critics' reviews divided into three categories: positive, negative and mixed (Basuroy et al. 2003; Eliashberg and Shugan 1997; Wyatt and Badger 1984). This is standard practice because data sources that are traditionally used to obtain information on film reviews and explain how they affect box-office takings (for example Variety) divide along the same lines. However, to pursue the aims of this paper, we substitute mixed reviews for what we will call 'neutral reviews', reviews devoid of explicit value judgements and words that suggest a positive or a negative assessment. This follows other studies that use the same methodology as ours (Wyatt and Badger 1987).

We use expectations in the standard sense that the word has in the literature on services in order to measure pre-consumption behaviour. Overall assessment of the quality of the film – one of the traditional yardsticks for this variable (Oliver 1993)– was used to measure post-viewing evaluation. We also measured word-of-mouth by asking participants if they intended to recommend a friend to see the film and by scoring their response on a scale ranging from 'I will definitely recommend it' to 'I will certainly not recommend it.' A similar scale has been used in earlier studies for the same end (Neelamegham and Jain 1999). The experiment was run in a hall that was very similar to a cinema both technically and in the sensations it transmitted, so the environment for the experiment was optimum.

Information was collected in three stages:

- 1) Participants were given a questionnaire requesting information on their cinema-going habits.
- 2) Each participant was given promotional material for the film in the guise of a poster and a positive, negative or neutral review of the film. He or she had to describe expectations prior to seeing the film after reading this material.

3) The film was shown and participants were then asked to fill in a second questionnaire that included, *inter alia*, information on how they assessed the film and their intention of recommending it to other people.

The validity of the experiment greatly depends on the choice of the films that were shown, which were taken from a list of all the films premiered in 2004 according to the following criteria:

- Genre: genre is one of the characteristics that influences the public's response to a film (Neelameghan and Chintagunta 1999; Prag and Casavant 1994; Sochay 1994). In fact, it is one of the few variables that is consistently shown in the literature to be a determinant of the demand for films (Putler and Lele 2003). A single genre was used as a variable in our study – drama – since the industry often recurs to this particular genre and it is often in the running for prizes and awards.
- Country of origin: characteristics that are key to audience response depend on where the film was produced. The style, the symbolism, and an actor's cachet are determined by the cultural context in which the film was made. American films, for example, portray realities that are close-to-home, are more conventional and are easier to understand and follow for the public not only in America (Holbrook 1999). American films were thus chosen for the study.
- Investment in publicity: films with a lower than average promotional budget by American film industry standards were selected, which meant that they were not well known or popular. Otherwise, participants' previous knowledge could have tainted our results (Eliashberg and Sawhney 1994).

The two films chosen according to the above criteria were 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind' and 'The Notebook.' Jim Carrey stars in the former and also heads Quigley Publishing's Top Ten Money Making Stars of 2003, which has been used in other research to gauge super-star levels (Jedidi et al. 1998). Carrey is one of the actors with the greatest potential for making a film a financial success (De Vany and Walls 1999). In contrast, none of the actors in 'the Notebook' could be considered superstars either by the above criteria or by any others traditionally used in the sector, such as ranking in Blockbuster Entertainment Guide to Movies and Videos (Jedidi et

al. 1998), having been nominated for or given an Academy Award, and so on (Basuroy et al. 2003).

Film reviews in the general and popular specialised press and others published on Web sites specialising in the cinema were used to obtain information about both films' reviews. This information served as a basis to write three reviews for both films – positive, negative and neutral in both cases – which were then reviewed by experts. Our test units were young university students and the sample size was 107 people. Each participant was expressly instructed to abstain from commenting on any film while the experiment ran its course. This is an important point, as other studies have shown how film-goers assess a film more positively or negatively depending on the kinds of comment heard while the film is on at the cinema (Burzynski and Bayer 1977).

RESULTS

According to other studies, post-consumption evaluation should be affected by both expectations and perceived results (Bolton and Drew 1991). Bartlett's test of sphericity does indeed show that there is a link between our experiment's three dependent variables of expectations, satisfaction and intention to recommend the film ($\chi^2(3) = 132.19, p < .01$). For this reason, a MANOVA model, which explicitly handles the interrelationship between three variables, was applied. Results for each of the three variables are commented on next.

Film reviews

As highlighted in table 1, film reviews influence consumer expectations but do not cause differences in overall assessment or intention to recommend the film. Our results therefore fail to support hypotheses 1a and 1b relating to the predictive nature of film criticism, that is, they fail to confirm the predictor role of film reviews and their value as quality indicators capable of influencing post-viewing assessment. However, film criticism does affect the expectations of film goers, with negative criticism having a greater effect, as predicted in hypothesis 2. Lower average expectations occur in the face of negative reviews. Average expectations for positive and neutral reviews are high, with no significant differences between the two ($t = .115, p = \text{NS}$). These

results are consistent with the influencing role of negative criticism. Negative criticism as a quality indicator affects pre-viewing attitudes. However, film reviews of any type consistently fail to affect either the overall evaluation of a film or intention to recommend once it has been viewed.

TABLE 1
THE INFLUENCE OF FILM REVIEWS

	Expectations		Assessment		Intention to recommend the film	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Critic						
Positive	7.00	2.01	7.18	2.06	5.33	3.20
Negative	4.47	2.32	6.55	2.36	5.23	2.89
Neutral	7.17	1.99	7.44	2.48	6.02	2.99
	$F= 18.2$		$F=.90$		$F= .64$	
	$p< .01$		$p = NS$		$p = NS$	

Film stars

Unlike film reviews, film stars fail to influence consumers' expectations, thus invalidating the content of hypothesis 3. Furthermore, in contrast to the predictions of hypothesis 4, the intention to recommend the film is higher for the film in which there are no big stars. Stars figuring in a film is not *per se* seen by the public to be an indication of quality either before or after the film. Nor do they play a role as an informational signal.

TABLE 2
THE SUPER STAR EFFECT

	Expectations		Assessment		Intention to recommend the film	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Supers star efects						
Stars	6.28	2.34	6.14	2.63	4.69	3.04
No Stars	6.04	2.54	7.63	1.89	6.07	2.89
	$F=1.54$		$F=10.79$		$F=5.96$	

$p = \text{NS}$	$p < .01$	$p < .05$
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Interaction effects

No interaction effect between any levels of the variables was detected in the experiment. This means that hypothesis 5 on the compensatory effect of big stars in the face of negative reviews cannot be sustained.

TABLE 3
INTERACTION EFFECTS

	Expectations		Assessment		Intention to recommend the film	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Interaction effects						
Positive critic × stars	7.5	1.58	6.30	2.66	4.20	3.32
Positive critic × no stars	6.78	2.17	7.56	1.67	5.82	3.09
Negative critic × stars	4.72	2.29	6.11	2.56	4.94	2.85
Negative critic × no stars	4.25	2.38	6.95	2.16	5.50	2.98
Neutral critic × stars	7.42	1.65	6.07	2.89	4.71	3.26
Neutral critic × no stars	7.00	2.22	8.40	1.63	6.95	2.48
	$F = .03$ $p = \text{NS}$		$F = 1.03$ $p = \text{NS}$		$F = .72$ $p = \text{NS}$	

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This experiment set out to analyse the influence of film reviews and big stars on the behaviour of film spectators at an individual level. A number of hypotheses were put forward based upon a range of studies analysing the aggregate behaviour of the cinema market. Curiously, one of the

main contributions of this present paper and the research herein is that most of these initial hypotheses cannot be sustained. This is a valuable conclusion in that it highlights the huge differences between analysing the cinema market at individual and aggregate levels. These differences have already been hinted at in studies that focused on the aggregate level and called for analysis at an individual level (Eliashberg and Shugan 1997; Holbrook 2005). The methodology we have applied has served to complement and provide a clearer explanation of conclusions that have been drawn from cinema habits at an aggregate level. In short, our results show that the only influence of the ones proposed that can be sustained is that of negative film reviews on the expectations of the cinema-goer. In contrast, expectations are not influenced by there being a big star in the cast of the film. Indeed, stars even fail to mitigate the negative effect of poor reviews, which is highly relevant since it means that the only tangible effect of the two (reviews and stars) that the cinema industry can control is, in fact, the one that does not seem to affect expectations. Of course, it is not quite true to say that the cinema industry has no control over reviews, for they can exert a relative control by means of film previews. Film reviewing as an indicator of quality before seeing a film is important because expectations affect the initial box-office results during the first few weeks of a film being shown, which are of great importance for the industry (De Vany and Walls 1999; Jedidi et al. 1998; Simonoff and Sparrow 2000). One must remember that the share-out of income from the first weeks when a film is screened is weighted in favour of the distributors, who will therefore have most interest in controlling the effects of film reviewing. Exhibitors, on the other hand, will be less interested in film reviewing and its effects. However, they will be extremely interested in a film not generating expectations that outstrip a film's real value, as this will have a negative impact on evaluation of the film and word-of-mouth, and will affect the box-office success of the film over a longer time scale.

By suggesting that there is no compensation mechanism between negative reviews and big stars in the cast, our results do not coincide with other studies. This is because other studies analyse the aggregate effect that a large number of reviews of all different types have as a whole on the progress of box-office takings (Basuroy et al. 2003). In contrast, our study analyses the reaction of a single review and a single actor, and fails to uncover any such interaction between the two variables.

Film reviews are not a quality indicator in cinema-goers' post-viewing assessment. The relationship between professional appraisals and cinema-goer assessments has aroused considerable interest. As far as complex cultural products are concerned, consumers tend to adjust their own opinions to coincide with those of the critics, who are seen as professionals in the field whose opinions should not be contradicted. This occurs, for example, in the theatre, where the critics do not influence the decision to go to see a play but do influence the overall assessment of the play after it has been seen (Boorsma and Maanen 2003). Some congruence between critics' and the public's opinions has also been discovered in the film industry (Hoolbrock 2005). However, such congruence is always the result of aggregate analyses of films, not of an analysis of the individual spectator. They always show how films that are more favourably considered by the critics receive more support from the cinema-going public. This is not the same as what we are analysing in our experiment, in which spectators have intentionally been given positive, neutral and negative reviews regardless of the true quality of the films. Seen in this light, film reviews fail to affect assessment. Results from aggregate studies highlight how critics' and film-goers' tastes coincide. An individual-based study indicates how this phenomenon is merely a coincidence of tastes, not the influence of the critics on the spectators.

A cast of stars is not a quality indicator either before or after a film has been seen. In aggregate studies, there are certain contradictions as regards the effect of stars on films' results. Our analysis seems to offer an explanation of such contradictions: a big-star cast does not influence pre- or post-viewing assessment of consumers, so it is logical for there to be no pattern in market response at an aggregate level. Market response depends on a gamut of other factors unrelated to whether there are stars in the cast or not. If stars do not affect expectations, they are useless at pulling in the crowds, since no more is expected of a film simply because a film star figures in it. What is more, our analysis also highlights differences between assessment and intention to recommend each of the films, although this post-viewing behaviour is not dependent on the film star, and indeed is more marked in the case of the film with less well-known actors.

Our results are subject to a number of limitations that point the way for possible future research. First, we have shown that a big star *per se* does not affect consumer assessment, which seems to suggest that it is irrational for the film industry to pay large sums of money for a quality indicator

that has no value at all. Indeed, such is the industry's faith in its stars that it even pays for them to dub the characters in cartoon films. This strategy may explain where the real value of superstars lies. Although they are not *per se* an indicator of quality, the film star acts as a kind of bait in that he or she provides a range of opportunities to promote the film (press conferences, publicity, etc.). In short, a big star enhances the options available to promote a film. This variable has not been included in our experiment, as participants received the same amount of information for both of the films they were asked to assess, whereas in real life they would receive more information about 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind' than 'The Notebook.' A cast of superstars is not an informational signal insofar as it fails to affect intention to recommend a film. Nevertheless, they can influence word-of-mouth prior to the film being shown. Word-of-mouth was deliberately excluded from our experiment so as not to distort the effect of the other variables under study.

Our study has distinguished between the effect of reviews according to their content. It would be equally interesting to know if their effect depends on the medium that they appear in. This is of particular relevance nowadays because of the multitude of different sites from which information about a film can be acquired on the Net. Moreover, given this proliferation, film assessments from different information sources are far more likely to differ. It would be interesting to know to what extent levels of assessment disagreement across film reviews affects the individual behaviour of the cinema-goer. Finally, this experiment was carried out using undergraduates. Though they represent a large segment of the cinema market, generalisation of our results to cover other segments of the market would require a follow-up study.

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