Revisiting the Role of Critical Reviews in Film Marketing

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This paper examines the impact of user generated content on film consumption choices. To date, a number of studies have addressed the impact of critical reviews on the performance of films at the box office. These studies were situated in a film marketing environment which preceded web 2.0 and the proliferation of user generated reviews which have resulted from the development of web 2.0 technologies. Literature on the impact which professional reviewers have on consumption of film (and other art forms) has developed separately from considerations of word of mouth. Word of mouth has been acknowledged as a key influencer for arts audiences and prior to the development of user generated content media, such word of mouth has been limited to actual friendship/ peer groups and could be seen as geographically and socially bounded. The development of the user generated review and the increasing importance of sites hosting such reviews can be viewed as a merging of the realms of the professional and amateur critic. This study uses a two stage method of analysis in order to explore the impact which such user generated reviews on the process of consumer choice. Through content analysis of user generated reviews on popular film websites as well as qualitative data collection concerned with consumer selection of film, we have evaluated the impact of user generated content on film choice. This study has implications for film consumers in terms of assisting them in selecting artistic products which fit with their tastes and for film professionals who need to understand how to navigate this new emerging terrain. The aim of this study was to (1) map out how film consumers search for and use reviews in the online environment and to (2) assess how this has changed the influence of and influencers in the area of critical reviews.

Marketing communications and influence on film choice
The marketing communications campaigns which signal a film's release highlight the elements of a film that the film makers or distributors believe will be attractive to the target audience. Marketing communications highlight the elements of what Kerrigan (2005; 2009) refers to as the film marketing

mix; the creative team, actors, script/ genre, age classification and release strategy. Film marketers use a range of marketing communications such as public relations, marketing materials such as posters and trailers and critical reviews in order to position a film in the mind of the consumer. However, film marketing professionals such as Durie et al. (2000) believe that word of mouth is central to the market success or failure of a film. Word of mouth indicates the presence of influencers on choice and in film these influencers are identified as critics and 'avids' (Litman, 1983), the term applied to film fans who influence the decisions of their peer groups. Many commentators believe that it is impossible to control word of mouth. However, identifying the most likely audience for a film and focusing on bringing it to their attention can go some way to ensuring that word of mouth is positive. Durie (2000) also looks at the impact of word of mouth and reviews on a film's success or failure. He differentiates between "want-to-see" and audience enjoyment. Film marketers can create "want-to-see" through the marketing campaign, this is also known as "marketability". However, the ultimate aim is to achieve audience enjoyment and therefore good word of mouth in order to sustain the film in the market.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) discuss various influencers on film choice and find that such influences vary in accordance with the stage a film is at in its release life cycle, as films are released sequentially. Consumers consider risk through evaluating the economic outlay required as well as the perceived risks. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) draw on information search literature to illustrate that high levels of uncertainty can lead to expanded information search behaviour common in the service sector. This often leads film consumers to assess 'quality' through clues such as the actors, directors, genre or critical reviews.

Much research has been carried out regarding the role of critics in predicting box office success (Austin, 1983; Austin, 1989; Cameron, 1995; Eliashberg and Shugan, 1997; D'Astous and Touil, 1999;Holbrook, 1999; D'Astous and Colbert, 2002). Findings here are inconclusive but there would seem to be an overall acknowledgement that good critical reviews can help a film to achieve box office success. There has been evidence from Austin (1981) to show how the influence of critics and reviewers only impacted on the more "esoteric films" and therefore did not heavily impact on box office receipts in the main. Hsu (2006) links discussions of critical reviews with notions of legitimacy. In doing so, she draws on Zuckerman (1999) in highlighting the significance of critics as gatekeepers who screen products offered to audiences and in this way shape consumers consumption habits. Hsu (2006:468) is particularly concerned with how critics established belief systems influence which 'market categories' gain recognition within this process. Drawing on Becker's (1984) seminal work, Hsu (2006) examines the

struggle which ensues in establishing legitimacy of critical reviews. In convincing the readers (and other cultural commentators) of the validity of one's schema of evaluation, critics increase their own legitimacy and as a by-product of this process, they influence wider notions of legitimacy of genres or classes of film based on the dominant discourse which they have established.

While much research has been carried out regarding the role of critics and awards in predicting box office success, the use of avids in marketing films has only recently been researched, in light of the rise of peer-to-peer file sharing and consumer reviews through social networking sites such as 'Facebook' and 'MySpace'. Fetscherin (2005) has found that quality concerns (e.g. lack of availability of high quality film viewing experience to date) have curtailed the level of peer-to-peer file sharing of film to a much greater extent than in the music industry. Social media and web 2.0 has been changing the role of the expert review in the arts. This project will address the gap in the literature and the similar gap in practitioner knowledge regarding the impact of avid reviews through the use of social media.

Word of mouth

Anderson (1998:6) defines word of mouth as "informal communications between private parties concerning evaluations of goods and services". Word of mouth has long been a concern for marketers (Czepiel, 1974; Buttle, 1998). Much of the research (Mahajan et al. 2000) on word of mouth derived from studies examining the diffusion of innovation following Rogers (1962; 1983). Holmes and Let (1977) showed that product involvement resulted in word of mouth activity by consumers. Studies have shown a link between customer satisfaction and positive word of mouth (Bolton and Drew, 1992; Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991) as well as dissatisfaction and negative word of mouth (Westbrook, 1987). What can be concluded by examining these studies is that word of mouth can be motivated both by satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a product or service.

One of the main problems which has arisen when studying the impact of word of mouth on consumer purchase decisions is how to measure word of mouth. The majority of studies follow Bass (1969) where it is assumed that sales data can indicate the impact of word of mouth. Such assumptions can be problematic as there are a number of factors which may be seen as contributing to sales which cannot be unpicked using existing research methods. Social network theory has also been used in measuring word of mouth (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Smaller scale surveys have also been used in order to assess the impact of the group on decision purchases. An example of such a study is that undertaken by Reingen et al, (1984) which examined purchases among members of a US college sorority and found differences in

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congruency of choice between those that lived together and those that lived separately from fellow sorority members.

Word of mouth and film choice

De Vany and Walls (1996) paper found that word of mouth had a significant impact on film performance at the box office. More recently, Moul (2007) concluded that consumer expectations are influenced by word of mouth, although it should be noted that Moul assumed that word of mouth would increase in line with the length of time that a film was on theatrical release, rather than actually measuring word of mouth. Moul and Shugan (2005) proposed that studios engaged in wide release strategies in the current market in order to minimize negative word of mouth. However, this can only be seen as one of the motivating factors behind the wide release.

Electronic Word of Mouth

The phenomenon of online consumer reviewing has been the focus of a number of recent studies. Chen and Xie (2008:478) note the difference between "third-party product reviews" and consumer reviews in that the former focus on the technical performance of products while the latter focus on the relevance for customer situational usage. In transposing this to the realm of the film world, online consumer reviews can be seen as less about analyzing the film as a text, with reviews focusing on the fitness of a film for purpose. Is a comedy funny, a thriller thrilling and so on?

While studies of the influence of word of mouth have been hampered by methodological issues regarding the ability of researchers to accurately measure the impact of off line word of mouth, the advent of online reviewing has facilitated new methods of assessing the impact of what is now being termed 'electronic word of mouth' (Hennig-Thurau, 2004) or 'online word of mouth' (Brown et al., 2007). Brown et al. (2007) draw on social psychology in order to develop a theoretical framework appropriate for assessing the impact of online word of mouth. In doing so, they cite Rheingold (1993) who stated that online communities resulted from sustained computer mediated public discussions between members of the community. Such interactions also illustrated discernable levels of human feeling to be considered social relationships. Dellarocas (2003) have indicated the power of online communities to influence a broad range of management activities such as brand development. This echoes the work of Kozinets (1999) in his studies of virtual communities. We can conclude that online, virtual communities should be considered by marketing managers when developing their overall marketing strategy.

Dellarocas et al (2007) highlight the problems which have existed in measuring word of mouth in the offline context and the possibility of measurement in the online context. In a study which looks specifically at the impact of online reviews on performance of films at the box office, Dellarocas et al. (2007) propose a number of diffusion models which can be used in forecasting film performance by factoring in online product reviews increases the accuracy of the model. This builds on a number of studies based on diffusion models which have focused on forecasting box office performance of films (Jedidi et al., 1998; Sawhney and Eliashberg, 1996; Swami et al., 1999).

Biyalorgorsky et al. (2001) found that consumer word of mouth was restricted to bounded social networks. Such network boundaries may be seen as limiting the impact of word of mouth in the off line context as impact of word of mouth can be seen as linked to the density of the social network within which opinions were transmitted. However, the online environment allows for such social networks to be more fluid and membership is less tied to offline social interaction. Brown et al. (2007) also highlight the need to examine online word of mouth through studying the impact of social structures on the network formation and the impact of this on the transmission of information. It is not enough to examine information transfer in itself, but it is necessary to assess the impact of strength of ties on influencing behaviour.

Method

In order to assess the impact of user generated reviews on film choice, this study consisted of two stages of data collection. We wished to examine both the production (stage one) and the consumption (stage two) of online user generated reviews and the first stage of the research focused on review production. A list of ten key sites which hosted online film reviews was compiled and these sites were studied in order to assess the volume of reviewing activity which took place over the course of one month (February 2008). From these, two sites were selected for further study, IMDB (Internet Movie Database) and Rotten Tomatoes. This was followed by an analysis of the 45 most active reviewers on each website. The most active reviewers were defined as those who were posting reviews more than 10 times per day. Following an analysis of the 45 most active reviewers on the IMDB site, we profiled the two most active reviewers on each site in order to gain insight into their motivation for posting reviews. We classified the films by release date, genre(s), age classification, country of origin, language, and if the review was positive, negative, or neutral. We also selected some significant quotes which emphasised the nature of these reviews and collated all of this information into a excel spreadsheet to allow for analysis. In order to interpret the data derived from the film reviewers on IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes, we used simple

categorical analysis. Hence, basic statistics were used to classify the reviews in terms of certain properties such as genre, valence of review, country of origin, and such.

The other element of our research focused on how film consumers engage with reviews of both professional and amateur reviews. We recruited a group of consumers aged between 25 and 40 through a facebook group and asked them to reflect on their film consumption over the course of two weeks. This group were chosen due to their engagement with web 2.0 which went beyond merely posting a profile as our participants also used quizzes, posted videos and photographs and could be seen as active users of social media. This initial understanding was further tested with a younger group of consumers who were recruited through email. This group were between 20 and 24 and were all University Students in London. There were few differences to be discerned between these two groups on first analysis.

In order to interpret the data collected from the facebook group and the emails, an interpretive approach was adopted and as such, the findings are a result analyzing the narrative data collected via facebook and interviews. Using nethnography (Kozinets 2002), we asked participants to describe how they engage with reviews of both professional and amateur reviews. The narratives provided were interpreted by both authors independently and following this, interpretations were discussed in order to arrive at a common interpretation.

Findings
There are a multitude of sites, ranging from IMDB, Variety, Screen International etc which provide box office and other professional information and opinion alongside platforms for user generated review and content. At the other end of the scale are countless sites which are specifically created in order to discuss films generally, particular stars/ genres etc or lifestyle sites where film is discussed alongside other cultural products. Many of these sites do not contain substantial film reviews and are sites where consumers exchange gossip, some opinion and many 'off topic' interactions take place.

In assessing the activity of non professional reviewers, we chose the two most active reviewers on IMDB (Moviewizguy and Zetes) and Rotten Tomatoes (Waterwizard 2005 and Bigpapasmurf) and profiled their reviewing behaviour over an eleven month period. They were chosen on the basis of the frequency of reviewing and the length and detail of reviews posted. Taking the reviewers for IMDB first, there one key difference between these two reviewers was that Moviewizguy has quite mainstream taste in

comparison to Zetes and his reviews are generally for films seen in previews or immediately on release, with a minority of the films reviewed well after the release date.

Moviewizguy had posted 90 reviews over 11 months, and there was a clear bias towards positive reviews. The negative reviews were largely present for horror/ thriller/ fantasy films. We could draw on the economic psychological theory of losses looming larger than gains (e.g. Thaler 1985) as the reviewer watched these films but was rarely satisfied. Perhaps because of her/his particular interest in the genre, 'failures' in that genre generated negative reviews. On the other hand, more mainstream, popular films were generally positively reviewed, and some such as *Slumdog Millionarie*, and *Wall-E*, which then went on to have Oscar success were among the most enthusiastically recommended. Four of the ninety films which the Moviewizguy reviewed were not in the English Language. We can presume that this consumer is from an English speaking country and therefore their consumption of non English language films is largely in line with what would be expected from the general population. Having profiled the types of films reviewed by genre, country of origin, age classification, language, and the valence of the review, we need to follow this up by conducting an email interview with the reviewer. Questions which need to be answered include demographic details as well as information as to what motivates the reviewer to post reviews and general questions about their overall cultural consumption, and the interplay (if exists) between her/his reviews and peer group.

The second reviewer, Zetes, reviewed 141 films in the same time period. Many of the films Zetes reviewed were the same as those reviewed by Moviewizguy but the two usually did not agree with each other's evaluations. Compared to those of the Moviewizguy, there is a less obvious pattern within Zetes' reviews and more detailed statistical analysis is required in order to understand patterns which may occur. Overall, Zetes' film consumption is more eclectic than Moviewizguy's consumption with 17 of the films consumed not in the English language.

Turning to the two profiled reviewers for Rotten Tomatoes, Waterwizard 2005, who reviewed 94 films during this time period, and Bigpapasmurf, who reviewed 41 films during the same period, their film consumption also diverged from each other. While Waterwizard 2005 consumed a wide variety of film in terms of country of origin and genre, Bigpapsmurf had a clear preference for American films and for 'action' and 'thriller' genres. In common with the IMDB reviewers, the majority of their reviews were positive. Again, their views diverged from each other and Bigpapasmurf had less mainstream taste

(judged in relation to box office performance and awards received) than Waterwizard and the IMDB reviewers.

Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 illustrate the breakdown of review by strength of support for the film and it is clear that overall, irrespective of the consumption taste displayed in the text of reviews and evident through analysis of the films reviewed by genre and other characteristics, reviews were positive. In the case of Zetes, he provided reviews which can be classified as either positive or strongly positive for 66% of films reviewed and 18% as either negative or strongly negative. Moviewizguy classified 57% positively and 24% negatively. Waterwizard 2005 classified 63% of films reviewed positively and 27% neatively while Bigpapasmurf classified 61% positively and 20% negatively.

Insert figures 1.1-1.4 here

There are a number of interesting observations to be made regarding the reviewing behaviour of the four reviewers studied. Firstly, the divergence in their assessment of the film (positive or negative impression) cannot be assessed in the way in which online reviews for other services can be assessed. Film consumption can be seen as more like a product in this sense than a service. Reinstein and Snyder (2005); Wolinsky (1995) link film reviews to other types of experience good where the product cannot be tested prior to consumption. As shown above, there has been a lot of attention paid to the impact of critical reviews on experiential goods and Hsu (2006) highlights the process of legitimation that critics engage in in order to establish themselves as gatekeepers of taste. Unlike conventional products, user generated reviews for film do not focus on objective factors such as 'did it work'. Rather, film reviews, like those for hotels, restaurants etc must be assessed in line with the preferences of the reviewer. Hsu (2006) establishes the impact of professional reviewer on establishing their own legitimacy and therefore the increase in their ability to influence consumer choice and taste. What is missing from existing literature is transforming this study to the realm of the user generated review. By analysing the non professional reviews posted on IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes, we can concur with Hsu's (2006) findings regarding professional reviewers' attempts at establishing legitimacy and the clear taste patterns exhibited within this reviewing process. The next stage of the data collection and analysis sought to establish the impact which user generated reviews have upon film choice in order to assess the level of legitimacy established by non professional reviewers.

Film consumers and user generated reviews

Existing studies have established that critical reviews from professional reviews can be seen to have some impact on film performance, although many of the studies have not been able to distinguish between causal and predictive measures. However, Reinstein and Snyder (2005) developed an analytical approach which overcame such a distinction and found that positive reviews did have marginal impact on film performance at the box office and that this impact was particularly true in the case of drama and films receiving marginal release. Of course, the data which informed this study was US data so there may be a cultural bias in the results. Our study extends the definition of the critical review and in doing so, merges notions of critical reviews with word of mouth.

Our findings suggest that in general, film consumers do not consult non professional reviews in selecting a film that they will watch at the cinema. Most respondents were selective in being influenced in film choice and still rely on conventional marketing materials in selecting films to view at the cinema. We can tentatively conclude that there are two categories of film consumers based on their use of reviews. Firstly there are '*independents*' who are influenced by a range of marketing communications which promote the film and are only influenced by the opinion of co-consumers for that particular film, i.e. if they watch the film with a friend or partner they discuss their choice with them alone. The independents like to consult reviews and discussion forums once they have watched the film and use these to expand their consumption of films which feature actors, directors or other creative personnel associated with these films. Film appears to be an important part of their cultural consumption and following du Gay et al.'s (1997) notion of circuits of cultural consumption, the consumption of the film is only one element of their engagement with individual films and the wider filmscape. The second category is the '*cautious*' who consult reviews to try to avoid cognitive dissonance but where marketing communications can overcome reviewer comments. The cautious only consider professional reviewers' comments in their selection process, rather than user generated reviews.

What is significant from our findings is that consumers use social media related to film in order to extend their film consumption experience after watching a film and this may have potential for greater revenue generation within what Anderson (2006) referred to as the long tail economy. While film viewing choices at the cinema are influenced to some extent by professional reviewers, and to a larger extent by those accompanying the film viewer to the cinema or their partners, user generated reviews are used by film consumers in selecting films to be consumed at home. Therefore, while new releases may rely on more traditional marketing tools such as advertising and promotion, existing film catalogues may be exploited through electronic word of mouth. This online process, where consumers engage with online

communities which are unknown to them, mimics off line word of mouth behaviour where consumers existing social networks inform their choices for home viewing of films. Home viewing can be seen as both opportunistic; viewing as a result of a film being aired on television or being invited to view by a friend or partner, or part of a more planned process of consumption, which can be linked to notions of film heritage. The second type of consumption is where the mining of online data can be seen as influential. Online communities of consumption (Kozinets, 1999) can be formed based on discussions of film heritage. This can also be linked to notions of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu (2003) as film consumers can use online reviewing sites in order to amass their cultural capital. Consuming film is complemented with exposure to film heritage. This finding may indicate why IMDB is seen as a key destination for film consumers, as IMDB combines technical information about the film in terms of cast and crew details, genre classification, age classification and so on as well as reviews for the films. This site may be seen as more valuable in efforts to increase cultural capital than those hosting non professional reviews alone.

We can conclude that for many, including both active reviewers and mere consumers, film consumption goes beyond merely watching films. Further research needs to be undertaken in order to understand the relationship between past film consumption and future consumption. In terms of contribution to film marketing theory, this research challenges existing notions of the power of critical reviews. Firstly, we go beyond the professional to look at user generated reviews and secondly, we can distinguish between the influences of social media on cinema attendance versus other types of film consumption. As we now accept that film is part of the long tail economy, we could argue that social media and reviews and discussions taking place within such media are significant for films in the post theatrical release stage. As the majority of earnings are accrued at this stage, further investigation of this issue is warranted.   The dominance of the English language in popular film is paralleled in examining popular social media sites. This research would also assess the influence of country of origin (which brings in issues of language) on propensity for films to be reviewed and the nature of such reviews.

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Positive	69
Neutral	27
Negative	30
Strongly Negative	3
No Feedback	2
Total	141

Figure 1: IMDB reviews, Zetes

Strongly Positive	5
Positive	54
Neutral	14
Negative	15
Strongly Negative	1
No Feedback	1
Total	90

Figure 2: IMDB reviews Moviewizguy

Strongly Positive	8

Positive	51
Neutral	10
Negative	24
Strongly Negative	1
Total	94

Figure 3: Rotten Tomatoes reviews, Waterwizard 2005

Positive	25
Neutral	8
Negative	8
Total	41

Figure 4: Rotten Tomatoes reviews, Bigpapasmurf