

Genre, Gender And Interpretation Of Movie Trailers: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Commercial movies cost tens of millions to make. Because they are now released on thousands of screens simultaneously, movie trailers are a major and necessary method of intensively promoting movies before they disappear from cinemas forever. Yet there is a paucity of research about how potential audiences react to these trailers. This study aimed at exploring consumers' interpretations of movie trailers. Nineteen in-depth interviews were the means of data collection, using nine trailers for yet to be released movies from the romance/drama, action, comedy and thriller categories. Genre provided a focus for exploring consumers' interpretations of movie trailers. Evaluative judgments of movies came first as a result of the value of genre to the consumer and then as a result of content which conveyed the movie would be involving relative to past movie experiences. Interpretations about the target audience for a movie were also influenced by assumptions that genre preferences differ according to gender. The findings pose implications for the construction of movie trailers.

Introduction

The experiential nature of movies limits consumers' abilities to evaluate a movie experience prior to watching the movie entirely (Austin, 1983; Cooper-Martin, 1991; Cooper-Martin, 1992; Neelamegham and Jain 1999; Reddy, Swaminathan and Motley, 1998). Movie trailers provide consumers with the ability to judge whether they would like to see a movie by sampling part of the complete experience. A movie trailer is "... a short publicity film, shown as part of a regular program at a theater, advertising the merits of a forthcoming motion picture...the trailer consists of highlight scenes appropriately cut to create an impression of excitement..." (Katz, 1980, p.1145). It is reasonable to predict that movie trailers influence audience size. Ultimately a large audience is necessary for box-office revenue to cover the increasing production and marketing expenditure involved in movie production and release (Motion Picture Association, 2004; Shugan and Swait, 1997; Zufryden, 1996). Furthermore, the transient lifecycle of new movies usually launched on thousands of screens simultaneously (Ainslie and Dréze, 2002) increases the value in understanding the effects of movie trailers on consumers' movie-going intentions.

Movie trailers can serve as a trial of the movie experience (Cooper-Martin, 1992; Faber and O'Guinn, 1984). Thus, they function like a product trial that gives good guidance as to the experiential qualities of something new (Kempf and Lacznik, 2001). The little research that has been conducted into movie trailers emphasised quantitative research designs and studied aggregate consumer behaviour in predicting audience size (Austin, 1983; Eastman, Bradbury and Nemes, 1985; Eliashberg and Sawney, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Wruck, 2001). Consumers' evaluation of the movie trailer experience and subsequent decision making remained to be explored.

Movies provide hedonic benefits. The value from a movie is derived from its ability to engage the consumer – to arouse feelings or emotional reactions (Holbrook, 1990 cited in Addis and Holbrook, 2001, p.59) and to provide a consumption experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). When evaluating a movie, consumers are likely to take into account their own preferences for types of hedonic experiences. Genre provides a consumer with the rules regarding movie content, structure, without having to watch the whole movie in advance (Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Wruck, 2001). Examples of genre labels for movies are ‘comedy’ or ‘action’. Genre provides a broad theme for construction of a framework regarding interpretation of movie trailers.

Consumers are likely to predict the movie experience by matching content in the movie trailer with expectations evoked by their cognitive schema about a genre. Secondly, categorisation of the movie, interpreted from the movie trailer is likely to convey the perceived value of the movie to a consumer. A likely reason is that pre-established knowledge structures or schemas also contain information about expected affect towards a product category (Fiske and Pavelchak, 1986, cited in Lee, 1990, p.210). Assuming there is a match between the trailer content and schema about a genre category, the consumer will evaluate the movie based on their affect for that genre category. Furthermore, genre is likely to communicate the target audience for a movie. The romance genre is assumed to fit into the female domain; genres such as action and sports are assumed to fit into the male domain (Oliver, Weaver and Sargent, 2000). These findings imply that embedded within consumers’ schemas regarding genres are assumptions about the target audience for a movie. Movie-going often occurs in mixed-gender groups such as a boyfriend-girlfriend situation. Therefore, from content in a movie trailer, consideration of with whom the consumer should attend the movie may also be communicated via genre.

Research Methodology

To begin, the scope of the study was defined by focusing on movie trailers made for cinema viewing, as opposed to the shorter promotional commercials shown on television. Also, the discussion of movies was in the context of ‘mainstream’ movies originating from native English speaking countries, for cinema release. This study used a qualitative research design to recognise the subjective nature of hedonic consumption. Data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews. In this study, 19 individuals were interviewed.

For a rich and diverse insight into the influence of genre on consumers’ interpretations of movie trailers, the main sampling criteria for interviewees were gender and age. The sample contained six females aged between 18 and 26, four males aged between 18 and 26, four females older than 26 years and five males older than 26 years.

A sample of nine movie trailers were selected from websites. The first sampling criterion was that the movie was ‘coming soon to cinemas’ after the data collection phase to support the study’s external validity. In recognition that genre preference has been shown to vary according to gender (Fischhoff, Antonio and Lewis, 1998; Kring and Gordon 1998), each movie trailer was selected to fit into one of three categories defined by who would likely prefer the movie. The movie trailers are listed in the table below. The genre labels were not provided to participants; rather they are listed here to illustrate the diversity of content shown to interviewees.

Interviewees were shown six movie trailers from the sample. To minimise intervening effects of pre-existing knowledge about a movie and improve internal validity, one movie trailer from each genre category was selected according to whether the interviewee had previously seen the movie trailer. As it happened though, no interviewees had previously seen any of the trailers used in this study.

Table 1: Movie Trailers and Genre Categories:

Movie Title	Genre Category	Likely to be preferred by females, males or neutrally by both genders
<i>The Notebook</i>	Romance/Drama	Female
<i>The Clearing</i>	Drama	Female
<i>Finding Neverland</i>	Drama	Female
<i>Ladder 49</i>	Action	Male
<i>National Treasure</i>	Action	Male
<i>Taxi</i>	Action & Comedy	Male
<i>Cellular</i>	Thriller	Neutral
<i>Code 46</i>	Thriller & Science-Fiction	Neutral
<i>Collateral</i>	Thriller	Neutral

To gain an appreciation of consumers' global interpretation of movie trailers, each trailer was first shown in entirety. Rather than assume genre categorisation, the researcher proceeded by asking the interviewee "What do you think?". After a movie trailer was played in entirety, the same movie trailer was then played scene-by-scene. To find out about perceived value in the movie experience, more direct questions were asked, "Would you want to see this movie when it is released in cinemas?", "What content of the trailer gave you information as to what the movie experience would be like?" Throughout, interviewees' answers were used as a basis to question further about particular content in the trailer that was communicating the movie experience. Finally, interview transcripts were analysed using a concept-by-concept basis, an approach adapted from previous qualitative studies (Spiggle, 1994). The preliminary literature review formed the framework for identifying thematic elements in the data.

Results

It was evident that interviewees used movie trailers to predict the likely movie experience and evaluate their willingness to see the movies. Interviewees came to a rapid judgment about genre at the onset of a movie trailer. This was noticeable first with use of genre labels and also cues in content of the trailers which evoked genre categorisation. Semantic symbols such as a gun and also fire conveyed an action movie; a 'driving for dummies book' conveyed a comedy. Music and sound effects in the trailers seemed to mark distinctions between different genres. *The Notebook* was associated with the romance movie genre: "...It's a romantic movie, the music at the beginning was quite relaxing and soothing so you knew weren't in for a thriller..." (Female, >26 years). Trailer construction was also a cue for genre categorisation. Namely, cutting of short scenes lead interviewees to predict the movie provided an experience of suspense.

The ability to genre-categorise the movie close to the beginning of the trailer evoked a network of associations about the likely movie experience: "...you can sort of tell there's

going to be a lot of explosions....you know there's not comedy or romantic crap in here..." (Male, ≤26 years, *Ladder 49*). To further demonstrate, images of children for *Ladder 49*, labelled an action movie, were interpreted as symbolising "death", "tragedy" and "the possibility of someone's life at risk." On the contrary, images of children in the trailer for *Finding Neverland*, labelled as a romantic movie, were interpreted as symbolising a "feel-good" experience.

In contrast, when viewing trailer content which did not evoke genre categorisation, interviewees were uncertain about the movie experience. Having seen the trailer for *Code 46*, a typical response was: "...you don't really know what's going on, you don't really know what the storyline's about". It emerged that genre categorisation allows association with types of emotions and feelings. *Taxi*, labelled as comedy was associated with "a light hearted" experience and described as "funny" and "a good aeroplane movie." Action was associated with "on the edge of your seat." Thriller was associated with "on the edge of your seat" as well as "suspense" and "exciting" and "spine-tingler."

Perceived value in the movie experience was, to a certain extent, conveyed by genre. Interviewees commonly expressed their preferences for types of movies using the genre labels. When interviewees interpreted a trailer to represent a movie incongruent with their genre preferences, negative evaluation would usually result. One interviewee who reported preferring thriller movies discerned *Finding Neverland* was not their type of movie: "...It's not in my genre of films. I like thrillers and action" (Male, > 26 years).

Further to the influence of genre preferences, for interviewees to perceive value in the potential experience, the trailer had to convey that the movie would warrant a degree of involvement. Several interviewees had a positive evaluation about *Code 46* because they interpreted it as unpredictable – they could not be sure how the movie would be played out. As one interviewee explained: "...it leaves things open enough so that you don't feel like you've wasted your money going to the movies..." (Male, ≤ 26). While genre categorisation made evaluation easier, if the movie was depicted by the trailer as too similar to prototypes established by past movie experiences, this subtracted from willingness to see the movie. For *Ladder 49*, one interviewee explained, "...The special effects look pretty spectacular but I don't think the story is much to go on, it's sort of seen better days I think..." (Female, >26 years). Data also revealed that familiarity with American movie conventions often subtracts from a willingness to see the movie.

Genre labels dominated interviewees' inferences about target audiences for the movies. The general consensus was that females have hedonic preferences for emotions and relationship themes in movies, males are more suited to the hedonic experiences provided by action movies. Interviewees used their familiarity with the types of hedonic experiences that different genres provide to predict whom a movie would likely appeal to. While a movie may not have appealed to an interviewee's genre preferences, a few reported they would choose to go to a movie to accompany their partner or to join friends. In addition to hedonic benefits, going to see the movie may also provide a benefit of maintaining social networks.

Discussion

Results from this study show that despite each movie being a novel product, consumers use movie trailer content to arrive at evaluations about their willingness to see a movie. Previous

studies regarding consumers' decision-making about movies had emphasised quantitative methodology. This study's use of qualitative methodology was supported by the key findings which show decision-making about a movie from a movie trailer occurs as a result of interpretation. Genres serve as shared codes for interpreting movie trailer content. Given the potential of movie trailers to generate word of mouth activity (Medhurst, 2001), movie trailer producers should consider that consumers are likely to talk about new movies using genre. Linked to consumers' past movie experiences, there are decisive elements of trailers which lead to genre categorisation. When trailer content is close with the activated cognitive schema, consumers are likely to find it easier to attribute meaning to the trailer content.

Understanding the type of experience a genre represents also allows consumers to predict whom a movie would likely appeal to, given that movie going is a social activity. Consumers are likely to make assumptions about target audience from their knowledge about social traits of males versus females, and their understanding of hedonic experiences provided by action versus romance genres. This finding provides insight about to whom consumers may recommend a particular movie. Knowing content that assists consumers to genre-categorise a movie allows producers of movie trailers opportunity to position the movie with regards to target audience. Also, trailers can be selected to appear with movies that will be interpreted as having the same target audience.

Perceived value in the potential movie experience was not just associated with genre preference. Another key finding from this study was that over-featuring of salient genre symbols in trailers might lead to interpretation that the movie is homogeneous with previous movies. The salience of the style of American genres implies that movies produced and marketed within genres will likely narrow consumers' expectations about the new movie. Whilst movie trailer producers want to give a clear insight about the movie experience, one appeal of movies is that they are new. Familiarity with genre conventions implies movie trailers do not necessarily need to be long in duration. Producers of movie trailers need to be mindful that following established codes with regards to genre and movie trailer conventions may subtract from the potential of the movie trailer to create an impression of excitement. Ideally, the consumer should be left with a degree of unpredictability about the movie. Trailer content should be reviewed in terms of this issue.

The need to consider the entire life of the movie is more reason to construct a trailer in a way that communicates how the new movie is sufficiently different to previous movies. Ancillary revenue streams, namely from DVD and video release becoming an increasingly significant part of the revenues earned by movie studios (Lehmann and Weinberg, 2000). Large rental chains, DVD-clubs and other sell-through outlets rely on consumers basing their buying or rental decisions on the movie's success in cinemas (Hanssens, *et al.*, 2003).

The results from the in-depth interviews in this study also serve as a platform for future research. Results have assisted in building an understanding of how consumers describe their interpretations of trailers and also the decisive elements of trailers from a consumer's perspective. Thus, the results are a basis for future research such as content analyses of movie trailers. In summary, interaction between trailer content and consumers' schema about genre appears to be a key reason as to how movie trailers can be effective for judging a movie experience prior to watching it in entirety. As one consumer explained, in contrast to other forms of movie advertising, the movie trailer "...brings the movie to life." The findings in this study support the potential of movie trailers to affect audience size and thus the ability of movie trailers to impact the success of a movie.

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