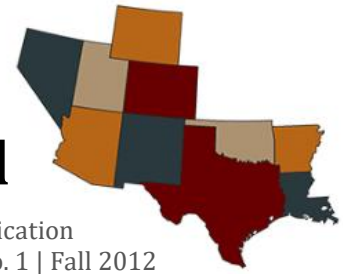


Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication
ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 28, No. 1 | Fall 2012

Critics' Influence on Moviegoing Decisions

Bryan Carr

The University of Oklahoma

Past research examining the content of media programming has shown women in the media tend to conform to certain beauty and body standards, with the dominant standard being one of “thinness.” Because this thin ideal is so well-documented, there has been an interest in examining the effects of those portrayals on media consumers. Previous research has demonstrated the media can play an important role in causing body dissatisfaction among women. This research builds upon prior studies by conducting an experiment exploring the interaction among image familiarity (the image was of a female celebrity or unknown model), body size (the female was thin or overweight), and race (the female was White or Black) and how those three items could affect participant body satisfaction. Unlike most prior research, the sample was diverse, allowing analysis examining any differences related to participant gender or race. Results suggest there were, indeed, different psychological effects based upon the size, familiarity, and race of the female image viewed, and the effects differed by race. Unlike previous research, there were no differences between genders. Implications from these results are discussed.

Suggested citation:

Carr, B. (2012). Critics' influence on moviegoing decisions. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 28(1). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

Abstract

This study seeks to compare the influence of film critics on the individual movie-making process to the effect of friends and family influence. Several significant relationships were found between perceptions of both groups of opinion leaders and the level of their influence on respondents. No significant relationship existed between opinion leader perception and the frequency of movie theater visits or entertainment media usage. A significant relationship was found between gender and the perception of friends and family as valid opinion leaders. The study suggests a weak to moderate two step flow relationship does exist between people and opinion leaders, though it is stronger overall for peers than for critics.

Two Step Flow Theory and Critics' Influence on Moviegoing Decisions

Critics have long been an important part of the film marketplace (Simonton, 2009). Yet the 21st century is a questionable time for film criticism. In a 2009 interview with CNN, actress Meryl Streep warned that film critics were becoming "scarily irrelevant" (Wong, 2009). In an age of cutbacks at many newspapers, film critics find themselves looking at a shrinking job market and facing increasing competition from online writers and audience members looking to use interactive media to share and disseminate their own opinions (Ebert, 2011; Wong, 2009). Online review aggregators such as Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic aggregate critical data and boil it down to a percentage of positive versus negative reviews in place of in-depth commentary, and bloggers increasingly exert more influence on the film enthusiast community (Doherty, 2010). In short, the factors of technology and the march of progress appear to be taking their toll on film criticism.

Yet the critics live on, with many plying their trade online. Even in an age of review aggregators, critical reviews must still originate from individual authors. For this reason, individual critics still play a significant role in the ecosystem of film. In fact, Lampel and Shamsie (2000) suggest that film studios incorporate critical reaction into their filmmaking plans. However, the changing nature of technology and the increased influence of social networks suggest that alternatives to film criticism exist and have an impact on audience decision-making.

This paper seeks to examine that question. The purpose of this study is to discover how much influence critics have over audience media selection, specifically when it comes time to decide what movies to see theatrically or otherwise. In order to analyze this question, the study first reviews literature related to film criticism and two-step flow communication theory,

assuming that film critics or friends and family act as opinion leaders in the two-step flow model. Following this review, the study suggests a survey aimed at exploring the impact of such opinion leaders on moviegoer decision-making. Finally, the study analyzes the findings of this survey and considers the implications for film criticism and the role of peers and loved ones in the media selection process.

Literature Review

Relatively little research has been conducted into whether critics influence the decision-making process of potential moviegoers, or whether peers and contemporaries have any effect on the decision. Traditional media outlets and word-of-mouth remain potential sources of information on movies. However, in the age of the Internet, professional film criticism is plentiful and diverse, and social networking makes it easier than ever to ascertain the cinematic opinions of friends and family. Therefore, this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature and knowledge of this topic.

Much of the literature on this subject has been aimed at the financial impact of film criticism. Several studies conducted in this area have returned similar results. Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid (2003) found that critics can have an impact on box office receipts, that a "negativity bias" exists, and found that big budgets and bankable movie stars can lead to greater revenue for films that get more negative reviews (Basuroy et al., 2003, p. 103). Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) found that critical reviews correlated with overall box office revenue but "did not have a significant correlation with early box office receipts" (p. 68). Larceneux (2007) found that online buzz and critical recommendations had a significant correlation with how much money a film made and that online recommendations could possibly influence said results. The idea of critical reviews having a positive effect on box office performance was further reinforced by

Brewer, Kelley, and Jozefowicz (2009), who conducted an analysis of domestic box office revenue and discovered that critics' influence was one of many factors positively correlated with economic performance.

Data on the influence of critics' reviews is not universally conclusive, however. Clement, Proppe, and Rott (2007) found that critical reviews did not necessarily guarantee the success of a book and that awareness and word-of-mouth were more influential. While in a different medium, this study does raise some questions about critical influence. Desai and Basuroy (2005) found that critical reviews had less impact on the box office performance of "familiar genre movies" than they did on lesser-known films (p. 203). The idea of critical influence proving more effective on specific types of film was supported by Reinstein and Snyder (2005), who compared reviews by well-known film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert to opening weekend box office totals. The results showed that positive reviews had the largest effect on the totals for movies with a limited release and dramatic films (Reinstein & Snyder, 2005). Finally, Gemser, Van Oostrum, and Leenders (2007) found that movie reviews predicted demand but did not influence the decision-making process for "mainstream" films, yet did have an influential impact on "art house" films (p. 57). Critical influence may vary in terms of both general effectiveness and effectiveness on specific categories of film.

There is also evidence to suggest that other influences can impact the decision-making process. Belvaux and Marteaux (2007) found that consumers acted as a source of "credible information" because of their position as an equal member of the film-going public" (p. 76). Online user reviews could "explain the final result of [a] movie" (Belvaux & Marteaux, 2007, p. 76). This idea of online consumer reviews and recommendations of film influencing the decision-making process is further borne out by Holbrook and Addis (2007), who contended that

individuals tended to recommend films they enjoyed to others. The idea of peers, friends, and family influencing film selection is not new. In an early study, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006) suggested that peers may play a significant role in the movie-going process.

After reviewing existing literature on the influence of film critics on box office totals, a few gaps emerge that this study can fill. First, there appears to be relatively few studies focused on the direct self-identified motivational response on the part of individuals to critical prompting - most studies look simply at box office receipts without exploring the actual opinions and perceptions of the people going to the films. There also appears to be relatively little information about the influence of family and friends in film selection. Finally, no study exists that compares the influence of family and friends to that of critics directly, which is one of the goals that this study seeks to accomplish.

Two-Step Flow Theory

This study uses the two-step flow theory of communication as a conceptual guide. First introduced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet in 1944, the theory suggests that many people make decisions based on interactions with so-called "opinion leaders" who pay close attention to the information provided by the media and tend to consume larger amounts of it (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006). These interactions generally replace firsthand consumption of the media and are often subject to the individual interpretations of the opinion leader (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006). Hence, a two-step process is developed, in which the information passes from the media to the opinion leaders, and then from the opinion leaders to the public (Liu, 2007). This process has been used to explain many different forms of decision making and opinion formation.

Since the initial studies, several new wrinkles have been added to the two-step flow model. Katz (1957) suggested that the interest gap between those influenced by opinion leaders and the opinion leaders themselves may not be very wide, and that often they may change roles depending on the situation. Van den Ban (1964) suggested that mass media may influence both opinion leaders and the influenced alike, and suggested that individuals may often get their information from personal relationships than from other opinion leaders. Anderson and Melén (1959) supported this idea with their study of political opinion formation in a pair of Swedish towns, where it was found that members of those towns were more likely to get their political information from interpersonal connections. Troidahl (1966) suggested similar findings in his study, stating that mass media messages were less effective than other influences on the decision-making process.

The theory originated from a study of electoral opinions and is still often used in social sciences, but is also common in mass communication studies (Liu, 2007). Trepte and Scherer suggested that opinion leaders vary in their level of knowledge and could be classified into both "uninformed" and "informed" categories (p. 119). The two-step flow theory has been used to analyze everything from differences in cross-national news reports (Farnsworth, Soroka & Young, 2010) to attitudes towards climate change (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). These studies show that two-step flow theory is flexible and applicable to a variety of different problems and areas of study.

Due to its supposition of an intermediary between the media and members of the audience, two-step flow theory is appropriate for a discussion of the effects of critics and contemporaries on individual media consumption. Critics fulfill the role of opinion leader in the theory, as they generally are exposed to a greater number and variety of films than their audience

and pass their interpretations and reviews on to that audience, which can then use those interpretations as they see fit. Peers, friends, and family can also fit into the role of opinion leader, as an individual may seek the advice of their friend or family member that has more disposable income or goes to see a larger number of films than the individual. Like with the critic, they may use that expanded understanding to supplement or guide their own view of the film marketplace. Because the concepts of the theory can be applied directly to the relationship between audience and critic (or audience and friend or family member), two-step flow theory is a valid theoretical grounding for this study.

As illustrated above, this study uses the two-step flow theory to investigate whether critics have a significant influence on the decision-making process of moviegoers. With the two-step flow and the rationale for this study, the present study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: What relationship, if any, exists between peoples' opinion of critics and the level of influence critics have on their movie-going decision?

RQ2: What relationship, if any, exists between peoples' opinion of friends and family and the level of influence friends and family have on their movie-going decision?

These questions are based in the assumption of the professional critic as a knowledgeable opinion leader different from friends and family. While peers may be knowledgeable about film, they likely have more limited access to movies due to more limited time and resources. This affords them less opportunity to compare potential film choices. Critics, on the other hand, may not be as trusted as a good friend or family member, or may come across as elitist. For this reason, it is necessary to separate critics from the other interpersonal relationships that might

influence film selection. Both of these research questions are focused on exploring to what degree individuals perceive themselves to be influenced by these opinion leaders.

RQ3: What relationship, if any, exists between frequency of film viewing and the overall influence of opinion leaders on the decision-making process?

RQ4: What relationship, if any, exists between the frequency of entertainment news consumption and the influence of opinion leaders on the decision-making process?

RQ5: What relationship exists between peoples' demographic characteristics and the influence of opinion leaders on the decision-making process?

These three research questions are focused on some external factors that may influence the selection of film. An individual who frequently visits a movie theater might have a different outlook on film and a different decision-making process than the individual who visits a theater less often. Likewise, an individual who is well-versed in the behind-the-scenes stories, news, and gossip that fill many entertainment websites, magazines, and podcasts may have a different appreciation for the role of the critic or a different means for deciding which films they will consume. Finally, the last research question posits whether gender or class standing has an effect on the decision-making process. These questions are based on theater visit frequency, entertainment website use, and gender and class standing - since these are generally not influenced by opinion leaders or critics, these will be independent variables in each question. More information on that concept is provided below.

Concepts and Variables

The concepts in this study are informed by the component parts of the audience/opinion leader relationship and the assumptions of two-step flow theory. For the purposes of this study, "opinion leaders" will be divided into two categories, as either film critics and journalists or peer

groups such as friends and family. "Critics" will be those professionals paid to share their opinion on a film through columns or reviews in any medium. "The decision-making process" will refer to the respondent's choice of what film to spend their time and resources on watching. "Entertainment news consumption" will refer to the respondent's usage of websites, magazines, and newspaper articles pertaining to news on the film industry and upcoming movies. These definitions should provide a clear lens through which to conduct the study and should provide ample opportunities for data analysis. Moreover, the questions should also provide answers to the stated goals of the study and also provide groundwork for further research.

This study seeks to determine whether film choice is influenced by critics or other opinion leaders. Therefore, the level of influence on film choice was the first variable constructed, and it will be a dependent variable in this scenario. However, the influence must be studied in terms of both critics and interpersonal/peer opinion leaders. Therefore, the influence of each type of opinion leader was measured in an individual variable. Other measures, such as the perceived trustworthiness or knowledge of the source, were chosen to create constructs that provide a more complete picture of respondent opinion towards opinion leaders. It was important and relevant to the research to gauge whether respondent feeling towards the opinion leader sources has an effect on the level of influence of these sources. All of these variables, as they are measures of intensity, will be measured via 7-point Likert scales.

This study contained several independent variables - the frequency of theater visits, the consumption of entertainment news, and demographic data such as gender. These factors were compared to the dependent variable to determine what, if any relationships exist between them. Theater visit frequency will be a variable in which the respondent simply enters the number of times they have been to a movie theater in the last six months. The consumption of entertainment

news will also be a ratio-level variable in which the respondent lists how often they consume entertainment news media - blogs, magazines, etc. - in a given week. Finally, gender will be a dichotomous nominal variable.

Method

A survey was conducted using a sample of students enrolled in a journalism and mass communication program. Student participation was solicited via in-person distribution of surveys to two primarily undergraduate courses. The survey was self-administered, which allowed for the collection of data from a large respondent sample in a small timeframe (Nardi, 2006).

The two classes selected for the study were chosen due to their status as larger, relatively heterogeneous courses of students from various concentrations within the program. Upon receiving the survey, participants were asked to complete a basic mixed-mode survey instrument consisting of several types of questions. The first section of the survey involved ten questions on a Likert intensity scale to measure respondent feeling towards film critics and friends and family. Other questions focused on their self-identified likelihood to use either source as a way of guiding their decision-making process. The questions were measured ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (7).

The second section asked participants to rely on their memory to explain how many times they have been to the movies in the last six months. Respondents were also prompted to offer rough hour estimates of the time they spend with both online and print entertainment news and film reviews. To obtain this information, respondents were offered a set of ratio-level variables that represented various frequency ranges in which they could find the range that best reflected their level of use. Finally, respondents were asked to specify the nominal variables that most accurately reflected their gender and class standing. To conclude the survey and allow for open-

ended feedback, respondents were given a blank space in which to write brief comments if they so chose. The survey was distributed to 98 respondents across the two classes. 18.4% of the sample were sophomores, 41.8% were juniors, 34.7% were seniors, and 5.1% were graduate or Ph.D. students. The majority of the sample (71.4%) were female, with males comprising 28.6% of the sample.

The mean, standard deviation, and other descriptive statistics were gathered for each question on the survey. Bivariate correlations were run between the variables pertaining to opinion leader influence and demographic and psychographic data to determine what relationships, if any, exist. Bivariate correlations were also conducted to determine what relationship existed between the number of films watched in the last six months and the level of opinion leader influence, as well. Independent sample *t* tests were also conducted where appropriate. In order to develop constructs to gauge the level of influence that opinion leaders have over the movie-going process, the relevant question measurements were combined into a single construct and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. This step ensures that the constructs reliably measure respondent feelings towards each type of opinion leader. Finally, in order to obtain additional relevant data from the sample, descriptive statistical tests to find the mean, standard deviation, and mode of each variable were run to determine whether the distribution of responses fell on a normal curve. All tests for significance were run as two-tailed tests due to a lack of certainty about the direction of the relationship at a 95% confidence level.

Results

In the first section, respondents were asked to offer their opinion of critics. The overall opinion towards film critics and their work was not a favorable one. Respondents were less likely to view critics as trustworthy overall ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.26$), though they held somewhat positive

opinions of critics' level of knowledge ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.21$). Respondents did not show a strong feeling of being educated after reading a critic's review, either ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.66$). The influence of critical opinion on the movie-going decision was also called into question.

Respondents were less likely to report that a critic influenced their decision to see the last movie they saw ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.76$) and were also less likely to state that a critic influences their opinion in general ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.66$).

In comparison, the influence of friends and family fared better. While trust in the opinions of friends and family was somewhat positive ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.44$), respondents were more likely to talk about movies with their friends and family ($M = 6.28, SD = 1.07$). Those answering the survey were also somewhat likely to their use of movies as a means of spending time with friends and family ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.46$). The influence of friends and family on the movie-going process was overall slightly higher than the influence of critics. Respondents were slightly more likely than neutral to have been influenced in their last movie-going decision by friends and family ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.60$) and were also slightly more likely than neutral to have been influenced by friends and family in general ($M = 5.34, SD = 1.377$).

In terms of media and movie-going habits, respondents were likely to be limited in the amount of time spent on such pursuits. The amount of movies seen in the last six months fell into the middle of the spectrum from zero to nine or more ($M = 1.96, SD = .97$). Time spent with entertainment media tended towards the lower end of the spectrum, with relatively low use of entertainment websites ($M = 1.33, SD = .67$) and lower use of entertainment print media ($M = 1.19, SD = .46$). Respondents were relatively unlikely to spend a large amount of time reading movie reviews, either online ($M = 1.05, SD = .22$) or in the newspaper ($M = 1.00, SD = .00$).

After gathering this data, the questions pertaining to respondent perception of critics and respondent perception of friends and family were collected into scales for the purposes of correlative testing. The first five questions pertained to respondent opinion and perceptions of critics. As a construct, the first five questions had a Cronbach's α of .80. The second set of five questions pertained to respondent opinions and perceptions of friends and family. Combined into a construct, this set of questions had a Cronbach's α of .78. In this case, the reliability was higher ($\alpha = .809$) when the question pertaining to whether movies were used to spend time with friends and family was removed. Because this question was not integral to the theoretical background of the study, this question was removed from the scale used in further analysis to ensure the highest level of reliability.

To answer RQ1, a bivariate correlation was conducted comparing the questions pertaining to respondent opinions of critics to the questions pertaining to critical influence on the movie-going decision. A significant positive relationship existed between perception of critical trustworthiness and critical influence on the last movie a respondent saw ($r = .30, p < .001$). Perception of critical trustworthiness also correlated significantly and positively with the level of critical influence in general ($r = .40, p < .001$). Perception of critical knowledge also had a weak positive correlation with influence over the last movie seen ($r = .21, p < .05$) and a weak positive relationship with general influence ($r = .26, p < .05$). Finally, respondent perception of feeling educated after reading a critical review had the strongest relationship with the level of critical influence. A significant positive moderate correlation was found between the perception of education and critical influence on the last movie seen ($r = .50, p < .001$) and a significant positive correlation was found between the perception of education and critical influence in general ($r = .62, p < .001$). From this data, it can be determined that a significant positive

relationship between feelings towards critics and critical influence on the movie-going process exists, thereby providing an answer for RQ1. However, this answer must take into account that the strength of this relationship varies depending on how the opinion is framed. It could be argued from this data that respondents who feel educated about a movie have more information and a stronger idea of whether they actually want to see the movie.

RQ2 asked much the same question as RQ1 while focusing attention on the relationship between respondents and family and friends. A significant positive relationship existed between the level of trust in the opinions of friends and family and the level of influence on the last movie respondents saw ($r = .54, p < .001$). However, the relationship became much stronger when correlated with influence on the movie-going process in a more general sense ($r = .70, p < .001$). Respondent likelihood of talking with friends and family about movies had a significant positive relationship with influence on the most immediate movie decision ($r = .36, p < .001$) and a similar but stronger relationship with general influence ($r = .46, p < .001$). Finally, respondent likelihood of using movies as a means of spending time with friends and family had a significant weak positive relationship with influence on the most immediate movie-going decision ($r = .24, p < .05$) and a similar but slightly stronger relationship with general influence ($r = .31, p < .05$). In answering RQ2, it can be assumed that there exists a significant positive overall relationship between respondent opinion of friends and family and their influence on a respondent's movie-going decisions, but this relationship is strongest when the opinion is trusted.

To answer RQ3, which focuses on the relationship between opinion leader influence and the frequency of seeing movies, correlation tests were run on the aforementioned scales of critics and friends and family. These scales were used because they include both respondent opinion towards the opinion leader and the level of influence they have on the movie-making decision. In

both cases, there did not appear to be a significant relationship between opinion leader perception and the frequency of theater visits. A statistically insignificant weak negative relationship existed between the number of movies seen in the last six months and the overall perception and influence of critics ($r = -.06, n.s.$) and a statistically insignificant weak positive relationship existed between the number of movies seen in the last six months and the overall perception and influence of friends and family ($r = .09, n.s.$). Therefore, it can be determined that the answer to RQ3 is that no statistically significant relationship exists between the perception and influence of opinion leaders and the frequency of movie theater visits.

RQ4 sought to determine if a relationship exists between the frequency of entertainment news consumption and the influence and perception of opinion leaders on the decision-making process. For the purposes of this research question, variables pertaining to movie reviews were also included. Again, there did not appear to be any significant relationships of which to speak. A statistically insignificant weak positive relationship existed between the amount of time spent on entertainment websites and the perception of critics ($r = .10, n.s.$), and a statistically insignificant weak negative relationship existed between entertainment website use and perception of friends and family as opinion leaders ($r = -.04, n.s.$). This did not change when the medium was shifted to print, as statistically weak negative relationships existed between print entertainment media use and the perception of both critics and friends and family ($r = -.11, n.s.$; $r = -.06, n.s.$). No respondents claimed to spend more than two hours a week with printed film reviews in the newspaper, making computation of that relationship impossible. However, a statistically insignificant weak relationship between online movie review usage and perception of critics was found ($r = .01, n.s.$) as was a statistically insignificant negative relationship between online movie review usage and perception of friends and family ($r = -.01, n.s.$). RQ4 found that

there was no statistically significant relationship between entertainment media usage and perception of opinion leaders.

Finally, RQ5 sought to discover what relationship existed between demographic characteristics and the perception of opinion leaders. There are two main areas of demographic data to consider - gender and class standing, so correlation tests were run for both. A statistically insignificant weak positive relationship was found between class standing and perception of critics ($r = .1.0, n.s.$). Finally, a statistically insignificant weak negative relationship was found between class standing and the perception of friends and family as opinion leaders ($r = -.09, n.s.$).

An independent samples t test was also performed to compare the mean scores for perception of friends and family and the mean scores of those who identified as male ($M = 16.57, SD = 4.11$) and female ($M = 18.67, SD = 3.08$). This test was found to be statistically significant, $t(96) = -2.756, p < .05$. Another t test was run to compare male ($M = 4.39, SD = 2.25$) and female ($M = 5.12, SD = 5.28$) mean scores to the mean scores of critical perception. This test was not found to be statistically significant, suggesting that there was no significant relationship between gender and perception of critics. Therefore, RQ5 is answered by the statement that no significant relationship exists between class standing and perception of opinion leaders, nor does a relationship between gender and perception of critics exist. However, a relationship between gender and perception of friends and family as opinion leaders does exist that is stronger among females.

Fig. 1: *Gender and Perception of Friends and Family means*

	Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male	Female			
Perception of Friends and Family	16.57	18.67	-2.756*	471	.01
	(4.11)	(3.08)			

*= $p = \leq .05$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Discussion

Based on the survey's findings, there does appear to be a two-step flow relationship between opinion leaders and audiences. However, at least in the case of this sample, audience members pick and choose who leads their opinion. While the overall response to the survey indicated that respondents had a more or less neutral opinion of critical knowledge, the popular perception that critics are knowledgeable about film does not appear to be a criterion that lends them credibility. The general lack of positive feeling towards critics might limit their efficacy as opinion leaders. However, some respondents did see critics and writings about film as useful, whether as an aid in understanding the plot or determining whether the content in a film was appropriate for a younger family member or their personal religious beliefs.

In general, respondents had a more positive perception of friends and family than they did of critics, though the positivity was not particularly strong. The mean score of respondents talking with friends and family was the highest of all the survey questions, showing that respondents were presumably more likely to discuss movies with their friends and family than they were to read critical reviews or entertainment media. This is in keeping with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955/2006) analysis of movie-going decisions, as well as Belvaux and Marteaux's (2007) evidence showing that peers and fellow consumers were seen as credible. However, most mean scores were barely above neutral. This indicates that most respondents' movie-going decisions were not strongly influenced by friends or family either. Therefore, while the two-step

flow factor was somewhat present when it came to friends and family and the scores were higher than with critics, it was not high enough to indicate strong opinion leadership. Some respondents stated that they tended to trust friends with whom they shared similar tastes in film, though others said they often disagreed with friends and family and used previous experience to determine whether they would listen to such opinion leaders.

The overall lack of strength of impact from either kind of opinion leader suggests that most people probably either made up their own mind ahead of time and ahead of other influences. One respondent said they tended to make their mind up ahead of time and were more strongly influenced when it came to movies about which they had less information. This suggests that there may be other factors that influence movie-going decision beyond opinion leader influence. An individual may be drawn to a particular type of movie or have enjoyed promotional materials and trailers for the film, as evidenced by some of the respondent reactions. This may have accounted for some of the low mean scores. This would be in keeping with the findings of Clement et al. (2007), which suggested that awareness and word of mouth were important indicators in the success of books. A similar effect may exist for movies.

The low scores from respondents in terms of their overall media use suggested that average respondents did not see movies and entertainment as a high priority or major component of their lives. This may have had an impact on the results. One possible explanation for the general low amount of time spent with movies could be the cost. One respondent said that going to the movies was "too expensive" and they preferred watching movies on online streaming services and another said they simply did not want to pay to see movies. Use of other media was also relatively low with little variance, suggesting that entertainment media and movie reviews, regardless of medium, were not a prominent part of respondent media consumption. It is also

worth noting that there was no variance in the use of newspaper movie reviews. Every respondent answered that they spent 0-2 hours reading movie reviews in the newspaper, suggesting that if newspapers are still running movie reviews, they may not be sought out by respondents as a primary source of information and influence on their decision-making process.

There appears to be a disconnection between the consensus of literature on critical influence and the degree to which individuals themselves claim to be influenced by critics. Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) and Brewer et al. (2009) suggested that critical reviews were often positively correlated with box office revenue and commercial success. The findings of this study call such an assumption into question. Respondents in this survey had an overall low opinion of critics, and claimed that their work had an overall lack of impact on their movie-going habits. Most studies in this field suggest that critical reviews are positively correlated with box office performance. However, based on these initial findings, suggesting that there is a causal relationship may be misguided. Even if positive reviews from critics are related to higher box office, it may be presumptuous to state that positive critical reviews cause audiences to see or not see certain movies.

Overall, this survey showed that there were few significant relationships between audience characteristics and the influence of critics and other opinion leaders. At the individual level, the mean scores showed relatively low opinions and levels of influence for both critics and friends and family opinion leader groups. The slightly stronger level of influence for friends and family suggest that other informal relationships may also be stronger, in keeping with the findings of Belvaux and Marteaux (2007) and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006). The data gathered from this study does not necessarily indicate a strong two-step flow relationship. However, as a pilot study, this survey provides justification for further inquiry into this subject.

A study addressing some of the limitations of the current survey could provide some interesting data applicable to the subject area and whether a two-step flow relationship really exists.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small. While it was possible to glean the direction of some relationships from the sample, it is very likely that a larger sample would affect the results, though whether they would be substantially different remains to be seen. The sample size also affects the generalizability, and it may be difficult to ascertain trends for the larger population from this sample.

The fact that this sample is a non-random convenience sample also may affect how the degree to which it can be used to predict larger group trends. Given more time and a greater degree of access, a random sample drawn from across the university would provide a more accurate portrait of the population. By the nature of how this sample was gathered, it was limited to the enrollment in these courses. As a result, it was skewed slightly towards students in higher class levels, with small representation from sophomores and no representation from freshmen. This too may have had an effect on the results.

As in any survey study, this study may have been limited by its reliance on self-reporting. Respondents may not have had an accurate perception of how many movies they had seen in the last six months or may not realize how much time they spent with entertainment media. A form of the third-person effect may have occurred, as well. Respondents may either have not realized how much they were impacted by opinion leaders or downplayed that influence to make themselves look better.

In looking at the survey, there may have been a degree of ambiguity in the questions. Some of the questions asked whether family members and friends influenced the decision to go

to the movies. The way this question was phrased may have been too open-ended. A family member or friend may influence the decision to go to a particular film, but that could either be in terms of a recommendation or in terms of a limitation. For example, a respondent may not have wanted to go to a particular movie but had no choice because of familial obligation - some movies may not be appropriate for certain members of the family so that may limit the number of choices. This ambiguity may have affected how some respondents answered.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies in this area could include additional questions pertaining to the effectiveness of promotional materials and advertising, such as trailers and online videos. In addition, a survey could be conducted within a movie theater to gather a sample that has recently made the active decision to watch a film, though this would require a larger degree of preparation and permission. This might get a substantially different result and would provide a comparison population from a more diverse background. Studies focusing on the impact of online user reviews and review aggregator sites on the movie-going decision process may also prove valid, as several respondents suggested that they get their knowledge about movies from word of mouth and online information. Such studies would expand the utility of the research into studies of online communications and community, as well as strategic communication areas.

References

- Anderson, B., & Melén, C. O. (1959). Lazarsfeld's two-step hypothesis: Data from some Swedish surveys. *Acta Sociologica*, 4(2), 20-34.
- Basuroy, S., Chatterjee, S., & Ravid, S. A. (2003). How critical are critical reviews? The box office effects of film critics, star power, and budgets. *Journal of Marketing* 67(4), 103-117.
- Belvaux, B., & Marteaux, S. (2007). Web user opinions as an information source. What impact on cinema attendances? *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 22(3), 65-81.
- Brewer, S. M., Kelley, J. M., & Josefowicz, J. J. (2009). A blueprint for success in the US film industry. *Applied Economics*, 41(5), 589-606.
- Clement, M., Proppe, D., & Rott, A. (2007). Do critics make bestsellers? Opinion leaders and the success of books. *Journal of Media Economics*, 20(2), 77-105.
- Desai, K. K., & Basuroy, S. (2005). Interactive influence of genre familiarity, star power, and critics' reviews in the cultural goods industry: The case of motion pictures. *Psychology & Marketing*, 22(3), 203-223.
- Doherty, T. (2010, February 28). The death of film criticism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved March 9, 2011 from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Death-of-Film-Criticism/64352/>.
- Ebert, R. (2011, January 22). Film criticism is dying? Not online. *WSJ.com*. Retrieved March 9, 2011 from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703583404576080392163051376.html>.
- Eliashberg, J., & Shugan, S. M. (1997). Film critics: Influencers or predictors? *Journal of Marketing*, 61(2), 68-78.

- Farnsworth, S., Soroka, S., & Young, L. (2010). The international two-step flow in foreign news: Canadian and U.S. television news coverage of U.S. affairs. *The International Journal of Press and Politics*, 15(4), 401-419.
- Gemser, G., Van Oostrum, M., & Leenders, M. A. A. M. (2007). The impact of film reviews on the box office performance of art house versus mainstream motion pictures. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 31(1), 43-63.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Addis, M. (2007). Taste versus the market: An extension of research on the consumption of popular culture. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(3), 415-424.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (2006). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. (Original work published 1955).
- Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 61-78.
- Lampel, J., & Shamsie, J. (2000). Critical push: Strategies for creating momentum in the motion picture industry. *Journal of Management*, 26(2), 233-257.
- Larceneux, F. (2007). Buzz and recommendations on the Internet. What impacts on box-office success? *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 22(3), 43-62.
- Liu, F. (2007). Constrained opinion leader influence in an electoral campaign season: Revisiting the two-step flow theory with multi-agent simulation. *Advances in Complex Systems*, 10(2), 233-250.
- Nardi, P. M. (2006). *Doing survey research: A guide to quantitative methods* (2nd Ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

- Nisbet, M. C., & Kotcher, J. E. (2009). A two-step flow of influence?: Opinion-leader campaigns on climate change. *Science Communication*, 30(3), 328-354.
- Reinstein, D. A., & Snyder, C. M. (2005). The influence of expert reviews on consumer demand for experience goods: A case study of movie critics. *The Journal of Industrial Economics*, 53(1), 27-51.
- Simonton, D. K. (2009). Cinematic success criteria and their predictors: The art and business of the film industry. *Psychology and Marketing*, 26(5), 400-420.
- Trepte, S., & Scherer, H. (2010). Opinion leaders: Do they know more than others about their area of interest? *Communications* 35(2), 119-140.
- Troldahl, V. C. (1966). A field test of a modified 'two-step flow of communication' model. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 30(4), 609-623.
- Van den Ban, A. W. (1964). A revision of the two-step flow of communications hypothesis. *International Communication Gazette*, 10(3), 237-249.
- Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2010). *Mass media research: An introduction* (9th ed.). Boston: Wadsworth.
- Wong, G. (2009 January 29). Film factbook: The changing role of the critic. *CNN.com*. Retrieved March 9, 2011 from http://articles.cnn.com/2009-01-29/entertainment/film.factbook.critics_1_critics-movie-reviews-captive-audience?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ.