



REVIEW

A directional review of research on film consumption: perspectives and interpretations

Una revisión direccional de la investigación sobre el consumo cinematográfico: perspectivas e interpretaciones

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ABSTRACT

With the development of social productivity and science and technology, film has become a popular form of entertainment in the world. People's consumption of film can not only provide entertainment and satisfy the spiritual needs of the public, but also increase the country's tax revenue, thus promoting the development of the cultural industry. Therefore, the research on film consumption is of practical significance. At present, many scholars in the world have conducted research on the topic of film consumption from different perspectives, therefore, this research emphasized and summarized the perspectives and directions of the current research on film consumption, and briefly described the relevant theories and results. Based on this, the research summarized a series of important viewpoints of current film consumption from the aspects of basic theory, consumer psychology, market and industry, environmental factors and special context.

Keywords: Film Consumption; Basic Theory; Psychology; Market; Environment; Special Context.

RESUMEN

Con el desarrollo de la productividad social y de la ciencia y la tecnología, el cine se ha convertido en una forma popular de entretenimiento en el mundo. El consumo de películas por parte de la población no sólo puede proporcionar entretenimiento y satisfacer las necesidades espirituales del público, sino también aumentar los ingresos fiscales del país, promoviendo así el desarrollo de la industria cultural. Por lo tanto, la investigación sobre el consumo de películas tiene una importancia práctica. En la actualidad, muchos estudiosos en el mundo han realizado investigaciones sobre el tema del consumo de películas desde diferentes perspectivas, por lo tanto, esta investigación enfatizó y resumió las perspectivas y direcciones de la investigación actual sobre el consumo de películas, y describió brevemente las teorías y resultados relevantes. Basándose en esto, la investigación resumió una serie de puntos de vista importantes del consumo cinematográfico actual desde los aspectos de la teoría básica, la psicología del consumidor, el mercado y la industria, los factores ambientales y el contexto especial.

Palabras clave: Consumo de Película; Teoría Básica; Psicología; Mercado; Medio Ambiente; Contexto Especial.

INTRODUCTION

Film consumption, a sub-concept included in the research on consumer behavior,⁽¹⁾ is concerned with both commodity-based and cultural consumption categories. Commodity-based consumption is consumption that presupposes purchase under the conditions of a commodity economy.⁽²⁾ In terms of sources, consumption behaviour includes two levels, subsistence consumption and commodity-based consumption. With the development of productive forces and the increase in the socialization of production, the natural economy will be transformed into a commodity economy, and the proportion of commoditized consumption in people's consumption will continue to increase.⁽³⁾ Meanwhile, within the field of cultural consumption, cultural products or services are considered as a kind of consumption to satisfy people's spiritual needs,⁽⁴⁾ which has a wide range, including education, entertainment, sports, tourism, and so on. Meanwhile, cultural consumption can be physical consumption, such as buying books and magazines. It can also be non-physical consumption, such as visiting museums or watching films.⁽⁵⁾ The research on film consumption follows the conceptual framework mentioned above.

Thus, film consumption research can be defined as research focusing on the consumption behaviour of film, an object of the dual attributes of culture and commodity, which in turn has a wide range of connotations and extensions.⁽⁶⁾ It encompasses both film and consumer behaviour, as well as the consumers themselves. At the same time, film consumption research is also an interdisciplinary theme research, and its related theories involve marketing, media, psychology, behavior, and other disciplines.⁽⁷⁾ Therefore, it is obvious that for this wide-ranging research field, its study is a theoretical filler for many disciplines. And at the same time, the issue has practical significance and guiding significance for the development of the film industry, which is the original purpose of the research.

So far, from the theoretical level alone, the film consumption theory follows the path of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory.⁽⁸⁾ In terms of practical value, the research on film consumption includes several dimensions, such as the direction of taking film consumers as the main body of research and making research from the micro perspective of consumers' psychology, consumption motives, preferences, and so on. Another example is the research on the film consumption industry and market, which involves exploring the operation and production methods of the film industry, national policies, patterns, and analysis of the current market situation. Another part of the scholars noticed the external factors affecting film consumption and discussed them accordingly, such as natural factors, geographical factors, economic factors, policy factors, and so on. In addition, with the rapid development of technology and the Internet, research on film consumption has been placed in a corresponding cultural context and specific new phenomena have arisen. For example, new research topics such as the relationship between the streaming media era and film consumption, gamification and film consumption, fan-to-film consumption, and net generation and film consumption. This research summarized and discussed from the above perspectives using a literature review.

METHOD

This research adopted the literature research method of review. Specifically, this research mainly used a qualitative review to analyze and summarize, and then extracted some important points, research results and research trends in the field of film consumption. As stated above, because the point of view on which this research is focused, this research did not involve quantitative research or quantitative synthesis analysis, as this research did not include a systematic statistical analysis of the literature.

Specifically, this research utilized both a historical review and a theoretical review, the former of which reviewed a number of important issues and mainstream research perspectives in the field of film consumption. Theoretical overviews, on the other hand, present a number of different theories in the field and their main points of view.

Research On Film Consumption

As the name suggests, film consumption research is research focusing on consumers' consumption of film as an art form and a commodity, and in a narrow sense, film consumption research focuses on the ontology of consumption, i.e., the main objects of research are film as a consumer product and the audience as a consumer.⁽⁹⁾ With the deepening of related research, film consumption research now includes many levels of exploration of value, that is, a series of external influences affecting consumer goods and consumers are included in the scope of research.⁽¹⁰⁾ On the whole, however, the main objective of film consumption research is the same, namely, to discuss the correlation between film and viewers, and discuss the mediating variables that affect this correlation. Thereby revealing the consequences and general laws that influence this correlation and rationalizing the predictions of consumption behaviors to influence them.⁽¹¹⁾

The main significance of the research on film consumption is to improve the ability of film creators to control production and marketing, to satisfy the needs of film audiences more effectively, and to increase the box office.⁽¹¹⁾ Secondly, it helps the formulation and planning of national macro policies, thus effectively developing

the cultural industry, promoting the prosperity of the cultural market, and expanding tax revenue. It can also improve the quality of film consumer decision-making, and by understanding the psychology and behavior of film audiences, audiences can make better consumption decisions.⁽¹²⁾ The following section will discuss in detail the different theoretical perspectives of current film consumption research and related research ideas.

Basic Theory About Consumption Of Film Research

Film consumption is considered a subset of cultural consumption. In the broader theory of consumption, consumption is understood as a need that people have that drives their behavior and refers to a state of being.⁽¹³⁾ The same statement is shared by several other scholars.⁽¹⁴⁾ The American economist Maslow developed seven levels of human needs;⁽¹⁵⁾ Alderfer in the article “Empirical Test of the new theory of human needs”.⁽¹⁶⁾ The hierarchy of needs was supplemented, according to the nature of human needs compressed into three kinds, that is, the existence wants, the relatedness wants and the growth wants, referred to as the ERG theory.⁽¹⁶⁾ Film consumption, as one of the forms of cultural consumption, belongs to the category of high-level spiritual needs. That is to say, people’s consumption has long exceeded the stage of meeting the functional level of basic survival needs and has more often entered the stage of meeting the high-level functions of spiritual consumption, enjoyment, and development consumption,⁽¹⁷⁾ and film consumption is precisely such a form of consumption.

According to some research, film consumption tends to reflect the following two characteristics: on the one hand, it satisfies the audience’s spiritual needs and makes consumers feel pleasure and satisfaction;⁽¹⁾ on the other hand, the audience also needs to have a certain level of education or artistic appreciation when accepting a specific film work,⁽¹⁸⁾ only in this way can they better appreciate the cultural value and artistic attributes of the film. Some other scholars believe that film consumption, as a typical non-material pursuit activity, its development, maturity, and expansion of scale are determined to a certain extent by the development of productivity, the size of the scale of surplus products, and the increase in the level of residents’ income.⁽¹⁹⁾ Bodunrin and Stone analyzed the relationship between film consumption and the national happiness index and extend the relevant paths: the selection of film products and services the Value realization of film products -Human capital enhancement and comprehensive human development -Spiritual pleasure, happiness satisfaction -Harmonious development of society.⁽²⁰⁾

In addition, many scholars will conduct theoretical research on film consumption from a behavioural and cognitive perspective. For example, Weingartner argues that there is a problem in research on film consumption that neglects to pay attention to the behavioral theories behind it,⁽²¹⁾ and according to him, film consumption is the result of thoughtful and rational decision-making based on weighing up aesthetic preferences and situational opportunities. In addition, internalized aesthetic attitudes and tendencies are so important that they automatically guide film consumption with relevant situational cues.⁽²¹⁾

Some other scholars found that there is a certain degree of uncertainty in film consumption, and in the context of the streaming media era, simple analyses such as the impact of trailers on the audience or analyses of the box office in the film market are no longer sufficient to explain this uncertainty in film consumption.⁽²²⁾ There is an urgent need for research on film consumption to go beyond the traditional scope of cultural economics and integrate the relevant elements of epistemology and socioeconomics, that is to say, the analysis of film consumption should incorporate more anthropological and sociological dimensions.⁽²³⁾

Research About The Consumer Psychology Of Film Audiences

As a dynamic subject, film audience is undoubtedly one of the key areas of research on film consumption. Because without the film audience, which does not constitute the consumption behavior, the research on film consumption cannot be discussed.⁽²⁴⁾ The psychology of film consumption can generally be corroborated at the same time in general research on the psychology of cultural consumption, that is, the psychology of film consumption tends to conform to the psychological laws of the consumption of cultural products. For example, the psychology of popularity, the psychology of seeking beauty, the psychology of seeking differences, the psychology of curiosity, the psychology of convenience, and so on.⁽²⁵⁾

With the development of the times, the consumption psychology of film audiences has been transmuted. This is mainly because although film exists as a form of art, it is more easily accepted and loved by the general public than other cultural or artistic activities such as painting, music, dance, comedy, and so on because of its easy-to-understand character and highly entertaining connotation. As a result, film consumption psychology has some characteristics that are different from the general cultural consumption psychology.⁽²⁶⁾ It is generally believed that the initial intention of film consumption is to obtain relaxation and enjoyment, spiritual satisfaction, and emotional release and resonance.⁽²⁷⁾ With the continuous extension of the art of film and the improvement of the audience’s aesthetic taste, the audience is not only eager to get pleasure and excitement in watching films, but also eager to get irony, inspiration, criticism, and other emotions. The audience’s demand for the film has evolved from a simple plot to a far-reaching flavor.⁽²⁸⁾

Friedberg believes that in a multicultural society, the consumer psychology of modern film audiences shows the characteristics of postmodernism, i.e., the audience is not satisfied with the traditional narrative but is eager to see a kind of artistic thinking with the spirit of rebellion and transcendence.⁽²⁹⁾ This is reflected in the fact that some films with spoof plots, surreal and exaggerated lines, and anti-heroic styles have gradually gained more audience attention. Furthermore, Johnson also believes that Hollywood superhero films have not performed well at the global box office in recent years, one of the factors is that the audience has become aesthetically tired of superheroes, and the deeper reason is that the audience desires for anti-heroic, anti-narrative and anti-reunion film structure from the psychological level, which also reflects some of the psychological characteristics of the post-modern cultural consumption.⁽³⁰⁾

In addition, the discussion of the relationship between film creators and the consumer psychology of film audiences is another direction of research on the consumer psychology of film audiences. A considerable part of the opinion is that the fundamental goal of the whole process of film, from production to marketing, is to cater to the consumption psychology of the audience.⁽³¹⁾ Grasping the psychological needs of the audience is the key to the success of a kind of film. However, some other scholars believe that deliberately catering to the audience's psychology can certainly increase the attention and box office of a film, but it should not be the fundamental purpose of film creation.⁽³²⁾ Whether it is "catering to the audience" or "improving the audience's appreciation level", this kind of thinking puts film creators in a higher position than the audience.⁽³³⁾ Bringing the psychological needs of the film audience into natural proximity with the creator's self-consciousness and artistic aspirations is the ultimate purpose of a film being created as art.⁽³⁴⁾

In addition, some scholars researching the consumption psychology of film viewers in their own countries have found that meeting friends to watch films is a common way of gathering, especially among young men and women. This shows that watching films not only has entertainment attributes, but also has strong social attributes.⁽³⁵⁾ Film consumption in this context is not only a manifestation of the herd mentality, but also a reflection of the fact that viewers sometimes use film consumption as a way of emotional contact between people. Although people are often speechless or do not communicate too much during the film-watching process, a considerable number of people will think that the act of watching films together can increase the intimacy between each other. Under the influence of this consumer psychology, most people will relax the choice of films they watch to achieve the purpose of watching films together, i.e., the result is more important than the process, and purposefulness is more important than selectivity.⁽¹⁸⁾

Research On Film Industry And Consumer Markets

Research on this part tends to be more practical, as it can visually reflect the details and situation of film consumption in a region or country. Some scholars have researched the pattern and development status of the film industry in specific regions or countries.

Take China for example, discusses three features that have emerged on the landscape of China's film market in recent years, namely the dominant spiritual construct (melodramatic films), the rise of art films representing elite culture, and the expansion of commercial film genres representing popular culture.⁽³⁶⁾ In addition, Yin and Sun studied the operation of cinema lines in China and found that the headline cinemas (top ten) in China's film market accounted for the vast majority of the total box office of China's film market, and the development of cinema lines had a serious polarization and is imbalanced.⁽³⁷⁾ The number of cinemas in various cities in China has shown a rapid increase in recent years, but due to the impact of COVID-19, cinemas have shown a wave of closures since 2021, with fewer films being filmed, and the box office shrinking at an extremely rapid rate, the film industry has suffered a huge impact, and is still in a period of recovery.⁽³⁸⁾ On the other hand, in the Chinese film market, the box office of local films has grown significantly in recent years, substantially exceeding the box office share of imported films.⁽³⁹⁾ It is believed that this is related to China's policy orientation and populism, but in fact, imported films represented by Hollywood are still active in the Chinese film market, and the number of imports has not decreased.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This phenomenon is due to the great progress of Chinese film shooting standards, cultural identity, and emotional resonance in local films, and the aesthetic fatigue of Hollywood films.⁽³⁹⁾

Recently, China's Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities have contributed nearly half of the market box office, indicating that in China's small and medium-sized towns, the level of film consumption is still low.⁽³⁷⁾ China's high-grossing films over the past years and concludes that the most popular genres of films in China are comedies and feature films. Films with good topicality and gimmicks tend to perform better at the box office, while the quality of a film is not necessarily proportional to its box office. This suggests that a significant portion of film audiences have a herd mentality when choosing which films to watch.⁽⁴¹⁾

Researching the film market in one's own country is widespread among relevant scholars in various countries, and this certainly includes the United States. However, the scholars' research perspectives on the American film market tend to reflect some differences. Because American Hollywood films or American commercial films are undoubtedly occupying an important position in the global film market;⁽⁴²⁾ many American films have filled cinemas in different countries around the world, and at the same time, American values have been widely

spread through the medium of film. As the North American film market is mature and stable,⁽⁴²⁾ scholars are more willing to research the reasons for the popularity of Hollywood films in the global film market and discuss the influence, impact, or reference of Hollywood films on the domestic film industry than to research on the North American domestic market. This will also lead to another topic, that is, how to achieve the purpose and feasible direction of cultural export through the export of domestic films. This topic is very popular in some countries with relatively prosperous film industries, such as India, China, and South Korea.⁽⁴³⁾

Research On Environmental Factors And Film Consumption

As a kind of consumer behavior, film consumption is inevitably affected by certain environmental factors, which are divided into external and internal environmental factors.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Some research summarizes the external and internal environments affecting film consumption, of which the external environment includes the level of national economic and cultural development, the level of economic development in the region, the relevant national policy guidance, the hardware facilities of the cinema, the price of film tickets, the distance and proximity of the cinema, the perfection of the supporting facilities around the cinema, and the strength of film publicity.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Internal factors refer to consumers' factors,⁽⁴⁶⁾ such as income level, age, receptiveness to new things, gender, availability, etc. Interestingly, individuals have found that women outnumber men in terms of the proportion of people who like to watch films.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Possible factors include the fact that men tend to be more vigilant when being interviewed and do not like to disclose their preferences easily.

Overall, the higher the investment in film consumption, the higher the level of economic and cultural development of a country, and the more people have the desire to invest in spiritual needs.⁽⁴⁶⁾ As for the audience themselves, most of them pay attention to the ticket price, and research shows that most of them don't care much about whether the cinema facilities are good or not, but whether the cinema is in a busy area is what they are more concerned about.⁽⁴⁵⁾ which proves that going to the cinema is sometimes an incidental activity in people's daily lives, such as shopping and partying.

However, the above factors are not absolute, and different countries will react differently to external factors according to their national conditions and their residents' attitudes towards culture and entertainment.⁽⁴⁸⁾ For example, in some countries, religious or ideological issues are also an important factor affecting film consumption. In China, for example, as an atheistic secular country that believes in materialism, Chinese film consumers rarely watch films involving ghosts and gods,⁽⁴⁹⁾ whereas films with similar themes are popular in Southeast Asia,⁽⁵⁰⁾ and there is a considerable market for them in Japan or South Korea.⁽⁵¹⁾ In some countries, films do not constitute a regular means of daily cultural leisure for nationals, i.e., film consumption is a lower priority for the people of the country when they are engaged in entertainment or leisure,⁽⁵²⁾ in which case the intention to engage in film consumption is not influenced to a high degree by the external environment, and their desire to watch a film is the most important factor.

Meanwhile, some research says that for imported films, transnational cultural distance is an important factor for the country's nationals in choosing whether or not to watch the film,⁽⁵³⁾ and usually, people choose films from countries that have a large domestic film market or have cultural similarities with their people. For example, although the Western values represented by Hollywood films are different from those of many non-western countries in the world, because of the strong cultural influence of the United States and the long-term dominance of Hollywood films around the world, filmgoers in most countries still watch American films regularly and do not feel culturally alienated.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In the case of films from smaller countries, viewers are hesitant to choose.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Then again, Chinese-language films have always accounted for a sizeable share of the Singaporean film market, and most of these Chinese-language films are imported, coming from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. Although Singapore's official language is English, it is clear that this predominantly Chinese nation still has an affinity for Chinese narrative expression.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Research On The Consumption Of Film In Specific Contexts

Under specific conditions or contexts, film consumption tends to take on different characteristics, and the corresponding research, often in conjunction with subcultural environments. For example, in the context of fan-oriented culture, some film creators tailor their films to IPs with large fan bases, which may be novels, comics or video games.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Such films are considered to have a certain threshold for viewing, as the audience may not be able to understand the worldview, background, and corresponding settings of the film if they have not been acquainted with the source material.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Accordingly, such films are widely distributed among fans, but lack appeal to the general audience.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Big IP films are far more likely to release sequels than original IP films because big IPs have stronger fan loyalty.⁽⁵⁹⁾

There are two directions in which fan-oriented films or big IP films lead viewers to make consumer decisions. The first is to replicate a successful single film and keep releasing sequels that continually expand the film's worldview and debutantes, such as the "Transformers" series of Hollywood films and the superhero films of Marvel Studios.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Another direction is to create a secondary artwork rooted in some kind of deeply rooted

cultural symbols, such as the image of “the Monkey King” (Wu Kong) in the Chinese classic “Journey to the West”. Thanks to the great influence and spread of the main character of the novel, both Chinese and Western films often use the fictional character of “the Monkey King” as the main character of the film,⁽⁶¹⁾ which innately attracts the corresponding fan base of the audience.

In addition, the Net Generation is a concept agreed upon by today’s society, because with the development of the Internet and its deep embedding in people’s lives, many young people have grown up with the Internet, and the Internet has become part of their lives.⁽⁶²⁾ Against this backdrop, the phenomenon of cross-media film consumption has emerged, with people watching films not only in cinemas but also relying on streaming channels and mobile. Although watching films in cinemas still provides a better viewing experience, cross-media consumption is more in line with the consumption and living habits of the Internet generation.⁽⁶³⁾

The Net Generation subculture has also given rise to another major phenomenon, namely fragmented entertainment. Rather than watching a film that often lasts more than 90 minutes, the netizens seem to prefer watching short video programs in a fragmented manner to gain a quick sense of leisure and entertainment, thus giving rise to many short-lived online films or short online dramas that are specifically designed for streaming media platforms. Such webisodes are characterized by a much shorter duration than regular films, or single episodes of only a few minutes duration, but with hundreds of episodes, and a strong emphasis on dramatic conflicts and reversals, as well as creating huge emotional differences to cater to the psychological needs of viewers.⁽⁶⁴⁾

At the same time, video games or gamification has also influenced the film consumption habits of contemporary young people to a certain extent. This is because video games are now a regular means of entertainment commonly accepted by young people all over the world.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Strong positive emotional feedback and the presence of a setting characterize video games, and such experiences influence contemporary sensory perceptions and experiences. A considerable portion of young people are more eager to pursue the thrill of gamification in films, as evidenced by their preference for role-playing mode films, breakthrough mode plot settings, and non-linear narrative structures.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The corresponding demographic will therefore pay more attention to films with gamified plots and spectacles and will be more likely to make consumption decisions about such films.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper introduced and discussed several types of current research directions on film consumption and related results. The theory of film consumption relies on the theory of cultural consumption makes adaptive extensions and discusses the relationship between film and consumers. However, as stated above, research on film consumption theory is a subset of cultural consumption theory. The research on film consumption involves both the study of cultural consumption and the study of behavioural, epistemological, and socio-economic studies. However, unlike research on film theory alone, film consumption theory is not an ontology or mere textual research. It is more of a cross-cutting type of research that primarily involves the scope of economics. This therefore explains why few scholars have yet proposed a specific theory of film consumption alone. Research on the audience’s film consumption psychology has been quite fruitful, this is reflected in the fact that scholars have found that the psychology of film consumption can reflect the convergence of traditional cultural consumption psychology as well as the unique psychological characteristics of film consumption, such as the extreme pursuit of entertainment, sensory stimulation, and emotional identification and resonance. At the same time, this kind of consumption psychology evolved accordingly because certain groups are influenced by specific cultural and social environments, such as postmodernist psychology. Furthermore, research on the film market and industry has also been quite comprehensive. Scholars from most countries not only research the development of their film markets, but also pay attention to the development of the American film industry and hope to learn from it. Similarly, many scholars have also researched various environmental factors affecting film consumption, A detailed analysis of the impact of various internal and external factors is also made and the extent of their influence on film consumption is discussed and the reason for this is that the above points are of direct significance in promoting the development of the film industry. There is still room for expanding the research on film consumption in specific contexts, which lies on the one hand in the fact that this kind of research belongs to cross-disciplinary research, and on the other hand, with the development of society, new cultural forms are constantly generated, which require simultaneous follow-up of research work.

The above research has interpreted the specific concept and operation process of film consumption, a human economic and cultural activity, from different perspectives, which can effectively promote the development of the film industry, improve the audience’s viewing experience, and thus increase film consumption.

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Project management: Gong Ke, Asmidah Alwi.

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