

Self-Perception Theory and Letterboxd: The Art and Science of becoming, a cinephile.

Introduction and context

Letterboxd is a product that blends multi-channel engagement across Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tik Tok with a home base application. It is a design that allows for a unique generation of content and personal creativity to enmesh and integrate with one's identity. It has become synonymous with a cool cultural cache, an almost indispensable lifestyle tool for an ever growing community of cinephiles. In fact as of 2025, Letterboxd has grown to nearly 20 million users with the majority of those skewing young (under 35) and nearly 80% of new sign ups post-pandemic emerging between the ages of 18-24 (Steiner, 2025).

Most fascinating is how this phenomenon appears to be conducive with a broader appeal and audience hunger towards "indie-film" making. There have been significant shifts in the entertainment landscape the past 5 years, notwithstanding the cultural rise of studios like A24 (*Everything Everywhere All at Once* & *Moonlight*) and Neon (*Anora* & *Parasite*), there is significant economic evidence of rapidly evolving consumer taste (Steiner, 2025). "Super Hero Fatigue", the fall of traditional Hollywood Blockbusters and movie stars, today's next generation of film makers and talent aren't likely going to be found on a broad-base consumer streaming platform, but at the diverse and eclectic palette of film festivals and independent gems that are released to an ever growing 'in the know' audience. It is about championing the humans behind the art and science of film projects. It is at this juncture that this author wishes to acknowledge the specificity for the scope of this assignment, focusing the design process within the realms of a single user and how they correspond their internal identity within the theories of self-perception posited by Bem (Bem, 1972). The hope is to continue to explore design possibilities in this field from all angles going forward. In particular focusing on ideas that integrate the Letterboxd tooling with a more sophisticated economic and infrastructural understanding to drive impact by forging real ideas and blueprints that could scale into existing cinemas, business pipelines and technologies.

Problem-scope, Psychology and Design Opportunities

First this paper needs to address the fundamental underpinning psychology of Self Perception Theory as posited by Daryl Bem in 1967. Specifically his studies uncovered how "Individuals come to know their own attitudes emotions and other internal states" by a combination of inference through observations of their own behaviour as well as the circumstances in which this behaviour occurs (Bem, 1967). Essentially as individuals we derive the meaning of our attitudes through a retrospective analysis of our performed behaviour, suggesting how critical it is to design frameworks that support the behaviours for the kind of individual one would like to manifest.

This theory runs in contrast to Dissonance Theory first posited in 1957 by Festinger which postulated that pairs of cognitions can be relevant or irrelevant to one another making them either consonant or dissonant (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2004). It is important to distinguish these two schools of thought as understanding the origins of self-perception through dissonance leads to a richer understanding of the psychology literature upon which to draft design opportunities and creative solutions. Specifically Dissonance Theory helps to address the resistance to change that occupies an individual's behavioural cognition. That deepening on the extent of pain or loss endured and the satisfaction obtained from the behaviour an attitude shift occurs to dissolve that dissonant discomfort (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2004). While this is useful for understanding potential points of pain for users, the theory is limited in its understanding of how to potentially apply those discoveries to design informed frameworks to initiate the type of change in action to transform those same feelings of dissonance. This paper holds the perspective that self-perception theory elicits a greater brevity of empathy towards actively effecting an individual's psychology through external change that can be considered and designed.

Fundamentally it is the focus of this review that underscoring the application of Design thought within this broader context is a user who sees themselves through the product and through the films they log, retrospectively. It is because of the context stated above that trying to understand this shift at scale in user identity can help make intelligent and specific design choices moving forward. They have come to know their own attitudes and emotions towards film and the identity of being a 'cinophile' by observing their own behaviour within the context (Bem, 1972). This paper holds the opinion that once the user downloads Letterboxd it is by that very mechanism that one takes on a more robust cinephile identity, and not the other way around. Incentivising someone to download the app and then offer an exceptional experience around is critical in getting people back to the movies and engaging with the wider spheres of economy that the film-landscape provides.

The genius of the Letterboxd design is the diary system that keeps a log of the films you watch over the course of the year. Indeed as Joubert and Hitge identified with agent-based testing for cyclists, the integration of a framework/structure into an ongoing activity proved significant in establishing the pattern of behaviour corresponding with the theories posited within self-perception theory (Joubert & Hitge, 2023). Of the 15% of the new cyclists introduced and tested within the MATSim parameters of the study conducted, there was a near total positive correlation for cyclists introduced within the mechanisms of a self-perception testing condition who continued to cycle willingly and enthusiastically post study (Joubert & Hitge, 2023). The results corroborate the potential then to design solutions that drive habitual movie-going behaviour by focusing on the construction of the framework around the product solutions, integrating and building from the diary system and giving the user the freedom to explore films and independent locally-owned cinemas like a game.

This introduces us to our next relevant area of focus in understanding how self-perception and social capital theory integrate to induce a greater sense of belonging which has been so effective in the gamer community. In online conditions higher relational switching costs and habitual behaviour were charged by positive community interaction (Teng, 2017). The design should therefore aim to leverage social capital which "facilitates co-operation and co-ordination for mutual benefit", thereby increasing the total value exchange of Letterboxd. This in turn will increase the likelihood of tangible economic exchange at the movie theatre and peripheral film related activities as well as commodities. The more value a user can get for free simply by joining and engaging in a community creates opportunity for a greater willingness to engage in the wider film economy. As suggested by the study, by focusing on the typology of length, depth, and breadth which users engage with the app Teng's work with online gamers can translate to online cinephiles and film by having them interact more closely with other users and professionals.

This is the key transitional moment in design thinking, to imagine possibilities for 'engagement' beyond just sucking time and attention on an app for the appearance of business growth but at the expense of the human and local business.

Referring to the study from Castillo, Benitez, Llorens and Luo, who analysed the "golden" and "silver" forms of engagement in social media focused film campaigns this review integrates that content into self-perception theory and how users perceive themselves as they engage online. Across 966 cinemas in Spain and the U.K whilst controlling for distributor, month of release and factoring cultural variance the authors were able to ascertain that increasing pre-consumption content engagement positively correlated to an increase in box-office performance (Benitez, Castillo, Llorens & Lou, 2021).

In order for the Letterboxd product to drive consumer demand at the box-office the design opportunities should consider how Letterboxd can cross-pollinate with other social media platforms and use effective psychological design in order to draw consumers back into the app. This will then facilitate more excitement and drive further engagement, a mutually reinforcing loop. Smaller budgeted films would be able to utilise the infrastructure to lower costs of marketing, and using the two metrics of "personal" and "interactive" engagement form more conclusive datapoints about a film's prospective performance (Lee & Wang, 2020).

The study also found that social media sites possess different features and provide different affordances that "satisfy individuals' psychological need[s]" (Can, Meadows, Wong & Xia, 2020).

The affordances then work as facilitators that motivate individuals to use social media to meet those needs, such as self-presentation, content-sharing, meta-voicing, and communication amongst others. Letterboxd in turn has its own set of engagement parameters and that allows for a unique form of self-presentation which is something that should be coherent with any new design additions to the app. Specifically with your top four favourite films and the consistent logging of the types of films you watch, future design features could dare to be more bold and unique from other apps because user's perception of the platform and the types of affordances it allows are already unique.

Conclusion

In conclusion the problem of incentivising consumers towards a healthier economic ecosystem of film consumption and in-person theatrical experiences can be addressed through a holistic lens of Design opportunities. By focusing on self-perception theory in the literature research and review, opportunities emerged as a composite of an individual's retrospective perception of themselves and the types of activities that a particular platform afforded them. Simply, as designers we have the power to shape a person's identity by designing the mechanisms they choose to satisfy their desires. Considering this in the context discussed film-loving behaviours and identities can be forged through intelligent and empathetic design. By focusing on giving people a more enjoyable way of using the app and considering features beyond the screen design can help move the user from the ephemeral digital space towards in person engagement and community by providing increased social capital and affordances.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-Perception Theory. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 1–62). [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0065-2601\(08\)60024-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0065-2601(08)60024-6)
- Cao, D., Meadows, M., Wong, D., & Xia, S. (2020). Understanding consumers' social media engagement behaviour: An examination of the moderation effect of social media context. *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 835–846. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.06.025>
- Castillo, A., Benitez, J., Llorens, J., & Luo, X. (2021). Social media-driven customer engagement and movie performance: Theory and empirical evidence. *Decision Support Systems*, 145, 113516. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2021.113516>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2004). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In *American Psychological Association eBooks* (pp. 3–21). <https://doi.org/10.1037/10318-001>
- J. Bem, D. (1967). SELF-PERCEPTION: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE PHENOMENA. *Psychological Review*, 74, 3.
- Joubert, J. W., & Hitge, G. (2023). Testing self-perception theory with agent-based simulation. *Procedia Computer Science*, 220, 730–734. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.03.096>
- Steiner, R. (2025, January 17). Variety. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/vip/letterboxd-year-end-report-growth-1236277320/>
- Teng, C. (2017). Managing gamer relationships to enhance online gamer loyalty: The perspectives of social capital theory and self-perception theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 79, 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.024>
- Wang, T., & Lee, F. (2020). Examining customer engagement and brand intimacy in social media context. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 54, 102035. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102035>