

Exploring antecedents of word-of-mouth in the movie industry

Crafting positive WOM through movie uniqueness

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Within the motion picture industry word-of-mouth is considered to be important for the box office success of movies. Most of academic research has looked at the explanatory value of word-of-mouth on the box office performance. Online buzz is found to increase demand for movies and is correlated with movie revenue. Online reviews as well as expert reviews are said to influence motivation and intention to watch movies. Yet only few academic studies have explored the antecedents of word-of-mouth for movies. Therefore, little is known about why some movies receive more word-of-mouth than other movies do, or why some movies receive more positive word-of-mouth than others. Let alone the understanding of what drives people to share word-of-mouth. This study focussed on the differences in word-of-mouth between arthouse and Hollywood movies and the mediating role of perceived uniqueness between this relationship. The definitions of arthouse and Hollywood movies hint to a big difference in their uniqueness, and their relationship is dependent on what is normal and what deviates from that. According to the word-of-mouth literature uniqueness is a strong predictor for positive word-of-mouth, leading to believe that an indirect relationship might be present. Additionally, this study looked if an individuals need for uniqueness moderates the relationship between perceived uniqueness of movies and word-of-mouth. This is because literature shows that high and low need for uniqueness individuals are different in their likelihood of sharing word-of-mouth for various types of unique goods.

This study made use of primary data collected through an online experiment ($n=126$). Using the PROCESS tool for moderated mediation it was identified that arthouse movies lead to a higher perceived uniqueness and that perceived uniqueness has a positive effect on word-of-mouth. However, no effect was found for the moderating role of need for uniqueness. Based on the results of this research movie studios and marketers for arthouse movies could try to incorporate uniqueness in their promotional materials as this might enhance the positive word-of-mouth during the pre- and post-release of a movie. On the other hand, movie studios and marketers for Hollywood movies with larger budgets, could instead focus on trying to create immersive experiences for their movies as previous research has indicated towards.

PREFACE

In front of you lies the thesis “Exploring antecedents of word-of-mouth in the movie industry, crafting positive WOM through movie uniqueness”. This thesis marks the end of my MSc marketing management at Tilburg University, but hopefully not the end of my time as a student.

Although there were often moments in between where I was momentarily *dazed and confused*, I worked on this research with great love and passion. In the end I made a thesis I can be proud of.

I Would like to take the time to thank my supervisor Dr. Arjen van Lin for all his valuable and critical feedback. Who despite my bad time planning, lack of concentration and sometimes muddled way of writing things down always remained to help me and guid me through the process of writing this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people who helped me when I needed them, managed to live with me, and who pulled me through this period.

Sit back, relax, and enjoy reading!

Jesse Dekker

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INTRODUCTION

Problem background and problem introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has been an important communication instrument in the set of a marketer's toolbox for over decades impacting every field of work including the movie industry. It relates to the positive or negative exchange of information and experiences by consumers about goods and brands to influence their surroundings (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). In the movie industry marketers try to nudge people towards talking about their movies, providing positive WOM and generating a lot of buzz during their release. WOM is believed to be the most influential factor affecting consumer behaviour (Buttle, 1998; Huete-Alcocer, 2017). A great example of this is the 2002 movie '*My Big fat Greek Wedding*' which went on to become a box office success despite its limited \$5 million dollar production and a little over \$1 million dollar marketing budget (Goldenberg, 2016; Moul, 2005). Studios were hesitant to release the movie as it sounded like another dime a dozen romantic comedy. However, just at the moment the average movie starts declining in revenue, *My Big fat Greek Wedding* took off. It stayed in theatres longer than anyone expected thanks to positive word-of-mouth. In fact, plentiful of research exist on the effects of (electronic) WOM on the box-office success of movies (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Lee & Choeh, 2020; Liu, 2006). For good reasons, as it is among the most important contributing factors to a movie's success (Eagan, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Depending on the type of movie and its budget, word-of-mouth can support a carefully orchestrated release strategy to drive movie attendances (Moul, 2005).

Differences in the type of movie, its quality, and in consumer preferences exist. One of the bigger distinctions can be made between arthouse (independent) movies and Hollywood (mainstream) movies. Traditionally arthouse movies were made for small audiences, enthusiasts of movie for which the benefits are greater than solely entertainment, opposed to Hollywood movies where the latter more often holds true (Cardullo, 2011; Chuu et al. 2009). This original audience of arthouse movies has given way for a broader audience in recent years. Due to the rise of streaming platforms and viral WOM marketing campaigns, arthouse movies are becoming increasingly popular (Baron, 2017; Booth, 2023; Lang, 2018; Roxborough, 2022; Sperling, 2023). Mainstream movies are often made in Hollywood in a formulaic way (Moul, 2005, p.17), where large movie studios have enormous production and marketing budgets. While these budgets vary and heavily depend on the various studios, generally the budgets of Hollywood movies are many times higher than those of arthouse

movies (Gemser et al., 2007). One could further argue that differences in uniqueness exists between arthouse and mainstream movies. Independent movie makers of arthouse movies have more freedom, resulting in more artistic and unique expressions (Cardullo, 2011; Chuu et al. 2009).

The difference in uniqueness between an arthouse movie and a Hollywood movie may lead to a difference in the extent to which people are willing to generate WOM for either type of movie. Hughes (2005) calls uniqueness one of the six important drivers behind WOM and Berger (2014) argues that uniqueness, as part of impression management, encourages WOM. In this case this should lead to some sort of increased inducement of WOM for arthouse movies. An explanation for this might be that unique goods are believed to enhance one's distinctiveness and when talking about it makes a person seem more unique and interesting (Berger, 2014).

Additionally, an individual's need for uniqueness (NFU) might also play a role in the generation of WOM as consumers with a high need for uniqueness have a higher desire to consume unique products but a lower tendency to generate WOM. To protect their identity, individuals with a higher NFU are less likely to consume popular products and feel a threat when people become like them, and thus do not talk about the unique products they consume (Berger & Heath, 2007; Tian et al., 2001). Based on this notion, consumers with a high NFU might be less likely to promote arthouse movies than Hollywood movies.

As the previous discussion indicates, WOM can play multiple pivotal roles in the movie industry. However, the antecedents of WOM in the movie industry is a subject rarely touched upon, with a few exceptions (Ladhari, 2007; Lefèvre & Vlangar, 2016; Wang & Tang, 2021). Against this background this study tries to explore whether there is a difference between the likelihood of generating WOM for (independent) arthouse movies versus (mainstream) Hollywood movies, and if this relationship is mediated through perceived uniqueness and moderated by NFU.

Problem Statement

Against the previous introduction, the problem statement of this research is:

To what extent is there a difference in the likelihood of generating word-of-mouth between type of movie (arthouse movies vs. Hollywood movies), and is this relationship mediated through the perceived uniqueness of a movie, and to what extent does the relationship between the perceived uniqueness of a movie and the likelihood of generating word-of-mouth depend on the need for uniqueness of an individual?

Contributions

Theoretical contribution

To this date little research has been conducted towards the difference between arthouse movies and Hollywood movies. This study will add to the literature twofold.

Firstly, it will explore the differences in word-of-mouth between the two types of movies. Contributing to the literature by exploring underlying mechanisms of audience engagement and communication behaviour. Previous research has explored the effect of word-of-mouth on box office success for both types (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Lee & Choeh, 2020; Liu, 2006). However, only research exist on what motivates people to engage in word-of-mouth for Hollywood movies (Ladhari 2007; Wang & Tang 2021).

Secondly it will investigate the role of uniqueness in this relationship. Broadening our understanding of what influences movie watchers and the understanding of audience's perceptions. Drivers of word-of-mouth have been explored for various hedonic goods and even for Hollywood movies but not yet in the arthouse industry (Berger, 2014; Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Lefèvre & Vlangar, 2016; Oetting, 2009). Uniqueness has been said to be a motivator for word-of-mouth (Berger, 2014; Hughes 2005). Yet when people are in a state of need for uniqueness, they are less likely to share their experiences with others. How these two interact with each other has only been studied in different context such as public versus private goods, and chocolates and fashion (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010) but not in the context of movies.

Managerial contribution

Due to the limited marketing budgets associated with arthouse movies it is important that there is good understanding of alternative advertising tactics. One of the alternative lower-cost advertising tactics known to work in the movie industry is word-of-mouth (Eagan, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Yet little research exists towards the drivers of word-of-mouth in the industry.

This research can help in shaping effective strategies for audience engagement. Understanding the differences between movie types makes it possible to tailor marketing campaigns to specific audience segments. Researching the moderating role of uniqueness allows to uncover the elements that enhance WOM. Studying the effect of need for uniqueness as a moderator could help to shape promotional activities to the preference of

various consumer groups with different levels of need for uniqueness. Which in effect could lead to more effective personalized communication strategies.

If the results of this study show that one of the movie types lead to more WOM through their perceived uniqueness, then movie studios could exploit this fact by emphasizing the movie's uniqueness as early as possible to generate buzz before the initial release. This in turn could lead to a higher immediate attendance or streaming rush. Another strategy could also focus on the uniqueness after the release of the movie to increase the legs of the movie, that is the overall time the movie is in the cinema. However, if NFU shows to have a negative effect on the relationship between perceived uniqueness and WOM, studios should be careful and try to reach high NFU individuals on niche platforms where they tend to spread more WOM with people that share the same interests. This way their individual uniqueness is less impacted.

Outline

This research will have the following structure. First an overview of existing literature on the differences between arthouse and mainstream (Hollywood) movies is given, together with an overview of the impact of WOM on the movie industry, which will be used to develop the hypotheses and to create the conceptual framework. Next will be the research methodology explaining the experiment which is accompanied by the results of the analyses. Finally, this research concludes with the discussion of the results, implications, and limitations and suggestions for future research.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Background Literature

Arthouse versus Hollywood movies

To get a grasp on the differences between movie types, it is essential to first understand what defines an arthouse movie and what defines a Hollywood movie. Definitions vary and especially for the concept of arthouse the meaning is highly situational.

Gemser et al. (2007) state that arthouse movies are those that are played primarily in theatres that run arthouse movies and that mainstream (Hollywood) movies are those that are played primarily in mainstream theatres. This does not hold true these days however, since many arthouse theatres also run Hollywood movies. A better explanation would be to look at arthouse movies as made by: “independent producers, usually non-commercial that reflects the moviemaker’s personal vision in technique or story line; usually expressing a unique and sometimes bizarre artistic viewpoint” (Ensign & Knapton, 1985, p.19) and as an ever-changing concept (Wilinsky, 2001). This definition is in line with seeing arthouse as a relative concept in specific timeframes and cultures. It is about the tension to what is normal and what is different that makes art(house) what it is (Fech, 2022).

On the contrary mainstream movies exist, for which there are various definitions too. One of these definitions goes reasonably well with the definition of arthouse. That is; mainstream movies are just as culturally dependent as arthouse movies, however, sticking to the dominant ideology in a certain area and therefore also differs in various regions and cultures (Przylipiak, 2018). Then what is not mainstream cinema, in this case, could be thought of as arthouse, as this would be different than the dominant ideology and drift away from what is normal. Mainstream movies and Hollywood movies are often mentioned together and used interchangeably, as I did in this study. That is because from a global perspective, Hollywood movies are generally considered the biggest worldwide example of mainstream movies, as they are the most widely distributed movies and try to be enjoyable for a large audience. These Hollywood movies are made to make profit and to solely entertain. Made by major companies situated in Hollywood like Disney, Paramount, and Universal (Chuu et al., 2009).

WOM and its impact in the movie industry

Word-of-mouth is said to be of major influence on consumers attitude (Buttle, 1998), and it is also sometimes perceived to be more trustworthy by consumers than traditional advertising as it comes from non-incentivized consumers rather than companies (Murray, 1991; Trusov et al., 2009). Through the rise of internet together with social media platforms, traditional WOM has made place for online WOM (eWOM). Consumers have a broader audience to express their opinions to, and WOM has become increasingly accessible for others compared to offline WOM. This in turn increases the impact of WOM on movies too (Kim et al., 2013).

Within the movie domain it is possible to make the distinction between expert reviews and ordinary consumer WOM, for which differences exist. Gemser et al. (2007) found that mainstream movie audiences rely more on WOM while in the case of arthouse movies, critics' reviews will influence demand. According to Gazley et al. (2011) WOM plays a more significant role in the movie decision-making process of consumers than critic reviews do. They argue that this effect stems from the idea that aesthetic preference comes from the individual and is likely more shared with their reference group than with critics. It is believed that both volume, valence, and topic consistency of WOM play a significant role in movie demand and has a positive effect on box-office revenues (Kim et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

As explained in the background literature arthouse movies are often defined by their uniqueness opposed to Hollywood movies for their entertainment (Cardullo, 2011). The moviemaker is able to express a “unique and sometimes bizarre artistic viewpoint” (Ensign & Knapton, 1985, p.19). This would mean that when compared to a Hollywood movie, which sticks to a dominant ideology, an arthouse movie, which leaves this realm, might have a higher perceived uniqueness. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H1: arthouse movies have a higher perceived uniqueness than Hollywood movies.

Consuming and talking about unique products and experiences makes a person seem more interesting and enhances their self-image (Berger, 2014). It is argued to be one of the requirements leading to word-of-mouth (Hughes, 2005). In addition, interesting products are likely to receive more immediate WOM (Berger and Schwartz, 2011), which is important for movies as it is a short lifespan product. So, it is likely that consumers are more willing to

engage in positive WOM when goods, including experiences such as movies, are perceived as more unique than when they are perceived as less unique. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H2: Perceived movie uniqueness has a positive effect on word-of-mouth.

Being unique has become increasingly important in an environment where trends are emerging and disappearing faster than they have time to exist. An individual's need for uniqueness reflects the state in which one feels highly similar to their peers and needs to express their uniqueness to differentiate, in order to protect the self-esteem (Tian et al., 2001). People can enhance their self- and social image by different forms of behaviour. One way of doing this is through consumption of goods perceived as unique and another way is interpersonal interaction, talking to others about uniqueness of oneself, products, or experiences (Tian et al., 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Albeit while adhering to social norms, coherent with the need for social assimilation (Ruvio, 2008). Uniqueness enhancing activities, such as watching unique movies may increase the consumer's self-image of uniqueness as a form of counter conformity behaviour (Tian & McKenzie, 2001).

Though consuming unique products and talking about those same unique products might conflict with each other. While consuming unique products can enhance one's unique self-image and the perception by others, talking positively about the products poses a risk in the adoption of those goods by others. In turn, this adoption by peers might damage one's unique self-image (Ruvio, 2008; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Cheema and Kaikati (2010) argue that high NFU consumers are therefore less likely to engage in WOM for publicly consumed goods. When others exhibit similar attributes, an individual may experience self-identity threat in high NFU situations (Berger & Heath, 2007; Tian et al., 2001). A similar effect was found in the case of early adoption, where early adopters with a high NFU were less eager to share positive WOM (Moldovan et al., 2014). Yet, in the case of movies one can have a similar feeling. Talking about a unique movie one saw might evoke feelings that hurts one's identity in a high NFU situation. That is, if everyone starts seeing those unique and different movies one might have the feeling that it becomes part of a larger majority taste and becomes less part of one's unique identity, in turn making those movies normal or mainstream. There is also no other non-verbal way to express uniqueness for movies, which in the case of clothing, for example, can be done by wearing it and showing it to others. This makes it less attractive for high NFU individuals to generate positive WOM (Henkel & Toporowski, 2022). Talking about a less unique movie should not result in the same effect, since those movies are generally more widely available and thus to a lesser extent part of one's unique identity

(Berger & Heath, 2007). The fear of imitation by others is influencing the extent to which one is willing to share positive WOM (Pape & Toporowski, 2023). Based on this notion it is hypothesised that:

H3: The effect of perceived uniqueness on word-of-mouth is weaker when there is a higher need for uniqueness than when there is a low need for uniqueness.

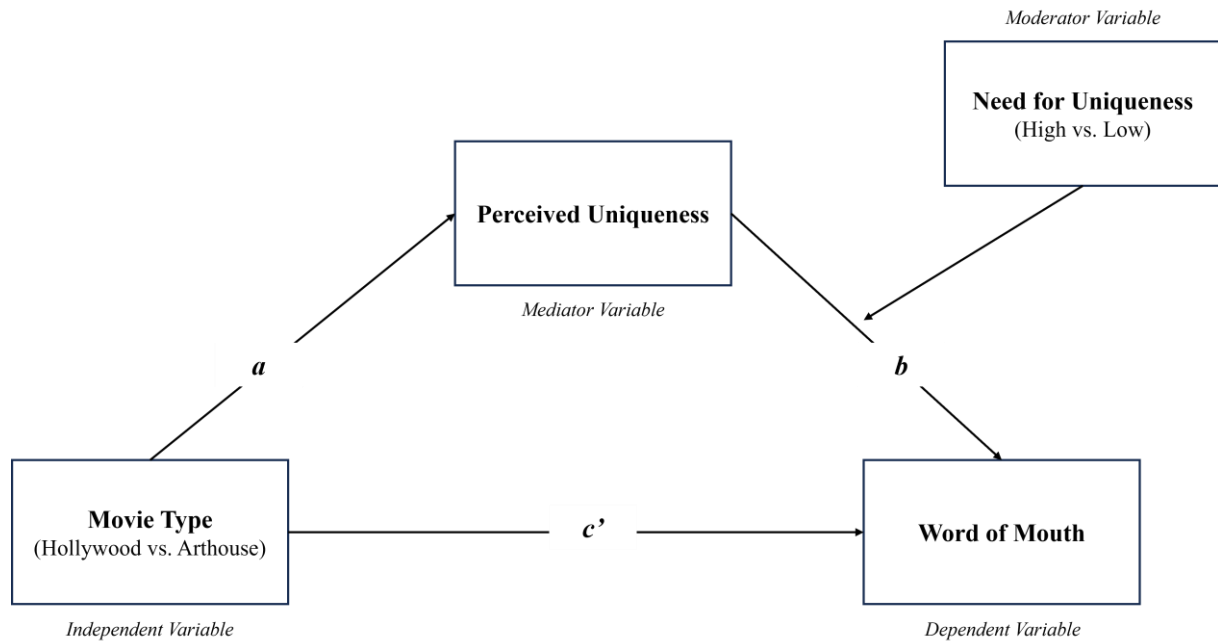
Berger (2014) argues there are multiple components that drive WOM. Entertaining things are believed to generate more WOM. Context is important in this case, a movie is not more unique than something simple as breakfast cereals perse, but movies are talked about more than cereals because it is more interesting and entertaining (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Due to their often-higher advertising budgets, Hollywood movies are cued more often. Which according to the accessibility of goods motive is likely to lead to increased WOM. In addition, Hollywood movies often have a higher attendance than arthouse movies which means WOM is likely to be higher again. There are likely additional reasons for people to be more willing to engage in WOM between different types of movies. Which means partial mediation could exist. However, research in the context of what drives WOM for movies is scarce. Though the previous hypotheses state that arthouse movies will indirectly lead to higher positive WOM, based on the above information it is expected that Hollywood movies are likely to directly lead to more WOM. It is therefore hypothesised that:

H4: People are relatively more willing to spread positive WOM for Hollywood movies than for arthouse movies.

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 indicates that consumers have different perceptions of movie uniqueness, which in turn has a positive impact on WOM. In addition, high (low) NFU is expected to weaken (strengthen) the relation between perceived uniqueness and WOM.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data and Design

This study will have an experimental research design. Primary data will be collected through online experiments made with the survey software offered by Qualtrics. The variable NFU is manipulated between respondents and the variable movie type is measured within respondents. That is, as long as respondents saw both a Hollywood and arthouse movie before, in other cases respondents will be able to fill out the survey for only one of the movie types. Thus, implying a mixed 2x2 factorial within-between subject design (Table 1). Respondents will be randomly assigned to one of the two NFU conditions and will be exposed to a manipulation check at the end of the survey.

Table 1: Structure of Design

Movie Type (within)	Need For Uniqueness (between)	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Hollywood</i>	PWOM	PWOM
<i>Arthouse</i>	PWOM	PWOM

Variable operationalisation

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is positive word-of-mouth. Described as the willingness of people to share their thoughts about a movie either online or offline. Wang and Tang (2021) in their study towards the effects of narrative transportation of movies on positive word-of-mouth used a three-item scale to measure positive word-of-mouth. The items used are *I would recommend this movie to anyone who asks my opinion*, *I would recommend this movie to my friends*, and *I say positive things to other people about this movie*.

This construct showed to be reliable with a more than sufficient Cronbach's alpha in previous research. As the goal in movie marketing is to create positive talk around a movie this study adapts the concept of positive WOM from Wang and Tang (2021).

Independent variable and moderator

Movie type

In this study respondents were asked to think of the most recent arthouse movie and Hollywood movie they have seen. To help respondents in their assessing of a particular movie, three recent examples of both an arthouse (*'Everything Everywhere All at Once'*, *'Triangle of Sadness'*, *'Parasite'*) and a Hollywood movie (*'Barbie'*, *'Avatar'*, *'Top Gun'*) were given. These movies were chosen as they are all certified fresh according to rottentomatoes.com and within the top 30 highest grossing movies in their respective release year according to boxofficemojo.com, except for *Triangle of Sadness*. All Hollywood movies were distributed by one of the major Hollywood studios and all mentioned arthouse movies are independently made and distributed. Additional explanation was given about the movie type based on the differences described in the theoretical background, see table 2. In this study movie type is manipulated within respondents, this means that the respondents, when possible, will answer the questions for both movie types. If the respondent only saw one of the movie types, they will continue to answer the questions for the type they saw. The order in which the movie type showed up was randomized.

Table 2: Arthouse and Hollywood movie description

Description of <i>arthouse</i> movie	Description of <i>Hollywood</i> movie
<p><i>Arthouse movies</i> are characterized by their emphasis on artistic and intellectual content over commercial appeal. They often explore unconventional narratives, unique visual styles, and abstract storytelling. <i>Arthouse movies</i> tend to have slower pacing and focus on the emotional and psychological aspects of their characters. They may challenge traditional storytelling structures and are often open to interpretation. These movies are usually made with smaller budgets and may feature lesser-known actors. <i>Arthouse movies</i> seek to provoke thought, evoke emotions, and can include abstract or avant-garde storytelling. Examples of such movies include: <i>'Everything Everywhere All at Once'</i>, <i>'Triangle of Sadness'</i>, <i>'Parasite'</i>.</p>	<p><i>Hollywood movies</i> are typically associated with mainstream commercial cinema. They tend to feature big budgets, high production values, and well-known actors. These movies are designed to entertain a wider audience and often prioritize action, special effects, and clear, linear storytelling. <i>Hollywood movies</i> commonly follow familiar narrative structures, including a clear beginning, middle, and end. They aim to deliver a combination of entertainment, escapism, and spectacle. Examples of such movies include: <i>'Barbie'</i>, <i>'Avatar'</i>, <i>'Top Gun'</i>.</p>

Need for uniqueness

NFU can both be measured via proxy variables, or it can be truly manipulated to get respondents in a situational state of need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2022). The latter applied to this study. Due to the timeframe of this study, it was chosen to manipulate the variable as it might be difficult to find enough participants that are already in different states of need for uniqueness. Through the completion of a sentence unscrambling task participants can get primed in a high need for uniqueness mood state or in a control state, as successfully shown by Wang et al. (2022). A sentence-unscrambling task was therefore developed based on the NFU scale from Ruvio et al. (2008). Respondents were either asked to form 10 logical sentences about uniqueness from groups of scrambles words such as: *ordinary products as / I dislike / a rule* (high NFU) or not related to uniqueness: *zoo yesterday / visiting*

the / she went (low NFU). To validate if the manipulation worked a pilot test was conducted. However no significant difference in situational NFU was found.

Therefore, it was chosen to adopt a writing elaboration task from Cheema and Kaikati (2010) in the final survey. Due to time limitations, it was not possible to pilot test the writing elaboration task. Therefore, as a check, a 3-item NFU scale was included at the end in the final survey to measure the effectiveness of the manipulation. Adapted from Wang et al. (2022) the scale consists out of the following items *I feel like obtaining scarce and special products*, *Elite appeal in products is important to me* and *Right now, need for uniqueness in consumption is at the top of my mind*. Respondents started the survey with the elaboration task and were asked to think of a situation in which either individuality was important to them and elaborate on that (high NFU) or think of a situation in which conformity was important (low NFU), see question 1A and 1B in appendix A. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the high NFU condition or the low NFU condition.

Mediator variable

In this study the concept of perceived uniqueness will be used as a mediator variable. It is necessary to know whether various movie types actually lead to a difference in perceived uniqueness. Perceived uniqueness can be measured via a construct consisting out of multiple items (Vos, 2021). For this study the construct was adapted from Vos (2021) and made fitting to capture the perceived uniqueness of the different movie types, the measured items are *The movie I thought of sounds like a unique movie*, *The movie I thought of sounds like an ordinary movie* (reverse coded), *The movie I thought of is different than most other movies I know*, and *I perceived the movie as highly unique*. One of the items was reverse coded to obtain a consistent reliability score.

Control variables

Because the treatments are randomly assigned there is no real need to include control variables. Though, demographic variables such as gender, age, education, and country are included. Education and culture might influence the extent to which one is willing to share WOM and might influence the understanding of the concepts of arthouse movies (Chuu et al., 2009). Therefore, both finished education and country residence are included as a proxy.

Table 3: Operationalisation of variables

Variables	Items	α
WOM (7-point Likert)	1) I would recommend this movie to anyone who asks my opinion. 2) I would recommend this movie to my friends. 3) I say positive things to other people about this movie.	.96
Movie type	See table 3	Categorical
Need for uniqueness	Writing elaboration task	Categorical
Perceived uniqueness (7-point Likert)	1) The movie I thought of sounds like a unique movie. 2) The movie I thought of sounds like an ordinary movie. (reversed) 3) The movie I thought of is different than most other movies I know. 4) I perceived the movie as highly unique.	.82
NFU manipulation check (7-point Likert)	1) I feel like obtaining scarce and special products. 2) Elite appeal in products is important to me. 3) Right now, need for uniqueness in consumption is at the top of my mind.	.74
Demographics		
Age		Continuous
Country residence		Categorical
Gender		Categorical
Finished education		Ordinal

Note: Category of data given when no α present.

Survey flow

Participants were first asked to complete the writing task to which they were randomly assigned in either the high NFU or low NFU condition. After this they were asked if they had seen a Hollywood movie before and whether they had seen an arthouse movie before. These were presented to the participants in random order. When the participants answered ‘no’ to both questions they were presented with the exit screen and excluded from the survey. When they answered ‘yes’ for either one of the movies they were asked which movie of its kind they had most recently seen. If the participants answered ‘yes’ to seeing both types of movies, they

would continue to fill out the survey for both movies. Then the participants were asked to rate their latest seen movie or movies in case they saw both types of movies on their uniqueness on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. After the uniqueness questions participants were asked to indicate their willingness to spread positive WOM about the movie, again on a 7-point Likert scale. Next, the respondents were asked to rate their need for uniqueness as a manipulation check and lastly, they filled out the demographic questions, see table 3. Attention checks were included to keep respondents focused and to filter out ‘fake’ answers in the analysis.

Sample

The goal of this research is to reach participants who have seen at least one of the movie types but preferably both, hence a mainly ordinary audience was targeted, avoiding respondents with a heavy preference for either one. A small pre-test was conducted to make sure respondents understand the questions. To collect as much information as possible and due to the time frame of this study, convenience sampling was used. As this study has a 2x2 within-between design, the targeted sample size for the survey is set at $N=148$. This is based on a small to medium effect size of Cohen's $f=0.15$, a significance level $\alpha=0.05$ and a power of $1-\beta=0.95$ as calculated with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Social platforms that were close to the researcher (Facebook, Instagram and SurveySwap) were used to distribute the survey.

RESULTS

This chapter explains the results of the experiment discussed in the previous chapter. First, the descriptive statistics are shown. Next, the assumptions for regression using PROCESS are explained. Lastly, the mediation analysis and its results are described.

Descriptive Statistics

In total 133 respondents completed the survey. Seven answers were deleted as they did not pass the confirmation checks or misinterpreted the elaboration task. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables that are used in the (moderated) mediation analysis. The table shows the number of observations per condition or variable (N), the mean (M), and the standard deviation (SD). Notable immediately is the difference between uniqueness for the movies but the lack of difference between word-of-mouth.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

	N	M	SD
Hollywood Uniqueness	126	4.196	1.354
Arthouse Uniqueness	59	5.623	1.024
Hollywood WOM	126	5.193	1.505
Arthouse WOM	59	5.396	1.368
<i>WOM split up in NFU conditions:</i>			
Low NFU Hollywood WOM	67	5.463	1.363
Low NFU Arthouse WOM	28	5.345	1.138
High NFU Hollywood WOM	59	4.887	1.608
High NFU Arthouse WOM	31	5.441	1.564

Figure 2 – 5 show the frequency distribution of the continuous variables in the model. Striking is the spread of the uniqueness for Hollywood movies, which seems to be more normally distributed. A stronger tendency to the right part of the graphs is present for the Arthouse movies. For WOM, the distributions look more alike.

Figure 2: Hollywood perceived uniqueness

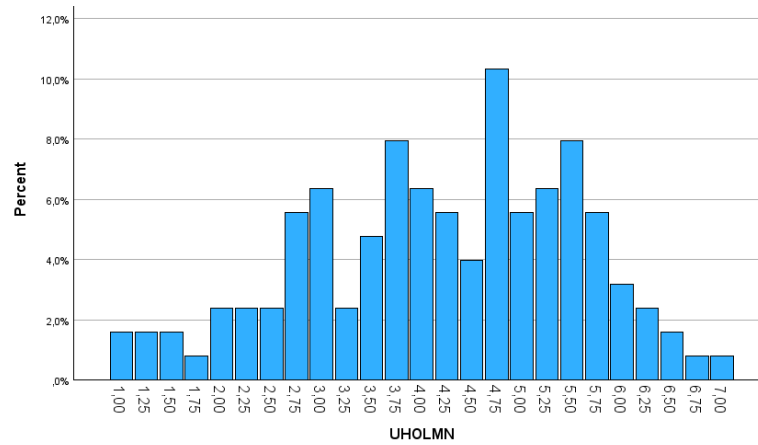


Figure 3: Arthouse perceived uniqueness

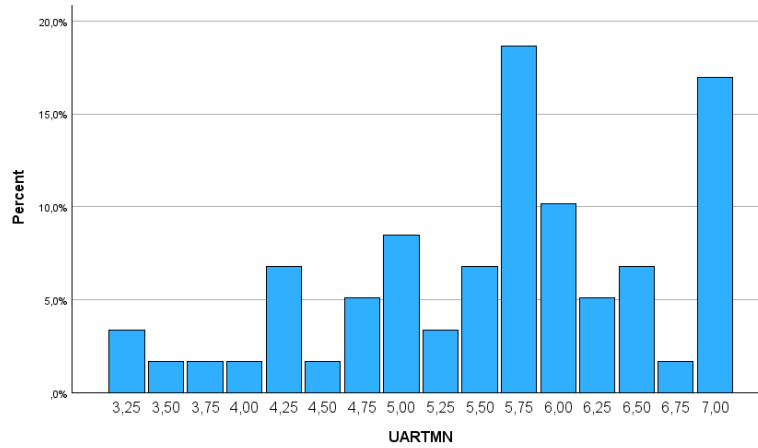


Figure 4: Hollywood WOM

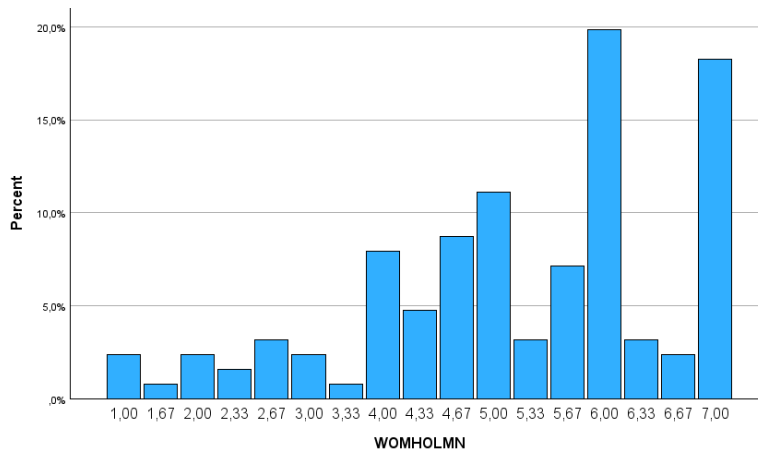
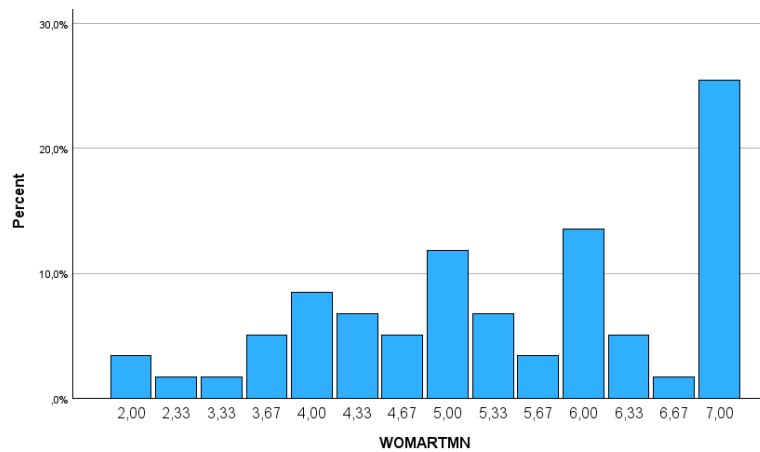


Figure 5: Arthouse WOM



Assumptions

The variables perceived uniqueness, word-of-mouth, and the manipulation check for need for uniqueness were conceptualized using several items. These concepts were all found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7. The items were summed, and a mean score was calculated for each individual case.

Before using the PROCESS analysis tool for mediation a few assumptions must be met (Hayes, 2022). Firstly, the relationships between the variables should be linear. This can be checked using a scatterplot (Appendix B). The plot indicates a linear relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable and thus the assumption is met. The assumption of normality is met by bootstrapping, which is available in the PROCESS tool (Hayes, 2022). This is also the case for homoscedasticity, the estimator used in this analysis is the Cribari-Neto estimator (HC4) (Hayes & Cai, 2007).

A mixed within-between subject experiment was conducted to collect data. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the high or low NFU elaboration task and, in the case of movie type, respondents either completed the survey for both arthouse and Hollywood movies if they had seen both movies before or completed the survey for the respective movie type when they had seen only one type before. However, for analysis purposes, mainly the needed sample size, the variables are transformed to function as between subject data. This holds in the case of the "Hollywood & Arthouse" condition, where 59 participants both completed the survey for Hollywood and Arthouse movies. A partial repeated measures ANOVA tool would be necessary to analyse this data. As SPSS only considers the paired cases in repeated measures ANOVA this would result in a sample size of 59. MEMORE (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) also does not allow partial missing data for such an

analysis. In the new situation of between subject analysis the total sample size becomes 185 compared to the old 59. This new situation might introduce bias and increased error for some variables. However, as discussed, PROCESS can control for this (Hayes, 2022).

Results

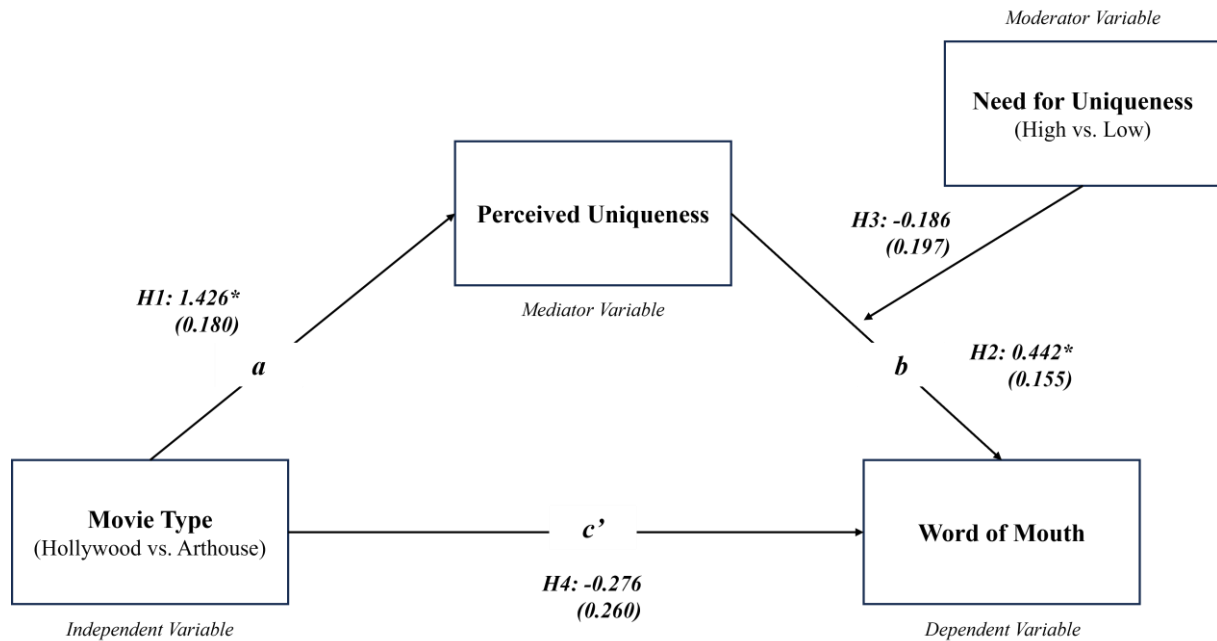
Model 14 of the PROCESS tool is used to test for the proposed moderated mediation model. Perceived uniqueness was mean centered prior to analysis. Table 5 shows that there is no moderation, as zero lies between the bootstrapping confidence interval of the index of moderated mediation (LB: -0.803, UB: 0.255), therefore hypothesis 3 is rejected. However, the analysis does hint to a significant simple mediation, as the *a*-path (Movie Type → Perceived Uniqueness) and *b*-path (Perceived Uniqueness → WOM) are significant.

Table 5: Output PROCESS model 14

Model 14	<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
	Perceived Uniqueness	WOM	
Movie Type	1.426* (0.180)	-0.276 (0.260)	
Perceived Uniqueness		0.442* (0.155)	
Perceived Uniqueness		-0.186 (0.197)	
*NFU			
	Index	BootLBCI	BootUBCI
Moderated	-0.265 (0.268)	-0.803	0.255
Mediation			
<i>Notes:</i>			*p<0.01

Standard error given in parentheses

Figure 6: Conceptual model with effects from model 14



As the moderation showed to be non-significant a different model without NFU as the moderating variable could lead to better estimates. The conceptual model as hypothesised is revised into the model as shown below in figure 7. Using model 4 of the PROCESS tool it is possible to estimate a simple mediation model. Table 6 indicates that there is an indirect effect of movie type on WOM, the confidence interval does not contain zero (LB: 0.186, UB: 0.847). This means that WOM is mediated through the uniqueness of a movie, and that the type of movie leads to a different uniqueness perception. The table reports a significant *a*-path ($b=1.426$, $t=7.917$, $p < 0.001$), thus the results are consistent with hypothesis 1. The table further reports a significant *b*-path ($b=0.351$, $t=3.175$, $p < 0.001$), this means that the results are consistent with hypothesis 2 too. Both the *a*-path and *b*-path do not contain zero in their respective bootstrapping intervals. As for the direct effect, Table 6 reports a negative non-significant direct effect ($b=-0.298$, $t=-1.148$, $p=0.252$). This indicates that Hollywood and Arthouse movies do not directly lead to different amounts of positive WOM; therefore, H4 is rejected. The results are consistent with complete mediation.

Table 6: Output PROCESS model 4

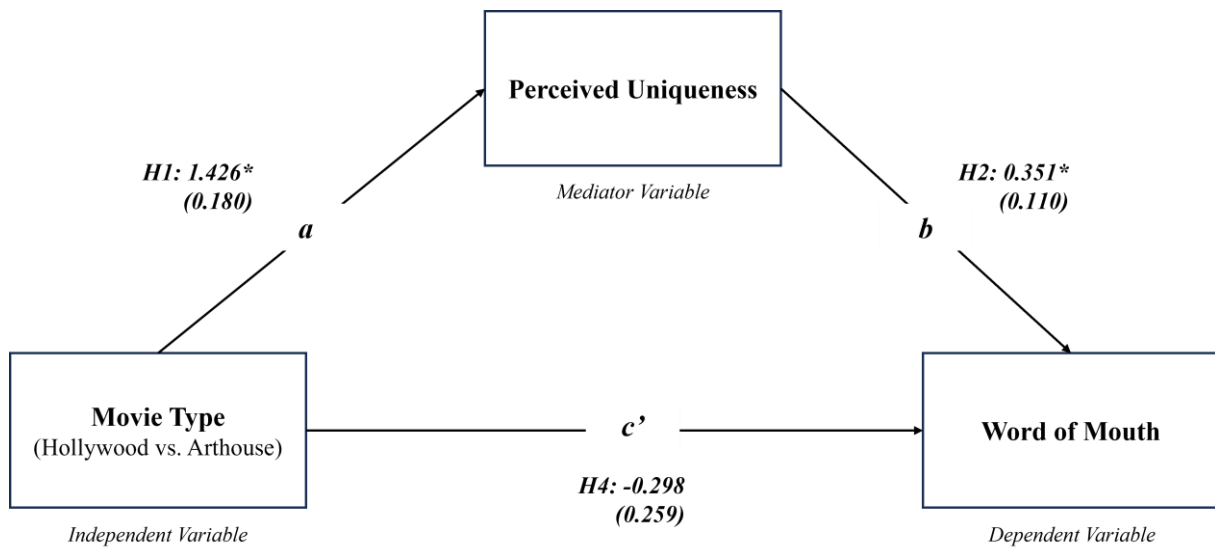
Model 4	<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
	Perceived Uniqueness	WOM	
Movie Type	1.426* (0.180)	-0.298 (0.259)	
Perceived Uniqueness		0.351* (0.110)	
	Effect	BootLBCI	BootUBCI
Indirect Effect	0.500 (0.168)	0.186	0.847

Notes:

*p<0.01

Standard error given in parentheses

Figure 7: Conceptual model with effects from model 4



DISCUSSION

Discussion of the results

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether there is a difference between arthouse movies and Hollywood movies in terms of the likelihood of generating word-of-mouth and to explore whether this relationship might be mediated by perceived uniqueness and moderated by need for uniqueness. Research towards the antecedents of (positive) WOM in the domain of movies is limited, though, it is regarded to be influential to a movie's success (Eagan, 2020). No paper, to the researcher's knowledge, so far tried to explore the differences between word-of-mouth between arthouse and Hollywood movies. At the same time, there is grounded reason to believe a difference might exist in how the two generate WOM. It was hypothesized that arthouse movies would lead to increased WOM mediated through perceived uniqueness. The rationale behind this is based on existing antecedents of WOM of experiences and the definitions of (independent) arthouse and (mainstream) Hollywood movies. That is, uniqueness of a good is expected to lead to increased WOM (Berger, 2014) and arthouse movies tend to differ from the dominant ideology, or what is normal, and therefore tend to be more unique. In addition, it was predicted that need for uniqueness would moderate the relationship between perceived uniqueness and positive WOM. The argument here is that, though the uniqueness of products might lead to increased WOM, one's own uniqueness might get harmed. Therefore, people with a high need for uniqueness are less likely to generate positive WOM than low need for uniqueness individuals.

this study finds a significant indirect effect between movie type and WOM. The findings support the idea that arthouse movies do indeed have a higher perceived uniqueness than Hollywood movies do and that the perceived uniqueness of movies might lead to more positive WOM. The more unique a movie is perceived, the more willing one is to engage in word-of-mouth for that movie.

Considering the moderating effect of need for uniqueness on the relation between perceived uniqueness and positive WOM there was no significant effect found. This might be explained by the fact that consuming movies is an experience good and in the end is not owned by the consumer. Thus, it might not harm a person's own uniqueness to the extent that for example the adoption of a unique sneaker can. Where one might feel that others become similar in the adoption of that product and are therefore less likely to engage in WOM like Cheema and Kaikati (2010) found.

Theoretical implications

A handful of academics have focussed on the importance of WOM on the success of a movie (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Lee & Choeh, 2020; Liu, 2006). However limited research focusses on what drives people to talk about movies to others (Ladhari 2007; Lefèvre & Vlangar, 2016; Wang & Tang 2021). Therefore, this research contributes to the narrow stream of academic literature on the antecedents of WOM with a specific focus in the movie industry.

The insights provided by this research indicate that the perceived uniqueness of a movie influences the likelihood of generating word-of-mouth for that movie and that the perceived uniqueness differs for movie type (arthouse vs. Hollywood). This improves our understanding into the underlying patterns of audience engagement and the mental processes that influence individuals to share WOM or not.

It further contributes to the vague literature on the definition of movies (Ensign and Knapton, 1985; Fech, 2022; Wilinsky, 2001). In the way of our understanding of the perceived differences in movies, specifically between arthouse and Hollywood movies. This research showed that people have a different perception of uniqueness for arthouse movies and Hollywood movies. Something that was philosophized about and hinted at by their various definitions, however, not yet a subject of research.

Finally, this research adds to the literature about the role of need for uniqueness by suggesting that need for uniqueness does not influence WOM for movies. This contrasts with the little previous research that focused on studying the role of NFU in the relationship between experience (goods) and WOM (Henkel & Toporowski, 2022; Pape & Toporowski, 2023). In the situations in which high NFU individuals are less likely to share positive WOM, consumption of those goods is less conspicuous and thus individuals are less able to express uniqueness non-verbally (Henkel & Toporowski, 2022). Hence, information is withheld to remain unique. This is also the case for movies, where it is not possible to express uniqueness non-verbally. Though, in this study no moderating effect of NFU was found. Therefore, future research should explore differences between WOM for different types of experiences and experience goods.

Managerial implications

For marketing managers and distributors within the motion picture industry this study supplies some worthwhile implications. The understanding of what could have a positive

effect on WOM makes them able to better shape their marketing materials. A better understanding might lead managers to tailor advertising and WOM campaigns to specific audience segments more effectively too.

As shown, uniqueness is likely to lead to increased WOM, which could be focused on in the advertising materials and get people talking. In the case of arthouse movies studios should maximize perceived uniqueness in their promotion material, trailers showing the unique aspects or scenes of the movie might lead to more pre-release buzz. In addition, managers can shift online conversations to focus on what was unique about the movie improving WOM during and after its release.

For Hollywood movies focussing on uniqueness might be more difficult, marketers could instead focus on the pleasure and arousal of going to the movies to increase WOM (Ladhari 2007; Lefèvre & Vlangar, 2016). Studios with a higher marketing budget should create immersive experiences that allow people to engage with the movie and encourage them to share WOM about the whole experience. Though, without creating unrealistic expectations. To an extreme extent, however very unlikely, producers or movie executives could integrate uniqueness in their movies to increase the likelihood of positive WOM.

Understanding that uniqueness is an advantage in the case of arthouse movies brings us a step closer to what people perceive to be differences between a more mainstream movie and an arthouse movie, for which definitions remain to be vague.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Firstly, and most importantly, this research is not perfect and has its limitations, it neither does imply causal relations. The limitations this study has, offers opportunities for future research.

To start with the sample and design of this study, which could be greatly improved to get more robust estimates. The design of the study could be improved to get a more fair and real picture. As pointed out in the results section, the experiment had a mixed within-between subject design. However, it was treated as only between respondent data for analysis purposes. Therefore, future research should try to get a larger sample and treat the data as is or should try to design either a between or within experiment.

Next, while this study was distributed in English and respondents from multiple countries filled out the survey, they were mostly Dutch. As explained in the hypotheses section of this study, arthouse and mainstream is likely to be perceived differently in most cultures. However, due to globalization these borders might fade and that is why Hollywood could be

considered globally mainstream. Still, it could be interesting to explore whether there are different effects or different views on the concepts of arthouse and mainstream in different cultures.

Lastly, only a couple of studies exist towards the antecedents of WOM in the movie industry. This study showed uniqueness to have a positive relation with WOM, and it would be interesting to explore other differences between movie types or genres and to what extent they influence WOM. This would allow managers to better shape their advertising campaigns and support the narrative both off and online in a more effective way. Further research could also investigate what the role is of need for uniqueness for other experience goods as in this study no significant effect was found for the moderating role of need for uniqueness.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey WOM for movies

Start of Block: Introduction

Introduction of survey

☐ I hereby confirm that I have read and understand the above information.

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: Outline

Outline of survey

End of Block: Outline

Start of Block: NFU manipulation

Q1a Please think of a situation in which individuality was important to you. With individuality we mean the qualities of you as a person that distinguishes you from others. Please describe this situation and elaborate on the importance of individuality. (For example: I found it really important to express my individuality during an evening out, by choosing an eye-catching outfit I could really express my identity and it helped me boost my confidence.)

Q1b Please think of a situation in which conformity was important to you. With conformity we mean you as a person being similar to others. Please describe this situation and elaborate on the importance of conformity. (For example: I found it really important to express conformity during work, by adhering to the social norms it helped us to achieve shared goals.)

End of Block: NFU manipulation

Start of Block: Movie introduction

Movie introduction

End of Block: Movie introduction

Start of Block: Movies Hollywood

Introduction text Hollywood

Q2 *Hollywood movies* are typically associated with mainstream commercial cinema. They tend to feature big budgets, high production values, and well-known actors. These movies are designed to entertain a wider audience and often prioritize action, special effects, and clear, linear storytelling. ***Hollywood movies*** commonly follow familiar narrative structures, including a clear beginning, middle, and end. They aim to deliver a combination of entertainment, escapism, and spectacle. Examples of such movies include: '*Barbie*', '*Avatar*', '*Top Gun*'

- ☐ I have seen such a movie.
 - ☐ I have not seen such a movie.
-

Q3 What is the most recent ***Hollywood*** movie you have seen?

End of Block: Movies Hollywood

Start of Block: Movies Arthouse

Introduction text Arthouse

Q4 *Arthouse movies* are characterized by their emphasis on artistic and intellectual content over commercial appeal. They often explore unconventional narratives, unique visual styles, and abstract storytelling. ***Arthouse movies*** tend to have slower pacing and focus on the emotional and psychological aspects of their characters. They may challenge traditional storytelling structures and are often open to interpretation. These movies are usually made with smaller budgets and may feature lesser-known actors. ***Arthouse movies*** seek to provoke thought, evoke emotions, and can include abstract or avant-garde storytelling. Examples of such movies include: '*Everything Everywhere All at Once*', '*Triangle of Sadness*', '*Parasite*'

- ☐ I have seen such a movie.
 - ☐ I have not seen such a movie.
-

Q5 What is the most recent *Arthouse* movie you have seen?

End of Block: Movies Arthouse

Start of Block: Perceived Uniqueness

Q6 You have indicated that you have seen *Hollywood movies* before. Please think of the most recent *Hollywood movie* you have seen and indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Totally Agree 7
The movie I thought of sounds like an unique movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The movie I thought of sounds like an ordinary movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The movie I thought of is different than most other movies I know.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I perceived the movie as highly unique.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please click on 'Totally agree', this is an attention check.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q7 You have indicated that you have seen *Arthouse movies* before. Please think of the most recent *Arthouse movie* you have seen and indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Totally Agree 7
The movie I thought of sounds like an unique movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The movie I thought of sounds like an ordinary movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The movie I thought of is different than most other movies I know.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I perceived the movie as highly unique.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please click on '4', this is an attention check.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Perceived Uniqueness

Start of Block: WOM

Q8 Please think again of the most recent *Hollywood movie* you saw and indicate your agreement with the statements.

	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Totally Agree
I would recommend this movie to anyone who asks my opinion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would recommend this movie to my friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I say positive things to other people about this movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q9 Please think again of the most recent *Arthouse movie* you saw and indicate your agreement with the statements.

	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Totally Agree 7
I would recommend this movie to anyone who asks my opinion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would recommend this movie to my friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I say positive things to other people about this movie.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: WOM

Start of Block: Manipulation check

Q10 Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Not at all agree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Extremely Agree 7
I feel like obtaining scarce and special products.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Elite appeal in products is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Right now, need for uniqueness in consumption is at the top of my mind.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please click on 'Not at all agree', this is an attention check	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Manipulation check

Start of Block: Demographics

Introduction text Demographics

Q11 How do you identify yourself?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q12 What is your age? (In numbers)

Q13 In which country do you currently reside?

▼

Q14 What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? If currently enrolled, your current study.

- ☐ No schooling completed
- ☐ Primary school
- ☐ High school
- ☐ Secondary vocational education
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree University of Applied Sciences
- ☐ Bachelor's degree University
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctorate or higher

End of Block: Demographics

Appendix B: Linearity Scatterplot

