

Discovering Audience Motivations Behind Movie Theater Attendance

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Abstract

A content analysis tracked the top box office films of the past six years, and the top box office films of all time, to determine what factors currently draw audiences to movie theaters in comparison to what factors have drawn audiences in the past. Overall, the study concluded that movie theater attendees are more interested in watching remakes of old movies, or films with large fandoms, in order to remain part of an ongoing conversation. Additionally, evidence suggests viewers tend to enjoy watching films in community with others, making movie theaters a prime medium for this type of interaction.

I. Introduction

Brent Lange (2017), Senior Film and Media Editor for *Variety*, noted that despite the rich and successful history of movie theaters, “there is mounting anxiety among theater owners, studio executives, filmmakers, and cinephiles that the lights may be starting to flicker. As consumer tastes and demands change, Hollywood is scrambling to adapt” (p. 1). With streaming services and in-home entertainment devices such as Apple TV and Amazon Fire TV Stick on the rise, younger audiences are choosing the comfort and convenience of home over a trip to the movie theater. However, despite an overall drop in ticket sales, movies released within the past year continue to break box office records. *Black Panther*, which was released in February 2018, had the highest-ever domestic opening weekend for a film released in February, March, or April, earning \$201.8 million over its first three days, not adjusted for inflation (Vary, 2018). Additionally, prior to the release of *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman* became the highest-grossing superhero origin film of all time, with box office totals around \$821 million (Hughes, 2017).

This article seeks to understand what entices audiences to view a film in theaters versus at home in today’s current technological climate of on-demand streaming services and large-screen televisions. The collective spectatorship theory, which seeks to explain why audiences may enjoy watching films together, provides a framework for this research. This article proposes that audiences are particularly drawn to films in movie theaters when the content of the film is relevant to previously existing aspects of popular culture. Audiences want to experience these types of films in a setting where there is a sense of community in order to remain relevant and part of the overall conversation surrounding the film.

Keywords: Films, Audiences, Motivations, Attendance, Theaters
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II. Literature Review

This study draws from literature related to the rise of on-demand and subscription-based streaming services, the current landscape of cinema attendance, and the theory of collective spectatorship, especially in regards to movie viewership in theaters. Also relevant are studies related to online film promotion and selling an experience.

On-Demand and Subscription-Based Streaming Services

With a steady rise in digital media consumption, on-demand streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon prime continue to grow. According to Anderson (n.d.), video on-demand refers to “an interactive system that allows viewers to select a movie from a database and watch it instantly on their television or personal computer” (p. 1). Access to video on-demand is offered through a cable provider, or online through a monthly subscription fee. Some devices such as Apple TV and Amazon Fire TV Stick charge a certain fee per movie or television episode, but regardless of the platform, the movie or television show is available to the viewer for instant consumption. According to a survey published by *Statista* in 2017, around 58% of survey respondents in the U.S. reported having at least one subscription to a streaming service. Netflix was used by 50% of respondents, 29% reported using Amazon Prime, and 14% reported using Hulu (“Share of consumers,” 2017).

The use of streaming services is especially prevalent in younger generations, specifically those between the ages of 18-29. Within this age group, about 61% watch television primarily through streaming services on the Internet (Rainie, 2017). Additionally, the population’s media interactions are constantly changing thanks to a rise in mobile phone usage, and entertainment viewership is no exception to this. Researchers believe that the current boom in online video and music streaming is likely to change the entire structure of the entertainment industry (Chen, Liu, & Chiu, 2017).

Despite the fact that many viewers of on-demand content are watching alone, some researchers believe that it should still be considered a social experience due to the conversation and social connections that form after one watches content. According to Steele, James, Burrows, Mantall and Bromham (2015), “Even if consumers are watching on-demand alone, they are still likely to converse with others during or after their experience. This has been greatly aided by the increase of present technological devices within the home” (p. 219). However, despite the fact that delayed viewing of media allows for more consumers to partake in conversations, it also has the tendency to exclude people from “water-cooler conversation,” as they are afraid to hear spoilers. Therefore, both on social media and in-person, people feel excluded from cultural conversation until they make the time to watch (Matrix, 2014).

Landscape of Cinema Attendance

Throughout history, movie theaters have represented a source of community for various neighborhoods, cultures, and social groups. According to Lockett (2013), between 1908 and 1917, movies had greater success when cinemas repositioned themselves as a “fundamentally local pleasure deeply linked to family and community” (p. 130). These theaters encouraged customers to linger in the lobby before and after the movie, and would often host local charity events, and showcase local businesses. By 1917, these small neighborhood theaters were the main venue for feature films (Lockett, 2013). As time progressed and neighborhood theaters rose in popularity, moviegoing became a fun event for people of every social class. It was a way to socialize and get out of the house without having to pay too much money, but still allowed people to be part of a conversation. At the turn of the twentieth century, millions of new moviegoers viewed films as a language understood universally, and as something that transcended national class and boundaries (Tratner, 2008).

From their very origin, movies and movie theaters were created with a sense of community in mind. However, with the current increase in media technology, films are no longer always released in the so-called “traditional” sense (i.e. a film goes to the theater before being released for everyday use). Tryon (2009) suggests that in today’s digital landscape, “the optimal experience of watching movies with a group of strangers in a darkened theater is about to disappear” (p. 4). For example, the Oscar-nominated film *Mudbound* received limited release in theaters at the same time it was released on Netflix, which caused an ongoing debate between theater owners and Netflix producers, who wanted the film to receive time exclusively in theaters before release to the general public (Pearson, 2017).

As media technology continues to evolve, cinema attendance has slowly begun to reflect this change. Although movie box office numbers tend to fluctuate from year to year, they are currently on the decline, with 2017's box office declining by 2.7% from the previous year (McNary, 2017). These numbers include the release of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, which was expected to gain more revenue than it did.

Social Media and the Internet's Influence on Film Promotion

Social media in general has changed the landscape for conversation online given the fact that users are able to discuss hot-button issues with large numbers of people in real time. This aspect of social media plays a significant role in the promotion of new films, particularly after a film is released. Sang Ho Kim, Namkee Park and Seung Hyun Park (2013) conducted a study on the importance of word of mouth (WOM) and critic reviews of movies and describes the significance of their findings:

Given that movies are an experience good whose product quality cannot be judged before consumers attend it, moviegoers are likely to rely upon others' reviews and opinions when they make a movie consumption decision. Further, the recent development of the Internet and abundance of social media make it possible for moviegoers to easily find other people's assessment and reviews and exchange information about movies (p. 99).

Essentially, since the information is easily accessible online, moviegoers take into account whether people who have previously viewed the movie gave it a positive review. Advertising tends to be the medium that boosts a movie's media presence, and media presence is what subsequently creates conversation in social networks and forums. However, when people talk about a particular movie (regardless of whether or not money has been spent to promote it), the number of people who go to see the movie is affected (Armellini & Villanueva, 2011).

While it is clear that social media alone is not to be credited for all movie promotion success, it is definitely the medium that fosters the most amount of conversation, which tends to be the highest-driving factor for audiences to attend movies. Additionally, the Internet itself tends to motivate consumers to actively seek information regarding movies, rather than passively watching the trailer on television (Xiaoge, Xigen, & Nelson, 2005).

Selling an Experience

As consumer preferences continually evolve, newer generations have begun to show an interest in paying money for experiences rather than material objects. In fact, this desire for experiences has grown in popularity so much that experts have coined it as the "experience economy." Experiences are often described as a fourth economic category, and businesses have begun to adapt their services in order to position them as experiences. According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), experiences are personal and unique, so they exist "only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level" (p. 2). Most researchers believe that we haven't quite reached a full experience economy, but as younger generations continue to seek out new experiences, more and more businesses are changing their marketing model to adapt.

It is also important to note that different experiences impact different senses, because they trigger different emotions and levels of effort to comprehend. Movies are mentally demanding experiences, especially those that require consumers to think about the greater social, political or cultural issues surrounding the story (Sundbo & Darmer, 2008).

Theory of Collective Spectatorship

Although the theory of collective spectatorship is relatively new, it builds upon older theories regarding how audiences perceive entertainment, particularly films. In the 1970s and 1980s, some film theorists introduced the concept of "spectator theory" to explain the psychology behind the movie watching experience. These earlier theories, developed by scholars such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry and Roland Barthes, all center on the idea that while watching a film, spectators are silent, motionless, and expressionless. Barthes compared film viewing to a type of hypnosis where the viewer is not entirely conscious of what is happening (De Luca, 2016). In contrast, theorist Vivian Sobchack disagreed with the notion that a spectator is "motionless" and "silent," and believed that the viewer is always conscious (De Luca, 2016).

The idea of “collective spectatorship” was originally introduced by Julian Hanich, who disagreed with the idea that watching a film was solely an individual experience, regardless of the medium. According to Hanich (2014), the collective spectatorship theory states that audiences “can enjoy watching a film collectively without being fully aware of this fact” (p. 354). Essentially, the theory suggests that watching a film should be regarded as a joint action. Even though audiences may believe they are paying full attention to a film, the collective spectatorship theory proposes that the viewer hasn’t forgotten the other spectators present. Audience awareness levels reach the very edges of one’s consciousness, because a viewer is usually not actively thinking about those around them, but rather focusing on the film. However, the idea of joint-viewing is especially prevalent in moments of high emotion during a film, as it becomes easier to sense a shared emotion such as deep sadness or happiness (Hanich, 2014).

In light of the previous scholarship, this study seeks to explore communal aspects of movie viewing. In particular, with increasing advances in subscription-based video on demand and declining movie theater box office numbers, what elements influence viewers to choose to watch a movie in theaters versus at home?

III. Methods

The author compiled a list of the top box office films of all time, and the top box office films within the past six years. Both lists are adjusted for inflation, and are based on calculations conducted by the website *Box Office Mojo*. The purpose of comparing the two lists was to determine differences and similarities between the most popular films of all time, and films that are currently considered popular. The author then categorized each film on both lists into the following categories: Pre-Existing Fandom, Remake/Sequel, Superhero Movie, and Cinematic First. If a film fit more than one of the options, it was categorized more than once. If a film did not fit any of the categories, it was listed as Other.

Pre-Existing Fandom refers to any film where the basic storyline and characters had already been introduced to audiences, either in an earlier movie, book, video game, or television show. Remake/Sequel refers to any film that continued or retold a storyline established in an earlier film. Superhero Movie was defined as any film owned and created by Marvel or DC Comics. Cinematic First was defined as any film that incorporated new elements or concepts that had not been previously introduced in the film industry at the time (see *Figure 1*).

Movie	Cinematic First
Gone With the Wind	First female African American to win an Oscar (Hattie McDaniel)
Star Wars	First use of an animated 3-D wire-frame graphic
Titanic	First film with a budget of \$200 million (most expensive at the time)
Jaws	First summer Blockbuster
Snow White	First animated feature film
101 Dalmations	First feature to solely use a Xerox process for transferring animator’s drawings to cells (important because of all the spots on the dogs)
Jurassic Park	First movie to use DTS digital sound and CGI Dinosaurs
The Lion King	First Disney movie whose storyline was created in-house rather than adapted from a previously written children’s fairytale
Return of the Jedi	First film to be shown in a THX-certified auditorium
Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace	First film to contain over 90% of computer animation and special effects
Black Panther	First Marvel movie with a black director
Frozen	First animated feature in Disney’s studio history to offer two princess heroines.
Wonder Woman	First superhero film directed by a woman

Figure 1: Cinematic Firsts. Source: *AMC Filmsite*

The purpose of categorizing the films was to determine a few of the basic ways the lists differed from one another, as well as what that may imply about current movie theater attendance.

In order to explore the impact that social media may have on the promotion of films, the author also compiled opening weekend box office numbers for the top films listed and compared them to the total box office gross. If a film garners a high percentage of its revenues during the first weekend, it may suggest a high level of social media interaction during the days and weeks leading up to the film’s opening.

IV. Findings

Comparison of Top Box Office Films

Top 20 Movies of All Time (Adjusted for Inflation)	Year	Box Office Revenue	Top 20 Movies in the Past Six Years (Adjusted for Inflation)	Year	Box Office Revenue
<i>Gone With the Wind</i>	1939	\$1,854,769,700	<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	2015	\$992,496,600
<i>Star Wars</i>	1977	\$1,635,137,900	<i>Jurassic World</i>	2015	\$725,671,700
<i>The Sound of Music</i>	1965	\$1,307,373,200	<i>Marvel's The Avengers</i>	2012	\$705,769,500
<i>E.T.</i>	1982	\$1,302,222,800	<i>Black Panther</i>	2018	\$665,355,740
<i>Titanic</i>	1997	\$1,244,347,300	<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi</i>	2017	\$620,106,600
<i>The Ten Commandments</i>	1956	\$1,202,560,000	<i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i>	2016	\$554,854,100
<i>Jaws</i>	1975	\$1,175,763,500	<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>	2012	\$528,601,000
<i>The Exorcist</i>	1973	\$1,015,300,400	<i>Beauty and The Beast</i>	2017	\$521,407,600
<i>Dr. Zhivago</i>	1965	\$1,139,563,500	<i>Finding Dory</i>	2016	\$515,531,300
<i>Snow White & the Seven Dwarves</i>	1937	\$1,000,620,000	<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i>	2015	\$491,377,100
<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	2015	\$992,496,600	<i>The Hunger Games: Catching Fire</i>	2013	\$469,232,400
<i>101 Dalmations</i>	1961	\$917,240,400	<i>The Hunger Games</i>	2012	\$466,924,700
<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	1980	\$901,296,200	<i>Frozen</i>	2013	\$450,196,500
<i>Ben-Hur</i>	1959	\$899,640,000	<i>Iron Man 3</i>	2013	\$448,436,600
<i>Avatar</i>	2009	\$893,301,900	<i>Despicable Me 2</i>	2013	\$430,487,800
<i>Return of the Jedi</i>	1983	\$863,465,400	<i>Captain America: Civil War</i>	2016	\$429,213,000
<i>Jurassic Park</i>	1993	\$841,088,300	<i>Wonder Woman</i>	2017	\$423,340,500
<i>Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace</i>	1999	\$829,064,800	<i>Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle</i>	2017	\$402,881,800
<i>The Lion King</i>	1994	\$818,364,200	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i>	2017	\$399,848,900
<i>The Sting</i>	1973	\$818,331,400	<i>The Secret Life of Pets</i>	2016	\$397,253,600

Figure 2: Top 20 box office films of all time compared to top 20 box office films in the past six years

The only movie to make both lists was *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (highlighted in blue). All other movies on the Top 20 Films of All Time list were released between the years of 1937 - 2009. *Avatar* is the only other movie from the 2000s to make the all-time list.

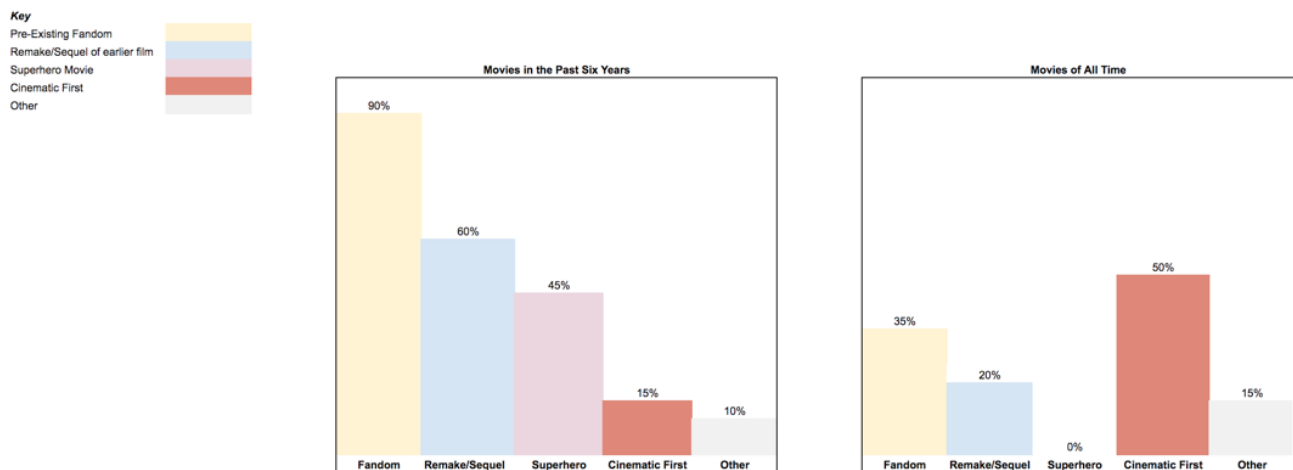


Figure 3: General categories of top box office films

Movies were sometimes placed in more than one category. For example, most superhero movies were also classified as having a pre-existing fandom due to the fact that they are based on comic books. However, the pre-existing fandom category does not exclusively include superhero movies since films such as *The Hunger Games* and *Gone With the Wind* also had pre-existing fan bases due to the fact that they were based on books.

As the data shows, movies from the all-time list contain a lot of cinematic firsts. *Gone With the Wind* continues to hold the highest box office success to date, and is often cited as the first film to use a more

diverse technicolor palette, revolutionizing movies in color (Dirks, 2016). Additionally, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first full-length animated feature film ever, a concept for which Walt Disney decided to take a big (and successful) risk (Johnson, 2017). The top 20 movies of all-time list suggests that one of the biggest driving factors for movie theater attendance was the opportunity to experience something new and revolutionary.

In contrast, the movies with top box office performances from the past six years fell mainly into two main categories: they were either a remake or sequel of a previously successful film, and/or they had a pre-existing fan base. In fact, the top two films listed within Top 20 movies of the last six years are remakes or sequels of films appearing on the all-time list (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Jurassic World*).

Superhero movies also represented a large portion of the movies listed on the Top 20 movies in the past six years list, with *Marvel's The Avengers* ranking third and *Black Panther* a close fourth. However, there is not a single superhero movie on the Top 20 Movies of All Time List.

Comparison of Opening Weekends

Top 20 Movies of All Time (Adjusted for Inflation)	Opening Weekend Box Office	Total Box Office Revenue	Percent of Total Revenue
<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	\$247,966,675	\$936,662,225	26.50%
<i>Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace</i>	\$64,820,970	\$474,544,677	13.70%
<i>Jurassic Park</i>	\$47,026,828	\$402,453,882	11.70%
<i>Avatar</i>	\$77,025,481	\$760,507,625	10.10%
<i>The Lion King</i>	\$40,888,194	\$422,783,777	9.67%
<i>Return of the Jedi</i>	\$23,019,618	\$309,306,177	7.44%
<i>Titanic</i>	\$28,638,131	\$659,363,944	4.30%
<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	\$10,840,307	\$290,475,067	3.70%
<i>E.T.</i>	\$11,835,389	\$435,110,554	2.70%
<i>Jaws</i>	\$7,061,513	\$260,000,000	2.70%
<i>Star Wars</i>	\$6,806,951	\$460,998,007	1.48%
<i>Gone With the Wind</i>			
<i>The Sound of Music</i>			
<i>The Ten Commandments</i>			
<i>The Exorcist</i>			
<i>Dr. Zhivago</i>			
<i>Snow White & the Seven Dwarves</i>			
<i>101 Dalmations</i>			
<i>Ben-Hur</i>			
<i>The Sting</i>			

Top 20 Movies in the Past Six Years (Adjusted for Inflation)	Opening Weekend Box Office	Total Box Office Revenue	Percent of Total Revenue
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i>	\$179,139,142	\$408,084,349	43.90%
<i>Iron Man 3</i>	\$174,144,585	\$409,013,994	42.60%
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i>	\$191,271,109	\$459,005,868	41.70%
<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i>	\$146,510,104	\$389,813,101	37.60%
<i>The Hunger Games</i>	\$152,535,747	\$408,010,692	37.40%
<i>The Hunger Games: Catching Fire</i>	\$158,074,286	\$424,668,047	37.20%
<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>	\$160,887,295	\$448,139,099	35.90%
<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi</i>	\$220,009,584	\$620,164,565	35.50%
<i>Beauty and The Beast</i>	\$174,750,616	\$504,014,165	34.70%
<i>Marvel's The Avengers</i>	\$207,438,708	\$665,630,708	33.30%
<i>Jurassic World</i>	\$208,806,270	\$652,270,625	32.00%
<i>Black Panther</i>	\$202,003,951	\$665,630,708	30.30%
<i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i>	\$155,081,681	\$532,177,324	29.10%
<i>The Secret Life of Pets</i>	\$104,352,905	\$368,384,330	28.30%
<i>Finding Dory</i>	\$135,060,273	\$486,295,561	27.80%
<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	\$247,966,675	\$936,662,225	26.50%
<i>Wonder Woman</i>	\$103,251,471	\$412,563,408	25.00%
<i>Despicable Me 2</i>	\$83,517,315	\$368,061,265	22.70%
<i>Frozen</i>	\$67,391,326	\$400,738,009	16.80%
<i>Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle</i>	\$36,169,328	\$403,652,109	9%

Figure 4: Opening weekend box office gross in comparison to total box office gross (opening weekend numbers not available for films released prior to the mid-1970s.)

Generally, the opening weekends of newer movies made up a higher percentage of total box office gross than older ones. In fact, *Star Wars* (1977) had a very limited release because movie theater owners believed that it wouldn't do well and didn't want to show it. This changed once audiences began showing great interest. Therefore, its opening weekend only comprised 1.48% of its total box office gross. *Captain America: Civil War's* opening weekend made up 43.9% of the movie's total box office gross, making it the highest out of all the movies listed.

V. Discussion

When considering inflation, the top box office performers of all time were almost all released between 1937-1999 with *Avatar* (2009) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) being the only two exceptions. Half of the movies on the Top 20 Movies of All Time list had some sort of historic cinematic first, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* being the first animated feature film. This implies that audiences are drawn to the theater in large amounts when something new and exciting is occurring. Conversely, the majority of the popular movies released in the past six years were either superhero movies, or remakes of earlier films (such as *Star Wars* or *Jurassic World*). Current audiences aren't necessarily as inspired to make a trip to the movie theater for new content, but rather, they want to re-experience popular movies from the past. Part of the reason for this could be the fact that it is easier for important plot points from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* to be spoiled than it is for a movie with a completely new storyline. Therefore, going to the theater to view the movie as soon as possible eliminates the chance of spoilers.

Additionally, as the theory of collective spectatorship suggests, people enjoy watching films together whether they are aware of it or not. Movies with an intense and loyal fandom like *Star Wars* tend to develop a strong sense of community among viewers, meaning audiences want to experience the excitement of these movies with others in the moment, rather than waiting to watch them on streaming services at home.

Superhero movies are also driving current audiences to movie theaters, a trend which *Captain America* screenwriter Stephen McFeely says is because it is "a genre that you can do well now given the world of computers and perhaps it's also just a time in the sun. You went to the movies in the '50s and '60s you went to a western. So at this point, you're going to a superhero movie. It's taking over that same black hat, white hat myth-making surface" (Romano, 2015). Additionally, since superhero movies are based on old comic books, they also have a pre-existing fan base and community with which to watch the films. Therefore, similar to the *Star Wars* franchise, people tend to watch these films in a community setting.

Opening weekend box office numbers suggest that social media has an effect on movie theater attendance. For movies released in the past six years, the percent of total revenue generated during the opening weekend box is much higher than for movies of the past. This would imply that audiences are attending movies during the opening weekend after hearing about the release ahead of time, very likely through social media. Conversely, movies such as *Star Wars* and *Jaws* became popular by word of mouth after their release because there were fewer media outlets through which to promote them.

This study has a number of limitations. Additional box office numbers were needed, since most movies before the 1980s did not have opening weekend numbers reported. Some films also had limited release weekends before the actual release date, which were omitted from the study. Additionally, the "cinematic firsts" category was defined largely by groundbreaking technical aspects, not for innovative storylines or novel narrative structures. Future researchers may also want to utilize social media analytics in order to determine a deeper evidence-based correlation between social media usage and movie theater attendance.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine some of the factors still drawing audiences to movie theaters despite the increase in streaming service technology. It also sought to identify the differences between popular box office films of all time in comparison to top box office films in the past six years in order to further understand how audience preferences have changed.

The compilation of top box office film data showed that recent popular movies were very different from the top movies of all time. Today's audiences are most interested in viewing superhero movies, or remakes of old films. In the past, audiences went to the movie theater to view films that were considered "groundbreaking," but audiences now appear to want films that already have a large fan base established, such as *Star Wars* and *Jurassic World*. Audiences do not want to hear spoilers about films where they know the characters and plot well, so viewing it in the movie theater is a useful way to remain part of the conversation in real time.

When considering the theory of collective spectatorship, movie theaters also elicit a sense of community that people want to experience whether they realize it or not. *Star Wars* has a large, dedicated fanbase (so much so that people will dress up for the premieres), thereby making it a movie people want to view with their fellow fans. This is not as easy to do from one's living room, and by the time the movie is released to streaming services, the hype and excitement surrounding the movie's release will have already died down.

The movies chosen for this study only comprise a small portion of the top box office movies of all time, so further research could be done with a more extensive list of movies over a longer time period. However, the preliminary conclusions drawn from this study indicate that in order for movie theaters to remain successful in the future, they need to brand themselves as an experience rather than just another medium to view movies.

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