The relationship between the viewing context and viewing habits and its influence on audiences' viewing decisions

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Guy on radio "why would I watch film in cinema when it's also on my TV?"
Obviously some people can't get to movies, but for those who can:
Cinema is bigger than life,
your TV is smaller than life. You control it.
In entertainment and art I usually want to lose control a bit.

5:11 PM · Sep 30, 2021 · Twitter for Android

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"Don't see the need for season 4 of *Stranger Things* having 2 volumes when the 2nd is only going to be 2 episodes. And the last 3 eps being 98, 85, & 150 minutes is ridiculous. Too long," another commented.

"Back in my day, we had a word for this. It was called a movie!" joked *ScreenCrush*'s Matt Singer.

The New York Times

OPINION

Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain.

Cinema is an art form that brings you the unexpected. In superhero movies, nothing is at risk, a director says.

Nov. 4, 2019

"It was an event created by the chemistry between the audience and the picture itself, and it was electrifying."

Main Aims

- analysis of viewing conditions

- analysing the public debate around the need for films to be seen in cinemas

- the audiences' response and how they navigate between cinema and home viewing

Methodology

- Central Belt Scotland chosen as a sample due to easier access to audiences
- desk research concerning cinema screens in Central Belt Scotland
- research into relevant academic and popular works and debates on the topic to inform the survey
- a mix-questions survey

Hanchard, Merrington and Wessels (2020) assess that an audience member has to make a multitude of choices prior to watching a film. These are:
- the type or style of watching (how and where, e.g. in cinemas, at home on laptops, television, mobile devices) and
- who they watch it with (alone, with family, friends, strangers).
In other words – the viewing context.

They categorise the audience into 5 categories:
- individualised film audience experiences
- group film audience experience
- venue-specific film audience experiences
- global film audience experiences
- digital film audience experience

With the move from mass to multiple audiences, it is important to note that moving between different experiences is a normal aspect of audience engagement, with audiences interacting with each other and the films differently at different times.

Proposed Segmentation of Audiences

Cuadrado and Frasquet (1999) argue for segmentation of audience based on the benefits it seeks from going to the cinema. This can be expanded to any film-watching activity.

They group their study participants in the three main groups:
- "individuals who go to the cinema mainly to enjoy themselves and cultivate social relations"
- those "characterised by not evaluating any of the motives proposed very highly"
- "cinema buff".

With the arrival of streaming platforms the audiences' viewing habits have changed, and while the three proposed grouping might still exist today within the cinema viewing, the notion can be expanded to all film watching.

There is a dichotomy between a film-forward approach and a socialisation-forward approach to film watching. The two are not entirely exclusive, there is a spectrum between the two and audience members freely move between the two poles.

The decision between the two is made in each step of the film watching experience/process, the decision:
- whether to watch,
- on company,
- on venue,
- on film,
- on food/breaks/type of watching,
- on post-watching activities.

Predominantly younger urban, culturally conscious demographic

- 15/30 respondents go to the cinema on foot
- 28/30 respondents under 35 years
- 25/30 respondents have less than 30 minutes to their usual cinema

Film watching is a social experience

- 23/30 respondents list a friend recommendation as a reason to watch a film
- 18/30 respondents predominantly watch films in company of others
- 26/30 respondents decide on a film collectively when watching with others
- 17/30 respondents talk with friends about the film after watching

"We always look for the "golden ratio" of cheapest ticket + closest possible + most convenient time."

While convenience (24/30 respondents) and comfort (12/30 respondents) are the two main associations with streaming, negative aspects such as the option of distractions, repetitiveness and disappointment (8/30) are also pointed out.

On the other hand the atmosphere and immersion into film (21/30 respondents) is the predominant factor associated with cinema viewing, as are the quality of image and sound (12/30 respondents).

Both are successful in creating an atmosphere of exclusivity – 7/30 respondents listed it as a reason to streaming and 12/30 to go to the cinema.
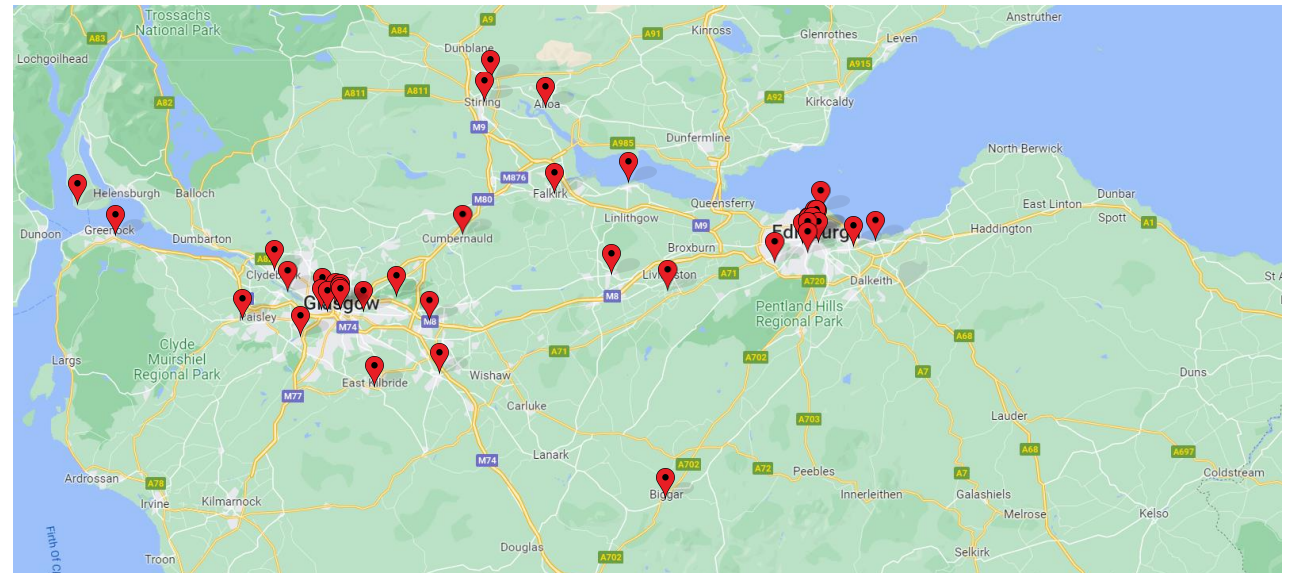
Analysis & Conclusions

- While industry experts prioritise cinema viewing, audiences predominantly differentiate between cinema and home-watching based on the type of experience they are looking for, meaning they are aware of the difference in the two experiences.

- Streaming platforms offer accessibility to films not showing in cinemas – either because of their language or age – serving as libraries, while at the same time lacking the big screen and collective experience, which makes the case for cinematheques.

- Exclusivity for new releases can be achieved by both, the socialising aspect of cinema viewing is just as strong (17/30 listing a new release and 18/30 socialisation as the reason for cinema viewing). While each are their own medium with individual advantages, there is a desire for a big screen and socialisation. With audiences aware of the differences between the two.

Potential developments or improvements of the landscape

- There is a need for a better film education in schools:
  - to educate and open a debate around different viewing contexts,
  - needed for both the sustainability of the exhibition sector and the creative industry itself,
  - highlighting that the choice for cinema can lie in more than exclusivity,
  - showing that cinema viewing does not have to be reserved solely for films with amazing imagery and sound.

- Smaller screens for private hire in cinemas could potentially merge the exclusivity and high technology afforded by the cinema with the personal, private and comfortable ("on one's own terms") experience of a home viewing.

"Watching the film in a venue is a more action-based experience with more responsibility, whereas streaming it online is more passive consumption with the option to press hold & take a break."

Reflection on the research process

- understanding that the process of how to conduct research is a learning process

- understanding the scale of the project and its limitations

- being realistic about the achievable goals

- mitigating and controlling the self-created pressures and expectations

"When something exciting happens while watching a movie at home with friends, we sometimes stop the film to point it out – something impossible in the cinema."

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