

Navigating the Cinematic Landscape: Analyzing Consumer Decision-Making Through Cognitive Mapping Methodology

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Abstract

In the era of the streaming boom, the traditional cinema experience is undergoing a profound transformation. While attention spans are perceived to be diminishing, the success of long-form television (e.g., *Stranger Things*) suggests a complex shift in consumption rather than a simple decline in engagement. This research explores film selection motivations in “late-adopter” markets, where the tension between dominant global productions and local content creates a distinctive market environment. While Hollywood maintains dominance, they occasionally elicit consumer resentment, whereas in other regions, audiences express a bias against locally produced content. Understanding the underlying motivations in this environment is a pertinent issue for both practitioners and film studies. The objective of this study is to delineate the mental maps of consumers, identifying the factors influencing film selection and their interrelationships. Given its exploratory focus, the work adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews integrated with cognitive mapping. The analysis seeks to synthesize variables into a comprehensive mental map, illustrating the trade-offs consumers make between accessibility and content attributes (platform, genre, cast, or origin). Preliminary observations suggest that decision-making is significantly mediated by the viewer’s situational affective state, which functions as a primary filter before technical factors, such as production year, are even considered. Consequently, this research constructs a conceptual framework that serves as a foundation for future model development and quantitative validation.

Keywords: film consumption, narrative interviews, content analysis, film marketing

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Introduction

With the emergence of streaming services, the significance of the cinema institution has begun to decline in recent years. The restructuring of the film industry and the slight resurgence in cinema attendance, however, raise the need for researchers and professionals to understand the film selection process of viewers. The literature related to cultural consumption, particularly focusing on films, explores a variety of topics: from individual personality traits (Sae-tae et al., 2024) to political affiliation (Roos & Sachar, 2014), and even the impact of ethnocentrism (Russell et al., 2011) on film consumption.

In the literature, there is no unified model used by all researchers to describe the film consumption process. It is still unclear what happens in potential viewers from the moment the idea appears until the film starts: this study examines this research gap. To achieve the research objective, the study seeks to answer the following question: What factors influence the film choices of regular movie consumers? This research can serve as a foundation for future quantitative studies and model development.

Literature Review

Culture Consumption

The consumption of culture is an interdisciplinary topic of study. Individuals consume cultural products, including films, to satisfy their various needs. Such needs can include relaxation, expression of identity, or even social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work is connected to the concept of taste, which highlights that individuals' consumption of culture and genres is a learned behavior typically determined by social class. According to openness to genres, two main groups are usually distinguished: the “omnivores,” that is, genre omnivores, and the “univores,” that is, those who regularly consume one or two genres (Peterson, 1992). In addition to watching television, listening to the radio, and reading books, going to the cinema is one of the most popular forms of cultural consumption in the European Union (European Commission, 2013). Hungarian viewers are also most characterized by watching films, going to the cinema, and watching series. Domestic consumers also seek lightness in culture: comedy is one of their most favored film genres (Pavluska et al., 2018; Pavluska, 2022).

Factors Influencing Film Consumption Behavior

In the field of marketing, the literature partially defines films as objectified service products (Horváth & Gyenge, 2019; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018), which is why we also consider them in this way in the present study. The variables used in previous studies will be briefly introduced from the perspective of service marketing, according to the 7P marketing mix.

In terms of film as a service product, alongside genre (Dhar & Weinberg, 2016; Gazley et al., 2011; Roos & Sachar, 2014), one of the most important factors is whether the given film is part of a series or franchise, that is, a sequel (Chiu et al., 2019; Dhar & Weinberg, 2016; Yoon et al., 2017). In the case of access and channel, the number of playing cinemas is decisive (Feng & Sharma, 2018; Yoon et al., 2017). In terms of prices, two aspects are usually considered: the film's budget (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Nikolic et al., 2022) and the cost of “acquiring” the film, whether it be a movie ticket, a streaming subscription, or online/offline rental (Feng & Sharma, 2018; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). In the case of promotion, it is worth mentioning its

extent and frequency. In the case of films, the creators form part of the human environment. The actors, who can be considered part of the front office, and the director supporting from the background are crucial features of a film, bringing with them the so-called “starpower” effect (Chiu et al., 2019; Yoon et al. 2017).

From the consumers' side, factors such as gender (Ramírez-Castillo et al., 2021), age (Nikolic et al., 2022), education level (Sae-tae et al., 2024), and current film consumption frequency (Ramírez-Castillo et al., 2021) can typically influence the selection of a given film. Furthermore, the opinions of others, whether professional or consumer reviews, also play a significant role (Daiya & Garg, 2024; Tuo, 2024).

The characteristics presented above, used in the literature, can influence the film selection decisions of potential viewers. However, the aforementioned studies, due to the previously mentioned differences in approach, do not necessarily provide a comprehensive description of the factors influencing film consumption. Moreover, with the rise of digital platforms, decision-making mechanisms have become even more complex, as consumers, somewhat spoiled, only desire to “Netflix” from the comfort of their homes. Regarding the influencing factors, the number of domestic and international studies that generally explore them is limited, therefore the aim of the present research is to fill this research gap.

Primary Research

Methodology of Primary Research

The research, using the methodology of narrative interviews, examines the characteristics considered during the film selection process through the stories of regular film consumers. The steps of the research are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
The Steps of Narrative Interviews

Step	Opportunities, examples, explanations
1. Defining the purpose of the research Defining the purpose of the research	The aim of the study is to map the mental landscape in consumers' minds, which shows the factors influencing the selection of films, as well as the relationships and sequences among them.
2. Determining the type of stories	Personal stories related to film selection
3. Identifying the sources of stories	Regular movie watchers (at least biweekly)
4. Selecting the context of the stories	Individually told personal stories
5. The triggering of storytelling	Call to action, request for storytelling related to the last film selection
6. Collecting stories	Verbally, recorded on audio.

7. Analysis and interpretation of stories	Content analysis, deductive and inductive coding, readings within individual stories and comparing them
8. Theory building	Theoretical model of factors influencing film selection

Source: Own editing based on Horváth & Mitev (2015)

The interviews were conducted in March-April 2026, involving a total of 20 subjects. The subjects of the research included individuals aged 18 and older who consume films at least bi-weekly, with a mix of women and men, regardless of the platform used for film consumption. The literature typically treats film consumers as a single unit (Stamp, 2024). Since the research was conducted in a Hungarian context, we determined the age group of the subjects based on the NMHH (2025) study: the majority of online audiovisual content is consumed by those aged 16–35. However, typically, those over 18 have the appropriate financial background to access films legally, so we narrowed the age group to 18–35.

The subjects could apply for the discussions by filling out a screening questionnaire, where they had to provide their film consumption frequency and platform, as well as their demographic data. Participation in the research was completely voluntary and anonymous. The interviews were conducted online, and prior to that, the subjects were asked to prepare by reflecting on their last film selection process, which we then asked them to recall during the interviews. The characteristics of the narrative interview subjects are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
The Characteristics of Narrative Interview Subjects

Interview number	Subject code	Film consumption frequency	Gender	Age
1	N1	Daily	málé	21
2	HT1	Several times a week	female	21
3	HT2	x	male	20
4	HT3		male	24
5	HT4		male	33
6	HT5		female	24
7	HT6		male	20
8	HT7		male	26
9	HT8		male	27
10	HT9		male	22
11	HT10		female	21
12	HT11		male	35
13	HE1	Once a week	female	22
14	HE2		male	30

15	HE3		female	31
16	HE4		female	19
17	HE5		female	31
18	K1	Biweekly	female	27
19	K2		male	30

Source: Own research

The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (TA), based on the six-phase thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). The content analysis of the transcripts of the narrative interviews was conducted using deductive and inductive coding, utilizing previous research and additional literary sources. The basis of this is the classification of the characteristics of film as a service product according to the 7P marketing mix (Horváth & Gyenge, 2019; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). The analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 26.0 qualitative text analysis software, as was the case in previous domestic studies (Kéri, 2026). To avoid potential biases, the coding was performed twice, and the transcripts were subjected to final analysis by comparing the codes. As a result, 297 codes were created, which include characteristics from both the providers and consumers of the films.

Results of Primary Research

During the presentation of the results, the developed coding system will be presented first, followed by a code matrix-based heat map of the characteristics influencing regular film consumers during the film selection process, and finally, the established model will be presented.

Presentation of the Code System

The basis for coding the narrative interviews was the previously mentioned 7P framework. Based on the identified factors, they can be divided into three main groups: beyond the service provider and consumer sides, the intersection of the two sides, the intersection of promotion and reviews. This study aims to highlight which characteristics or groups of characteristics have the most significant impact on consumers' film choices. From the service provider's perspective, considering the 7P framework, we identified the following 5 subgroups: the film as a service product, access (channel), promotion, physical environment, and human environment. These subgroups also contain additional code groups, which are detailed in Table 3. At the intersection of promotion and reviews are consumer opinions, which include an additional 5 subgroups. Regarding the consumer side, we were able to identify 5 code groups based on the subjects' stories. Next to each code group, the frequency of their mentions can be found in Table 3. Regarding the service provider side, the following characteristics dominate in order of the 7P characteristics: genre, Netflix, trailer, Oscar award, actor. At the intersection of promotion and reviews, the recommendations of friends and acquaintances play the most significant role. On the side of the consumers, that is, the viewers, the dominant code was the company code: this indicates that they typically watch movies with others, which also affects their selection process. Due to the multitude of subcodes, in the following code matrix-based heatmap analysis, we will analyze the individual (sub)code groups in aggregate.

Table 3*The Code Groups Created During Thematic Coding and Their Number of Elements (N)*

Provider side			
Film, as a service product		Place	1
Resolution	1	Other online	2
Music	1	Videa	1
Quality	1	hdfilmek.net	1
Language available	0	Indavideo	1
Domestic voice	4	TV	1
Original voice	2	Cinema	6
Seasonality	1	Torrent	5
Genre	13	Streaming	4
Documentary	1	Apple TV	1
Historical	2	YouTube	1
Crime	2	Disney+	4
Fantasy	1	HBO Max	4
Biographical	2	Prime Video	3
Animated	4	Netflix	13
Horror	5	Promotion	
Science fiction	1	Streaming recommendation	
Action	7	You may also like this	3
Thriller	5	New releases	2
Adventure	1	Top 10	3
Comedy	11	Media presence	3
Drama	3	Online article	1
War	2	Poster, cover	3
Runtime	4	Social media	5
Sequel	8	YouTube Shorts	1
Production studio	1	Facebook	2
Book adaptation	2	Instagram	4
Plot	9	Facebook group	1
Release year	6	Tiktok	5
Country of origin	1	Trailer	12
Hungary	2	Physical evidence	
		Critical acclaim	1
		Palme d'Or	1
		Golden Globe	1
		Film historical significance	
		Academy Award / Oscar	6
		People	
		Voice actor	1
		Actor	19
		Composer	1

		Director	8
		Screenwriter	1
Intersection of promotion and reviews		Consumer side	
Consumer reviews	3	Mood	9
mafab	1	Prior exposure	6
Reddit	1	Time of day	8
Friends' recommendations	11	Personal availability	4
IMDb recommendation	1	Company	13
IMDb rating	5		

Source: Own research

Factors Influencing the Film Selection Process

In the following sections, we will present the obtained results by main group using the code matrix-based heat maps created by MAXQDA 26.0, interpreting Tables 4–6. The tables present the frequency of the mentioned factors influencing film selection for each interviewee, column by column. In the heatmap, the mention frequency of each code is also indicated by numbers within the cells and illustrated with color coding. The subjects are arranged in descending order according to their film consumption frequency: on the left, the results of those who watch films daily, and on the right, the results of those who watch films biweekly can be seen. The HE3 and HT2 subjects generated exceptionally high code numbers during the conversation (N = 23, N = 20).

On the heatmap related to the service provider side (Table 4), it can be seen that the characteristics of the film as a service product are the most prominent during the selection of films – except for subjects N1, HT10, HT11, HE1, and K1. Among the codes of this code group, every subject mentioned at least one characteristic. Looking more closely at the code group, it can be said that the genre and its subtypes were the most frequent. Regarding access, all narratives, except for one subject (HT6), also addressed this: in terms of the viewing platform, the mention of the subjects' existing streaming subscriptions and searching for films there was dominant (N = 17). In the case of promotion, the significance of social media appears to be the greatest (N = 12), while professional recognitions, which can be interpreted as characteristics of the physical environment, have a less influential effect among the subjects (N = 5). An element of the human environment appeared in the majority of the narratives (N = 16), and the dominant code was the identity of the actors (N = 16). The basis for coding the narrative interviews was the previously mentioned 7P framework.

Table 4*Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of the Service Provider Side (N)*

Provider side	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT8	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Sum
The film as a service product	1	7	11	5	6	6	8	5	4	8	2	2	1	6	9	8	5	4	4	1	103
Place	3	2	5	3	1	1	0	1	2	3	3	6	2	1	4	3	3	2	2	1	48
Promotion	1	3	3	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	3	3	3	0	4	0	4	6	2	3	45
Physical evidence	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	9
People	3	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	2	0	4	0	2	1	4	1	1	3	2	0	30

Source: Own research

At the intersection of the service provider and consumer sides, in terms of the intersection of promotion and reviews, the number of codes for the subjects was a maximum of 3, and in some cases, there was no code. The recommendation of friends or acquaintances seems to play the most significant role, which was mentioned at least once in the narratives of just over half of the subjects ($N = 11$). The related codes are illustrated in a heat map in Table 5.

Table 5*Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of Promotions and Reviews (N)*

Promotions and reviews	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT8	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Sum
Consumer reviewa	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
mafab	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Reddit	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Friends' recommendations	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	11
IMDb recommendation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
IMDb rating	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5

Source: Own research

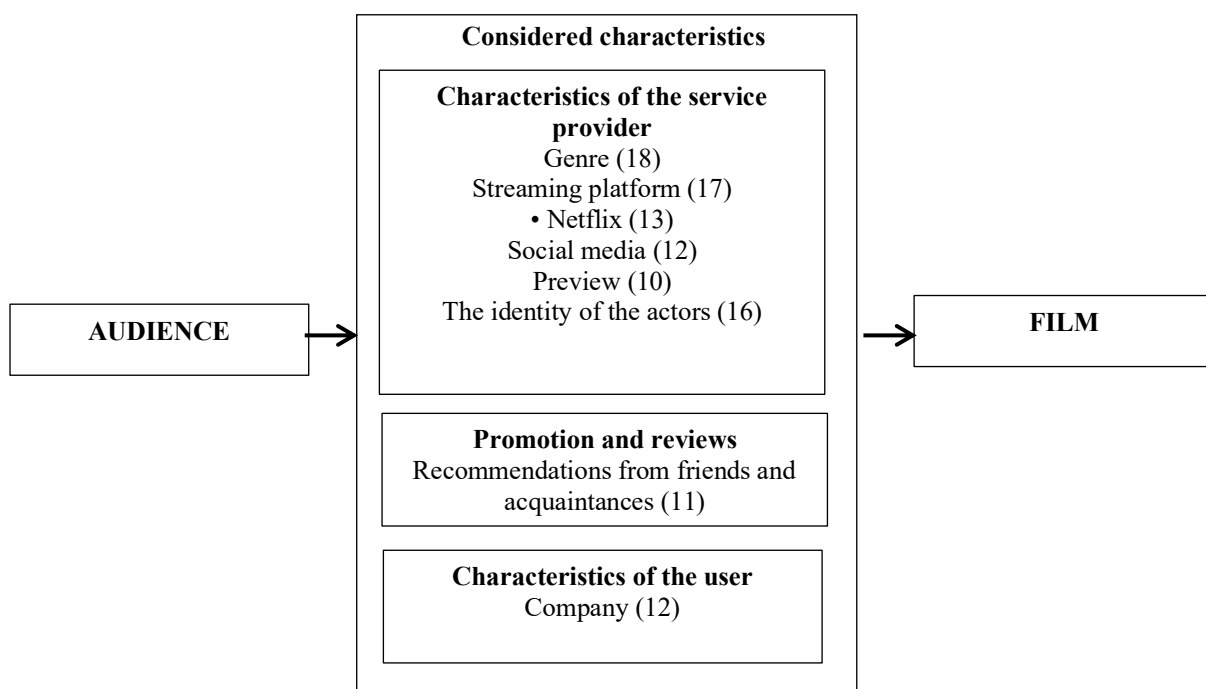
The number of codes related to the consumer's own characteristics, that is, the demand side, is typically higher for subjects than for the intersection of promotion and reviews. However, for all subjects, this frequency is lower than that related to the film's characteristics. The emphasis on the characteristics based on the narratives is illustrated in Table 6. In the case of most subjects, consuming films in a social setting is typical, so the influence of others was mentioned most frequently as a factor in their choice ($N = 12$). The second most frequently mentioned factor was the individual's mood at that moment ($N = 7$).

Table 6*The Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of the Service User (N)*

Service user	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT8	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Összesen
Mood	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	9
Prior exposure	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6
Time of day	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	8
Personal availability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Company	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	13

Source: Own research***Theoretical Model of Factors Influencing Film Selection***

In the following, we will present our model based on the obtained code numbers, which we created according to the mention frequency of the individual subcodes. The criterion for the characteristics was that at least half of the subjects mention them at least once in their narratives, meaning they appear in at least 10 people's stories. In terms of the characteristics of the provider, the genre of the film, the streaming platform, social media, the trailer, and the actors involved were found to be the most important factors. In addition, other influencing factors include recommendations from friends and acquaintances, as well as who the consumer watches the film with. Based on the results, we can say that the film characteristic is the most prominent during the selection process, and the other two factors are characteristics that have not been regularly examined in previous related research in the field. Based on the methodology of Horváth and Mitev (2015), the theoretical model of factors influencing film choice was constructed, as shown in Figure 1. We intend to test the model later using quantitative methodology.

Figure 1*Theoretical Model of Factors Influencing Film Selection**Source:* Own research

Conclusion and Limitations

The aim of the present study was to explore which characteristics influence the film selection habits of regular movie consumers. To answer the research question, 20 narrative interviews were conducted with subjects aged 18–35 who consume films at least biweekly. As part of the interview preparations, we asked the subjects to recall the story behind their last film choice. The transcripts were prepared using content analysis methods, thematic coding, and qualitative text analysis software, with the help of MAXQDA 26.0.

During the research, the code system built using inductive and deductive methods, based on the 7P framework, identified three main pillars: the provider side, the consumer side, and the intersection of the two sides, the intersection of promotion and reviews. The code matrix-based heatmaps created with the software highlighted that film selection is most influenced by provider characteristics, particularly genre, the identity of the actors, and availability (streaming platforms). Among the promotional tools, trailers and social media were found to be the most influential, while on the consumer side, the role of company and friend recommendations proved to be decisive. Based on the results, the theoretical model synthesizes the key factors mentioned by at least half of the respondents, emphasizing the significance of social influences and platform ecosystems.

The limitations of the research include the fact that the order of the individual selection characteristics, as well as the existence and direction of the relationships between them, could not be identified with the applied methodology. As a future research direction, we have identified the quantitative testing of the established model and its expansion with additional features.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Quillbot an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining, translating the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors. The author further declares that, apart from Quillbot, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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