

## Experiential Consumption: A Little Information May Not Be a Good Thing

The findings of three experiments are summarized which suggest that the informational needs for consumer purchase decisions relating to certain experiential products, namely entertainment narratives (e.g., novels, plays and films) containing surprise story elements, may be qualitatively different from the informational needs associated with other products.

Monroe Friedman, Eastern Michigan University<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this study is on feature films with special attention to one particular genre, i.e., mysteries. This genre has as its defining property certain classic plot components, such as the planned or actual commission of a major crime (often murder), the subsequent search for suspects, and the eventual identification and apprehension of the guilty party, who, if the author has successfully practiced his or her craft, is a person one would not suspect of the crime. Indeed, this surprise element in mysteries is perhaps its singular characteristic and it appears in the works of such writers as Agatha Christie and P. D. James.

Reviewers and advertisers of mystery novels, plays and films have long acknowledged the importance of surprise elements by deliberately withholding information from the audience about significant unexpected events in a story; the objective, of course, is to permit the reader to experience the unexpected event in the surprised manner intended by the author. It would appear that societal norms respecting the non-disclosure of surprise elements in advance are well-established, and especially for mystery stories.

### Study Hypotheses

The hypotheses for the studies described herein consider the effects on audiences of advance disclosure (vs. non-disclosure) of information concerning certain elements in the stories told in three feature films. The first of these, which was used to test the effects of complete vs. incomplete information, was *Death on the Nile*, a 1978 adaptation of an Agatha Christie classic mystery novel. The second film, a non-mystery used as a control for the first film, was *French Connection II*. This is a 1975 cops-and-robbers sequel to the Oscar-winning *French Connection*. While there are many suspenseful twists and turns in *French Connection II*,

it is not considered a mystery in the classic "who-dunnit" sense in that the film's ending comes as no surprise to viewers. The third film, *Sleuth*, an award-winning British mystery, was used to examine the effects of true vs. false information disclosures on the viewers' experience of the film. The disclosure of concern relates to a surprise development which occurs midway through the film.

The dependent variables all concerned the consumer experience of the various films. Since the main consumer benefit from viewing films is enjoyment, it is this subjective dimension which was the primary focus of the study although related hedonic dimensions (involvement, power and excitement) were also explored.

The research hypotheses are as follows:

1. Viewers of a classic mystery film (*Death on the Nile*) will find the film experience adversely affected by the advance disclosure of information revealing the film's ending. In particular, these viewers, as compared to a control group not presented with advance information about the film's ending, will find the film experience to be a) less enjoyable, b) less involving, c) less powerful, and d) less exciting.
2. Viewers of a non-mystery (suspense) film (*French Connection II*) will not find the film experience adversely affected by the advance disclosure of information revealing the film's ending since the ending is not surprising (as expected, the police get their man). In particular, these viewers, as compared to a control group not presented with advance information about the film's ending, will not find the film experience to be a) less enjoyable, b) less involving, c) less powerful, or d) less exciting.
3. Viewers of a mystery film (*Sleuth*) will

find the film experience adversely affected by the advance disclosure of information concerning a significant surprise development occurring midway through the film. In particular, these viewers, as compared to a control group not provided with this information in advance, will find the film experience to be a) less enjoyable, b) less involving, c) less powerful, and d) less exciting.

4. Since the disclosed information for *Sleuth* relates not to the film's ending but the film's middle, the disclosure effect is expected to be less pronounced for this film than for *Death on the Nile*. (The point here is that the viewers' last experience with a film is its ending, and their sense of disappointment is likely to be especially acute if they are denied a surprise experience at this point rather than earlier in the film.) Needless to say, the effects of disclosure are expected to be least pronounced for *French Connection II* since the film's ending is not surprising. To sum up, the effects of disclosed vs. nondisclosed information for the three films on viewer reaction are hypothesized to be strongest for *Death on the Nile* and weakest for *French Connection II* with *Sleuth* occupying a middle position between the other two films.

### Research Design and Results

The research design consisted of three simple experiments, each with an experimental group and a control group. Each experiment focused on one of the three feature films identified earlier. For each experiment the independent variable consisted of the disclosure or non-disclosure, prior to viewing the film, of information pertaining to certain developments in the film. Four dependent variables were explored which asked how the viewers, after seeing the film, rated it on a ten-point scale with regard to enjoyment, involvement, power and excitement. For each experiment approximately 130 college students were randomly assigned to the experimental group (disclosure) or the control group (non-disclosure). All in all, 397 students were tested in the three experiments.

The results relating to the four hypotheses are supportive of them. First, the mean differences

found for *Death on the Nile* on all four subjective measures are in the expected direction in that the disclosure group students found the experience less positive than did the non-disclosure group students. For each of the four comparisons the effect was highly significant statistically although, practically speaking, the mean differences were modest in magnitude (about one and a half points on a ten point scale) as was the proportion of variance on the subjective measures accounted for by disclosure condition (11 to 12 percent).

Second, we found, as predicted, little difference on all four subjective measures between the mean scores of the disclosure and non-disclosure group students who viewed *French Connection II*. Not only were these differences not significant statistically but they were also not substantial practically in that they averaged less than half a point in magnitude on the ten point scales used to determine values on the four subjective measures.

Third, as predicted, the results for *Sleuth* fell between the other two films. An informational disclosure was intended to adversely affect the viewers' experience and this was indeed the result for all four subjective measures. However, the mean differences were very modest in size and just barely statistically significant. Also very modest in magnitude were the near-zero proportions of variance on the four dependent variables accounted for by the independent variable.

Thus we find support for all of the first three study hypotheses as well as the fourth, which predicts which of the three films would yield the largest disclosure effect (*Death on the Nile*) and which would yield the smallest (*French Connection II*).

### Study Implications

The study findings, while limited to three films, nonetheless suggest that consumers who are exposed, prior to viewing a feature film, to disclosures in film reviews or previews of major surprise developments in the film, might well find that their later experience of the film is adversely affected by the disclosures. These findings suggest that such disclosures not be made, and if this is not possible, that consumers be warned, when practicable, of their presence, i.e., in film reviews.

### Endnotes

1. Professor Monroe Friedman, Department of Psychology