

Do spoilers harm movie box-office revenue?

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Researchers from Western University and University of Houston published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines whether spoiler movie reviews harm box office revenue.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Do

Spoilers Really Spoil? Using Topic Modeling to Measure the Effect of Spoiler Reviews on Box Office Revenue" and is authored by Jun Hyun (Joseph) Ryoo, Xin (Shane) Wang and Shijie Lu.

"No spoilers!" say many directors. Their concern is that if publications or moviegoers reveal plotlines and surprises, the public won't want to pay for the movie. But is that concern well-founded?

To examine this question, the research team examined daily box office revenues for [movies](#) released between January 2013 and December 2017 in the United States. These movies were then matched with their respective reviews collected from Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the most popular movie review platform in the United States. The researchers also developed a measurement of spoiler intensity, or the degree of plot uncertainty resolved by reading spoilers in movie reviews. The study results indicate that spoiler intensity has a positive and [significant relationship](#) with box office revenue.

Ryoo explains that "We postulate that uncertainty reduction is the driving mechanism behind this positive spoiling effect. If potential moviegoers are unsure about the quality of a movie, they are likely to benefit from the plot-related content of spoiler reviews when making their purchase decisions." Consistent with this, the research reveals an inverted-U relationship between average ratings and spoiler intensity, which suggests that the positive spoiling effect is stronger for movies that receive moderate or mixed ratings compared to movies that receive either very high or very low ratings. The positive spoiling effect is also stronger for movies that receive less advertising. Advertising can serve an informative function for consumers and is seen as a credible signal of quality in the movie industry. Less advertising should therefore lead to greater uncertainty about movie quality for potential moviegoers. Wang adds "The positive spoiling effect is also stronger for movies with limited release, which is a strategy often employed by independent and

arthouse studios associated with greater uncertainty in terms of artistic quality. And the positive spoiling effect declines over time, likely because consumers have greater uncertainty in the earlier periods of a movie's [life cycle](#)."

This leads to several implications for stakeholders in the movie industry. Foremost among these is that online review platforms can potentially increase consumer welfare by using spoiler reviews. "The uncertainty-reduction mechanism suggests a spoiler-friendly review platform can help consumers make appropriate purchase decisions. We recommend that [review](#) platforms keep the warning labels on spoiler reviews because of the benefit of allowing consumers to self-select into the exposure to spoilers," says Lu.

More information: Jun Hyun (Joseph) Ryoo et al, Do Spoilers Really Spoil? Using Topic Modeling to Measure the Effect of Spoiler Reviews on Box Office Revenue, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920937703](#)

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