

Can movie reviews predict box office success?

June 3 2023



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When one thinks of movie reviews, one might see them as harbingers of success or failure at the box office. Some researchers have previously found that both positive and negative reviews correlate to box office

revenues, and the effect of negative reviews diminishes over time.

However, researchers at the University of California, Davis, suggest that is not the case.

Researchers analyzed pre-release commentary and opening weekend box office revenue, turning the impact of movie reviews on its head and revealing an unexpected harbinger of failure phenomenon in the movie industry.

The [study](#), "What reviews foretell about opening weekend box office revenue: the harbinger of failure effect in the movie industry," was published in *Marketing Letters* in April.

Rotten reviews = box office success?

The findings have implications that might change how one perceives popular pre-release reviews, authors said.

"We contend that it's essential to differentiate among movie critics, arguing that the influence of reviews on box office performance isn't uniform across all critics," said the study's lead author, Pantelis Loupos, assistant professor of marketing and business analysis for the Graduate School of Management. "In our analysis, we demonstrate that not all positive or negative reviews necessarily signal a movie's success or failure, respectively."

The study analyzed a plethora of pre-release movie reviews penned by film critics on Rotten Tomatoes.

Researchers wanted to see if they could predict a movie's success based on these reviews. As it turned out, the so-called harbingers of failure did exist.

"Interestingly, when these critics penned positive pre-release reviews, they signaled that the movie would be a flop," said Loupos. "Conversely, their [negative reviews](#) hinted towards the film being a success. The stronger the sentiment in either direction, the stronger the predictive signal."

For example, he said, the movies *Baywatch* and *Tomb Raider* received positive pre-release reviews but generated dismal opening box office results.

What's more surprising, this pattern persisted even with top critics. Expertise, it seems, does not always lead to accurate predictions, Loupos said. "This surprising outcome challenges the prevailing belief that positive reviews equate to better [box office](#) revenues," he said.

To understand this [paradox](#), researchers used text analytics to delve into the writing style of these harbingers of failure, shedding light on their [personality traits](#) and cognitive biases. What surfaced was that harbinger critics lean toward a formal and analytical writing style, using fewer self-reference pronouns.

"Our fresh perspective on the role of critics' personalities opens up new avenues in our understanding of the film [review](#) space," Loupos remarked. "It's an important acknowledgment that the [movie industry](#) is a puzzle of complexity and unpredictability."

Co-authors of the study include Yvette Peng, Sute Li and Hao Hao, all UC Davis Master of Science in Business Analytics students at the time of the research.

More information: Pantelis Loupos et al, What reviews foretell about opening weekend box office revenue: the harbinger of failure effect in the movie industry, *Marketing Letters* (2023). [DOI](#):

[10.1007/s11002-023-09665-8](https://phys.org/news/2023-06-movie-office-success.html)

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: Can movie reviews predict box office success? (2023, June 3) retrieved 1 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-movie-office-success.html>

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