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Exporting Media Products: Understanding the Success and Failure of Hollywood Movies in Germany

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ABSTRACT

Rising production costs in the US motion picture industry make overseas markets essential for movie studios' economic survival. However, movie marketers can rarely build on systematic research when attempting to customize movies or movie-related communications to different cultural settings. In this paper, we draw from cultural theory to develop a conceptual framework of US movies' success in foreign markets. Propositions are then developed that offer insight into the differing impact of a number of factors on movie success in the US and Germany. Marketing implications will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The US motion picture industry today suffers from an enormous rise of production and marketing costs. Average costs for making a movie rose from \$9.4 million in 1980 to \$54.8 million in 2000. To market a movie in 1980 it needed an additional \$4.3 million, while average marketing costs have reached \$31 million in 2001 (Lyman and Holson 2002). Due to rising costs, a global perspective has become essential to profitably market an American movie. While from the 1950s up to the 1980s exports constituted around one-third of American movie revenues, in 1997 overseas box office equaled for the first time the domestic figures. In 2002, the ten most successful Hollywood-produced movies gathered a domestic box office of \$2.4 billion, or 44.6 percent of these films' global receipts of \$5.5 billion (The Movie Times 2003).

As a reaction to this development American studios have begun to incorporate the overseas marketing in their domestic management systems (Dunkley and Harris 2001). However, to fully exploit the enormous success potential of overseas markets, it is necessary to understand the reasons why films perform differently in the US and abroad. For example, the first part of the AUSTIN POWERS series earned only \$250,000 in Germany, in contrast to a US box office of \$54 million. There is also evidence that movies that failed in their domestic release can be largely successful abroad.¹

In this paper it is argued that to optimize the success of Hollywood movies in foreign markets a global perspective is needed. To consider the global perspective the research focus is the success of American movies in the German market as the most important export market (Brown 2001; see also Neelamegham and Chintagunta 1999), with US productions accounting for almost 82 percent of admissions and hence dominating German movie theaters. A cultural framework is used to explore possible factors determining the success of US movies released abroad. Propositions are developed and discussed with references to managerial and research implications.

PROPOSITIONS ON A DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF MOVIE SUCCESS FACTORS ON BOX OFFICE

Culture impacts a movie's box office in three ways. First, a movie's box office within a specific country is determined by

different factors, including the movie itself. Key movie characteristics that influence the reception of motion pictures by its potential audience include the movie's genre (e.g., Litman 1983), its style (e.g., Wyatt 1991), its level of symbolicity (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Walsh, and Wruck 2001), and the stardom of the movie (e.g., De Vany and Walls 1999). A country's culture influences the consumer's perception of these movie characteristics which results in an indirect impact of culture on movie box office. Second, the awards a movie receives (e.g., Nelson et al. 2001) and its certification (i.e., ratings by MPAA; Prag and Casavant 1994) as movie-related concretizations of a specific culture also influence box-office success. Third, a movie's perception by foreign-country consumers is not only influenced by the movie itself and the respective foreign country's market and culture, but also by the movie's success in its home country (De Vany and Walls 2003).

In Figure 1, we present a conceptual framework of the factors influencing movie success in the US and Germany and discuss the model relationships. The framework will allow us to derive propositions about the reasons for an American film's success or failure in the German market. It is based on a differentiation between a vertical and a horizontal direction of thought.

Regarding the *vertical* direction of the model, a movie's box office within a specific country (here: USA) is determined by different factors, including the movie itself. The movie is embedded within a specific cultural context and a market structure which both also influence its box office. First, culture and market influence the consumer's perception of movie characteristics which results in an indirect impact on movie box office. Second, they have also a direct impact on box office.

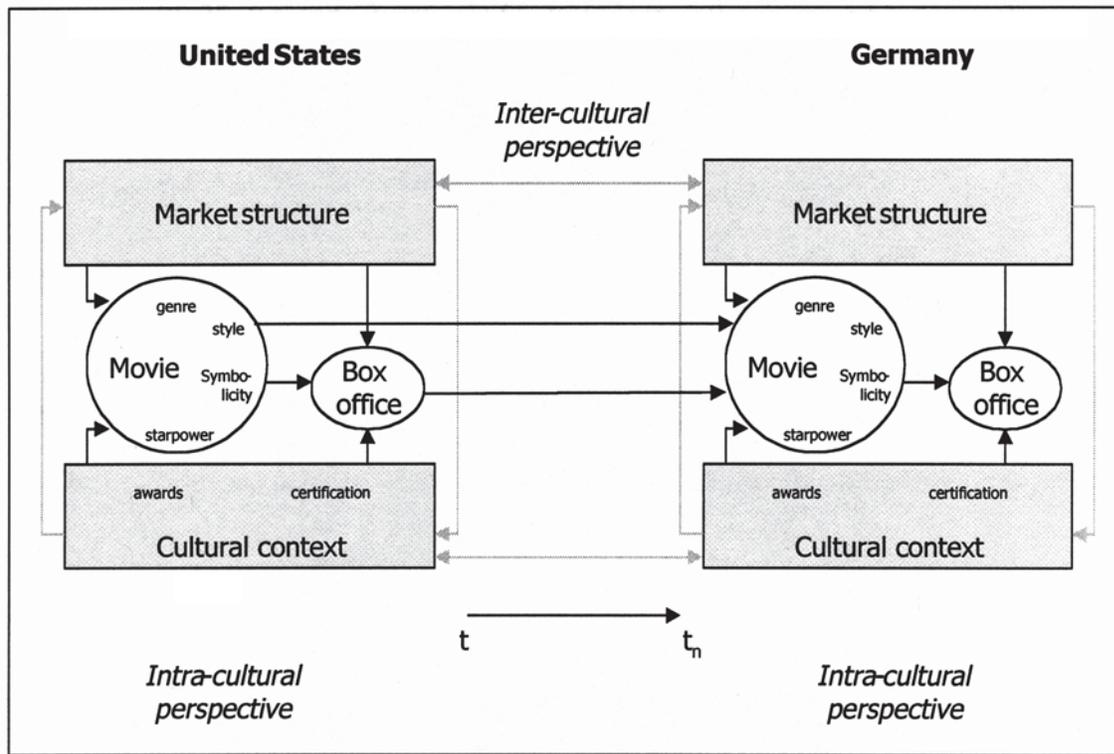
The *horizontal relations* within the model are centered on the bilateral media flow (Jensen 2002) and incorporate primarily the export of domestic movies into a foreign market (here: Germany). While interactions exist between the domestic and foreign market context (e.g., through international distributors) as well as between the domestic and foreign cultural context (e.g., through media), a movie's perception by foreign-country consumers is not only influenced by the movie itself and the respective foreign country's market and culture, but also by the movie's success in its home country (De Vany and Walls 2003).

Propositions for Cross-National Differences of Movie Characteristics on Box Office

Movie Genre. Genre has been empirically demonstrated to impact the North American box office (e.g., De Silva 1998; Prag and Casavant 1994). In these authors' view, the term "genre" requires no definition because it summarizes in a common-sensical way "movie attributes" (Neelamegham and Chintagunta 1991, p. 115) or "specific movie characteristics" (Jedidi, Krider and Weinberg 1998, p. 393). However, such a perspective overlooks that genres are not objective, timeless dimensions of a movie but dynamic, modifiable "envelopes" for a movie. Miller et al. (2001, p. 95) define a genre as a "cultural referencing system that provides pleasures for filmgoers as well as pre-sold forms for risk-averse industries". In this view the cultural and marketing perspective reconcile in the similar idea of genre as a concept connecting the production and consumption of movies, constituting "a kind of

¹For example, Roman Polanski's movie PIRATES collected \$5.8 million at the German box office, while the US box office was below \$1 million.

FIGURE 1
A Conceptual Framework on Exporting American Movies to Germany



'contract' between the media industry and its audiences" (Larsen 2002, p. 132). Based on our conceptual framework, we assume that a difference in a movie's box office success between the domestic and foreign-country market indicates a differing resonance between the marketed movie and the domestic/foreign cultural reference system. Differences are argued to exist for family-oriented movies, thrillers, and comedies.

Family-oriented movies. Considering the vertical direction of the framework, family-oriented movies have the potential to utilize the rich cultural referencing system of family related issues and values in the US. Despite the fact that the traditional family is undergoing dramatic changes in the US (Skolnick and Skolnick 2003), with new forms of family such as cohabiting couples, same-sex couples, single-parent families, and binuclear families emerging, the cultural norm of a traditional family figures large in the American public discourse. Consequently, movies with a "positive" family representation are especially recommended for family viewing.² This discussion is an indicator of a strong American cultural referencing system in regard of family-oriented movies. On the other hand, while the changing status of families is also discussed in Germany, the traditional family plays a less important role in the public discourse here (Schneider 1999; Leggewie 2001). Schneider (1999) found that "[c]ompared to North Americans, German males and females showed less appreciation for identities with family denotation and identities with religious or authoritative denotation". This leads to the expectation that family-oriented movies are more successful in the US than in Germany.

Thrillers. Movies referred to as thrillers share the narrative logic of surprise, suspense, and the name-giving thrills. Thrillers are organized around the central personae of victim, culprit/criminal and official or unofficial agents of law, order and justice (Derry 1988). On a very abstract level they incorporate a universal formula of a confrontation between good and evil. However, film research shows that the specific treatment has been closely related to the social, economic and political circumstances of the US (e.g., Leitch 2002). This is exemplified in the Depression and Prohibition era Gangster movie, as well as the conspiracy, political thrillers of the late 70s, early 80s. It has also been argued that the normative positioning of the criminal and/or avenger resonates specifically with the American public discourse or sentiments (Mandel 1984; Raeburn 1988). In the German culture, with a different law system and far less gun-related crimes, other referencing systems will be relevant. As thrillers require moviegoers to utilize a certain intertextual knowledge, including the American context as well as the specific genre conventions, thrillers are more likely to be successful in the US than in Germany.

Comedies. There are studies to suggest that the concept of humor varies between cultures, for example, the degree of humor used in advertisements and forms of humor such as sarcasm, irony, slapstick, ridicule, and situational humor (e.g., Zandpour, Chang, and Catalano 1992; Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet 1992). Palmer (1995) points out that laughter and humor require a certain situation of incongruity that is always historically and culturally local. It might imply a disregard of customs, social rules and norms and a situational knowledge of the appropriate and socially expected behavior. This refers to the nonverbal as well as verbal humor. Especially verbal humor is an important barrier for the successful export of comedies. Since in Germany the vast majority of movies screened in theaters are dubbed, it is likely that such dubbing reduces a movie's level of humor and, consequently, its attractive-

²See for instance the American religious organization Dove Foundation that awards a label for "family-friendly" movies and even sells Hollywood movies in "family-edited" video versions.

ness to movie audiences. Accordingly, American movie comedies which refer to the specific American cultural referencing system of humor and are shown in a dubbed format can be expected to perform less successful in Germany than in the US. This leads us to our first proposition:

P1: The success of US movies differs between the US and Germany due to certain genres, with family-oriented movies, thrillers, and comedies being less successful in Germany.

Movie Style. A second concept that can be expected to account for differences between US and German movie success is *movie style*. In the last several decades, the American movie industry has developed a distinct way of dramatizing and visualizing stories, which is sometimes referred to as “Hollywood style.” This specific aesthetic and narrative style differs from European kinds of story telling as well as from Asian stylistic movie patterns: “Hollywood movies move; European ones linger; Asian ones sit and contemplate” (see Miller et al. 2001, p. 98). For example, European films tend to be wordier and contain less visual dynamics as well as no or only few special effects. Although German consumers have learned to interpret the codes of the “Hollywood style” (Putnam 1998), a movie still has to have the ability to connect with the localized German cultural referencing system. Motion pictures that draw extensively on the stylistic concept of “Hollywood style” (e.g., strong use of special effects, stars, linear narration and happy end) have to be highly standardized so that they are less open to specific elements of the German cultural system. Consequently, movies with a high level of “Hollywood style” will be more successful in the US than in Germany. Therefore,

P2: The success of US movies differs between the US and Germany depending on the movie’s style, with movies having a high degree of “Hollywood style” being less successful in Germany.

Movie Symbolicity. Differences between movies’ US and German box office success can also be explained by the concept of *symbolicity*. Symbolicity refers to a media product’s potential to be categorized by consumers into existing positive cognitive categories (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001). Symbolicity has been proposed or empirically shown to impact US box office significantly in the case of sequels, remakes, adaptations of TV series, among others, with movie sequels exerting an especially high impact (Simonet 1987; Ravid 1999).

Symbolicity can be interpreted as a specific form of intertextuality. In an ontological sense, the concept of intertextuality refers to the idea that the reception of one text cannot be conceptualized as an isolated process as there has to be a pre-existing knowledge of a cultural text pool that can be applied to understand a new text. Symbolicity takes the perspective of the producing company in the movie context (i.e., the “author”), which, in order to “pre-sell” a movie, tries to promote a movie with references that are known to the target audience. Here it is assumed that an American movie with a high level of symbolicity, as it is especially present in the case of movie sequels, will try to primarily capitalize on an existing American symbolic value. This means that the probability for a resonance with the American culture is higher than for the German culture. Therefore, we expect that US-produced movies with a high degree of symbolicity (i.e., sequels) to perform more successful in the US than in Germany. This reasoning leads to the following proposition:

P3: The success of US movies differs between the US and Germany depending on a movie’s level of symbolicity, with sequels performing superior at the box-office in the US than in Germany.

Starpower. Finally, movie stars are also expected to account for differences in US and German box office. From the cultural point of view, stars create a certain set of audience expectations based on prior textual experiences. In this sense Albert (1998, p. 225) remarks, that “stars can mark a particular film type”. Evidence for a positive impact of “starpower” on the North American box office has been demonstrated by several authors (e.g., Sawhney and Eliashberg 1996), although others have questioned the strength of this impact (e.g., Ravid 1999). While Hollywood stars are international stars, being well known and appreciated in most parts of the world, their media coverage differs between their home country and foreign countries such as Germany. Specifically, there are disproportionately more TV shows and special magazines featuring Hollywood stars in the US than in Germany, which is at least partially stimulated by the stars’ local presence. This media coverage enriches the star-related cultural system in the US, providing a wider range of intertextual references for stars that can be utilized by both movie promoters and movie audiences to make sense of a certain new movie starring these actors. In addition, the fact that American movie stars themselves have been socialized within the US culture increases the cultural similarity between these stars and their audiences. This similarity fosters the star-audience relationship and adds to the expected stronger impact of American stars on US than German moviegoers’ behavior. Therefore:

P4: The success of US movies differs between the US and Germany depending on a movie’s level of starpower, with starpower having a stronger impact on box-office performance in the US than in Germany.

Propositions for Cross-National Differences of External Factors’ Impact on Box Office

Domestic Success. When a US motion picture is released in Germany, information on the movie’s prior success in the US market is regularly widely available through advertising and neutral media, such as newspapers and television. For example, the German magazine “Der Spiegel” comments the latest US box-office figures on its website weekly. Such information, which cannot be available to moviegoers in the US before a film has been released, can be expected to serve as an important choice criterion for foreign moviegoers when deciding which movie to attend (Elberse and Eliashberg 2002). Specifically, a film’s US success (and the underlying “buying decision” of the US audience) is interpreted as a quality signal by German moviegoers. Hence, a film being successful in US theaters is expected to deliver superior quality compared to an unsuccessful movie. Moreover, according to the “success-breeds-success” principle, moviegoers climb on the bandwagon for its own sake, i.e., preferring successful movies over unsuccessful ones, with their decisions being largely independent of quality matters (Elberse and Eliashberg 2002), or as Danan (1995, p. 132) notes, “[c]ontemporary international audiences are plugged into what’s hot on American marquee”. The latter effect is amplified by the disproportionate budget allocation of German distributors, who put an emphasis on films that have been successful in the US. Thus, we propose that:

P5: The success of US movies in Germany depends on the movie’s US box office success, with movies performing

successfully at the US box office being also successful in Germany.

Awards. Awards, such as the prominent AMPAS Academy Awards, are given to movies in the year following their domestic theatrical release (Nelson et al. 2001). Thus, their impact on US moviegoers tends to be, although significant, limited to theatrical re-releases of award-winning movies and the latter's video exploitation (Dodds and Holbrook 1988). However, as US motion pictures regularly open in Germany with a time lag, information on award nominations and winners are often available during a movie's initial German theatrical release. We offer the following proposition:

P6: The success of US movies in Germany depends on the movie's award nominations and winners, with movies being nominated and/or winners performing better in Germany than in the US.

Certifications. Finally, the varying certification procedures in both countries can also be expected to account for differences in box-office success. In the US, the certifications given by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) are reported to have a significant impact on the box office of movies in the US, with restrictive ratings such as "R" serving as barriers for parts of the audience to attend a movie and therefore limit their success potential (Prag and Casavant 1994). As ratings express a culture's attitude toward movie elements such as violence and sexuality, movies can be rated differently in countries such as Germany and the US. In the case a movie is rated differently, the target audience might be restricted from attending the movies to a differing extent. Consequently, a movie rated more restrictive in the US than in Germany is expected to perform more successful in Germany, where fewer people are restricted from attending the movie. Vice versa, a movie rated less restrictive in the US than in Germany will probably be more successful in the US. Therefore, we propose that:

P7: The success of US movies in Germany depends on the movie's certification in both countries, with films having a more restrictive rating in Germany performing less successful in Germany and films with less restrictive German ratings being more successful in Germany.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore differences in the factors that determine the success of a movie that is sequentially released in the US and Germany. Our research contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of movie success factors in an inter-cultural context and builds on previous work, which has focused on the US movie market. Propositions were developed on how those factors affect the box office in both countries. We argue that there is an interaction effect between movies and cultures that has an impact on movies success. Insofar this research may help film studios to target their international audiences more effectively, especially by giving heed to different movie characteristics and cultural factors.

From a research perspective, our study could help developing methodologies and approaches to better understand the impact of culture on the overseas success of US movies. Because the proposed framework distinguishes between an inter- and intra-cultural perspective, the hypothesized framework offers a fine-grained understanding of interrelated mechanisms. Our primary contribution to theory lies in developing a model of movie success in an

inter-cultural context. It is hoped that our proposed model will trigger some interesting future research. Naturally, the most powerful research addition would be an empirical test of our propositions. For some factors of the model, it is possible to draw on existing measures used in earlier studies. Other measures could be constructed with data from different sources. Table 1 lists those measures which are found to be most relevant for empirically testing the conceptual model presented in this paper.

Our study also has implications for future research in terms of examining movie success in a cross-cultural context. The advent of global markets and marketing movies across national boundaries require companies to become familiar with relevant moviegoers' behavior in different culture. Once empirically corroborated, the framework could be used to forecast the acceptance of a new motion picture in Germany even before the production stage of motion picture management. Gathering similar information for other important foreign markets can contribute to a global early warning system which may help Hollywood studios to reduce the dangers of economic failures of future movies outside the US market. To understand the effects of culture on movie consumption, it may be important to examine other factors than those considered in our framework.

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TABLE 1
Existing Relevant Measures

Variable		Description of measure	Data source
Movie Success	US box office	The overall theatrical box-office generated by a movie during its US release	Internet Movie Database (imbd.com)
	German box office	The overall theatrical box-office generated by a movie during its German release	Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA)
Movie-Inherent Factors	Movie genres and themes	(a) Genre assignments by imdb.com can be taken as nominal genre variables. (b) The degree of family appeal, sexual-erotic themes, romance, suspense, and humor as movie themes can each measured on 10-point rating scales. Assessments on each element can be made by movie experts of the motion-picture information service Reel.comm	imbd.com, Reel.co
	Movie style	The movies' degree of "Hollywood style", can be included as assessments from Reel.com experts.	Reel.com
	Movie symbolism	For sequel, remake, and films being based on a TV series, nominal variables can be constructed (e.g., sequel/no sequel). In the case of sequels and remakes, the absolute US and German box office of the respective predecessor was used as an indicator	imbd.com
	Starpower	The Hollywood Reporter's Star Power® measure can be used. The measure contains a starpower assessment by branch insiders which indicates the respective star's impact on the US box office.	The Hollywood Reporter
External Factors	Previous success	See description of US box office gathering above	imdb.com
	Awards	A scoring model can be developed to address the different categories of Academy Awards adequately when transferring the number of awards and nominations into a single scale value. For example, 50 points could be attributed to a Best Picture Academy Award, 25 points for each Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Director award, and 10 points could be given for each remaining award category.	AMPAS
	Timing	For each film, its' theatrical release dates in the US and Germany can be recorded and a difference score measuring the weeks between the two time points calculated	imbd.com
	Certifications	US: MPAA ratings could be used to measure movies', with G, PG, PG-13, and R ratings each being treated as nominal variables. Germany: FSK movie ratings can be used in a similar way, adding nominal variables for each of the rating categories ("general access", "6", "12", "16", "18") to the database	MPA, FSK

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