

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF USING MOVIES AS A MEANS OF ESCAPISM  
BETWEEN FINNS AND IMMIGRANTS IN FINLAND

Master's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract  <p>Escapist use is often considered the main use for movies in Uses and Gratification research, however there is hardly a detailed account on such use, on what the movie audience escape into. The present study, which consists of a research article and a monograph, has tried to utilize a qualitative approach to provide a better understanding of escapist movie viewing. The other aspect of this research is trying to compare such use among Finnish nationals and immigrants in Finland to see how people from different backgrounds might vary in their escapist use of movies.</p> <p>Although no difference between Finns and immigrants living in Finland were seen in the data, due to limitation in its scale, this study cannot confirm that such a difference does not exist. However, roles of platform and content, and more details about what audiences escape into has been discussed in the related research article. The monograph includes more detailed explanation of present study’s research process, and more factors regarding escapist movie viewing that were not predicted while data collection, but seem to be important for having a better understanding of escapism in movie viewers, namely rituals of movie viewing, enhancing one’s experiences, and movie viewing as a social act.</p>	
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## **Watching movies to escape: An intercultural account**

### **Abstract**

Watching movies is an act of media consumption which happens due to various reasons, including escaping everyday routines and trying to forget one's problems. Using uses and gratification theory as a basis for a qualitative approach, this study tries to look deeper into why people watch movies to escape. In this study, two main groups, Finnish people and immigrants in Finland, were interviewed to see if there is a difference in their approaches to escapist movie viewing. Findings showed various accounts of escapist film use, including the tendency to watch TV series more often than before, which in turns has had a profound effect on television industry. There was no indication of any difference between the way Finns and immigrants in Finland consume movies for escapism, which might imply their connection to a somewhat global film industry. However qualitative research on this scale will not be able to confirm this.

Keywords: movie, uses and gratification theory, escapism, Finland

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Uses and Gratification Theory**

There have been many theories and models introduced by communication scholars in different time periods to explain the relationships between media and its audience. Much of this research has tried to understand the effects of media messages on the people who use various media, especially after the emergence of radio and subsequently television in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Theories such as the "hypothermic needle theory" considered the media's effects on audiences as a one-way approach, in which media messages are deliberately sent with a homogenized and standardized content, and the audience entirely accepts them (Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994). Responses to such theories emphasized how the audience is able to select which

messages they prefer. This approach gave life to the uses and gratification model. One of the first examples of applying this model was the work done by Herzog (1940) to find the reason people watch soap operas.

Generally, uses and gratifications (U&G), which is seen as a framework and a model rather than a single theory (McQuail, 1994), tries to look into the motivations behind the decisions made by people to consume a specific type of media and also the gratifications they may gain from it. According to this theory, users are capable of explaining why they use media and also of stating the fact that media is one of the sources for obtaining the gratifications they seek (Palmgreen, 1984). Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) mentioned five assumptions that could be considered as the founding elements of U&G: (1) the audience decides what media to consume based on their goals and they are considered an active element in the whole process, (2) the choice of media lies within the audience and this issue limits the possibility of theorization of direct media effects on behavior or attitudes of the audience, (3) there are different sources of gratification for the users and these sources compete with each other, (4) the audience are capable of self-reporting not only the amount of the media they use, but also the reason(s) behind their media consumption, and (5) the researchers who use U&G should avoid value judgments about cultural differences and such judgments should be left to the user himself/herself.

They continued by suggesting U&G researchers should consider:

(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 510).

A considerable amount of studies have tried to categorize media users' needs and develop general or media-specific topologies of uses. One of the most prominent of such general models was suggested by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972). This model suggested four main categories for the gratifications users seek, namely diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance. U&G is known to be a remarkable tool for looking into patterns of mass media use in new media (Ruggerio, 2000), therefore in recent years there have been numerous studies on new media, such as online chat (Leung, 2001), animated news (Cheng & Lo, 2012), and online gaming (Wu, Wang, & Tsai, 2010).

### **U&G in an Intercultural Context**

The Uses and Gratifications model also provides strong enough tools for researchers to compare media users from different cultures based on their media activities and motivations. Blumler, Gurevitch, & Katz (1985) encouraged researchers to examine the question if the gratifications mentioned by this model apply to individuals from various cultures.

U&G has been applied in a number of studies to see if there is a difference in how people from different cultures use media. Allbaran and Umphrey (1993) used this model to compare television motivation and program preferences between three ethnic groups in the United States, namely whites, blacks, and Hispanics. There have been efforts to measure the social impact of online community participation in American, Korean, and Dutch users and it was found these communities have different motives for their web usage which are unique to their national culture and subculture (Grace-Farfaglia, Dekkers, Sundararajan, & Peters, 2006).

Researchers also have used U&G to understand the reasons individuals consume media while being in the process of acculturation, including Chinese (Hwang & He, 1999, Huang,

1993), Korean (Moon & Ha, 2005), East Asian (Ye, 2005, Reece & Palmgreen, 2000) and African-American (Abrams & Giles, 2007) immigrants in the US.

### **Applying U&G to the Context of Television and Cinema Viewing**

Initially, U&G researchers have used this model frequently to study television viewers, but maybe not as much to study movie viewers, although one could argue movies are among the most similar media to TV programs, specifically TV series. Relations between the audience and television programs, including soap operas and series, have been of keen interest for researchers who use U&G (i.e., Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Perse, 1987). There have been a few studies that tackle the media consumption of movie audiences using the U&G approach (Austin, 1986, Tesser, Millar, & Wu, 1988, Young, 2000). Pointing out the lack of literature on movie viewing using a U&G approach, Austin (1986) mentioned that movies usually are compared to other media, and the existing literature does not study this medium. Moreover, Young (2003) suggested U&G studies of movies should take cultural backgrounds into account, since consumption of this form of media does not “take place in a cultural vacuum” (p. 463).

Television consumption by children from different cultures has been a key issue for researchers using the U&G approach (Rubin, 1977, Zohoori, 1988). Zhou (2011) used U&G as well as perceived impact to find out how American television programs may affect Chinese college students. Some studies have examined the way audiences and fans from different cultures perceive specific TV dramas, i.e., the cases of Chinese viewers of *Friends* (Xiaying, 2012) and *Prison Break* (Li, Chen, & Nakazawa, 2013).

In their study of television audiences, Rubin (1983) stated there are two types of television audiences; those who consume it as an instrument, and those who use it in a ritualized

way. Although television-viewing used to be considered as a more ritualized and passive activity with a low level of involvement (Ehrenberg & Wakshlag, 1987), emergence of the Internet and web 2.0 has turned this activity to a more instrumental and active way through which fans perform activities that can be divided into two main categories. First, they use the Internet to gain information about their favorite shows, and second, they create their own content regarding their loved shows in fan websites and forums (Andrejevic, 2008). The latter has been the subject of some U&G studies. Moreover, Godlewski and Perse (2010) suggested related online activity after watching a reality TV, including searching more content related to the program or show can happen when the audience is not satisfied with the program. The audience activity takes an even more interactive form when it comes to voting for the content of reality TV shows, which may affect the output of the show; therefore, the audience who has voted has actively participated in the process of creating the program (Liu & Shrum, 2002).

Movie fans use the Internet to view films, seek information, and even create related content just as fans of TV shows do. It is safe to assume these new opportunities have helped movie fans become an active audience, which is an important concept for the uses and gratifications model. As Wang et al. (2009) put it, in order to comprehend audiences' activeness, one should study their uses of a specific medium rather than media in general sense.

### **Escapism**

Escapism or diversion, described as escaping from alienation caused by unpleasant everyday routines and problems, or "needs related to escape or tension-release which we define in terms of the weakening of contact with self and one's social roles" (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973, p. 167), is one of the clustered categories of media use motives articulated in numerous communication studies, mainly of U&G. According to these studies, media users tend to turn to



specific media such as video games (Greenberg, Sherry, Lachlan, Lucas, & Holmstrom, 2010), movies, and books (Katz et al., 1973b) to escape, and this decision might be related to factors such as financial status (McQuail et al., 1972) or the need to reduce anxiety (Katz et al., 1973a). According to Katz and Foulkes (1962), popular-culture writers believe people who are alienated because of everyday life and their roles in modern society, turn to mass media to gratify their need for experiencing a “dreamlike world,” which in turns leads to distancing oneself from social and political spheres to a greater extent. They identified various elements for “escapist” use of media, including *drives* such as alienation, *high exposure*, *escapist content*, *the social context of media exposure* and *the psychological process* and possibly an unanticipated *consequence*, which leads to “negative feedback to one’s everyday roles” (p. 380). Moreover, they warned that studies often target one of these elements and consider them escapist, and as Katz and Foulkes (1962) who claimed, these studies about using media to escape are “often unwarranted assumption that there is a necessary association between the various elements (drive, high exposure, social context of exposure, content, psychological process) and certain dysfunctional consequences” (p. 380). In other words, an escapist drive does not necessarily lead to escapist media use, since there are other means of answering these needs. Moreover, it has been suggested in seminal work that alienation as a reason for escapism may lead to higher media exposure, while high media exposure does not necessarily translate to alienation and escapist use of media (Freidson, 1953). In the same manner, Katz and Foulkes (1962) called for distinguishing escapist use of media from using media merely for social retreat, such as “use of the newspaper as a shield to protect one from the immediate demands” (p. 384). Arguably, the boundaries of escapist media use definition are open to researchers’ interpretations of the *social* and *dysfunctional* characteristics of such use. Although the so called *social* part is critical to the

conceptualization of escapism, its definition is not limited to it, as Katz et al. (1973b) counted both “self and one’s social roles” (p. 167) as what media users escape from.

Consequently, considering its *dysfunctional* characteristics, procrastination or postponing one’s tasks by consuming media is counted as one of the aspects of escapism in the present study, although procrastination might not seem to hold any obvious social charge to it. This decision was made while trying to avoid taking *dysfunction* literally and acknowledging so called “negative feedbacks.”

It is worth mentioning that in this study, the terms *media use* or *media consumption* will be applied instead of *media exposure*, to emphasize the agency and activity of media users. Based on defining *activity* as *selectivity* (Zillmann, & Bryant, 1985), it is safe to assume that different platforms for watching movies such as streaming services, Torrent websites, and movie theaters provide many options for movie audiences to choose. This activity can be seen in the audience who stop watching movies after they are not satisfied with them in the early parts of the movie, and look for another movie to watch instead, simply because streaming services provide these choices.

Considering the aim of the present study, the following research questions are proposed:

*RQ 1.* How do movie audience in Finland use movies as a means of escapism?

*RQ 2.* How do Finns use movies in an escapist way to identify with their nationality or local culture?

*RQ 3.* How do immigrants who live in Finland use movies in an escapist way to identify with their nationality or local culture?

## **Method**

### **Data collection and analysis**

In recent years, the U&G model has been used extensively in quantitative research to explore patterns of media use for various new media, although these assessments might not be accurate in the early phases of development of that medium (Pool, 1983). Moreover, when it comes to escapism, a lack of qualitative and/or interpretive research is a central critique of the U&G approach, as U&G studies “rarely question what the audience is escaping into” (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994, p. 107).

To answer the research questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 participants. In this study, based on Seidman's (2006) suggestion, interviewing was chosen as the best way of collecting data, since the focus of the research is what Schutz (1967, cited in Seidman, 2006) called the participants' subjective understanding. Moreover, semi-structured interview questions were conducted because they give freedom to the interviewees to express their thoughts on issues openly (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014)

The original interview questions were designed in an attempt to get a more detailed insight on escapism regarding watching movies. Accordingly, there were four original themes: what audiences escape into, procrastination, platform, and national/cultural identity.

Besides the same set of questions, Finnish participants were asked if they ever watched Finnish movies while living in places other than Finland, or while travelling abroad for a relatively long time. The participants who were immigrants in Finland were also asked to see if they watch movies from their birthplace after migrating from the country they were born in, or the country related to their national identity. These questions were asked to see if these participants use movies to escape in times of nostalgia for their national/regional/cultural identity.

The interviews were conducted in 2017 and took between 25 and 70 minutes, depending on the participants. Except for one interview, which was conducted through Skype, all other interviews were done face-to-face. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

### **Participants**

Eighteen interviews were conducted: nine interviews with Finnish nationals, eight interviews with immigrants living in Finland, and one interview with a couple where one of the interviewees were Finnish and another one an immigrant. The age range of participants ranged between 21 and 43. The immigrants interviewed were originally from Australia, Austria, France, Iran, Kazakhstan, Scotland, and Vietnam. The duration of their residence in Finland varied between 6 months and 4.5 years.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **What the audience escapes into**

As collected data for the present study suggested, there are various ways through which the viewers lose themselves in a movie and escape into the story. One way is to imagine oneself in the events and settings of the story, which requires emotional engagement, while another way is avoiding emotional engagement. A third way, which might be more related to *cine-philialia*, is watching movies without any specific psychological motivations for escaping, as participant number 7 stated: “When I watch a film, I forget [everything], but after that ... ‘oh my god, I watched a film, now I need to...or maybe...another film?!’”

A number of the participants reported watching “passable” comedies or action movies to pass the time *and* not having to think about various daily issues. The following quote is taken from the interview with participant number 10.

...with action movies, they are not so much story...it's mainly like just shooting and you know...but there's some story into it, but I don't feel like I live in the story as much as if I would watch a movie like *Shawshank Redemption* or such.

As can be seen in the quote below from the interview with participant number 8, escapist movie viewers also tend to lose themselves in the story of movies and forget about their surroundings, if the film is “really good.”

If it's a good story, then definitely yes. I mean not every movie is particularly complex, or demanding in that kind of that you have to get into the character's head. Like certain kind of action movies...they don't kinda depends on you sympathizing with the character. The action is what makes you want to watch the movie, not the characters.

In this regard, they reported that “action” and “moving images” are what makes them watch the “easy” movies to pass the time. The suggestion here is some viewers prefer to watch fast-moving images of an action movie, since slower and more “boring” images might cause them to start thinking about what they intended to escape from. This process might be even more convenient if the audiences are already familiar with the movie’s characters. In response to what type of movies they would use for forgetting their work and everyday problems, participant number 3 responded:

Then it'd be fantasy or mindless not-so-thrilling action films. Like I do like Marvel films, because they're pretty easy and you know that it's going to be lot of fighting, not much kind of "oh my god, what's going to happen", because you know in the end the good will win.

In their study of escapist media use, Katz and Foulkes (1962) stated “escapist worlds, for most critics, are made up of unreal or improbable people who are very good or very bad (or very

good-bad) and whose successes and failures conveniently cater to the supposed wishes of the audience” (p. 382). Participant number 5 discussed his past habits of fantasy viewing as follows:

I don't have so much time to do that anymore, and also the necessity for doing that, or the need to do it isn't that big anymore, because I'm quite satisfied with my life. I used to do it a lot when I was a teenager and when I was in my 20s, early 20s, especially when I was a student. I would usually be the hero.

These different styles of escapist use have some similarities and differences. Fantasy viewing is similar to viewing “mindless” movies in a way that the audience knows the good will win, and they are generally familiar with the characters already. For viewing “easy” movies, the related mental process helps avoid emotional engagement and requires a relatively lower degree of concentration. The main difference between these two processes is “vicariousness” (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, p. 382), high level of engagement and possibly high level of participation among viewers of fantasy media, the latter being more frequent recently with online fanbase forums.

However, as data suggested, imagining oneself is not limited to fantasy media and might happen with every movie that has an engaging story for the audience. These movies might not necessarily include characters who are familiar for the audience, but there might be familiar clichés and archetypes. The more significant difference between this type of escapist viewing and fantasy viewing might be that in the former, the audience don't imagine themselves to be the characters; they rather imagine themselves to be in the same situation as the characters and try to speculate what would they do in those situations. In this case, they don't escape from their selves, but they escape from the surrounding issues or problems while self-reflecting. The following quote from participant number 12 shows the significance of this process to some movie viewers and their higher level of participation while viewing a “good” movie:

I watch and I think what would I do in that situation. Or if the character thinks like that, my friend might think like that too. I'm always processing my relationships and other people's relationships to see how people process the situations.

Katz and Foulkes (1962) also stated that “to emphasize that media content is ‘escapist’ when it is used for vicariousness and make-believe is to avoid serious consideration of the function of fantasy and ignore other probable uses of this very same content” (p. 383). Considering the similarities and differences between these various ways of escapist using movies mentioned in this section, one possibility is to distinguish between different processes leading to escapist use, for instance *fantasy escapism*.

### **Procrastination**

One can say procrastination occurs if the person is not mentally prepared or willing to put their time and effort on a related task, which is “a form of self-regulatory failure” (Corkin, Shirley, & Lindt, 2011, p. 603). Consuming media might work as an excuse to postpone a task, or a way to forget the fact that the person is postponing it, since probably that person would not do the task even if they wouldn't watch a movie. Arguably procrastination is more probable to occur if the task is not rewarding enough (Sabini & Silver, 1982), for instance if one needs to finish an essay for their own studies, compared to the occasion that one would be paid for writing an article, which might generate higher motivation. The following quote is taken from interview number 4 and explains how the participant use movies for procrastination:

It's basically delaying the inevitable and trying the idea of getting sucked in so that I cannot remember all the stressful things that I'm supposed to do. It basically works in a drug way.... escaping to another reality, to another place and time to watch something...a different place than the present.

This way of using movies for procrastination was also reported by participant number 12 among others, including the quote below:

I can't say it's happened like that. I have watched films to avoid doing stuff. I have procrastinated and delayed them, because those stuff were really stressful or I just didn't want to approach them and I just started binge-watching TV series of films.

As it can be seen, the idea of escaping to “another place and time” can also happen if the main reason for escapist use is not being alienated, but procrastination. The viewers might just need to forget about what they need to do and escape for a limited amount of time, that is until they decide to tackle their task.

However, an interesting finding in the present study was feelings such as guilt in relation to procrastination escapist use, which might be felt due to pressures induced by parents, educational institutions, and society. All the participants who said they use movies for procrastination reasons, mentioned it in an exaggerated dramatic way, and/or laughed. This paralinguistic feature might be evidence of feeling guilt, conveying they were aware that escaping was not expected from them. The arguably suppressing nature of the pressure of tasks/burdens and the “anti-authoritarian” act of procrastination (McCown & Johnson, 1991, p. 413) is evident in the following quote from interview number 15:

There are things to do and you don't want to start it, you don't feel like it or whatever.  
And kinda rebellion against myself in some way.

Although it seems it is an interesting issue to consider for future studies, it is safe to say the “dysfunction” characteristics is significant here, although one could argue “dysfunction” is not on the same level as “dysfunction” in other situations, i.e. if one ignores their friends and family for watching movies.



## Platform

Arguably, what different movie platforms offer are various degrees of accessibility and different physical settings, and to some extent social settings. Watching movies in theaters provides a unique physical setting, including generally better sound and picture quality, and a dark room that makes focusing easier. As participant number 11 mentioned about getting drowned in a movie, “nothing can disturb you...nothing around. It's just a dark room, a screen and you don't have anything else to...”

Some of the participants, including participant number 5, stated that social interaction makes it difficult for them to focus on the movie, and therefore they usually don't go to theaters:

If there's a movie that I really want to see, I tend to not go to the premier, because when I watch a movie, I want to be really focused on the movie and kinda lose myself in the movie. And I find that to be hard when there's almost hundred people or more around you and they all reacting to the film...they're laughing and you can hear them and feel them around you and for me that's kind of distracting.

However, it seems this semi-social interaction in movie theaters is valued by some other viewers, even while being able to drown in the world of the movie. This following quote is taken from the interview number 11:

The whole atmosphere. Like how big the screen is and everything and everybody's watching the same movie...when it's a comedy everybody's laughing at the same...like you're sharing something, but still like for example when it's a sad movie, I'm always the one looking around and like who's crying with me.

This tendency towards limited social interaction also manifests in the audience who get help from movies while bonding with friends and family, but at the same time they want to avoid direct interaction while watching the movie with these people.

### **Episodic Television and a hybrid new medium**

Based on the data, although most participants watch more movies than before because of streaming service, some others are replacing watching movies with watching more TV series. This replacement of movies with episodic television, or rather a hybrid new medium, was not considered while designing the themes and developing the interviews, but its recurrence in the data showed its significance. An example can be seen in the following quote from one of the interviews, which was done with a couple, participants number 10 and 11:

10: "I somehow feel it's easy to drown in series, rather in the movies. I find it somehow easier. I cannot explain why."

11: "It has much more plot and you know the people better."

Chadwick (2017) suggested having a better understanding of a medium requires considering that medium in the broader hybrid media system it operates it. In recent years, the emergence of streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu has contributed to new developments of a hybrid medium consisting of television and internet. These services can be used on laptops or smart TVs, offering a variety of physical settings available for the audience. What makes this hybrid interesting is that these streaming services provide both movies and TV series, making the distinguishing line between them narrower than before. The streaming services give their users a variety of choices, which arguably can make escapist use easier, since choosing a movie will be generally easier and faster, as stated by the participants in the present study. The variety of

choices offered to the audience, gives them the option to stop watching a movie at any point and look for another one, if they are not pleased with their choices.

Arguably, TV series or at least the ones produced by television networks in United States and their global coverage have significant differences compared to TV series broadcast a decade ago, or before that. Services such as Netflix, Hulu and, Amazon Video are making TV series a distinct type of media and independent from television. Another difference between TV and streaming services is that the streaming services give the audience the freedom to watch what they want at their preferred time of the day, not just at the time it is being broadcast by the distributor.

This new platform has led to birth of *binge-watching*, which has a strong relationship with escapism. This behavior, is a quite recent phenomenon and the term was chosen as Collins' English Dictionary's word of the year in 2015. Binge-watching, or watching several episodes of a TV series consecutively, has even affected the distribution patterns in the industry, with Netflix releasing all the episodes of their original series' at once, starting with *Lilyhammer* in 2012, and more famously, *House of Cards* in 2013. The habit of marathon viewing, is not non-existent with movies, but arguably far less common than doing it with TV series, and when it does occur, it probably happens in a more ritualistic way, such as watching all *Star Wars* movies in one session once a year. As for the TV series, the fact that viewers have all episodes of a TV series at their disposal, can make it more convenient for the audience who tend to use the TV series for escaping, while another reason might be trying to avoid spoilers for the audience who use social media heavily.

The new distribution model can potentially lead to a new story structure in TV series, such as the possibility of deviating from the cliffhanger-driven structure in drama TV series,

which was traditionally used to make the audience watch the next episode. Instead, TV series broadcast in this new format can benefit from better story development, and more relatable stories and characters. If these speculations about structure of TV series do occur, arguably these “TV” series, or “episodic Television” can become something closer to a very long movie with richer storylines and more characters than a TV series with a traditional story arch. Not being bound by the strict time structure of traditional TV format can give the creators of new TV series the chance to maneuver on various possibilities and make the audience more familiar with various characters. Considering these arguments, one could say the hybrid of computers and TV might lead to a new format, something between series and movies not being shown in the theaters.

The signs of this hybrid medium can also be seen in the case of the Cannes 2017 festival in which parts of *Twin Peaks* and *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, both TV series, were shown. David Lynch, the director of *Twin Peaks* stated that he considers *Twin Peaks* an 18-hours long movie rather than a TV series. Moreover, two Netflix movies, *Okja* and *The Meyerowitz Stories* premiered in Cannes 2017, in the first and the last occasion that movies without any theatrical releases were shown in the famous traditionalist film festival; the rules for such premiers were changed afterwards. Other instances include *O.J.: Made in America*, which premiered in Sundance festival, shown in other film festivals such as Tribeca, and broadcast in a format more similar to miniseries by networks such as *ABC* and *ESPN*.

### **Watching movies and national/cultural identity**

This study’s aim was to find out how Finnish movie viewers and immigrants in Finland watch movies from their own culture or birthplace to find closure in times of need to feel connected to the national/regional culture they identify with, i.e. after migrating to another

country. No evidence was found in the data to answer these questions, as almost none of the participants reported watching movies from their own country/culture on a regular basis, or when they were away from their hometown, or after migration to other places. However, this lack of evidence should be approached cautiously, as not using movies to reinforce one's sense of national identity does not necessarily mean one does not reinforce this sense using other means; they might just not use movies to do so. One reason for this, might be a lack of a significant movie industry in a particular country or from a particular culture. For instance, had there been people born in America or India among the participants, the results might had been different. Arguably, a quantitative approach can be a more suitable device for finding out the significance of using movies regarding this function.

Moreover, this is not to say only movies from one's birthplace can work in that way. A movie viewer can re-watch a movie from another culture and still strengthen their own cultural/national identity, i.e. by reconstructing how they interpreted the movie's themes in relation to their identity the first time they watched it. The nostalgic movie-viewing might strengthen their sense of identity to their own nationality/culture by just remembering the social settings around them in the previous viewings.

The only instance in which a participant mentioned occasionally strengthening their sense of national identity by watching movies from their own country was seen in a Finnish movie viewer. As can be seen in the quote taken from interview number 5, some Finnish movies have the ability of arousing feelings related to national identity in the participant, however this might be related to a relatively small number of Finnish films which are pleasant to them:

I'm not really a huge Finnish film devourer...I haven't watched that many, you know I still have the thing that to me Finnish film pretty much means Kaurismäki...I'm still kinda

stuck in that...so i think I can kinda talk in that kind of a perspective and I think I don't have a lot of national pride in me. There are very few times that makes me feel like "fuck yea, Finland! I'm from here! This is our thing!" and I think watching Kaurismäki films are one of those rare occasions, where I can watch it and I can relate to...this is totally Finnish...I don't usually think about stuff like that, but those are one of the few cases.

One speculation regarding RQ2 and RQ3 can be that those movie viewers who have the freedom to choose among different type of movies will not be limited to movies from hegemonically dominant cultures or industries such as Hollywood. Using new platforms can help us be adventurous in movie choices and watch more movies that are deviating from watching only dominant movie cultures, i.e. American independent films, European artistic movies, or Bollywood products. This speculation will require evidence from further research, both qualitative and quantitative. Moreover, another interesting path for further research in this field is the exploration of the *transnational* audience, which has been born due to new means of distribution and globalization of media industries (McQuail, 1997).

Discussing *transnationalization* in the TV context, Sepstrup (1989) listed three types of *transnationalism*, including (a) *multilateral flow*, which includes redistributing the content originally produced for home consumption and nationally organized media world media, (b) *national* redistribution of foreign media products, and (c) *bilateral* flow through which the audience are unintended receivers of media, i.e. spill-over effect of national radio stations and television channels between neighboring countries. However, there are other types of *transnational* audiences in the internet age that can be distinguished. The *bilateral* effect has arguably become much more common than before thanks to the internet and peer-to-peer downloading services. Moreover, a belated spill-over effect can happen when a viewer gets their

hands on media products not produced for international audience with the help of the internet, i.e. viewing French New Wave movies, or watching *Friends* in countries where it was not redistributed.

### **A note on methodological implications**

As discussed in the discussion about the significance of content, different people might use the same types of movies for different reasons, or one person's source of escape might be one person's reality (McQuail et al., 1972). Moreover, these reasons might be overlapping and not so distinguishable, indicating that uses and gratification categories are rather flexible. One can watch a movie for learning about another culture or releasing tension at the same time. Although this issue undermines the positivistic nature of the U&G model, such an approach can lead to getting the help of this model and applying it while combining it with other theoretical tools, such as media dependency theory or even hedonistic theory to make it a more beneficial device for understanding mass media use.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored out how movie audiences in Finland watch movies for escapist use, and if there is any difference in how Finnish nationals and immigrants in Finland use this function regarding their national/ethnic identity. This study took a qualitative approach to find out what the audience escape into, and how they do it, rather than merely categorizing and labeling audiences' movie viewing, and thus enriching the understanding of escapist movie viewing. Based on the interviews with participants, important factors such as content and platform or structure of the text were taken into consideration to show the complexity of the escapist use of movies. Regarding content, although "easy" and "passable" movies can help with releasing tension or procrastination, movies with more complex stories and characters can help

some audiences drawn into the story of the movie. This latter process is somehow similar to viewing fantasy media, with the difference that the audience doesn't imagine themselves as the hero. It was suggested that new means of reception can convince audiences to replace movies with other similar visual media such as TV series for the same type of use. Moreover, the recent distributing models can lead to a hybrid of TV series and movies. There was no specific relationship between watching movies and national identities, suggesting that many movie audience consume more global or international movies than movies related to their own native culture.

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## Introduction

The relationship between media and its audience has been of significant interest to communication theorists (Klapper, 1960, McQuail, 1997). Various speculations and efforts have been done to find out the nature of this relationship; however rapid changes in media, including emergence of new media, changes in the existent media, and changes in how people use existing media, have led this topic to be a challenging one. Studying movies has been dominated by film theory, however this approach barely considers actual film audiences. While facing solid critiques, uses and gratification (U&G) as a theoretical lens, provides an opportunity to study the ways media audiences deal with media and media messages. What makes this model a useful one for studying media, is the way it enables researchers to try to ask what people do with the media.

As will be stated in the section regarding critiques of uses and gratification, the categorizations that researchers have tried to establish have been criticized alongside the functionalistic approach of U&G (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). Moreover, numerous efforts to conceptualize media use have led to confusion regarding various terms and concepts in the U&G framework (Stanford, 1983). Such problems might call for efforts to solidify its various concepts; however, another approach can be using the methodological and theoretical advantages of U&G to study the realms of media use such as watching movies that relatively has not been studied extensively using this model. Another step that can be taken to pass beyond limitations of this model is to deviate from its classic application in a manner that could be helpful for finding answers to more complicated questions, such as using it to conduct qualitative researches to find out *how* people do what they do with media.

Only some decades ago, movie viewers had to go to theaters, or at the time TV sets were a more common piece in homes. Viewers had to catch movies being shown on their television

sets. However, technology has added more and more options for viewers. VHS and TV recorders started to liberate film viewers. PCs, laptop, and the internet became colossal game-changers. Now movie viewers can watch movies while lying on the couch and holding their laptops above their heads. Now they can look for the movies they want to watch, instead of only watching movies that are available. These changes, as it has been argued in the related research paper, have been changing our habits of watching the moving images that we call movies.

Movies enjoy characteristics that make them a unique form of media, i.e. their conventional duration makes them relatively easy to consume. Films might be viewed in various ways, including watching them in movie theaters which is at the same time both social and solitudinous. Such a manner of viewing is quite interesting, since some viewers might tend to forget themselves while in a room full of strangers. Considering such unique characteristics in combination with various factors such as movies' content, which might range from disturbingly graphic to irresistibly funny, and the settings and/or platform that today have become much more variable than before, movies and movie audiences are increasingly interesting to study.

The present study includes a research article that examines how viewers might use movies to *escape*, and how they might do it for nostalgic reasons, especially regarding their national and cultural identities. A qualitative approach was applied to obtain insight into the nuanced manner of escapist viewing of movies, as there is no objective answer to these questions. The present monograph is an extended view into the theoretical and methodological aspects of this study, including more detailed critique of uses and gratifications and its applications to new media. While analyzing the data, some common themes were seen in the data. Although the interview questions were not particularly designed to find out about those theme, they are related to escapist viewing of films in various ways. These aspects include

watching movies as an enhancing experience, rituals of watching movies, and watching movies as a social activity.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Uses and Gratifications**

Mass media researchers first proposed theories that revolved around considering the relationship between media and its audience as a one-way process. Such notions embedded in the mass society theory and the hypodermic needle theory saw media audiences as being powerless when it comes to dealing with media messages (O'Sullivan et al., 1994, West & Turner, 2006). As West and Turner (2006) stated, these theories got discredited because observations showed that not all mass media audiences are influenced by the media, and those that are influenced are not all influenced in a similar manner.

The notion of powerless media audience and their lack of agency continued in theories such as the individual differences perspective and the social categories model. The former saw personal traits such as intelligence and self-esteem important regarding the extent of media messages' effects, and the latter considered associations and group affiliations of individuals to be crucial factors for deciding the level of media messages impacts on individuals.

In response to such notions about the relationship between mass media and its audience, researchers such as Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch applied Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which listed categories of needs based on their level of importance, famously in a pyramid shape. This effort was also a continuation of Herzog's (1944) study of radio soap operas in which they tried to articulate the different reasons and needs behind patterns of media consumption. Interviewing female viewers of radio soap operas, Herzog recognized three categories of needs that lead to



consuming them, namely emotional, wishful thinking, and learning. These efforts are considered the first stage of U&G research.

The second stage is generally known as the period when various researchers tried to come up with their own categorization for audiences' needs, beginning with Blumler and McQuail (1969) studying the viewing of political programs. One of the most well-known efforts in this regard is the work of McQuail et al. (1972), whose suggested categories were mentioned in the research paper for the present study.

Another categorization was suggested by Blumler (1979), who contended there are four basic types of activities media users perform in relation to their use:

1. Utility (using the media to perform tasks)
2. Intentionality (using media based on previous motivations)
3. Selectivity (uses that reflects the users' interests)
4. Imperviousness to Influence (the meaning that the audience give to the content

presented by the media which is not capable of influencing users all the time).

Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) also distinguished five basic categories of needs different media users may have:

1. Cognitive needs related to gain more information and knowledge,
2. Affective needs related to emotions and aesthetic issues,
3. Personal integrative needs related gaining credibility, confidence and status,
4. Social integrative needs related to maintaining interaction with family and friends, and
5. Tension release needs related to escaping from social roles to an extent.

The third stage of U&G research is recognized by efforts to study the connection between reasons for media use and various factors such as needs, benefits, goals, etc. (West & Turner,

2006). A major path during this stage are the efforts to make U&G “more predictive and explanatory and predictive” (West & Turner, 2006, p. 396). Moreover, a revival of U&G has occurred in recent years due to the emergence, or the explosion of, newer forms of social media (Ruggiero, 2000), which is arguably a suitable field to be studied by U&G, however this revival might not necessarily imply a paradigm shift in U&G.

Another important characteristic of U&G is its assumptions that function as its theoretical foundations, mainly developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974). These assumptions are as follows: (a) the audiences are active and they use media based on their goals, (b) the audiences choose how to link needs gratifications to a specific medium that they use, (c) the media compete with other sources that might gratify their related needs, (d) the audiences make the media choices concisely and they can report their related interests and motives, and (e) only the audience can judge the value of media.

### **Active Audience**

There are various ways of describing audience activity, including selectivity, which was the basis for the article in the present study for emphasizing audience activity. This factor for audience activity can be described as the effect of the audience’s interests and preferences on their choices of media and media content (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Lack of choosing the content, like how it might happen with viewing television is an indication of what is thought to be a passive audience.

Research is conflicted on the notion of a passive audience in terms of lack of selectivity. It’s not clear if it is still considered being passive if someone *passively* listens to songs broadcast on the radio, which broadcasts that person’s favorite genre. As McQuail (1997) mentioned, some television viewers might use the remote control to go through various channels, and this might be

more in line with lack of suitable content and indecision, than mere passivity. In other words, the relationship between preferences and choosing different media is not as simple as mentioned in the premise of *selectivity*.

Rubin (1984) stated two different way of viewing television: instrumentalist and ritualistic. Instrumentalist television use occurs to serve a purpose for the viewer and thus, indicates selectivity. On the other hand, ritual television viewing is said to be based on habits, and generally heavy consumers of media go through this way of viewing. However, as shown in the results of the current study, some participants stated they watch movies in a way that combines of these two categories.

Other aspects of audience activity are *utility*, *intentionality*, and *involvement*. *Utility* is defined as trying to gratify one's specific needs or accomplishing certain tasks. Regarding *intentionality*, audiences will be considered more active if they choose specific media and process incoming information in a more conscious way. Finally, involvement is an aspect related to audience activity which is related to mental state of viewers. A media user will be considered as being more active if they are engrossed or drowned during the process of using media. Arguably, higher levels of involvement in media can lead to continuation of media use, which is reminding of binge-watching behavior. Other signs of involvement in case of watching movies or TV series might be uttering sentences about the film or series, either as "talking back" to TV, or as discussion of the story with other viewers who are there (McQuail,1997).

As Abiocca (1988) mentioned, it is "nearly impossible for the audience to *not* be active" (p. 77), as one could bring examples for all the aspects mentioned above in which the audience might be in the same *passive* line indicated by those notions, but in fact not be really passive. The assumption of goal-oriented consumption of media might be contradicted with Bogart's

(1965) idea that most mass media consumption is pastime activity rather than purposeful consumption, however, trying to pass the time to relax and release one's tensions does not necessarily translate to being passive. This can be seen in case of choosing and viewing a movie or TV series, for example on Netflix, to pass the time, which possibly requires more attention and activity than merely sitting in front of the TV and viewing what is broadcast. Moreover, a specific medium or media content might have become one's favorite media choice for various reasons, and later helps them with passing the time as well. In other words, such "passive" viewing might merely be a matter of availability of the media text. On the other hand, both audiences' needs and structure of media text can reduce their media choices and limit their shape their activity, if not limit it (O'Sullivan et. al, 1994).

Ruggerio (2000) claimed U&G "has always provided a cutting edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio, television, and now the Internet" (p. 27). New technologies, social media and the Internet provide users with new sources, so they can satisfy their needs and also act as a means of interpersonal communication, as well as mass communication. According to Angleman (2000), throughout history new media has caused the audience to develop new gratifications and motivations, turning U&G into a logical option for studying these new media.

### **Criticism**

Although Uses and Gratifications has been a useful tool in media studies, it has been the target of criticism. Katz (1987) stated one of the early criticisms of this approach:

Early gratifications researches had leaned too heavily on self-reports, was unsophisticated about the social origin of the needs that audiences bring to the media, too uncritical of the possible dysfunctions both for self and society of certain kinds of audience satisfaction,

and too captivated by the inventive diversity of audience uses to pay much attention to the constraints of the text. (pp. S37-S38)

According to Ball-Rokeach (1998) the inability of U&G to address the outcome of the use of media by the audience is one of the limitations of this model. Also, Elliott (1974) claimed focusing on audience consumption has rendered U&G an individualistic approach, which does not consider the social implications of media use and does not go beyond people who were studied in the research. Moreover, LaRose, Mastro, and Eastin (2001) stated “attempts by uses and gratifications researchers (Babrow & Swanson, 1988) to distinguish gratifications from formulations involving outcome expectations were of no avail and failed to produce more robust explanations of media exposure, suggesting that they may be related constructs” (p. 399).

One of the attempts to make the U&G model more productive was made by Swanson (1987) who suggested research based on this model should focus on the role of gratification seeking in using mass media, the relation between gratifications and mental frames used by the audience in order to understand media content and the link between gratifications and media content. Also, Rubin (1994) stated using the U&G model and media effects research combined could be highly productive.

The assumptions used for U&G, specifically the assumption that considers media users capable of self-reporting their media use accurately has been criticized by some scholars, including Elliot (1974) and Severin & Tankard (1997). West and Turner (2006) also stated U&G does not consider that the participant who reports their own media use might have done so regardless of the available choices they had for using media.

## **Methodology**

As noted in the research article, semi-structured interviews were chosen to gather data. Such an approach might help participants to share their stories. As Seidman (2013) noted, storytelling helps people reflect on the detail of their experience and give them order, thus making it a meaning-making process. The interview questions were designed based on particular themes that were considered related to escapist use of films, and the thematic content analysis was done deductively in the article. However, while analyzing the data, a number of other common themes were found. These themes may not be as important as the themes used intentionally in the interview questions and discussed in the article, nonetheless they might be of use for explaining escapism of movie viewers. These themes, including rituals of movie watching, watching movies for enhancing one's experiences, and movie watching as a social act, which were inductively analyzed, will be discussed in this monograph.

The interviews benefited from a same set of questions, including questions with the aim of finding out how they identify in national level through movies. Immigrants in Finland also were asked if they used movies from their home country more than before, at any time during their residence in Finland, or since leaving their home country. Additionally, Finnish participants were asked relatively similar questions to find out if they use movies for identifying as a Finn, or if they ever consumed more Finnish movies while living abroad or travelling outside Finland for a long time. It was decided that viewing movies should not be narrowed down to specific platforms, i.e. movie theaters, since the relatively high price of movie tickets in Finland might probably limit the variety of people who go to theaters. Moreover, seeing the relationship between platform, content and specific uses can be a fruitful sequence, as will be discussed in the discussion section.

In the interviews, first, Ice-breakers such as questions about participants' favorite movies, and then questions about how they watch movies in general were asked. Some of the questions remained strictly the same, as they included key terms that could lead to relevant discussions. In other cases, discussions were brought up using the interviewer's own stories and examples, so the interviewees could identify the concept easier through the potential similar narratives, rather than being faced strict questions. This helped both the interviewer and the interviewees to escape the potentially awkward feeling of interviews. Therefore, the interviews often turned into discussions, especially with self-acknowledged *cine-philes* who would in turn talk about their own stories and experiences. This was an important issue, since building trust and creating mutual respect between the interviewer and the participants is a vital matter for such an approach (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

The researcher did make an effort to break the bubble of potential participants, which was a difficult task, considering two main reasons: language barriers, and the nature of interviews. The language barrier potentially prevented the researcher to access people who were not able or willing to talk in English. It also possibly limited both the researcher and the participants, as for many of them English was not a first language.

The only required characteristic for participants was to watch movies on a somewhat regular basis. The following table gives more insight into the participants and their backgrounds.

Table 1.

	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Reported number of movies watched	Number of years of living in Finland (for immigrants in Finland)
Participant n 1	31	Male	Finland	2 to 3 per week	
Participant n 2	25	Male	Finland	1 to 2 per week	

Participant n 3	35	Undisclosed	Finland	One film a month (recently)	
Participant n 4	31	Male	Finland	At least 2 per week	
Participant n 5	28	Male	Finland	1 film a day recently	
Participant n 6	31	Female	Finland	2 to 3 per week	
Participant n 7	43	Male	Finland		
Participant n 8	28	Male	Finland	1 to 2 per week	
Participant n 9	27	Female	Finland	3 per week	
Participant n 10	21	Male	Finland		
Participant n 11	22	Female	Austria		2/5 years
Participant n 12	34	Male	Iran	2 or 3 per week	4/5 years
Participant n 13	39	Male	Scotland	2 to 5 per week	3 years
Participant n 14	24	Female	Kazakhstan	No regular pattern	2/5 years
Participant n 15	31	Male	Australia	2 to 5 per week	3/5 years
Participant n 16	30	Female	Iran	Around 5 per week	3/5 years
Participant n 17	29	Male	Vietnam	Every day	6 months
Participant n 18	38	Male	France	2 per week	
Participant n 19	37	Male	Iran		4/5 years

### Further findings

#### Rituals of movie viewing

There were some patterns found in the analyzed data that despite being interesting, using them would disturb the coherence of the article, and they were not included among the themes the interviews were based on. One of them is the way most of the participants watch movies, namely the setting they would provide for themselves, or the timing of viewings. The following sentences are stated by participant number 4:



when I watch war movies, historical films, action films, or Sci-Fi, I prefer to watch them alone, with my headset, especially when it comes to science-fiction and the historical things. I tend to watch them with the lights out and minimal distraction. Cellphone closed and everything.

As it can be seen in the above quote, the participant reported trying to create a certain setting for themselves, which in this case was interestingly related to the content, or type of the movies.

Other participants also reported trying to watch movies in a setting that wouldn't distract them frequently. Arguably, these settings would be more helpful with types of movies that the viewer would want to engage in its story, while the movies which are used primarily for tension release or procrastination might not be highly engaging.

Another related factor for the setting of watching movies is the timing. Almost all the participants reported watching movies in the afternoon or in the evening, or right before going to bed. This might be due to less possible distractions at that time of the day, or in the same line as tension release function of watching movies. Participant number 18's articulation about how they watch movies in the evenings, even during the weekend, is worth mentioning:

Well typically I like to do that in the evening, between dinner and bedtime. That's typically when I have time for that. Yeah that would be the most common...very rarely I watch movies during the morning or during the day. Even during weekends...I don't know, it feels the timing is wrong, you know? I think I've developed a certain association between how I feel in the evening with watching a movie, and it feels like you know in the morning you feel different. For me there's this habit...I think there's a mismatch between my state of mind and my physical state, and the biological clock as well...your

mood, your everything shifts during the day. So it's just an association I've developed you know, like after the dinner in the evening [is a] good time for watching a movie.

As seen in the above quotes, some of the participants would engage in a routine or habitual way of watching movies, that might be created both because of unique characteristics of movie as a medium, and the reasons those audiences were using movies for. One could say in some cases such routines become almost rituals, however, this should not be mistaken by Rubin's account of ritualistic way of watching Television (1984).

### **Enhancing one's experiences**

Another interesting pattern seen in the gathered data was the way participants described watching movies as a way to enhance their life experiences. This described act was not necessarily happening as a form of escapist use, but in some cases, it was not far from it either.

Participant number 14 described watching movies as such, while mentioning related functions, including tension release:

...when I use movies and stuff as an escapist device, it's the same thing that motivates me to have a drink or smoke something like that as well, it's kinda this stress-relieving, escapist thing to turn it off. So I kinda put it in the same category.

Enhancing one's experiences also came up during the interview with participant number 12. The following quote shows the not-so-solid nature of the ways one might watch movies. The process described by this participant might be quite similar to the processes reported by other participants who described it as escapism, but in this case, they preferred to mention different motives for the same process.

I would say I don't watch films to forget about things, that would be like drinking alcohol to forget about something, or to take drugs to escape from reality. I don't find it like that.

It improves my reality. Drinking alcohol improves my reality. It's not running away from anything...[It's to] enhance it. Gives you something to think about, something to digest. And when watching it with someone, it's nice as well, cause you can do that with them and you get some bouncing feedback. The same if I'm sitting and drinking a pint with you. I get bouncing feedback and talking about things and the rest of it. I'm not particularly the one to watch films all the time by myself. Certainly, I wouldn't say I watch films to escape reality. However, you get into a fantasy world for a little bit, but let's be honest, it's 90 minutes, you know?

Moreover, participant number 5 also mentioned the process of watching movies for enhancing one's life experiences, while noting that this process, is probably less damaging and costly comparing to other ways one could enhance one's experiences, such as recreational drugs or travelling.

[Watching movies] is sort of tuned out into a different kind of life and different kind of a world for an hour or half or 3 hours or however long the movie is...it is a big factor in it. I think it's really helpful to do that, because there are other ways to do that, but they can be more damaging, so I think movies are pretty safe way of...kinda like getting experiences and feelings that you probably wouldn't otherwise get at that point. Like your romantic life can be nonexistent and dull, and then you can watch a very heartbreaking movie and all of a sudden be very full of emotions. Even though they're not from your own life, you still feel them very powerfully, and they help you feel stuff that at the time isn't available otherwise.

Participant number 18 also gave a very descriptive account of how they consider watching movies as a way of enhancing one's experiences:

I think it's a very safe way to experience things by proxy, so you don't live it direct[ly], the thing is life is short. You cannot live every possible life and have every possible experience directly, but movies allow you very quickly, if they're well-done, to empathize and identify with characters and it's really realistic, I mean on the psychological level the experience is probably very much identical to, if you would have it yourself, so it's just kind of maybe a way of living [pause] errr, yea it's like living a more intense life by using technology and modern means to which I would add the "safe" parameter, because the fact that it is, it remains a simulation. I'd say probably many people would tell you the same about reading books. Books also have the possibility of allowing you to dive into a whole world, experiencing things indirectly, but very realistically though. The impact comes from the fact that it is realistic enough to move you, to talk to you. Of course, it is also entertaining. There's the fun factor. It's a pleasant easy safe way to experience things. And actually, what is ironic is that now I'm old enough to tell you that there are certain things in real life that I have found actually more creative in any movie could possibly have been, and sometimes I'm thinking this would never be in a movie, and yet it is created, it happened to me or someone told me that happened...how crazy can that be. But real life still does beat movies in the end [laughs]. But movies come quite close to how crazy life can be, so it's a good proxy.

One should notice that although such accounts of mental processes related to watching movies might be easily categorized as merely *entertainment* or *utility*, such common referring to media consumption are worth being studied more thoroughly, as media such as movies can give one an opportunity to engage in unique mental processes that might be suitable for various research approaches.

### **Movie viewing as a social act**

There are various ways of media consumption that might seem suitable as a group activity, including watching specific episodes of TV series and seeing live performances of different sorts. However, watching movies, either at home or in theaters, and more recently binge-watching TV series are among the types of media consumption that do not need to have totally different settings to be done in groups. Different ways of watching movies in a group even as small as a group of two, might be an interesting topic to consider studying. Various questions come up regarding this issue, including why people watch movies in groups, although one might say that it is an idealistic activity. According to participant number 2, although organizing watching a movie in a group might not be easy, it gives one the chance to initiate conversations about the movie:

I usually watch alone. It's always kinda nicer to watch a film with company, but then it's usually too much of a hassle to get a group together, and watch something. But almost every time when someone asks me if I want to watch a film, I say yes. It's easier to watch a film with somebody...you can just start talking.

Participant number 12 mentioned that before migrating from Iran, they used to watch movies from their own country more often as a group:

There was more chance of watching them there. In Ahvaz going to cinema is the only fun activity, because it's the only place that you can sit there and the weather has been cooled. We used to go to cinema and watch Iranian films more often. And if we'd go to someone's place, they wouldn't put foreign films. They would put an Iranian film that they'd rented.

Also, participant number 16 stated that back in the country they were born, watching movies at home in a group of friends was a common activity, however watching movies in general was a less frequent activity:

I started watching films more here, because in Iran I was always going out with my friends and partying all the time. I was too busy to watch films. But I'd watch films with my friends. We would gather together and watch films.

Participant number 4 mentioned they might be even able to focus more on movies from specific genres in the presence of their friends:

Sometimes when I watch drama movies or an emotional film, I prepare to watch it with friends, because I cannot concentrate hard on it by myself and alone. I get bored easily, not bored but frustrated a little bit. So it's just like a state of mind that I have. So this kind of films I prepare to watch with other people, just because their presence makes me more concentrated on that.

Although, watching a movie in a big group might be distracting for some people, watching them in smaller groups, for example in a group of two, with persons whom the viewer is interested in, might have intimate implications for the viewers as a shared experience, possibly an early form of negotiation, as participant number 5 described:

I don't show the movies that I don't like and pretend that I like it because it's deep or whatever. But I show the movies only that I like, but it's a good way of getting the person to know that this is a part of me...this is the kind of art that I'm into...and I feel like I'm pretty serious about this kind of movies. I think about them a lot and I watch them quite a lot and enjoy them quite a lot, so this is a part of my world and this is at least one glimpse into the stuff that I'm into...relationships cannot be determined by "do you like

the same movies?", but for me it's some kind of message, that if we watch *Lost Highway* by David Lynch and when the movie ends and we get into that conversation of "how did you like it?" and if the girl says "it was awful" and "it was terrible" and "how can you show me a movie that's so dark and cryptic" and "made me feel awful", and then I kinda know that "okay, we're probably not into the same stuff." So it doesn't determine everything, but it's sort of unifies you and creates this kind of a bond.

On the other hand, participant number 3 discussed how they might avoid watching specific movies to avoid the discussion afterwards:

If there was a film that I felt very personally, for example about rainbow culture, or something I knew would touch me deeply, I would not necessarily want to watch it with for example people I don't know very well, or on the other hand not necessarily with my parents, because I wouldn't necessarily want to have a discussion about it with them later, even though we're close, but there are certain topics that I'd rather keep to my friends than parents.

Another interesting issue regarding watching movies in a group might be the question of how people in a group might negotiate the movie they want to watch. This negotiation might be different in case of couples, as this process might extend to daily choices of movies. Participant number 6 mentioned such a negotiation with their partner:

Occasionally we make a pact with my boyfriend which sort of movies we want to watch, because he's more into scary movies and thrillers and actions and I like those too, but it's not every day.

Participant number 8 also reported a similar process, and also discussed the way they might talk to their partner while watching the movie, or afterwards:

I might watch films with my friends, or my spouse. I live with my girlfriend now, so we'll watch films together now, so then it's like I choose a film one time, and next time she chooses a film. So not every time my choice either... Sometimes if it's something that neither of us have watched, then we might be really focused on the movie and talk about it afterwards, but then sometimes when one or the other or both have seen the movie, then we might discuss something, like "have you noticed this thing about the movie that's going on right now" or then just some kind of a joke of something of what they do or say in the movie. So it's both really. It might be mid-movie or it might be after it.

Moreover, participants number 10 and 11 who were a couple and were interviewed simultaneously, explained how this negotiation might actually affect their interest in different genres. In this case, they reported a mutual developing interest in horror movies, probably for the same reason they stated, which is having someone next to them to decrease the possibly intense experience of watching a horror movie. The following quote was stated by participant number 10:

I think it influences a lot when we live together. We share the one TV that we watch movies, we wouldn't necessarily watch on our own.

Participant number 6 discussed how the level of interaction among people in the group might be different in various settings of watching movies:

So when I watch it alone, I think I'm more concentrated on the movie perhaps. Occasionally when there are friends or if there's good stuff...if it's a common joke...we don't talk...I hate people talking in the cinemas, but just whisper one thing or just like HA HA...so you can actually interact with your friends when you watch a movie, and of course if you watch it at your home with 2 or 3 people, then it's easier...someone goes to



the toilet or someone extend the popcorn and then it's more casual, but when you're home, we might have some sort of conversation. But in the cinemas we don't interact.

This topic might not seem directly related to escapist use of cinema, but as shown above, it is probable that some people get more drowned in the stories of the film if they watch movies with people they are close to. Also, the tension release function might be more possible in case of watching “lighter” movies in a group, however there will be a new question emerging from this discussion. Is such a case still in the same line as escapist use, or is it the social interaction or shared experience that helps one forget about their own problems?

### **Reflection**

As mentioned before, U&G is criticized for not examining how people do what they do with media. One of the major aims of the present study has been to address this problem by trying to find out the *how* of escapist film watching. In this sense, this study tried to recognize escapist use of movies among participants, while deviating from the common application of it and trying to study it more extensively to acquire a richer understanding of it.

Initially, ethnographic approaches seemed an appropriate way of studying the how of media use; however, such an approach is problematic in case of escapist use, as it would probably disrupt the viewing. Consequently, self-reports, which are one of the basic foundations of U&G, seemed a suitable option for this study. However, the nature of the escapist use requires a subtle approach that takes the probable sensitivities and subtleties related to the topic into account. Inducing straightforward self-reports of such use can be a challenging task, as participants might not feel comfortable enough to talk about it, or they might not have thought about this issue in a way that would make the self-report easy.

The present study provided various insights into an important topic that is overlooked in communication theory; a topic that deals with a vast array of issues such as how the cinema industry might change in future, or how we, as human beings might turn such a unique way of story-telling into a tool and use it in various ways. Moreover, Finland might not be known for its film industry, but this study can contribute to a body of literature that is needed in order to know more about different forms of escapist use of cinema or hybrid media that are close to cinema.

Apparently, new technologies are causing movie viewers to turn to watching TV series more than before, for the same reasons they would watch movies. As discussed before, this is leading to fundamental changes in viewers' behaviors and also in the entertainment industry. As binge-watching is becoming more common because of the availability of TV shows, new relevant distribution models are emerging, which are changing the structure of TV series as well. The bilateral effects of new platforms and new viewing behaviors is causing movies and TV series getting closer to each other than ever, which is leading to new factors that also affect this media environment, such as more investment, or movie directors getting attracted to the medium of episodic television. Further discussion and examination of this topic seems necessary for communication theory, as it will be pointed out in the next section.

### **Implications and further research**

The topics examined in the present study, either in the research article or in the monograph, were not extensively narrowed down, due to the relationship between the various aspects. However, this does not mean that studying these aspects in isolation would not be beneficial for better understanding of them and the related processes. Watching movies in cinema theaters is continuing to be a unique phenomenon, specifically considering issues such as social class, as going to the movies is costly enough to cause a related pattern in how people

from different backgrounds choose going to cinema theaters. Watching movies at home is also a source for major questions, i.e. to see what people prefer to watch on their laptops or tablets comparing to what they would prefer to watch on bigger screens and why.

As mentioned before, the present study did not find any significant data on how people watch movies in an escapist way to examine their national identity or culture. However, it does not mean that this topic is not worth examining more, as there is not enough statistic data to show if it is a significant type of media use in Finnish culture. Moreover, this might be also interesting to study in case of Finnish communities living abroad, such as Finnish immigrants in Sweden, or even Spain, or other diaspora communities, such as the way Nollywood movies are being consumed by some African immigrants outside of Africa.

Considering that media scene develops quite rapidly, a somewhat new phenomenon which deserves more attention is binge-watching which arguably occurs more with TV series than movies. Distribution venues such as Netflix have grasped and accepted this idea and release their products in a way suitable for such form of viewing. Thus, the dialectic between consumers and producers would potentially go in a direction that would make the distinction between movies and episodic Television vaguer than ever, thus making arguing the birth of a hybrid media more convenient. Availability is a key factor in why watching movies is a different process than before. Accordingly, the more various audiences' choices are, the more realms to study. For example, having access to platforms which enable viewers to choose among numerous options, audiences might choose surprising options, such as watching, or in some cases binge-watching documentaries for tension release purposes.

While audience affecting the structure of such media might not be common, affecting content of such media has been going on for a while, specifically in the age of the Internet and

social media. Various examples show how fans can cause changes in their favorite media, specifically TV series, both intentionally such as the case of *Prison Break* in which a character who had been killed off had to be reconnected due to angry fans, or unintentionally as in the case of *Westworld*'s season 2, the production of which was delayed due to fans already figuring out the direction of the shows' events in Reddit, according to the show's creators. Fanbases are not only important for the content development process, but they might also affect the experience of viewing enormously. One might easily dismiss *Planet 9 from Outer Space*, as being rubbish, but knowing that it is a cult film among other Ed Wood's works can create new dimensions to it. This, might even lead to production of films that are intentionally *too bad*, to create works that are *too bad that they are good*, which in combination with media campaigns can turn into financially successful films, as it was probably the case of *Sharknado*. In such a manner, various disciplines and approaches including reception studies are able to study various modes of reception, i.e. fan arts or fan theories and their relation to escapist use, along with the relation between escapist use and fantasy viewing. In communication theory, various theoretical approaches can be applied to enrich our understanding of escapist use, such as hedonistic theory or cultivation theory. Escapist use of movies is not an easy topic to be studied using anthropological methods; however, studying watching movies in groups more extensively might shed more light on different forms of escapist use, in the ways that have not been considered before, especially that this type of watching movies might be more convenient for disciplines such as anthropology.

As mentioned in the introduction, escapist watching of movies is directly related to what one might consider the magic of moving pictures. This magic, in words of Gray (2010), will not dissolve by the efforts to know films better, and it will not dissipate with knowing more about

film audience, as understanding of what people do with movies is essentially a way of understanding what movies are. Instead, this understanding would provide new ways of enjoyment and excitement. In the words of one of the participants in the present study:

Last time I went to the cinema, I think it was last week, and my friend's kid was hanging out with me over the weekend, stayed the night and I took him to the movies. He wanted to go to see the new animated film Sing...the one with the animals in singing competition, and that was one of those occasions when I afterwards sort of felt like a douche, because I obviously didn't mention it to the kid, but I was like "fuck, we're gonna have to see the Disney bullshit picture and I'm not really into animated animals singing songs and this feels like a thing that I'm just gonna have to sit through" and I looked into the information and it was over two hours, and I was like "when the fuck the cartoons this long...this is gonna be killing me" and I think as an experience, it was one of the best experience with movies I've had in a while. It really touched me in a way that I was not prepared to. It was superweird seeing the...even though I know the script is really calculated...it's very calculated on what we're supposed to be feeling and the music is amplifying it and the looks of the animals is amplifying and everything plays towards you getting emotionally touched, and when it happens you kinda feel dumb, cause you are like "well this is supposed to happen, that's what they're doing to you" but still it happens. But it felt great to see like a father gorilla giving his son gorilla a hug and telling him that "I appreciate you even though you want to be a singer and I'm very very proud of you" and you're just getting tears in your eyes watching that and forgetting that they're animated gorillas in a Disney movie, and I think those kind of experiences are really healthy...kinda knocks you down. Even though you're going in like "this is gonna be

typical Disney Hollywood animated bullshit and I'm not gonna enjoy it" and if you just give yourself into that, you can get emotionally involved with those pics and gorillas and giraffes and their emotions. And you can get emotionally touched when Terminator gives the thumbs up while going down into the lava pit. If you just give yourself a chance you can get touched by that.

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