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Stanton, Michael J., "A Theoretical Application of Metaphor Research to the Film Industry" (2017). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 428. <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/428>

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East Tennessee State University

Honors Thesis

A Theoretical Application of Metaphor Research
to the Film Industry

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Abstract

This paper explores the value of using metaphor based marketing research methods (most notably Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) in the development and green-lighting processes of filmmaking. A review of literature reveals that even large blockbuster films lack any marketing research employed in the developmental stage. Audiences are extremely difficult to analyze when considering something as abstract and subjective as what makes a “good” film. Metaphor based marketing research methods (e.g. ZMET) offer a solution by examining the minds of consumers through language markers called metaphors. Using a metaphor based marketing technique early in a film’s development process may help to predict the success of a film as well as help to inform other marketing promotions for the film. The purpose of this study is to show how using an adaptation of ZMET will help film developers better predict the market potential for a project before the green-lighting phase.

Introduction

Every year, large and small films are produced and screened. Some are financially successful while others flop. For example, one of the biggest box-office disasters of 2016 was directed by the acclaimed director Steven Spielberg titled *The BFG*. The film lost an estimated \$90 million (McClintock & Galuppo, 2016). The status quo of the industry is vast uncertainty when it comes to predicting the financial success of a film. This uncertainty is largely due to the inability of film marketers to predict the market potential of films and what stories will sell. Thus, film projects are put into production without any consideration to whether or not any market potential exists for the project (Escoffier & Mckelvey, 2015). At the same time, marketing researchers have made strides in their ability to understand what consumers want even before products are developed (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Cornelissen, 2003; and Dahl & Moreau, 2002). In addition to marketing research, film development research has been conducted to show that the success of a film can be predicted with some reliability (Cullen & Toth, 2012; and Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007 and 2014). Marketing research, however, has not been applied to

the development phase of filmmaking and is essentially nonexistent. Thus, many opportunities are presented in becoming the first to propose the application of a marketing research technique (such as Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) to the development phase of the film industry.

This study aims to show that incorporating the right marketing research technique early in the development process of filmmaking will not only help to predict the market potential of the film, but it will also suggest changes to the film to make it better suited for the market. The marketing research technique suggested in this study is the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET). The technique is a qualitative marketing research methodology that uses images and metaphor mapping to discover the deep cognitive constructs of consumers. The technique is specifically well suited for understanding what consumers expect from a given product or service and it offers suggestions that aid in the creative process. If such a technique could be seamlessly implemented into the earliest stages of film development, it would vastly improve the quality of films as well as help the films meet audience expectations.

Chapter 1: Problem and Background

The Case for Improving Motion Picture Development

The U.S. Motion Picture Industry is an interesting industry for researchers for many reasons. Firstly, its size and economic importance provide a good environment for finding solutions to the problems that face the industry. In the U.S., the industry provides roughly \$43 billion in revenue, pays out roughly \$8 billion in wages, and is still projecting growth rates despite its maturity (Petrillo, 2016). In the U.S., around \$11 billion was spent on theatre tickets in 2016” (Box Office Mojo, 2017). Purely gauging the money spent on marketing research, “It is not unusual for a studio to spend over \$1 million on market research for a single film, a relatively small investment when \$30 million may be spent on advertising and another \$60 million on production” (McDonald & Wasko, 2008, p. 73). Unfortunately, most (if not all) marketing research conducted for a project focuses on gaging an audience’s reaction to a nearly

finished film instead of applying research earlier in or before production. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, hundreds of films are produced and released every year, creating jobs and improving the local economies in the cities that host productions.

Aside from the cold economic perspective, there are several other reasons for marketers to research the film industry. News in the motion picture industry often catches the public eye more than many industries, and the industry has a disproportional impact on culture. The films themselves impact culture, but even the buzz around films affects American (and some would argue global) culture (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006).

The relatively short product life cycle of films is also an interesting research opportunity. Researchers can apply methods and observe results quickly as films are born and die in only a few years. There are many other interesting puzzles that still need to be solved in the industry around what makes one project successful over another and why (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006). One of the most intriguing of these puzzles is the ability to determine whether a project will be financially successful *before* any financial investment is given. This process is called Green-Lighting, and it is largely based on expert opinion rather than marketing research based analysis (Elberse, 2002; Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006; Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007).

The individuals in charge of producing the content that many movie fans are eager to consume “rely heavily on tradition, conventional wisdom, and simple rules of thumb, which often have not been—but should be—closely examined” (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006). The most notable process that relies on these simple rules of thumb are the development process and green-lighting process. In the development process, the core of the film is molded and the entire trajectory of the project is determined. In the green-lighting process, a project is given a “green-light” to go ahead with production (i.e. the finances needed for production are secured for the project). For studio blockbusters, this is the

stage in which the studio decides exactly how much money will be invested to complete which projects. Often, the decision is made purely on a single individual's gut feeling. The following is an example of a typical green-lighting decision process:

“We bring together all studio department heads. Beforehand, our financial department prepares an overview of key estimates to get a sense of the financial viability. It really revolves around the production costs. That is our most reliable estimate, and that thus forms the basis for our launch decision.... The idea is to work towards the bottom line. We ask ourselves whether we can recover our production costs, and whether there is room to spend on marketing. In the end; though, it comes down to the fact that someone has to sign off on the deal. Someone in the meeting has to put his or her reputation on the line and say ‘yes’—regardless of whether the numbers add up” (quoted in Elberse, 2002).

Many industry experts regard the current green-lighting process as a necessity due to the unpredictability of the industry. They are not completely wrong. Researchers fully admit that there are many difficulties in creating a research tool that will consistently improve the green-lighting process.

“The main obstacle in developing [a green-lighting] tool has been the lack of reliable predictors for the financial success of a movie at the green-lighting stage: There are simply too few tangible determinants for the success of movie before it is produced” (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007). Despite the challenges, the need for such a tool is growing as new investors enter the market. “The new players include wealthy financiers, private equity firms, hedge funds, and other institutions that invest in the early stage of movies’ production. Their metric is return on investment (ROI)” (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007). But the question remains: how can film developers provide these new financiers with the metric they desire at the development stage of production?

There is a case to be made for not giving numerical/economic data too much weight in a business that is built on creativity. But when \$300+ million could potentially be lost in a blockbuster flop, it seems odd that studios or any financier would place that much trust in the opinion of a few individuals. But it is not just the financing of a film that is left up to the opinions of a few individuals. Sometimes entire projects are built around one person's creative vision regardless of how much market potential exists for the

film. “Indeed, it is startling to discover that, at both the financial stage and the marketing stage, decisions are largely guesses based on the experience and intuition of a few experts” (Escoffier & McKelvey, 2015). It is also startling to compare the film industry to other industries.

In no business is a single, unique product fully created at an investment of tens of millions of dollars with no real assurance that the public will buy it. At its core, any movie investment is speculative, high risk, and at the mercy of customers. The formula that attracts audiences is as speculative, uncertain and elusive as can be (quoted in Escoffier & McKelvey, 2015).

Escoffier & McKelvey show how unreliable it is to trust expert opinions in their research on the wisdom of crowds. They show that averaging the guesses of a large group of nonexpert individuals proves more accurate than any one expert’s (or even an average of a group of experts’) estimations (Escoffier & McKelvey, 2015). This makes sense when one considers that it is the average public who will be making up the bulk of ticket sales, not experts. Crowds are the most reliable predictor of success. Thus, it is imperative to find ways include consumer opinions as early in a film’s development as possible using consumer based marketing research methodologies.

The film industry is ripe for a new research method to fill in the gap where expert opinion is consistently falling short. “Digital content already has more demands than offers, and this market will grow even more rapidly in the near future” (Escoffier & McKelvey, 2015). Financers are demanding ROI’s, crowds are proving demand as well as serving as reliable predictors for success, and technology is now reaching a point where large computations can be done quickly to allow for the flexibility that is needed by those making green-lighting decisions.

[Due] to the advances that marketing scholars have made in the past decades in the general area of new product development, and in particular with expert and knowledge-based computer systems already employed by practitioners in creative industries such as the advertising industry, quantitative and qualitative (e.g. linguistics analysis) research methods may facilitate decision making and improve the success rate. Even a marginal decrease in failure rate of the green-lighting process could confer tremendous financial and reputation benefits for studios and other players involved (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006).

What would a green-lighting tool analyze? As stated earlier, there are few tangible determinates in the earliest stages of the development process. Sometimes, the only asset for the project is the script. In projects closer to being ready to be green-lit, there will sometimes be other bankable talent associated with the project (a famous actor, producer, or director). The bankable talent is so named due to the assumption that associating famous people with the project will increase ticket sales and pre-release hype. The research over whether or not bankable talent actually does influence the final box-office sales for a film is conflicting. The more agreed upon element for success is the story of a film. Unfortunately, story is difficult to analyze.

Although many studio managers and critics argue that the story line is the most important predictor of a movie's success, there has been no rigorous way for them to incorporate the story line into their forecasting. As a result, the common view among industry experts is that picking a successful movie from scripts is like picking a horse long before the race: it is difficult, if not impossible. Likewise, academic researchers have thus far not addressed this issue, despite its economic importance. This lack of attention can partly be explained by the textual nature of the data—the stories. Textual data are extremely high dimensional: A text article contains thousands of different words of different frequency and in different order. If we take each word, its frequency, and its order of appearance as a distinct dimension, the dimensionality for even a short news article would exceed millions and even trillions (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007).

Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang go on to describe how they overcome these and other obstacles with their research methodology. In fact, there are several research techniques that are being developed to tackle this complex and multifaceted issue. However, once a script has been given a score and projected ROI, the potential market for the film still needs to be analyzed. That is where this paper attempts to improve the green-lighting process. By not only projecting the future ROI of a film based on its craftsmanship, the proposed research technique – a slight adaptation of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995) – would analyze the consumers' minds to see how much potential the film has in the current market place. It would also offer suggestions for refinement at a stage when the film can still be easily refined. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to show how an adaptation of ZMET will help film developers better understand the market potential for their project. The question facing this

research is: does the market potential for a given project warrant providing the financing needed to green-light the project?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review is divided into two basic sections. First, a case for the validity and practicality of metaphor research will be made followed by the other research techniques being applied to the green-lighting process and how metaphor research will complement the existing research. It is worth noting that after an extensive search not a single academic research paper could be found specifically analyzing marketing research within the development or green-lighting phases of film production. Most marketing research in the film industry is done only after the film has already been made (Marich, 2013). The goal of this paper is to show that marketing research can be done in the development phase to help improve the film as well as predict the market potential of the film from an early stage.

Metaphor Research in Marketing

The origins of metaphor research stem back to Lakoff & Johnson's book on cognitive linguistics theory, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). In the book, the authors describe how nearly every aspect of language that deals with the intangible is linked to some tangible experience through metaphor. This is a very useful theoretical model, and has been used in hundreds (if not thousands) of different research applications. The most noteworthy feature of understanding human thought through metaphor is that researchers can accurately and succinctly map out what is going on inside another person's mind through understanding the metaphors they use.

This process involves mapping what are called source domains (i.e. the conceptual domain from which the metaphorical expression is drawn) to target domains (i.e. the conceptual domain that is being made clearer by the metaphor). Another way to express this is to say that humans tend to understand abstract concepts *through* more tangible or concrete terms. The example Lakoff & Johnson usually refer to is

LOVE IS A JOURNEY. In this metaphorical expression, *Journey* is the source domain and *Love* is the target domain. People often unconsciously use the *LOVE IS A JOURNEY* in their everyday language. They say, “we are going through a bumpy time in our relationship,” or “we have a long way to go in our relationship.” These expressions are both versions of the *LOVE IS A JOURNEY* metaphor. There are thousands of these metaphors that penetrate consumers’ daily lives. In fact, they are quite inescapable.

The importance of using metaphor as a framework for understanding human cognition is twofold. First, it is inescapable and so firmly wired into the human subconscious to create metaphors that researchers would have to deal with metaphors whether they wish it or not. Second, metaphors are shared by cultures and across cultures. The second point is extremely important for marketing research methodology. The fact that large populations (or cultures) share certain metaphors means that the study of a few individuals can be extrapolated to the many.

This is where the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) shows its usefulness. While other metaphor research has been done in marketing and related fields (Cornelissen, 2003; Cotte, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2004; Hunt & Menon, 1995; and others), Zaltman’s patented technique is the most structured, tested, and proven marketing research methodology employing metaphor to understand consumer expectations.

At its core, the technique is simple, but the insights it provides are extremely powerful, especially when considering the difficulty of analyzing what makes people enjoy something as abstract as a “good” film. The technique works as follows. The researcher designs a non-leading question for participants to “answer”. In answering the question, the participants are asked to gather images that represent their thoughts. Those images are brought to an interview where the interviewer asks more non-leading questions about the images. The focus is to allow the participant to describe the symbolism of the images using metaphors. The interview is recorded for further analysis. The participant is then asked to

work with an imaging specialist to create a collage of the images and talk about how the images interact with each other, often creating a new metaphor or reinterpreting previous metaphors. The process is repeated with multiple participants (usually 20).

After the interview process is completed, the recordings are analyzed to discover the different metaphors that are used, the frequency of their use, and their relation to other metaphors that are used. The researcher creates a consensus map¹ that represents the commonalities between the participants. This consensus map is then used as an aid for whatever marketing task is needed. Often, it is used to help develop advertising copy or marketing initiatives.

Specifically, we: (1) engage participants in a personal, in-depth conversation that averages two hours in length, (2) triangulate across methods as evident by the multiple steps used in the ZMET interviews, (3) regularly interact with interviewers to discuss the interview structure, constructs elicited, etc., (4) triangulate across researchers, reviewing the interview transcripts and audiotapes of the participants, and (5) have participants verify the constructs elicited, and those not elicited, during the interview (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

The insights gained from this process are similar to those gained from a large-scale surveys. In fact, Zaltman has shown that the results from ZMET and those of other traditional research methods help to reinforce one another. The only difference between the two is that ZMET provides insights on a deeper level than traditional methods by mapping the connections between metaphor constructs. These deeper insights, will be key to helping researchers identify market potential for a film as it will show how well a new script matches or exceeds an audience's expectations.

Another useful feature of ZMET is the fact that it allows the participants to guide the interview process. The film industry currently demands that projects be praised from very early in their conception or else no one (consumer or investor) will waste their time with the film. This creates a lot of blind bias in the industry as it is the only way projects can get pushed through the process. Because the film creatives

¹ See Appendix [Figure 1](#) for an example of the Metaphor Map

tend to be extremely bias toward their projects, using a research technique that puts the consumer in the driver's seat will be extremely valuable as it will help to remove the filmmaker's bias in projecting what they "believe" is the market potential of the film.

[The] Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, ZMET, [is] a patented research tool designed to (1) surface the mental models that drive consumer thinking and behavior, and (2) characterize these models in actionable ways using consumers' metaphors. ZMET uses consumers' visual and other sensory images and employs qualitative methods to elicit the metaphors, constructs, and mental models that drive consumers' thinking and behavior. Quantitative analyses of the data provide information for advertising, promotions, and other marketing-mix decisions (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique should prove to be an excellent research tool for a phase in the film development process that has been notoriously difficult for marketing researchers to analyze. It will prove its worth through focusing on consumer expectations and projecting market potential.

Existing Research Methodologies for Green-Lighting

Although the film industry has continued to reject or at least ignore research methods that would help with the development and green-lighting processes, researchers have continued to develop different methodologies that will help to predict ROI in the development and green-lighting phases. Some of the most notable are outlined below.

Cullen & Toth's *Independent Film Funding: A Structured Approach* (2012)

Cullen & Toth attempt to create a structured model for predicting the ROI of independent films. They use a limited but diverse set of factors including the talent involved in the project, the script type and complexity, and budget of the film. These factors are used to score individual film projects so that they can be grouped into portfolios for financiers.

Using the individual score and the portfolio formulas developed in the model, Cullen and Toth can predict the ROI of independent film portfolios with around 25% error overall. This is an immense improvement to what industry "experts" say is equivocal to betting on horses.

Although the model demonstrated its ability to convert the subjective elements of a film into quantifiable metrics, it did so by ignoring many of the nuances present in creative projects. It also ignores whether or not the script in question is well written, something that many experts consider the best indication of whether a project will succeed or not. These flaws should not be considered reasons to outright reject the study, but should be viewed as opportunities for improvement.

Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang (2007 and 2014)

The primary benefit of the works of Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang are found in their ability to analyze the complexity of film scripts using both a cold textual analysis as well as a script reviewing process. The cold textual analysis is something they developed that can be run by a computer and offers significant predictive power in and of itself. Noting the limitations in a cold textual analysis, the researchers also developed a script reviewing process that has a small number of readers look for whether or not certain story elements exist in the script. These two analyses combined provide significant predictive power. More significantly, they provide at least some portion of analysis that is completely free from bias.

Escoffier & McKelvey's *The Wisdom of Crowds in the Movie Industry: Towards New Solutions to Reduce Uncertainties* (2015)

Although this research focused on a phase well after development and green-lighting, it did prove that crowds of audience members are the best predictors of a film's success. The study showed that even groups of experts were less reliable in predicting the success of a film than audience members. This is an extremely important revelation as metaphor research relies almost exclusively on the consumers' perspective. Since the consumer is the most reliable indicator for the success of a film, ZMET should prove even more useful than previously anticipated.

Research Questions

Given all the research discussed so far, a strong case is made for the ability of ZMET to show researchers exactly how consumers think about a given topic. This is a very powerful, marketing research tool.

Further, since Escoffier & McKelvey (2015) showed that crowds are the best way to predict the success (or market potential) of films, the case for studying consumers in marketing research is made even stronger. Cullen & Toth (2012) and Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang (2007 and 2014) show that a film's market potential can be predicted in the development stage with some degree of reliability when only analyzing the creative elements (script and talent) of the film. Thus, if a ZMET adaptation can be developed and used in conjunction with textual analysis, it should be able to create even better ROI predictions in the development stage as well as be able to make suggestions for improvement.

The research questions that the proposed ZMET adaptation should be able to answer are: (1) what is the size and key characteristics of the potential market for the film in question? (2) how well does the current script and other creative elements (production, talent, etc.) "fit" the existing market for the film in question? and (3) what changes can be made to the script and/or other creative elements to help it maximize its market potential?

Chapter 3: Proposed Methodology

Metaphor as a research tool, and ZMET more specifically, have proven themselves as a reliable alternative marketing research methodology that can provide greater insight into creative or otherwise difficult to analyze industries. It makes sense that applying ZMET as it currently exists would provide numerous insights for film developers to improve their projects and make them more successful. However, what film developers need is not a tool to help them improve their project (per se). What they need is a tool that will help them alleviate risk in green-lighting a project (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006). There is a subtle but significant difference here. ZMET, as it currently exists, will help improve the quality of a film's script, and doing so will make the project less risky. However, film developers need to know roughly how risky a given project is with respect to the willingness of consumers to purchase tickets so that they can show potential investors that the project is ready to be

green-lit. ZMET is not currently designed to provide these types of figures as it is primarily a qualitative research method. Thus, an adjustment is proposed.

There are two basic approaches that could be used in adapting ZMET to help aid in the green-lighting process: focusing on adjusting a script to meet audience expectations, and focusing on finding the right audience for a given script. The first approach would likely be the most straight forward. It would involve identifying the script's genre and performing a ZMET analysis based on the commonalities of the genre. Then the producer would have a consensus map that could be used to help guide the drafting of the script. The second approach would be more difficult as it would involve first drafting a script and then identifying a target demographic that is a best fit with the script. Several ZMET analyses would need to be done on different target demographics to identify who would be the best fit and what is the best way to communicate the message of the script with them.

Assuming that some combination of the two approaches is needed (as no script is fully developed even after being green-lit nor is an audience completely unknown to the developers), the following adjustments are suggested for the ZMET process. First, some tool is needed that maps the thematic elements of a script without any thought of consumer expectations. This can be done on several levels. A textual analysis like that developed by Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang (2007 and 2014) could be used to remove some bias from the development process. In addition, using the knowledge of story experts, a review tool could be used (also perhaps based on Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang's work). The end goal of the thematic map would be to create something that would resemble the consensus map created by ZMET. This mapping of the script and story can then be compared to the consensus map of the target demographic. The researchers could then note the number of similarities and discrepancies between

the two maps, creating a sort of market potential score for the project. This market potential score is the green-lighting tool the film developer needs to help convince investors to green-light the project.²

How would this adaptation be evaluated and scored? Like the scoring method developed by Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang (2007 and 2014), it would be based on reviewers. The reviewer would likely follow a set of guidelines developed from several story experts. There are many different theories on what makes a good story good, but there are also many commonalities between the theories. A reviewing tool will need to be developed based on these commonalities.

For the consumer half of the research, the ZMET will likely stay basically the same. The only difference will be in finding ways to correlate the traditional ZMET results with the results from the adaptations. Generally speaking, the traditional results are based on the frequency of metaphors used in interviews, the number of participants that used the same metaphors, the number of connections between metaphors, and the number of participants that used the same connections. For the adaptations, the results will likely be based on the commonalities between reviewers for the reviewing section and the results from bootstrapping for the textual analysis section. Researchers creating further refinement to the ZMET adaptation will need to keep in mind the need to correlate results with the traditional ZMET results.

For the traditional ZMET, the participants for the study will depend on the film. Most demographics for new films are determined by the demographics of previous films that cover a similar theme or are found in a similar genre. Since the point of the proposed study is to discover the potential audience, it may be worth conducting preliminary interviews with a variety of socio-economic groups to determine which groups have the greatest fit to the current script. If the film is known to appeal to a niche audience, then

² Please refer to the Appendix, [Figure 1](#) for more information.

this preliminary step can likely be skipped. The creators of ZMET recommend using around 20 participants.

For the ZMET adaptation, the “participants” will likely be members of the research team who specialize in story analysis. These individuals will carefully read the script and create a theme map using the same structure that creates the consensus maps. Since the traditional ZMET utilizes visual mediums in its interview process, it should be relatively simple for the story analysts to comb through the visual aspects of the script to identify certain thematic elements and to map those elements in a similar pattern to those used in the traditional ZMET.

The analysis of the traditional ZMET will be qualitative and will help the film developers understand the current market size and the key characteristics of the market. The analysis of the ZMET adaptation will also be qualitative in nature and will help the film developer identify the core strengths and weaknesses of the script. The cross analysis between the two ZMETs will be more complex. It will involve identifying how well the two ZMETs “fit.” To do this, the researcher will need to count the total number of metaphor and thematic constructs as well as the relationships between the constructs in both maps. Then the researcher will count the number of similarities for both constructs and relationships between constructs for the two maps. Two basic ratios can be created using the number of similarities (construct and relationship) divided by the total number of constructs and relationships. The closer these ratios are to 1, the better fit exists between the script and the existing market for that script.

Further refinement of the model will require analysis of not only the number of similar themes/metaphors, but also the number of similar relationships between the themes/metaphors. Such a comparison could become extremely complex. The purpose of running such a quantitative analysis over the qualitative data is to give a numerical value to the marketing potential that can be quickly evaluated for green-lighting decisions. The numerical value is not meant to be the only piece of data

considered for the green-lighting decision. It is meant to serve as a summary figure. The financier should still consider the qualitative analysis in the green-lighting decision.

In summary, the proposed methodology is to analyze both the market with a traditional ZMET analysis as well as analyze the film script in question with a ZMET adaptation that will focus on the thematic/metaphorical elements of the script. Finally, a third analysis will compare the maps created by the first two analyses and will generate a summary ratio that describes the “fit” of the script to the current market.

Chapter 4: Expected Results

The initial results from the proposed adaptation of ZMET will take time to refine as they will need to be correlated to the success or failure of future projects. To test the model, researchers should attempt to find films that are still in production and develop a model similar to that developed in Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang’s first paper (2007) where they used spoiler pages for movies for textual and reviewer analysis.

The ZMET adaptation will also require interviewing participants who show interest in films similar to the one being released. The researchers could then determine the level of correlation between the ZMET adaptation score and the traditional ZMET score. Once that correlation is determined, a rough prediction of the success of the film should be made and tested against the actual financial performance of the film; similar to that done in Cullen & Toth’s paper (2012).

The results will be predictive (i.e. predicting the ROI for the project given the current state of the script) as well as diagnostic (meaning it will help the developers see what areas of the script need changing).

The predictive results should be boiled down to basic numbers: the project will likely make as much as X or as little as Y, the project has Z percent risk associated with it, etc. The diagnostic results will be far more in-depth and qualitative, much like the results of a traditional ZMET. These results will point to what is and is not working in a story from a consumer perspective. This is a very powerful tool as it will

help the film developer correct the course of the project while it is still in the easiest and cheapest phase to make those corrections.

An example of how this process would likely work in a real-world scenario is as follows. A filmmaker has already developed a script that he/she believes is ready to start production. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to sign certain big name stars to the project as either there are scheduling conflicts or the stars want the producer to secure financing before they will put their name on the project. Unfortunately, the financiers always require that bankable talent be signed to the project before they provide any financing. This predicament causes the producer to seek ways to show the financiers that the project is ready to be green-lit. He/she decides to run the proposed ZMET adaptation for his/her script to show financiers that the script is ready for production and has good market potential in the current market. After running the proposed ZMET adaptation, the producer finds that the construct fit ratio is 0.44 and the relationship fit ratio is 0.10. The producer is concerned that these ratios will not be convincing enough for his/her financiers, so he/she decides to dig deeper. After looking over the consensus map and the thematic map, the producer notices that although there are a fair amount of similar constructs between the two maps, the consensus map shows that the audience expects films of this genre to have a happy ending³. Knowing the story calls for a sad ending, the producer takes the two maps to his/her writer to brainstorm ideas. The two decide that a sad ending is still the right decision for the story, but they find that if they can increase the relationship between a few theme constructs, it should not only fit with audience expectations better, but it will also make the story have a better thematic payoff in the sad ending. After running the proposed ZMET adaptation once more, the producer finds that the construct fit ratio has increased to 0.51 and the relationship fit ratio has increased to 0.42. Armed with these summary ratios and the incites gained from qualitative analysis of the two mappings, the producer takes

³ Note that the results of ZMET usually offer incites much deeper than this example. "Happy Ending" was used for illustrative purposes only.

his/her pitch to the financiers. The financiers are happy to see such a good fit between the producer's script and the producer's confidence in the script seems much improved over their last meeting. They provide the finances the producer needs to secure the other bankable talent, and the producer can move the film into pre-production.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Suggestions, and Limitations

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of using a ZMET based scoring tool is that it will also offer suggestions for improvement by its very nature. The technique is designed to show marketers what the customer wants and why they want it. Since the film project will still be in development at the point these analyses are done, there will still be time to correct the project to be a better fit to what audiences are expecting. The technique will also make these suggestions in a way that will not force awkward changes or cause elements to be shoehorned into the script in the way other surface level marketing analysis would. Keep in mind, this is assuming that whoever is writing the script will be able to creatively incorporate strategic suggestions from ZMET into the core of the story.

It is useful to keep in mind the overall picture of where this proposed adaptation of ZMET comes into play. The adapted ZMET technique could replace other film scoring techniques or be used in conjunction with the techniques developed by Cullen & Toth (2012) and Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang (2007 and 2014). What the adapted ZMET would not replace is the portfolio analysis developed by these researchers. However, it would add a new element to the green-lighting analysis: market potential. Thus, the green-lighting analysis would be threefold: individual film score, portfolio score, and market potential score.

The ZMET adaptation described above would be most suited for scoring the market potential of a film, but it also serves as a way to isolate exactly what will and will not work in a film and help developers correct these issues before green-lighting the project. If used in connection with the existing individual

film scoring techniques, it could also help to create a more accurate prediction of the film's success based on the content of the film.

There are several challenges to gathering, interpreting, and adapting the results from the proposed ZMET adaptation. The first is that the process itself will likely slow down the green-lighting process. Often, any delay in the green-lighting process can cost the developers the chance to ever get the project made. However, the main reason film developers often rush into production is because some key bankable talent is only available for a short period. If the film developers had some other means to secure finances (such as the methods the proposed research would provide), there would be less need to rely on bankable talent and instead the emphasis would be on creating excellent content to secure financing. The tool still needs to offer some amount of flexibility and it should be able to be performed quickly.

The proposed methodology requires a complete shift from the current film development process. To make the methodology work, it will require the full cooperation of film producers and developers. It is likely that the model will take time to adapt, but it should prove more effective the more it is used and refined. It also should help the industry shift away from its shortsighted habits of producing sequels and reboots as it helps to alleviate risk for the development of new content.

The proposed methodology could be adapted to many other creative industries that are plagued with similar issues regarding alleviating risk for the development of new creative projects. Thus, there are countless future research opportunities based on the proposed model.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Although many challenges face the implementation of marketing research to the development and green-lighting phases of the film industry, trends in research show that it can be done. Much of the current lack of research in this area is due to the film industry being unreceptive to any new ideas. This

could partially be because such research will take power from those individuals currently calling the shots. There is a lot of egotism plaguing Hollywood, and change seems to always come very slowly despite the need for improvements and the high stakes involved. It is the opinion of this researcher that such mentalities will slowly die out of the film industry for two reasons. First, the current mentality is not sustainable, and it will likely result in sluggish growth for large firms who are perpetuating the reboot and sequel film mentality. Second, any firm that can perfect or at least refine the green-lighting and development processes will have a significant strategic advantage over those firms who fail to do so.

Thus, it is recommended to continue to find ways to apply marketing research to the green-lighting and development phases of film production. ZMET offers the most potential because it is both visually based and it focuses on the consumer. Turning the incites of the process inward on the script can only further refine and improve the process.

More research is needed in the area of how much the market potential of a film impacts the overall ROI. If researchers can show that early predictions on the size and quality of the current market positively correlate with larger box-office returns, than it is likely that film studio executives will become very interested in the research and be willing to pay a premium to better understand how well their films will do in the market.

More research is also needed in what statistical analysis will be best suited to combine the various predictive measures (film score, portfolio mix, and market potential) to understand the overall likelihood of an individual film to perform well at the box-office. Such summary data would prove to be a very helpful way of comparing different projects over time to see how well predations actually reflect reality.

Some practical applications of the proposed ZMET adaptation could be to create a third-party consulting firm that would analyze any film project for a fee. Another application could be if a studio or production company wanted to develop the analysis tool in house to help them gain a strategic advantage over their competitors.

In conclusion, the proposed ZMET adaptations shows a lot of potential and still requires further refinement as well as real world testing. Once the model is fully refined and tested, it will likely become an invaluable asset to film producers and financiers alike as it will help to better understand the market potential for a film through the mind of those who will actually be purchasing the tickets.

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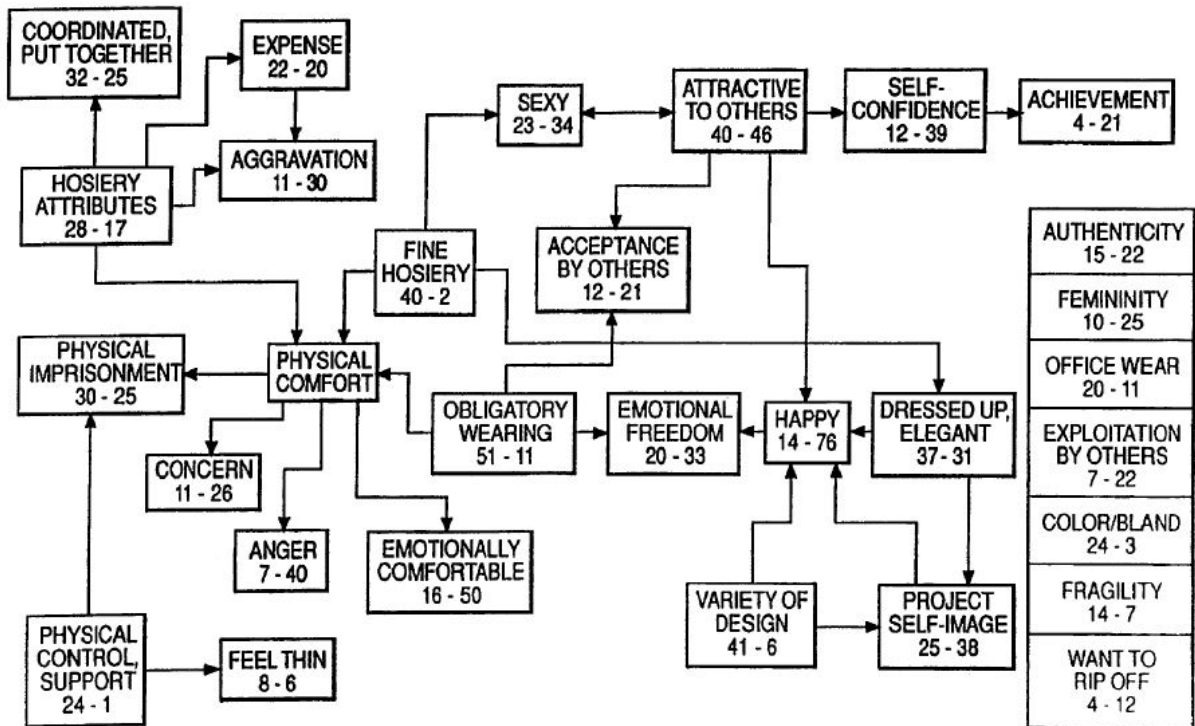
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Appendix

Figure 1



An example of a consensus map from an actual ZMET study. Taken from Zaltman, G. (2001). *U.S. Patent No. 6,315,569 B1*. Washington, DC: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. "The number to the left of the hyphen indicates the number of times this construct was the origination point in the relationship with another construct. The number to the right of the hyphen indicates the number of times this construct was the destination point in a relationship with another construct" (Zaltman, 2001).

Like this traditional ZMET consensus map, the ZMET adaptation would show the relationships between thematic constructs within the script.

The two maps could then be compared by counting the number of construct matches and relationship matches divided by the total number of constructs and relationships respectively.