

Understanding *The Hobbit*: The cross-national and cross-linguistic reception of a global media product in Belgium, France and the Netherlands

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Abstract:

The *Hobbit* franchise, as many global media products, reaches audiences worldwide. Audience members apparently consume a uniform media product. But do they? The World Hobbit Project offers a new and exciting opportunity to explore differences and similarities, for it provides us with audiences' understandings of the trilogy across languages and nationalities. In this paper we conduct a statistical analysis on differences and similarities in understandings of *The Hobbit* trilogy between Belgium, the Netherlands, and France – both in what audiences do and do not feel *The Hobbit* films to be. Analyzing this particular region in Europe provides an extraordinary opportunity, for The World Hobbit project allows us to compare on the language level (the Dutch and French-speaking Belgian regions with respectively the Netherlands and France), as well as on the level of national identities

(comparing the three countries amongst each other). In doing so, we are able to further understand what informs geographical and linguistic differences in the consumption of a uniform media product. As such, this paper touches upon cultural hegemony, cross-border flows of fiction, language and cultural proximity.

Keywords: comparative study, nationality, language, globalization, cultural proximity, reception

Introduction

Today's European market for audiovisual products is strongly characterized by trends of globalization (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011; Bielby & Harrington, 2008). More specifically, Hollywood seems to prevail as the global storyteller of our time (Gao, 2016; McDonald & Wasko, 2008). The top box office lists across the Western world, or in fact the globe, are dominated by blockbuster films released by powerful media majors that originate in the United States (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015). Since the turn of the 21st century, the fantasy franchise – exemplified by *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hobbit* – is particularly paramount; these trilogies are all among the worldwide highest earning films of all time (boxofficemojo.com).

The incredible international popularity of these global media products leads to concerns with regard to cultural hegemony and the rise of a so-called 'world-audience' (Crane, 2002; Drori et al., 2006; Lechner & Boli, 2005; Kuipers, 2015). In Europe, debate and policy-making on both national and international levels are the result, and a range of interventions and regulations designed to protect and stimulate European film industries (Moran, 1996).

But are these concerns really justified? There are several reasons to question the concerns ventilated in debates on global media products. Firstly, protectionist measures presume the uniform reception of global products whereas there is reason enough to question such uniformity. Scholarly work has shown that audience reception can still be differentiated amongst 'interpretative communities'. A key concept in these studies is 'cultural proximity' – the cultural distance between audience and product is believed to explain the latter's popularity or lack thereof within a given community (Straubhaar, 2007). This concept is understood and operationalized in various ways, though most academic debates focus on the role of nationality versus language in the differentiation of media reception (Gao, 2016; Ginsburgh et al., 2011; Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000). Language, following Sinclair (2000), is especially crucial, emphasizing that (television) products exist not in global, but in locally connected 'geolinguistic regions'.

Secondly, within these debates the concerns over cultural hegemony often assume a uniform global media product. The notion that media products are adjusted to local contexts and therefore not strictly 'globally uniform' is largely ignored. Film translation, in the form of subtitling, dubbing, or voiceovers, always leads to a culturally specific representation of the original (Koolstra et al., 2002; Kuipers, 2015).

In this paper we primarily focus on the roles language and nationality play in the reception of a global media product: *The Hobbit* trilogy. We therefore statistically analyze differences and similarities in understandings of the trilogy in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands –in what audiences both do and do not feel *The Hobbit* films to be. Analyzing this particular region in Europe provides an extraordinary opportunity, for The World Hobbit Project allows us to compare on the language level (the Dutch and French-speaking Belgian regions with respectively the Netherlands and France), as well as on the level of nationality (comparing the three countries amongst each other). In doing so, we are able to further understand how possible differences in audiences' consumption of a global media product are informed by geographical and linguistic dimensions. As such, we aim to contribute to academic literature about the topics of cultural globalization, interpretative communities, and cultural proximity.

The Hollywood film franchise prevails

The diffusion of cultural and media products across national borders is regarded as the 'most visible manifestation of globalization in everyday life' (Janssen et al., 2008: 720). This type of cultural exchange is not new but certainly expanded since the mid-twentieth century due to the increase of shared languages, the proliferation of multinationals in the field of cultural production, and the significant acceleration of dissemination processes that followed technological developments. More recently, digital media technologies took the globalization of media markets yet another step further (Wasko, 2001), continuing a long history of global media streams (e.g. the predominance of Hollywood films in Western societies over the past century, cf. Decherney, 2013). Whereas many scholars have theorized about the direction, intensity, and consequences of these increased cross-national flows (e.g. Crane, 2002; Wasko, 2001) – from the cultural imperialism thesis (Tomlinson, 1999) to the notion of cosmopolitanism (Cheyne & Binder, 2010; Meuleman & Savage, 2013) – it seems clear that today Western national markets for products like books, music, games, films, and television programs strongly resemble one another and that transnational flows of these products tend to be asymmetrical (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011; Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Biltereyst & Meers, 2000; Brandellero & Verboord, 2016; Casanova, 2004; Crane, 2002; Straubhaar, 2007).

Best-seller lists across countries show the proliferation of English-language products by multinational companies that often originate in the United States. In particular, the markets for audiovisual products across Europe are dominated by so-called Hollywood productions. In these expensive, hit-or-miss industries (Bielby & Bielby, 2004; Elberse, 2013), the economic advantages that result from a large and diverse home market lead to US predominance in the production and sale of films and television programs (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Crane, 2002; Gao, 2016; Trumbour, 2008). Other less often cited reasons include the fragmentation of European film with regard to production and distribution (aimed at cinematic releases), the relative scarcity of pan-European movie stars, and the absence of pan-European popular genres (cf. Meers, 2001). Despite the (growing) success of

(some) national productions, Hollywood prevails on Western film markets (Chung, 2011; Fu, 2006; Lee & Waterman, 2007). In 2014, the market share of US films in the European Union was no less than 63.1% (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015). American (co)productions counted for the lion share of top-grossing movies across the EU, the charts being topped by *The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies* and the third installment of the *Hunger Games* franchise.

It is particularly this type of blockbuster movies that draws most people to film theatres across the world. Following a blockbuster strategy, Hollywood film studios are heavily invested in making 'event films', producing movies that transcend the cinematic domain and become a public experience (Biltereyst, 2006). These movies tend to attract not only a large audience, but also attract the attention of journalists, policy makers and opinion leaders (Biltereyst, 2006; Elberse, 2013; Schatz, 2009). Blockbuster strategies often include betting on 'brands' that have already achieved consumer recognition, be it within or independent of the film sector (Drake, 2008). Other strategies include following up on previously successful films by prequels, sequels, and spin-offs, and adapting successful products from other cultural industries (e.g. novels, comic books, and television series) for the wide screen. This leads to the proliferation of franchises like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Spider-Man*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and *Twilight*, which are characterized by multi-million dollar budgets that allow for high production value and major star power (Elberse, 2013).

Since the turn of the century, the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* franchises have been prominent in the international box office (boxofficemojo.com). The fantasy genre proves very suitable for the franchise format. As Thompson (2003) explains, fantasies are assumed to appeal to the demographic sector that Hollywood pursues with most vehemence – teenagers and young adults. Not only do these young viewers visit the movie theatre most, they are also most likely to see a film more than once. Plus, fantasy films are very often based on popular literature or comic books and can therefore count on the support of an existing fan audience, who will not only come to the theatre but also create (online) buzz (Elberse, 2013; Thompson, 2003). Next, the fantastic film universes and storylines give way to dazzling special effects spectacles that interest film enthusiasts all around (Schatz, 2009). Finally, fantasy films usually offer great opportunities for attractive imagery, merchandizing, tie-in deals, and ancillary products like video games. It is no wonder, then, that New Line Cinema decided to follow-up on the *LOTR* success with *The Hobbit* trilogy. Rightly so, because the three films have quickly joined their predecessors on the list of highest grossing films of all time (boxofficemojo.com).

One 'world audience'?

Explanations for the worldwide appeal of Hollywood films range from the distribution of global taste through 'narrative transparency' (Olsen, 1999) to the political economy-informed monopolization of international markets (Miller et al., 2005). Either way, the popularity of Hollywood is worrisome for those invested in the national film industries across Europe. As these blockbusters require multi-million dollar budgets for both

production and marketing (Elberse, 2013), most European domestic studios cannot even begin to compete on this level (Drake, 2008; Elsaesser, 2005; Wasko et al., 2001). This just adds to concerns about the homogenizing effects of cultural globalization in general and of the dominance of major Hollywood studios specifically. For one thing, critics regard the supposed similarity of the blockbuster movies that rule the international charts as symptomatic of processes of 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 2011) in the film industry, meaning that a rationalized factory-like style leads to standardized, simplistic, and superficial products. With film being one of the most popular cultural forms, in particular among younger audience segments, this would lead to an impoverishment of cultural life across Europe. Secondly, these popular films are seen to represent the American way of life and, with that, a particular set of norms and values that does not necessarily match other cultures (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011). With box office hits being much the same across the Western world, national film audiences appear to consolidate into one 'world audience' and cultural hegemony seems imminent. In fact, at the turn of the century, various scholars announced global homogenization (Crane, 2002), the emergence of a 'world society' (Drori et al., 2006), and 'world culture' (Lechner & Boli, 2005; Kuipers, 2015). Worries about such developments seem to be echoed by the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which was adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2005. The convention affirms the right to one's own culture, and protects nations' abilities to install or maintain protectionist measures (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011). Furthermore, at the time of writing, the European Commission plans also to make digital on-demand and streaming services as *Netflix* and *Amazon* adhere to broadcasting regulations that stipulate that 20% of their content has to be European in order to positively impact cultural diversity and help sustain European audiovisual industries (*The Guardian*, 25 May 2016).

The extent to which European nations choose to protect and promote cultural diversity shows great variety. France is known to be very protective of its national culture and language. Government measures in the cultural industries therefore include quotas that cap the import of foreign music, television, and film. The state further supports domestic cultural production with high levels of public spending (Toepler & Zimmer, 2002). In part thanks to this financial support, the French film industry remains one of the largest and most successful in Europe (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011; Elsaesser, 2005; Scott, 2000). Government intervention in both Belgium and the Netherlands is far less protectionist, and more exclusively aimed at supporting national industries through subsidies. These countries tend to be more open to foreign imports and influences (Kersten, 2014), and the Belgian and Dutch domestic film industries are a lot smaller than their French counterpart. To illustrate, in 2014 France produced 124 fully domestic feature fiction films (44.4% market share), Belgium 10 films (14% market share), and the Netherlands 22 films (20.8% market share) (European Audiovisual Observatory 2015). Of course, this is strongly influenced by the simple fact that France (in addition to other French-speaking territories) is considerably larger than Belgium and the Netherlands (in addition to other Dutch-speaking territories)

taken together. Furthermore, France represents one of the top 10 film markets worldwide (by gross box office and admissions as well as film production) (ibid).

Differentiation of reception

These numbers demonstrate that, while major Hollywood blockbusters rule the top box office lists across Europe, *the extent to which* national markets are dominated by them varies significantly. Moreover, since the 1980s, cultural media studies scholars (Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1993) have argued that audiences are active rather than passive recipients of globally disseminated media, and groups from diverse national backgrounds understand and interpret the same cultural products in different ways (Crane, 2002). Films may be made sense of in a range of different manners (Chon et al., 2003). So, whereas we might all watch *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and indeed *The Hobbit* around the globe, we understand and appropriate them in our own distinct ways (cf. Staiger, 2000; 2005; Wasko et al. 2001). Peoples' cultural preferences, interpretations and evaluations are understood as the result of particular discursive resources. These resources in turn are informed by social markers such as age, gender, educational level, class, ethnicity, and social environment (Hall, 1999 [1973], 2013; Van Rees & Van Eijck, 2003; Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005). Evaluations, interpretations and understandings depend on cultural surroundings and vary according to demographic characteristics, and across historical eras and national contexts (Cheyne & Binder, 2010; Daenekindt & Roose, 2013; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000; Liebes & Katz, 1993). It is in these contexts that groups of people construct shared 'horizons of expectations' (Fish, 1980) and form an 'interpretative community' (ibid). But how to draw the lines around these communities? Which concepts play what role in shaping these interpretative communities? And what determines whether films do or do not meet such collective expectations?

In scholarly efforts to make sense of interpretative communities and their differences in media reception, the concept of 'cultural proximity' is often positioned as the central piece of the puzzle. People tend to gravitate towards media products that were produced within their own culture or in a culture that resembles one's own culture because of supposedly greater cultural resonance or compatibility (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). The cultural distance between audience and product is believed to explain the latter's popularity or lack thereof within a given community. This required closeness is understood and operationalized in various ways. When is something or someone culturally 'near'? Does this depend upon geographical distance or are there other factors that cluster people together, e.g. social or demographic traits? Studies show that cultural proximity may take place at various levels (Gao, 2016; Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009) – 'multiple proximities', La Pastina & Straubhaar (2005) argue, influence consumer choices and interpretations. Yet, nationality and language are often the point of investigation in empirical research.

In social research, the nation-state remains the most important organizing principle (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009). The boundaries drawn around interpretative communities therefore usually align with the borders that surround the 'imagined' community of said

nation-state (Anderson, 1984). Studies are either situated within one or several nations or, more rarely, are aimed at cross-national comparisons (cf. Janssen & Peterson, 2005). As such, 'culture' is often equated with nationality. Here, the work of Lamont (1992; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000) is influential, claiming that people from different countries wield different 'repertoires of evaluation' that order their judgment and evaluation of a variety of things in life, resulting in specific preferences and interpretations. These repertoires are then said to originate in the cultural characteristics as well as the central structuring institutions of the nation-state. This academic approach has its merits, since many researchers do indeed find evidence of differentiated national discourses on culture. For example, Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) chart how American, Dutch, and German reviewers apply different sets of evaluative criteria to popular music albums. And Kersten (2014: 717) shows that, while film critics employ the same discourse components across France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, evaluative repertoires still vary in composition and style as 'Western countries command distinguishing features that particularize their manners of meaning making despite the ubiquity of globalizing trends'.

However, the use of the nation-state as the sole or main unit of analysis can certainly be questioned. With regard to interpretative communities, both audiences' characteristics such as language as well as characteristics of the transnational media product raise questions about the validity of the nation-state as unit of analysis. Language is key to how people read, interpret, and value all things in life, including media products. It enables communication between people, and either promotes, limits, or obstructs our understanding of written and spoken word. As such, language is a strong tie binding interpretative communities together and might be a better operationalization of 'culture' than nationality is. The differences found between audiences in different countries could very well be on account of language, as one's nationality often coincides with having a particular language as one's mother tongue. For this reason, for example Ginsburgh et al. (2011) use linguistic distance as a proxy of cultural distance instead of nationality. Language groups do not *always* coincide with nation-states. As Heilbron (1999) explains, some languages (English, German, French, Spanish) have a supranational character. Languages may exceed national borders, while at the same time those same borders may hold more than one language. In case of the latter, film policy can be complex. Belgium, for example, consists of communities that speak Dutch and French.¹ Each community designs specific media policies aimed to reinforce a (language informed) identity. Flanders, for example, has its own regionally rather than nationally informed film policy (cf. Willems, 2015).

Others who problematize the use of the nation as a main unit of analysis at this day and age argue that, considering the way processes of globalization have taken hold, the factors regarded as central to taste formation might now take place on a transnational scale (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009). The rise of transnational institutions is seen to result in cosmopolitan 'repertoires of evaluation' that bring together transnational audiences (Lizardo, 2005; Meyer et al., 1997). Scholars have found that educated, cosmopolitan youths are particularly drawn to global media products in general, and Hollywood storytelling

specifically. According to Gao (2016: 3), 'to international audiences, what Hollywood lacks in cultural proximity it compensates by universal tropes – themes and formulae that are so primordial and fundamental that they are psychologically accessible and discursively intelligible to viewers around the world'. In their large-scale research project on the reception of Disney products around the world, Wasko et al. (2001) acknowledge the importance of the universality of their mode of storytelling to the company's success. The universality of Hollywood storytelling might be further strengthened since the field of media is 'denationalizing' itself – companies and their products themselves don't have a clear nationality anymore (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009). Whereas the major media conglomerates might originate in the United States, they operate on a global level now. The film trilogy under investigation here is a clear illustration: *The Hobbit* was released by an American company, but is based on an English story, filmed in New Zealand and directed by one of its natives, and includes actors of a range of nationalities.

Global media companies not only produce works that are increasingly difficult to trace back to any one nationality, their success also depends upon their understanding of and adjustment to local markets. They deliver global products in adapted versions that fit the 'horizons of expectations' of the community aimed at. In film, such adaptation mainly consists of translation into other languages. Kuipers (2015) demonstrates that translation norms vary greatly – practices range from subtitling and dubbing to voiceovers. Translations, in whichever form, are made in accordance with policies and (perceived) audience expectations and are therefore not neutral. Translations in themselves are never completely accurate; since language is 'never perfectly mirrored when translated' (Butsch & Livingstone, 2014), they are always a modified representation of an original. This suggests that global products are not exactly 'globally uniform' after all. In other words, audiences around the globe might not consume the exact same product. That the industry is aware of the importance of language shows in the adaptations made in neighboring nations that share the same language. For example, Flanders and the Netherlands often exchange successful Dutch-language formats; local adaptations tailored to domestic audiences are quite common. In the past years, the Dutch film industry released various remakes of Flemish film hits for the Dutch market and vice versa (e.g. *Loft* (2008, 2010), *Smoorverliefd* (2010, 2013), *Mannenharten* (2013, 2015)). In case of dubbing or voiceovers, these two countries are usually provided with their own separate versions of English-language products as well. This seems to indicate that the media industry itself presumes differentiation of audiences on the basis of both nationality and language. However, this assumed difference between audiences based on nationality and language should not be overestimated, as some of the production choices are more or less forced by geography and language (cf. Van Keulen & Krijnen, 2014).

The data of the World Hobbit Project allow us to analyze the reception of a global media product across different communities and nations. We study the understanding of a major movie franchise that has climbed to the top box office lists across Europe, in three countries that all experience Hollywood domination but to varying extents as they are more

or less open to foreign influences and command domestic film industries that vary strongly in size and scale. We aim to find out whether in today's global media world, the reception of the *Hobbit*-trilogy across Europe can be differentiated. Rather uniquely, the corner of Europe under analysis includes various nationalities as well as different language groups that do and do not coincide with those nationalities. Here, this relatively small geographical space holds three distinct nation-states that share two languages. In the Netherlands, the vast majority of the population speaks the official language Dutch. The official language in France is French. The nation-state of Belgium, however, is home to both language groups¹: Dutch is mostly spoken in the northern region of Flanders, French is spoken in the southern region of Wallonia, whereas Brussels is officially bilingual. Here, nationality and language do not neatly align. Thus, this project offers the unique opportunity to study the reception of a major global media product across communities based on nationality *and* language, thus avoiding one unit of analysis masking the other.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper are grounded in the World Hobbit Project dataset. This dataset consists of 36,109 respondents worldwide. Each completed an online questionnaire between December 2014 and June 2015, available in 35 different languages in the wake of the cinematic release of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*. As with any dataset released to serve a wide array of researchers (and their specific research interests), it needed some tweaking to meet the needs of the operationalization for the statistical analyses fit to answer our research question(s). The choices made, and their implications, are highlighted below.

Operationalization

The core of our analysis explores differences between three neighboring countries, sharing two languages to explore the geographical and linguistic dimensions of interpretative communities. When confining the dataset to nationals from either Belgium, France, or The Netherlands that completed the questionnaire in either Dutch or French, we are left with 1,975 respondents. As the dataset distinguishes between country of residence and nationality, we decided to include only those living in their native country. This led to a small loss of 36 respondents, bringing the total sample to 1,939. However, this choice makes the sample more consistent, for the characteristics of each group of respondents are more univocal.

The samples are quite consistent over the countries, for the demographics age, gender and educational level (see **Table 1**). We see that the Belgian and French samples are slightly younger and consist of more men. Furthermore, we observe some differences in educational level. An explanation could lie in age differences; within the age group 16-25 some might not have finished high school, whereas others already started working. Nonetheless, we have to take into account that some of the findings presented in this paper

may partially be explained by differences in demographics. The respondents are dispersed over the countries and languages as follows: 377 Dutch, 518 Belgian and 1,044 French. 487 respondents speak Dutch, 1,452 French. This implies that the number of Flemish respondents is the lowest, with 110 respondents. Despite this weakness in the dataset, we decided that combined with either the Dutch, or French-speaking Belgians the sample of Flemish respondents was large enough to be included in the analysis.

Table 1: Comparisons among country samples on age, gender and educational level

		The Netherlands	Belgium	France
Age	6-15	4.5%	2.1%	4.8%
	16-25	49.1%	71.2%	65.8%
	26-35	19.6%	16.5%	18.0%
	36-45	12.5%	5.2%	8.5%
	46-55	9.5%	3.8%	2.1%
	56-65	3.7%	0.8%	0.7%
	66-75	1.1%	0.4%	0.1%
Gender	Male	45.9%	51.5%	51.5%
	Female	54.1%	48.5%	48.5%
Educational Level	Primary school	4.2%	3.3%	2.0%
	Secondary school	39.5%	36.3%	14.1%
	Vocational qualification	26.3%	9.6%	15.8%
	University Degree	14.6%	29.2%	37.5%
	Higher qualification	15.4%	21.5%	30.7%

Having set the parameters on the language and nationality of our sample, we can focus on the potential difference(s) we aim to explore. For this exploration we selected two questions: on what the respondents understand *The Hobbit* film(s) to be, and what they understand these films not to be. These questions reflected the notion of universal themes best (Olsen, 1999). The list of categories respondents are able to choose from ranges over different levels (e.g. genre, technology, and origin), but it is informative on what kind of storytelling audiences perceive the movies to be (Gao, 2016; Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009). Therefore, the two questions are suitable to investigate how both nationality and language inform the formation of interpretative communities. Out of a list of fifteen categories, respondents could pick up to three categories they considered fitting, or in the case of the subsequent question, not fitting. The categories include: Children’s story, Fairytale, World of fantasy, Prequel/sequel, Star attraction, Part of Tolkien’s legend-world, Multimedia franchise, Family film, Digital novelty cinema, Action-adventure, Peter Jackson movie, Literary adaptation, Stunning locations, Coming-of-age story, and Hollywood blockbuster. The list is far from exhaustive and the questions ask the respondent to say something about *The Hobbit* film(s), leaving us in the dark on which *Hobbit* film it is, or films it are, they are elaborating on. We therefore want to stress that we are neither exploring the categories as

such, nor (a) specific film(s) in *The Hobbit* series. Nevertheless, the two questions function well to shed light on similarities and differences between nationalities and languages in the understanding of an allegedly uniform media product.

Given the binary nature of the answers (fitting or not fitting), and limitations in evaluated categories (respondents could pick up to three definitions, vs. e.g. judging all on a Likert-scale), we made a further selection of categories. Only those categories selected by at least 400 respondents were included in the analysis.² As such, we aim to make sure that the analysis measures similarities and differences between groups, rather than differences between individuals. After all, the notion of an interpretative community, a group of people sharing a horizon of expectations, is under investigation, not individual audience members. The categories that yielded enough responses, did so for both nationality and language. For what *The Hobbit* films are understood to be, the analysis is limited to the following eight categories, with in between brackets the number of respondents: World of fantasy (N=1060), Prequel/sequel (N=496), Part of Tolkien's legend-world (N=1,270), Action-adventure (N=566), Peter Jackson movie (N=441), Literary adaptation (N=511), Stunning locations (N=720), and Hollywood blockbuster (N=411). On what *The Hobbit* films are understood not to be, only four categories emerge. Again, the number of respondents on the level of respectively nationality and language are put between brackets: Children's story (N=1,022), Fairytale (N=776), Star attraction (N=589), and Coming-of-age story (N=828).

The exclusion of the remaining categories does not make these irrelevant for analyzing *The Hobbit* film audiences. They might for example be selected by audiences beyond the Dutch, Belgian, and French. In fact, the disregarded categories might even be relevant for these audiences – the lowest number found were 15 respondents stating that *The Hobbit* films are not fantasy, which amounts to 1%. However, their numbers are too small to statistically analyze in this sample.

Analysis

The statistical analysis applied in this paper entails a test of association between categorical binary variables. This test serves to explore whether these associations exist beyond the dataset. In other words, whether the associations are merely coincidence or whether these are not. We want to know, for example, if being Dutch is associated with a selection for the category world of fantasy. Or if speaking French is associated to identifying *The Hobbit* film(s) as not being a children's story. By comparing the outcomes of these tests, we can further explore similarities and differences between nationalities and languages. Given that we work with two binary variables per analysis, the proper statistical test to measure association is the Chi-Square test. The effect size is thereafter measured with the Phi-Coefficient. Effect is not to be interpreted as a causal relationship. Rather, the measured effect indicates the strength of the associations. The Phi-coefficient is interpreted similarly to a Pearson Correlation, identifying a positive, negative, or no relation.

A Chi-Square test is designed to test random samples, to be able to say something about a population as a whole. This type of sample is distinctively different than the

convenience sample we are working with. For one, there is no way of knowing whether the sample of *The Hobbit* audiences this questionnaire reached is representative, and if so on what level. Most likely, it is not, but it might very well be indicative for *The Hobbit* audiences (cf. Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009; Livingstone, 2003; Meers, 2009). However, *The Hobbit* audiences are a distinctive group in their own right. Rather than questioning the population as a whole, for example aiming to explore the understanding of all Belgians, we thus confine ourselves to the *Hobbit* audience members who have participated in the survey. Findings of this research are therefore not representative and thus not generalizable to all Belgians, all *The Hobbit* audiences, or to any of the groups we explore in this paper. However, by exploring the differences and similarities within this sample, we are able to scrutinize the geographical and linguistic dimensions of understanding *The Hobbit* for this analysis surpasses the exploration of categories and films as such.

Findings

Analyzing the data on both the level of nationality and mother tongue, differences are found, be it that effect sizes don't exceed the value of (-).3, even if significance levels are high. This means that observed differences are small. Nonetheless, these differences are plentiful and differ on the level of nationality and language. Yet, before turning to these findings in more detail it has to be noted that there are also similarities observed. First, on the level of nationality, there are no differences between being Dutch, Belgian, or French in categorizing *The Hobbit* films as a Prequel/sequel, an Action adventure film and as not a Star attraction. Grounded in mother tongue, even more similarities can be observed. In addition to the similarities on the level of nationality, speaking Dutch or French does not yield any differences in characterizing *The Hobbit* films as a Legend world, a Literary adaptation, a film with Stunning locations, and as not a Coming-of-age movie. These similarities are an important finding. They indicate an uniformity in categorizing a Hollywood product over the geographically closely situated nationalities and languages explored. We are however specifically interested in the differences. To explore these in more detail, we will first turn to the differences between nationalities, and thereafter to language. Lastly, we will compare the findings and the implications of measuring on different levels of (cultural) proximity and the importance of language and nationality therein.

Nationality

Most observed associations on the level of nationality are rather small in their effect size. However, they do result in associations with one or more nationalities – each significant finding is marked in bold in the following Tables. The only category that correlates with each of the three nationalities we examine in this paper, is *The Hobbit* films as part of the Peter Jackson oeuvre (see **Table 2**). Being Dutch or Belgian yield small effect sizes, respondents holding either of these nationalities are less likely to ascribe this category to *The Hobbit*

films. Being French, however, yields a large positive effect size on ticking this category in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Categories of what *The Hobbit* films are, per country

<i>The Hobbit</i> film(s) is/are...		The Netherlands	Belgium	France
...a world of fantasy	X ²	91.320***	.015	55.930***
	Phi	.217***	-.003	-.170***
...a prequel/sequel	X ²	.114	.584	.894
	Phi	.008	.017	-.021
...a legend world	X ²	5.301*	.459	1.504
	Phi	.052*	-.015	-.028
...an action/adventure	X ²	.000	.001	.001
	Phi	-.000	-.001	-.001
...a Peter Jackson film	X ²	18.883***	12.446***	43.309***
	Phi	-.099***	-.080***	.149***
...a literary adaptation	X ²	2.713	2.849	7.872**
	Phi	.037	.038	-.064**
...a film with stunning locations	X ²	4.081*	.151	3.796
	Phi	.046*	.009	-.044
...a Hollywood blockbuster	X ²	32.993***	1.514	31.945***
	Phi	-.130***	-.028	.128***

(2, N=1975) * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 2 shows that differences between countries mainly occur between the Dutch and the French. There is only one exception to this: the Belgians and French differ, be it in small effect sizes, in their opinion of *The Hobbit* not being a Coming-of-age story, as can be observed in **Table 3** (with the Belgians more likely and the French less likely to identify this category). The Dutch and the French differ in identifying *The Hobbit* as a World of fantasy, with the Dutch more often selecting this category, and the French less often selecting this category – both with proper effect sizes. A similar difference is observed in identifying *The Hobbit* as a Hollywood blockbuster. However, here the French are more likely to select this category, whereas the Dutch select this category less often. Lastly, the Dutch and French differ in identifying *The Hobbit* as not being a Children’s story. The former are more likely to emphasize this, whereas the latter, with a small effect size, are less likely to select this category.

Table 3: Categories of what *The Hobbit* films are not, per country

<i>The Hobbit</i> film(s) is/are...		The Netherlands	Belgium	France
...not a children's story	X ²	56.314***	3.063	19.395***
	Phi	.170***	-.040	-.100***
...not a fairytale	X ²	15.743***	2.058	3.522
	Phi	-.090***	.033	.043
...not a star attraction	X ²	1.723	.673	3.133
	Phi	-.030	-.019	.040
...not a coming-of-age story	X ²	1.087	11.584**	4.810*
	Phi	-.024	.077**	-.050*

(2, N=1975) * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

The Dutch are furthermore most often found to be the only ones with an association to categories: in three observations. All of these effect sizes are small. This means that being Dutch is only slightly associated with selecting a legend world, and a film with stunning

Table 4: Categories of what *The Hobbit* films are, per language

<i>The Hobbit</i> film(s) is/are...		Dutch	French
...a world of fantasy	X ²	97.291***	97.291***
	Phi	.224***	-.224***
...a prequel/sequel	X ²	.282	.282
	Phi	.012	-.012
...a legend world	X ²	2.387	2.387
	Phi	.035	-.035
...an action/adventure	X ²	1.369	1.369
	Phi	-.027	.027
...a Peter Jackson film	X ²	25.929***	25.929***
	Phi	-.116***	.116***
...a literary adaptation	X ²	3.035	3.035
	Phi	.040	-.040
...a film with stunning locations	X ²	2.036	2.036
	Phi	.032	-.032
...a Hollywood blockbuster	X ²	30.675***	30.675***
	Phi	-.126***	.126**

(2, N=1975) * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

locations when categorizing *The Hobbit*. They are also less likely to find *The Hobbit* not to be a Fairytale. The French are the only ones in one category: a slight effect size is observed in

being less likely to select *The Hobbit* to be a literary adaptation. In the next section, we explore whether the differences found on the level of nationality may or may not continue on that of language.

Languages

Before turning to the more detailed findings, we first have to make a general remark on the findings regarding languages. While there are fewer differences in categories between languages than there are between countries, the effect size measures are much larger. This means that when we observe an association, it is much stronger than the ones we have presented thus far. Furthermore, none of the effect sizes are small, as was the case with some of the effect sizes on the level of nationality. Thus, the pattern may differ, but the findings presented in **Table 4** and **Table 5** are stronger than those on the level of nationality.

Table 5: Categories of what *The Hobbit* films are not, per language

<i>The Hobbit</i> film(s) is/are...		Dutch	French
...not a children's story	X ²	46.928***	46.928***
	Phi	.156***	-.156***
...not a fairytale	X ²	21.024***	21.024***
	Phi	-.104***	.104***
...not a star attraction	X ²	3.292	3.292
	Phi	-.041	.041
...not a coming-of-age story	X ²	.555	.555
	Phi	.017	-.017

(2, N=1975) * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Respondents speaking Dutch are more likely to categorize *The Hobbit* film as a world of fantasy (see **Tables 3** and **4**). Those speaking French, on the other hand, are positively associated with *The Hobbit* films being a Peter Jackson film and a Hollywood blockbuster. On what *The Hobbit* films are not, opinions also differ. Those speaking Dutch feel stronger about *The Hobbit* not being a Children's story, while those who speak French are more likely to indicate that it is not a Fairytale.

The observed differences are interesting findings as such. Yet, what cultural differences may root these different categorizations is beyond the scope of this paper. What we will take from the analysis presented here however, is that an allegedly uniform (Hollywood) media product is not consumed as uniformly as some may have expected. Language and nationality clearly are of importance for how the films are understood. Even between countries situated rather close to one another, significant differences can be found. It is how these two variables stand in comparison that invites for a final section.

Nationality and language

Thus far, we explored that there are many differences found in how *The Hobbit* film is categorized between countries, but the associations are small. On the level of language, there are less differences, but stronger associations. This means that one question remains: how do nationality and language compare. To further understand this, we simplified the findings presented thus far in **Table 6**, differentiating between mere a positive, negative, or no relationship between categorizations.

Table 6: Simplified overview of differences between countries and languages.

<i>The Hobbit</i> film(s) is/are...	Country			Language	
	The Netherlands	Belgium	France	Dutch	French
...a world of fantasy	+	.	-	+	-
...a legend world	+
...a Peter Jackson film	-	-	+	-	+
...a literary adaptation	.	.	-	.	.
...a film with stunning locations	+
...a Hollywood blockbuster	-	.	+	-	+
...not a children's story	+	.	-	+	-
...not a fairytale	-	.	.	-	+
...not a coming-of-age story	.	+	-	.	.

A (+) means correlated with a positive effect size, a (-) means correlated with a negative effect size and (.) means no correlation.

As depicted in **Table 6**, findings on nationality and language do not necessarily overlap. For example, being French or Belgian is not associated with identifying *The Hobbit* not to be a Fairytale, whilst we observe a positive effect of speaking French and categorizing the film(s) as such. A similar finding can be observed the other way around. Whilst being Dutch is associated with categorizing *The Hobbit* as a Legend world and as a film with Stunning locations, speaking Dutch is not. And being Belgian or French is respectively associated positively and negatively with categorizing *The Hobbit* as not being a Coming-of-age story, whereas speaking either language is not associated with this category. However, if there is an overlap, speaking French and being French overlap. As do speaking Dutch and being Dutch. We would therefore conclude that whilst language and nationality (partly) overlap, each also brings different understandings of media products, as in this case *The Hobbit*.

Discussion

Hollywood endures as the storyteller of our time; audiences around the globe continue to find entertainment in major blockbusters and films like *The Hunger Games*, *The Hobbit*, and *X-Men* consistently lead the box office charts across the Western world (Gao, 2016; Elberse, 2013). Audiences are particularly spell-bound by the many-faceted fantasy franchises such as *The Hobbit* (Thompson, 2003). The huge international success of such global media products leads to concerns with regard to cultural diversity (Barthel-Bouchier, 2011) but there is plenty of reason to suppose a differentiation of audience reception of these same films amongst various interpretative communities that are tied together by cultural proximity in one way or another (Crane, 2002).

This study allowed us to take a close look at the understanding of a highly successful global media product across a set of communities. In particular, it provided us with the unique opportunity to study how audiences appropriate a major fantasy franchise across nationalities as well as language groups. This enabled us to reconsider the persistence of nationality as the main (differentiating) unit of analysis in scholarly work on audience reception and see whether linguistic proximity is a useful complement or supplement to this.

We analyzed how survey respondents in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands characterized *The Hobbit* by selecting three categories that they felt the movies belong to (most) and three categories that were least fitting. We looked at the degree to which they checked the eight available options. Our findings show that how audiences understand and thus position *The Hobbit* is indeed related to their nationality to a certain extent. The analysis demonstrates that the Belgian, Dutch, and French filmgoers agree on three aspects: they characterize the trilogy as a Prequel/sequel, and as an Action/adventure film to the same extent. They also agree that the films are not a Star attraction. Whereas this shows that audiences across countries apparently share the degree to which they emphasize these categories in stating what the trilogy is and is not, these characterizations are also fairly factual and less dependent on interpretation than some of the other options. The films were indeed presented as prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, they represent the action/adventure genre, and the main cast is not populated by major movie stars although they do appear in less central roles. In this respect, the blockbuster strategy employed by the producers (Biltereyst, 2006; Elberse, 2013; Schatz, 2009) can be considered as successful.

However, there were also differences between groups. Defining *The Hobbit* as, for example, a Coming-of-age story, a Peter Jackson film, or a Legend world seems of a more subjective nature and these categories indeed show differences amongst the three countries. The analysis shows a range of differences (variation occurs in eight instances), which mostly occur between France and the Netherlands. The respondents thus display different understandings of what the franchise does or does not represent in these national contexts. However, these differences might be more geographically grounded in some cases than is suggested by previous literature. For example, the participants with a Dutch nationality more often than others classify the movies as 'a film with stunning locations'.

The Netherlands is a highly populated and industrialized country, and is particularly flat. This might explain why the Dutch are particularly stunned by the mountainous landscapes in *The Hobbit* films. This qualification might have to do with nationality, but only in a very literal and geographical way. Other findings, of why the French for example identify *The Hobbit* to be a Peter Jackson film, call for more complex social explanations. Regardless of these nuances on the level of nationality, our findings suggest that language might be of more importance than nationality.

The differences between the understandings of *The Hobbit* between the two language groups are fewer but considerably stronger. The Dutch-speaking respondents in Flanders and the Netherlands differ from the French-speaking respondents in France and Wallonia with respect to the degree to which they define *The Hobbit* as ‘a World of fantasy’, ‘a Peter Jackson film’, and ‘a Hollywood blockbuster’, and ‘not a Children’s story’, and ‘not a Fairytale’. In these five instances, the differentiation is considerably more significant. This would indicate that interpretative communities may be defined by cultural proximity operationalized as both nationality and linguistic distance but the latter demarcates different understandings more clearly. What is more, the differences found between nationalities and language groups do not necessarily overlap, so cross-national differences are in this case not masked by variation that is in fact caused by linguistic proximity. These findings suggest that both the film industry and scholars that are concerned with cultural homogenization understand the linguistic dimension of sense making. As noted, language is not a neutral medium (Butsch & Livingstone, 2014; Ginsburgh et al., 2011) and our findings suggest that linguistic proximity is indeed a valid supplement to nationality (maybe even more valid than nationality). To further explore the linguistic dimension and the role it plays in sense making processes of interpretative communities, we envision three important lines of future research. Firstly, it would be interesting to see how this dimension is of importance for other countries with similar differences as the ones investigated here (for example, Austria, Germany and Switzerland). Secondly, one might wonder whether we should think in terms of language groups (Dutch and German are for example closer together than Dutch and French) (cf. Heilbron, 1999). Language usually comes with a mode of storytelling, hence the differences in the perception of *The Hobbit* trilogy as either a fairytale or a children’s story might be explained as such. Thirdly, attention should be paid to subtitling and dubbing. As language is obviously significant in the appropriation of culture products, and translations are never a mirror of the original (Butsch & Livingstone, 2014) these two modes might distort the assumed universality of the product. For example, in France dubbing is more common, while in Flanders and the Netherlands subtitling is the dominant mode.

This study confirms that a global media product is understood in different ways across various interpretative communities. The borders around these communities may be drawn on the basis of several social demographics. Language appears to be a stronger delineator here than nationality. However, we not only found differences between Dutch- and French-speaking audiences in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands; we also found many similarities. And although further audience research is needed to qualify these results,

we can already conclude those similarities might be taken as signs of cultural proximity within this corner of Europe, as signals of decreased cultural diversity in the Western world, or as indicators of the universality of global media products that originate in an increasingly denationalized film industry.

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Notes:

¹ German is an official language in Belgium, in addition to Dutch and French. However, the German-speaking Community consists of a very small number (around 76.000) of inhabitants. This is too few to include them in the analysis. However, a similar analysis between for example Germany, Austria, and Switzerland may be very fruitful on the level of language.

² This cut-off point is set because after the 400 mark, respondents that marked 'indeed' plummeted to around 300 and lower.