

Studying, Defining and Reaching the Audience in a Film Market: The Case of Estonia

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ABSTRACT

In small European film markets reliant on public funding and artistic considerations, the audience question has been a constant source of ambiguity. This inherent challenge has significantly influenced the strategies employed by film industry professionals to understand, target, and engage their audiences. Through conducting in-depth interviews with film professionals, this article examines these practices within the Estonian film industry. By filling a significant research gap, this exploratory study will argue three key points. Firstly, despite limited institutional knowledge production on audiences, industry professionals, particularly in exhibition and distribution, actively engage in diverse research endeavours to tailor their approaches. Secondly, despite the constraints imposed by Estonia's relatively small market size, industry professionals employ film-, production-, and audience-specific details to identify their target audiences. Lastly, this research demonstrates how these investigative and defining activities contribute to the formulation of audience-reaching strategies, thereby highlighting the complex role audiences play within the context of a small European film market.

KEYWORDS: film industry, production studies, audience, imagined audience, imagined affordance

INTRODUCTION

In light of the datafication and platformization of film audience's consumption patterns, recent film industry lore in Europe around financing, producing, distributing, and exhibiting films in recent years has emphasized knowing, owning, and shaping one's audience (see Koljonen 2020, 2019, 2018). While these developments might suggest a more audience-centric film industry, very little research has been conducted to examine how such professionals in Europe actually try to understand, conceptualize, and shape the practices of

audiences. Addressing these issues academically is crucial as it sheds light both on the rationales and positions that industry professionals take towards the audience and on how audience perspectives are considered in increasingly complex film markets, where different types of films and content providers compete for audiences' time and attention. Moreover, the ways in which the audience is operationalized in the practices of film professionals contribute to what is offered to local audiences and to how effectively, comprehensively and purposefully these offerings are performed.

In this paper, I will address these issues by exploring (RQ1) how industry professionals (producers, executives in distribution, executives in exhibition) in Estonia study and understand their audiences; (RQ2) how they define imagined (target) audiences; and (RQ3) how they intend to shape audiences' practice.

This paper is situated in the Estonian film market, which has witnessed steady growth over the past 20 years in terms of production volumes; state funding (from 2-3 feature-length feature films per year to 10 per year, in addition to documentaries, animations and short films); market share of national productions; and cinema admissions. Such developments have increased the diversity (in terms of genres and themes) of films and introduced commercially oriented and privately funded productions to the market. However, despite these advancements, as a small market with its 1.3 million inhabitants and linguistic and cultural peculiarities, Estonia faces the challenges of such markets in general: limited resources, commercially challenging domestic demand, instability, and vulnerability (Puppis 2009; Rohn 2014). These limitations also appear on the level of audience-oriented activities as discussed further below, although film professionals in Estonia have been increasingly successful in reaching their audiences.

Amid recent research that addresses the practice shaping relationships between film audiences and industry professionals in small European markets, Petr Szczepanik (2021) has shown how small market dynamics, state-dependent financing, and artistically driven filmmaking have shaped filmmakers' approaches to audiences. Focusing on peripheral markets in East-Central Europe, he highlights the filmmakers' intuitive and speculative approach to audiences. He characterizes Czech producers as "anti-businesslike" and emphasizes the absence of audience research, marketing strategies, and targeting efforts (*ibid.*). These tendencies are often attributed to the smallness of the market, and they were also referred to by the informants in Esto-

nia. Such a stance towards audiences can be observed in other parts of Europe as it is influenced by the states' involvement in film funding, which can be argued to undermine productions' commercial ambitions in favor of artistic aims. However, this appears particularly pronounced in the smallest European markets, leading to "enclosed conceptions of national audiences and cultures" and self-centred intuitiveness forming the backbone of producers' activities towards audiences (*ibid.*).

Industry professionals in Central and Eastern Europe often view filmmaking as a dichotomy between art and business, limiting the potential economic and cultural impact of their productions, as argued by Mitkus and Nedzinskaitė-Mitké (2015). Such tensions between "economics vs. culture, high vs. low, public vs. private" (Hill & Kawashima 2016) have also been widely documented in film policy research, which has further shown how often the tension between the cultural and economic value tends to dominate policy discourse (McElroy & Noonan 2022). Thus, such tensions materialize on the levels of both policy and industry practice, which tends to be symptomatic for dominantly publicly subsidized film markets. In this paper, I explore the ways in which, despite existing in the Estonian context, such juxtapositions do not reflect the larger picture of studying, defining, and reaching the audience. However, as an underlying tendency, they may limit the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of different types of activities, as explored further in this paper.

In Estonia, where the film industry's audience-related activities have been highly under-researched, sales and marketing have still been identified as a stumbling block for Estonian film production firms (Tafel-Viia et al. 2012; Ibrus et al. 2013). The lack of comprehensive marketing and targeting efforts has also been pointed out (Soo 2011), similar to the aforementioned East-Central European context. Additionally, in the last decade, the Estonian Film Institute (EFI) has identified film marketing as an important development area in

development plans and vision documents¹. Year after year, the same documents have underlined the necessity of institutionally led audience research. Industry professionals seem to expect that this should be the job of EFI. However, the articulated necessity has not led to any outputs, which demonstrates its low priority for the industry.

Although the greater involvement of distribution companies has strengthened the marketing of Estonian productions since the early 2010s, the activities of studying, defining, and reaching the audience practices remain unexplored. To address this gap, which is similarly prevalent in Europe and the US (Funk 2021), I will explore the different activities and approaches behind understanding audiences, the specifics of defining target groups, and the different ways in which film professionals try to shape and guide the practices of audiences. The exploratory and explanatory results aim to illuminate the unexplored areas and establish paths for future (applied) research. In doing so, I argue that, while similarities in terms of rationales and stances towards the audience can be found in the context of other Central and Eastern Europe markets, the dynamics among audience research activities to define and reach audiences in Estonia point to significance and value that is assigned to the audiences by the professionals in different junctures (in financing, production, distribution, and exhibition) in which audiences and the film interconnect. While I argue that Estonian film professionals' audience-orientedness is particularly significant in their audience reach activities, the attitudes and approaches to audience research and target group formation points to unestablished systems and narrow practices, especially when it comes to financing and production.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationships between media production and consumption have been studied mainly within the domain of media production studies. The focus has been on the ways in which producers and other professionals in media production relate to their audiences and what kind of stances they take towards them. As Ross (2019: 134–135) summarizes in his overview, understanding the “public taste” (McQuail, 1987, 149) and “what the audience wants” (Gitlin, 1983, 19–46) have been perceived as a central skill and focus of media professionals. Authors have also argued that producers are “popular anthropologists” (Dornfeld, 1998, 141–143) and maintain a “social distance” (Thompson, 1995; Zafirau, 2009) between themselves and audiences. Ross (2019: 134–135) also points out that, in the context of the discussions around cultural industries, the relation has been argued to miss the interaction between the audiences and producers of cultural artefacts (see Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Caldwell, 2008; Deuze, 2007).

Mostly US- and UK-centric, these studies have established that “informal knowledge” (Ross 2019) often guides decision-making in media production. The notions used to conceptualize this concept in the context of film production are “common sense” (Caldwell 2008), as well as intuition and tacit knowledge (Zafirau 2009). On the other hand, Ross (2014) utilizes Goffman's (1959) model of social interactions and Meyrowitz's (1985) conceptualizations of social situations to frame production as a social situation. Ross (2019) also introduces frameworks from expertise and experience studies to production studies in order to study the knowledge the producers have about their audiences. In the context of television, Ang (1991) discusses how “institutional knowledge,” as interconnected with institutionalized power, is motivated by a need to construct the audience in a way that serves the production's institutional goals and needs. Such knowledge is then produced through audience research and importantly through different

1 “Filmivaldkonna visioon 2030. Ettepanekud Eesti Filmi Instituudi arengukava koostamiseks”, “Eesti filmi arengusuunad 2012–2020”, “SA Eesti Filmi Instituudi arengukava 2020–2024”

types of formal and spontaneous industry practices (ibid.).

In this paper, I will approach the research questions with the notion of imagined affordance as a core of the theoretical framework, primarily for its utility in delving into the practice shaping dynamics between the two (Kauber 2022; Kauber & Rohn 2025). As we have theorized in detail elsewhere (Kauber & Rohn 2025), as a notion, imagined affordance conceptualizes the ways in which industry professionals and audiences approach and shape the process that Gray (2010) calls “speculative consumption.” Thus, audiences actively participate in activities to envision the potential offerings and experiential impact of a film. On the other side, industry professionals aim to shape these activities (through marketing and PR, for example) to guide audience expectations and decision-making. These concepts highlight how industry professionals connect with both the film itself and the audience, influencing their expectations and activities.

Briefly, imagined affordance, a notion that builds on the general affordance theory (Gibson 1979; Norman 1988, 1990 and 1999) is defined by Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015: 5) in the following way:

“Users may have certain expectations about their communication technologies, data, and media that, in effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested. These expectations may not be encoded hard and fast into such tools by design, but they nevertheless become part of the users’ perceptions of what actions are available to them. This is what we define as imagined affordance[.]”

Importantly, Nagy and Neff (2015: 5) point out that these imagined affordances that, in the context of this paper, shape how audiences approach and “use” film experiences emerge “between users’ perceptions,

attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers.” This concept is illustrated in Figure 1. Now, crucial for the framework of this paper is how industry professionals form and mediate their intentions and perceptions to the audience; how they define imagined audiences and imagine their attitudes and perceptions; and how they thenceforth try to influence how audiences form their expectations with the materials (PR, marketing) that industry professionals produce. Thus, the complex interrelation among the ways in which they produce knowledge about the audience, the ways in which they perceive their target audience and its relation to the film, and the audience’s expectation forming practices can be conceptualized with the notion of imagined affordance. **(Figure 1)**

The theoretical framework here links the notion of imagined affordance together with the Genette’s (1987) notion of paratext that, in the context of film, informs audiences’ expectations, perceptions, and attitudes towards the film experience (Gray 2010). Thus, by producing and mediating different marketing and PR materials (trailers, posters, interviews, synopsis, etc.), the professionals of film production, distribution, and exhibition provide content for the audience to imagine the affordances of a film – or, in other words, for their expectations and perceptions.

Here, it is important to incorporate the notions of imagined audience, institutionalized audience, and audience information systems. Imagined audience is a widely used notion in social media research (Litt 2016; Marwick & boyd 2011; Kim et al. 2018; Murumaa & Siibak 2012, etc.) and refers, in its broadest definition, to “the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience” (Litt 2012: 331). By combining the ideas of imagined affordance and imagined audience, we can better understand how professionals imagine and conceptualize their audiences, enabling them to target their activities and shape the imagined affordances that audi-

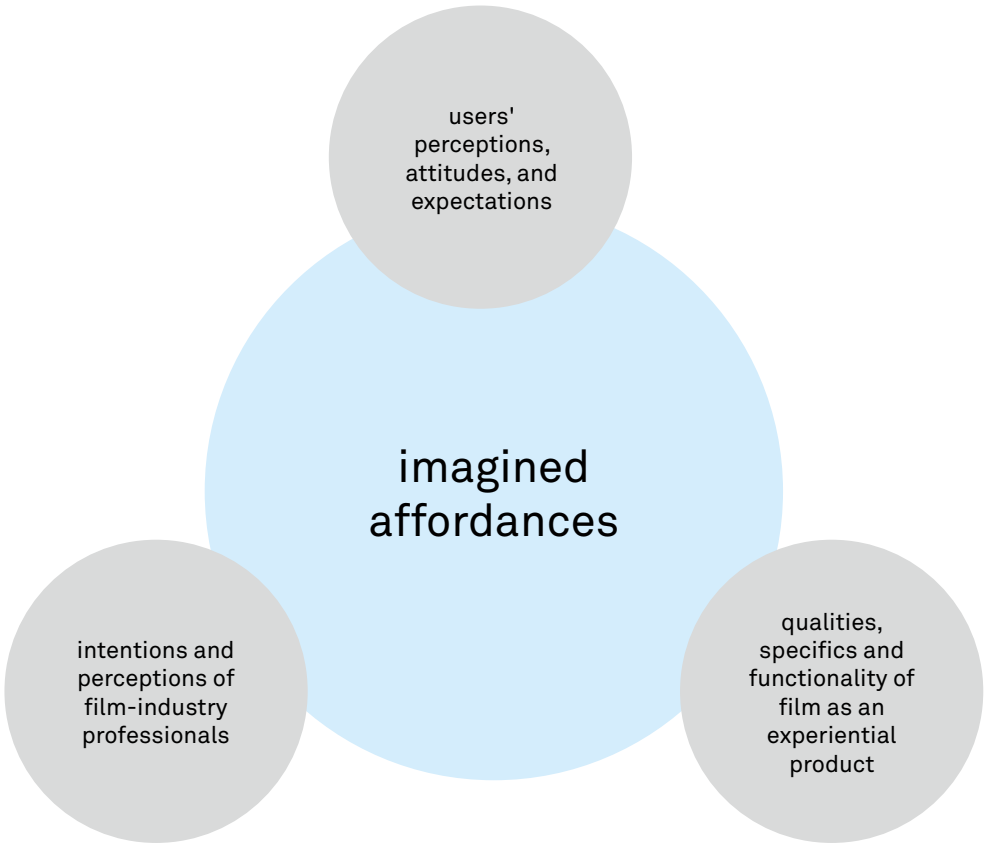


FIGURE 1
Emergence of imagined affordances.

ence form. Thus, imagined audience and institutionalized audience shape industry professionals' intentions and perceptions, as well as the ways in which they produce, mediate, or exhibit the film as an experiential product.

This aspect also points to the possibility of marrying the notions of imagined affordances and institutionalized audience, as coined by Napoli (2011), who builds on the concept of institutionally effective audience, as discussed by Ettema and Whitney (1994). Napoli (2011: 3) defines institutionalized audience as "socially constructed by media industries, advertisers, and associated audience measurement firms," reflecting not only the needs and interests of media firms but also the ways in which they conceptualize and operationalize their audiences. Both concepts (imagined audience and institutionalized audience) refer to the audience as (social) constructs, whereas the notion of institutionalized audience is more focused on the imperatives, practices, rationales, and strategies of media organizations in its definition. The notion of imagined audience, however, focuses more on the individual mental conceptualizations for which reason both are necessary for the theoretical framework. Thus, in the framework, it can be used to understand those underlying rationales, constructs, and activities of professionals that influence the emergence of imagined affordances.

Lastly, the framework incorporates the notion of audience information systems (Napoli 2011), which encapsulate the resources, tools, and feedback mechanisms with which media professionals study and predict audience preferences and consumption patterns, streamline product targeting, and observe the effect and effectiveness of their activities. As discussed in the results sections of this paper, imagined audience, institutionalized audience, and audience information systems inform film industry professionals in studying, defining, and reaching the audience. To summarize the theoretical framework in the context of RQs, the notion of imagined affordance,

as coupled with the abovementioned concepts, addresses the dynamics among industry professionals, audiences, and the film as an experiential product by illuminating how the audience is understood, studied, and defined, as well as how this influences the ways in which industry professionals aim to shape audience expectations and perception-forming practices. Additionally, the framework helps to reveal the central rationales and activities that contribute to imagined affordances, which are key for understanding the factors that drive audience decision-making and practices.

METHODS

This paper is based on 17 in-depth expert interviews conducted online via Zoom in 2021. More specifically, I interviewed seven cinema theatre executives (mostly CEOs), six film producers, three executives in distribution companies, and one representative of a film institute (public film funding agency). The representatives of cinemas were chosen to include multiplexes and cinema chains, arthouse theatres, and small-town cinemas, while distributors were chosen to include both companies that distribute major global productions and those that distribute mainly European and arthouse films. The producers were chosen amongst the most active production companies focusing on producing feature films, based on their availability and willingness. I used a semi-structured interview format for the interviews, as it enables flexibility, promotes dialogue, and leaves room for exploring emerging aspects of understudied research questions (Brinkmann 2018). As in the case of "exclusive informants," the interview situations formed "asymmetrical social relations" between the informant and the interviewer (Bruun 2016), which required me, as a researcher, to acknowledge my position as an outsider and establish ways to build trust with the interviewees. To do so, I aimed to be transparent in terms of the goals and purpose of the research, as well as open and very responsive in interview situations.

Comprehensive interviewee-based preparations and active listening were crucial in this context. The interview guides following key themes (studying, defining, and reaching the audience) were reviewed beforehand by an industry professional and two scholars in order to assure the relevance and understandability of the questions. The interview guides were adjusted for the stakeholders, so there were recurring and also specialized questions for each stakeholder. In developing the interview guides, I stayed within the limits of key topics, while including questions that were relevant for the particular interviewee (based on their position in the film industry or on their previous work). The interviews lasted from 40 to 110 minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed.

I applied Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis as an analysis method and used Nvivo12 software as a tool for the analysis. I utilized an iterative process following six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars and writing. The first phase involved reading and rereading the transcripts and listening to the recordings while making notes and analytically seeking connections between the data and the research questions to lay a foundation for the coding process. In the second phase, I started coding the data, using a mix of interpretive and descriptive codes inductively, which helped me to capture the nuances of the data without losing focus on the research questions. After polishing the codes, I proceeded with the third phase: constructing themes by analyzing the codes and relating the constructed themes to each other. While the constructed themes encompassed various other aspects of audience-industry professional relations discussed in interviews, the main themes (and their subthemes) explored for this paper were studying the audience, defining the audience, reaching the audience, and shaping expectations. Throughout the fourth phase, I refined the

themes and ensured their scope, meaningfulness, and coherence. This involved reviewing the themes "in relation to the coded data and entire data set," as well as the codes as a whole (Braun & Clarke 2012: 65). The fifth phase encompassed developing the essence of the themes further by working on the specifics of each theme in relation to RQs and other themes, as well as polishing the names of the themes. The last phase, which ran in parallel with the previous ones, was to turn the themes into writing. Additionally, I took notes during the interviews, and I wrote short analytical memos and notes during the analysis and literature review process to support the research process and reflect on possible ethical issues. As a result, the informants are referred to only by their profession, and I removed any references to specific productions from the quotes. Furthermore, I used informed consent, granted anonymity when possible, and used member checks to further the trustworthiness of the findings and ethics of the research process (Tiidenberg 2018; Mertens 2014). Generally, I also followed Estonia's Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.² The results are presented in the following three subsections following the RQs: studying, defining, and reaching the audience.

STUDYING THE AUDIENCE

To understand how film professionals aim to shape audience practice, it is essential to map how they understand and produce knowledge about the audience and then employ this knowledge to form or not form target groups. Thus, how they form their imagined audiences (Litt 2012) or institutionalized audiences (Napoli 2011), as well as utilize different audience information systems (Napoli 2011), becomes a set of practices and a strategic stance towards the audience and reflects the needs and interests of film professionals. I will start with the institutionalized forms of studying the audience and continue with the

2 <https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/HEA-TEADUSTAVA.pdf>

practices as performed by producers, distributors, and cinema executives.

Despite policy calls for more audience research, Estonia lacks comprehensive studies on audience preferences and compositions. The relevant knowledge production performed or initiated by the Estonian Film Institute (EFI) is largely limited to managing and disseminating weekly box office results, a task assumed in 2020 after a major distributor's closure. Such institutionalized knowledge production around box office data includes weekly BO reports and yearly BO summaries, only mediating quantitative data that lacks analytical depth. In comparison to more successful Nordic film markets, where public institutions conduct regular audience research, such activity is very limited.

Accordingly, industry professionals need to build their knowledge about audiences by themselves. However, results suggest that this is often limited by resources, artistic principles, and market dynamics. Consequently, various players adopt distinct practices and approaches to gather audience knowledge. Distributors and exhibitors play a pivotal role here due to their proximity to audiences. Producers, who typically rely on their intuition when it comes to audiences, depend on input from distributors. Two producers explained:

"Usually, a producer tries to find a distributor who already knows the client [audience], for every project before the production." (Producer, interview 29.04.2021)

"As every film has its audience, right, I think that it's wise for the producer to collaborate with a distributor, who collaborates with a media agency or a digital agency, as it is today." (Producer, interview 23.04.2021)

However, the interviews suggested that, for producers, the audience information systems (Napoli 2011) also consist of admission figures, test screenings, feedback

on earlier films, "participant observation" of screenings, (social) media monitoring, analysis of previous marketing/PR activities and their performance regarding different types of productions, and the observation of societal milieux. Such use of audience information systems suggests that the focus is more on planning and analyzing PR/marketing activities effects, rather than on integrating the audience's perspective to early phases of production (e.g., script-writing, script analysis from the audience's point of view).

Yet, as suggested by several producers, producers' audience research is often unsystematic, relying more on intuition and personal experience than on data. As one producer stated:

"I think that a producer should observe what is going on in society. I think that they do this. And on the basis of this, a perception emerges. And I think that is enough for a producer." (Producer, interview 23.04.2021)

When it comes to utilizing quantitative data, industry professionals typically limit their efforts to monitoring social media metrics and box office results. This can be attributed to the small size of the market, which renders broader research endeavors impractical for producers. Additionally, the small-scale nature of companies within the industry plays a role, as producers lack the necessary resources, time, and personnel to conduct more extensive research activities. The interviewed producers often underscored these factors by contrasting Estonia with major players in Hollywood, emphasizing the differing principles and rationales guiding their work. Thus, despite the variety of different research practices, a rather ambivalent stance towards knowledge production about the audience prevails amongst interviewed producers, as in other Central and Eastern European countries. This again displays the low priority of such research activities for producers, as well as the narrowness of the constructed

understandings of audiences. Moreover, notably, many of the discussed activities focus on examining the effects of their production, dissemination, and exhibition-related practices, rather than on proactive research that can be interconnected with other production related activities throughout the production. This raises further questions about how sufficiently the audience is constructed and considered in the lifecycle of a production, as the activities are focused on informing the mediating activities and gaining feedback after finishing the production. Thus, limiting the (audience-based) understanding and scope that the producers have about the imagined affordances of a particular film.

The situation is different for distributors, although they also rely on intuition, tacit knowledge, and industry experience to understand audiences. However, in comparison to producers, their activities are more systematic, goal-oriented, and comprehensive. A central resource for understanding (imagined) audiences and imagined affordances of specific film experiences is admission figures, which are used to predict possible performances of new titles by finding similar films for comparison, to form imagined target audiences for new titles, to set goals and expectations for new releases, and to analyze possible release/marketing/PR strategies:

“What I do is that with every film I examine the numbers [BO results] of similar films that have screened before and what could be the so-called indicators. [...] And I try to reach some conclusions on how the number is what it is. And about 90% of films behave in a way that I have predicted.” (Distributor, interview 30.03.2021)

For distributors, the mentioned key elements and the analysis of specific films constitute the resources for defining target groups, as discussed further below. Beyond these, efforts that can be argued to con-

tribute to tacit knowledge and intuition also included participant observation at screenings. The results align with the notion of industry professionals acting as “popular anthropologists” (Dornfeld 1998) or acquiring “interactional expertise” through interactional activities with audience members (Ross 2019). However, it can be argued that the intuition and tacit knowledge-based approaches cannot cover the complexity of audience composition, practices, and expectations and perceptions (shaping the imagined affordances). This is due to the nature of the described resources (BO results analysis, observation at screenings), as they support preexisting assumptions and perceptions rather than provide novel insights into the interests, practices, and needs of the audience.

Among the various players in the Estonian market, exhibitors display the most diverse practices for audience knowledge. In addition to analyzing weekly admission figures for program and schedule formation, as well as tracking audience interests, exhibitors' key resources include satisfaction surveys, questionnaires, commissioned market research, campaign performance surveys, and loyalty program data. Cinema chains, in particular, utilize these audience information systems to gather feedback and improve their services by designing venues and offerings accordingly. A CEO of a cinema chain explained:

“We also do market research and customer feedback polls if we want to know something more qualitative that cinema visit statistics may not give. [...] We have asked about movie viewing trends, especially in today's Covid era, where there are discussions about cinema versus streaming and about the fate of the cinema [...] We have studied customer experience, consumption preferences – all kinds of things.” (CEO of a cinema chain, interview 29.03.2021)

The cinema chains also have loyalty programs in place in which they claim to have up to half a million unique accounts (the population of Estonia is 1.3 million), allowing them to track their customers' purchase history and analyze their long-term film, purchase, and venue preferences, as well as to target personalized advertising to them. A CEO of a cinema chain illustrated:

“Our main tool is the [X] cinemas club membership, where there are over 500,000 members in Estonia. It is a very large target group. The ticket purchase is saved in our ticketing system so that we can process and analyse it in every way, from film genre, visiting density, location and so on. Club member trails help us to understand the target audience better.” (CEO of a cinema chain, interview 29.03.2021)

Arthouse cinemas have relied on external student research for audience insights, offering a cost-effective method for gaining a deeper understanding of audience profiles and interests to improve the user journeys of audiences (see, for example, Reitalu 2020). When compared to the cinema chains, arthouse theatre activities are less structured and regular. However, they put effort into direct communication with the audience, as they stress the importance of being present at the screenings, observing their audiences, and stepping into dialogue with them. A community-driven attitude and proximity to the audience seems to drive such initiatives:

“Or they express directly what could be improved. [---] The main thing is that you should speak with your audience – they give a lot of new and important information. [---] And there is also part of the audience that speaks to us... a specific part that has already befriended us. [---] We get a lot of feedback from just

being present. Then you perceive and feel the audience.” (CEO of arthouse theatre, interview 25.03.2021)

For the bigger chains, the dialogue is mediated through structured communication (questionnaires) or feedback from first-line employees, making it more unidirectional and anonymous. It can be argued that the dialogue with arthouse theatres is more personalized and intimate than with cinema chains. These approaches create different relationships between audiences and cinemas, affecting how audiences perceive their experiences and manage their cinema-going practices.

In conclusion, significant differences exist in how film professionals use audience information systems and construct imagined audiences. Exhibitors and distributors possess the most comprehensive audience insights, while producers and funding bodies exhibit ambivalence toward audience research. This raises questions about the effectiveness of financing and production activities where audience insights are crucial. In terms of imagined affordances, the limitedness of audience conceptions and audience research reduces the effectiveness of efforts in considering and shaping perceptions and expectations of audiences, limiting how professionals perceive the imagined affordances of films in relation to the audience. The differences between professionals thus indicate that, in the Estonian context, the comprehensiveness of audience research could be improved on the level of public institutions and producers, which could lead to improved understandings in the whole market.

DEFINING THE AUDIENCE

Audience information systems shape the ways in which target groups or imagined audiences are defined for different venues, screenings and films, meaning that practices discussed in the previous subsection also inform the formation of target audiences. However, in addition to the

abovementioned resources, target audiences are defined on the basis of film-, production-, and audience-specific details that are discussed in detail below.

Film-specific details

Firstly, film-specific details include genre definition, story, topics, tone, characters, and storytelling specifics. Genre, in particular, serves as a primary determinant, incorporating conventional classifications (drama, comedy, documentary, etc.); geographically specified classifications (e.g. European drama, French films, Estonian films, Danish crime films); and age-based/ socially specified classifications (e.g. children's films, youth films, family films, comedies for the middle-aged). As a producer summarizes, *"I think the definition is primarily based on the genre."* (Producer, interview 16.06.2021).

The results suggest that when a film's genre is clear, identifying its target audience becomes easier, as explained by a producer:

"If you are producing a YA film or something like this, or a comedy, a very simple comedy, then the target group is very specific. [...] or when you make a genre film, right. But as we rather produce here in our company different drama films, which are a bit... could reach everywhere or nowhere (laughs)." (Producer, interview 06.05.2021)

Thus, it can also be argued that, for this reason, the imagined affordances of films that have clearly imagined, differentiated and established genre definitions are also easier to perceive (and thus to mediate to the audience). That is, film professionals see that genre definition, as a paratext, is an effective way to mediate the film to the audience and thus shape their expectations and perceptions. It is closely interconnected with the audience-specific categories of age and gender. In Estonia, industry professionals often assume that each

genre has its specific audience, characterized by gender, age, interests, and social composition (e.g., family or couples). Thus, the imagined audience and the imagined affordances of the film experience emerge in the process of examining the title's specifics in the context of existing knowledge about Estonian audiences. This aligns with Mittell's (2001: 19) conceptualization of genre as "discursive processes running through texts, audiences and industries via specific cultural practices."

Other film-specific aspects such as story, themes, and characters prompt professionals to consider questions like: Who will the story resonate with? Do the protagonists' age or gender attract specific audiences? The following quotes illustrate these considerations:

"It seems to me that the more classic the storytelling is and the easier the topic is to decipher, the wider target groups you can sell or market the film to." (Producer, interview 26.04.2021)

"Substantive in that sense – what are the themes of the films, right? And how big an audience the themes might reach locally." (Distributor, interview 02.06.2021)

Production-specific details

The results suggest that production-specific details include cast, crew, shooting locations, and production country. Certain geographic genres like Danish crime films or European dramas guide target audience identification by recognizing audience interest in specific national cinemas. This is often combined with audience-specific categories (age, gender) and film-specific categories (genre and tone), as the following quote from a CEO of arthouse cinema indicates:

"With Danish crime films, the audience is very different from what we usually have. They are younger and there are more men.

Same with Japanese films, which have their own fan base, which is also younger.” (CEO of arthouse cinema, interview 26.03.2021)

The cast and the film crew as a resource are based on the assumption that mainly actors, but also directors, have an established fan base, and audiences make their choices and form their imagined affordances of film experiences on the basis of the involved cast and the creative crew. A distributor and a producer explained:

“If I have an actor that does certain types of films, then her/his previous films influence who comes to see the new film.” (Distributor, interview 30.03.2021)

“The target group is also formed by the main characters’ fan clubs, who also go to the theatre to see them or watch their TV series and so on.” (Producer, interview 21.04.2021)

While these categories have been commonly perceived as essential elements of film marketing (Kerrigan 2010), the results here illustrate how they play out in a small European market. For example, it was noted that the size of the Estonian market sets some limitations on the effectiveness of using actors as tools for defining the target audiences. That is, producers believe that Estonia is not that large for actors to have a substantial follower base. However, local actors were perceived as an important factor for creating paratexts that shape audience expectations, highlighting the actors’ role in shaping the imagined affordances for films.

With shooting locations, the imagined audiences emerge in relation to the locations where the film was shot. Based on the assumption that people want to see familiar places and spaces, industry professionals see shooting locations as a way to link the audiences and the film. Such localization practices are evident in PR and

marketing strategies, such as highlighting locations in trailers, booking interviews in local newspapers, organizing special screenings in specific areas, and utilizing locals as extras. This is expected to have a social snowball effect wherein local involvement attracts broader interest. Thus, cultural and regional proximity is seen to have an effect in shaping audiences’ decision-making through forming a resource with which audiences form the imagined affordances of a film experience. Such details also help to highlight and operationalize distinctive features of domestic cinema.

Audience-specific details

Results suggest that film professionals define imagined audiences and affordances using factors like age, gender, interests, education, nationality, and cultural consumption.

As a distributor sums up, *“Age groups and gender groups are the main thing”* (Distributor, interview 02.06.2021). Assumptions about distinct preferences for different demographics lead to classifications impacting film promotion. Importantly, audience-specific classifications often intertwine to form categories that illustrate the assumption that film industry professionals have about their audiences. Quotes from a producer and a CEO of a small theater refer to this:

“Basically, an average Estonian film corresponds to a, let’s say, 25–45-year-old housewife.” (Producer, interview 21.04.2021)

“When you take an action film, then a man comes to watch it. When you take a romantic film, a woman comes— perhaps with a man.” (CEO of a small cinema theatre, interview 08.04.2021)

While age and gender are primary factors, professionals also analyze preferences in relation to specific films. This involves imagining audience worldviews and

educational backgrounds, refining (secondary) target groups accordingly. However, the lack of systematic research (as discussed in the previous subsection) raises concerns about potential biases in audience definitions, leading to stereotypes and ineffective targeting, as well as to a disconnect between what the industry professionals and the real audiences conceive of as the imagined affordances of particular films. In a small market such as Estonia, this may influence general national film output, diversity, and availability of films in the market, and the potential neglect of some (niche) audiences that aren't easy to intuitively perceive.

To sum up, whereas Funk (2021) recently identified four main ways (demographics, film taste, lifestyle and interest, and behavior) in which German producers categorize their target audiences, I argue that the categories identified in this subsection (film-, production-, and audience-specific details) reflect the definition of the audience more effectively, as they show how the dynamics between audience, industry professionals, and the specific film feed into the definitions. However, it needs to be taken into account that such different approaches may derive from the differing sizes of the markets, thus reflecting the distinctive rationales and practices of film professionals in these markets. In other words, the categories identified here might be specific for Estonia as a small market. Nevertheless, these categories are also useful for understanding the different aspects with which industry professionals construct the imagined affordances of films and create resources (paratexts) for the audiences to form their imaginations.

REACHING THE AUDIENCE

Next, I will discuss how – after the audiences are studied and defined – the resulting knowledge and definitions are used to shape the audience's expectations and perceptions, which shape their film experience. Although film professionals often form target groups intuitively, this practice significantly impacts how the imagined affor-

dances of film experiences are understood and communicated to audiences.

Paratexts are crucial in shaping audience expectations. Both audiences and industry professionals use paratexts – such as trailers, posters, and synopses – to guide understanding and attitudes toward a film (Kauber 2022). Industry professionals primarily engage in marketing and PR activities related to paratexts, which often begin during pre-production and intensify two weeks before and after the film's premiere. This aligns with traditional practices, in which promotional campaigns start about four weeks before the premiere and gain momentum in the final week (Kerrigan 2010). Despite the challenges of sustaining audience interest throughout production, producers employ strategies to generate early anticipation and engage potential audiences.

The results suggest that producers engage audiences in the early phases of production through various participatory methods. These include inviting locals as extras, organizing mass scenes, soliciting prop donations, hosting social media contests, and collecting public ideas. These activities leverage participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Rohn & Nylund, 2018) and transmedia marketing (Zeiser, 2015; Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2022) to boost audience engagement and early familiarity with the film.

During the production phases, more common forms of PR and marketing are also used. However, as stated by a producer, these activities need to be low-cost or costless. Typically, the more costly forms of marketing are used around the release of the film. This means that the production team produces paratexts in the form of production photo galleries, social media posts, press days/conferences/visits, press releases and so forth, as exemplified by a producer:

“At first, we usually work with the press and social media for a long period of time.” (Producer, interview 06.05.2021)

Depending on the project, these activities are performed by distributors, PR specialists, producers, or media agencies. According to the results, this also happens in collaboration among the different parties (between producers and PR specialists/distributors, for example). On the basis of the results, the main aim here is in enforcing visibility, whereas how and what kind of imagined affordances these activities evoke gets less attention. The results (discussed in previous sections) raise questions about how the (imagined) audience are interconnected with the decision-making and considerations behind the activities. This is an important aspect that influences the effectiveness of such endeavors.

PR and marketing efforts intensify when the project approaches the premiere date. The general assumption is that the film needs to “be in the picture” as much and as widely as possible. A distributor gave some examples of the activities for achieving this:

“In every major newspaper, week-end paper, weekly paper we have long interviews, and usually with the same people in worst cases (laughs).” (Distributor, interview 02.06.2021)

This suggests that professionals believe that the crucial decision-making process regarding the audience occurs in the weeks leading up to and following the film’s premiere. This assumption is connected to the belief that a strong performance in the initial weeks will generate organic momentum and lead to a longer theatrical run. Additionally, it is believed that audiences base their preferences and decisions on the involvement of specific actors and directors, leading to a greater emphasis on press interviews during this period. A producer’s quote refers to this:

“We have previously made very specific press plans – for example, the covers of some magazines and some things that we

very often try to get – either with the actors, the director or with someone else – so that at that moment when the film is about to hit the screen, society’s attention would be concentrated as much as possible on the film.” (Producer, interview 06.05.2021)

The imagined audiences and the imagined interests and (media consumption) practices of these audiences influence PR activities. From picking the possible outlets to choosing the interviewees for them and guiding the topics discussed, film professionals aim to shape the specifics of the paratexts (interviews) with which audiences start to form their perceptions and expectations:

“For example, in the case of film X [film title removed], we still have a plan for how to get an older audience to watch this film, because there aren’t as many teenagers in Estonia as we need. They [older audiences] have their own publications, and we give interviews of a different kind or focus on other topics for these publications.” (Producer, interview 23.04.2021)

The key question here is how such PR activities are informed by audience-defining practices and the audience information systems (Napoli 2011) that are used for this, as discussed above. As the quote suggests, audience-specific factors play an important role here. However, these require the most systematic approach to knowledge production on the audience. For example, if misinformed by a lack of research or intuition and gut-fueled biased/stereotyped understandings, the imagined audiences and the imagined interests might not be where the professionals expect them.

The data suggests that, regarding marketing, shaping the audience’s perception and expectations, as well as encouraging their practices in relation to the film, are

based on established practices that intend to reach wide audiences through multiple channels. While it is about covering a wide spectrum of the imagined audiences' imagined media consumption practices and reaching them where film professionals assume the audiences to be, it is also about establishing or "legitimizing" the existence of the film, as illustrated by a producer:

"There must still be bus shelter ads and big posters in cinemas, on their facades; and there still has to be TV advertising even though people don't watch TV anymore, and so on. Because you need some kind of point of legitimization. If you don't use these traditional ways, it's like you don't exist." (Producer, interview 26.04.2021)

The analysis suggests that at the core of the marketing activities is establishing a (visual) identity for the film and defining its most central selling points. It is about answering the question of *how* to present and sell the film to the imagined audience and the answers to the question fuel how the industry professionals attempt to shape audience practice. It can be argued that these activities are interconnected with defining imagined audiences (as they need to be taken in consideration in answering the "how") and imagined affordances of that film experience (as they inform the idea of the title's most important aspect and most central selling points).

These aspects are utilized to create and mediate marketing-related paratexts, tailored to the imagined audiences for whom they are designed. Here the professionals' conceptions of the imagined audiences are interwoven with the film's specifics, influencing how various film and production elements are presented in different paratexts. These film and production elements include, among others, actors, directors, genre definitions, atmosphere, tone, story, themes, characters, and source materials (novels, theatre productions,

comic books, etc.). Thus, such elements constitute the "film marketing mix," as well as materials with which the mix is applied in the Estonian context (Kerrigan 2010). Importantly, imagined affordances and imagined audience inform the industry professionals on how to construct and mediate these materials. A distributor explained how the elements are used:

"Say it's 'Estonian funeral', say it's by Andrus Kivirähk; put all the actors on the poster, a stack of logs on the background and that's it – then you see if they come or not." (Distributor, interview 02.06.2021)

Of the above-mentioned marketing-related paratexts, film professionals perceive trailers, posters, and synopses as the most central in shaping audience's expectations. As the following quote from a producer illustrates, the interplay between the imagined (target) audiences, the film- and production-specific elements and the imagined affordances, as formed by industry professionals, come to shape the trailers:

"You amplify your trailer in the direction from where the target group might expect a little more. Because, look – the goal is that a person has to love this movie before he/she sees it, because he/she won't come to see the movie if he/she doesn't believe in it." (Producer, interview 26.04.2021)

Lastly, the industry professionals also acknowledge the existence of expectation- and practice-shaping paratexts that reach beyond their full control. The two main such paratextual corpora are word-of-mouth in its various online and offline forms and film reviews and other coverage by film critics. The data suggests that film professionals widely acknowledge the importance of positive word-of-mouth, whereas it is often

perceived as something “mystical” that realizes or not. However, arranging special screenings (premieres, screenings with invited guests, preview screenings), concentrating marketing and PR efforts to the weeks around the premiere, sharing critical and audience feedback in social media, adding new screenings on the basis of good word-of-mouth, and demonstrating the box office success with PR are perceived as ways to boost and take advantage of word-of-mouth.

In conclusion, as the overview of the audience-reaching activities suggest, the activities themselves are rather diverse and systematic. As my previous research has indicated, the audiences perceive that many Estonian films have good visibility locally (Kauber 2022). However, the key questions here are how they link to and are informed by audience-defining and studying activities, and how these contribute to successful and effective marketing and PR outputs. Overall, in comparison to previous research on Eastern and East-Central Europe, the attitudes in Estonia regarding audience-reaching seem more audience-oriented and less indifferent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the results partly align with the findings made elsewhere in Eastern and East-Central Europe (Szczepanik 2021; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė 2015), the overall dynamics in Estonia are complex. More specifically, although the smallness of the market and the (artistic and mostly anti-commercial) nature of publicly financed films shape the attitudes and approaches to the audience, the activities around audiences cannot be considered plainly passive or indifferent (see Szczepanik 2021; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė 2015). Although the intuitive and speculative approaches tend to prevail for different industry professionals who tend to rely on intuition and tacit knowledge, these are usually coupled with light research and analysis activities. Furthermore, the knowledge production and targeting activities are often allocated to those that are perceived to be more

relevant for studying and reaching the audience (i.e., distributors, PR specialists).

In other words, the efforts behind studying, defining, and reaching the audience are not based only on intuition and speculation. The practices are much broader and diverse, especially when it comes to film industry professionals in distribution and exhibition. However, the lack of systematic and thorough (and possibly institutionally conducted or coordinated) research on audience practices and preferences still persists, which can be argued to limit the possibilities for national cinema to find and reach their respective audiences. In terms of knowing, owning and shaping, the focus in Estonia is mostly on the shaping activities, whereas the audience information system enriching, imagined audience constructing, and imagined affordance supporting activities all receive less attention. This is problematic, as the studying and defining activities inform the audience-reaching efforts.

However, generally, the results suggest that efforts to define imagined target audiences are variable in the Estonian context. The film experiences were analyzed by industry professionals from multiple angles in order to imagine the possible target audiences and what the film experience could offer for them. At the same time, it was often stressed that the smallness of the market makes forming specific target audiences unreasonable. However, the practices behind reaching the audience revealed that specific target audiences are defined and used to target PR and marketing efforts. The PR and marketing activities themselves turned out to be extensive and long-lasting, as the efforts tend to start as early as in pre-production. The results thus indicate that the film market has developed further from the early 2010s, as documented by Tafel-Viia et al. (2012), Ibrus et al. (2013), and Soo (2011), as well as in Estonian Film Institute documents in which marketing was highlighted as insufficient. As I have discussed in Kauber (2022), from the audience's perspective, the smallness of Estonia is beneficial for the visibility of

Estonian productions. That is, audiences perceive that the marketing efforts of film professionals reach the audience and make the films visible. The question for the audience rather is the degree of their clarity, effectiveness, and “trustworthiness,” which point to questions around the lack and clarity of audience conceptualizations and understandings that inform the marketing efforts (for example, how and for whom films are packaged and promoted).

Overall, the progress can be attributed partly to greater involvement of distribution companies, the lack of which before was perceived as a problematic aspect for conducting effective marketing and PR. This could be connected to an increase in cinemas and screens, the emergence of more diverse domestic competition with growth in commercially oriented productions, and the slight increase in the diversity of genres in domestic cinema.

While this paper gives insights into how such transitions have been happening by outlining the audience studying, defining, and reaching frameworks that influence both the broader tendencies, as well as audiences' film experiences, it also discusses how the utilized audience information systems (Napoli 2011) and the constructed imagined audiences (Litt 2012) shape audience's speculative consumption processes (Gray 2010). Thus, it illuminates how film industry professionals in Estonia shape not only how audiences construct their imagined affordances, but also how they connect and, in the end, engage with film experiences.

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