

The imagined affordances of cinema-going and national cinema

Sten Kauber,
Tallinn University, Estonia

Abstract:

Among the global embracement of platformized film consumption, a small Eastern European film market, Estonia, has shown consistent growth in cinema admissions. With such global and local trends as a background, this empirical study investigates how Estonian film audiences form and perceive the imagined affordances of cinema-going and national cinema. Thus, this study addresses the expectations and perceptions around cinema-going in relation to different viewing environments and types of films. In this paper, I will apply affordance theory (Gibson, 1979), and the notion of imagined affordance in particular (Nagy and Neff, 2015), to understand the ways in which audiences make sense of, approach, and shape the practice of cinema-going. The study, which results in defining the imagined affordances of contemporary cinema-going and national cinema as well as illuminating the aspects and processes around forming imagined affordances, is based on focus group interviews (N=21) and surveys with film audiences (N=415).

Keywords: cinema audience, cinema-going, national cinema, imagined affordance, affordance theory

Introduction

Although the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 boosted the embrace of online and platformized film consumption, audience studies should not neglect the local trends in cinema-going that the pandemic interrupted. By zooming in on unmapped audience territories, this paper explores cinema-going practices in Estonia—a small Eastern European film market that has gone against the grain of some of the bigger markets, which have shown a recent decrease in cinema admissions. In fact, in the last decade, Estonia has seen a steady

growth in cinema admission figures, which reached 3.7 million in 2019. Estonia, with its population of 1.32 million, has nearly twice the number of admissions per capita (2.8 in 2019) in comparison to the other Baltic states (as well as to the UNIC¹ average), and the growth in admissions in the last 10 years has been the second fastest in Europe (UNIC 2020). While this growth has been driven by a steady increase in venues and screens much like elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, Estonia stands out in the region for its high per capita figure.² Moreover, Estonia has the third highest cinema-going rate across Europe, after Ireland (3.3) and France (3.2) (UNIC 2020). Also, the increasing market share of domestic films (23% of the total admissions in 2019) has shown audiences' consistent interest in both government-supported and privately funded domestic productions, the latter of which has seen a remarkable growth during the last five years.

This paper addresses the above-mentioned regionally distinctive cinema-going trends by looking into the ways in which film audiences in Estonia approach cinema-going and national cinema.³ This will be studied particularly in the context of the dynamics between cinema-going and home watching, as well as in a situation where imported and domestic productions fight for the attention and time of the dispersed and fragmented audience. To address the following research questions in such a context, the study applies the concept of imagined affordance as a theoretical framework. In short, imagined affordances entail the practice-shaping expectations that people have towards artefacts and media (Nagy & Neff, 2015). That is, imagined affordances refer to the importance of perceptions, attitudes, and expectations (and how these are formed) in shaping the cinema-going activities of film audiences. Thus, the paper focuses on two main research questions: **(RQ1) what are the imagined affordances of seeing a (domestic) film in a cinema theatre,** and **(RQ2) how are the imagined affordances of such experiences formed by film audiences?**

In this manner, the paper aims to expand on film audience research that has otherwise been argued to lack contemporary empirical takes on cinema-going practices. It, thus, addresses the call for more research on contemporary European cinema audiences (Van de Vijver, 2017, 2019; Styliari, 2019). While prior research on 21st century cinema audiences will be put into dialogue with the findings of this paper, the applied theoretical approach diverges from previous studies. Instead of approaching film audiences from the point of view of practice

¹ UNIC is the International Union of Cinemas, which groups European cinema trade associations and operators. It covers 38 territories across Europe and publishes annual reports on cinema admissions.

² Venue numbers for Estonia according to Estonian Film Institute: 12 cinemas in 2009 versus 20 in 2019, 3 multiplex cinemas in 2009 versus 8 in 2019, 74 screens in total in 2009 versus 111 in 2019.

³ I acknowledge the complexity of the notion of "national cinema". However, engaging with the debates on the notion falls outside the focus and scope of this paper, as it concentrates on the analysis of audience experience. Production finance (including co-productions with Estonian company as a major producer) and defined production country lead the approach taken in this paper.

theory (Grundström, 2018), “a consumer behaviour perspective” (Cuadrado-García et al., 2018), a mix of critical political economy perspective and sociological and cultural analysis (Veenstra et al., 2020), a Bourdieusian theoretical framework (Blagrove, 2020), or a combination of film studies and human-computer interaction approaches (Styliari, 2019), I will introduce affordance theory to the context of film consumption.

Here the aim of illuminating the practices of audiences that encourage and accompany cinema-going meets with the aim of applying theoretical constructs that could address both what is expected from contemporary cinema-going experiences and how the perceptions and expectations of film experiences are formed by audiences. The convergence of affordance theory and audience studies is discussed in the next section, the methods section addresses the methodological particularities of the study that is based on surveys and focus group interviews, and, finally, the findings are presented in two different sections addressing the research questions separately.

Theoretical Framework

Despite diverging from the previous theoretical approaches that scrutinise the film audience experience, the proposed theoretical framework follows, similarly to Hart et al. (2016), a more holistic stance, as it is constituted to encompass the different elements of the film consumption process that are often treated separately. As the Hart et al. (2016: 376-377) suggest, a large portion of studies approaching the (paratextual) elements that influence film consumption focus on measuring and evaluating the effects of these elements (actors, trailers, genre definition, reviews, etc.) on a given film’s box-office performance. Since I am more concerned with the social and cultural aspects of the interaction between people and films in their experiential and paratextual diversity rather than their economic outcomes, I follow the idea of looking into the ways in which the relations and interactions between audiences and films “come together”, as introduced by Hanchard et al. (2020), who draw on Livingstone (1998) in building their approach to the contemporary film experience. In doing this, the theoretical framework here answers the film audience researchers’ call to turn to media studies in finding approaches to address the variety of practices that encourage and accompany film consumption (Aveyard, 2016; Grundström, 2018).

This paper employs affordance theory and the notion of imagined affordances, in particular, since it provides a unified framework for conceptualising both the expectation and perception-forming processes as well as the imagined affordances of film experiences. Briefly, affordance theory was first introduced by the cognitive psychologist, James Gibson (1979), who was concerned with the ways in which “living beings” (learn to) operate in their environments and used the term to refer to the action possibilities that the environment or an artefact affords to a person or an animal (Gibson, 1979; Kammer, 2020). For Gibson, affordances emerge between the action capabilities of an agent and the action possibilities offered by an object or an environment. With such an approach, he pointed to the relational

nature of action, as well as of environments and artefacts, as the term highlights how both practice and the meaning/function of an object emerge from interaction.

Later, Donald Norman (1988, 1990, 1999) provided a more object-centred approach that acknowledges the role of designers and makers of objects. He conceptualised affordances as “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” (Norman, 1988: 9). As Bucher and Helmond (2017) explain, for Norman the interest is in the design aspect of an object and how the object could be designed to invite certain action possibilities. Additionally, Norman (1999) differentiates between real and perceived affordances. As Davis and Chouinard (2016: 242) summarise, while real affordances point to the “functions attached to a given object,” perceived affordances are the “features that are clear to the user”. More recently, it has been argued that affordances are a “multi-faceted relational structure” (Faraj & Azad, 2012: 254) and, as such a structure, affordances emerge “between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioural outcomes in a particular context” (Evans et al., 2017: 36).

Relationality and perceivability lead us to the core of the theoretical framework—imagined affordance. In the field of communication and media studies, Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015) have provided a reconstruction of the concept of affordances. Their approach grasps “the material, the mediated, and the emotional aspects of human-technology interaction” in a more complex manner, and the concept of affordances in their approach can cover “expectations and beliefs” of the users, as well as the designers of these technologies (Nagy & Neff, 2015: 2, 4). Since Nagy and Neff see the (more than often ambiguously defined) concept of affordance as incapable of addressing “the complexity of cognitive as well as emotional processes” (e.g., perceptions, beliefs and expectations) behind the processual relationship between the users, media product/technology/service, and its maker (in the widest sense), they provide their own reconstruction of the concept of affordance: imagined affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017: 14). Nagy and Neff (2015: 5) give the following definition:

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[.]

Furthermore, the authors claim that “imagined affordances emerge between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers” (Nagy & Neff, 2015: 5). Thus, by identifying audiences’ perceptions and expectations about film experiences, we

can start to grasp the imagined affordances of contemporary cinema-going practices in general, as the paper's study on Estonian audiences will exemplify.

In order to answer the research questions of this paper and conceptualise how such imagined affordances emerge, I'll put the notion into dialogue with the concepts of paratexts and speculative consumption. In the context of the user journey of film consumption, an audience member interacts with various texts before actually viewing a film. Such texts as trailers, posters, information on cast, genre definition, word of mouth (WOM), marketing campaigns, interviews, merchandise, reviews, memes, cinema venue information, and synopsis can be conceptualised as "paratexts," which, as Gray states, "condition our entrance to texts, telling us what to expect", while also "sha[ping] the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text" (2010: 25-26). Gray, who builds on Genette's (1987) concept, sees paratexts as having the intrinsic quality of speculative consumption. That is, they constitute part of "creating an idea of what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, what 'effect' it will have on us, and so forth" (Gray, 2010: 24). Such use of paratexts in forming expectations and shaping modes of reception has been theorised before in audience research with the notion of a horizon of expectations (Michelle et al., 2017a & 2017b, following Jauss, 1970, and Biltereyst & Meers, 2006). The reason to diverge from this approach is that imagined affordance provides a structured approach for asking how, why, and with what materials such acts of speculative consumption or prefiguration (as per Michelle et al. 2017a & 2017b) are performed as well as what such expectations and perceptions actually are. Also, the notion of imagined affordances helps to extend the focus beyond the expectations of the film to the surrounding experiential, social, cultural, material, and environmental aspects of the film and cinema experience, as well as to the aspects that are substantial for the practices and processes of forming expectations and attitudes of film experiences.

Thus, speculative consumption can be viewed as one of the processes through which imagined affordances of film experience emerge. I argue that paratexts are the resources of imagined affordances when the process is regarded from the audience's perspective. While being a form of speculative consumption, the practices of using and consuming paratexts are the methods by which film audiences construct the perceptions of, attitudes toward, and expectations of a given film and cinema-going. Imagined affordances emerge in this process that can be illustrated with the Hart et al. (2016) model that presents the different resources defined here. Figure 1 below, which is the result of the visualisation of the analysis process, illustrates the different activities (active research, classifying, reading, viewing, etc.), materials (ads, social media posts, WOM, media coverage, etc.) and factors (viewing environment, situational environment, etc.) influencing the film consumption process at large. Thus, the figure presents the different elements that constitute the process in which a person forms expectations, perceptions and attitudes of the film experience. It shows what different types of paratexts can inform decision-making and shape the viewing experience. Importantly, it also illustrates that past and current film experiences shape future film

experiences through influencing the speculative consumption process (active research) and, in this way, how expectations, perceptions and attitudes of new film experiences are formed.

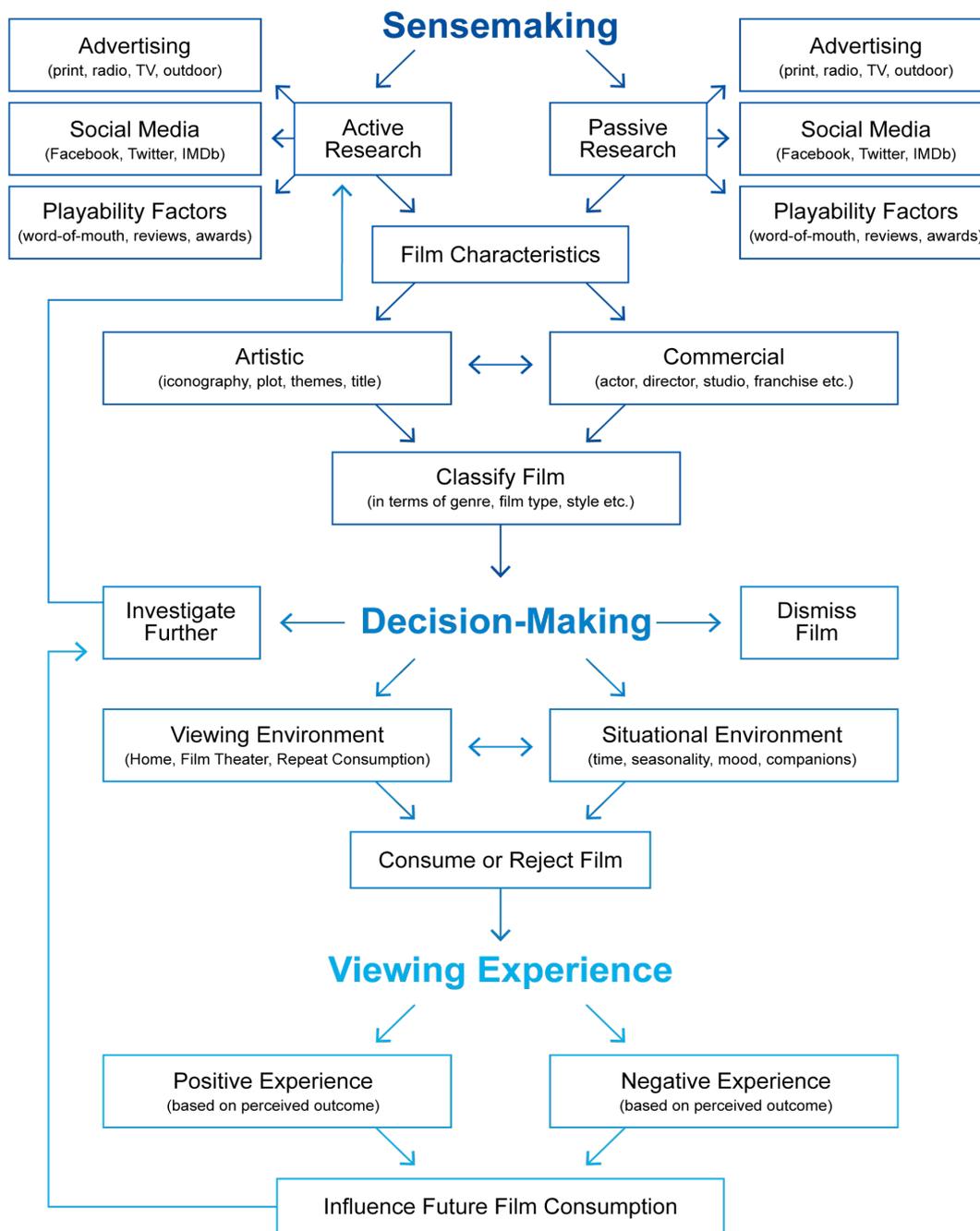


Figure 1. Consumption path, redrawn from Hart et al. (2016).

Methods

The paper is based on a larger study that approaches Estonian film audiences multidimensionally by asking how practices of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption are shaped by the dynamics between film-industry professionals, film

experiences, and film audiences. Thus, the methodological framework is derived from the larger research project that follows an embedded single case-study on strategy level (Lune & Berg, 2017; Schwandt & Gates, 2017) and applies both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. On the level of this paper, the reasoning for using qualitative and quantitative means of inquiry is based on the benefits of a mixed-method framework. That is, the purpose is to provide complementarity through using both QUAL and QUAN methods (described below) that “increase the interpretability, meaningfulness, and validity of constructs and inquiry results” with the help of the specifics of each method (Greene et al., 1989: 259). Qualitative results carry a bigger weight in this study, while quantitative results “elaborate, enhance, or illustrate” the qualitative results (Greene et al., 1989: 266).

As an overall sampling measure, purposive sampling techniques were used to achieve representativeness and comparability as well as to meet the predetermined criterion (Teddlie & Yiu, 2007; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). For this reason, criterion sampling was used to seek: participants who attended three Estonian case-study films in three different cinema theatres for the survey, and, more generally, audiences of Estonian films which were released during the data collection period (2019-2020) for the focus group interviews. The three films were one government-funded microbudget comedy *Unicorn* (Rain Rannu, 2019), one privately funded comedy *Men* (Gerda Kordemets, 2019), and one government-funded international co-production, nationally critically acclaimed arthouse drama *The Last Ones* (Veiko Õunpuu, 2020).⁴ Pre-screening surveys on paper and on-location were conducted with the audiences of these films in two large cinemas run by two different cinema chains (for the comedies) and

⁴ These films were picked to provide variety in terms of funding and commercial/artistic aspirations. Also, the films depended on the pandemic-shaped release schedules of Estonian films. *Unicorn* is a comedy about two young start-up entrepreneurs, who are trying to make it with their tech company. The humorous insight into the start-up field is the second feature film of the well-known tech entrepreneur and investor Rain Rannu. *Men* is a comedy with three popular actors playing three men in midlife crisis. The story about escapism and self-discovery is based on a commercially successful Estonian theatrical production by the same team, who made both the film and the play on the basis of a Russian production that followed the same path from a theatrical production to a film. *The Last Ones* is an Estonian-Finnish arthouse co-production that has been framed as a Nordic western. The film, which was Estonia’s entry for the 93rd Academy Awards, is set in Lapland in a small mining community struggling with capitalist greed, desperate choices and the clash of modernity and tradition. It is important to differentiate between government-supported and privately funded films in the Estonian context. As a recent trend, there has been a rise in privately funded commercially oriented films that often are low-budget comedies based on already established popular intellectual properties (theatre plays, films or novels). While government-supported projects that are more oriented towards festival audiences, wide or specific (children, young) local audiences and generally have artistic and cultural aims in the forefront, privately funded films aim to maximise profit. In terms of admission figures, there is interest towards both government-supported and privately funded films.

in one arthouse cinema (for the arthouse film). The sample totaled 415, with 129 participants for *Men* (total admissions 31 735 and box office (BO) €177 000), 97 for *Unicorn* (admissions 29 013, BO €185 000), and 189 for *The Last Ones* (admissions 4 530, BO €19 000), with the last film premiering during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the sample, 60% (N=249) of the participants were female, 38.6% (N=160) were male, and 1.4% (N=6) did not want to specify. SPSS 25 was used to run descriptive analysis on the data. I explored frequencies and ran cross tabulation analysis on the data set.

Additionally, I conducted five focus group interviews with the audiences of Estonian films between 2019-2020 with 21 participants in total that I recruited via open calls distributed online through film thematic Facebook (FB) groups, Estonian film thematic FB sites, and student/university mailing lists, the FB page of a cinema theatre and a production company. The interviews⁵ lasted approximately 1h 30 min each, whereas three were conducted online and two on-location. Of the participants, 76% were female, and 24% were male⁶. The age dispersion of the focus group participants is presented in Table 1, which shows that 43% of the participants were in the age group 25-34, 19% in 18-24 as well as in 35-44, 10% in 45-64, while there was only one participant under the age of 18 and one between the age of 55-64. The six-phase approach to thematic analysis with the inductive coding approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2012) was used as an analysis method that was performed with NVivo 12. With this approach I moved from familiarising with the data and generating initial codes to constructing, reviewing and defining themes for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Age	>18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
Number of participants	1	4	9	4	2	1

Table 1. Participants of focus group interviews by age.

The Anatomy of Impulses and Expectations

As argued in the theoretical framework, speculative consumption is part of the process in which imagined affordances emerge. By focusing on the specifics of paratextual encounters, the first results section presents the aspects of such processes where people interact with paratexts to form expectations about and receive impulses for cinema-going. Thus, the analysis of qualitative data resulted in what I call the anatomy of impulses and expectations, which will be illustrated by quantitative data on the resources of both.

⁵ Focus group interview guide is in the Appendix 1.

⁶ I didn't collect any additional demographic data on the focus group participants. Characteristics such as occupation and education weren't the focus of my present analysis.

First, the results suggest that processuality is a recurring characteristic of both how a person encounters paratexts and forms expectations about the film experience. That is, the impulse of going to watch something in a cinema theatre is often awakened by multiple encounters with different paratexts, which, again, starts to contribute to the formation of expectations. The analysis resulted in five categories that illuminate the nature of different encounters that stimulate impulses: **film-specific aspects, cinema theatre-specific aspects, social aspects, situational aspects, and media and promotion.** The division, explored below, explains the specifics of the interaction and the composition of paratexts.

Film-specific aspects encompass the actors and the director attached to the film, the story, and the topics, as well as award nominations and inclusion in festival programs. Informants indicated that prior experience with an actor or a director may be enough to initiate cinema-going or promote further information-seeking. Such prior experience also makes a person more aware of such films entering circulation. Awareness is also boosted by award nominations and participation in festivals, while both make the film more significant for the person, as the nominations and inclusions in festival programmes suggest that a film is something that is worth their time. Furthermore, the story and topics as impulses are evaluated against the criteria of relevance and allure, which for respondents meant that the film's topics or story needed to appear personally, socially, culturally or politically momentous to initiate cinema-going or further information-seeking. For example, Maia (age 25-34) argues that she has "specific topics, specific film cultures and directors" that she knows and follows, and this leads her decision-making. As a second example, Helen (age 24-34) argued, in the context of the film *Unicorn*, that she wanted to know more about start-ups, while Katrin (age 55-64) had her daughter working in the start-up field, which made the film personally and thematically appealing for her. What is notable here is that genre was missing from this impulse-inducing category, although it is relevant to the affordance-forming process as presented below. Lastly and most importantly, the informants almost univocally declared the elevated status of national cinema. That is, the fact that the film was an Estonian production was enough for many to initiate cinema-going. This film-specific aspect revealed the stark difference in attitudes towards watching domestic and imported productions. National cinema was perceived as something that is primarily sought to be experienced in the cinema theatre, instead of to be watched on TV or on a video-on-demand service.

Cinema theatre-specific aspects highlight the importance of eventization, programming, urgency, and collectivity, as well as the atmosphere of the cinema theatre, as central impulses evoking cinema-going. Here a specific film might not play a role in impulse-making, but the momentum-inducing element is located in the specifics and practices around venues. In such cases, the impulse is fostered by the interaction between a person and those practices performed by cinema theatres (i.e. scarcity marketing establishing fear of missing out) that create urgency and alerted awareness, e.g., eventization of screenings (invited special guests, premieres, pre-screenings, special screenings, special programs, retrospectives, audience

programs, etc.). The highlighted eventness of cinema-going combined with the technological features and collective atmosphere form the core of the category, alluding already to the imagined affordances of cinema-going as discussed below. The category also highlighted the curatorial authority and taste-forming status of arthouse cinemas, as the respondents stated that the activities of arthouse cinemas on social media promote active following, which again enhance cinema theatre-specific impulses.

Further, the collective atmosphere of the cinema theatre is interconnected with the next category that stimulates attendance: **social aspects**. In order to provoke the impulse for cinema-going, films form part of a person's social interaction with other people, creating a process where a film is mediated to the person through a trusted, close, and/or socially significant other who recommends, invites, or makes the film relevant for the person in some way. Here the category connects closely to the notions of WOM and social network markets, as discussed below. More particularly, research on WOM has emphasised the awareness function (e.g., getting to know about a film) and persuasive function (e.g., influence on opinion and decision-making) of WOM (Berger, 2015), and the results here confirm these functions in practice. Social aspects (as well as media and promotion, as discussed later) also point to the specifics of social network markets in which "individual choices are determined by the choices of others within the network" (Hartley, 2007). That is, in order to deal with the uncertainty that comes with creative goods (in terms of the value that they can offer), consumption (as well as production⁷) in social network markets is highly influenced by the acts of others in social networks, which are mediated through WOM. Further, the category of social aspects includes collective decision-making, where the collective taste patterns (of spouses, couples, families and friends) and the desired social practices (a family event, date night or going out with friends) drive impulses and later form the basis against which the imagined affordances of the film experience are negotiated. The results of the focus group interviews also suggested that the need to be involved in the socially significant and relation/community (re)producing discourses around films also drives cinema-going, as it is perceived as part of the anticipated social value of the practice. That is, impulses within the category are driven by or lead to (anticipated) social practices that structure engagement with paratexts or the experience of cinema-going.

In the next category of **situational aspects**, the decision-making process is first and foremost initiated or driven by available time resources that are evaluated against time allocated for work and family, for example. However, four distinctions emerged in my study. Respondents described cinema-going decisions as: (1) reacting spontaneously to a free night, (2) evaluating the need to see a film against other responsibilities, (3) hierarchizing the film-specific impulse

⁷ In social network markets communicative processes between consumption and production are vital, as the production and consumption choices and decisions made within the social network rely on the decisions of and feedback from others through which the uncertainty and novelty around films as experience goods is managed.

along with content abundance and time resources situationally, and (4) picking a film and evaluating the imagined affordances of film-viewing on the basis of situational mood. Thus, within this category that was not as recurring than the others, for some informants, situational factors outweighed the others.

Media and promotion, as the final and admittedly broad category revealed by analysis of the focus group interviews, entails the awareness and interest which promotional activities and media coverage create around a film. Although paratexts (such as reviews, interviews, trailers, etc.) involve film-specific aspects to a degree that they mediate these aspects, they emerge as separate entities beyond the specifics of the actual film, thus constituting distinct speculative consumption experiences. Reviews, media appearances of the cast, and trailers increase appetite and ratify the appeal of films, as for example media attention as such affirms the film's general appeal for the audience. The mere fact of being featured in the media or highlighted by a critic in a cultural talk show or in a review may be enough to stimulate impulses of cinema-going. As the aspects of media and promotion are a central part in the process of forming expectations that are explored next, the quality of establishing interest in and focus on film is only mentioned here.

Further, the analysis of qualitative data resulted in three processes that illuminate the practices and paratexts that constitute the resources of imagined affordances. I define these processes as **furnishing, determining, and disrupting**. As elements of the anatomy of expectations, these processes point to the dynamic aspects of the interactions that create expectations as part of negotiating and forming imagined affordances of the film experience. While furnishing epitomises the ways in which the dialogue is started and boosted, determining refers to what is actually sought from the interaction between the person and the paratexts. Disrupting, on the other hand, shows how these two processes are interrupted and disturbed.

The results show that the usual paratextual subjects contribute to the process of **furnishing**: trailers, WOM, film characteristics, synopsis and storylines, publicised information on the specifics of production, PR activities, media coverage, awards and participation in festivals, a person's previous experience with the actors, director, or/and related work (prior instalments of a franchise, source books, etc.), and background knowledge (about films, topics discussed in the pictures, involved production countries, etc.). WOM as the most central furnishing agent was said to increase the status of the film and to provoke further investigation. It has the capacity to advance the decision-making process and break preconceptions set by genre definitions or other film-specific characteristics. It was also indicated that the quality of WOM is negotiated against the understanding of the source's taste and film preferences. Informants suggested that, for national cinema, WOM has an increased value due to the scepticism toward local productions, which derived from the stereotypes around local productions as well as from previous negative encounters with national cinema. This is rooted in the production history of national cinema, where the artistically driven and festival oriented government-supported productions of the 2000s and early 2010s fed the stereotypes of

Estonian films being slow, “artsy” and “serious”. However, such scepticism can also be connected to cultural proximity that might make the audience more critical of national cinema, which again increases the importance of WOM for local productions. WOM helps to soften such a critical stance, which lies in the negative encounters with national cinema, awareness and closeness to the film’s story, topics, locations etc. as well as in higher expectations the audience might have of domestic films that come in limited numbers.⁸ In general, paratexts mediate and deliver the materials with which the person starts to form expectations and perceptions, and thus imagined affordances. The essence of these materials depends on what the person sees as valuable and relevant for their affordance-forming process.

Here the process of **determining** in forming imagined affordances plays an important role. How and with what intentions speculative consumption is performed depends on what a person wants to get from the interaction. Genre is the most recurring category for informants in the context of the process of determining. It is defined through the interaction with paratexts and depends on the person's previous film experiences. On the basis of previous encounters with different genres, the genre of the specific film is defined and employed in the individual processes of exclusion and inclusion. Determining the genre is something that is expected to be performed through acts of speculative consumption such as watching the trailer or reading through the film’s introduction in the cinema theatre’s webpage. Another recurrent aspect here is the tone of the film, which was often referred to in relation to the lack or level of humour in the film that needs to be perceived (e.g. is it funny, vulgar, darkly humorous?). Appeal in terms of its topics and local/global reception, production quality, and level of relatability were also qualities that required determining. Beyond these specific aspects (genre, storyline, tone, characters, atmosphere, etc.), for some informants, the determining process needed to answer the question of “Why should I watch this film?”. This could relate to any of the aspects above or the individually perceived categories of relatability, novelty, and excitement, which have to be measured and anticipated. All in all, the process of determining places paratexts into the context of prior knowledge, experiences, and preferences of the person, thus contributing to the formation of imagined affordances.

However, the informants indicated that the previous two processes can be disrupted in multiple ways. Neglecting paratexts altogether is the main aspect of what I have defined as **disrupting**, which, as a process, interferes or interrupts the imagined affordance-forming practices. The analysis of focus group interviews suggests that, in the case of disrupting, the person receives an impulse from one of the film-specific aspects discussed above (e.g., name of the director) and tries to avoid the following encounters with paratexts entirely. When this is not possible due to WOM, for example, receiving a minimal amount of information is

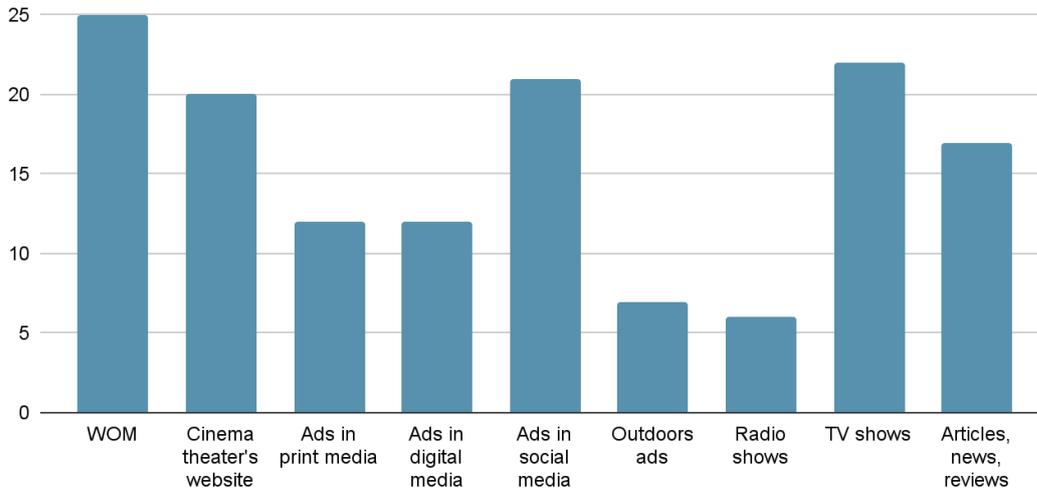
⁸ The number of fiction features produced in Estonia according to Estonian Film Institute: 14 in 2017, 14 in 2018, 12 in 2019 (including 4 minority co-productions), 15 in 2020 (including 5 minority co-productions) and 12 in 2021 (including 4 minority co-productions).

preferred. The most averted paratext is the trailer due to its possibly “spoiling”, “overselling”, “misleading” and “showy” nature as described by the informants. Trailers are avoided by some informants as they “create disappointments”, “are untrustworthy” and are seen as ruining the surprise or the emotions. In the case of national cinema, scepticism toward new productions disrupts the previous two processes as well. Scepticism, evolved from previous negative and stereotype-forming encounters with national cinema, thus creates reservations and prejudices with which the paratexts of national cinema are approached. Significantly such scepticism was highlighted only in the case of national cinema toward which some informants expressed having more reservations and a more critical stance in comparison to other films. Such scepticism is also connected to the stereotypes revolving around Estonian cinema, which has previously been considered visually and narratively slow and thematically depressing by the public (and by some of the informants), as suggested above. The question of what still draws audiences to national cinema despite such scepticism is discussed further in the final results section.

Additionally, the issues of overpromotion and classification difficulties were discussed in relation to national cinema. The disrupting elements of overpromotion come from fear of overhype leading to disappointment, promotional monotony, and fatigue. With classification difficulties, it was also suggested that it is harder to “adjust the expectations” and determine the genre of domestic films than that of Hollywood films. This observation derives from the fact that government-supported Estonian cinema is mostly not genre-driven. However, this seemed problematic for the informants, as genre was essential for the determining process as suggested above. Altogether, the disrupting factors emerged either from the way in which the paratexts were furnished, how they were formed, or what preconceptions and preferences the person had toward certain types of paratexts.

The analysis of quantitative data points to the possible starting points of the interaction as well as resources of imagined affordances (Figure 2). The results suggest that the three main starting points for paratextual encounters are WOM, ads in social media, and TV shows (talk shows). Outdoors advertising and radio shows covering the film were the least used resources. While the results highlight the importance of WOM, it is also significant that advertising on social media outperforms other forms of advertising.

Figure 2. I found out about the film from, % of yes



In terms of age groups (excluding the underrepresented age groups of under 18 and over 65), the data firstly indicates that significant differences between the age groups emerge especially with WOM (See: Table 2). WOM is more prevalent in the age groups of 18-24 (36% answered yes) and 25-34 (31%) than in 35-44 (17%) and 45-54 (10%). Secondly, the age groups of 35-44 and 45-54 come in contact with films through TV shows and radio shows more than the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34, suggesting that the “old media” is more relevant for the age groups above 35 for engaging with the paratexts.

	<18		18-24		25-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65<		p value
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	
WOM	33	4	36	22	31	45	17	18	10	5	25	25	0	0	0.002
Cinema theater's website	17	2	30	18	13	19	26	27	14	7	18	6	8	1	0.06
Ads in print media	17	2	12	7	10	14	10	10	10	5	13	4	50	6	0.005
Ads in digital media	25	3	13	8	13	18	10	10	12	6	6	2	8	1	0.698
Ads in social media	25	3	23	14	24	35	20	21	18	9	6	2	8	1	0.331
Outdoor s ads	0	0	7	4	8	11	7	7	6	3	3	1	8	1	0.812
Radio	0	0	3	2	3	4	10	10	18	9	0	0	0	0	0.001

shows															
TV shows	25	3	12	7	16	23	22	23	43	21	25	8	50	6	<0.001
Articles, news, reviews	8	1	12	7	13	19	19	20	27	13	16	5	33	4	0.155

Table 2. I found out about the film from, % of yes.

The case-study film comparison shows that the biggest differences emerge between the privately funded comedy and the arthouse film (See: Table 3). 30% of the arthouse film audience chose WOM as a main resource for obtaining information about the film, while the number for the privately funded comedy was 16%. For the government-funded comedy, WOM was essential for a large number of participants as well. The cinema theatre's website as a source of information however was more popular for the privately funded comedy *Men*. A statistically significant difference emerged with articles, news, and reviews as a resource, as 29% of the arthouse film audience disclosed that such paratexts informed their decision-making, while the percentage was 5 for *Men* and 9 for *Unicorn*.

	Comedy <i>Men</i> (2019)		Comedy <i>Unicorn</i> (2019)		Arthouse Film <i>The Last Ones</i> (2020)		
	%	N	%	N	%	N	<i>p</i> value
WOM	16	21	26	25	30	56	0.024
Cinema theater's website	30	39	20	19	12	22	<0.001
Ads in print media	12	16	6	6	14	26	0.156
Ads in digital media	9	12	13	13	12	23	0.597
Ads in social media	18	23	28	27	19	35	0.121
Outdoors ads	5	6	6	6	8	15	0.625
Radio shows	5	6	4	4	8	15	0.322
TV shows	16	21	21	20	27	50	0.092
Articles, news,	5	6	9	9	29	54	<0.000

reviews							
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Table 3. I found out about the film from, % of yes.

Table 4 shows how expectations were affected by different resources. In this cross-tabulation, trailers were the most significant expectation-shaping paratext for every film. However, in comparison, a bigger proportion (64%) of the audience of privately funded comedy picked the trailer as an imagined affordance-shaping paratext than of the arthouse film audience (42%). As another statistically significant difference, the arthouse film audience leaned more towards WOM and articles/reviews than the audience of *Men*. As for the government-funded comedy *Unicorn*, WOM was picked by a larger number of participants than with the other films.

	Comedy <i>Men</i> (2019)		Comedy <i>Unicorn</i> (2019)		Arthouse Film <i>The Last Ones</i> (2020)		p value
	%	N	%	N	%	N	
Trailer	64	82	58	56	42	80	<0.001
WOM	20	26	34	33	30	57	0.043
Articles and reviews	15	19	24	23	31	59	0.003
Posters and ads in print	5	7	6	6	9	16	0.550
Posters and ads online (incl. social media)	11	14	12	11	6	11	0.161
Introduction on cinema theatre's website	17	22	13	12	6	11	0.006

Table 4. Expectations were affected by, % of yes.

Imagined Affordances of the Cinema Theatre Experience and National Cinema

Continuing with the imagined affordances of the contemporary cinema theatre experience, the analysis of focus group interviews resulted in four main imagined affordances of cinema-going: **(1) eventfulness and experience**, **(2) collectivity and sociality**, **(3) being focused and staying offline**, and **(4) conditions for film consumption**. Within the limits of the empirical data, these imagined affordances epitomise the nature of cinema-going in the 21st century in the streaming-influenced landscape, where people draw clear distinctions between consumption contexts and their merits and disadvantages. The four affordances as defined

here illustrate the expectations around the cinema theatre experience and the qualities attached to the practice of cinema-going (See: Table 5).

Eventfulness and Experience	Collectivity and Sociality	Being Focused and Staying Offline	Conditions for Film Consumption
cinema-going as (cultural) event, curated and exclusive programme, planning and going out, FOMO (fear of missing out), eventization of screenings	cinema-going as a shared and collective experience, presence of an audience, sense of togetherness	cinema-going affords dedication to the film experience, being in the present moment and disconnected, away from distractions	the venue affords technologically, atmospherically, and materially “ideal” conditions for film-viewing

Table 5. Imagined affordances of cinema-going.

First, cinema-going provides an experiential framework for going out, for going to see a film, and for experiencing a film (versus simply watching a film). Informants indicated that, while home watching operates under flexible temporal and financial circumstances, the eventfulness of cinema-going is underscored by fixed schedules, a curated and exclusive programme, and the need for spatial movement as well as practices that accompany cinema-going, i.e., (collaborative) planning, dining, and post-viewing sociality. That is, cinema-going is perceived to provide a qualitatively greater film experience and a distinctive (cultural) event, which, as an imagined affordance, differentiates cinema-going from home watching very distinctly.

Secondly, collectivity and sociality as an imagined affordance entail performing cinema-going together with someone, thus (re)producing the sense of togetherness. For the informants, sociality was primarily about the social practices around cinema-going and experiencing the film together. On the contrary, the presence of other people in home settings was notably mostly framed as a “disruptive factor”. Collectivity as an imagined affordance of cinema-going, on the other hand, entails an idealised audience that knows how to respond to the film and act in the theatre without causing distractions, which highlights the ambivalence of this particular imagined affordance. That is, although collectivity is perceived as an essential aspect of what is expected of cinema-going, littering, noisy or smartphone-using audiences can easily disturb the positive materialisation of this affordance.

Thirdly, the imagined affordance of being focused and staying offline emphasises the difference between viewing environments, as, contrary to cinema-going, the home environment comes with its own diverse disturbing individual, technological, and social factors. Although collectivity could be a disturbance, as mentioned above, cinema-going was perceived to provide “100% attention to the film”, focus, and discipline to watch the film until the end and to avoid engaging with smart devices. This imagined affordance draws a very

clear line between the different viewing environments and, thus, emphasises the distinct nature of contemporary cinema-going in the media-saturated everyday life.

Fourthly, conditions for film consumption condense the material, technological, and environmental circumstances that the cinema-going experience is expected to provide, whereas the lack of these was perceived as a negative aspect of home watching. A bigger screen with higher image definition, better sound quality, comfortable seating, immersiveness, and a suitable and special atmosphere are the aspects that constitute this imagined affordance, which highlights the significance of materiality as well as the ambience of venues in shaping the distinct nature of cinema-going. Although these aspects manifest themselves differently on the basis of the type of the venue (an arthouse cinema versus a multiplex⁹), they all come under the imagined affordance of conditions for film consumption. So, the conditions for film consumption as an imagined affordance emerged when informants described their experience with three main arthouse cinemas in Tallinn and Tartu (Kino Sõprus, Tartu Elekriteater and Kino Artis) as well as when the experiences in both new (Apollo Kino) and established (Forum Cinemas' Coca Cola Plaza) multiplexes were discussed.

All in all, these four imagined affordances of cinema-going encapsulate the diversity of the experiential, social, material, and affective aspects that converge to shape the contemporary cinema-going experience and the practices that surround and encourage it.

The quantitative data illustrate different affordances in the context of the films within the limits of the variables (See: Table 6). The possible effect of COVID-19 circumstances affecting exhibition needs to be considered with the results of the arthouse film *The Last Ones*, which was distributed during the pandemic. The statistically significant differences between the case-study films emerge for the categories of size and quality of the screen as well as sociality. 58% of the arthouse film audience picked features of the screen as a reason to watch the film in the cinema theatre, while the percentage for the comedy film *Unicorn* was 39%. Sociality on the other hand was more prominent for both comedy films: 38% for *Men*, 46% for *Unicorn* versus 19% for *The Last Ones*. These findings might be influenced by the fact that the arthouse film was released during the COVID-19 pandemic or be related to the expectations that the audience has of the environment in which they experience arthouse films.

	Comedy <i>Men</i> (2019)		Comedy <i>Unicorn</i> (2019)		Arthouse Film <i>The Last Ones</i> (2020)		
	%	N	%	N	%	N	<i>p</i> value

⁹ For example, the importance of technological specifics of the screen and sound versus just a big screen; the relevance and specifics of a “special” or “retro” atmosphere; the cozyness of traditional seats in an idiosyncratic arthouse venue versus the comfort of having a lot of legroom and wide and soft seats in a new multiplex’s hall.

Size and quality of the screen	47	60	39	37	58	110	0.005
Escaping from the daily routine	37	48	28	27	32	61	0.348
Collectivity	21	27	27	26	18	33	0.174
Sociality	38	49	46	44	19	36	<0.001
Seeing it fast	12	16	25	24	19	36	0.051

Table 6. Reason to watch the film in the cinema theatre, % of yes.

Another statistically significant aspect here was related to the level of cinema attendance. Namely, those who go to the cinema theatre once or more in a week perceive the size and quality of the screen as an important reason more often than the other groups (See: Table 7). The results suggest that the imagined affordance of the conditions for film consumption are thus more important for the eager cinemagoers than for those who go to the cinema less often.

	Reason: Screen Size and Quality, % of Yes	
	%	N
Once a week or more	72	23
1-3 times a month	54	99
Twice in two months	41	49
1-2 times in six months	45	31
Once a year	44	4
Less frequently	33	1
<i>p</i> value	0.030	

Table 7. Reason to watch the film in cinema theatre and cinema attendance, % of yes.

Further, the analysis of qualitative data resulted in four categories that show how the expectations about Estonian films were articulated, while illustrating how the informants evaluate their prior experiences in the form of their future expectations about Estonian cinema. The analysis resulted in the following categories: **(1) production-related, (2) genre-related, (3) effect-related, and (4) thematic expectations**. First, the informants stressed the importance of good production values (and the potential of co-production to increase it), new voices in terms of directors and screenwriters, and freedom for experimenting for forming a positive perception of contemporary Estonian films. They expected filmmakers to get a chance to develop their skills and achieve continuity of work as well. The informants stated

that filmmakers should “have more courage to express their vision” and funding should give more opportunities to young filmmakers to start their career.

Secondly, many informants highlighted the need for diversity in terms of genres. They expressed a desire for “genre experiments” and “as diverse selection of genres as possible”. It is noteworthy that the drama genre in its widest form did not come up as a preferred genre at all. This and the wish to avoid “slow”, “morbid”, “artsy”, “overly serious” and “depressing” tones pointed to the above-mentioned prior stereotypes revolving around Estonian cinema that accompanied the discussions. However, historical and biographical films were often mentioned as preferred genres for national films. Such genres allude to the preservation, representation, interpretation, and reflection functions of national cinema that are inherently attached to the local social, cultural, political and historical contexts, which such films are perceived to extensively deal with.

Thirdly, thematic expectations present the fact that, according to informants, national cinema is perceived to provide an opportunity for reflection and identification by including historically, culturally, and socially relevant themes and stories. This is also interconnected with the previous category and the genre preferences within it. For example, the informants expected national cinema to deal with themes that are “important for Estonians” and globally or locally topical and relatable. The locality was a distinctive feature of this category. The domestic films were expected to be thematically based on “Estonian history” and “Estonian culture” but also it was stated that they should reflect “real life with its authenticity, beauty and pain” and tell stories about contemporary local life. Additionally, the point of introducing Estonia to the world through universally relatable stories was also perceived as one of the imagined properties of new Estonian cinema. Thematic expectations are closely linked to the final category of effects, as Estonian films were perceived to provide a sense of commonality and unity, in addition to being an opportunity for reflection and identification. The social relevance of national cinema was also articulated through the expectation of the films to achieve a wide resonance within society, thus reaching a wide audience and leaving a long-lasting effect.

The quantitative results reveal the expectations about national cinema in the context of the case-study films. As these were framed with the pre-selected variables presented in Table 8, the results provide a somewhat limited but still telling overview of what is expected from domestic films. The entertainment value and sociality were more prominent reasons to watch the Estonian comedies than the arthouse film (respectively, 75% and 64% versus 29% of the participants indicated that). Gaining a cultural experience while being engaged in affective experiences (signified by the variable “emotions and experiences”) was chosen more often by the arthouse film audience. Importantly, keeping up-to-date with national cinema as a reason for attending one of the case-study films was picked by around half of each film's audience, which suggests that Estonian films in general draw local audiences to the cinema theatre.

	Comedy <i>Men</i> (2019)		Comedy <i>Unicorn</i> (2019)		Arthouse Film <i>The Last Ones</i> (2020)		<i>p</i> value
	%	N	%	N	%	N	
Entertainment	75	97	64	62	29	55	<0.001
Emotions and experiences	3	4	6	6	31	59	<0.001
Sociality	41	53	50	48	20	37	<0.001
Keeping up-to-date with national cinema	49	63	54	52	54	102	0.638
Cultural experience	5	6	7	7	38	71	<0.001
Actors or director	16	20	10	10	52	99	<0.001

Table 8. Reasons to watch the film, % of yes.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I addressed the nature of cinema-going in the 21st century by defining (1) eventfulness and experience, (2) collectivity and sociality, (3) being focused and staying offline, and (4) conditions for film consumption as the imagined affordance of cinema-going. While the results derived from the Eastern European context affirm findings made recently elsewhere in Europe – the importance of sociality, eventfulness, and space in Belgium (Van de Vijver, 2019 & 2017) and the significance of sociality, going offline, and technical conditions in Finland (Grundström, 2018) – the approach taken here added a layer to the previous findings by underlining the experiential, material, and sociocultural specifics of cinema-going in a context where cinema-going has shown growing popularity. While the findings, within the limits of the empirical data, illuminate personal and interpersonal as well as affective and material driving forces behind the local growth trend in cinema admissions, they also call attention to the clear distinctions that audiences draw between home viewing and cinema-going amidst global trends. By addressing the expectations around national cinema, I also pinpointed the cultural, social, industrial, artistic, and individual functions and values that the film audiences attach to domestic films, which are expected to provide a sense of commonality and unity as well as an opportunity for reflection and identification.

The analysis of how the imagined affordances of film experiences are formed by audiences resulted in the following categories that show how cinema-going is encouraged and shaped by film-specific aspects, cinema theatre-specific aspects, social aspects, situational aspects, and media and promotion. Thus, the results show what the expectation-forming processual

encounters between persons and paratexts look like in a media-saturated world. By reflecting on the expectations of viewers and showing the functions played by the processes of furnishing, determining, and disrupting cinema-going dynamics, I framed the processes and practices that have previously been conceptualised through the notions of speculative consumption (Gray, 2010) and horizon of expectations (Michelle et al., 2017a, following Jauss, 1970, and Biltereyst & Meers, 2006). I approached the notion of imagined affordance in the context of interconnected practices (as elaborated in the theory section).

It resulted in an encompassing theoretical framework that can be used to study the specifics of understudied “prefigurative activities” that create anticipation and expectations as well as direct decision-making and reading strategies before film-viewing and cinema-going (Michelle et al., 2017a). Thus, applying the theoretical framework showcased its potential for conceptualising the expectations and perceptions around cinema-going as well as forming processes in their paratextual, material, technological, social, experiential, and cultural complexity. With this in mind, the notion of imagined affordances could work as a conceptual tool for the much-needed research on the role of cinema-going for European audiences in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biographical notes:

Sten Kauber is a junior research fellow at the Centre of Excellence in Media Innovation and Digital Culture at Tallinn University. He is currently working on his Ph.D. dissertation, which examines Estonian film audiences multidimensionally by focusing on the practices that shape and encourage film consumption. His research interests include audience studies, production studies, film culture, and material culture. Sten works also as a freelance film critic. Contact: sten.kauber@tlu.ee.

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Appendix 1. Focus group interview guide (translated from Estonian by the author)

Introductory questions

1. What prompted you to watch “The film X”? How did the movie reach you?
(This is a warm up question which everyone was asked individually)

Topic 1 - User Journey

2. When you think about your movie watching habits, how do you usually decide that you want to watch a certain movie?
3. What kind of materials usually shape your expectations about a film the most? (trailers, posters, reviews, interviews etc.)
4. What would you usually like to get from such materials?
 - a. Are such materials in Estonia usually sufficient - do you get the necessary information?
5. How do you try to figure out if an Estonian movie is or is not for you? (additional question: Is it easier or harder to decide with Estonian films than with others?)
6. What role does social media play in your film consumption journey? (before, during, after the film experience)

Topic 2 - Cinema versus Home

7. What prompted you to watch the film “X” especially in the cinema?

8. Imagine a perfect cinema experience, what does it look like?
9. On what basis do you decide whether you should watch a movie in the cinema theatre right away or wait for the home release?
10. Assignment: Compare the pros and cons of watching a movie in the cinema theatre and at home, and write down three pros and cons for each (discussion on the basis of individual lists)
11. On the basis of what do you decide which cinema theatre to go to?
12. Cinemas have become increasingly active in organizing special events (special and premiere screenings, screenings with invited guests, screenings for women and men, etc.). Have you been to such screenings and, if yes, have they provided any added value to the cinema experience?
13. Have your cinema experiences been affected by the recent investments in the quality of cinema venues (better seats, better picture and sound, more legroom, additional services, etc.)?

Topic 3 - Expectations about Estonian Films + assignment

14. If we look at Estonian films from a broad perspective, what kind of films should be produced in Estonia?
15. What kind of movies should be funded by public funding?
16. Task: Would you go and watch the film on the basis of the impression given by the following information? What aspects did you consider during decision-making? What guided your decision?
 - a. Estonian comedy starring three well known actors. Seems like light and easy entertainment on the basis of the extensive media coverage and the fast-paced trailer.
 - b. Estonian drama from a well-known director. Very little media coverage with mediocre reviews, but it looks visually appealing in posters and ads.
 - c. Estonian arthouse film, which premieres in Estonia after a successful festival tour. Good reviews from critics, but comments from friends/acquaintances were rather cold.
 - d. Big Hollywood blockbuster, which is a sequel of some franchise with many well-known actors and a lot of action according to the trailer.
 - e. Oscar-winning US drama about some socially relevant topic.
 - f. Estonia and Nordic co-production, which is an historic drama featuring few Estonian actors.

Summary

17. When you think back to our conversation, then:
 - a. What were your most important topics, discoveries, and thoughts for you?
 - b. Did we miss something important during the discussion?
 - c. Would you like to add something that you couldn't bring up during the discussion?