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Capturing film festival buzz: The methodological dilemma of measuring symbolic value

Diane Burgess

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Abstract

Film festivals have long been associated with ephemeral value creation, from the dynamic energy associated with the festival experience to the more static traces of cultural capital that remain once the events are over. This article investigates film festival buzz as it has been conceptualised in film festival studies, and explores existing measurement frameworks drawn from industry stakeholders and federal agencies in the Canadian context. Even though film festival buzz appears to function as an institutional antecedent to consumer buzz in the film value chain, serious methodological dilemmas are raised by the intersecting stakeholder interests that shape knowledge production.

Keywords: feature film distribution, film success indicators, movie hype, word-of-mouth marketing

Symbolic value is the critical currency of film festivals, which are conventionally seen as being located outside of the commercial circuits of distribution and exhibition. From programming decisions to awards to red carpet premieres, film festivals are associated with cinephilia, cultural prestige, and discerning hierarchies of value – or, as Marijke de Valck has noted, ‘festivals function as gateways to cultural legitimization’.[1] These largely figurative, and often ephemeral moments of value creation – which can be subsumed within the broad designation of buzz – do have structural impacts on the film industry. For industry professionals, this symbolic capital is associated with marketing, as assessments of a project’s potential economic value. Distributor

Mongrel Media increased the print and advertising budget for *Bollywood/Hollywood* (Deepa Mehta, 2002) by \$400,000 based on the reaction at TIFF, including buzz that suggested the film's potential to be 'an unanticipated mainstream success'.^[2] For state funding agencies, like Telefilm Canada, festival selection and awards are included as success factors in their assessment of the cultural performance of national cinema.^[3] In Telefilm's Success Index calculations, these traces of festival buzz exist as static measures of a festival event that has passed.

For film festival researchers, buzz is a dynamic constitutive element of festival experience. In Andrew Sarris' seminal writing about attendees at Cannes, it is festival buzz (which he characterises as a 'cinematic virus') that entices the moles into darkened theatres and lures the moths to the flame of celebrity.^[4] Virality offers an apt metaphor for buzz's infectious spread as well as for its connections to the excessive behaviours of the moles and the moths (when healthful pursuits take a temporary backseat to marathon sessions of cinephilia, star-gazing, and networking parties). By definition, film festival buzz sits at the intersection of multiple senses of the word – connected to rumours, word-of-mouth publicity, and murmurs (or 'a low sound as of people talking'), while evoking 'hurried activity (a buzz of excitement)' or even 'a feeling of mild intoxication'.^[5] The energy associated with the generation and spread of buzz seems integral to value creation, albeit perhaps not synonymous with the value that is created in the festival sector. Instead, buzz seems to be a precursor or necessary ingredient in the creation of forms of symbolic value or perhaps also a confirmation of selections made by festival programmers. My interest in this topic started with questions about how a dynamic conceptualisation of festival buzz might inform measures of the film industry value chain, particularly in the context of demand-driven approaches to distributing independent films. How do value creation and attention converge? Does the dispersive energy of buzz connect with consumer demand or content discoverability outside of festival spaces? Can it influence attention momentum?

This article investigates existing measurement frameworks while trying to unpack the intersecting conversations about how to define and measure buzz. Since each festival constituency offers a slightly different perspective on the festival's role in value creation, the construct of festival buzz splinters easily and resists attempts to devise a cohesive approach to analysis. As a result, this article raises some serious methodological dilemmas around potential research directions that could better engage with the role of festivals in

discoverability and distribution of national cinema. The examples that follow are drawn from the Canadian context so that my exploratory research could be informed by my existing knowledge of, and participation in, what for me is a domestic festival sector. Part reflection and part exploration, this article aims to identify potential research directions that could better engage with the role of festivals in the ephemeral aspects of symbolic value that can be captured within the designation of buzz.

Locating buzz

When value creation is discussed within film festival studies, Pierre Bourdieu tends to be the theorist of choice via reference to his writings about the field of cultural production. Bourdieu's approach to artistic value 'situat[es] the work within a "universe of belief" that is produced by the (inter)actions of the agents and institutions whose relative power to consecrate comprises the field'.^[6] His delineation of non-economic forms of capital has provided a heuristic framework for thinking about how festivals contribute to canon formation^[7] and cultural legitimisation.^[8] As de Valck explains, cultural capital is associated with knowledge and taste (hence the connection to festival programming), and symbolic capital is linked to prestige.^[9] In the context of how buzz fits into value creation, there appear to be important differences between the recognisability of cultural capital (as a more static imprint of value) and the convertibility of symbolic capital (as a more dynamic and potentially perishable measure). In my own writing, I notice a tendency to mention buzz alongside symbolic capital^[10] (possibly as an informal synonym) based on convertibility. The potential to convert symbolic capital to economic capital (e.g.: box office returns or ancillary sales for recipients of major festival awards) highlights its inextricable relationship with the festival's role as a 'symbolic banker' (securing programming investments with its own accumulated prestige).^[11] Variability in value negotiation and the role of recognition (including the recognisability of the recognised) point to these processes as being both socially-enacted and situated.

In his ethnographic account of Sundance, Daniel Dayan concludes with the significance of the 'written festival', a term inspired by Roland Barthes' explanation of how fashion becomes meaningful through critical commentary and photography (transformed to 'written fashion').^[12] Dayan mentions buzz only briefly, in conjunction with rumours, noting their 'precise function

[in the ‘shared experience’ of the festival] is to travel from mouth to ear’.[13] There is a clear distinction between buzz and the ‘stable, paradigmatic form’ of the written festival that emerges from ‘constant captioning’.[14] With an intriguing turn of phrase, Dayan’s list of contributors to the definitional action of the written festival includes ‘those who script buzz’[15] (which could be variably interpreted as publicity or reportage). Thomas Elsaesser picks up the core ideas of ‘performative self-confirmation and reflexive self-definition’ from Dayan’s written festival, but refers instead to ‘verbal architectures’.[16] Elsaesser’s usage of this term – which he seems to equate with buzz – suggests a more expansive concept than the written festival because ‘only a part ... finds its way into print’.[17] Instead, he describes a ‘dispersive energy’ that is ‘fuelled by rumor, gossip and word-of-mouth’ as well as by anxiety associated with hierarchies of access (to festival spaces and information).[18] In Christian Jungen’s study of Hollywood in Cannes, the festival’s dispersive energy is less about FOMO (fear of missing out) than it is about hype. Jungen also aligns with Dayan’s assessment of ‘media multipliers’[19] at festivals, and grounds his position with Niklas Luhmann’s theory of the media as an auto-poietic system (‘that describes and maintains itself’).[20]

The role of the media in capturing and amplifying festival experience appears to be a key component in the spread of buzz, even if there is uncertainty about how its diffusion relates to measures of value. Jungen’s use of hype (rather than buzz) fits the context of his focus on the launch of studio films at the Cannes Festival, where accreditation is largely restricted to industry delegates and the press. Hype connects to marketing – positioning the red-carpet premiere as a media event ‘to anticipate strong word of mouth’[21] – and to the shared attention of a global audience attracted to massive day-and-date releases.[22] Jungen does frequently mention prestige, associated broadly with the idea of recognition, ranging from Cannes’ cultural (or cinephilic) cachet,[23] to the inclusion of ‘prestigious studio films’ (like *Moulin Rouge*),[24] as well as the Festival’s accumulated prestige as ‘a catalyst for global mass releases’.[25] Yet, the spread of buzz, or the media’s amplification of hype, implies attracting attention and anticipation beyond the festival event, thus raising questions about the boundaries of the festival’s influence. Here, there is a useful distinction to be made between place and presence. The importance of situatedness in discussions of value creation – where ‘[f]ilm festivals both *make* and *mediate* film history’[26] – foregrounds programming (e.g.: Aida Vallejo’s ‘geolocated history(ies) of cinema’[27]), publics (or counterpublics; e.g.: Cindy Wong’s delineation of festivals as public

spheres[28]), and critical networks (e.g.: Jungen's exploration of Cannes as 'a site for active film historiography'[29]). Presence, on the other hand, relates to the energy generated in festival space(s). In her work on African cinema and film festivals, Lindiwe Dovey refers to Leslie Witz' explanation of "festive excitement" (or "festive excess")[30], which emerges from struggles over meaning or value. Noting 'the dynamic way both consensus and dissent arise in aesthetic and other judgements', Dovey offers the term '(dis)sensus communis'[31] to capture the festive excitement that can arise at film festivals.

Dovey's approach diverges from Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's notion of "festive viewing", which is associated with the shared viewing (or what Nick Couldry calls "social watching") of a media event.[32] Instead, she highlights the difference between the 'liveness' of media events and the 'live togetherness' of film festivals.[33] It is the live togetherness of festival participants that allows for (dis)sensus communis or festive excitement to emerge. Interestingly, both Dovey and Witz consider the extent to which dissent, transgression, or excess might be 'authorized' by a festival, suggesting a 'continuum' from planned (or sanctioned) festive excitement to unexpected '*appropriations of the festival*'[34] – an idea that points to the festival as a catalytic environment and also to its institutional role in fostering sparks. Janet Harbord's analysis of festival time similarly stresses live togetherness as a pre-requisite for the 'contingencies' (i.e.: 'accidents or controversies')[35] that are an integral part of film festivals. For Harbord, liveness (in a slightly different usage than Dovey's) brings together the temporality of a film's screening with the shared attention of viewing, leading her to conclude that 'the festival demands that you are there within the fold of its moment'.[36] However, the concept of presence (as a necessary component of either liveness or live togetherness) is complicated by broader realities of attention and attendance in the context of the film festival as a multi-faceted array of events unfolding across multiple localised spaces. In tallying the category of festival participant, Brendan Kredell has argued that 'the non-attendee [often] proves to be just as important a stakeholder'.[37] He offers the term 'constituency' to encompass the broad range of non-attendees who find themselves indirectly invested in the festival through the local business community, civic governance, or even hailed by marketing and media coverage as 'potential future attendees'.[38]

Further, Kirsten Stevens asserts that with the rise of digital technologies '[t]he act of being there has increasingly become mediated'.[39] Festivals can

extend access via digital delivery or live-streaming and festivalgoers are encouraged to engage with social media. Stevens cites the example of an app developed by the Melbourne International Film Festival that enabled users to ‘follow “festival buzz”’.[40] The sanctioned interactivity inherent in the invitation to “join the conversation”[41] dovetails with the potential to partake in the type of contingencies identified by Harbord, as these ‘unexpected “moments”... result in the most active forms of digital engagement’.[42] Thus, social media engagement seems to be articulated in an intriguing intersection of buzz, festive excitement, and contingency that challenges the materiality of presence. Porous notions of liveness or live togetherness that defy the temporal and spatial boundaries of the festival event(s) point towards what Stevens anticipates as ‘a point of rupture’ where there is a ‘risk [of] destabilizing the very boundaries that have allowed them distinction as events’.[43] In considering how buzz might be measured, I find this idea of a potential point of rupture to be particularly useful. Jungen describes the film festival as ‘a privileged site of reception standing at the intersection of production and consumption, a site where something “happens” to films’.[44] The idea of buzz – and its involvement in what ‘happens’ in the process of value creation – finds expression in a range of terms used by film festival researchers to capture the energy of the festival experience. But this energy relies on both the paratextual occurrences and the dynamic spread of information. Meaning invested in the telling and re-telling seems to be almost as important as the festive excitement sparked by the contingent moment.

Buzz is, at best, an ephemeral construct in film festival research. For a relatively new field, the necessity of connecting with the scholarly state of knowledge has involved creating distance from the informalities of industry lingo and entertainment journalism – i.e. shoring up symbolic capital in academia – and navigating (inter)disciplinary boundaries, which, in practice, create myriad constituencies that can be challenging if not unmanageable to bridge. The result is a range of terms – that extend to some rather esoteric jargon – that strive to grapple with ideas of presence, energy, and communal experience. Key questions remain about the extent to which the measurement of film festival buzz implicates the festival site and the interaction of different festival constituencies. As spatial and temporal boundaries are stretched, how does the value associated with buzz shift or decay? Is there a point of rupture? With these questions in mind, I turned to different potential data sources for methodological insight. The first step involved looking at how industry and government approach value creation at film festivals.

Measuring festivals: Commercial bridge or cultural platform

Although festival screenings are seen as being distinct from commercial theatrical exhibition, their relationship to film industry revenue streams tends to be at the root of their perceived value. Film festival exhibition has been categorised as marketing by government funding agencies, as parallel circuits of subsidised distribution[45] by academics, and met with skepticism by distributors who are aware that '[t]he demands of a festival audience ... are very different from the demands of a daily cinema going public'.[46] If there is a unifying thread here, it involves the bridging potential of festivals in launching films or in chasing the long tail. The variability of film festival buzz can be attributed to how value might transfer out of the festival space – in other words, how symbolic capital can be converted to economic or cultural capital to achieve some sort of return on investment. In their interviews with emerging filmmakers in Brisbane, Tess Van Hemert and Elizabeth Ellison found mixed experiences with festival exhibition and characterised 'the links between successful festival exposure and ongoing distribution [as] tenuous'.[47] Variability also has been identified in potential buzz generation, based on program positioning and scheduling within the festival. In a case study of the gala screening of *45 Years* (Andrew Haigh, 2105) at the Berlin International Film Festival, Roderik Smits observed how the film's sales agent organised market screenings to maximise the exposure offered by the prestigious slot – noting 'how festivals and market screenings operated as tournaments of values and added values to the film sales process'.[48]

In some instances, the value of circulation through subsidised distribution can accrue through networking and training (that defers return through the development of industry capacity), and that branding (perhaps through a national cinema showcase) can be a precursor to canon formation and possibly also to market presence. However, in considering how buzz might be indicative of different types of value creation, it also is important to note that festivals are not equally implicated in these processes. Festivals carry different weight in terms of the value conferred on the films they present. Approaches to differentiating festivals include FIAPF ranking (to identify A-list competitive festivals),[49] Mark Peranson's 'ideal' dual model (of business vs. audience festivals),[50] and Skadi Loist's circuit hierarchy (of top-tier events and parallel/sub-circuits).[51] With this awareness of the potential variability of individual factors that impact festival buzz, it is useful to begin from the more

generalised foundation offered by existing measures of the value of the film festival sector.

Between 2011 and 2013, the consulting firm Nordicity developed a value chain framework for analyses of the performance of Canada's film and television sector. Their model was adapted (with some significant omissions) from Peter Bloore's independent film value chain, and it was also changed to focus solely on the domestic sector.[52] Nordicity's methodological framework and data analysis are used for the annual profile of the screen-based media production industry in Canada that is published by the Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA). In Nordicity's 2013 value chain, although film festivals are visually depicted amongst the content consumption platforms, a numbered list earlier in the report places festivals before theatrical exhibition and descriptively associates their activities with marketing.[53] In other words, the festival seems to be perceived more as a bridge than as a platform. With the rise of on-demand services, the film festival has been further segregated in the CMPA value chain, presented strictly as a bridge to theatrical release (either via the distribution sector or directly from the production sector).[54] For the purposes of Nordicity's analysis, the value chain maps the delivery of media products from script to screen. The distinct segments, in turn, become targets of economic impact analysis, which measures the performance of each industry sector (as opposed to how media products gain value).

For the content consumption platforms, measuring economic impact shows market share and captures shifts in market penetration. Between 2007 and 2011, 'DVD/Blu-ray sales dropped 41%'[55] while 'VOD revenue more than tripled'.[56] During this period, market penetration of VOD use among English-Canadian adults more than doubled from 7% to 16%.[57] From the economic impact data, it is possible to gain insight into changes in the viewing behaviours of Canadian audiences. For film festivals, on the other hand, the data capture operating expenditures, visitor spending, and generated employment. The section preamble explains that the focus will be on quantifying festivals' economic contribution through program delivery and impacts on host cities, as opposed to 'the benefits they indirectly generate for other value chain industries'.[58] Thus, value creation for the films and filmmakers navigating the value chain is not included. Nevertheless, in the presentation of attendance data from 40 domestic film festivals that received Telefilm support, TIFF stands out with 21% of the total – 400,000 in 2011; in comparison, the third largest festival, Vancouver International Film Festival, had

152,000 attendees or 8% of the total.[59] TIFF's total operating expenditures (33.8M) exceed the combined total for the other 39 festivals (33.3M), but perhaps the most telling figure is 21.4M for delegate expenditures, which accounted for approximately 35% of total industry-delegate spending.[60] As a figure that captures spending on 'delegates' business travel and public relations (e.g. events and parties)'[61], delegate expenditures might provide insight into TIFF's relative influence as a symbolic banker – as a potential way to value-weight buzz.

However, the Canadian festival audience is a somewhat problematic construct, based on the question of how (or where?) festivalgoers fit in measurements of value creation. According to Nordicity's 'Overview of the Film and Television Value Chain', festivals 'can raise awareness' for films 'but do not directly generate large audiences' during the content consumption stage.[62] Based on this ambivalent assessment of film festival buzz, festival attendees are not the focus of the ensuing analysis except in terms of how their presence has an economic impact on the host city. In part, the measurement of festival attendance is limited by reporting that does not distinguish between types of attendees (with the exception of industry delegates). More importantly, festival attendance does not actually measure the presence of audiences at screenings (which comprise a complex mix of pass holders, ticket buyers, comps, and guests). It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the centrality of shared experience in how festival studies theorises buzz, here the measurement of audience presence is devoid of the 'live togetherness' of the cinemagoing experience. From an economic standpoint, festival box office does not accrue to the films, which means that buying a ticket to a festival screening does not directly contribute to a film's revenue. It is possible that the absence of a direct return on investment is what disqualifies the film festival from an industry definition of a consumption platform (based on performance data that are incompatible with other platforms in the value chain model). Nevertheless, for industry stakeholders, anxiety remains about whether festival screenings might exhaust potential box office in specific markets; after all, most people are not going to buy tickets to the same movie twice.

Elsewhere, I have written about Telefilm Canada's struggles with domestic film festival policy and a doubled definition of the national audience[63] – as the target both of industrial measures of box office share and of cultural objectives related to subsidised access to national cinema. Based on Telefilm's old formulation, the domestic film festival was seen as both industrial bridge

and cultural platform. The performance measurement of Canadian participation at international film festivals was not troubled by this distinction, instead focusing solely on how the films gained value through selection, sales, and awards.[64] In 2008, Telefilm shifted domestic film festival support away from the Canada Feature Film Fund (with its box office target), and by 2015 rationalised their financing programs based on broad categories like Development, Production, and Promotion (which includes domestic festivals). In their annual reporting, Telefilm's performance data now focuses on the presence of government-supported films at festivals. Thus, while the national trade association (CMPA) focuses on economic impact analysis, the state funding agency calculates a success index for Canadian films; but neither approach considers commercial value creation for the national film industry.

Developed in 2011, Telefilm's Success Index aims to offer a 'comprehensive measure' of the performance of the portfolio of Canadian films that they support.[65] A key component of this approach is the inclusion of cultural successes (like festival selection and prizes) that would not be captured in box office data. The three components of the Success Index are commercial performance, with 60% of the score focused on sales and domestic theatrical box office; cultural performance, with 30% of the score devoted to festival selection and prizes; and industrial performance, with 10% of the score allocated to the involvement of private and foreign financing.[66] It is interesting to note that selection only matters for 'certain international festivals', while prizes also matter for 'some festivals and events in Canada'. [67] Adjustments have been made as needed, including the addition of several 'prestigious children's film festivals' in 2015-16.[68] Telefilm's website provides a list of events included on 'the international festival circuit', and this page links to information about the Success Index (under the heading 'Improve your performance score')[69] – suggesting that these are the relevant festivals. As of this writing in 2020, Telefilm's international festival circuit includes 17 domestic festivals, or just shy of a quarter of the Canadian film festivals funded by the agency.[70] Ultimately then, in the measurement of cultural success, only some of the domestic festivals matter – at least when it comes to value creation for feature films.

In their Annual Reports, Telefilm presents the Success Index as a bar chart with colour-coded segments for the three sub-indices. The accompanying analysis generally attempts to account for year-to-year changes. For example, the explanation of the 2015 increase in the cultural sub-index indicates that it was 'propelled by selections abroad and prizes earned in Canada'[71];

in its restatement of what is being measured, this information seems more like description than actual analysis. This section of the Annual Report concludes with the observation that the Success Index will develop to 'better reflect demand, namely, viewership levels'.^[72] In the 2018-2019 Annual Report, the depiction of the Success Index appears unchanged. However, there are additional pie charts that show the breakdown of consumer spending on box office, Pay TV, and Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) services, as well as a bar chart that tracks the accessibility of Canadian content on cinema and television screens. While puzzling over what to make of the Success Index, I looked for insight into how Telefilm values this information. What drew my attention were the opening pages of the 2015-2016 Annual Report, which presented various graphics highlighting domestic box office success (at benchmarks of \$1, \$3, and \$6 million), the presence of renowned Canadian directors (tagged with descriptors like 'Academy Award nominated') with their latest films at top international festivals like Berlin and Locarno, and finally a page devoted to 'A Talented Future', spotlighting the presence of emerging filmmakers at festivals. Interestingly, TIFF was the only domestic festival mentioned, thus further supporting my earlier observation that the domestic film festival circuit is perhaps under-valued as a contributor to the success of national films.

What stood out about the highlights pages was the categorisation of Canadian films into tiers, from box office hits to auteurs to emerging directors. These categories suggest a tacit acknowledgement of additional criteria of value, in particular because the components of the highlights pages do not explicitly match the Success sub-indices. This approach to designating highlights persists in the opening pages of the 2018-2019 Annual Report. Renowned directors or auteurs ('Canadian Legends') are presented before the first features from emerging directors ('The Future Looks Bright'), while box office performance has been replaced by 'Local Stories Global Impact';^[73] TIFF and the Whistler Film Festival are the only domestic festivals mentioned. Ultimately, the Success Index provides at best a partial view of the impact of festival exposure on value creation for films and filmmakers. The sub-indices are a bit of a black box and the annual highlights bring in corporate funding priorities, canonical categories, and traces of the longer-term influence of festival circulation. The result is closer to a chronicling of cultural capital accrued at festivals rather than insight into how symbolic value (or buzz) might be harnessed. In an effort to reconcile the seemingly incompatible views of the festival as commercial bridge or cultural platform, I

wanted to find a way to bring audiences back into a conversation about success and demand.

Awareness, anticipation, and antecedents of buzz

Why might the dynamic qualities of festival buzz matter when measuring industry success? In their work on the performance of Australian cinema, Deb Verhoeven et al. propose a film impact rating that captures theatrical presence as a more nuanced construct than what is offered by ‘a simple measure of box office’.[74] By incorporating weighted values for screening coverage and commentary, the resulting scores capture qualitative metrics that could aid in the identification of films that ‘punch above or below their weight’.[75] Film festival screenings are included in the category of coverage, thus broadening the measurement of a film’s theatrical presence in a way that could better inform assessments of ‘cultural exposure’.[76] In a similar vein to considering cultural exposure as a success factor, Telefilm Canada set an awareness target, based on the assumption that it marked a ‘first step in reaching audiences, improving perceptions and stimulating demand’.[77] Established in their 2011-2012 fiscal year, Telefilm’s awareness indicator measured the recognition rate or percentage of Canadians who ‘could recall the name of a Canadian film, when unaided’.[78] More of a performance indicator for corporate strategy than film impact, the awareness indicator targets the success of Telefilm’s promotional outreach and branding efforts. That said, many of the initiatives undertaken to boost awareness dovetail with film festivals, such as using social media platforms to share paratextual content (e.g.: interviews) from the festival circuit[79] (in effect spreading film festival buzz). Unlike the Success Index, the awareness indicator points to a broader conceptualisation of industry performance that implicates festivals (and their attendees) and possible antecedents of consumer buzz as a means of understanding film performance.

Although the mantra of the digital era is that ‘content is king’, it is attention momentum that drives the value chain in a multi-screened universe. For their study of ‘Pre-release consumer buzz’ (PRCB), Mark Houston et al. undertook an extensive review of ‘scientific articles that use the word “buzz” in the context of new product adoption’.[80] In particular, they sought instances where buzz was a ‘focal construct’ and not just a synonym for word of mouth or a briefly invoked catchphrase[81] (or buzzword). They ultimately define

PRCB as ‘the aggregation of observable expressions of anticipation by consumers for a forthcoming new product’ – noting ‘three types of behaviours (anticipatory communication, search and participation in experiential activities)’ along two dimensions (amount and pervasiveness).[82] Based on a quantitative analysis of 254 movies that received a wide release in North America, Houston et al. devised a model in which PRCB mediates studio actions and quality as drivers of initial success. However, their approach relies on an overly tidy view of theatrical release. Where would the film festival screenings fit? ‘Initial success’ is a box office measure, but critics likely encountered the film on the festival circuit, and ‘studio actions’ often become searchable when stars are on red carpets and festival buzz becomes the target of consumers’ anticipatory search behaviour.

But it is also problematic to designate the film festival as pre-release. Houston et al. insist that the conceptual uniqueness of PRCB rests on the distinction between ‘pre- and post-release contexts’ – asserting that there are changes in information, mental processes, and behavioural effects as soon as a product is available.[83] This would mean that experience-derived word-of-mouth starts to muddy the buzz field as soon as it is no longer a purely anticipatory construct. That said, how is product availability perceived in relation to festival screenings? Is a film considered available when it screens (almost) exclusively for industry and media at Cannes? Or does the notion of availability shift slightly at a public festival like TIFF? Even though most cinephiles and potential consumers experience TIFF from afar, there is an increased possibility of encountering the spread of festival word-of-mouth on social media. Looking further into the role of product availability in the designation of festival buzz, it is conceivable that clear distinctions might map onto a hierarchical model of international festival circuits. To explore whether social media engagement might provide traces of festival buzz or insight into how festival participation connects with a construct like PRCB, I examined a handful of examples.

Social media activity comprises a potentially useful data source that captures the transmission of buzz and provides some insight into how festival participants engage in processes of value creation. Released in April 2017, *Maudie* (Aisling Walsh, 2016) was the third-highest-grossing Canadian film of 2017, earning just over \$2.8 million at the domestic box office, and the highest-grossing English-language title.[84] An Irish-Canadian co-production, starring Sally Hawkins and Ethan Hawke, the film is a romantic biopic about Nova Scotia artist Maud Lewis. *Maudie* was referred to as a ‘blockbuster in

Atlantic Canada' where the per-screen average bested that of overall box office leader *The Fate of the Furious* (F. Gary Gray, 2017).[85] Looking to pre-release performance on the festival circuit, *Maudie* debuted at Telluride, screened as a Special Presentation at TIFF, was the Opening Gala at the Vancouver, Calgary, and Atlantic Film Festivals, and screened at the Berlinale. In terms of the cultural component of Telefilm's Success Index, selection for these festivals would count, along with several prizes – the People's Choice Award at VIFF, Best Feature at Cinefest, and awards for Atlantic Feature and Atlantic Screenwriting at the Atlantic Film Festival. I attended one of the TIFF screenings, where there was good buzz, but I would not say that the film stood out as a 'can't miss' title in conversations with fellow festivalgoers. As *Maudie* sustained positive buzz across the domestic festival circuit in autumn, I wondered whether this energy would dissipate before the spring theatrical release.

In looking at the Twitter activity related to *Maudie*, I found that the film's distributor, Mongrel Media, employed different messaging strategies for the festival screenings and the theatrical launch. During TIFF, Mongrel's tweets focused on their slate and brand identity – reinforcing title recognition of their selected films, and highlighting the daily activities (and celebrity parties) at Mongrel House. They did re-tweet and thus spread positive festivalgoer responses to *Maudie*, but did not actively push the film (e.g.: using buzz to encourage attendance) until the theatrical release. Their hashtagging also shifted from #MongrelTIFF to #MaudieFilm. Mongrel's social media strategy during the festival coincides with Smits' analysis of the gatekeeping activities of distributors. Specifically, Smits notes a role for film festivals in supporting the gatekeeping networks that operate in the cultural industries marketplace.[86] These networking arrangements in effect de-centralise decision-making about cultural products and reduce uncertainty by embedding professional routines and taste preferences within a transnational context.[87] Thus, as industry stakeholders converge on the festival circuit, distributors can assess the comparative value of films, confirming and even legitimising their choices. This stakeholder activity during festivals positions industry agents as symbolic bankers and could be considered in terms of antecedents to pre-release consumer buzz (setting the value of institutional drivers).

For a bit of contrast, I looked at the release of *Hello Destroyer* (2016), Kevan Funk's debut feature about a hockey enforcer dealing with the consequences

of on-ice violence. Selection for its World Premiere as part of TIFF's Discovery program (a sidebar devoted to emerging directors) led to acquisition by Northern Banner Releasing, a 'specialty label'[88] affiliated with genre-focused Raven Banner Entertainment. The theatrical release of *Hello Destroyer* was interconnected with TIFF's Canada's Top Ten touring festival, which partnered with local cinematheques or venues associated with regional film festivals. For some Canadian films, particularly those from emerging filmmakers, the Top Ten tour might have comprised their theatrical run or served as its launching point. For *Hello Destroyer*, much of the Twitter activity around the theatrical screenings involved the continued use of festival-related hashtags (which was not a significant feature of the *Maudie* release tweets) – including #TIFFTopTen and #SeetheNorth. This strategy raises questions about the role of the ancillary activities of Canada's major festivals in launching independent films. The infrastructure that has grown to support the year-round programming activities of festivals like Toronto and Vancouver – including Bell Lightbox and the VanCity Theatre – plays host to screenings that mimic festival events with their guest intros and discussions. That the release buzz for *Hello Destroyer* remained reliant on off-season festival circuitry suggests that this may be a key target for further research on innovative approaches to demand-driven releasing strategies.

Looking at *Hello Destroyer* alongside another recent Canadian hockey movie reveals a greater diversity of potential interest points for *Indian Horse* (Stephen Campanelli, 2018). Adapted from an award-winning bestseller by Ojibwe author Richard Wagamese, the film prominently credited Clint Eastwood as Executive Producer and won several festival audience awards – the Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton People's Choice Awards are featured alongside the TIFF selection on the release poster. These interest points could impact the two dimensions (amount and pervasiveness) of observable buzz-related behaviour from Houston et al.'s PRCB model. In the *Indian Horse* release trailer,[89] the audience awards and TIFF selection are presented in a single shot, framed individually by festival laurels. The cultural capital of festival buzz is literally stamped on posters and trailers, and, by this point, it is a static remnant of events that have passed. One of the few times I have noticed Mongrel using a festival hashtag in relation to marketing films during release was to point out that several of their TIFF 2017 titles were available on VOD (so that viewers could reenact their own Mongrel TIFF mini-fest). The relative absence of festival-related hashtags in Mongrel's *Maudie* theatrical release tweets brings to mind Tom Perlmutter's observations about the

differences between the festival audience and the cinema-going public – suggesting that distributors face ‘two quite different decision making processes’.[90] Perlmutter attributes a ‘depth of knowledge’[91] or expertise to distributors (and also to festival programmers) that is gained over time through professional experience. In many ways, this idea of a ‘feel for the game’ invokes both Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*[92] as well as Smits’ analysis of how professional logics and gatekeeping networks influence film distribution. Nevertheless, it appears that the more rabid cinematic virus of festival buzz seems significantly weakened, or less dynamic, when it circulates outside the festival sector in the context of commercial exhibition.

The examples cited above focused primarily on theatrical circulation post-festival – considering how distributors shore up their symbolic capital in the context of festival events as well as the use of festival hashtags or other imprints of festival-related cultural capital to attract cinemagoers (as opposed to festivalgoers). However, the hype associated with #MongrelTIFF or #SeeTheNorth is not necessarily what is meant by Harbord’s contingency or Dovey’s (dis)sensus communis, unless perhaps the image of a purple-suited Ethan Hawke playing ping pong at Mongrel House sparks the same viral engagement as Julia Roberts’ bare feet on the red-carpeted steps of the Palais at Cannes. Arguably, #heelgate (one of Harbord’s examples of contingency) was less about buzz for a specific film than it was about cinematic value writ large or film industry values. A different example that gets closer to the idea of festival buzz associated with (dis)sensus communis can be found in Claudia Sicondolfo’s study of intimate publics that coalesce around festival hashtags. Specifically, she distinguished between the ad hoc engagement of festivalgoers with #TIFF15 and #IN16th (linked to a highly mediated feed from the ImagineNative Festival) and the calculated public that formed to protest the Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM)’s screening of Dominic Gagnon’s controversial film *Of the North* (@RIDM, #OfTheNorth).[93] While Sicondolfo’s case study points to the significance of the festival as a site where things ‘happen’ (i.e.: the situated nature of buzz), it also carries the implication that the dispersive energy of buzz does not necessarily require live togetherness (in a strictly material sense).

A useful opportunity to study the importance of place and presence in generating film festival buzz will occur with the COVID-era versions of major festivals like TIFF (which will have very limited in-person gatherings). A *Variety* review that deemed Comic-Con@Home ‘a bust’ noted a lack of op-

portunities for fan interaction with pre-recorded panels, the loss of ‘the sensory overload of the Comic-Con floor’, and a 95% decline in Twitter mentions – raising the question ‘If a fan convention is held on the internet and no one’s there to talk about it, does it make any noise?’[94]

Conclusion: Contingent conversations

Houston et al. conclude with the observation that ‘[t]here is large agreement among scholars that it is the activities and perceptions of consumers that are essential for buzz to exist and spread’.[95] With film festival buzz, however, it appears that the ‘observable expressions of anticipation’[96] circulate first amongst industry stakeholders as aspects of cinematic value are negotiated and shared. Buzz certainly exists at this stage, when a product is not yet available for commercial consumption. Although cinephilic audiences are present at festivals, much of the anticipatory activity seems to be focused on critics, distributors, and exhibitors setting the terms for what is buzz-worthy – and this applies to the films, but also to the agents as symbolic bankers (i.e.: positioning Mongrel as a distributor that can be trusted to deliver a particular type of product). Note that the festival also serves as a symbolic banker, and insights from economic impact analysis point to ways in which their operational role positions these cultural institutions as value chain intermediaries that facilitate and situate the ephemeral work of symbolic value creation. In acknowledging that some scholars assert that there are different types of buzz, Houston et al. ask whether ‘expressions of interest in a new product by external actors, such as firms and the media, [are] unique types of buzz or do they simply function as antecedents that initiate and energize consumer buzz?’[97] However, the idea of putting consumers at the top of a conceptualised buzz hierarchy overlooks important distinctions between buzz as the negotiation and spread of symbolic value and buzz as a static imprint of accumulated cultural capital. Nevertheless, there does seem to be evidence in the stakeholder behaviour I have examined to argue that film festival buzz may function as an institutional antecedent to consumer buzz in the film value chain.

As a researcher, I began the journey presented in this article with an interest in what festival-related data might reveal about symbolic value, as though it were a cohesive body of information just waiting to be recorded. But I quickly realised that there were bigger questions about how to even

begin to identify variables when they are caught up in a tangle of intersecting conversations. Telefilm's awareness indicator shows traces of dynamic engagement with festival events while their Success Index tallies selection and awards like cultural capital; but both of these measures ultimately say more about Telefilm's performance and strategic objectives than they do about the film festival's role in the value chain. Similarly, the economic impact measurements offered by industry stakeholders sidestep the measurement of indirect value creation that is known to manifest in other value chain sectors.

Ultimately, my exploration of how film festival buzz might be measured raises some serious methodological dilemmas. This article began with an investigation of how film festival studies has engaged with the idea of buzz, often suggesting different terms to capture the energy associated with value creation and joining a debate about the significance of place and presence. Although the development of a range of theoretical perspectives sets a foundation for addressing the complexities of buzz, it also has resulted in a tangle of jargon that needs to be tamed. Festival studies seems to be best-positioned to bring coherence to the study of ephemeral value creation, potentially bridging constituencies to develop a systematic framework with practical application. Potential future research could undertake a review of existing empirical studies to reconcile case studies with the disparate threads of theoretical debate. And, festival researchers should consider how their work might be articulated with industry and policy measurements. However, faced with the persistent precarity of academic employment, along with the ongoing crisis in the humanities, the question of funding is front and centre. A particular question raised by each distinct measure of buzz relates to the value of the knowledge produced in different research contexts. Who is being addressed? Within the academy, what happens when research is a side hustle, subsidised by contract teaching? From a methodological perspective, lingering questions remain regarding how investment and awareness from potential stakeholders will shape the research agenda for film festival buzz.

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Notes

- [1] de Valck & Soeteman 2010, p. 294.
- [2] Young cited in Perlmutter 2015, p. 144.
- [3] <https://telefilm.ca/en/industry-resources/success-index>

- [4] Sarris 1978.
- [5] 'Buzz'.
- [6] Burgess 2014, p. 94, citing Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*.
- [7] See for example Czach 2004.
- [8] See for example de Valck 2016.
- [9] Ibid., p. 105.
- [10] Burgess 2014, p. 95.
- [11] Ibid. Bourdieu uses 'symbolic banker' to refer to art traders in *The Field of Cultural Production*.
- [12] Dayan 1997, 'Conclusion'.
- [13] Ibid., 'Focusing on the Festival'.
- [14] Ibid., 'Conclusion'.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Elsaesser 2005, p. 95.
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Jungen 2015, p. 16.
- [20] Ibid., p. 15.
- [21] Ibid., p. 289.
- [22] Ibid., p. 290.
- [23] Ibid., p. 11.
- [24] Ibid., p. 293.
- [25] Ibid., p. 296.
- [26] Vallejo 2020, p. 166.
- [27] Ibid., p. 156.
- [28] Wong 2011, pp. 163-168.
- [29] Jungen 2015, p. 91. Jungen connects this idea to Bazin and the relationship of film critics, particularly from *Cahiers du cinéma*, with major festivals like Cannes.
- [30] Dovey 2015, p. 17.
- [31] Ibid., p. 19. Dovey derives this term by reading Kant's 'sensus communis' through Eagleton's 'dialectical approach' to aesthetic judgement.
- [32] Ibid., p. 15.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Ibid., p. 19.
- [35] Harbord 2016, p. 70.
- [36] Ibid., p. 80.
- [37] Burgess & Kredell 2016, p. 163.
- [38] Ibid. See also endnote 5, p. 173.

- [39] Stevens 2018, p. 12.
- [40] Ibid., p. 17.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Ibid., p. 22.
- [43] Ibid., p. 25.
- [44] Jungen 2015, p. 13.
- [45] See for example de Valck 2007, pp. 104-105.
- [46] Perlmutter 2015, p. 20.
- [47] Van Hemert & Ellison 2015, p. 45.
- [48] Smits 2019, p. 74.
- [49] See <http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals.asp>.
- [50] Peranson 2009, pp. 25-29.
- [51] Loist 2016.
- [52] Nordicity developed this value chain for the *Study of the Audiovisual Distribution Sector in Canada* (2011), prepared for the Department of Canadian Heritage. Although Bloore is cited in the pre-amble and the figure mimics aspects of his model, the report presents a distribution-centric value chain that features distributors as the hinge that connects development and production with exhibition.
- [53] Nordicity 2013, pp. 8-9. See preliminary pages for a numbered list of the nine value chain segments.
- [54] *Profile 2016* presents this newer value chain model in the context of transitions in how screen-based content is experienced (p. 6). By *Profile 2018*, the report no longer includes data for the 'revenue and economic impact' of domestic film festivals (p. 7).
- [55] Nordicity 2013, p. 30.
- [56] Ibid., p. 32.
- [57] Ibid., p. 35.
- [58] Ibid., p. 23.
- [59] Ibid., p. 22-23.
- [60] Ibid., p. 25.
- [61] Ibid.
- [62] Ibid., p. 9.
- [63] Burgess 2012, p. 3.
- [64] Ibid., pp. 6, 8.
- [65] <https://telefilm.ca/en/industry-resources/success-index>
- [66] Ibid.
- [67] Telefilm Canada 2016, p. 14.
- [68] Ibid., p. 15.
- [69] <https://telefilm.ca/en/festivals-markets/festival-circuit>

- [70] Telefilm's 2018-2019 *Annual Report* lists 71 Canadian film festivals that receive funding through the Promotions Program (p. 113).
- [71] Telefilm Canada 2016, p. 15.
- [72] Ibid.
- [73] Telefilm Canada 2019, pp. 1-5. 'Local Stories Global Impact' includes documentaries that were feted on the international film festival circuit, a co-production with Eurimages funding, and the first Haida-language feature (coinciding with the International Year of Indigenous Languages).
- [74] Verhoeven et al. 2015, p. 8.
- [75] Ibid., p. 17.
- [76] Ibid., p. 10.
- [77] Telefilm Canada 2016, p. 26.
- [78] Telefilm Canada 2013, p. 23.
- [80] Ibid.
- [80] Houston et al. 2018, pp. 340-341.
- [81] Ibid., p. 342.
- [82] Ibid., p. 349.
- [83] Ibid., pp. 339-340.
- [84] "Top-Grossing Films of 2017".
- [85] Leavitt 2017.
- [86] Smits 2016, p. 39.
- [87] Ibid., p. 40.
- [88] Kay 2016.
- [89] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02cyFlnvA4s> The names Richard Wagamese and Clint Eastwood receive similar presentation as the shot featuring the festival laurels.
- [90] Perlmutter 2015, p. 20.
- [91] Ibid.
- [92] Burgess 2014, p. 100.
- [93] Sicondolfo 2016.
- [94] Vary 2020.
- [95] Houston et al. 2018, p. 357.
- [96] Ibid., p. 349.
- [97] Ibid., p. 357.