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Leaving An Impression
How different storytelling principles affect the effectiveness of a movie trailer.

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ABSTRACT

Movie trailers are some of the most viewed content in the world and film production companies spend millions of dollars every year in the hopes of capturing interest and getting people to watch their film. However, what makes a "good" movie trailer is highly debated, with factors like box office returns, the enjoyment of watching the trailer itself, telling a story from start to finish, and consumer engagement all playing a role. In this study, a random assignment experiment is run to determine whether storytelling impacts consumer engagement with a trailer. To do this, three trailers for the same student film were created, with one emphasizing story, one emphasizing character, and one emphasizing neither. It was hypothesized that the trailer emphasizing story would generate the most consumer engagement. A group of 181 undergraduate students from the University of Vermont were recruited to participate in the study and were randomly assigned to view one of the trailers and respond to a survey. Results show that the trailers failed to emphasize their differences, however the trailers did perform differently across consumer engagement measures. Interestingly, the trailer focusing on neither story nor character generated the most interest in seeing the full film on streaming services, as well as the highest likelihood of watching. This could suggest that for comedy trailers, storytelling is not as important as showcasing the best jokes, however due to the failure to emphasize trailer differences, the true reason for the higher interest is unknown. If the experiment were to be run again, trailers created from professional-length films as opposed to a 23-minute student short film would more readily emphasize differences in three, nearly two-minute long trailers. Still, the method of random assignment experimentation used in this study could be implemented in Hollywood for testing trailers, as it is far superior to focus-group testing in determining trailer effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global film industry is astonishingly massive, worth $285.62 billion in 2023 and projected to grow to $304.17 billion in 2024 (Global Market Research Report). It seems that everyone, everywhere, cannot look away from the big screen, an insight that film production

companies have certainly not overlooked. The biggest staple of the industry in capturing the attention of moviegoers is the trailer. The emergence of film trailers can be traced back to 1912, at Rye Beach, New York, and the serial, "The Adventures of Kathlyn." Onlookers watched as Kathlyn, at the end of the reel, "was thrown in [a] lion's den. After this 'trailed' a piece of film asking 'Does she escape the lion's pit? See next week's thrilling chapter!' and hence "trailer" became the word to describe an advertisement of an upcoming picture (Kernan, 2004). Since then, a myriad of methods for both creating trailers and measuring their success have been tested and developed, the most comprehensive history of which is unequivocally Lisa Kernan's book: *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers.* Kernan defines movie trailers as "at the most simple level, free samples to aid in moviegoing decision making" (Kernan, 2004). Essentially, a trailer is meant to show a consumer what the film it is advertising has to offer and entice them to come see it for themselves. However, discourse around movie trailers often suggests the opposite, that "today's trailers give too much away" and thus defeat the purpose of seeing the full story play out (Kernan, 2004). Much research has been performed in refuting this belief, in fact, "knowledge of a movie's plot or genre has been salient in most research concerning the reasons why people attend a specific movie or movies in general" (Hixson, 2006). So, which perspective is to be believed? The purpose of this study is to determine if knowledge of a film's plot and characters actually affects how engaged a consumer is in the content of a trailer, how interested a consumer is in seeing the film, and their enjoyment of the trailer itself. To do this, three trailers for a student comedy-documentary were created and shown to a random sample of University of Vermont students at the Grossman School of Business and College of Arts and Sciences. The three trailers are identical in length, music, and format, with three segments of dialogue scenes being changed to reflect a focus on plot, character, or neither. The hypothesis of the study is that the trailer focused on explaining the story will outperform both other trailers on all measures, assuming that knowledge of the plot of a film being advertised is the most salient in generating interest.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Why focus on trailers?

Trailers are not the only form of promotional media that attracts crowds to movie theaters. Posters, interviews with stars, social media interactive campaigns, early screenings, and many more methods are used to market a film outside of a trailer. Interviews with stars, in particular, may be seen as just as important as trailers themselves, as it is a common belief that star power drives the success of movies (Elberse, 2007). Although the multi-million-dollar wages given to Hollywood's biggest stars seem to support their importance, research suggests otherwise. In 2004, A *Forbes* article titled "The Myth of Brad Pitt" compared more than 200 films released within the late 90s to early 2000s and revealed "fewer than half of the highest-grossing hits featured an actor who had top billing in at least one hit movie previously," suggesting that more is at play in the success of a film besides which star is cast (Elberse, 2007;

Ackerman, 2002). Trailers are "brief film text[s] that usually display images from a specific feature film while asserting its excellence" (Kernan, 2004, pg. 1) or a condensed version of the film itself, which suggests that a trailer's success could be more indicative of a film's success than that of the star power. The literature of film trailers also asserts that trailers themselves "fulfill a particular and valuable function for audiences" (Johnston, et al., 2016). Qualitative research among college students in the 1980s revealed that trailers were considered "more important than…ads presented in radio, newspapers or magazines" (Austin, 1981) and audience research on *The Hobbit* noted that trailers were "the most widely consumed promotional materials" (Davis et al., 2014) for film (Johnston et al., 2016). Trailers have been, and will continue to be, the most salient promotional advertisement for a film, and as such, it is of crucial importance for film production companies to know what constitutes a good trailer.

Film and storytelling principles

As previously stated, scenes emphasizing both story and character will be the variables for the trailers used in the study, as such, it is important to establish what these terms mean. Story is most simply defined as: "A speaker tells a listener what someone did to get what he wanted and why" (Truby, 2008). For the purposes of this study, think of the speaker as the creator of a trailer, and the listener as the audience viewing the trailer. The key piece of Truby's definition is the process a character goes through to achieve their goals, which must be shown through a series of events. A story is made up of "all the events in [a] narrative, both the ones explicitly presented and those the viewer infers" (Bordwell & Thomson, 1979). Bordwell & Thomson's definition of a story is more that of an umbrella term, that encapsulates both a narrative and plot. A narrative can be described as "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space" (Bordwell & Thomson, 1979). An example of a narrative would look like this: "I woke up to a growling stomach, so I went to Dunkin Donuts. When I arrived, the line was out the door, so I left to get to class on time, still hungry." This crude example demonstrates the cause and effect nature of a narrative, where since the subject was hungry, they went to Dunkin. A narrative separates itself from a being a simple series of events through this cause and effect nature; the subject would not have gone to Dunkin (effect) if their stomach wasn't growling (cause). Plot, on the other hand, is used to "describe everything visibly and audibly present in [a] film…all the story events that are *directly depicted*" (Bordwell & Thomson, 1979). For the purposes of this study, plot is the most accurate term for what will be emphasized in the story trailer, as the visuals and dialogue of specific scenes will show events that are directly depicted in the overall story of the film being advertised.

Characters are the subjects of a story, whose wants and desires create action to propel the events of the narrative forward (Truby, 2008). Characters of a film typically have a physical body as well as traits, or "attitudes, skills, habits, tastes, psychological drives, and other qualities that distinguish the character" within the story (Bordwell & Thomson, 1979). A character is not simply defined by what they say, although that plays a role, but rather, "what a person does is what he is" (Field, 2005). In other words, a character exists within a story with unique traits to

distinguish themselves, as well as a goal to achieve through action. Stories cannot exist without characters, which begs the question: How will one trailer emphasize story without also emphasizing character? Afterall, "without character, there is no action" and therefore no events linked by cause and effect to create a narrative (Field, 2005). While story and character are inherently linked, the character-focused trailer will emphasize scenes showcasing their *traits*, as opposed to their actions in propelling the narrative forward.

Consumer Engagement

In order to assess the effectiveness of a movie trailer, consumer engagement measures will be used in this study. Consumer engagement has become a "central concern in brand management strategies" since the late 2000s, with consumers generally wanting to play "a more active role in the consumption process" (Gambetti et al., 2010). Even with the emphasis being placed on consumer engagement, the literature does not reflect a single definition, nor a best way to measure it. Organizational psychologists have provisionally defined engagement as "a sort of ongoing emotional, cognitive and behavioral activation state in individuals," and through Gambetti et al.'s study on the concept of engagement, it was concluded that it is a "very complex concept strongly influenced by psychological, social, interactive, relational, experiential and context-based components" (Gambetti et al., 2010; Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Wefald & Downey, 2009). These definitions imply that for a trailer to engage the audience (i.e. the consumers), it must activate something within a consumer that affects their emotional, cognitive, or behavioral state of being.

Consumer engagement, a market-oriented subcategory of the umbrella term of engagement, is defined as "The intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate" (Vivek et al., 2012). The key word of this definition is intensity, which when combined with Gambetti et al.'s definition of engagement from the field of psychology, creates the definition of consumer behavior that will be used for the purposes of this study: Consumer engagement measures the intensity of emotional, cognitive, or behavioral actions taken by an individual in response to their participation in, or connection with, an organization's activities. For the purposes of this study, Vivek's consumer engagement measure of conscious attention will be focused on. Conscious attention is described as "the degree of interest [a] person has or wishes to have in interacting with the focus of their engagement," and as it measures interest in what the consumer is engaging with, it is the primary engagement measure that will be adapted for use in this study (Vivek et al., 2012). The items used to measure conscious attention in Vivek's paper will be adapted for use and explained in the methods section.

Further, Sprott et al.'s study on the "importance of a general measurement of brand engagement," discusses brand engagement, measured by "consumers' tendencies to include important brands as part of their self-concept" (Sprott et al., 2009). This idea of brands included in one's self-concept fits well within our working definition of consumer engagement, as an intense emotional response to a brand's activities. Sprott et al.'s findings show that "in general,

participants associated their favorite brands with themselves more so than their least favorite brands and that they associated their favorite brands more with themselves than with an unspecified other," which demonstrates the importance of engaging a consumer emotionally (Sprott et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to see if storytelling in trailers increases consumer engagement, and since stories are "really giving the audience a form of emotional knowledge," theoretically, storytelling would better engage a consumer emotionally (Truby, 2008).

Similar studies

As previously stated, numerous studies have been conducted to determine what makes for a good movie trailer, as it is consensus that trailers are an "accurate and reliable" sample for consumers to judge the quality of a film against (Johnston et al., 2016). Johnston et al., in their study on "the trailer audience," argue that film trailers do not compel an audience to follow a simple linear path from watching the trailer to watching the movie, rather, criteria such as emotional attachment, cultural value, and societal expectation provide the ultimate decision on whether to watch a film or not after seeing the trailer (Johnston et al., 2016). In the study, they follow the acknowledgement that "that audiences likely see 'thousands of trailers ... [for films] that we will never watch'" and suggest that "the trailer-audience relationship is informed by more than simple informational exchange about feature content" (Gray, 2010, Johnston et al., 2016). To test this relationship, the team of researchers asked 418 participants a series of questions about their trailer viewing habits. When participants were asked if they had specifically searched for their most recently viewed trailer, "53.35% of respondents noted they had," with four distinct reasons emerging: "To develop [or] deepen existing knowledge on the film, to make a judgement on quality [or] aesthetics of film, as a result of external recommendation (personal or social media), [or] because of a preference for a pre-existing element (star, actor, director, story)" (Johnston et al., 2016). These results "challenge earlier notions that the trailer simply creates a desire to buy a ticket" and further emphasizes that consumer engagement is the best way to measure the effectiveness of a trailer (Johnston et al., 2016). In addition, this study helped inform the decision to create trailers for this study emphasizing different things, in order to test if the different emphases produced different judgements of quality.

Archer-Brown et al. (2017) conducted a study on stimulating positive word-of-mouth (WOM) in pre-release movie trailers where they argued for the importance of "understanding" as a factor of engagement. Films, and stories in general, are an experiential experience, as the audience is meant to experience "the story world…a human life condensed and heightened so that the audience can gain a better understanding of how life itself works" (Truby, 2008). Previous studies that Archer-Brown et al. rely on suggest that experiential experiences benefit from WOM (Eliashberg et al., 2000). Specifically, Eliashberg's research discusses the consumer adoption process, which is "very sensitive to word-of-mouth interactions," and the unique challenge of movie marketers trying to predict WOM *before* a film is released (Eliashberg et al. 2000). Archer-Brown's thesis is therefore based off the assumption that "although advertising can set the scene for success (Allsop, Bassett, and Hoskins, 2007; Day, 1971), WOM is the key factor that influences purchasing decisions" in the film industry (Dichter, 1966; Riegner, 2007; Archer-Brown et. al, 2017). To test the stimulation of positive WOM, the authors of the study ran an experiment in which surveys were sent out to participants via email, with links to four trailers for movies at least three months ahead of release. The survey contained links to all four

trailers, with the order randomized. After viewing the trailers, participants responded to several different scales, including: a five-item scale to test understanding the film, a five-item scale to test WOM intention, a 3-item scale to test liking of the film, and finally a 3-item purchase intent scale. The items of the understanding scale and liking scale have been adapted for this study and will be discussed further in the methods section. The data collected supported the hypothesis that understanding increases both liking of the trailer and intention to contribute to WOM, however data did not support the notion of understanding solely increasing intention to pay. Liking of the trailer positively influencing both WOM intention and purchase intention was supported by the data, and WOM intention itself was correlated with an increase in purchase intention. Since the data from the Archer-Brown study suggests that understanding influences liking, and liking influences purchase intent, measuring liking and understanding became key in determining how storytelling can affect purchase intent for the purposes of this study (Archer-Brown et al., 2017).

There are also numerous studies that use random-assignment experimentation to collect data on consumer engagement in similar ways to this study. One such study in 2021 attempts to measure the impact of crowdsourcing on mobile app user engagement, where mobile game users were randomly assigned to experimental groups with different access to crowdsourcing features (Bapna, 2021). In this study, "session duration" was used to measure consumer engagement between the experimental groups, which was adopted from the definition of user engagement in Obrien and Toms (2008). The authors then performed a regression analysis to determine the results of the study, which suggested that user engagement is positively affected by the ability to submit their own input as a crowdsourcing feature (Bapna, 2021). More broadly, random assignment experimentation has long been the gold standard in medical studies, going all the way back to Hill's study in 1948 which tested the antibiotic streptomycin in treating tuberculosis. In this clinical trial, patients were given a sealed envelope with a card that read either "s" or "c" with "c" standing for the control group and "s" for the streptomycin experimental group (Hill, 1948). Hill's study paved the way for random-assignment experimentation to be used indefinitely in medical research, as it is the best way to avoid bias and potentially overlooked confounding variables.

3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

It is suggested in the literature of movie trailers that storytelling has a key role in creating an effective trailer. This belief is demonstrated in Kernan's work, as discussed previously, where she defines trailers as "promotional narrative," suggesting the inseparability of storytelling and trailers (Kernan, 2004). This definition appears again in Barnett's research on predicting content recall of movie trailers, which suggests that trailers are designed to be "both narrative and persuasive" (Barnett et. al, 2017). Further, Kernan discusses how trailer marketing companies, "in their efforts to persuade viewers to see a film…may also appeal to spectators' desire for story" (Kernan, 2004). This "desire for story" is supported by Truby's explanation of the "story world" discussed earlier, where the story being told in a film facilitates "a better understanding of how life itself works" in the audience (Truby, 2008). If a film's story is meant to further the audience's understanding of life itself, then it's safe to assume that a story presented in a trailer is meant to further the audience's understanding of the film they are going to see. In addition, it has been shown that "by presenting a coherent and interesting plot, a movie makes individual brains

behave more similarly (since interpretations, predictions, etc. are linked to the orderly content) than they do in the absence of any semantic meaning to unify the minds of an audience" (Hasson et. al, 2008). Essentially, Hasson's research suggests that by presenting a coherent plot in a movie, audiences are more likely to react similarly. This can be adapted to storytelling in a trailer, where telling a coherent story will increase understanding of the film being advertised in most consumers. This notion, combined with Archer-Brown's findings that understanding of a film increases liking of a trailer, leads to the following hypothesis:

> **H1a** The story trailer of the film will be more liked than both the character trailer and the control trailer.

Further, the findings of Archer-Brown's (2017) study on understanding as a factor of consumer engagement suggest that while understanding does not stimulate positive WOM alone (a measure of interest in that study), liking does. Therefore, this leads to the following:

> **H1b** The story trailer will generate more interest in watching the full film than both the character trailer and control trailer.

Continuing this line of thinking, since it has been shown in other studies that audiences like trailers better when there is a comprehensive story, what would the effect of comprehensive characters be? All stories have characters, but characters themselves can be separated from the stories they come from. As such, it becomes possible to create a trailer focusing solely on the characters without showcasing the story, while on the other hand it is impossible to tell a story in a trailer without characters. H1 asserts that the story trailer, which also features characters, will perform better than both other trailers. However, a trailer focusing solely on characters could have a higher success than one focusing on neither story nor character because of prior research. For instance, Holt's research on the pursuit of heroic masculinity in everyday consumption references several studies (e.g. Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliott 1999) and asserts that "individual consumers routinely appropriate commodities and ads and use them as resources for personal identity projects and social interaction" (Holt et al., 2008). Holt's study takes this idea of personal identity being molded by consumption and applies it to movies, describing how men specifically tend to consume media in which a certain type of character is at the center of the story (Holt et al., 2008). For example, an action movie like *John Wick* establishes a badass trained killer who systematically wipes out hoards of goons to avenge his dog. John Wick is established immediately as a character with traits: a stoic man who values justice and will go to any lengths for revenge. If a character like John Wick is presented to an audience in a trailer, Holt argues that people will be more likely to watch that film *if* that is a character they want to relate to. Since the short film being advertised by the trailers in this study features college students as the main characters, and the trailers are being shown to college students, H2 was developed from Holt's findings:

H2a The character trailer will be liked more than the control trailer.

Moreover, like with H1, a second part of H2 was developed in line with Archer-Brown's findings on liking stimulating interest:

H2b The character trailer will generate more interest in watching the full film than the control trailer.

4. METHODS

Trailers

To determine the effect storytelling has on the effectiveness of a movie trailer, three trailers were created. The trailers were created using footage from a 23-minute-long unnamed student mocumentary (scripted documentary-style film) filmed in 2023 during a spring break East coast road trip. The mocumentary featured a comedic tone, with the main character, "Kev," finding himself disillusioned with the recent Burlington City Council election cycle, prompting him to travel down the East coast with his friends to learn more about the politics of the country so that he can run for city council next year. The story is non-sensical, with a comedic tone, and as such, all three trailers included jokes to try and make the audience laugh. In addition to a comedic tone, all three trailers were 1:47 seconds long, featured the same structure of: Introduction → dialogue scene → montage → dialogue scene → montage → title → dialogue stinger. Further, all the trailers featured the same music: An edit of three songs from King Gizzard and The Lizard Wizard's 2014 album: *I'm In Your Mind Fuzz*. Finally, the title text featured at the end of each trailer remained consistent, as the title text was not a variable to be studied. The text reads as follows: "An average documentary, from not so average UVM students…Exit 14W." Each of the trailers were meant to focus on different things: the story trailer on the plot of the film, the character trailer on the characters, and finally the control trailer focusing on neither character nor story. The dialogue scenes used in each trailer were chosen to highlight these differences.
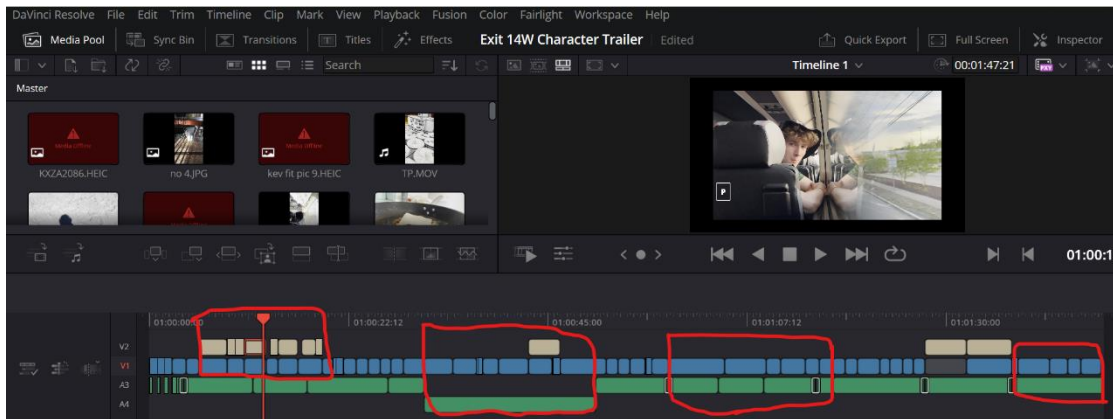
Figure 1 All three of the trailers in the experiment follow this same structure. The drawn-in boxes highlight dialogue scenes, which act as the main differentiation between the experimental groups. The non-boxed in segments are the montage scenes, synchronized with the beat of the music.

Story Trailer

As previously discussed, the differentiation within the trailers came down to two things: The dialogue scenes and, to a lesser extent, the shots used for the montages. In the story trailer, dialogue was the most critically important in establishing the narrative quickly. Sean Zabik, the Director of Creative Marketing at Universal Studios, believes that an effective trailer is "one that tells a story from start to finish" and does so in the limited time it has. As such, the story trailer used dialogue scenes that would help tell a full story quickly.

As defined earlier, a story exists when a character has a goal and in order to achieve that goal, they must act (Truby, 2008). These actions will then drive the narrative forward (Storr, 2020). There are three main elements of this definition that must be shown in the trailer: The character, the character's goal, and the actions they will take to achieve that goal. The first of these two elements, the character and the goal, were established immediately as the story trailer begins. Kev, the main character of the film, begins the trailer by stating that "[The antagonist] has wrongfully been elected as city councilor" before declaring: "This is wrong…I will be running for city councilor in 2024." This monologue from Kev is meant to immediately establish that we are going to be following Kev throughout the narrative and that he wants to become city councilor in place of his "nemesis." In the following dialogue scenes, the audience follows Kev and his friends in their car as they move towards their destination. Dialogue scenes inside the moving car were selected here to emphasize action: Kev is on a journey to achieve his goal, all while discussing the gripes he has with the country that he wants to fix, reiterating his goals. The next dialogue scene sees Kev angrier, directing his frustrations at the President, before reiterating that what this is really all about his "nemesis." This escalation in action is supposed to reflect how stakes increase as a narrative draws towards its conclusion. Finally, after the title card, a stinger joke is placed to leave the audience with one last laugh, while still trying to relate it to the greater story. Here, Kev explains how "its important to really understand the country from a ground level, which is why we drove straight through North Carolina" before finally ending the

trailer with the one-liner: "Vote Kev city councilor ward eight Burlington." This final line was used to summarize who the character is and what his goal is after the audience views the escalation of actions taken towards achieving that goal.

Figure 2 The main character of the trailers, Kev, declares to the audience that he will save the country when he becomes city councilor.

Character Trailer

The character trailer, unlike the story trailer, was meant to emphasize the differences with all of the characters in the film, giving each of them something to say. As defined earlier, characters of a film are defined by traits: "attitudes, skills, habits, tastes, psychological drives, and other qualities" that are meant to distinguish a character from the others in a narrative (Bordwell & Thomson, 1979). It was therefore critically important to distinguish the characters in the trailer in a very limited time. There were four characters that were highlighted in the trailer. To emphasize their differences, each character was given a scene where they are in the focal point of the camera with their name displayed in copy on the screen. After, they would each speak a line meant to show their attitude. For example, the character "P" was introduced with calm, quiet dialogue in response to something that Kev, the main character, was saying. Kev asks "That's what it's all about…right P?" to which P responds with a monotone "that's what its all about man." Another example would be with Kev himself, the loud, boisterous main character who yells for someone off screen to "take notes!" as he snaps at them. These dialogue scenes show the characters' different attitudes. However, more than dialogue must be used to properly convey a character, as "what a person does is what he is, not what he says" (Field, 2005). So, it was also important to include character actions. A prime example would be with the character "Hank" featured in the character trailer. In the scene used for his character introduction, his friends tell him that there are a group of girls at the other end of the beach, to which he excitedly asks, "are they bad?" before sprinting full speed down the beach. This is meant to show Hank as a "lady's man" sort of character, whose psychological drive involves talking with women.

Finally, shots with the characters facing the camera were preferred in the character trailer, as "Faces bear tremendous weight as carriers of various emotional signifiers and enigmas" and are therefore crucial in establishing a connection with a character quickly (Kernan, 2004, pg. 10). All of these scenes were selected to differentiate the character trailer from the story trailer, as the story trailer solely focuses on Kev and his goals, while the character trailer is meant to focus on every character and how they are different. The struggle in separating characters from story will be discussed in the results section.

Figure 3 The character introduction for P in the control trailer. Notice the on-screen copy displaying the character's name.

Control Trailer

While both the story trailer and character trailer were created with very intentional choices for dialogue scenes, the control trailer was not developed in the same way. Rather, dialogue scenes in the control trailer were selected if they were not used in the other trailers. As such, some very funny scenes that had no relation to the overall narrative were included in the control trailer. This may have had some impact on the results, as will be discussed later. Like the other two trailers, the control trailer used the same music, followed the same structure, used the same title copy, and was the same length of 1 minute and 47 seconds. The lack of storytelling techniques used in the control trailer was intentional in trying to differentiate this trailer from the two experimental groups.

Survey

A 27-question, pen and paper, trailer-reaction survey was created to gauge the responses to each of the trailers. The first two questions of the survey were asked to determine the movie-watching preferences of the respondents, asking "how many times did you go to a movie theatre in 2023?" and "how do you prefer to watch films?" with the former giving a range of options form 0 to 8+ times and the latter giving the option between at a theatre, on a streaming service,

or no preference. The next series of four questions adapts the conscious attention measures from the Vivek et al paper on customer engagement, which is defined as "The degree of interest the person has or wishes to have in interacting with the focus of their engagement" (Vivek et al., 2012). The questions asked how interested the respondents were in the content of the trailer, as well as if the trailer grabbed their attention, and finally if they would like to learn more about the trailer. Next, Archer-Brown's five-item measure of understanding was adapted for the next ten items of the survey to gauge respondent understanding of the story and characters of the trailer. These items act as a test to see if the trailers were differentiated in the way that they were made to, i.e., did the story trailer increase understanding of the story, when compared to the other trailers. Respondents would rank whether they agreed with the statement on a 1-7 scale from completely disagree to completely agree. These statements included: "The story presented in this trailer makes sense to me," "I understand the characters of this trailer," "the story presented in this trailer is confusing," etc. After the understanding measures, the survey would ask respondents what they believed the trailer focused on: Plot, characters, both, or neither. After, Archer-Brown's liking measure was adapted, asking respondents to rate on a scale of completely disagree to completely agree the following statements: "I like this trailer," "I like the story presented in the trailer," and "I like the characters presented in the trailer." Finally, a series of four questions, asking about the likelihood and interest in watching the full film if available on either streaming services or in movie theatres, wrapped up the measures related to the trailer itself. The survey ended with a genre preference question and demographic questions on major and gender.

Code	Item	Code	Item
Wpr1	How many times did you go to a movie theater to watch a film in 2023?	Und8	The characters in the trailer seem confusing.
		Und9	The characters in the trailer follow clear archetypes (i.e. hero, comedic relief, love interest, etc.).
Wpr2	How do you prefer to watch films?		
Att1	Do you find this trailer interesting?	Und10	The characters in the trailer are hard to comprehend.
		Und11	Do you feel that this trailer focuses more on the plot of the full film, the characters featured in the full film, both, or neither?
Att2	This trailer grabs my attention.		
Att3	I would like to learn more about the film that this trailer is advertising.	Like1	I like this trailer.
Att4	I am invested in the content of this trailer.	Like2	I like the story presented in the trailer.
Und1	The story presented in the trailer makes sense to me.	Like3	I like the characters presented in the trailer.
		Int1	If the full film that this trailer is advertising was available to watch in theaters, how interested would you be in seeing it?
Und2	I understand the plot of the trailer.		
		Int2	If the full film that this trailer is advertising was available to watch in theaters, how likely would you be to watch it?
Und3	The story of the trailer seems confusing.		
		Int3	If the full film that this trailer is advertising was available to watch on streaming services, how interested would you be in seeing it?
Und4	The genre (i.e. style of story) of the trailer is clear.		
		Int4	If the full film that this trailer is advertising was available to watch on streaming services, how likely would you be to watch it?
Und5	The story of this trailer is hard to comprehend.		
Und6	The characters in the trailer are distinct.	Gen1	What genre(s) (i.e. style of story) do you prefer to watch? (select all that apply)
Und7	I understand the characters in the trailer.	Dem1	What is your major?
		Dem 2	What is your gender?

Table 1 Shows all 27 of the items included in the survey. The "wpr" code stands for watching preference, "att" stands for conscious attention, "und" stands for understanding, "Like" stands for liking, "int" stands for interest in watching, "Gen" stands for genre, and "dem" stands for demographic.

Data Collection & Procedure

Undergraduate students at the University of Vermont were selected to take part in this research study for a total of 181 potential respondents. As mentioned previously, data was collected via a pen and paper survey, with the result inputted by hand into SPSS. All respondents are unidentifiable. The total pool of 181 respondents were each given a number between 1 and 181, before being randomly assigned into one of three groups. In total, 62 respondents were assigned to group 1 (story trailer), 61 respondents were assigned to group 2 (character trailer), and 59 respondents were assigned to group 3 (control trailer). After all of the respondents were assigned, a key was used to connect the numbers to students in each of the classes, where the professors of each class would split the class into the three groups based off of the numbers in the key. For example, numbers 47-92 on the 1-181 master list of respondents would be from class B. Class B would have 46 students in class, numbered from 1-46 alphabetically. If numbers 48, 49, 53, 55, 56, 59, and 62 were in group 1 on the master list, students with the matching number on the key would be selected to watch the story trailer. This was done to maintain the anonymity of responses. After the groups were split up by the professors, I would introduce the study, informing students that they are participating in a marketing research study and that they can withdraw from participation at any time with no penalty. Their participation was entirely voluntary. I also explained that they had been split into groups to measure consistency between groups in watching the same trailer, although in actuality they would all be watching different trailers. Next, I handed out the survey to students and asked each group stay and watch the trailer while the other two groups stepped out into the hallway. I then played the trailer for each group and collected their responses before asking them to stand in the hall as I called the next group inside. This process repeated until the end of the experiment, where I informed students that three different trailers were actually tested to see if story emphasis or character emphasis has a positive effect on the effectiveness of a trailer in generating interest to watch.

5. RESULTS

Out of the 181 potential respondents, 105 completed responses were collected for a response rate of 59.1%. Out of the 105 responses, 34 were in group one and watched the story trailer, 42 were in group two and watched the character trailer, and 29 were in group 3 and watched the control trailer. For the sake of readability, group one will be referred to as the story group, group two as the character group, and group three as the control group for the rest of the results section. A few events contributed to the response rate, mainly absences from class and the unanticipated crossover of students in multiple classes. Since students could not respond to the survey twice and multiple students were enrolled in more than one of the classes participating in the experiment, there were significantly less responses than what was hoped for.

Descriptive Statistics

After the data was inputted into SPSS, descriptive statistics were created for the understanding measures for both story and character to see if the means differed between the experimental groups. This was done to determine if the trailers themselves were successful in emphasizing what they were supposed to. First, the first five understanding variables, focusing on story understanding, were tested against all of the groups. The mean response for each of the five items measuring story understanding, between one and seven, differ slightly between the three groups. For instance, the "I understand the plot" measure has an average score of 3.26 for the story group, 2.90 for the character group, and 2.86 for the control group. While the higher average in the story group may suggest that the story trailer was better at conveying the story than the other groups at face value, when regressions were later run on each of the items of the survey, the difference in means was revealed to not be statistically significant. In addition, the items measured responses on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree), and even if the 3.26 mean is higher than the other groups, it doesn't necessarily mean that the story trailer conveyed the story very well. Unfortunately, based on these results, it can't be said that the story trailer properly emphasized the story of the film it was advertising.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
thestorypresentedinthetrailermakessense	34	1	7	3.18	1.466
iunderstandtheplot	34	1	6	3.26	1.214
thestoryseemsconfusing	34	2	7	4.59	1.480
thegenreisclear	34	1	7	5.00	1.670
thestoryofthistrailerishardtocomprehend	34	1	7	4.12	1.647
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Table 2 Shows the descriptive statistics for the understanding of story measures for group one, which watched the story trailer.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
thestorypresentedinthetrailermakessense	42	1	7	2.88	1.837
iunderstandtheplot	42	1	7	2.90	1.736
thestoryseemsconfusing	42	1	7	4.79	1.718
thegenreisclear	42	1	7	4.26	2.073
thestoryofthistrailerishardtocomprehend	42	1	7	4.74	1.712
Valid N (listwise)	42				

Table 3 Shows the descriptive statistics for the understanding of story measures for group two, which watched the character trailer.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
thestorypresentedinthetrailermakessense	29	1	7	3.55	1.804
iunderstandtheplot	29	1	7	2.86	1.407
thestoryseemsconfusing	28	1	6	4.43	1.574
thegenreisclear	29	1	7	4.62	1.761
thestoryofthistrailerishardtocomprehend	29	1	7	4.45	1.572
Valid N (listwise)	28				

Table 4 Shows the descriptive statistics for the understanding of story measures for group three, which watched the control trailer.

Next, descriptive statistics were also created to see if the character trailer's mean responses to the understanding of character measure differed from the other groups to a statistically significant level. Unlike the story trailer, for all of the character understanding measures except for one, the character trailer actually had the worst mean responses when compared to both other trailers. This is surprising, as the character trailer, of course, was made to try and emphasize all of the different characters as much as possible, even including their names in copy on screen. If nothing else, the character trailer did have the highest mean for the "the characters in the trailer are distinct" measure, however even this difference is still not statistically significant.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
charactersaredistinct	34	2	7	4.56	1.618
iunderstandthecharacters	34	1	7	4.12	1.719
thecharacterseemconfusing	34	1	7	3.94	1.594
followcleararchetypes	34	1	7	3.44	1.761
charactersarehardtocomprehend	34	1	7	3.82	1.678
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Table 5 Shows the descriptive statistics for the character understanding measures for group one, which watched the story trailer.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
charactersaredistinct	42	1	7	4.81	1.502
iunderstandthecharacters	42	1	7	3.98	1.615
thecharacterseemconfusing	42	1	6	3.88	1.699
followcleararchetypes	42	1	7	3.43	1.727
charactersarehardtocomprehend	42	1	7	3.98	1.615
Valid N (listwise)	42				

Table 6 Shows the descriptive statistics for the character understanding measures for group two, which watched the character trailer.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
charactersaredistinct	29	1	7	4.41	1.763
iunderstandthecharacters	29	2	7	4.31	1.391
thecharacterseemconfusing	29	1	6	3.55	1.526
followcleararchetypes	29	1	7	3.69	1.984
charactersarehardtocomprehend	29	2	7	3.93	1.334
Valid N (listwise)	29				

Table 7 Shows the descriptive statistics for the character understanding measures for group three, which watched the control trailer.

While some of the descriptive statistics suggest that the story trailer may have emphasized story the best out of the three trailers due to the higher means on the understanding scale, the same cannot be said about the character trailer. Even with the slight increase in average score seen with the story trailer, the increases are not statistically significant at the 0.1 level, which will be the level of significance used in this study. Because of this lack of statistical significance in differences between trailers, unfortunately the differences in liking and interest between the trailers that will be discussed in the next section cannot be attributed to understanding of the story or characters, and thus the effectiveness of storytelling in trailers cannot be supported by this data.

Regression Analysis

After the descriptive statistics were created to determine if the trailers emphasized what they were supposed to, a linear regression analysis was run on several measures in the survey against the group number dummy variable to test the hypotheses of the study. The regressions were run against the control group to see if being in either of the two experimental groups impacted the scores of interest and liking to a statistically significant level. For the purposes of this preliminary research study, a p-value of 0.1 was used to determine statistical significance. First, to test H1, regressions were run against the three liking measures of the study. The results

of the regression show that the control trailer, focusing on neither story nor character, was actually the most liked out of the three trailers. With an unstandardized beta of 4.759, the control trailer was liked more than both other trailers, but not to a statistically significant amount. This result does not support H1a *or* H2a, as the control trailer was expected to be the least liked.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.759	.283		16.817	<.001
	G1	-.288	.385	-.089	-.748	.456
	G2	-.544	.368	-.176	-1.480	.142

a. Dependent Variable: ilikethistrailer

Table 8 Shows the linear regression on the "I like this trailer" measure of the survey. Notice how both G1 and G2 have lower unstandardized betas than the constant, which is G3 (the control trailer).

The other two liking measures also have interesting results. For the liking of the story measure, the results are much the same. The control trailer presented the most liked story out of the three trailers, an unexpected result considering it was made with no clear plot structure in mind. A more interesting result would be for the liking of characters measure, which actually saw the story trailer with the highest unstandardized beta, although the margin was incredibly thin. Interestingly, the character trailer (G2) performed the worst out of all three trailers in the liking of characters measure. Still, all of these results were statistically insignificant, and as such, no real conclusions can be drawn from them.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.897	.275		17.791	<.001
	G1	.074	.375	.024	.198	.844
	G2	-.349	.358	-.116	-.975	.332

a. Dependent Variable: ilikethecharacterspresentedinthetrailer

Table 9 Shows the linear regression on the character liking measure of the survey. Notice how G1 has a slightly higher unstandardized beta than the constant G3, but the difference is far from significant.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.276	.294		14.567	<.001
	G1	-.452	.400	-.134	-1.132	.260
	G2	-.538	.382	-.167	-1.409	.162

a. Dependent Variable: ilikethestorypresentedinthetrailer

Table 10 Shows the linear regression on the story liking measure of the survey.

Next, regressions were run on the interest variables to determine the validity of H1b and H2b. Like with the H1a and H2a, the results were unexpected. The control trailer again performed the best across the board. First, looking at the measures of interest in and likelihood of watching the full film being advertised in a movie theater, the results are much the same as they were for the previous liking measures, as the control trailer had the highest unstandardized beta, but none of the differences were statistically significant. Still, both H1b and H2b are unsupported by the data.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.690	.320		11.527	<.001
	G1	-.601	.436	-.164	-1.380	.171
	G2	-.285	.416	-.081	-.685	.495

a. Dependent Variable: theatersinterest

Table 11 Shows the linear regression for interest in watching the full film in a movie theater measured against the three groups. Notice that the control group has the highest unstandardized beta, with the story group having the lowest.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.379	.291		11.606	<.001
	G1	-.615	.396	-.184	-1.551	.124
	G2	-.546	.379	-.171	-1.442	.152

a. Dependent Variable: theaterslikely

Table 12 Shows the linear regression for likelihood of watching the full film in a movie theater measured against the three groups. Notice again that the control group has the highest unstandardized beta, with the story group having the lowest.

While the theater interest measures remained statistically insignificant, the most interesting results of the entire study were found in the streaming service interest measures. While the control group again performed the best across the two measures, the story group actually performed the worst to a statistically significant level. For the streaming interest measure, the control group had an unstandardized beta of 4.552, while the story group had one of 3.736, which led to a p-value of 0.094, which is a statistically significant difference at the 0.1 level being used in this experiment. This result is surprising and does not support H1a. In fact, the story trailer generated the least interest out of all three groups, but to a statistically significant extent from group three. In addition, the streaming likelihood measure also had a statistically significant result, with the control group's beta of 4.448 being 0.873 points higher than that of the story group's, resulting in a 0.081 p-value. These results show that the control trailer was better at generating interest than the story trailer, at least in the context of advertising for a streaming service release. While this result has statistical value, the reason for the difference cannot be determined to be due to the influence of storytelling, as the trailers were unable to be easily differentiated with the story and character understanding measures. However, the control trailer was liked more than the other two trailers and it generated the most interest out of all three trailers, which supports Archer-Brown's findings that liking of a trailer increases engagement (Archer-Brown et. al, 2017).

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.552	.354		12.842	<.001
	G1	-.816	.482	-.200	-1.692	.094
	G2	-.718	.461	-.184	-1.559	.122

a. Dependent Variable: streaminginterest

Table 13 Shows the regression for the streaming interest measure. Notice that the p-value for G1 is 0.094, which suggests a statistically significant difference from the control group's responses. The 0.122 p value for G2 is not far off of being statistically significant either.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.448	.361		12.336	<.001
	G1	-.873	.494	-.209	-1.765	.081
	G2	-.686	.469	-.173	-1.464	.146

a. Dependent Variable: streminglikely

Table 14 Shows the regression for the streaming likelihood measure. Notice that the p-value for G1 is 0.081, which suggests a statistically significant difference from the control group's responses.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the results of the study are a mixed bag. None of the hypotheses of the study can be supported, and the trailers were unable to create statistically significant differences in the understanding measures, which prevents speculation on the effect of storytelling on the effectiveness of the trailers. This is a disappointment, however, the two statistically significant results of the control trailer generating the most interest while being the most liked on average supports the findings of previous studies.

While the results of the liking measure were not statistically significant, the control trailer still did have the highest average score out of all of the trailers, which is a ssurprising development. This could suggest something about trailers for comedy movies, as the jokes themselves could be more important than telling a coherent story because, after all, trailers are "free samples to aid in moviegoing decision making," and a sample of a comedy movie would likely focus on making the audience laugh rather than getting them to understand the story (Kernan, 2004). However, even if these results could suggest something about the differences in what makes different genres of trailers effective, further research is needed as the results of this study are not statistically significant.

A valuable takeaway from this study, regardless of the results, is the method used for evaluating the trailers. The random assignment experimentation used in this study is *not* the standard in Hollywood, rather, focus group testing is the norm. Studios use tools like Marketcast to get data on their target markets for films, and then recruit those refined target markets for focus group testing of trailers. While this is inarguably successful, as the target market for a film is able to tell the studio what they liked and disliked about each trailer, random assignment experimentation is a far superior method for selecting a trailer that will be most successful. If studios were to acquire a pool of participants for a random assignment experiment their target marketing research, randomize that pool of participants, and show each group a different trailer, they would be able to determine which trailer performed the best with the added benefit of general applicability to a larger population due to the nature of random assignment. Random

assignment assures that there are no systemic differences between groups, and therefore it allows for stronger generalization of results. Since studios spend millions of dollars on advertising to reach the most people as possible, it would be a huge benefit to them to use this method of random assignment because of that generalizability.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As discussed earlier, the three different trailers were not able to differentiate themselves in both the story and character understanding measures, and therefore, the effect of emphasizing story and characters in the trailer cannot be commented upon based on the data from this study. The two major shortcomings of the creation of the trailers may have contributed to these results. First, the student mocumentary used in the trailers was only 23 minutes long, with an additional five minutes from its shorter sequel documentary used as well. This left only 28 minutes of footage to be used to create three *different* trailers of almost two minutes each. As such, the trailers may have been too similar to one another, simply due to the lack of diverse footage.

In addition, the trailers were not created professionally. In fact, the trailers were the first project I attempted using the Davinci Resolve software, and as such, the trailers themselves were a learning process. If a team of professional trailer producers were able to contribute to this study, they would likely be far better at emphasizing or deemphasizing storytelling. Further, if a professional trailer studio were to run this same experiment, they would have the rights to use hours of footage form a professional two-hour long feature film, giving them much more footage to differentiate with.

Finally, if this study were to be run again, it would be best to simply run it with two different trailers, one focusing on story and the other avoiding emphasizing the story. Since story is defined by a character having a goal and taking actions to achieve that goal, character is inseparable from story (Truby, 2008). As such, difficulties arose in trying to emphasize the characters isolated from the story. It would be much simpler to determine the effects of storytelling on the effectiveness of a trailer if one trailer emphasized the story and the other did not. Further research must be done in order to determine storytelling's impact on generating consumer engagement with a trailer.

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