Beyond the Screen:
Exploring the Impact of Pre-purchase Information on Greek Consumers' Perception of Film
Quality and Viewing Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of abundant pre-purchase information available in the digital age on Greek consumers' perception of film quality and their viewing habits. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the study analyzes semi-structured interviews with Greek film consumers, exploring how this wealth of online information influences participants' perception of film quality. The research challenges the traditional notion that films are purely experience goods, whose quality can only be assessed post-consumption. Instead, it considers whether the extensive availability of online information transforms films into search goods, allowing consumers to evaluate quality beforehand. The findings indicate that while consumers heavily rely on online information for decision-making, the inherent uncertainty of film quality remains. Basic search information and recommendations from friends emerged as more influential than online data alone. The study concludes that despite the digital age providing vast pre-purchase information, it does not significantly alleviate the quality uncertainty associated with films. This highlights the complex nature of cultural product consumption and suggests that films retain their experience good attributes. Further research is recommended to explore the impact of digital information on other cultural products and different demographic groups, as well as the evolving influence of online streaming platforms on consumption habits. This research offers valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between online information and consumer behavior in the film industry.

KEYWORDS: Film consumption, Quality perception, Digital age, Experience goods, Pre-purchase information.
Word count: 13820

Contents

1. Introduction

The seventh art, cinema, holds a significant place in cultural consumption, with millions of people watching movies in theaters, through streaming services, and on other platforms. Greece, in particular, has a rich cinematic history dating back to the early 20th century, producing acclaimed filmmakers, actors, and films that have left a lasting impact on the global stage. It can also be assumed that Greek film consumption reflects the country's unique geographical and cultural influences, drawing from European, Middle Eastern, and Asian traditions. This diverse cultural backdrop gives the chance for Greek audiences to enjoy a wide range of films. Greek viewers can appreciate both domestic cinema and international releases, spanning from mainstream commercial hits to independent and arthouse productions. This eclectic taste is evident in the variety of films that find success in Greece, catering to different segments of the population and reflecting the rich influences that characterize Greek culture. Whether it's a Hollywood blockbuster, a European drama, or a local indie film, Greek audiences can engage with a broad spectrum of cinematic experiences.

With such a vast selection of movies, audiences must navigate a certain level of uncertainty with every film they decide to watch. Consumers can never be entirely certain of a film's true quality or their taste for it prior to viewing. A movie might belong to their favorite genre or be directed by someone they admire, but the quality and preference for films, like other cultural products, cannot be determined by simple characteristics in contrast to material products. This concept echoes Akerlof's (1970) "lemons" problem, where the quality of cars can be assessed by tangible attributes like mileage or frequency of breakdowns, but such clear-cut characteristics are not easily applicable to cultural products like films. Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (2011, p.180) aptly state that every new experience of a given art form reveals to the consumer an unexpected positive or negative increment in her taste for it, highlighting the inherent uncertainty in cultural consumption.

On the other hand, the digital age has revolutionized information access, enabling consumers to instantly find data on any product characteristic online. This development has significant implications for the quality uncertainty consumers face. For cultural products and movies, in particular, consumers can access online sites such as IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, and Letterbox. Social media also plays a crucial role, with people frequently sharing their opinions. On these platforms, consumers can search for official ratings, reviews by critics and fellow viewers, and specific details about the film like genre, length, and cast—even the entire script if they wish. With the ability to compare numerous attributes of a product, one might wonder if this abundance of information alleviates the quality uncertainty to some

extent and thus the inherent quality and taste uncertainty of cultural products, transforming movies—and cultural products in general—into search goods rather than experience goods.

This study aims to explore this theme from the perspective of consumers. It is presumed that if films have transformed into search goods due to the impact online information, this would mean that consumers could access the quality of a film prior to watching it. Therefore, this research tries to answer the question of how consumers understand and alleviate quality uncertainty due to online information and how that impacts their consumption choices of film. By focusing on the Greek context, the study seeks to challenge the theory proposed by Nelson (1970), which categorizes cultural products as experience goods. Nelson calculated the overall expense of a commodity by combining search costs and product costs, labeling experience goods as such because their primary characteristics are challenging or prohibitively expensive to assess before purchase (Klein, 1998, p.196). Moreover, given that pre-purchase information is now widely available, this research also challenges the overall notion of experience goods in this new digital age, as it could be argued that films might be losing many of their experience good attributes. With consumers now able to find almost everything about a film in advance, including the entire script, they can determine if they will like it before viewing. Does this change mean that films could now be considered search goods?

In conclusion, this study aims to shed light on the intricacies of consumer perception regarding the quality of films and how it can be influenced by online information. Drawing inspiration from the classification proposed by previous research, which categorizes products based on their quality assessment attributes, this research seeks to delve deeper into the impact of online information on the experience goods that are films. Specifically, it aims to explore the extent to which this emerging medium of online influences, drive consumer purchase decisions by investigating its effect on the underlying attributes of quality of films that influence consumers' pre-purchase information search. We come to wonder if in this new digital era, the availability and plethora of pre-purchase information on films alleviates quality uncertainty for consumers to a certain extent and if the nature of cultural products, as we define them as experience goods, could be challenged in theory and furthermore if consumption habits may change due to digitization and information available on the internet. The societal relevance of this study is significant, as its findings could have implications for various stakeholders, including filmmakers, marketers, and streaming services. Understanding how online information affects consumer behavior can help these stakeholders tailor their strategies to better meet consumer needs and expectations in the digital age. Theoretical contributions thus far have been limited and discouraging. In particular, the decision-making process of consumers has proved an intricate subject to research in past studies. The qualitative approach presented in this research offers new

empirical data. By examining how online information shapes consumers' perceptions of film quality and their consumption habits, this research attempts to offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of the film industry in the digital age. Through qualitative thematic analysis and empirical investigation, it seeks to uncover the intricate ways in which the internet influences the behavior of the 10 participants interviewed, as well as their decision-making processes in the realm of film consumption. In the following chapter, the main theoretical contributions will be presented, then the methodology developed in this research, following the results section and the conclusions of the overall study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Information goods, search and experience

Every day, consumers encounter numerous choices, each carrying uncertainty about product quality. As Nelson (1970) points out, buyers often struggle to assess quality variation prior to purchase and consumers cannot be certain about the quality differences between products due to the difficulty of accessing relevant information (Nelson, 1970, p.311). Unlike sellers, who have knowledge of the true value and quality of their products, consumers are at a disadvantage and unable to make fully informed decisions. This asymmetry in information places consumers in a vulnerable position during transactions, where they must navigate a marketplace with uncertainty. Akerlof (1970) was one of the first to illustrate how this information asymmetry can lead to adverse selection, where low-quality products dominate the market, driving out high-quality ones. Over time, this phenomenon can gradually undermine the confidence of consumers and can have implications on the effectiveness of market operations. As low-quality products dominate and consumer trust becomes weaker, the efficiency of the market diminishes, leading to unfavorable outcomes for both buyers and sellers. Consequently, the inability to evaluate the true quality of products underlines the challenges consumers face as they endeavor to make lasting purchasing decisions.

To address this issue, buyers must seek to understand a product's true quality before purchasing, aiming to gather all necessary information for an informed decision. Consumers rely on various sources, including external information and past experiences, to reduce uncertainties in the marketplace. However, for some products, the cost of searching for quality information outweighs the benefits, making it easier to simply buy the product and evaluate it firsthand. These products require direct engagement to evaluate their quality and preference among other options. Nelson (1970) describes this "information process, experience" (p.312). Cultural products, such as art and cultural goods, are prime examples of experience goods according to him, unlike material goods with tangible attributes, because the quality of cultural products is often more subjective and harder to define.

Essentially, for search goods, consumers have the ability to examine an option before buying it, while for experience goods, quality assessment is only possible after purchase and use. That is because search goods are defined by attributes where full information is accessible prior to purchase, whereas experience goods entail attributes that necessitate direct experience for full comprehension of their quality, as well as that their dominant attributes cannot be known prior to direct experience or are too costly to attain. Typically, obtaining information for experience goods is costlier because sources of information are less accessible than just purchasing the product. Additionally, Nelson

suggests that consumers are more inclined to heed recommendations for experience goods compared to search goods (1970, p.327) However, since Nelson's testament a lot has changed. It can be presumed that the internet has expanded the array of available information, blurring the distinction between search and experience goods to a considerable extent. It is for that reason that we come to question if the internet can play a role on the experience good attributes of movies by the widespread information sharing through digital means, a subject that will be further discussed later on.

2.2 Digitalization of pre-purchase information in the film industry

Over the years, there have been both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence that have shed light on the influence that online information has on both search and experience goods, as well as on consumers' broader preferences (e.g., Kutabish et al., 2023). Particularly, the examination of how online ratings and reviews shape consumer purchasing decisions is a subject that will inevitably gather considerable interest, because of the widespread use of e-commerce platforms and consumers' growing dependence on digital feedback. This interest underscores a significant departure from Nelson's (1970) work, which couldn't have anticipated the transformative impact of the digital era, expanding opportunities for accessing product information while simultaneously reducing associated costs. Consequently, formerly prohibitive search costs for experience goods have suddenly become more attainable. Theoretical contributions however, have not been particularly exploratory about that impact on cultural products.

To begin with, we need to first establish what online information can be. Essentially, online consumers have access to more types of product information than offline consumers do. There's the typical seller-generated information distributed by traditional media (advertisements, promotional content) and then there is the online information that the consumer can have access to from various channels. Online recommendation sources can be categorized into three main broad groups. First, other consumers and peers, friends and acquaintances (meaning that also includes online testimonies from other customers on retail websites), secondly human experts and professionals such as sales representatives and independent experts (like critics), which pose as the traditional recommendation source, and lastly personalized recommendations made by automated systems provided by algorithms, like recommender systems (Senecal & Nantel, 2002, as stated in Senecal & Nantel, 2004, p. 160-1).

Pre-purchase information on the internet for cultural products can come in many forms and can belong in all online recommendation categories as mentioned before (Senecal & Nantel, 2002, as stated in Senecal & Nantel, 2004, p. 160-1). Specifically for films, consumers have both access to traditional media and recommendations from peers,

critics and automated systems, which also includes online reviews and ratings. For instance, IMDb (Internet Movie Database) and Rotten Tomatoes are platforms from which fellow consumers can rate and post their review for a film. Letterbox and Rotten Tomatoes now include both reviews and ratings from fellow consumers or professional critics. TasteDive, an entertainment recommendation engine, is also a prime example of the third category of online recommendations consumers have access to. Moreover, social media platforms can also act as platforms where fellow consumers review films. Users can post about films, they can exchange opinions on online threads and create groups and communities around this theme. Specifically, digitalization within the realm of cinema has given new dimension to online communities centered around movies. Film enthusiasts nowadays can provide ratings and share reviews and subsequently have emerged as a significant information hub. Platforms that such communities exist offer a wealth of data, encompassing details such as casting, directors, trailers, and critiques. However, amidst this plethora of information, the contributions of users notably stand out for their significance. Presently, users are taking on novel roles in shaping discussions and influencing perspectives within these communities (Gavilan et al., 2013, p. 46).

For the first category of recommendations sources, online consumer reviews created by previous purchasers, gives access to their personal experiences, assessments, and viewpoints on products. An online consumer review serves a dual purpose, acting as both an informant and a recommender. In its role as an informant, it provides user-centric product details, while as a recommender, it offers endorsements from past consumers in the form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Park et al., 2007, p.126-7). A high score on IMDb suggests that a film is generally well-liked, which may encourage viewers to watch it. Additionally, once a viewer enjoys a film, they are likely to seek out similar films, expecting to enjoy those as well. This is where movie lists come in handy, as the popularity and high ratings of films can drive demand. Furthermore, a highly anticipated film on social media can attract more viewers, influencing taste formation. As Becker (1991) noted, "a consumer's demand for some goods depends on the demands by other consumers." In other words, popularity in cultural products can be perceived as quality by other consumers, as the existence of risk and nuanced nature of cultural products further indicates the significance of critics and herd mentality in the consumption of arts (Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette, 2011, p. 182). Particularly for films, evidence suggests that word-of-mouth volume also subsequently contributes to increased box office success and positive feedback loop underscores the significance of word-of-mouth in generating and maintaining retail revenue (Duan et al., 2008, p.233). Moreover, the reach of online reviews and online information can extend beyond the personal network of individuals, beyond traditional advertising channels because of the widespread use of the internet.

Criticism also, remains a consistent element within the realm of arts and entertainment and its enduring presence does not inherently imply significance, although from a strictly neoclassical economics viewpoint, the persistence of any phenomenon suggests it serves some societal utility, unless it stems from market imperfections, but overall critique, fundamentally, is a service that provides value to consumers by offering utility (Cameron, 2011, p. 138). This further underlines the experience good attributes of films and the need from consumers to gather as much information as possible before the purchase of cultural products. It is also essential to differentiate between criticism and reviewing. In its literal sense, reviewing is simply recounting what has been experienced and a distinction can be drawn between reviews, which tend to be 'positive' and factual, and criticism, which is more 'normative' and involves value judgments (Cameron, 2011, p. 138). However, it is suggested that the role of critics doesn't seem as significant. Although they do have an impact on audiences, and reviews from professional movie critics significantly boosted consumers' intrinsic motivation to watch a film (Yu et al., 2019), consumers primarily rely on them for specific instances where uncertainty exists regarding whether the film will align with their expectations and the reason for this may very well lie in the nature of information conveyed by film critics, which is not as simple as a numerical rating (Gavilan et al., 2013, p. 55). This departure of consumers relying on traditional recommendations sources (professional critics), could further indicate the impact of the internet on the consumption of film.

Therefore, it's fair to say that online reviews and ratings have emerged as a powerful tool and we're left to wonder to the extent of the substantial influence it can wield over consumer behavior. Theoretical contributions for cultural products and the film market in particular, is extremely limited. According to Gavilan et al. (2013), online ratings from peers regarding films, influenced both consumers' decision-making process in selecting a film and substantially diminished the perceived risks (financial, temporal, and experiential) associated with the decision-making process when selecting a film. Furthermore, users of online communities place trust in numerical ratings, leading them to gravitate towards films with higher ratings when compiling their shortlists and influences their decision making process, as the "aggregated numerical information in the form of ratings" simplifies the film selection process, minimizes the likelihood of unfavorable outcomes in decision-making and thus minimizes risk (Gavilan et al., 2013, p. 55). To enrich the limited viewpoints provided for cultural products and films, relevant studies within the realm of e-commerce provide valuable insights. First, it seems that the volume of reviews influences consumer perception and purchasing intent. A higher quantity of reviews indicates product popularity and provides social validation, increasing trust and confidence in the product (Park et al., 2007, p. 140; Ibrahim, 2023, p. 5). Consumers often rely on the consensus of others, with numerous

reviews prompting them to rationalize their choice by thinking, "Many others have also purchased the product" (Park et al., 2007, p. 129). For example, the number of customer reviews and the number of Amazon likes, led to an increase in sales in Amazon Kindle books over a certain period (an 1% increase in the number of customer reviews corresponded to a 0.57% increase in sales, while a 1% increase in the number of Amazon likes resulted in a 0.17% increase in sales) (Colvin, 2013, p.126). These results are important as they bridge the gap empirically that there is some influence that online information can have, in this instance the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), on consumer's behavior for cultural goods. To be more specific, it shows that individuals can depend on internet reviews from unfamiliar sources when deciding to buy items such as Amazon Kindle books, and that these reviews can influence sales (Colvin, 2013, p.127).

Moreover, the quality of reviews significantly impacts purchasing intent. Coherent and compelling reviews with precise product details enhance this intent (Park et al., 2007, p. 140). Additionally, the emotional tone of reviews, whether positive or negative, strongly affects consumer behavior (Chen et al., 2020). Credibility is also an important factor, with consumers showing greater trust in reviews from other consumers and previous purchasers. Elements that can enhance the credibility of online reviews are elements such as the reviewer's knowledge, standing, and openness regarding their identity or connection to the product or brand, while the reputation of an online platform can also contribute to the credibility factor (Ibrahim, 2023, p.4). On the other hand, the source of the recommendations didn't impact that much consumers' choices, that is if the recommendations came from experts or other consumers (Senecal and Nantel, 2004, p.167). However other consumers were perceived as less expert from human experts, but as trustworthy. The difference between expertise and trustworthiness is slight, as expertise refers to how well an information source is accurate and perceived to possess the correct knowledge, while trustworthiness refers to the motivation of the information source to share this expertise impartially (McGuire, 1969, as stated in Senecal & Nantel, 2004, p. 161). Both are important as they have an impact on the likelihood of a recommendation being followed by consumers. Overall, consumers do rely on reviews that can be perceived as credible and impartial sources of information, to alleviate uncertainties and make well-informed purchasing choices.

It is also worth mentioning that despite this new digital age, consumers for film still can rely on basic information factors like cast or director for films and seem to play still a prevalent role in quality assessment for cultural products. For example, we see that celebrities can influence revenue, mainly by generating excitement and attracting viewers to cinemas during the initial week of release (although it can still have a negative impact on

revenue during subsequent weeks) as well as Academy Award nominations (Karniouchina, 2011, p. 70).

The activity or "involvement" of consumers may also draw some distinction on the impact of online reviews (Park et al., 2007). Online consumer reviews can serve a dual purpose for consumers, unlike advertisement messages as mentioned before, on their role as informants and recommenders. Both the roles of informant and recommender are positively linked to consumer purchasing intent. But consumers with low involvement give emphasis more on the popularity displayed by reviews (recommender role) regardless of the quality of the reviews (informant role). On the contrary, high-involvement consumers give equal priority to both - they consider both the information provided by reviews and the product's popularity as indicated by the number of reviews, because even if they find reviews lacking in quality, the sheer volume of reviews still influences them by signaling the product's popularity (Park et al., 2007, p. 140). Ultimately, the recommender role seems to serve as a stronger signal for consumers and heightens purchasing intent. (Park et al., 2007, p. 140). This might prove integral to research samples, as a sample of consumers with particular and niche interests, accustomed to using online information, might prove more distrusting to watching a film that is popular online, in contrast to lower-involvement ones.

Consequently, a consumer has now the ability to research in greater extent the characteristics of a certain film and compare them with others, thus it can be presumed that search of quality has become a lot easier to evaluate once a consumer can instantly find the information they're looking for to determine film quality.

2.3 The impact of digitization on search, experience and cultural goods

So far, all these are observations for which, the type of product does not play a crucial role in the impacts of online information and recommendations (that is if we're referring to a search product or an experience product). As mentioned before, typically experience goods require post-purchase evaluation, leading to higher information search costs while search goods allow for pre-purchase inspection and cultural goods are essentially experience goods. There have been previously suggestions that the internet has blurred the line of search good attributes on experience products (ex. Alba et al. 1997, Klein 1998, as stated in Huang et al.,2009, p. 64). When consumers have access to crucial product details before making a purchase, the product can be categorized as a search good (Klein, 1998, p.199). From a theoretical standpoint, there has not been major contributions on this for the film industry, but we can access the impact of online information on films when looking at the impact they can have in experience products as a whole.

Therefore, the internet can impact film consumption because firstly, the internet has the potential to decrease the expenses associated with searching for specific product

features, secondly, the internet has the capacity to change the manner in which consumers evaluate various product characteristics and thirdly, the internet enables us to virtually experience products like software without directly examining their attributes (Nakayama et al.,2010, p. 251). Hence, by offering such experiential details, products previously categorized as experience goods can transition into search goods, allowing consumers to access essential product information before making a purchase. From an economic standpoint, these shifts will be influenced by alterations in consumers' perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with seeking various types of information (Klein, 1998, p. 196).

Specifically, according to Klein (1998, p. 200), the "transformation" for an experience good to become a search good is achievable in three different ways, expanding the thinking presented by Nakayama et al. (2010). First, the accessibility of product attribute information, although always existing, has significantly improved, rendering the search process simpler and more cost-effective. For instance, Klein brings up the example of determining whether a new software product fulfills specific functionalities, claiming that this has become effortless through searchable online databases and user forums, where detailed discussions about the software are readily available. However, it is not just the mere availability of information but the quality and reliability of this information that profoundly impacts consumer behavior. The rise of expert reviews and community ratings enhances the trustworthiness of online information, making it easier for consumers to sift through vast amounts of data and focus on what is truly relevant to their needs. This evolution in information accessibility has democratized consumer knowledge, allowing even the less tech-savvy individuals to make informed decisions that were previously out of reach. Secondly, the manner in which information is presented can influence consumers' prioritization of various attributes. For example, a website may offer comprehensive third-party software reviews, leading customers to perceive this information as more crucial than factors like product packaging. The interactive nature of online platforms also allows for a richer, more engaging presentation of information. Features such as comparison tools, user testimonials, and detailed specifications can shift consumer focus towards the intrinsic qualities of a product, rather than superficial aspects. Moreover, the shift in presentation styles can create a more immersive and user-friendly experience. The inclusion of multimedia content, such as video reviews and interactive demos, caters to different learning styles and preferences, making the evaluation process more comprehensive and enjoyable. This tailored approach to information dissemination not only influences consumer preferences but also enhances their overall engagement with the product. Lastly, consumers can gain firsthand knowledge of a product's functionality by accessing a demonstration version of products. Additionally, if consumers regard the simulation as trustworthy as direct experience, they may accord greater importance to its diagnostic value in their decision-making process. This virtual trial

experience reduces uncertainty and perceived risk, making it easier for consumers to commit to a purchase.

However empirical evidence is divided. On one hand for example, findings suggest that the distinction between search and experience goods, concerning consumers' perceived capability to assess product quality prior to purchase, although remains the same in traditional retail settings, it diminishes in the online sphere (Huang et. al, 2009, p. 64). It seems that consumers tend to browse through fewer pages but dedicate more time per page when considering the purchase of experience goods compared to search goods. Furthermore, buyers of experience products spent more time on consumer feedback and reviews and other communication channels (Huang et al.,2009, p. 65). Feedback enhances the probability of consumers making a purchase from a particular seller, with a more pronounced effect observed for experience products compared to search products and consumers exhibit a greater tendency than buyers of search goods to purchase from the website where they acquire the most product information (Huang et al.,2009, p. 66). Consequently, we see that consumers face greater uncertainty with experience products and thus spend more time browsing on the internet looking for information and indications that would render the decision of a purchase easier. On the other hand, other findings (Basu, 2018) suggest that consumers exert less effort when searching for experience goods online compared to search goods. This is because they perceive minimal additional benefit from further information. Prior knowledge also influences search behavior more for search goods, with knowledgeable consumers conducting more thorough searches for these products. Thirdly, the influence of recommendation agents significantly affects search goods more than experience goods. This implies that personalized recommendations wield a more substantial influence in steering consumers towards search goods as opposed to experience goods and overall, that consumers tend to conduct fewer searches for experience goods compared to search goods before finalizing a purchase decision in online markets (Basu, 2018, p.34). This thus seems to disregard the logic that experience goods demand more reliance on recommendations and feedback.

The answer to this major difference in empirical findings may very well lie in an explanation offered by Huang, Lurie, and Mitra (2009). They argue that what sets apart search goods from experience goods in this day and age, with the widespread information on the internet, is no longer solely the extent of searching or the perceived capability to evaluate product quality prior to purchase. Instead, it is the nature of the information sought and how consumers access and interpret this information that makes the distinction (Huang et al., 2009, p. 66). This nuanced perspective invites us to consider the complexity and depth of the information landscape today. In the past, the challenge lay in the sheer availability of information, but now, with an overabundance of data, the critical issue is how this

information is curated and presented. Consumers must navigate through a myriad of sources, discerning the credible from the unreliable, and this interpretative process significantly influences their purchasing decisions. Thus, the internet does not merely supply information; it shapes the cognitive processes by which consumers evaluate and decide upon products. Moreover, when evaluating whether experience goods are slowly becoming search goods in this new digital era, we need to consider that this shift can occur due to enhancements in product quality over time, or alterations in product innovation and marketing tactics, which can influence consumers' perception of the product, shifting it from an experience good to a search good (Nakayama et al., 2010, p. 259-60). The dynamic nature of product evolution means that as goods improve in quality and functionality, the need for physical interaction diminishes. Innovations in marketing, such as interactive ads and virtual demonstrations, also play a pivotal role in transforming how consumers gather and trust product information. The power of advertisements, also, cannot be understated. Clever marketing campaigns that utilize testimonials, influencer endorsements, and detailed product walkthroughs can significantly alter consumer perceptions, making experience goods appear more like search goods. Additionally, advancements in product design and technology contribute to this transformation. As products become more intuitive and user-friendly, consumers rely less on firsthand experience to evaluate their suitability. For example, software has made it easier for potential buyers to understand product functionality through online reviews and tutorials alone. So understandably, measuring the considerable influence the internet can have in transforming experience goods into search goods, can become a complicated process because of these other elements.

Overall, access to the web does not appear to lead to significant shifts between search and experience characteristics classifications, as there are counteracting forces at play on the web as well (Nakayama et al., 2010). Among these opposing factors are promotional advertising claims, alterations in product quality, collaborative filtering practices employed by online retailers, and the increasing prevalence of online shopping, where consumers lack the ability to physically examine products as they would in retail stores (Nakayama et al.,2010, p. 260). Even though the increasing use of e-commerce has led consumers to feel more assured about product quality, resulting in slight shifts in experience and search ratings, the overall impact remains limited. The fundamental uncertainty regarding product quality persists, as consumers must rely on the credibility and reliability of online information. Nakayama et al. (2010, p. 260) emphasize that the SEC (search and experience characteristics) ratings hinge on whether and when consumers can know product quality, pointing to the ongoing challenge of ensuring trustworthy and accurate online content. Moreover, the issue of credibility is exacerbated by the sheer volume of information available online. Consumers often face difficulties in discerning credible sources from

unreliable ones, which can undermine the perceived value of online reviews and ratings. This information overload can lead to confusion, where the abundance of choices and opinions makes decision-making more challenging rather than easier. In conclusion, while consumers increasingly rely on online information, the inherent quality uncertainty of products remains largely unchanged. The immediate impact of current web usage on SEC ratings is minimal or insignificant. This underscores the need for improved mechanisms to enhance the reliability and credibility of online information, such as verified reviews and better transparency in advertising. By addressing these challenges, it may be possible to facilitate a more significant shift from experience to search goods, fully leveraging the potential of the internet to transform consumer behavior.

Moreover, beyond these findings that suggest experience products do not attain search good attributes due to digitization, it is this nuanced nature of cultural products that make them even more unique in contrast to, not only other tangible goods, but even other experience goods. Cultural products and notably movies, possess inherent characteristics that render quality assessment even more challenging before consumption. Unlike tangible goods or other experience goods, the evaluation of cultural products includes subjective factors such as personal taste, artistic interpretation, and emotional resonance. Prior to consumption, we're left to wonder if potential viewers can rely on indirect indicators such as reviews, recommendations, or other information to cover their subjective quality uncertainties, as these sources may not always accurately reflect individual preferences or the overall viewing experience. It appears that while consumers can now readily access most product attributes for a film, their individual taste and preference for it remain elusive. Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (2011, p.180) assert that consumers are typically unaware of their true taste and must uncover it through repeated experiences in a sequential process of unsystematic learning by consumption. They argue that tastes are inherent but undisclosed, and that a portion of the uncertainty surrounding the demand for arts can be alleviated through repeated exposure and engagement. The same can be said for criticism, as challenges emerge due to variations in tastes among consumers. In an efficient market, consumers would ideally be able to identify critics whose preferences align with or differ from their own (Cameron, 2011, p.139). Consequently, while pre-purchase information for films can indeed influence demand and consumer choices, accessing the quality of cultural products, especially movies, can be a complex process influenced by many factors, making informed decisions prior to consumption a nuanced endeavor as the true value and personal taste for a cultural product can only be realized through firsthand experience, owing to the intricate nature of such products.

Furthermore, the idea that a film can be classified as a search good rather than an experience good overlooks the inherently subjective and personal nature of artistic taste.

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While ratings and reviews offer some guidance, they only represent the opinions of a diverse audience. As Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (2011, p. 177) state, "The subtle alchemy of individual taste for the arts ultimately relies on experience" and the unique experiences of each viewer. Therefore, the abundance of information available online about cultural goods, including ratings, reviews, and quality indicators, doesn't transform a film into a search good. Instead, it emphasizes its experiential aspects and highlights the consumer's uncertainty regarding the true quality of cultural products. In fact, the vast amount of information available on the internet about a film can sometimes create confusion rather than reduce uncertainty. Sifting through numerous reviews to find ones that align with their personal tastes and preferences can be challenging for consumers. All these additional information available on the internet can heighten information loads and can complicate decision-making processes (Malhotra, 1982, as stated in Gavilan et al., 2013, p. 55). However, other findings indicate that this is not the case and the plethora of available information does not overwhelm users, especially for online rating as users depend on them because they perceive such data as more beneficial and reliable compared to other forms of information inputs (Gavilan et al., 2013, p. 55).

So, all in all, we expect that this research will reflect on the fact that digitalization has not made cultural products any less experience goods, following the theory of Nakayama et al., (2010) and the unique nature of cultural goods theory explored by Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (2011). These theories highlight the intrinsic qualities of cultural goods that resist simple categorization as search goods, emphasizing their experiential and subjective nature and hence the experience product attributes of films. Cultural products, such as movies, derive their value not merely from their tangible attributes but from the emotional and intellectual experiences they evoke. We left to wonder however, if the audiences also share a similar realization and if thus their consumption choices have not been influenced by widespread information sharing on the internet and quality uncertainty of movies, as an experience good product, remains just the same.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study aims to answer the general research question, "How does the abundance of pre-purchase information in the digital age influence Greek consumers' perception of film quality?", as well as the sub-question of the impact of this information on their viewing habits, with a qualitative research design and in particular qualitative semi-structure interviewing. By focusing on the qualitative aspects of consumer behavior, this research aims to delve deeper and uncover the relationship between digital information, perceived film quality, and consumption habits within the Greek context. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to delve into the nuanced perspectives and subjective experiences of consumers, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their preferences, as that approach can enhance the possibility of getting the participants' meanings and concepts emerge out of data collection easier (Bryman, 2012, p. 408). The emphasis is put on the individuals' experiences and their interpretation of it. Furthermore, the decision to employ qualitative methods is appropriate particularly in an area where theoretical frameworks may be limited or underdeveloped. As Bryman (2012, p. 36) notes, qualitative approaches are more suited for inductive approaches and "theory generation". The lack of substantial theory surrounding the impact of digitization on the consumption of cultural products calls for the exploration of new insights and understandings from new data. Moreover, according to Bryman (2012, p.408) qualitative approaches are more fitted for research that focuses on the perspective of participants, contrary to the viewpoint of the researcher in quantitative studies through standardized measures and statistical analyses. This research calls for a focus on participant perspectives, as consumers are asked to give their subjective view of how much they rely on information on the internet and how does that affect their consumption habits and their personal experiences when trying to face quality uncertainty of movies. Therefore, qualitative research was chosen for this study due to its suitability for exploring individuals' perceptions, experiences, and behaviors related to film consumption in the digital age and given the rich and varied nature of the research questions, qualitative methods are well-suited to capture the diverse perspectives and narratives of Greek consumers regarding their reliance on pre-purchase information and its impact on their film viewing habits.

3.2 Sample Selection

The sampling logic employed in this study is driven by the objective of capturing the perspectives and experiences of Greek consumers who are likely to be influenced by digital pre-purchase information in their film consumption decisions. Greece is a country that in

contrast with the rest of the EU, lacks in digital literacy and use of internet. According to the EU's DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index) report in 2022, an index that measures and monitors the digital processes of all Member States of the European Union since 2014, Greece ranked 25th out of 27th, the lowest among Bulgaria and Romania, and one of the lowest in internet use (85% households with internet subscription to be exact, while the top Luxembourg and the Netherlands had the highest percentage at 99%). The same can be said of the country's population in digital skills. In 2022 just 52% of the population reported having basic digital skills, a percentage that just manages to be close to the EU average (54%). This paints a picture of a country that is not particularly accustomed to using digital tools and moreover, not that reliant on information on the internet in contrast to the rest of the EU. Presumably, the same can be said for their habit to utilize pre-purchased information for cultural consumption. Simply, Greece's population ought to lack behind on the uses of this new digital age in comparison to the rest of the EU.

This slow pace with modern times in cultural consumption of film is also evident and reflected on OTT streaming platforms' entrance to the Greek market. Netflix, arguably one of the biggest streaming companies, only made its introduction to the Greek audience in January 2016 (Papadimitriou, 2020). In the same year, the age group that presented the biggest daily internet usage, where internet users between the ages of 25 and 34 at 93% (Statista, 2016). Subsequently, it could be presumed that internet usage in Greece is mostly popular among young adults, that have the digital skills and are educated enough to use the internet in contrast to 45+ age groups that fall below 77% of internet usage and the youth (16-24) that may not have the economic luxury to own a personal phone or live in a household with internet subscription (89% of internet usage presented in this age group).

Within this context and data in mind, Greece, and in particular the Greek age group of 25-34, present themselves as a unique audience to study the impacts of digitization in their consumption habits of cultural products. That is because age groups that were mostly born in the 90s in Greece, are mature enough with their digital skills and use of the internet in their daily lives in later years, while old enough to remember the difference of consumption without relying on the internet for information (internet usage in Greece started approximately around 1993 according to World Data). It is therefore presumed, that the younger generation, and particularly the Greek age group of around 25-34 years old makes the most suitable target demographic, due to them being more accustomed and more likely to look up for pre purchase information on the internet.

Following that reasoning, members of the Facebook groups Βιντεο Κλαμπ (translated in English: Video Club) and Σινεφίλ (translated in English: Cinephile), were approached for the purposes of this research. These groups were selected due to their substantial membership and active engagement in discussions related to film culture among young

adults and because Facebook remains the prominent social media platform in Greece. Βιντεο Κλαμπ now has more than ninety thousand members and Σινεφίλ has more than two hundred thousand members. The majority of posts are about culture news and most importantly movie reviews. It is frequent practice in the groups for members to post about their opinion of a recent film they watched and the comments below to be from the rest of the members discussing further the quality of the film. Furthermore, the members were approached not because of their specific affiliation with those groups, but rather because it is assumed that individuals who are active participants in these groups are familiar with what the internet has to offer when looking for information on films, thus more likely to be influenced by digital pre-purchase information and are somewhat more frequent movie watchers that the average individual.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The members were approached to be interviewed on the topic of how much as consumers they rely on information available on the internet to determine the quality of a film and as a result, how are their consumption choices influenced by this information. Therefore, to establish such influences, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection. This approach allows for flexibility in questioning while ensuring that key themes related to the research questions are explored in depth (Bryman, 2012, p.471). A total of 10 interviews were conducted with members of the selected Facebook groups who expressed willingness to participate in the study. Each interview duration varied, but lasted approximately 35-57 minutes and was conducted digitally using the Microsoft Teams platform. The interviews were recorded with both video and audio and participants were advised to conduct the interview with the cameras turned off to ensure anonymity. The recordings were stored digitally within the platform. This digital format was chosen for its convenience and accessibility, particularly in reaching participants who may not currently reside in Greece. Nonetheless, because of the targeted age group, most interviewees that did not currently reside in Greece were living abroad for just a couple of years because of work or studies. Participants were given the option to conduct the interview in either English or Greek, depending on their language preference.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants from the selected Facebook groups. At first a general call out was posted to the pages of the groups, following the groups' participation rules and guidelines. The main contributors of the groups were also personally contacted (Facebook groups allows participants to view who are the most popular contributors and members of a group). A sequence of referrals and advisements on persons of interest followed while contacting group members. Convenience

sampling was chosen due to its practicality and accessibility in accessing a specific population of interest, namely active members of the film-related online groups. While convenience sampling may introduce some bias, particularly in terms of overrepresentation of certain demographic groups or characteristics, it was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on capturing diverse perspectives within the target demographic (Bryman, 2012, p.201-202). Snowballing sampling also occurred when interviewees suggested to reach out to fellow members of their group that they deemed were willing to participate in the research.

3.4 Operationalization

In this study, specific interview questions and prompts were tailor made to facilitate the exploration of key concepts related to Greek consumers' perception of film quality and their viewing habits in the digital age. Each interview question response provides observable and measurable data relevant to the study's objectives and the research question and sub-questions at hand. Thus the exploration of the influence of pre-purchase information available in the current digital age on Greek consumers' perception of film quality and its impact on their viewing habits, is operationalized through a series of follow up questions that delve into specific aspects of consumer behavior and decision-making processes related to film consumption. These sub-questions are designed to explore the role of digital pre-purchase information in shaping consumers' perceptions of film quality and its impact on their viewing habits.

The were four main research concepts that emerged during the research. First, the impact of online information, the quality perception of participants, the research methods behind their consumption habits and finally the factors that influence mostly their viewing habits. More specifically, the criteria and considerations that influence participants' decisions to watch specific films, including prior knowledge and recommendations. For instance, for the first and third concept, the main interest lay on if online information was a permanent feature of their decision making process, but questions like "Did you do any research on the film prior to deciding to watch it? What kind of research?" and "Why did you watch this film" provided insights to determine how often participants relied on online information, in contrast to other information sources. Thus, we would be able to determine how prominent feature of research are online information. Furthermore, for the research methods used mostly from participants questions: "Did you do any research on the film prior to deciding to watch it? What kind of research?" and "When you're uncertain about the quality of a film, is there anything you do to help you decide if you're going to watch it?" were asked. The second main concept focused on the quality perception of consumers. This refers to participants'

subjective assessments of a film's quality, which may be influenced by factors such as genre, cast, director, recommendations and online information. Questions like: "Do you think a good rating online and good reviews online are a good indicator for the quality of a film? Why (not)?" and "Do you think information on the internet are enough for you to decide if you're going to like a film?" led to main focus of the study, about the impact that online information have on the perception of quality for consumers. Questions such as: "Was there ever any case you were certain for a quality of a film?" also was addressed to be determined if online information was a prominent feature of quality assessment in contrast to others, as well as: "If something is very popular online, would that be an indicator of quality for you? Would you watch that film?" and a discussion that starts the interview process by asking the participants of the latest film they watched, gathers further insights on the viewing habits of the interviewees.

Overall, each interview question is directly linked to one or more of the research concepts outlined above and is designed to explore participants' perspectives and experiences related to film consumption in the digital age. Questions are structured to lead detailed responses that provide insights into the factors influencing participants' decisions and perceptions. The interview guide (refer to Appendix A) consists of 25 in total, open-ended questions organized into thematic sections, beginning with demographic information and general consumption habits before moving on to more specific inquiries about participants' research methods and perceptions of online information. The goal of the interview is to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and articulate their perspectives in their own words.

All in all, this study aims to systematically explore the influence of digital pre-purchase information on Greek consumers' perception of film quality and their viewing habits. The interview questions are designed to provide rich and nuanced insights into the complex relationship between online information, consumer decision-making, and film consumption behaviors in the digital age and film quality.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as the preferred method, for its inherent simplicity in discerning patterns of significance within qualitative data. This approach, as underlined by Herzog, Handke and Hitters (2019, p. 385), involves a systematic process of constructing analytical elements. These elements include coding and identifying themes that encapsulate expressions, opinions and viewpoints and then finding the recurrent patterns or associations within these themes. Moreover, thematic analysis (TA) holds significant importance in media

and creative industries policy research when utilizing qualitative data, primarily due to two key factors. Firstly, it serves as a versatile and economical method for conducting exploratory research. Secondly, as pointed out in this chapter, TA is viewed as the fundamental "starting point" of virtually all qualitative data analysis endeavors, underscoring its foundational role in the research process (Herzog et al., 2019, p. 385). Thematic analysis essentially begins with the identification of codes, followed by the clarification of themes, and ultimately patterns within qualitative data sets. Overall, this method was chosen for its versatility and because it can be applied to analyze diverse qualitative data sources, including interviews, enabling a comprehensive examination of participant perspectives and insights (Herzog et al., 2019, p. 388).

More specifically the process of data analysis for this research, was completed using the AI software Atlas.ti. Transcripts of the interviews, that were completed with the help of Microsoft Teams' automated transcription software, were individually reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes related to participants' reliance on digital pre-purchase information and its influence on their film consumption habits. Each interview transcript was first reviewed, then coded individually, using both Atlas's coding tools and manual coding. At the initial stage, familiarization with the dataset and the transcripts of interviews conducted with the 10 participants, provided some first observations and recurring themes. This evolved into a thorough breakdown and examination of the dataset and then, with the help of Atlas's coding tools, the initial codes emerged during this stage of the data analysis. The dataset was systematically organized into meaningful groups relevant to the main concepts presented in the Operationalization section. So, all codes were grouped under the concepts of the impact of online information, quality perception, research methods and finally, viewing behavior. For example, codes such as that "critics not as reliable as friends' recommendations" and "continuous feedback from friends (makes them more reliable)" were grouped under the influence of friends in the concept of quality perception. Codes that indicated that directors, cast and nominations were perceived by participants as a factor of quality, were grouped into the influence basic search information can have in the concept of quality perception. After grouping codes, the main themes within each concept started to emerge. By developing codes that gave insight to all factors that can influence the quality perception of participants, or the viewing habits, the last part of the coding process involved distinguishing which were the most relevant of all in regard to our research question and hence the impact of online information. Therefore, the main themes out of all four concepts emerged, which were reviewed for a second time and were given names that were relevant to the research questions. The last part of the analysis consisted of writing a report on the findings, containing data extracts such as interview quotes that best represent specific themes identified in the analysis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the interviews, and measures were taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were advised to turn off their cameras during the recording process of the interview and edit their username in Microsoft Teams if they wished to have full anonymity and their name not to appear on transcripts. Additionally, participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion.

3.7 Limitations

It's important to acknowledge potential limitations of the study. The sample consisted of members from specific Facebook groups, which may not be fully representative of the broader population of Greek film consumers. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the study context as well as its subjectivity, as the reality presented can constantly shift with time, country and age group. However, the focus on in-depth exploration and understanding of individual experiences compensates for these limitations by providing rich and nuanced insights into the research topic.

4 Results

The results of the coded interviews revealed more than 160 codes, under the 4 main categories as presented in the Operationalization section. First the impact online information have on consumers, the most common research methods the participants applied for, the quality perception of interviewees for films and from what was quality mostly influenced by and lastly their viewing and consumption habits. These four main concepts were introduced for convenience during the coding process but also because quality perception proved to be a complex and challenging concept to explore, particularly among participants lacking prior familiarity with attributes associated with goods being categorized as search and experience goods. Throughout the interview process, participants encountered difficulties in grasping the notion of quality. For instance, an interviewee (participant B) expressed confidence in good reviews as indicators of quality, stating, "Yeah, for me it is a good indicator because I'm easily influenced. What can I say? [laughs]" but they also exhibited uncertainty when directly asked about their perception of quality, stating: "this information and these reviews are not enough to tell me if for sure I'm going to like it or not [a film]". Indeed, during the coding process of the interviews, it became difficult to distinguish if the impact of online information was on their decision-making process or on their quality perception. It is for that reason the coding process focus on the four different concepts presented above was used to make this distinction as easy and informative as possible, but also to answer as accurately as possible the research questions at hand. Consequently, codes were grouped first in each category to get a general picture of the main themes in the data. After this process, a lot of common themes occurred among the categories.

4.1 The impact of online information

To begin with, the impact of online information in the decision making and influence of participants is clear. Participants rely heavily on online reviews and ratings to decide which films to watch. Interviewee C states: "if it's an under 7, like low 7 [rating of a film] […] it's a no for me. It's not gonna feel motivated to watch it" as well as participant D: "if there are above, let's say, six or seven, [the rating of a film] I'm gonna be like, OK, I'm gonna watch it". Overall, none of the participants expressed indifference or complete ignorance to the existence of online information to their film consumption habits. Some may rely on them less, so they have an "authentic" opinion and experience when watching a film not influenced by the opinion of others, but the rest will always seek guidance and advice when deciding to watch a film. More specifically, it was only 2 out of 10 participants (interviewees B and G) that stated that they wish to have the least information possible when watching a film: "I do believe in order to watch a movie, you need only the essential characteristics. […] I think the

less information I have the better for me." Similarly participant G and I, mention that when watching a complicated film with many meanings and take away messages, they prefer not to read any reviews prior to watching the film, so they don't get influenced.

Among the reasons participants rely heavily on online information is the convenience it offers. They find it easy to conduct extensive research to find exactly what they're looking for, tailored to their preferences and mood. Overall, they feel that this enables them to make informed decisions and avoid wasting time on films they might not enjoy. As Participant C noted, "I'm pretty indecisive as a person, and the more factors exist that, you know, kind of minimize this indecisiveness, the better for me. So, if I'm uncertain about a movie, I might research a lot."

On the other hand, online information can sometimes lead to disappointment and may not always guarantee the quality of a film, a point that will be explored further in the section of quality assessment. But concerning the theme of the impact of online information, despite the abundance of online content, participants sometimes find the information insufficient. Certain films, especially niche or independent ones, may lack comprehensive online coverage. This limitation can frustrate consumers seeking detailed insights and reviews. A major issue reported by some participants is information overload. The vast amount of available content can be overwhelming, making it difficult to sift through and identify the most relevant and trustworthy sources. This overload can hinder the decision-making process rather than help it. Participant D mentioned: "There is so much information that you can spend hours before deciding what movie to watch 100%." and similarly participant C recalls:

> It was such a waste of time and energy […] reading reviews. So, I would say the vast information that you have is kind of at your disadvantage if you're tight on time or not someone who focuses so much on movies. In the end, you just want to watch a movie.

4.2 Perception of Quality

However, it seems that online information doesn't significantly affect consumers' perception of quality. Despite its impact on decision-making, it doesn't add much value to their pre-watching quality expectations. Some participants express a certain level of trust; for instance, Interviewee C states, "Most of the time, when the rating is good, I like the movie," and regarding the latest film they watched, they mention, "It had a decent score, so I assumed it was going to be fun." Nevertheless, the influence on quality perception remains limited for all participants. Interviewee D remarks about online information: "At least it helps me decide [...] but I won't be certain that it will be a good movie beforehand" and all participants echo the fact that they can not know prior to watching the film, if they're going to

like it or not. Online information according to them are not enough to alleviate this uncertainty. "If at the end I'm going to like this movie or not, of course, this information and these reviews are not enough [...]" interviewee B states.

The were four main subthemes that were developed during the coding process of the quality perception of participants. The first thematic thread that surfaced within this category centers around the credibility of online information. Although, it is recognized by all participants that in an era dominated by digital platforms, online reviews, ratings, and discussions have an impact on their film selection process, the credibility of sources and the presence of authentic, non-biased, user-generated, reliable content were highlighted mostly by participants to cause distrust in online information to ensure quality for a film. Biased reviews and ratings are something Interviewee A mentions strongly: "a lot of people would like give something like one out of 10 or something because […] the movie was about specific political issues or something that there were against". Participant D mentions: "I think it's because people have so […] [much] access to online so they can review and say whatever they want about a movie". Beyond the concern for non-biased reviews, with the wide use of AI today on the internet, participants also mention their skepticism if reviews are user-generated. Interviewee E and F mention that bots or fake accounts can be used nowadays to generate reviews in any desirable quantity.

The second most mentioned theme of quality perception by participants was the influence of basic search information of films. Karniouchina's (2011) remarks about the importance of famous actors or directors on the commercial success of a film is further highlighted by participants in their quality criteria. Interviewees underline the significance of trusted and loved directors, cast ensembles and liked (and disliked) actors, genres, the duration of a film (interviewee C indicated higher concern for the quality of a film if it was a lengthy film), the plot, the soundtrack, the trailers, promotional posters, nominations and award recognitions in shaping their decision-making process, as well as their quality perception. All these information are categorized as basic search information of films for the purposes of this study. It could be argued that the internet makes it easier to search for these information, but consumers could still have access to them from other sources and media outlets, despite the internet. So, the importance and influence of them are not associated with the impact of online information. Overall, it seems that, familiarity with a director's track record instills confidence in the anticipated quality of a film, serving as a decisive factor in their viewing choices. Interviewee C states: "if I like the director and I know the kind of quality that he provides in each film, I'm not gonna doubt it. I'm just gonna watch it". This underscores the role of prior knowledge and expectations in shaping quality perceptions. For example, Interviewees D and G mention that even if they read bad reviews about a movie, they may still decide to watch it. The reasons for them to oversee and ignore

bad reviews would be a trusted director, a good cast and the plot. The exact opposite can also occur, with another participant claiming that they won't watch a film despite the good reviews, if they don't like the actors: "if I see this actor playing in a […] movie that is very well advertised, I'm gonna be like, no, I don't want to watch it because of these actors". So, it seems that basic search information for a film exceed online information and can have a bigger influence in quality perception.

The third most mentioned thematic exploration of quality perception also unveiled the significance of friends' recommendations and the influence of friends and social networks in shaping quality perceptions. This sentiment is echoed by all participants with no exception, as they find that their friends' opinion is way more credible because: "our tastes align more, or like they're closer to my age, so they have like the same interest or […] the same perspective in discussing a movie" participant D explains. Participant A clearly mentions that because of the unreliability of online platforms and the credibility of information on the internet, they developed a research process focusing on friend's recommendations through a specific platform (Letterbox). The participant finds that friends recommendations are way more credible because of "the constant alignment of tastes along the years" and mentions that they never watched a film that had high rating from their friends in Letterbox that didn't end up personally liking. Participant E agrees and further adds that: "if a friend has suggested the movie I might even not search online about the movie and just watch it". This is further echoed by other participants. Overall, it seems that friend's recommendations have such a strong influence that participants are sometimes willing to skip online research, basing their consumption solely on the recommendation. The interpersonal relationship seems to add more credibility and trust in the reliable exchange of recommendations and shared viewing experiences.

Moreover, the theme of subjectivity of personal preferences was the next most mentioned factor to the inherent variability in individual perceptions of film quality. Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette's (2011) portrayal of how nuanced, explorative and personal the demand of cultural products can be, is mirrored here when participants acknowledge the subjective nature of their preferences, recognizing the interplay between personal inclinations, emotional resonance, and contextual factors in shaping their quality assessments. For instance, when interviewee B was asked if she finds online information not credible, they answer: "There is not such a thing like false information because when you read a review, you read mostly about an opinion and the taste in, in artistic things". So, the notion of credibility of online information becomes even more nuanced when we take into account the subjectivity and personal tastes of each individual. A lot of participants mention examples where their expectations based on online information differed from their actual experience of watching a film and despite the good reviews, they saw a movie they didn't

like and vice versa. This experience cannot only occur because online information are unreliable, but because that particular information maybe didn't align with their personal tastes. Interviewee C states that when she read reviews: "[…] most of the time, I don't see people representing my way of thinking, of course, like they have their own experiences and needs and they focus on that". This theme highlights the diverse perspectives in film consumption and reinforces Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette's (2011) view that cultural products must be first experienced for viewers to determine their taste. Despite the availability of online information, the subjective nature of quality perception underscores that films are fundamentally experience goods.

In addition, the theme of popularity also emerged when determining the factors that shape quality perception. For the most part, participants seemed indifferent to the influence of popularity on the quality of a film. Interviewee A clearly mentions that popularity wouldn't be an indicator of quality. Moreover, it's worth mentioning that the sample selection of this research fits mostly the profile of high-involvement consumers introduced by Park at al. (2007), which further indicates the limitations of this research, with the choice of interviewing individuals that belong in active Facebook film groups. Some interviewees presented themselves as very specific in taste and research processes when deciding which film to watch (especially interviewee A) and seemed mostly indifferent to the effect of popularity in films. On the other hand, lower-involvement participants (interviewees B, H in particular - judged by the fact that they both state they're individuals who do not pay great attention to directors and are not frequent movie watchers) seemed more gullible to popularity, something that extends on Park's et. al (2007) distinction that consumers with low involvement give emphasis more on the popularity displayed by reviews. It should also be mentioned here that popularity is a somewhat abstract term, as it was conceptualized by participants as a term that could mean that a film was generally much discussed in the media and not necessarily only on the internet. It would be difficult to distinguish the popularity of films on the internet without the influence of other media and social circles. Although popularity is a factor on the viewing and consumption habits of participants (mentioned later), it seemed to play little role in their quality perception.

In conclusion, everyone agrees that online information aids decision-making and serves as a strong motivator, though it cannot ensure quality. Interviewee D clearly summarizes this sentiment: "I still think that there are many things online [reviews and ratings] that help you decide on a movie—not entirely about the quality, but definitely about the motivation to watch it". As long as consumers cannot access the quality of a movie prior to purchase, they are still considered an experience good. Therefore, findings such as Nakayama et al. (2010) that states the internet plays little role in transforming experience good attributes to search attributes, are confirmed.

4.3 Research methods

From the thematic code analysis on the research methods consumers of film use, several key themes and findings emerge, but the impact of online information is once again strongly mirrored. All interviewees have researched for both reviews and ratings, scores and comments from online users among other online information. Participants use many different platforms and websites such as IMDb, Letterbox, Rotten Tomatoes and social media pages such as Facebook and Instagram. Interviewee A states: "every movie that I'm gonna watch, I'm gonna check it first in Letterbox and then maybe on IMDb", as well as interviewee B: "I follow some accounts on Instagram and through these accounts often I find some interesting movies that I try to […] watch". Basic search information for films like cast, director, plot and award recognitions are also important in their research methods to inform their film-watching choices. Interviewee C mentions that apart from ratings they will always search for the director of a film. Another participant points out that: "I will search online, I will ask around like should I go watch this movie in the cinemas or not? Or should I not waste much time?" which also underlines that recommendations from friends are also a significant influence.

Among the issues and concerns shared by the participants, the availability and ease of accessing information for a particular movie, shape their research methods while most participants attest to the easiness of researching for the information they're looking for. A few mention complexity of researching that is connected to the information overload mentioned previously in the impact of online information. Moreover, few consumers also consult magazines, though this method appears less prevalent. Digital means seem to have taken over completely from traditional media outlets.

The role of critics is multifaceted; while some consumers may research for critics' opinions, they mostly feel indifferent to them. In fact, critics are barely mentioned by participants. Interviewee H very interestingly claims that reviews from fellow consumers are more reliable than professional critics, disregarding the theory presented by Senecal and Nantel (2004) that consumers pay little mind in the sources of the reviews. According to the interviewee's view, other consumers are "simple viewers like her" and thus closer to her taste. Critics seem a bit impersonal and maybe too professional and out of touch with her age group, as Gavilan et al., (2013) pointed out that maybe other consumers' reviews seem simpler to the average consumer. Interviewee I on the other hand disagrees; she will mostly rely on critic reviews rather than user reviews.

What is also worth mentioning is that research habits may vary depending on the social context of consumption. For instance, some viewers tend to conduct more thorough research when planning to watch a film alone compared to when watching with others. This indicates a deeper investment in ensuring personal satisfaction when viewing solo. The contrast between cinema and streaming also influences research intensity, with the former

often prompting more detailed investigation due to the higher commitment involved in a cinema visit. Participant J states: "when I'm home it's more flexible […] if I don't like it, I can stop watching it while at the cinema you put effort to get there. You pay the ticket, you arrange your day based on that". There were participants, however, who seemed indifferent to the social context or the difference in cinema or home viewings.

Overall, online information is the primary source of research for the participants while other methods take a more supplementary role.

4.4 Viewing and consumption habits

Previous findings are also strongly mirrored in the thematic coding analysis of participants' viewing consumption habits of films with online information emerging as the central theme. At the core of participants' viewing behavior is the reliance on prior knowledge, obtained through online sources which shapes expectations and viewing choices. Participants with more background information about a film tend to have more defined expectations, which influences their confidence to view a film. Participants seldom chose to watch a film with no prior information on it. Some state that it would now be difficult to imagine watching a film with no prior research. Interviewee D answers a question about watching a film with no prior knowledge: "I mean, it sounds fun, right? It sounds interesting and I think I would do it, but it wouldn't be my favorite thing to do. […] I would prefer to know from beforehand what I'm gonna watch" and participant C states: "some movies just don't have sufficient reviews or, you know, like nobody has watched it and you're like, is that even good?" meaning that participants feel uncertain to choose a film without having available information.

However out of the all the circumstances that the interviewees chose to watch a film with zero research, the role of basic search information once again has an impact. As mentioned before, interviewees have chosen to watch films primarily because of a favored director. The social circle influence also played a role with recommendations and discussions from friends being another source of choices that guided participants viewing habits. The popularity of a film also strongly influences viewing behavior as many interviewees mention curiosity for a film that is much talked about and their desire to shape their own opinion on the film. Participant B claims: "if a movie for example becomes popular at some point […] the circle of the people that you know […] they will start talking about this. So I wanted to have my own opinion". It is also worth mentioning that when researching the impact of viewing context on participants, streaming platforms seem to also have an impact on viewing choices. For example, participant A states that she chooses films from a particular streaming platform. In conclusion, the thematic analysis underscores the centrality of online information in shaping film consumption habits. Despite the varying influences of

social circles, prior knowledge, and viewing contexts, online information remains a pivotal factor in guiding participants' viewing choices and expectations.

5 Conclusions

This study explored the theme of digitalization's impact on film consumption from the perspective of consumers. The central premise was that if films have transformed into search goods due to the abundance of online information, consumers would be able to assess the quality of a film prior to watching it. Therefore, this research aimed to answer how consumers' quality uncertainty is influenced by the plethora of pre-purchase information available online and how this affects their film consumption choices. Through thematic coding analysis applied to 10 qualitative interviews, the findings reveal that despite the extensive availability of online information and its influence on consumption habits, quality uncertainty remains largely unaffected. This suggests that while online information may shape consumer behavior, it does not significantly mitigate the experiential nature of films as cultural goods.

More specifically, movie consumption presented itself as an intricate subject to research. The subjective nature of cultural products adds another layer of complexity compared to other experience products. The decision-making process involved in selecting films to watch can include numerous factors. However, our study specifically focused on examining the impact of online information on the quality perception of consumers. Theoretical contributions asserting that cultural products are experience goods, and that online information does not fundamentally alter the nature of these goods, are corroborated by this study. Despite participants' reliance on and confidence in using the internet for decision-making, research, and viewing choices, it appears that online information had little influence on their quality perception prior to purchase. Consequently, pre-purchase information did not alter the experience good attribute of films, and quality uncertainty remained unchanged.

This finding is further underscored by stronger themes that emerged during the thematic coding process regarding the perception of film quality. Basic search information and recommendations from friends appeared to have a more significant influence on participants. While online information can offer some quality reassurance, films, as experience goods, ultimately require consumption to truly assess their quality.

Furthermore, our research reveals several key insights into how the abundance of pre-purchase information in the digital age influences Greek consumers' perception of film quality and their viewing habits. Participants consistently emphasized the convenience and extensive availability of online information. They appreciated the ability to quickly and efficiently gather data about films. This information was considered useful for forming initial impressions and narrowing down choices. However, when it came to final quality assessments, the information often fell short. This reflects the general sentiment that while

online information can reduce indecision and drive consumption habits, it cannot fully replace the experiential aspect of watching a film. Participants also expressed that despite the abundance of online reviews and ratings, there remained a persistent uncertainty about whether they would enjoy a film until they actually watched it.

The study also highlighted the issue of information overload. The vast amount of available content can be overwhelming, making it difficult for participants to sift through and identify the most relevant and trustworthy sources. This overload can sometimes hinder the decision-making process rather than help it. These insights are very important as the difficulties that the participants claim to still face, can lead us to suggestions for society, policy making, and other practical recommendations. For example, information overload, suggests a need for better curation and organization of online content to help consumers navigate the vast array of available data. Policymakers and digital platform designers could consider implementing more effective algorithms and user interfaces that prioritize quality and relevance over quantity. Additionally, there could be a role for media literacy programs aimed at equipping consumers with skills to critically evaluate online information and manage information overload. For stakeholders in the film industry, such as filmmakers, distributors, and marketers, it is crucial to understand that while digital platforms are dominant, maintaining a presence in traditional media can still be valuable for reaching certain segments of the audience. The participants of this study numerous times added that sometimes online information is limited for older or more independent films. This led to discouragement and uncertainty to view these specific films. Practical steps could include fostering collaborations between digital and traditional media outlets to provide a balanced approach to film promotion. These recommendations aim to enhance the consumer experience, ensuring that the digital transformation of film consumption leads to informed and satisfying viewing choices without overwhelming consumers.

Despite these challenges, some positive aspects of online information were noted. Participants valued the ease with which they could access trailers, reviews, and ratings. These resources were seen as useful tools for making preliminary decisions and reducing the risk of selecting a poor-quality film. However once again, the ultimate quality assessment remained an inherently subjective experience, influenced by personal tastes and preferences. Mainly Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette's findings (2011) turned out to be crucial in evaluating the experiential attributes of films. Klein's (1998) and Nakayama et al. (2010) insights on the transformation of experience good attributes to search attributes were corroborated, as the abundance of information had little influence on the uncertainty of film consumption.

Overall, our research underscores the necessity for further investigation into the intricate dynamics surrounding the influence of online information on experience goods.

Other experience goods can be studied using the same methodology employed here, broadening the scope of understanding in this area. Additionally, exploring the impact of digital age information on different age groups could yield valuable insights. Older generations, in particular, may provide more nuanced perspectives compared to younger ones. Comparing current findings with past consumption behaviors of experience goods could also enhance our understanding of these dynamics. Younger generations, including those in Greece despite their later adoption of the internet, found it challenging to compare current experiences with pre-internet years. More specifically, the data sample introduced here presented itself mostly particular in taste and thus may provided limited insights in contrast to a more varied research sample. The qualitative approach may also include biases and unclear take away messages. Quantitative research approaches may provide in the future more solid and clear results.

Furthermore, the findings reveal opportunities for further research by exploring additional theoretical frameworks. The influence of recommendations from friends and social circles was evident in participants' quality perceptions, research methods, and viewing habits. This suggests that Social Influence Theory could be further examined to support these results. Additionally, exploring taste formation and Becker's (1991) social aspects of the demand for cultural products could provide deeper insights into how social dynamics shape film consumption behaviors. These theoretical perspectives could enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between social influences and consumer choices in the digital age, as well as explore their role in the experience nature of cultural products. It could be that reliance on social circles might actually be another integral part of experience attributes of products, providing further insights into Nelson's claim that recommendations are followed more for experience products (1970, p.327).

This research also opens up philosophical discussions about consumers' tolerance for uncertainty in the digital age. As access to information increases, consumers may become less tolerant of uncertainty, seeking more assurance before making decisions. This phenomenon warrants further exploration to understand its broader implications on consumer behavior and decision-making processes.

Another topic that emerged during the research is the impact of online streaming platforms on consumption habits. With the rise of platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+, the way consumers access and choose films has transformed significantly. This shift presents another area ripe for further research. Investigating how these platforms influence perceptions of film quality, decision-making processes, and overall viewing behavior could provide deeper insights into the evolving landscape of film consumption.

In conclusion, our study confirms that while online information is a valuable tool for film consumers, it does not eliminate the inherent uncertainties associated with experience

goods. Participants rely on and appreciate the convenience of online resources, yet personal recommendations and intrinsic preferences ultimately guide their final decisions. Future research should continue to explore the complex interplay between online information, consumer behavior, and the subjective nature of cultural products, particularly in the context of rapidly changing digital environments. This ongoing exploration will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital information shapes consumer experiences and expectations in the realm of film consumption and beyond.

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Appendix A

Overview of Respondents

The participants in this research were all Greek individuals aged between 25 and 30. Gender was not a primary focus of the study, but the majority of the participants were female and non-binary. Geographically, three participants resided in Denmark, one in the Netherlands, one in Italy, one in England, and the remaining participants lived in Greece. In terms of occupation, most participants were students, with the exception of three who were employed. All participants had completed or were pursuing master's studies. 9 out of 10 interviews were conducted in the English language. Only one participant requested the interview to be done in Greek.

Interview guide.

Demographic information
1) How old are you?
2) Where are you from?

General consumption habits
3) How frequently would you say you watch films?
4) What was the latest film you watched?
5) Did you watch it alone?
6) Why did you watch this film? What were the deciding factors for you to decide to watch it?
7) Prior to watching the film, were you certain if you're going to like the film or if the film was going to be good?
8) Did you do any research on the film prior to deciding to watch it? What kind of research?
9) Do you do this for all/most films you watch? Why?

Confirmation of theory
10) Was there ever any case you were certain for a quality of a film?
11) When you're uncertain about the quality of a film, is there anything you do to help you decide if you're going to watch it?
12) Does your concern for the quality of a film change if you watch a film alone or not?
13) Does your research method vary depending on the way you watch a movie? (streaming, going to the cinema)

Online information
14) (Depends also if it's mentioned from previous answers) Do you do any research that relies on information you gather from the internet? What information do you look for?
15) Do you find it easy to search for this kind of information?
16) How does this information help you?
17) Do you think a good rating online and good reviews online are a good indicator for the quality of a film? Why (not)?
18) Do you think information on the internet are enough for you to decide if you're going to like a film?

19) If something is very popular online, would that be an indicator of quality for you? Would you watch that film?
20) Can you discuss any instances where your expectations based on online information differed from your actual experience of watching a film?
21) Think back on previous years when you didn't have access to that much information online. How did you determine what movies to watch?
22) Do you think your research process/criteria changed in later years?

Concluding remarks
23) Do you believe that the availability of online information has made it easier or more difficult for you to make informed decisions about which films to watch? How so?
24) Is there's anything else you wish to share that's not been touched upon so far?

Appendix B

Atlas.ti network trees for the four main concepts of the research.
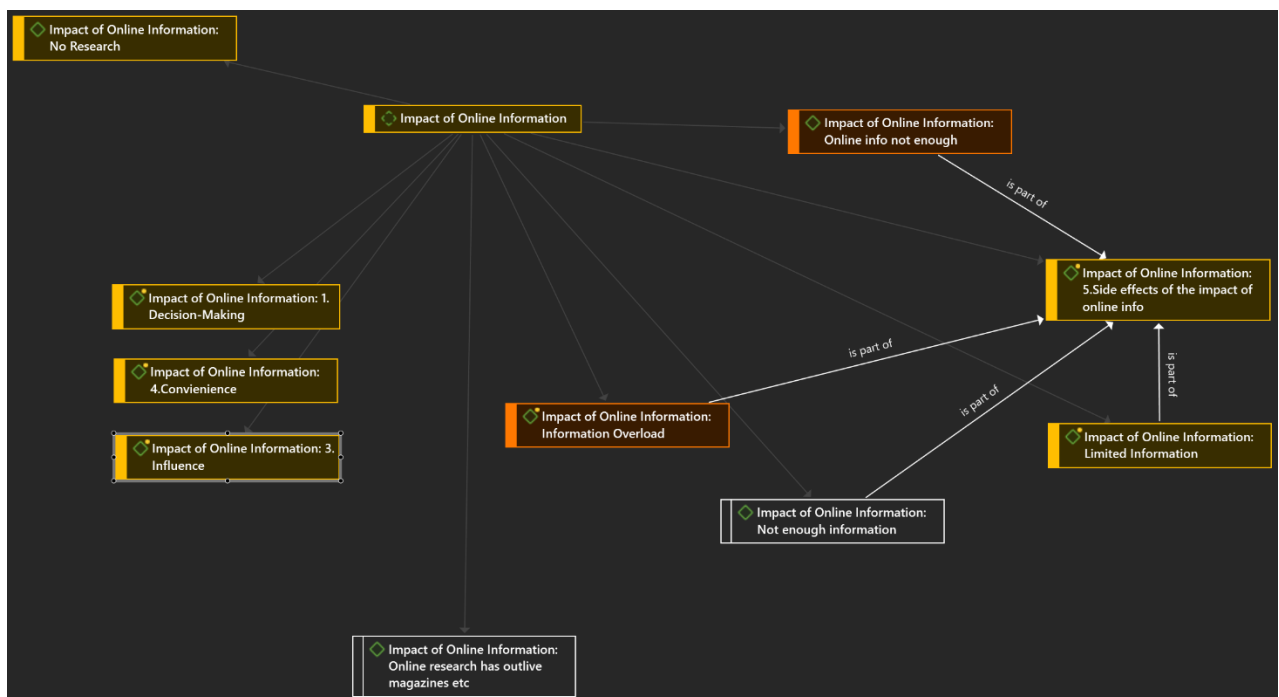

Image 1. Export image of the network of codes under the concept of the impact of online information.
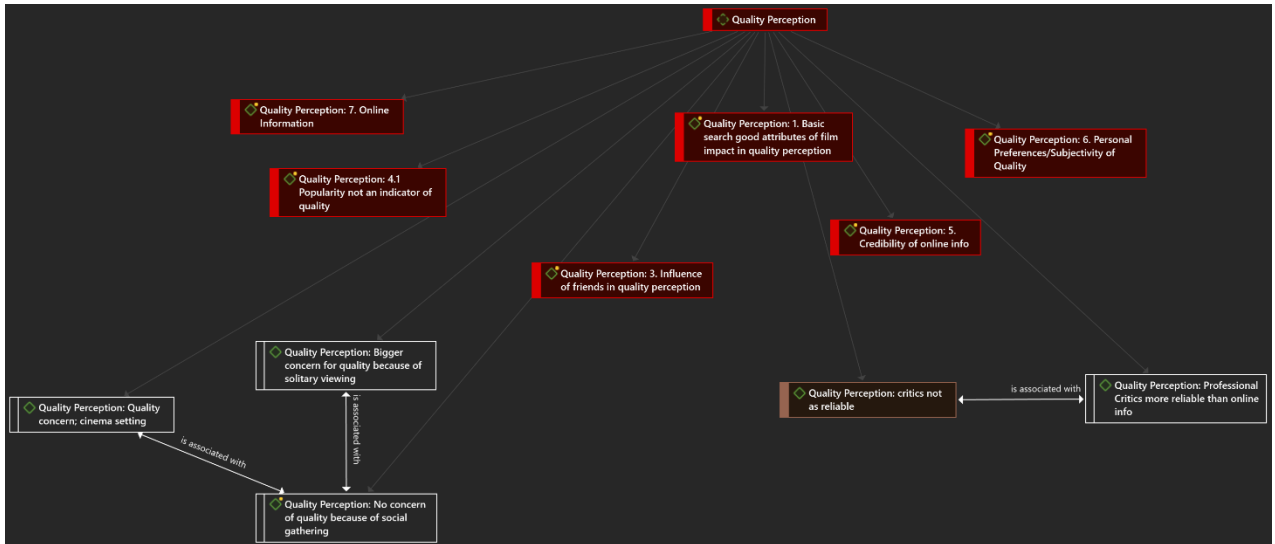
Image 2. Export image of the network of codes under the concept of quality perception.
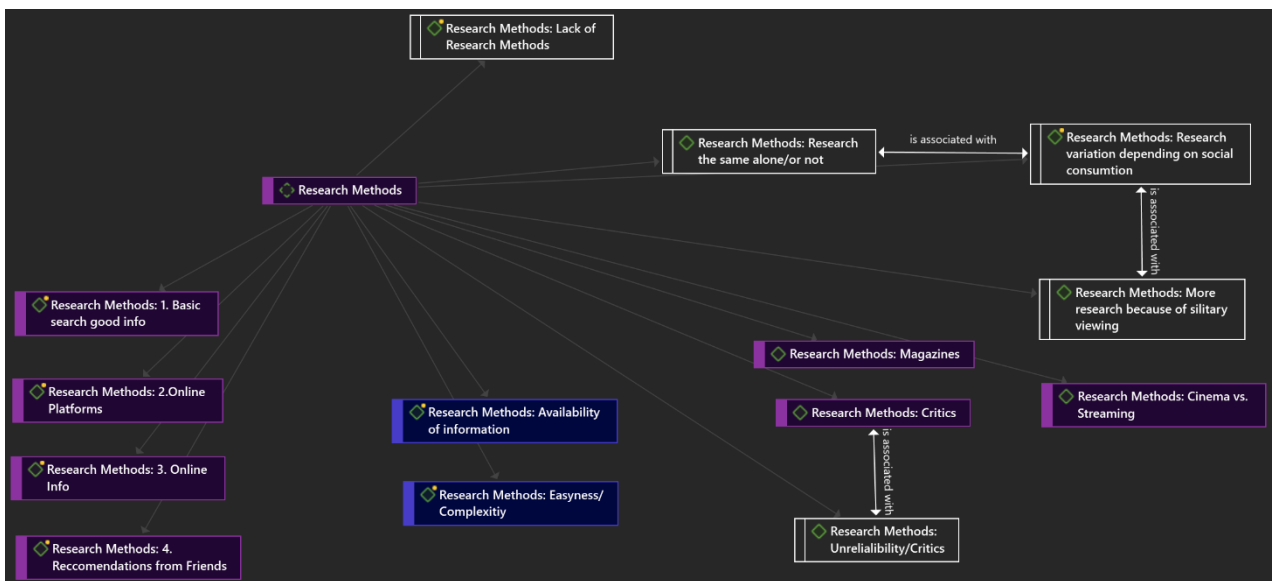

Image 3. Export image of the network of codes under the concept of research methods.
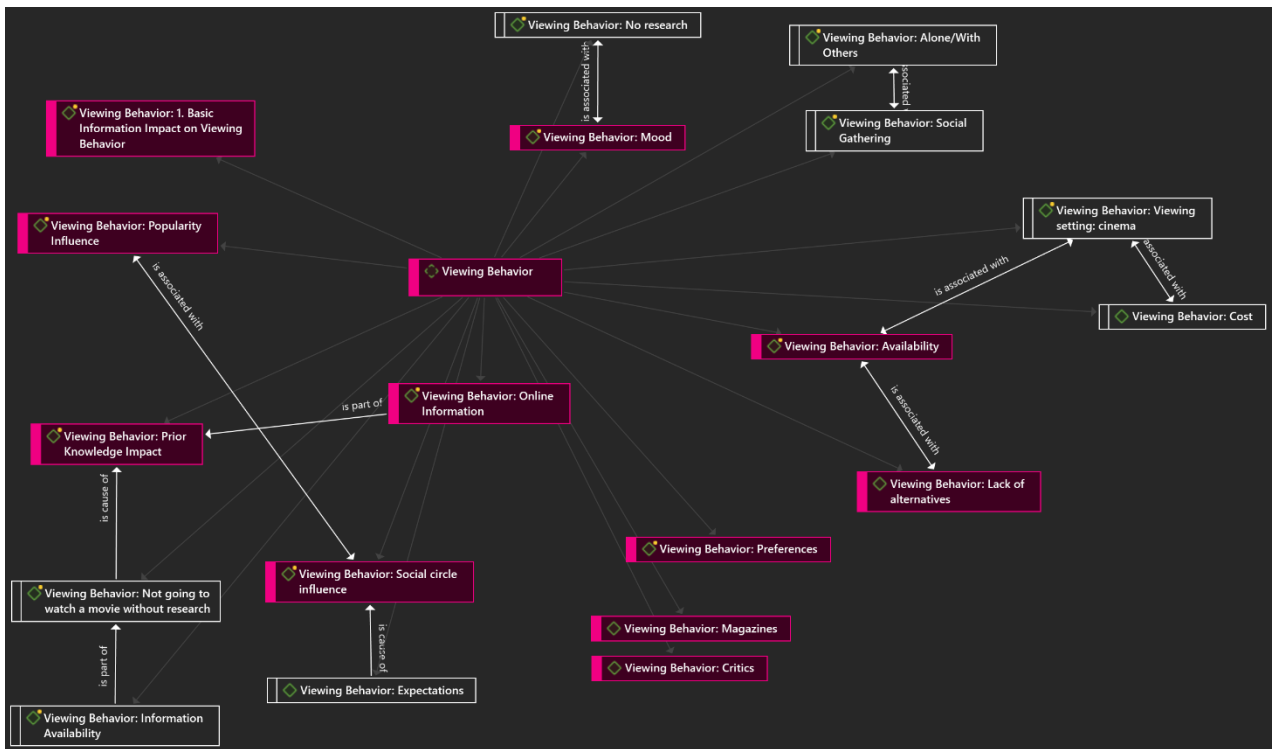
Image 4. Export image of the network of codes under the concept of viewing behavior and viewing habits.