Determinants of Spoiler Reviewing: The Roles of Social Preferences and Self-Presentation[1*]

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Abstract

Online spoiler reviews, while often criticized, can sometimes reduce the uncertainty associated with movie viewing and even stimulate box-office performance, challenging the conventional assumption that "spoilers are inherently harmful." This study shifts the focus from recipients to reviewers, analyzing 489 spoiler-containing reviews collected from the film review platform Filmerks using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to extract eight topics. To further validate reviewer motivations, a third-person projection survey was conducted with 1,200 participants. The findings reveal that, in addition to the general motives of information provision/explanation and self-expression/recognition, spoiler reviews are uniquely driven by the desire to share narrative outcomes and shocking moments as a means of emotional release and resonance. Rather than being merely disruptive behavior, spoiler postings function as spaces for re-experiencing stories, combining altruistic intentions with community engagement. Theoretically, this study extends existing eWOM motivation models by incorporating post-viewing factors such as emotional resonance and catharsis. Practically, it suggests that platforms should implement spoiler labels and dedicated threads, while film producers can leverage in-depth spoiler reviews for content refinement and marketing strategies.

Keywords: Movie, eWOM, Spoiler, Motivation
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1. Introduction

Spoiler postings, which reveal key plot points or endings in advance, have attracted particular attention within fan communities. As Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) have shown, producers and distributors have long expressed concern that spoilers may diminish audience motivation to watch films, with some directors and actors even issuing "no-spoiler" appeals. For instance, the movie review platform Filmerks explicitly warns that spoiler reviews may "deprive users who have not yet watched the film of their enjoyment."

However, more recent studies suggest that spoilers do not necessarily harm box-office performance and may, under certain conditions, exert positive effects (Ryoo et al., 2021). A large-scale text analysis of U.S. films released between 2013 and 2017, for example, demonstrated a positive correlation between spoiler intensity in IMDb reviews and box-office revenues (Ryoo et al., 2021). The underlying mechanism is thought to lie in spoilers' ability to reduce uncertainty and psychological risk among prospective audiences by clarifying narrative ambiguities. Survey evidence in Japan similarly indicates that some viewers develop stronger interest in films after being exposed to spoilers, suggesting that a portion of the audience does not lose enthusiasm even when forewarned. Moreover, Rosenbaum et al. (2019) argue that, for horror or emotionally intense films, knowing the ending in advance can mitigate emotional shock and enable viewers to enjoy the film more comfortably. Spoilers may thus have positive functions such as reducing consumption risk and supporting self-protection (Domanska et al., 2024).

These findings challenge the conventional assumption that spoilers are inherently harmful. Instead, spoilers may broaden potential audiences by clarifying narrative content, thereby creating so-called "positive spoiler effects" (Ryoo et al., 2021). Such effects are expected to be particularly pronounced for mid-range films or those with limited promotional budgets, where reducing uncertainty can significantly influence audience decisions. By contrast, for blockbuster films with established fan bases, or for movies that are critically acclaimed or widely criticized, the impact of spoilers is likely to be smaller, varying by film characteristics and audience segments.

Within the broader marketing literature, Duan (2008) has demonstrated the importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) in influencing consumer behavior, and extensive research has examined motivations for posting reviews. Yet despite the growing scholarly focus on spoiler effects, most prior studies have addressed the recipient's side—exploring how spoilers affect viewing intentions, satisfaction, and box-office outcomes—while largely neglecting the motivations of those who post spoilers. Consequently, there remains a research gap concerning the psychological drivers of spoiler-containing review postings.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the psychological motivations behind spoiler postings in the film industry. In particular, as online communities and SNS play an increasingly important role before and after film consumption, spoiler reviews may function not only as potentially disruptive acts but also as mechanisms that stimulate discussion and fan engagement. To this end, this study combines a survey of individuals with actual posting experience and textual analysis of their reviews, drawing on established eWOM motivation frameworks while introducing the distinct dimension of spoilers.

2. Literature Review
2.1 The Film Industry and Marketing Research

The film industry is recognized as a highly volatile, high-risk, and high-return business within the entertainment market, where the success or failure of individual titles has a substantial impact on firms' revenues (Eliashberg et al., 2006). A distinctive feature of this industry is the speed and magnitude of information diffusion. Evaluations and reputations of films spread rapidly, and box-office performance has long been shown to be significantly influenced by word of mouth (WOM) (Eliashberg et al., 2006). Duan et al. (2008) highlight that online WOM

following theatrical release not only boosts opening-week revenues but also creates a reinforcing cycle for successful films, generating long-tail revenue streams. Recent studies have moved beyond WOM "volume" and "valence" to examine the textual content of reviews (Dellarocas et al., 2007), underscoring the growing importance for distributors to monitor online discourse and strategically manage reputation formation (Chen et al., 2011).

2.2 Research on Electronic Word of Mouth

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) synthesized prior work by consolidating eight previously identified motives into five factors through principal component analysis: (1) acquisition of product-related information, (2) social orientation through information, (3) community participation, (4) remuneration, and (5) learning about consumption. This framework has become foundational in the study of eWOM motivations.

2.3 WOM Research in the Film Industry

In the film industry, WOM spans multiple stages: from pre-release "anticipation," shaped by trailers and promotional activities on SNS, to immediate post-release reviews and ratings, and finally to post-exhibition discussions that sustain long-term buzz (Duan et al., 2008; Liu, 2006). Recent research has increasingly focused on the textual content of reviews, especially the inclusion of "story-specific information," with spoilers emerging as a salient phenomenon (Chen et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2020). Lu et al. (2020), for instance, conducted an econometric analysis linking the degree of spoilers in reviews with box-office performance, reporting cases where spoilers positively affected revenues.

While the majority of spoiler-related studies have centered on recipients—examining how spoilers influence viewing intentions, satisfaction, and box-office outcomes—this study shifts the focus to senders. Specifically, it seeks to uncover the psychological motivations behind spoiler postings in film reviews, an area that remains underexplored despite its growing relevance.

3. Analysis

The purpose of this study is to investigate the psychological factors that motivate spoiler-containing review postings in the film industry.

In designing the study, particular attention was given to minimizing social desirability bias. Because directly asking respondents about spoiler-related motives could distort their answers, the study employed a third-person projection method, in which participants were instructed to imagine and respond based on the behavior and psychology of others. This approach allowed for the indirect elicitation of respondents' unconscious motives and attitudes.

First, 489 spoiler-containing reviews were collected from Filmerks, one of the largest review platforms in Japan. Morphological analysis was conducted to standardize synonymous expressions, resolve orthographic variations, and remove stopwords and meaningless terms. These preprocessing steps reduced noise in the text data and enhanced analytical precision. A Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model was then applied to extract latent topics. Based on model fit and interpretability, the optimal number of topics was determined to be k = 8.

From the top five reviews with the highest topic probabilities within each cluster, reviews unsuitable for use in the subsequent survey (e.g., excessively long texts exceeding 1,000 characters) were excluded. Ultimately, three representative reviews were selected per topic, yielding a total of 24 reviews.

Next, a screening survey was conducted to identify valid respondents based on criteria such as having posted a film review within the past year and passing instructional manipulation checks. For each of the 24 reviews, responses were collected from 50 participants, resulting in a total sample of 1,200. The survey achieved a 90.0% response rate. After excluding blank or uninterpretable responses, 400 valid open-ended responses (33.3%) remained for analysis.

The free-text responses were subjected to the same preprocessing procedures (morphological analysis, synonym unification, and stopword removal) before applying an LDA topic model.

Considering residual values, model fit, and the purpose of document classification rather than readability, the optimal number of topics was again determined to be k = 8. The high-probability words and representative responses associated with each topic were then examined to interpret and classify the motivational dimensions underlying spoiler postings.

4. Result

As demonstrated by Alsulami & Thafar (2025), the ChatGPT label exhibited high interpretability in both keyword- and context-based dimensions. Therefore, in this study, ChatGPT's reasoning was also referenced to assist in topic labeling. In Topic 1, words such as *"emotion," "expectation,"* and *"lesson"* were included. This cluster was interpreted as a group of motives centered on sharing emotional reactions with others—including cautionary intentions toward potential viewers—and was labeled "Emotional Sharing." In Topic 2, words such as *"evaluation"* and *"level"* appeared. This was interpreted as a group of motives related to discussing and exchanging evaluations about the film's quality or storyline, and was labeled "Exchange of Evaluations." In Topic 3, words such as *"myself"* and *"convey"* were found. This was interpreted as a motive group reflecting a desire to express one's individuality by sharing personal interpretations or analyses, and was labeled "Self-Expression." In Topic 4, words such as *"want"* and *"approval"* were included. This was recognized as a group of motives driven by the desire for recognition through reactions or feedback on one's posts, and was labeled "Need for Approval." In Topic 5, words such as *"myself"* and *"memory"* appeared. This was interpreted as a group of motives aimed at organizing and recording spoiler information—such as endings or foreshadowing—and was labeled "Recording and Transmission." In Topic 6, words such as *"disappointed"* and *"appeal"* were included. This was recognized as a motive group involving the release or expression of negative emotions, and was labeled "Disappointment Venting." In Topic 7, words such as *"want"* and *"explanation"* were found. This cluster was interpreted as a group of motives seeking empathy or mutual understanding through explanatory or interpretive posts, and was labeled "Interpretive Empathy." Finally, in Topic 8, words such as *"mere"* and *"opinion"* appeared. This was interpreted as a group of motives reflecting a desire to publicly present one's personal opinions, and was labeled "Critical Expression."

5. Conclusion and Implications
5.1 Theoretical Implications

By examining the motivations behind spoiler-containing review postings in the film industry, this study offers several contributions to the literature on eWOM and consumer behavior.

First, the findings shed light on spoiler-posting motives within the context of narrative consumption. Compared with eWOM motivations in domains where spoilers are not a central concern, two notable differences emerge. For instance, research on hotel reviews has emphasized the combination of "social concerns," "personal motives," and "consumer empowerment" as determinants of posting behavior. Similarly, in this study, motives such as "information provision/explanation" and "self-expression/recognition" were observed. However, spoiler reviews additionally revealed unique motives such as the desire for "emotional sharing," including the discussion of plot twists and story endings. In contrast to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who identified eight eWOM motives—where social benefits, self-enhancement, altruism, and economic incentives were concluded to be major drivers of review frequency—our findings highlight spoiler-specific motives such as "emotional sharing (Topic 1)" and "disappointment venting (Topic 6)." Unlike conventional eWOM, which is largely anchored in rational or socially oriented motivations, spoiler postings are characterized by post-consumption motives: (1) disclosing and reconstructing narrative details, and (2) releasing and sharing emotional experiences. Thus, spoiler postings function not only as reviews but also as spaces for narrative re-experiencing and emotional regulation within viewing communities.

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Second, the study confirms that several general eWOM motivations identified in prior research are also applicable to film reviews. Factors such as "self-expression" and "positive or negative evaluations of products or companies" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) were found in the film review context as well. At the same time, spoiler postings involve behaviors particularly characteristic of narrative-driven industries, such as the enjoyment of thoroughly discussing endings and foreshadowing (Topic1) or the urge to convey shocking plot developments to others (Topic5). This blurring of boundaries between the "core experience" of viewing a film and the "after-experience" of discussing it in fan communities illustrates how detailed spoiler discussions can themselves constitute an important source of enjoyment.

Third, the findings highlight implications for spoiler postings in relation to box-office performance and perceived viewing risk. Some spoiler posters expressed motivations that were not solely self-serving, such as the desire to share profound emotional experiences ("I want others to appreciate the film more deeply after knowing the ending"). This aligns with Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015), who showed that spoilers do not necessarily diminish viewing enjoyment, and suggests that platforms could leverage altruistic spoiler motives (e.g., Topic1) to reduce perceived risks for potential viewers, thereby positively influencing attendance.

Fourth, this study demonstrates that spoilers, often considered a secondary or even harmful factor, may be usefully examined through established frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Diffusion of Innovations. Reinterpreting spoiler postings in terms of attitudes toward spoilers, subjective norms shaped by community culture, and perceived behavioral control (e.g., spoiler tags) could provide a more precise understanding of decision-making processes in online communities. This represents a step forward in understanding how community norms and platform features shape consumer behavior.

Finally, spoiler behavior is not limited to films but is prevalent in other narrative-driven entertainment domains, such as television dramas, anime, manga, and games. The more narrative-centered the content, the more diverse and contested spoiler interpretations become, often leading to ongoing negotiation within communities regarding "what counts as a spoiler." By conceptualizing spoilers as multifaceted phenomena—encompassing information sharing, emotional release, and cultural formation—this study offers insights relevant to broader content industries beyond film.

5.2 Managerial Implications

This study also provides several practical implications for marketing strategy in the film industry, the operation of review platforms, and the management of fan communities.

First, the findings suggest ways to encourage spoiler postings by leveraging the motives identified in this study. For example, producers and platform operators could stimulate motives such as "emotional sharing" (Topic1) and "exchange of evaluations" (Topic2) by providing designated spaces for fans to post detailed impressions and inviting them to participate in structured discussions. As Ryoo et al. (2021) noted, spoilers may reduce uncertainty for potential viewers, creating so-called "positive spoiler effects" that can help attract new audiences.

Second, platform design should avoid the blanket assumption that spoiler posters are inconsiderate. Recognizing the diversity of altruistic and cooperative motives underlying spoiler behavior, platforms can implement more nuanced features such as mandatory spoiler labeling and pre-viewing warnings. These mechanisms serve two functions: (1) protecting spoiler-averse users, while (2) enabling spoiler-seeking users to satisfy their desire for detailed discussions. Such segmentation not only reduces conflict within communities but also enhances user satisfaction across different audience segments.

6. Future Directions

This study explored the motivations behind spoiler-containing online reviews in the film industry, offering both academic and managerial insights. To minimize social desirability bias,

the research employed a third-person projection method combined with multiple stimuli.

However, several limitations and future research opportunities should be noted. For example, the study relied primarily on data from Japanese review platforms and surveys of Japanese moviegoers. Whether the findings are generalizable across other cultural and linguistic contexts remains uncertain. Prior research has suggested that spoiler-related norms may vary significantly across cultures (Chen et al., 2019). For example, while South Korea and China have developed unique SNS ecosystems, in the United States an implicit rule often discourages spoilers during the first week of release but permits open discussion thereafter. Future research should adopt a cross-cultural comparative perspective to examine both the universality and cultural specificity of spoiler-posting behaviors.

 In sum, this study advances understanding of spoiler-posting behavior as a unique form of eWOM in the context of narrative consumption. By uncovering the psychological motivations of spoiler posters—an area previously underexplored—this research contributes both academically and practically to the intersection of film marketing and consumer behavior.

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