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ABSTRACT

Personal interviews were conducted with drive-in theatre patrons in an attempt to paint an empirical portrait of a contemporary drive-in movie theatre audience. A total of 607 patrons of one Rochester, New York, drive-in were interviewed by trained college undergraduates using a prepared 33-item questionnaire consisting of open- and close-ended questions. Analysis of a question about frequency of attendance was used to divide the sample into 366 "occasional" drive-in goers (once a month or less) and 236 "frequent" attenders (twice a month or more). Further analysis produced among others, the following results: (1) there was no significant difference by attendance group as to type of film attended; (2) opposite sex friends were the most common companions of respondents; (3) "occasionals" were more likely to be employed in white collar and professional jobs and to be college students, while "frequents" were more likely to be unemployed or homemakers; (4) the mean response for education was "completed high school," with occasionals reporting a significantly higher level of education than frequents; (5) 89% of the sample was white, while only 8% was black; and (6) including attendance at "walk-in" theatres, the respondents were indeed heavy movie-goers, particularly the frequents. The results also indicate a decline in the use of drive-ins and their concession stands, not an encouraging sign for the drive-in movie industry. (JL)

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PORTRAIT OF A CONTEMPORARY
DRIVE-IN MOVIE THEATER AUDIENCE

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In America, with the advent of the automobile, a plethora of ancillary industries was spawned; a virtual car culture.¹ The root beer and hamburger stands and billboards that populate the highways -- in fact, even the highways as we now know them -- came about in large part as a response by business to tap the mobile consumer's wallet. In addition to those noted above, other industries developed later, once the car became more than simply a mode of transportation. Thus we saw the rise of custom car shops, their parts suppliers, and mechanics/artists, who built and serviced the kandy-colored tangerine-flake streamline babies.² And, half a century ago, in the midst of a catastrophic economic depression, a prescient entrepreneur developed and even patented³ the three key components of the drive-in movie theater; a fan, or clam-shell, shaped parking lot, terraced parking rows, and earthen ramps which tilted the cars upward. At first a curiosity and later a point of moral concern, the "passion pits" or "parking lots for petters" have nevertheless endured as a form of film exhibition and today, in their golden anniversary, account for 21 percent of all U.S. movie theaters.⁴

The conceptual and research value of examining film audiences in the context of their movie experience has been suggested by Austin.⁵ He drew an analogy stating that the valid interpretation of data on film audiences, as with nonverbal communication, was dependent upon analysis of the context. And the drive-in, as Downs has noted, "is not one theater: it is a series

of separate theaters, each with its own seats and loudspeaker, united only by the single screen and the refreshment stand at the rear of the lot."⁶ This paper reports the results of a field study for which personal interviews with drive-in theater patrons were conducted and paints an empirical portrait of a contemporary drive-in movie theater audience.

In 1933 Richard Milton Hollingshead, Jr., a chemical manufacturer, opened the first drive-in movie theater. A modest initial effort, the first drive-in had seven rows of parking spaces with room for some 400 cars.⁷ This new form of exhibition, located in Camden, New Jersey, has been described as "an elaborate scheme designed to make the patron feel that the movie theater is his natural home."⁸ Further, the drive-in has been touted as "perhaps second only to that of television in terms of its effects on conventional theater exhibition."⁹

As history would show, Hollingshead correctly believed that the drive-in would be attractive to patrons since it combined "the two luxuries which he felt that people in a depression would give up last -- automobiles and movies."¹⁰ The drive-in has been credited with providing an exhibition outlet for the product of smaller, independent film producers and distributors such as American International Pictures, a "relatively late comer to the movie business [which] initially thrived by taking advantage of a totally new market, the drive-in theatre."¹¹ The drive-in also proved to be the means for drawing back to the movies the "lost audience" in the 1950s.¹² Today, the drive-in "is the

only form of moviegoing for many of the population"¹³ and a few industry observers suggest that, at least in warm weather locales, it will "survive as a prospering alternative to the pay-tv competition in the home."¹⁴

However, while for some the future of drive-ins seems rosy, others are less optimistic.¹⁵ In 1976 the U.S. Department of Commerce forecast that "it is doubtful there will be any appreciable increase [in the number of drive-ins] in the future"¹⁶ and a study by Giles reports that even in California, "it is probably only a matter of time until most owners sell or convert their real estate to other uses."¹⁷ A Morton Research Corporation economic and marketing report states that "over the long run, drive-in theaters have made substantial inroads into indoor theaters, however since 1967 the outdoor theater has been losing ground."¹⁸ Such assertions seem to be supported by the data on the percentage of film revenues earned by drive-ins. In 1967 drive-ins accounted for 24.4 percent of all U.S. film revenues, a figure never equalled. By 1972 22.7 percent of all film revenues came from drive-ins and Morton was forecasting a decline of .3 percent for each subsequent year.¹⁹ Concomitantly, the number of U.S. drive-ins fell from their all-time high of 6,000 in 1961 to the present 3,636.²⁰

The key factor in this decline of the theaters is the price of real estate. Construction of new drive-ins in most, if not all, areas is virtually out of the question since some 11 to 20 acres of land are needed for even a modest-sized site.²¹ At the

same time, existing drive-in operators are finding that either outright sale of their land or its development for shopping malls or industrial locations provide attractive incentives to get out of the film exhibition business. Additionally, various legal restrictions based on local zoning and public nuisance laws, as well as "private action and pressure against exhibitors" (especially concerning the screening of X-rated pictures), are often more trouble to the drive-in exhibitor than the revenues received.²² Furthermore, drive-in operators typically find that they have a difficult time getting first-run movies, especially from the major film distributors, while at the same time they face increasingly stiff competition from multiplex "hardtops."²³ Weather, too, is an important consideration impinging upon the profitability of drive-in operations. Unlike the hardtops which can remain open for business year-round, topless theaters in cooler climates usually shut-down for the winter months. And, while direct operating costs also cease, such sunk costs as land taxes do not.

The majority, if not the consensus, opinion concerning the future of U.S. drive-ins has perhaps best been summarized by Frederic A. Danz, board chairman of the Sterling Recreation Organization: "All exhibitors, of course, are seeing the gradual demise of the drive-in theatre."²⁴ Still, doom and gloom may not be a definitive prognosis for drive-ins. The unique conveniences offered by drive-ins for, especially, the family group may make continued operation viable, at least in some areas. A 1981

Newspaper Advertising Bureau telephone survey of Americans and Canadians found that a majority of both groups said they wanted to go to the movies more frequently than they do presently. More important, though, was the finding that "the more young children at home, especially of ages six and under, the more likely [the respondents] were to say they would like to go to the movies more than they do now."²⁵

Previous Literature

While anecdotal and apocryphal reports abound, few scientific inquiries have been made concerning the audience for drive-in movies, and none have been published since 1960. In 1949 Business Week reported that Hollywood movie-makers felt that drive-ins appealed to a distinctly different audience than walk-ins. Exhibitors, it was reported, believed that "among the devotees of drive-in movies . . . [were] large numbers of elderly people, cripples, shut-ins -- people who [couldn't] get in and out of a car readily" as well as "non-white collar workers who [found] it bothersome to dress for the theater," couples with children, and "young romantics."²⁶ In brief, unconfirmed and speculative reports painted a hazy image of the drive-in audience as being composed of the family group, young married couples, and the elderly, the infirm, or physically handicapped.²⁷ And, based upon such conjectural and casual observations, the conventional wisdom concerning building site locations for drive-ins was that to maximize patronage, drive-ins should be located near laboring

class rather than white-collar communities.²⁸

Some of the informal observations about the composition of the drive-in audience, of course, were reasonably accurate and were confirmed by systematic research. While the attendance unit most frequently encountered at walk-ins prior to 1960 (and still true today) was two persons,²⁹ drive-ins, it was reported, were attended by larger groups. In two studies conducted by Luther in 1950, he found an average of 3.45 and 3.28 persons a car.³⁰ Handel's preliminary inquiry found that an attendance unit of four persons "is encountered most frequently," a finding corroborated by the Opinion Research Corporation's 1957 poll.³¹ The family attendance group -- two adults plus children -- was found to account for slightly more than 50 percent of those surveyed in Luther's two studies and in Britt's 1960 report.³²

According to the extant literature, the 1950s drive-in audience went to the movies quite frequently, with an average attendance ranging from 2.3 to 5.2 times a month according to Luther.³³ Additionally, at least half of those surveyed reported they attended drive-ins a majority of the time and one-third said they attended no other type of theater during the summer.³⁴ Further, Hungerford's research found that drive-in audiences were affected "to a much greater degree" by television advertising for a film than were hardtop audiences; TV was found to have been "nearly twice as powerful" in influencing attendance among drive-in patrons than walk-in movie-goers.³⁵

Handel suggested that because drive-ins "provide a rather

novel form of entertainment," their audience may have distinct characteristics. Drive-ins, he wrote, "create new business. . . .

A large portion of the drive-in theater audience is composed of regular movie-goers who would not have attended a conventional theater on the day of the drive-in theater attendance."³⁶

Britt's mail questionnaire study of 2,683 families confirmed that "the drive-in audience was noticeably different from the general population." Also, his report at least in part contradicted the armchair analysis of drive-in patrons which typified them as blue collar. Britt's respondents "generally had better jobs, higher income, more education, more children, more home ownership, more cars, more major appliances, and more conveniences."³⁷

Research on the drive-in audience, while never prolific, came to a standstill after 1960. Since then, important social, economic, and industry practices have occurred which, it can be suggested, may have caused a reshaping of the drive-in audience configuration. Use of the automobile and driving habits have changed following the gas crunch of 1973. Childbearing patterns have been in flux. Expansion of entertainment options -- particularly home entertainment activities -- has increased, and with them, presumably, entertainment habits have changed. The development of the suburban multiplex offers multiple screens and a variety of film-types, including those formerly restricted largely to drive-ins. And, especially in the 1960s, as television became more widely diffused into American society, "family fare at the drive-in gave way to teenage exploitation films as mom

and dad sat at home watching TV."³⁸ A 1978 report of a study conducted by the Leo Burnett advertising agency offers quite contradictory data to those reported by Britt in 1960. The 1978 report found that "while the heavy filmgoer is socially active, confident, future-oriented, financially stable, and career-minded, the drive-in patron tends to be a dissatisfied lonely blue collar worker with financial worries."³⁹

METHODOLOGY

Personal interviews with a total of 607 patrons of one Rochester, New York drive-in theater comprise the sample for this study. The interviews were conducted on weekends (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) during October 1981, and April, May, and June 1982. Altogether interviews were conducted on 21 separate dates. Patrons were interviewed only once even if they attended on subsequent evenings. Fewer than 30 patrons refused to be interviewed.

Patron interviews occurred prior to the screening of the first film. The interviewers were college juniors and seniors enrolled in mass communications courses who had been trained in interview techniques. They used a prepared 33-item questionnaire consisting of open- and closed-ended questions. Responses to the open-ended questions were content classified by the author. A strict probability sample for this field study was neither possible nor practicable.⁴⁰

As was noted earlier, contextual analysis of film audiences

has research value. Therefore, in addition to reporting the results of the present study, comparative data on a contemporary cult film audience and an art film theater audience will also be noted when appropriate. Data on the cult film audience were collected by means of personal interviews with patrons waiting on line at a theater in late 1979. Data for the art film audience were gathered by means of a mail questionnaire in 1982. Both studies were conducted in Rochester, New York.⁴¹

RESULTS

The respondents were asked how often they attended drive-in theaters. An eight-point response scale ranging from "never or almost never" to "more than four times a month" was provided. For the sample as a whole the mean (and median) drive-in attendance was found to be once a month. Using the responses to this question, the sample was divided at the median into two groups. "Occasional" drive-in goers were those respondents who reported drive-in attendance of once a month or fewer (n=366); "Frequent" drive-in goers were those respondents who reported drive-in attendance of twice a month or greater (n=236). As a check for differential attendance patterns between Occasionals and Frequent, as well as the meaningfulness of the categories, the respondents were asked, "All in all, about what percentage of the time do you go to drive-in movie theaters as compared to walk-in movie theaters?" An eight-point response scale ranging from "ten percent of the time" to "all the time" was provided.

Frequents reported significantly ($t=-7.50$, $df=579$, $p < .001$, two-tailed) greater percentages of drive-in attendance than Occasionals. The respondents were also asked, "Suppose there was a movie you wanted to see and it was playing at both a drive-in and a walk-in theater. Which type of theater would you go to, all things equal?" Crosstabulation of the data found that Frequents were significantly ($\chi^2=29.62$, $df=1$, $p < .00001$, $C=.22$) more likely to select the drive-in than Occasionals. By way of comparison, the art film audience overwhelmingly (98%) reported that they both preferred and actually attended walk-ins to drive-ins. Finally, a third method (closely related to the second) used to determine the reliability of the sample subgroups was to compare them with regard to the type of movie they went to see on the evening they were interviewed. Overall five types of films were shown on the different evenings when interviews were conducted: comedy, horror, drama, crime drama, and "soft pornography" (R-rated films with sexual themes). Results of the crosstabulation showed no significant difference by attendance group as to type of film attended ($\chi^2=4.73$, $df=4$, $p=.316$). These results suggest that the difference between attendance groups is based upon preference for the form of exhibition rather than the kind of film that happened to be playing. Thus the two attendance categories appear to be both meaningful and reliable.

The participants were asked how many people accompanied them on the evening they were interviewed and the relationship of those persons. For the sample as a whole the size of the

attendance unit ranged from one to 14. Overall the mean size of the attendance unit was 2.66 and the median 2.23 persons (including the respondent). No significant difference ($t=.34$, $df=489$, $p=.732$) was found between audience aggregates for the size of the attendance group (for Occasionals $\bar{X}=2.67$ and for Frequenters $\bar{X}=2.63$). These data indicate that the size of the attendance unit has diminished by about one person since Luther, Handel, and the ORC reported their research in the 1950s. The drive-in attendance unit was slightly larger in size than that of the art film audience ($\bar{X}=2.16$, $Md=1.91$); the cult film attendance unit, however, was much larger ($\bar{X}=4.67$ persons, $Md=3.15$) than the drive-in attendance unit.

Luther and Britt both found that the family group was the most prevalent attendance aggregate in their studies. In the present sample, however, the family group accounted for only 16.7% of those interviewed. Table 1 shows that the most common relationship of the respondents' companion was an opposite sex

 TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

friend, followed by the family, spouse, mixed-sex group (more than two persons), same-sex friend, male group, by oneself, and the female group. No significant difference between attendance groups was found regarding the relationship of the respondents' companion. The couple (spouse or opposite sex friend) was also the most common attendance relationship found for art film patrons

while the cult film attracted mixed-sex and male groups most often.

Males comprised 57.9% of the sample and the two attendance groups did not differ significantly as to sex of the respondents ($\chi^2=.43$, $df=1$, $p=.509$). For the sample as a whole the average age was 24 years ($Md=22.1$ years); Occasionals were somewhat, but not significantly ($t=1.83$, $df=598$, $p=.068$) older than Frequents ($\bar{X}=24.4$ and 23.3 years respectively). Thirty-three percent of the sample reported being married and no significant difference for marital status was found between the two attendance groups ($\chi^2=1.19$, $df=1$, $p=.273$). Also, the two groups did not differ as to the number of children in their families ($t=-.44$, $df=217$, $p=.659$). Nearly similar proportions of males and females were also found to attend both the cult and art film. However, cult movie-goers were somewhat younger than drive-in patrons ($\bar{X}=19.3$ years) and art film patrons were considerably older ($\bar{X}=49.7$ years).

The respondents' occupation is reported in Table 2. More

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

than one-third of the sample was employed in blue (e.g., factory and production-line work) or pink collar (e.g., secretarial, waitress) jobs. A significant difference between the two attendance groups was found. Occasionals were more likely to be employed in white collar and professional jobs and to be college students; Frequents were more likely to report being unemployed

or a homemaker. These findings appear to suggest agreement, to at least a limited extent, with those reported in the Leo Burnett study. In short, Frequent drive-in goers were found to hold less prestigious jobs than Occasionals.

The respondents were asked to report the highest level of education they had completed. The mean response for the sample as a whole was "completed high school." Occasionals reported a significantly higher level of education than Frequents ($t=3.22$, $df=590$, $p=.001$) which, given their reported occupation, would be expected. In comparison, the cult film audience was by and large composed of high school and college students (61%) and the average level of education among the art film audience was a college degree. Thus, the results gathered for the present study on the respondents' occupation, education, and number of children all seem to differ from those found by Britt in 1960.

The present study's sample was largely white (89%) with just a sprinkling of blacks (8%). No significant difference between attendance groups as to racial composition was found ($\chi^2=1.60$, $df=4$, $p=.807$). Catholics comprised nearly half (44%) and Protestants a quarter (26%) of the audience. Nearly one-quarter (23%) expressed no religious preference. A significant difference between attendance groups by religion was found ($\chi^2=10.06$, $df=4$, $p=.039$, $C=.128$); Frequents were more likely to report Catholicism as their religious preference. The distribution of religious characteristics reflect the population of the area in which the study was conducted.

The respondents were asked to report which political party

they identified with and their usual stand on political issues. More than one-third (36%) classified themselves as Independents, 20% said they were Republicans, 24% said Democrats, and 19% "Other." No significant difference by attendance group was found ($\chi^2=.94$, $df=3$, $p=.814$). Half the sample (53%) said they took a middle-of-the-road posture on political issues, 18% reported themselves as conservatives, and 29% said they were liberals. No significant difference by attendance group was found ($\chi^2=.75$, $df=2$, $p=.684$). Similar percentages for party affiliation and usual political stand were found among the cult film audience.

Previous research has indicated that the drive-in audience attends movies frequently. In addition to this sample's frequency of drive-in attendance they were also asked to report how often they went to movies altogether (drive-ins and walk-ins combined) and how often they went to just walk-in theaters. Identical eight-point response scales ranging from "never or almost never" to "more than four times a month" were provided. Attendance at walk-in theaters for the sample as a whole averaged once a month. Total movie attendance for the entire sample averaged twice a month.⁴² These findings suggest that respondents in the present sample were, indeed, heavy movie-goers. The Opinion Research Corporation has reported that persons attending movies at least once a month constitute only 27% of the U.S. public over 12 years of age, and these same individuals account for 87% of all movie admissions.⁴³ Thus, regardless of how movie attendance was measured, the present sample falls into an elite frequency of

movie-going group. The cult film audience, too, had an average movie attendance of twice a month (not counting attendance at the cult movie) while the art film patrons averaged one film a month (not counting attendance at their repertory theater).

The respondents were asked if there was any particular time of the year when they preferred going to drive-ins. Most (80%) reported they did have a preference. Although the responses did not differ significantly ($\chi^2=3.11$, $df=1$, $p=.077$), a greater percentage of Occasionals said they had a seasonal preference than Frequents (83% to 77% respectively) which suggest a less avid attachment to the form of exhibition among this group. A follow-up question posed to those respondents reporting a preference inquired as to the months preferred. The data were subsequently analyzed by season (excluding Winter). No significant difference between attendance groups was found ($\chi^2=4.38$, $df=2$, $p=.111$). Most (64%) respondents indicated Summer was their preferred season, followed by Spring (35%), and Fall (1%). Unsurprisingly, 94% of the sample reported the reason for their seasonal preference was the warm weather.

Differences between attendance groups as to their frequency of total movie-going were significant ($t=-14.00$, $df=598$, $p<.001$). Frequents went out to the movies more often than did Occasionals. For attendance at just walk-in theaters the difference in frequency of attendance between audience aggregates approached significance ($t=-1.89$, $df=599$, $p=.059$); Frequents reported going to walk-ins more often than Occasionals. These findings indicate that individuals

in the Frequent drive-in category not only attend drive-ins more often than others, but are heavier movie-goers in general.

The sample's consumption of three other media was also measured. For the sample as a whole, daily television viewing averaged nearly two to three hours a day, newspaper reading averaged almost four times a week, and number of magazines read averaged two and a half a month. Although differences between attendance groups for their use of these three media were all nonsignificant,⁴⁴ Frequents had a higher mean score for televiewing while Occasionals reported higher mean values for print media consumption. Thus Frequents appear to be attracted more to moving image media while Occasionals had greater use of printed media. Both the cult and art film audiences averaged one to two hours a day of televiewing. The art film audience were heavier newspaper (six times a week) and magazine (four a month) consumers than both the cult film and drive-in audiences.

A series of questions was asked concerning the respondents attendance behavior and decision-making process for their movie-going on the evening they were interviewed. These questions were designed as context-specific rather than context-free, a methodologically preferable approach since respondents' answers can be assumed to be more accurate, and hence valid, when asked to recall information about a specific film situation rather than drive-in movie-going in general.

First the respondents were asked if they had planned to go to the drive-in on the evening they were interviewed or if

their attendance was a "spur-of-the-moment" decision. The sample divided nearly equally on this question; 51% said their attendance was a spur-of-the-moment decision and 49% said they had planned to attend. Although no significant difference by attendance group was found ($\chi^2=2.09$, $df=1$, $p=.147$), a higher percentage of Frequenters reported having planned to attend than Occasionals (53 to 47% respectively). This may be indicative of a certain degree of habitual behavior among a modest segment of the drive-in audience. Higher percentages of planned attendance than those found for the drive-in audience were found among both the cult film (76%) and art film (92%) audiences. A follow-up question asked if the respondents had decided to see the particular movie playing before deciding when to go see it, or if they first decided to go to the movies and then selected a film. Again the sample was nearly evenly divided in their response: 58% indicated they picked the movie first and 42% said they decided to go to the movies before selecting a particular film. No significant difference between attendance groups was found ($\chi^2=.25$, $df=1$, $p=.610$); the percentages within the four cell crosstabulation were virtually identical. The responses to these two questions seem to suggest that about half the sample went to the drive-in on the spur of the moment and half the sample decided on movie-going before selecting the specific film. At least for some individuals, drive-in attendance occurs regardless of interest in what film is being shown. Further, crosstabulation of the responses to these two questions supports what would be intuitively expected: respondents who planned their

attendance were significantly ($\chi^2=10.27$, $df=1$, $p < .005$, $C=.132$) more likely to have decided to see a particular picture first; conversely, respondents who reported attending on the spur of the moment were significantly more likely to have decided to go to the movies before selecting a particular film.

The respondents were asked to recall where or from whom they learned about the movie they were attending. Table 3 presents the responses to this question. More than half the respondents

 TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

used the newspaper as their source of information; word-of-mouth accounted for almost one-fifth of the responses, and television 8%. No significant difference between attendance groups was found. A follow-up question asked where or from whom the respondents learned specific information (e.g., time and location) necessary for them to attend the film. Again no significant difference between groups was found ($\chi^2=8.88$, $df=8$, $p=.351$). Reliance on newspapers increased (to 67.5%) while word-of-mouth and television decreased (to 11.5% and 2.2% respectively). Among cult film patrons personal contacts were the primary source of information (83%) about the film and for more specific information the respondents relied equally on newspapers (44%) or personal contact (44%). For the art film audience, most (88%) of the sample learned about the films they attended from the schedule brochure published by the art film theater. In short, newspapers were the predominant

source for providing the drive-in respondents with information about the film as well as specific information about showtime and theater.

Two questions probed the respondents' reasons for drive-in attendance. Responses to a question on the respondents' most important reason for going to drive-ins are presented in Table 4.

 TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Altogether 14 different types of responses were reported. Overall no significant difference between attendance groups was found. Four reasons accounted for two-thirds of the responses. Drive-ins were perceived with equal frequency among the two sample groups as being less expensive than walk-ins to attend. The privacy offered by drive-ins (i.e., the car as a "private booth") was also noted with nearly equal frequency by both groups as a key factor in motivating attendance. On the remaining two of the top four reasons for drive-in attendance, however, Frequenters were about one-third more likely than Occasionals to cite the comfort of one's automobile and the opportunity to "party" as motives for attendance. The sixth most frequently cited reason for attendance was to see the movie being screened; Occasionals and Frequenters reported this in equal percentages. The apparent low salience of this reason for attendance offers support for the conclusions drawn earlier from the two questions on planning attendance and temporal ordering of decisions (i.e., deciding to go to the movies and then selecting a film or vice versa).

While the data presented in Table 4 offer general reasons for drive-in attendance, Table 5 presents the respondents' reasons for attendance on the evening they were interviewed. Although,

 TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

again, there was no significant difference between attendance groups, an interesting rearranging of reasons for attendance may be noted. Whereas the movie being shown accounted for only 7.5% of the reasons for attendance at drive-ins in general, fully 58% of the respondents reported this as their reason for going to the drive-in on the evening they were interviewed. One explanation for this large difference may be that when asked about motives for drive-in attendance in general, the respondents reported perceived advantages of the form of exhibition (as compared to walk-ins), while their response to the context-specific question more accurately reflected the actual salient behavioral incentives. A second important reason for attendance on the evening interviewed was the proximity of the theater. Fifteen percent reported this as their reason for attendance suggesting, perhaps, some degree of overlap between a desire to see the film playing coupled with the ease, or convenience, of attendance. The remaining reasons for attendance each accounted for five percent or fewer of the responses. Cult film attendance was largely motivated by the social nature of the film audience ambience. Art film attendance was motivated by desire to see old "cinema classics" and recently

made films that had not received wide distribution and exhibition.

Finally, a set of three questions was posed concerning the respondents actual or expected purchase of snacks and whether they had brought snacks with them. A number of reports, dating from the 1950s, have indicated that drive-ins earn as much as 20 to 50% of their income from sales at the concession stand. Further, drive-in refreshment stands were reported to have earned as much as four times that earned by hardtop theaters.⁴⁵ Only five percent of the sample reported that they had purchased something from the snack bar at the time when interviewed. No significant difference between attendance groups was found ($\chi^2=.35$, $df=1$, $p=.549$). However, since the interviews were conducted up until the beginning of the first film, the respondents may not have had time to get to the concession stand. Consequently, they were also asked if they expected to purchase something at the snack bar. More than one quarter (29%) of the sample indicated they did expect to buy snacks, 59% said they did not expect to buy snacks, and 12% chose the "not sure" response option. No significant difference in response by attendance group was found ($\chi^2=2.46$, $df=2$, $p=.291$). Lastly, the respondents were asked if they had brought any food or drinks with them. More than three-quarters (78%) of the sample indicated they had brought refreshments with them. No significant difference in response between attendance groups was found. Casual observation of the drive-in patrons found many fully equipped with picnic coolers and lawn chairs. And, although a systematic count was not kept, vans and pickup

trucks were popular vehicles at the drive-in; often they were backed into the parking spaces and chairs arranged in and around the vehicle.

What this study suggests about attendance at drive-ins in general is that it is motivated by the low cost, the comfort and privacy afforded by one's car, and the opportunity to socialize. For many, the motion picture being screened, it seems, serves as merely a backdrop and the drive-in lot a convenient meeting place. Attendance was as likely to have been spontaneous as it was to have been planned for this sample. The frequent drive-in patron tends to be somewhat older, to have completed fewer years of formal education, is more likely to have a less prestigious job, and goes to the movies (including walk-ins) more often than the occasional drive-in patron. Frequent and occasional drive-in goers were similar on such dimensions as sex, race, religious and political party preference, usual political stand, use of three mass media other than movies, planning of drive-in attendance, and the decision process used for drive-in attendance.

Based on the data gathered in the present field study, the forecast for drive-ins is not optimistic. While more than half (55%) of the present sample reported they went to drive-ins (as compared to walk-ins) half the time or more, the size of the attendance unit has diminished since the 1950s, thereby lowering revenues on a per-person admission basis. The refreshment stand is apparently not as popular among patrons as it once was since many bring their own food and beverages. And the number of patrons

attending as a family unit comprises less than one-fifth of the total audience. Thus, while the Newspaper Advertising Bureau found that among individuals with young children their desire to go to the movies more often was high, this desire did not translate to actual behavior for drive-in attendance among the present sample -- despite the fact that drive-ins may offer the most convenient and least restraining movie ambience for parents.

Contemporary film audience research has focused on three contexts thus far: the cult film, the art film, and the drive-in theater. Further research on the contexts of movie-going needs to be directed at the audience for various film genres such as the horror, science fiction, sneak preview, and X-rated film. Additional research attention is needed on such film audience contexts as the various forms of film exhibition including the suburban multiplex and theaters located at shopping malls. Analysis of audiences by type of film distribution (e.g., first- and subsequent-run) would also be useful in gaining a full understanding of the audience for motion pictures.

FOOTNOTES

¹For a discussion of the appeal of drive-in movies as related to the car culture see "Moon-Washed," New Yorker, October 1, 1949, pp. 20-21.

²Tom Wolfe, The Kandy-Koloréd Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (New York: Pocket Books, 1965).

³Hollingshead's patent (no 1,909,537) was contested by Loew's Drive-In Theaters. Hollingshead won in a lower court but this decision was overturned when appealed by Loew's in 1949 to the Federal Circuit Court in Boston which ruled that the ramps were landscaping and were therefore not patentable. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal by Hollingshead. For further discussion of this issue see: Frank J. Taylor, "Big Boom in Outdoor Movies," Saturday Evening Post, September 15, 1956, p. 102 and John Durant, "The Movies Take to the Pasture," Saturday Evening Post, October 14, 1950, pp. 89-90.

⁴Richard Gertner (Ed.), Motion Picture Almanac 1982 (New York: Quigley Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), p. 30A.

⁵Bruce A. Austin, "The Motion Picture Audience: A Neglected Aspect of Film Research," paper presented at the Ohio University Film Conference, April 1982, Athens, Ohio (available in ERIC ED 214 21F).

⁶Anthony Downs, "Drive-Ins Have Arrived," Journal of Property Management 18 (March 1953): 149.

⁷For discussion of this first drive-in see: "Drive-In

Theater," Business Week, August 5, 1933, p. 19; "Drive-In Movie Holds Four Hundred Cars," Popular Mechanics, September 1933, p. 326; "Camden's Drive-In Theater," Literary Digest, July 22, 1933, p. 19; "Movie Theater Lets Cars Drive Right In," Popular Science, August 1933, p. 19; Al Hine, "The Drive-In," Holiday, July 1952, pp. 6-11.

⁸Margaret Farrand Thorp, America at the Movies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), p. 61.

⁹Rodney Luther, "Marketing Aspects of Drive-In Theaters," Journal of Marketing 15 (July 1950): 41.

¹⁰Garth Jowett, Film: The Democratic Art (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 352.

¹¹Robert Stanley, The Celluloid Empire (New York: Hastings House, 1978), p. 243. See also Will Tusher, "Land Values Up; Ozoners Down; Tenser's Market, Now in Multis; He's Dubious About Upper Ages," Variety, December 2, 1981, pp. 3, 32 for information on Crown International Pictures, another independent which targets many of its pictures to the drive-in circuit.

¹²See "Drive-In Film Business Burns Up the Praires," Life, September 24, 1951, p. 104; "Hollywood Learns How to Live with TV," Business Week, August 9, 1952, pp. 46-48; Downs, "Drive-Ins Have Arrived," pp. 149-162.

¹³Garth Jowett and James M. Linton, Movies as Mass Communication (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 95.

¹⁴Will Tusher, "Drive-Ins Lure to Young Weds," Variety, September 30, 1981, p. 5.

¹⁵For information on optimistic outlooks see: Tusher, "Drive-Ins Lure to Young Weds," pp. 5, 40; Lee Grant, "Selig: Can Movie House Be Saved?" Los Angeles Times, September 26, 1981, part 2, p. 4; Andrew Horton, "Turning On and Tuning Out at the Drive-In: An American Phenomenon Survives and Thrives," Journal of Popular Film 5 (1976, nos. 3 & 4): 233-244.

¹⁶U.S. Department of Commerce, "U.S. Industrial Outlook 1976 with Projections to 1985," in National Association of Theatre Owners, Encyclopedia of Exhibition 1976 (New York: National Association of Theatre Owners, 1976), p. 68.

¹⁷Dennis Giles, "The Drive-In Economy: 1946-1981," paper presented at the Ohio University Film Conference, April 1982, Athens, Ohio.

¹⁸Morton Research Corporation, The Movie Entertainment Industry: An Economic, Marketing, and Financial Study of the Motion Picture and Movie Theater Market (Merrick, New York: Morton Research Corp., October 1976), p. 14.

¹⁹Morton Research Corp., The Movie Entertainment Industry, p. 16.

²⁰The 6,000 figure is reported in Christopher H. Sterling and Timothy R. Haight, The Mass Media (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), p. 35. However, they note that these figures are "very approximate estimates" and their accuracy is somewhat suspect. The present number of drive-ins is reported in Gertner, Motion Picture Almanac 1982, p. 30A.

²¹"Land Values, Short Year, Single Screen All Hamper Drive-Ins," Variety, April 7, 1982, p. 29. See also "Ozoners in Bay

State Closing; Can't Spurn Land-Value Offers," Variety, June 28, 1978, p. 7.

²²For discussion of legal issues see, especially, Richard S. Randall, Censorship of the Movies (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), pp. 151, 160-161; Michael F. Mayer, The Film Industries, 2nd ed. (New York: Hastings House, 1978), p. 145; Rodney Luther, "Drive-In Theaters: Rags to Riches in Five Years," Hollywood Quarterly 5 (Summer 1951): 401-411. For information on X-rated movies at drive-ins see for instance: "Drive-In Battles Berlin, Conn. Closure to Suppress Sexplicity," Variety, February 3, 1982, p. 31 and "Must Shield Ozoners Showing X Pictures," Boxoffice, February 11, 1974, p. E-1.

²³See David Paletz and Michael Noonan, "The Exhibitors," Film Quarterly 19 (Winter 1965-1966): 14-40; Steven Ginsberg, "Drive-Ins Rate Firstrun; Hardtop Sites Re-Valued," Variety, April 26, 1978, p. 23; Michael Conant, "The Impact of the Paramount Decrees," in Tino Balio (Ed.), The American Film Industry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 367.

²⁴Alexander Auerbach, "Despite the Christmas Season Chill, Circuit Heads Remain Optimistic About the Future of the Theater," Boxoffice, April 1982, p. 23. See also Lynn Langway with Susan Agrest, "The Disappearing Drive-In," Newsweek, August 9, 1982, p. 65.

²⁵Newspaper Advertising Bureau, "Movie-Going in the United States and Canada" (New York: Newspaper Advertising Bureau, October 1981), p. 22.

²⁶"Twice as Many Drive-In Theaters?" Business Week, January 1, 1949, p. 44.

²⁷ See for example: Durant, "The Movies Take to the Pastures," p. 22; Marguerite W. Cullman, "Double Feature.-- Movies and Moonlight," New York Times Magazine, October 1, 1950, p. 68; Downs, "Drive-Ins Have Arrived," p. 150.

²⁸ Downs, "Drive-Ins Have Arrived," p. 154.

²⁹ Leo A. Handel, Hollywood Looks at Its Audience (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), p. 113; Los Angeles Times, A Look at Southern California Movie-Going (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times, 1972), p. 30.

³⁰ Luther, "Drive-In Theaters," p. 409; Luther, "Marketing Aspects of Drive-In Theaters," p. 45.

³¹ Handel, Hollywood Looks at Its Audience, p. 211; ORC data reported in Jowett and Linton, Movies as Mass Communication, p. 84.

³² Steuart Henderson Britt, "What is the Nature of the Drive-In Theater Audience?" Media/scope 4 (June 1960): 102.

³³ Luther, "Drive-In Theaters," p. 409.

³⁴ Luther, "Marketing Aspects of Drive-In Theaters," p. 45; Luther, "Drive-In Theaters," p. 409.

³⁵ Chris Hungerford, "A Survey of Los Angeles Theater Attendance of Two Motion Pictures Which Were Advertised on Television," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1955, p. 115.

³⁶ Handel, Hollywood Looks at Its Audience, p. 211.

³⁷ Britt, "What is the Nature of the Drive-In Theater Audience?" p. 102.

³⁸ Harley W. Lond, "Drive-In Operations: Still in the Game," Boxoffice, March 1982, p. 53.

³⁹Ginsberg, "Drive-Ins Rate Firstrun," p. 23.

⁴⁰The justification for using inferential statistics with a non-probability sample may be found in Robert F. Winch and Donald T. Campbell, "Proof? No. Evidence? Yes. The Significance of Tests of Significance," American Sociologist 4 (May 1969): 140-143.

⁴¹Bruce A. Austin, "Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: The Rocky Horror Picture Show," Journal of Communication 31 (Spring 1981): 43-54; Bruce A. Austin, "Portrait of an Art Film Audience," unpublished manuscript, Rochester Institute of Technology, June 1982.

⁴²Note that the reliability of the respondents' answers to their frequency of movie attendance is demonstrated by the findings from these three questions: attendance at drive-ins averaged once a month; walk-in attendance was once a month, and total movie attendance was twice a month.

⁴³Richard Gertner (Ed.), Motion Picture Almanac 1981 (New York: Quigley Publishing Co., 1981), p. 32A.

⁴⁴For TV $t=-1.08$, $df=596$, $p=.283$; for newspapers $t=.56$, $df=596$, $p=.578$; for magazines $t=1.72$, $df=598$, $p=.087$ (all two-tailed).

⁴⁵See W. Flaherty, "Drive-In Theatres," British Kinematography 23 (September 1953): 66-67; Downs, "Drive-Ins Have Arrived," p. 151; Luther, "Drive-In Theaters," p. 401.

TABLE 1

Who Attends the Drive-In with Whom

	Occasionals (n=362)	Frequenters (n=231)	Total (n=593)
Opposite-sex friend	39.8%	42.9%	41.0%
Family	18.5	13.4	16.7
Spouse	15.5	18.1	16.3
Mixed-sex group	12.4	12.6	12.5
Same-sex friend	8.0	5.6	7.1
Male group	3.9	3.5	3.7
Alone	1.9	2.2	2.0
Female group	0.0	1.3	0.5

$$\chi^2=8.71, df=7, p=.273$$

TABLE 2

Occupations of the Drive-In Audience

	Occasionals (n=354)	Frequents (n=223)	Total (n=577)
Blue & pink collar*	36.4%	39.0%	37.4%
High school student	13.6	15.3	14.2
College student	13.3	9.0	11.6
White collar	13.0	7.6	10.9
Skilled	9.6	9.4	9.5
Unemployed	5.1	11.7	7.6
Homemaker	2.8	4.9	3.6
Professional	5.1	1.4	3.6
Artist	1.1	1.8	1.4

$$\chi^2=21.43, df=8, p=.006, C=.189$$

*including clerical and unskilled

TABLE 3

Source of Information About the Film Attended

	Occasionals (n=366)	Frequents (n=236)	Total (n=602)
Newspaper	54.6%	54.2%	54.5%
Friends	19.1	17.4	18.4
Television	9.6	6.4	8.3
Other	5.7	8.5	6.8
Marquee	3.6	8.5	5.5
Don't recall	3.6	1.7	2.8
Radio	1.6	1.7	1.7
Previews	1.4	0.9	1.2
Magazine	0.8	0.9	0.8

$\chi^2=12.02$, $df=8$, $p=.149$

TABLE 4

Most Important Reason for Drive-In Attendance

	Occasionals (n=332)	Frequents (n=226)	Total (n=558)
Less expensive than walk-ins	18.1%	18.1%	18.1%
More comfortable than walk-ins	14.2	21.2	17.0
Privacy	16.6	14.2	15.6
Can have fun (e.g., party, drink, and smoke)	13.9	18.1	15.6
To be outdoors	7.8	8.0	7.9
To see the movie	7.5	7.5	7.5
Convenience (e.g., can take the baby)	6.0	4.4	5.4
Entertainment	2.7	1.8	2.3
Casual; don't have to dress-up	2.4	2.2	2.3
To get out of the house	2.7	1.3	2.2
Change of pace; a different movie experience	2.1	1.8	2.0
Nothing else to do	2.7	0.9	2.0
Quieter than walk-ins	1.8	0.4	1.3
Romance; to "make-out"	1.5	0.0	0.9

$$\chi^2=16.17, df=13, p=.240$$

TABLE 5

Reason for Drive-In Attendance on the Evening Interviewed

	Occasionals (n=340)	Frequents (n=226)	Total (n=566)
For the movie playing	56.5%	60.6%	58.1%
Closest drive-in	16.5	14.6	15.7
Nothing else to do	4.7	5.3	5.0
Other	5.3	4.0	4.8
To have fun (party)	3.2	5.8	4.2
Change of pace	2.9	2.7	2.8
"Not my choice"	4.1	0.9	2.8
Less expensive than walk-ins	2.6	2.7	2.7
To be outdoors	2.1	1.8	1.9
To relax	2.1	1.8	1.9

$\chi^2=8.49, df=9, p>.50$