

Gender, comedy and reviewing culture on the Internet Movie Database

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Summary:

Despite its self-proclaimed position as “#1 movie website in the world” IMDb has been the focus of surprisingly little academic attention. The academic work which does exist has typically focused on its user-generated content and has, in various ways, used this as a means of investigating a sub-section of the *film* audience whilst nevertheless acknowledging that IMDb users are likely to differ from film audiences. This article explores whether gender identity is one of the ways in which IMDb users and film audiences may differ. Based on an analysis of IMDb’s own rater demographics, combined with a content analysis of IMDb reviews for three contemporary gender comedies – *(500) Days of Summer*, *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* - I argue that IMDb is discursively constructed as a male space where male voices and systems of value dominate.

Keywords: IMDb; film audiences; film reviewing; approval ratings; gender comedy.

Introduction

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) claims to be “the world’s most popular and authoritative source for movie, TV and celebrity content”, offering a searchable database which includes more than two million films, television and entertainment programmes and attracting more than 150 million unique monthly visitors (IMDb, 2013). IMDb’s self-presentation as the “#1 movie website in the world” is supported by data gathered by Alexa.com (2013), which positions IMDb as the 52nd most visited site globally, with rankings in its top three territories - the US (where it is the 27th most visited site nationally), India (31st) and the UK (21st) – being considerably higher. On these figures alone, IMDb is clearly a significant feature in the contemporary film and television landscape. Yet, it has attracted relatively little attention within media and cultural studies.

The research on, or making use of, IMDb which does exist (Verboord, 2013; Ottenbacher, 2011; Bore, 2011; Monk, 2011; Barker, 2011; Van Zoonen, 2007; Dodds, 2006)

has largely focused on its user-generated content and user-generated film reviews in particular. This work has acknowledged that IMDb users are not an adequate stand-in for the film audience given inequalities around internet access, but has not yet considered the specific ways in which IMDb users may differ from film audiences. Moreover, whilst the construction of user-identities has been explored in relation to genre preference (Bore, 2011), fandom (Monk, 2011) and (geo-)political allegiance (Van Zoonen, 2007; Dodds, 2006), whether these user-identities are inflected by structural inequalities on the grounds of gender, sexuality, race, location and class, for example, is yet to be addressed. This may be because of the methodological challenges in researching off-line identities of on-line audiences. However, whilst there are questions about structural inequalities, user motivations and patterns of engagement which are best answered by research on IMDb users themselves, the material freely available on the site does allow us to begin to explore the discursive construction of identity categories within its reviewing culture. This article is an initial foray into this territory, using publicly available data and content to focus on arguably the most visible - but also contested - of these categories online: gender. Specifically, I consider the gender self-presentation of IMDb raters and reviewers, using ratings and reviews of three contemporary gender comedies – *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009), *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009) and *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) - as my case studies. In focusing on the gender identities that these IMDb users construct, this research cannot offer insight into the *actual* make up of this subset of the IMDb audience. However, it does allow me to explore how user identity is discursively constructed and the gendered norms this creates around reviewing practice on this site.

As this research is conceived as a response to previous work which has used IMDb to investigate *film* audiences - as discussed in more detail in the next section - the way reviewers and their reviews are positioned relative to professional film reviewing is not my primary concern here. Academic work on the relationship of amateur and professional reviewing practices is emerging (Verboord, 2010, 2013) but it is notable that questions about the construction of (re)viewer identity in relation to gender are yet to be addressed, although Melanie Bell's work suggests that women's involvement in professional film reviewing has been increasingly marginal since the 1970s (Bell, 2011a, 2011b). With this in mind, it is certainly plausible that IMDb user-participation can tell us as much about how film *reviewing* is understood and experienced as a contemporary gendered practice as it can about film *audiences*. However, in this article, it is with this latter group that IMDb raters and reviewers are firstly compared. I then go on to examine the ways in which IMDb reviews construct a discursive terrain which is distinctly male both through the gendered presentation of raters/reviewers and the in/visibility of gender as a frame of reference for film evaluation.

Methods

This article examines user-ratings and reviews for contemporary gender comedy – films where the comedy hinges on gendered misunderstandings in heterosexual romance and/or

on rituals which are fundamentally gendered (e.g. the bachelor/ette party). The choice of genre was designed to facilitate a comparison with existing work on IMDb audiences – specifically, Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore’s *Participations* article “Reviewing romcom” (2011) – and was also a reflection of my own research interest in the genre (e.g. Boyle & Berridge, 2014). Whether the findings presented here are particular to this genre or not is for future research to explore. However, as indicated at a number of points in what follows, the available data on IMDb supports a more general argument that this operates as a gendered culture.

In her article, Bore identifies and analyses the criteria of value deployed in user-reviews of *(500) Days of Summer*. Although Bore focuses on a genre which is widely recognised to have a gendered address and appeal (the romcom), and on a film which offers a gendered-reversal of a typical romcom scenario (the tagline is “Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love. Girl doesn’t.”), she does not consider how gender operates in relation to these criteria of value. My work thus provides an extension of Bore’s, but in comparing the reviews of *(500) Days* with those of *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* it further investigates whether films operating within a similar generic terrain – but with a predominantly male or predominately female cast – are differently framed.

Before moving on to outline my methods, it is necessary to briefly introduce the films. *(500) Days of Summer* focuses on the romance between Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer (Zooey Deschanel), a romance we know is doomed from the beginning thanks to Tom’s voice-over narration. Tom is the film’s central character and events unfold largely from his perspective. *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* are less centrally concerned with romance, although both focus on a bridal party in the run-up to a wedding. *The Hangover* – which has now spawned two sequels – focuses on the aftermath of a bachelor party. Set largely set in Las Vegas, its central characters are three groomsmen who wake up in a trashed hotel suite missing the groom, with no memory of the night before (an effect of unwittingly ingesting the so-called “date-rape drug” Rohypnol). The film follows them trying to piece together the events of the previous evening. In *Bridesmaids* – which was widely billed as a female-*Hangover* and was in cinemas at the same time as *The Hangover Part II* (Todd Phillips, 2011) – it is the women in the bridal party who are the narrative centre. The film has three key narrative strands: the unravelling relationship between the bride and her maid of honour, the film’s central character, Annie (Kirsten Wiig); Annie’s relationship with the other bridesmaids; and her developing heterosexual romance with a traffic-cop.

All three films generated considerable user-commentary on IMDb, particularly in the form of reviews, and by focusing on *all* reviews of these films, this research aims to analyse a broader sub-section of the IMDb reviewing community than much of the existing work on IMDb to date (cf Dodds, 2006; Van Zoonen, 2007; Bore, 2011; Monk, 2011; Barker, 2011).

To explore the responses to these films, I first analysed the information about the rating community available on IMDb itself. IMDb provides basic demographic information (sex, country, age) about those who rate individual films based on information provided by users at the point of registration. Of course, individuals can falsify this and some do not

provide this information. Why and how users choose to identify themselves on/to IMDb is beyond the scope of this article, nor will I speculate here about the reasons different users may have for opting into, or out of, such practices of identification. However, this data does allow me to discuss one aspect of how raters/ reviewers choose to present themselves in this forum.

Moving beyond the audience data collated by (and available on) IMDb, I then archived all reviews for each of the films, giving me a total of 1426 reviews to work with: 420 for *(500) Days*, 581 for *The Hangover* and 425 for *Bridesmaids*.¹ Existing work on IMDb users has largely worked with the assumption that as comments and reviews are posted on a public website, apparently with the intention of being read by a wide audience, it is legitimate for researchers to work with that material without seeking the approval of the users whose words they analyse. Nevertheless, following Bore (2011: 146) as I am removing these reviews from their original context (where users retain the right to remove their review), I have sought to protect the identities of individual users through ‘light disguise’ and I do not provide the usernames or dates of individual reviews here.

Having archived the reviews, I then read all the reviews several times in order to devise a coding schedule for a content analysis to focus on two main questions: (how) do reviewers present themselves as gendered subjects?; and (how) do the reviews engage with the films as gendered texts? To explore the first question, I analysed reviewers’ self-presentation through usernames, before identifying instances where reviewers self-identified as male or female in the text of their review. To explore the second question, I identified reviews which contained an element of gender analysis as part of their description or evaluation of the film. My criteria for “gender analysis” were deliberately broad, including brief descriptions of the films as gender-genres – e.g. as “bromance” or “chick flick” – as well as more detailed discussions of sexism or analyses of gender representation. My intent here was to identify broad patterns in relation to the ways in which gender was – or was not – operationalised in the reviewing culture. As such, in what follows individual quotations are used for the extent to which they do/not represent broader trends: the language and rhetorical strategies of the reviews is not explored in any detail.² The remainder of this article discusses the findings of my research.

Gender genres and IMDb

As noted in the introduction, the central argument of this article is that IMDb constructs a discursive terrain which is distinctly male both through the gendered presentation of raters/reviewers and in relation to the contexts in which gender is (and is not) deployed as a frame of reference for film evaluation. However, this is not immediately obvious from IMDb’s own statistics. For instance, in relation to *(500) Days*, IMDb suggests that there is no difference in men and women’s approval ratings, with both sitting at 7.8 (out of a possible 10). IMDb data for *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* also show minimal gender variation with *The Hangover* achieving a 7.8 approval rating from men and 7.7 from women, and *Bridesmaids* achieving 6.8 from men and 7.1 from women. The sequels to *The Hangover*,

whilst achieving lower ratings overall, similarly show little gender variance with *Part II* achieving a 6.4 rating from both male and female viewers, and *Part III* rated 6.1 by men and 6.4 by women.

However, when we consider the *proportion* of ratings provided by men and women, rather stark differences appear.³ Although there is some variation among the titles I am interested in, the consistent pattern is that men are over-represented within the rating community (**Table 1**). This is not specific to the films chosen here: as a point of comparison, for the Top 10 ranked films on IMDb at the time of writing, the percentage of male raters was between 82.9%-92.1%.⁴ This is despite the fact that, according to Alexa.com (2013), the gender breakdown of the IMDb audience as a whole is broadly similar to that for the general internet population. Although the gender gap between men and women online varies geographically, in the developed world only 2% fewer women than men use the internet (ITU, 2013). With the US alone providing over 30% of IMDb’s audience (Alexa.com, 2013), the gender gap on IMDb might be expected to sit closer to that for the developed than developing world. This would suggest that female IMDb users are less likely than their male counterparts to rate films – or, at least, to rate films *as women* – a pattern which coheres with the greater participation levels of male than female users identified in other recent research on cognate areas such as ratings on online video sharing websites (Warren et al, 2011; Goode et al, 2011: 599).⁵

Table 1: Gender comedy films on IMDb

Film	% male raters on IMDb	% female raters on IMDb
<i>(500) Days of Summer</i>	71.7	28.3
<i>The Hangover</i>	82.4	17.6
<i>The Hangover Part II</i>	83.3	16.7
<i>The Hangover Part III</i>	86.2	13.8
<i>Bridesmaids</i>	65.0	35.0

Moreover, these figures do not cohere with what is known about the gender make-up of contemporary cinema audiences,⁶ with recent reports based on theatrical box-office data in the US (MPAA, 2012: 13) and UK (UK Film Council, 2010: 111; BFI, 2011: 126) indicating a broadly even gender split. Admittedly, given the international reach of IMDb, there is no easy point of comparison between the reported demographics of the rating community and the demographics of the audience. But if we take the UK as a point of comparison,⁷ women are consistently under-represented on IMDb relative to their position in the UK cinema audience (**Table 2**) and films with a strong female appeal attract markedly fewer ratings overall than films with a strong male appeal (**Tables 2 & 3**).

This is not simply down to the greater box office appeal of male-oriented films. For example, according to Box Office Mojo (n.d.), *Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part 1* (with 128,185 IMDb ratings as of August 2013) was the fourth biggest film of 2011 globally, ranking one place above *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (with 229,908 IMDb ratings) and taking almost double the box office for *Captain America* (with 230,078 ratings on IMDb). To give another example: *Sex and the City 2* took more than three times *Green Zone's* box office (Box Office Mojo, n.d.) but generated a little over half as many ratings on IMDb. Moreover, the average IMDb rating for films appealing strongly to women in **Tables 2 and 3** is also lower (at 6.06) than those appealing to men (at 6.91). All of this suggests that IMDb is a male-dominated space where male-oriented narratives appealing to male audiences are more highly valued than their female equivalents. This is borne out in the next section when I examine the discursive construction of gender in the framing and content of IMDb reviews.

Table 2: Films with greatest female audience share in UK cinemas (2009-2012)⁸

Film	% female audience	% female IMDb raters	IMDb rating	Total number of IMDb ratings
<i>Anna Karenina</i>	71	42.8	6.6	37,990
<i>Street Dance 2</i>	70	36.9	5.3	4,180
<i>Jane Eyre</i>	86	56.0	7.3	37,305
<i>One Day</i>	81	49.5	6.8	57,701
<i>Bridesmaids</i>	79	35.0	6.8	146,893
<i>Twilight Breaking Dawn: Part 1</i>	70	42.9	4.8	128,185
<i>Sex and the City 2</i>	73	49.2	3.9	41,367
<i>Marley and Me</i>	78	30.4	7.0	78,651

Reviewing culture

In this section, I consider whether/how gender emerges in relation to reviewers themselves before moving on to their analyses of the films under discussion.

As Otterbacher (2011) notes, compared to other review communities, IMDb does not provide particularly detailed reviewer profiles. Above the main text of each review, basic reviewer information (username, location) is given, and, by clicking on the username, the reviewer's profile can be accessed. However, the profile focuses specifically on the user's engagement with IMDb – length of membership, accolades within the community,

other film ratings, reviews and lists – and provides no further demographic or personal information. Moreover, unlike for ratings (discussed above), IMDb does not provide demographic profiles for reviewers of a particular film. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, a significant minority of reviewers chose to self-present a gendered identity.

Table 3: Films with greatest male audience share in UK cinemas (2009-2012)

Film	% male audience	% male IMDb raters	IMDb rating	Total number of IMDb ratings
<i>Dredd</i>	74	92.9	7.0	115,572
<i>Wrath of the Titans</i>	70	88.4	5.7	102,355
<i>Captain America</i>	78	85.5	6.8	230,078
<i>Senna</i>	73	92.6	8.5	28,062
<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i>	73	88.2	6.3	213,747
<i>Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol</i>	73	88.2	7.4	229,908
<i>Green Zone</i>	76	93.1	6.9	80,181
<i>Terminator Salvation</i>	72	91.2	6.7	194,333

The self-presentation of gendered identities on IMDb takes two main forms: through usernames (and, very occasionally, photographs – a new addition to IMDb at the time of writing); and through the text of the review itself. In the first category, I coded reviewers as male or female *only* when their username was either an unambiguously male or female one or where there was a gendered noun used (e.g. man, lady). In all other cases, the user was coded as “neutral”. The majority of IMDb users choose gender-ambiguous names: 60.8% of *(500) Days* reviewers fall into this category, for instance. However, among those who do present a clearly gendered identity, the vast majority are male: staying with *(500) Days*, 32.1% of all reviewers present as male, and this accounts for 81.8% of all those reviewers presenting a gendered identity. Similarly, in reviews of *The Hangover*, 82.5% of those making a gender self-presentation are male, and the figure for *Bridesmaids* is 72.5%.

In addition to gender self-presentation through usernames/ photographs, a minority of reviewers make gender presentations in the text of their reviews, with 25.6% of *Bridesmaids* reviews, 11.7% of *(500) Days* reviews and 8.1% of *The Hangover* reviews falling into this category (**Table 4**). IMDb reviews have to be a minimum of 10 lines long, are titled by the reviewer, and are prefaced by their rating (presented in the form of stars), the

author's name and location. A significant proportion of these reviews are little more than film synopses with short evaluative judgments (Bore, 2011) and many are what Gilbert and Karahalios refer to as "deja-reviews" – postings which do not add anything new, given what has already gone before (cited by Otterbacher, 2011: 439). As such, the use of textual markers of gender at all is striking.

However, an analysis of these textual markers of gender does not simply confirm the pattern of male dominance identified in relation to rater demographics and usernames. What is most significant here is the differences which emerge between films which suggest that male experience – on screen and off – is normative on IMDb. So, in the reviews of *The Hangover* – a film with an almost exclusively male cast – (re)viewers feel little need to mention their own gender. In the reviews of *(500) Days* – a generically feminised text but with a male lead - gender-identity becomes slightly more significant. In contrast, more than a quarter of the reviews of the female-ensemble *Bridesmaids* make the gender of the reviewer a feature of the review.

Given the generic qualities of IMDb reviews – which, as Ottenbacher (2011: 425) notes, means it is likely that lower ranked reviews gain a very small audience - ⁹it might be expected that those reviews which offer additional detail (such as gender identification) might stand out and so gain approval and prominence within the review community. This was not entirely borne out in the current research. Whilst the top 50 reviews of *(500) Days* contained a higher concentration of gender-identified commentary (this being true of 28% of the top 50 reviews, compared to 11.7% of all 420 archived reviews), this was less marked in relation to *Bridesmaids* (30% cf 25.6%) and reversed in the reviews of *The Hangover* (4% cf 8.1%). However, given the small numbers in the latter case, it is arguable that genres or texts identified primarily with female audiences may both attract and privilege gender-identification on IMDb although – as indicated in Table 4 – it is not the female audience which is most vocal.

In terms of the prominence accorded male-identified and female-identified writers, the most notable finding here was the higher concentration of male-identified writers overall (Table 4). However, it was *not* the case that male voices were necessarily given prominence in the review communities for these three films. Male-identified commentary was more highly concentrated in the top 50 reviews of *(500) Days* - with 26% of the top 50 reviews written in a male voice compared to 10.9% of all reviews for this film - but this was not true of *The Hangover* (4% cf 6.4%) or *Bridesmaids* (18% cf 19.7%). Moreover, female-voiced *Bridesmaids* reviews had higher prominence in the top 50 (12%) than elsewhere (5.8%). Otterbacher's analysis of IMDb, Amazon and Yelp – although not focusing specifically on gender – suggests that the content of reviewers' profiles are *not* significant in determining how reviews are ranked within these communities (2011: 439). This analysis adds to Otterbacher's work firstly by suggesting that textual gender-markers might be both used and privileged in *particular* contexts and, secondly, by noting that, overall, male voices are more dominant than female.

Table 4: Reviewer gender as a feature of IMDb reviews

Film	% with textual markers of reviewer gender	% with textual markers of reviewer gender (male)	% with textual markers of reviewer gender (female)
(500) Days of Summer	11.7	10.9	0.7
The Hangover	8.1	6.4	1.7
Bridesmaids	25.6	19.7	5.8

In relation to all three films, reviewers who deploy their gender identity typically do so as a means of situating the review (and, so, the film) for particular audience segments, with gender and age often intertwined. For example, one reviewer of *The Hangover* begins by noting “As a 32 year old all American white male, I should have thoroughly enjoyed this movie”, thus positioning himself within the target audience for a film he goes on to critique. Another concludes his review of the same film with “Overall, I’m a 24 year old guy and found this movie VERY enjoyable”, implicitly addressing others of the same demographic. Similar strategies can be found across the reviews of *(500) Days* and *Bridesmaids*.

In addition to age, sexuality also becomes part of the narrative in a number of reviews of *Bridesmaids* and *The Hangover*. Whilst this is far more marked in relation to *Bridesmaids*, the following examples from reviews of *The Hangover* help to establish the ways in which references to heterosexual partnerships function discursively. These reviews bring to the surface the ways in which IMDb operates primarily as a homosocial space, with the significance of the girlfriends and wives being largely what they say about the reviewer *to other (heterosexual) men*:

My girlfriend’s face was so red for days from laughing so hard!!!! And the bachelor party in the movie was so much better than the ones I’ve been to in real life.

I’ve just returned from the theater where I saw ‘The Hangover’, and I must admit, with what I saw from it first, I wouldn’t have chosen it myself, but a very foxy lady (Italian, redhead, and a nice rack) asked me if I wanted to see that one, and any guy will know that if a girl like that asks you out, SHE chooses the movie.¹⁰

Whilst the “foxy lady” is given a degree of agency here (she chose the film after all), no male reviewers identify any *dissent* on the part of female companions. Arguably, women’s enjoyment becomes an alibi against accusations of sexism levelled against the film in popular culture more broadly and, very occasionally, on IMDb. Moreover, like the female characters on screen who occupy marginalised and sexualised positions, the girlfriend and

“foxy lady” assure us of the heterosexual prowess of the reviewers in an otherwise homosocial (re)viewing context in which men are commenting on men for an audience which is also largely assumed to be male.

However, as noted above, this kind of commentary is relatively unusual in *The Hangover* reviews. Indeed, reviews of *The Hangover* are far more likely to discuss the film’s appeal in gender-neutral terms, claiming that the scenarios on screen are universally recognisable: “I mean, who hasn’t had a morning where they woke up from a night of drinking and just cannot remember one thing about the night before?” Even when discussing scenarios and characters whose appeal is both gendered and (hetero)sexualised – e.g. evaluations of Heather Graham’s physical attractiveness, Mike Tyson’s iconic status, or the rituals of the bachelor party – the potential *specificity* of the film’s address and appeal is rarely addressed. In contrast, reviewers repeatedly offer recommendations to “everyone” and “anyone”.

Of course, not all reviews are positive, but limits to the film’s universal appeal are primarily framed in relation to taste cultures, originality or generational appeal:

Okay....I’m still trying to figure out why everyone thought this movie was *so* funny. Because it wasn’t. At all. Harold & Kumar go to White Castle is FUNNY. American Pie is FUNNY. Animal House is FUNNY. National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation is FUNNY. Monty Python is FUNNY! This movie is NOT funny.

It is a little gross so I don’t suggest taking young kids to see it because it will be a little awkward.

A juvenile, mindless, and just plain stupid storyline that apparently tried to put a slapstick comic spin on 1998’s excellent “Very Bad Things”.

So, although this is a film about three men, in which women barely register on screen, the appeal of the film is not generally figured in gendered terms. Somewhat surprisingly, this is true even of those few reviews that do acknowledge the film’s gendered address. In the following review, for instance, the writer moves from a statement of the film’s *universal* appeal (“everybody”, “you”) to an acknowledgement of its gendered address (“a *Male Movie*”) to an ambiguous, but arguably gender-neutral, conclusion about the audience. But at no point are women in the audience for the film or the review directly addressed:

I recommend this movie to everybody. This is a really great movie and you will laugh to every bit part of its one liners. Great Job!!! Though the movie is essentially a Male Movie and I am damn sure almost 90% of the lot would find (at least a tiny bit) of their life’s fun in it!!! Thanks a lot Warner Bros.

Echoing classic arguments in feminist film theory from Mulvey (1975) onwards, this is suggestive of a sense of entitlement among male IMDb (re)viewers and acceptance of spectatorial marginalisation on the part of their female counterparts. Male (and female) viewers assume that films *should* address a male audience such that the gendered address of a film like *The Hangover* is almost invisible as such – to both men and women – and claims about the film’s universal appeal reinforce this.

As demonstrated in **Table 4**, the gender-bending romcom (*500 Days*) produced reviews which are slightly more likely to address the (re)viewer’s gender as a component of the review, but it is when *women* occupy unfamiliar roles as comedy protagonists, in *Bridesmaids*, that (re)viewer gender identity becomes more central to IMDb evaluations.

In fully a quarter of IMDb *Bridesmaids* reviews, the reviewer makes their gender a feature of the review (**Table 4**). This is significant both as a comparison with *The Hangover* and in the broader context of IMDb reviewing where, as we have seen, short, plot-driven evaluations are favoured. As with the *Hangover* reviews, reviewers make reference to their gender in negotiating their perceived inclusion or exclusion from the film’s address (e.g. “as a guy....only watch this if you are forced to.”). However, a recurring feature particular to the *Bridesmaids* reviews is commentary about the experience of watching the film theatrically in a predominately female audience. That there is no equivalent commentary in relation to *The Hangover* may be because *The Hangover* audiences were genuinely more mixed, but this in itself speaks to the ways in which films about men are still assumed to address a universal audience whereas films about women are presented as “niche”. The analysis of the IMDb reviews would suggest that similar assumptions underpin its reviewing culture: although often disguised beneath a veneer of “universalism”, the assumed audience for IMDb reviews appears to be largely male.

Performances of (male) heterosexuality were also more common in the *Bridesmaids* reviews, featuring in 9.2% of these reviews (compared to less than 3% of reviews of *The Hangover*):

My wife and I sat through this very very unfunny movie absolutely unable to understand what anyone found appealing in it.

My wife 100% agrees with me.

My wife and I were laughing out loud almost continuously throughout the entire film.

Here, the references to wives and girlfriends provide a rather different kind of “alibi”, less a sense of “license” to indulge in homosocial ritual, than, firstly, an explanation for the male (re)viewer’s presence in a feminised viewing context, and, secondly, a reinforcement of the universality of the male reviewer’s response. Notably, very little disagreement between spouses is presented and male (re)viewers express little anxiety about their authority to

pass judgment. It is perhaps unsurprising that, in the context of IMDb, female reviewers rarely assume this role vis-à-vis male companions: in only 4 of the 581 reviews of *The Hangover* was this the scenario.

That the commentary on heterosexualised viewing contexts is part of an address to other male IMDb users is particularly obvious in those reviews which comment on gendered negotiations about film choice:

My girlfriend kept asking me if we'd go out to see Brides Maids which would also be enjoyable by us males as well. After having her beg just a little more I decided to do and see it with her.

Basicly if your girlfriend does drag you along to see this film, you'll pretend you didn't like it and tell her it was lame but you'll laugh as much as she will.

My wife wanted to see it based on trailers and the mostly good reviews/ She had to cover her eyes during the bathroom scenes and found the whole movie to be one of the worst she has ever seen. If you must waste \$20 bucks (roughly two tickets) take a \$20 bill, shred it in a food processor then flush it down the toilet. Do this while eating popcorn and you'll have the same overall feeling of having seen this movie.

As a form of consumer advice to other men, these reviews further exclude women from their address by rendering them the butt of the joke (the first two quotations), or by subjecting "their" tastes to sometimes quite aggressive ridicule. For example, in the last quotation, the reviewer prefaces his scathing response by noting both that his wife *wanted* to see it and that she *hated* it. This not only provides him with an alibi for being there (it wasn't *his* choice), but also suggests his spousal superiority as an arbiter of taste. That these examples are at times framed as comically over-the-top does not negate their gendered address.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that any claims about *Bridesmaids'* universal appeal are framed very differently. It is not about how "everyone" will respond to the film, but rather how *men as well as women* will enjoy it (or not):

performances plus the hilarious humor, this film is easily one of the funniest female comedies ever although it's unnecessarily long but it's undeniably enjoyable (*even if you're a guy*).

Written by women, starring mostly women *but aimed squarely at both men and women*, *Bridesmaids* deserves to be a huge comedy hit. (emphases added)

Rather than questions about comic mode or genre, the central issue here seems to be whether male audience members are “accommodated” by the film.

Evaluating gender comedy: *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids*

The final stage of my analysis was to identify passages of gender analysis in the discussions of the films themselves and here I have focused specifically on *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* as – unlike the central heterosexual pairing in *(500) Days* – their ensembles are primarily single-sex and so might be expected to generate more gendered commentary.

The majority of reviews of *Bridesmaids* (57.8%) offered some kind of gender commentary. As the film was widely positioned in its own marketing materials as a “female *Hangover*” this is perhaps unsurprising. However, given the generic conventions of IMDb comedy reviews the visibility of *Bridesmaids* as a gendered text and experience is both striking and in sharp contrast to *The Hangover* reviews, only 8.4% of which adopt a gender lens. A more significant comparison here might be with reviews of *The Hangover Part II* – which was in cinemas at the same time as *Bridesmaids* and so might be expected to generate more comparative gender analysis. But here too, gender analysis was a minority pursuit, featuring in around 12% of reviews.

Accusations that *The Hangover* is sexist do get a limited airing on IMDb, but they are as likely to be contested as presented straight. Indeed, sexism is not, necessarily, presented as an impediment to the (re)viewer’s enjoyment, although some feel obliged to state that they do not share these values:

Some here have criticized *The Hangover* as racist, sexist or just gross. If done right, such politically incorrect ingredients don’t prevent me from laughing, and sometimes they actually enhance a comedy if done right.

And I’m no fan of R-Rated sexist slap stick usually filled with mindless moronic nonsense, but this movie is the bomb! It is definitely a man’s movie though.

For others, the comedy mode is alibi enough:

Look, from the previews you pretty much know the whole story going in: some dudes go to Vegas for a bachelor party, gets wasted, and wake up wondering what has happened. You should be able to tell going in exactly what the movie is, and what to expect. If anything, this movie is much funnier than I expected it would be from seeing the trailer./ So complaining about the fact that *The Hangover* is juvenile, sexist, stoopid, etc., says more about the reviewer than it says about the movie. For what it is, it is quite effective. It made me laugh out loud numerous times.

This particular reviewer then goes on to rebuff and ridicule specific criticisms levelled at the film by other IMDb reviewers, suggesting that these reviewers simply don’t get it. This

argument is a familiar one to feminists, the assumption being that these forms of culture should be left to those who *do* get it and others (women, feminists, minority groups) should simply avoid them if they don't want to be offended (Braithwaite, 2013; Ahmed, 2010). This plays out with particular ferocity in relation to popular culture, which is – at once – the source of intense investment from viewers/users and, at the same time, something we are discouraged from taking seriously: it's 'only' a movie (or a game, or a joke). The review quoted above concludes:

So, in conclusion, if you are an uptight moral majority type looking for a reason to be offended, avoid this film. If you get your panties in a bunch when adults use adult language, don't see this film. If you want to see a realistic depiction of the horrors of alcohol and drug abuse, perhaps you should see a different movie. If you go into a movie called "The Hangover", with a plot about a bunch of guys having a bachelor party in Vegas, expecting that by the end you and the characters will learn some important life lessons, grow as human beings, and come away with a more deepened spiritual outlook....perhaps you are an idiot.

For this reviewer, at least, it is not enough to state that critics simply don't get it, they are therefore characterised as infantile, unintelligent and moralistic. Although this review is unusual both in the depth with which it engages with other reviews and in its tone towards them, it is in keeping with the film itself where the one character who offers any kind of critique of the men's behaviour is Melissa (Rachael Harris), the domineering and entirely unsympathetic girlfriend of one of the central characters, who notably also attracts some aggressive responses on IMDb: "The chick in this film is a total b*tch and needs a flogging". The reviewer advocating flogging also presents an alibi of sorts for his aggressive tone: he claims he's not being *sexist* but rather that "everyone should have the right to a 50/50 relationship", something he claims Melissa's domineering behaviour precludes.

Overall, then, the reviews of *The Hangover* construct a discursively male space but the extent to which this is made explicit varies, with claims about its universal appeal frequently stated and the position of women in the audience rarely considered.

The criteria used to judge the success (or otherwise) of *Bridesmaids* – whilst often cohering with Bore's emphasis on originality, quality and comedy value – are nevertheless frequently gendered. So, for instance, in relation to originality, *Bridesmaids* is variously criticised as being "just" a chick flick, or praised for being "more than" a chick flick, as though the very presence of women in leading roles marks *Bridesmaids* as potentially generic. This is in contrast to reviews of *The Hangover* where judgments around originality are most commonly made in relation to *specific* other titles – in particular, *Dude, Where's My Car* (Danny Leiner, 2000) and *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998). These titles share more than a male ensemble cast and target audience with *The Hangover*: *Dude* focuses on male friends struggling to reconstruct a drug-fuelled night; whilst *Very Bad Things* centres on a Vegas bachelor party gone wrong. This suggests a willingness to consider male-fronted

films in far more specific terms, which is further borne out by the more detailed attention to plot and character across *The Hangover* reviews as a whole.

Similarly, although questions about the legitimacy and appropriateness of certain kinds of humour emerge in both contexts, it is in relation to *Bridesmaids* that these questions are posed in gendered terms. Whilst there is some – albeit very limited – commentary on whether child sexual abuse is a legitimate topic for humour in *The Hangover*, there is no space for discussion of what this means *for men* (either on screen or off). In contrast, discussions of *Bridesmaids*' most contentious and divisive scene – in which the women are hit by food poisoning in a bridal shop – are frequently framed in relation to what it means *to see women* vomit and defecate in the name of humour. Likewise, whilst reviewers of both films occasionally comment on the “crude” language used, only in relation to *Bridesmaids* is there felt to be comic value (or not) in the relationship between speaker and language. So, in relation to *The Hangover* the creatively-offensive language is either funny or not, but in relation to *Bridesmaids* the evaluative judgment is more often whether it is funny to hear *women* speaking these words.

Although the central characters in *The Hangover* are frequently acknowledged to be unlikeable, this does not necessarily hamper reviewer enjoyment of the film and, indeed, they are also presented as quasi-inspirational figures in some reviews. In contrast, reviewers who find *Bridesmaids*' central character unlikeable are typically unwilling to engage with the film's comedy. Words frequently used to describe Annie and her co-stars include: loser, unlikeable, selfish, bitter, strident, unattractive, irritating and annoying – all adjectives that could just as easily be used to describe one or more of the male characters in *The Hangover*. However, their deployment here – typically in negative reviews – suggests that there is, at least for some reviewers, an assumption that female characters should be more accommodating to their audience, providing conventional narrative and scopic pleasures. Moreover, as with the comments about *The Hangover*'s Melissa, above, reviewers' responses to the women's failure to fulfil accepted/acceptable roles are at times “comically” violent. My point here is not that these reviewers genuinely advocate violence against women, nor that these comments are the norm on IMDb, but that this performance of gendered aggression contributes to the discursive construction of IMDb as a space for *male* (re)views. Indeed, a broad critical consensus emerges in relation to *The Hangover* on IMDb and this in large part depends upon ignoring its gendered address. In contrast, whether *Bridesmaids* works for men is at the heart of the IMDb debate about the film.

Conclusion

This article highlights some of the difficulties in turning to IMDb as a source of film audience response by emphasising men's and women's apparently uneven participation in the rating and reviewing culture and beginning to highlight some of the gendered assumptions underpinning that culture. Whilst IMDb users may be an imperfect stand-in for the film audience, the ways in which its users – and in particular its reviewers – both construct

identities for themselves and contribute to the construction of IMDb as a gendered space for film discussion and debate merits further investigation.

The research presented here focuses on contemporary gender comedy and suggests that, for IMDb (re)viewers at least, women continue to be anomalous within film comedy outside of very narrowly defined roles in the romcom. In addition to expanding this work by considering the construction of reviewing cultures around other genres, time periods and national cinemas, it would be useful to explore how IMDb users (those who participate and those who do not) understand and experience the site as well as to consider whether gender performativity of IMDb users is inflected by other identity categories. Finally, whilst recent work has begun to compare the value systems deployed in offline and online film reviews (Verboord, 2013), questions about whose (re)views of film culture “count” for different audience sectors would be worth further exploration. Relatedly, whether online film reviews can be understood in relation to gendered communication strategies and structures of value remains underexplored.

In all of these contexts, work on gender – as well as on race, class, age, and sexuality – has remained under-developed, perhaps because of alleged difficulties in fixing these identity categories in the virtual world. Whilst the current research certainly does not negate the importance of relating online and offline identities, it nevertheless suggests that analysing the ways in which gendered identities are discursively fashioned online is a useful point of departure for (re)inserting the importance of gender analysis into our studies of online cultures and film audiences.

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Notes:

¹ Ratings and reviews for *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* were archived on 21 May 2013. To provide a point of comparison with Bore's work, I then archived the *(500) Days* ratings and reviews on 6 August 2013. As IMDb ratings and reviews are updated daily, it is not possible for me to work with an identical sample to Bore, moreover I have chosen to work with *all* reviews posted (where Bore focused on the top 50 and bottom 50 "best" reviews).

² For a discussion of the rhetorical strategies of well-rated reviews on IMDb (as well as on Yelp and Amazon) see Ottenbacher (2011).

³ IMDb provides a numerical gender breakdown of raters for individual films: the percentage calculation is mine, and represents male or female raters as a percentage of all raters *for whom gender is known*. The number of raters for whom gender is known is not equivalent to the total number of ratings for an individual film, but remains consistent at around 79%.

⁴ The Top 10 films on IMDb, as of August 2013, with the percentage of male raters indicated in brackets, are: *The Shawshank Redemption* (85%); *The Godfather* (88%); *The Godfather Part II* (89%); *Pulp Fiction* (85.9%); *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (92.1%); *The Dark Knight* (84.9%); *12 Angry Men* (86.4%); *Schindler's List* (82.8%); *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (82.9%); and *Fight Club* (83.2%). Notably, these are all films with male protagonists and directors.

⁵ It is worth noting here that research on the gendered use of social networking sites identifies that it is typically *female* users who are more extraverted and emotionally expressive (e.g. Thelwall et al, 2010). That this does not appear to be the case on IMDb may be a reflection both of its more "public" and less inter-personal function (there is little direct interaction between reviewers in the reviews section at least) and of the contemporary gendering of professional film reviewing (Bell, 2011a, 2011b). Empirical work with IMDb users would be needed to explore these questions more fully.

⁶ Although IMDb reviews are not exclusively based on *cinema* viewing, Bore (2011: 147) suggests that those reviewing whilst the film is in cinemas may be more likely to have their reviews read and rated by other users, suggesting the importance of the theatrical audience to the construction of taste cultures on IMDb.

⁷ According to Alexa.com (2013) around 5-6% of the IMDb audience is from the UK: this makes the UK the third most popular country of origin for IMDb users, behind the US (around 30%) and India (around 10%). Whilst the MPAA in the US provides information about the demographic split of the theatrical audience this is not broken down by individual film titles, nor is such information freely available from other sources as far as I can tell. Based on release dates listed on IMDb, it is not clear that two of the films in this study – *(500) Days* and *Bridesmaids* – had an Indian theatrical release. On this basis, I have chosen to present the comparison with UK cinema figures, although this is intended to be suggestive only.

⁸ The films in Tables 2 and 3 were all identified as having a gender split of at least 70/30 in the UK (BFI, 2013: 170; BFI, 2012: 145; BFI, 2011: 127; UK Film Council, 2010: 112). IMDb data in these Tables was gathered on 16 August 2013.

⁹ IMDb users are given the option to “rate” the reviews they read by noting whether or not the review was useful to them. The rankings of reviews are then derived from ratings.

¹⁰ All quotations from reviews use the language, grammar and formatting of the original.