

## Researching Audience Engagements with the *Hobbit* Trilogy: A Unique Methodological Approach

### INTRODUCTION

In what follows, we firstly situate our project within the wider body of scholarship on audiences for adaptations of Tolkien's written works that has informed our core questions and research focus. Then, we explain our rationale for conducting a large-scale longitudinal investigation of transnational receptions of the *Hobbit* trilogy. These reasons reflect our interest in understanding whether and how a person's national or cultural identities, social location and affiliations might make a difference to their reception of these (and potentially other) films. Since we also wanted our project to contribute to theory-building about audience receptions in general and receptions of blockbuster film adaptation franchises in particular, our research and analysis have been informed by an established analytical framework, the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of Modes of Audience Reception (hereafter the Composite Model). For the benefit of readers, we outline the major distinctions charted in this model before detailing the specific methods employed to gather our research materials, which combined Q methodology with a conventional questionnaire. This approach, we believe, has allowed us to gain rich insight into the form and content of diverse global audience receptions of this Hollywood blockbuster fantasy film trilogy.

## AUDIENCES FOR *THE HOBBIT*: INSIGHTS FROM PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Our task in attempting to chart audience responses to *The Hobbit* was made more complex because of its status as simultaneously a literary adaptation, a prequel series to a much acclaimed earlier film franchise *and* a blockbuster event-film trilogy designed to appeal to global audiences. As noted in the previous chapter, *The Hobbit* clearly benefited from the existence of two ‘pre-assembled’ audiences in the form of dedicated Tolkien readers and fans of the *Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) film trilogy eager to return to cinematic Middle-earth. We considered it likely that the pre-existing affinities of these two groups would colour their subsequent encounters with the *Hobbit* prequels. But, as we have previously noted (Davis et al. 2014), while we might imagine these two groups to be relatively distinct, there is considerable overlap between them and each is also internally diverse.

For instance, Brayton (2006) notes that even within the Tolkien fan community, there is a division between Tolkienists, whose primary allegiance is to the author and his wider corpus of literary works, and those who are more specifically fans of the *LotR* novels. Brayton also observes that there has been active online discussion of Jackson’s adaptations of Tolkien’s works since at least 1998, with Theonering.net being the key location for the articulation of fans’ hopeful imaginings and anxious speculations before the release of the *LotR* films. Chin and Gray’s (2001) in-depth analysis of these online fan discussions identified three distinct pre-viewing responses. First, a Tolkien purist position which regarded any potential deviations from the books as objectionable. This was countered by a second, more moderate Tolkien-oriented position, which sought to understand the need for modifications when translating books to screen while remaining apprehensive about the potential for unpalatable changes. The authors also observed a third position marked by wholesale enthusiasm for the long-awaited film version of a favourite book series, which many assumed was destined to enshrine its place in literary and cultural history. Thus, while many Tolkien readers expressed a strong sense of loyalty to and familiarity with the original works and their creator, not all were averse to changes being made in the process of cinematic adaptation (see also Thompson 2003).

Adding to this complexity, a new audience group has emerged in the wake of the commercial and popular success of the *LotR* film trilogy, one

which Brayton (2006, p. 144) terms ‘Ringers’, or ‘the fan of all things *Lord of the Rings*’. Yet within this new form of fandom there are different interests, loyalties, concerns and priorities, leading to internal debates and at time conflicts relating to the inclusion, exclusion or presentation of characters and scenes (Brayton 2006). As noted by Rae and Gray (2007), however, few reception studies have explored the significance of such distinctions and competing loyalties among audience groups, nor the ways differently interested and endowed viewers subsequently read and make sense of film adaptations (for further discussion see Davis et al. 2014).

One study that has attempted to address these issues explicitly is Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs’ (2008) Tolkien’s World Audiences project, which traced transnational receptions of *The Return of the King*, the final episode in the *LotR* film trilogy. The various publications emerging from this extensive project offer detailed evidence of key lines of division among viewers across multiple dimensions, but their collective impact is hampered by the absence of a shared conceptual framework with which to make sense of connections across the different publications, which analyse different sets of data in disparate ways. For instance, four ideal ‘types’ of *LotR* film viewer were identified through cluster analysis of the Italian survey data, including ‘the enthusiastic fan, the disappointed fan, the critic reader, and the mass spectator’ (Barker et al. 2008, p. 229); while suggestive, these distinctions do not appear to have been taken up more widely in the World Audiences project. Kuipers and de Kloet (2009) also performed a cluster analysis of *LotR* audiences using three different variables and found just two groups. One contained highly involved and devoted fans, predominantly from Anglophone countries, who expressed greater appreciation for the film and the book on which it is based. The other contained less involved viewers from non-English-speaking countries, who offered a wider range of interpretations and themselves diverged more strongly from what these authors posit as Hollywood’s assumed primary target market of young white males. While an interesting distinction, the lack of a shared conceptual framework makes it difficult to compare these findings with those presented by other scholars involved in the same project—including Jerslev’s (2006) analysis of emotional engagement, de Kloet and Kuipers’ (2007) and Barker’s (2009) reflections on spiritual readings, Mikos et al.’s (2008) comparison of the reception strategies used by the ‘literary’ versus ‘media’ generations and Turnbull’s (2008) discussion

of disappointed book lovers. The eclectic foci and disparate analytical approaches also make it difficult to extract from this otherwise impressive body of scholarship a more unified and coherent understanding of audiences for blockbuster adaptations of literary texts. Nonetheless, each of the above works individually informs our analysis.

In preparing for our study, we thought it likely that responses to *The Hobbit* would be influenced by whether a viewer's primary loyalty was to Tolkien's written works or Jackson's *LotR* films, following Thompson's distinction between 'book-firsters' and 'film-firsters' (Thompson 2011, p. 43). We also imagined further distinctions according to which book(s) they were most loyal to—whether it was *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* or Tolkien's wider corpus of works. While academic criticism has recently sought to expand the understanding of textual fidelity (in which original sources are given greater value and primacy than their screen adaptations [Stam 2000]), faithfulness clearly still matters for many viewers (Geraghty 2008), and thus remains an important concept in reception studies of literary adaptations such as *The Hobbit*. In addition to these pre-assembled audiences familiar with Tolkien's books and the Jackson-helmed films, we anticipated a wider viewership for this Hollywood blockbuster event-film, including film critics and scholars (who frequently denounce blockbusters as ostentatious and shallow); 'mainstream' casual viewers (who are often assumed to enjoy them as easily consumed but somewhat meaningless entertainment); fans of celebrities drawn to see their favourite stars perform on the big screen; fans of fantasy as a genre; and possibly more. In undertaking our research, we hoped to capture at least some of these distinctions among potential audiences for the *Hobbit* film trilogy and to trace their significance in shaping viewers' subsequent modes of engagement and response.

### RESEARCHING *THE HOBBIT*'S GLOBAL RECEPTION

Informed by this scholarship on Middle-earth audiences along with the wider body of research on fans, film adaptation, audience reception and blockbuster film production, our project sought to chart major distinctions in viewers' perspectives on the *Hobbit* trilogy and explain how and why their perspectives may have evolved over time. The project's focus reflects the kinds of questions we were interested in exploring from the outset. In particular:

- How was this keenly anticipated blockbuster event-film trilogy understood, engaged with and made sense of by different viewers at key moments in its life course?
- To what extent did discussion, debate, marketing and promotion of *The Hobbit* before its cinematic release shape subsequent responses to it?
- How did individual and public reactions to the first *Hobbit* film shape engagements with its sequels?
- To what extent did global responses to the *Hobbit* trilogy transcend differences in terms of nationality, language and culture?
- Were there any significant differences in audience engagement and response based on gender, age, socioeconomic class, education, occupation, ethnicity, political views, religious beliefs, fan affiliations and so on?
- Which particular aspects of national, political, economic, social and cultural positioning were most influential in shaping audience responses to the *Hobbit* trilogy, and why?

Other questions emerged over the course of our research, as the films themselves and evolving audience reactions to them suggested new avenues for exploration. In particular, we wanted to know:

- Why were responses to this prequel trilogy so mixed and seemingly polarised, particularly compared to Jackson's *LotR* films?
- How did differently aligned viewers respond to the blockbusterisation of J. R. R. Tolkien's original novel as a familiar collective cultural property?
- What impact did this film trilogy's pioneering combination of CGI, high frame rate projection and stereoscopic 3D have on audience engagement and response?
- In what ways did New Zealand's central involvement in the transnational production of *The Hobbit* inform local and global perceptions of the films, their conditions of production and New Zealand as a sovereign nation?
- And, finally, in what ways did the meaning and significance of the *Hobbit* trilogy change over time?

Ultimately, we hoped that our research would offer in-depth understanding of how different audiences, each with prior experiences, desires

and commitments, engaged with the *Hobbit* trilogy from the period immediately before the release of *An Unexpected Journey* (*AUJ*) to the post-release period following *The Battle of the Five Armies* (*BotFA*). In this respect, our research adopted a very different approach to previous research on audiences for the *LotR*. Most importantly, ours was a longitudinal as well as cross-cultural empirical investigation informed by an explicit theoretical understanding of audience reception, and utilised a unique mixed-methods research design that incorporated what is known as Q methodology. In what follows, we explain our research design and its rationale in greater detail, and outline the kinds of problems we hoped to overcome in developing our methodological approach.

### A LONGITUDINAL INVESTIGATION INTO RECEPTIONS OF A BLOCKBUSTER FRANCHISE

The most obvious point of difference between our project and virtually all previous work in this area is our use of a longitudinal approach to data collection, which traced the evolution of audience responses to all three *Hobbit* films over the full course of the trilogy. Our research thus began in 2012, with our first online survey of potential viewers' opinions and forms of engagement being conducted in the three weeks before *AUJ*'s world premiere in Wellington, New Zealand, on 28 November 2012. This survey gathered 1000 usable responses from 59 different countries. This was followed by a survey of *AUJ*'s reception, conducted initially in English from February to June 2013, with translated versions going online in six other languages in April that year. From these multilingual surveys, a combined total of 2870 responses were collected from 85 countries. A third survey of *The Desolation of Smaug* (*DoS*) audiences took place from January to July 2014 and collected 1051 responses from 62 countries. The final survey of receptions of *BotFA* took place from January to May 2015 and collected 840 responses in total from 49 countries.

By surveying viewers at key moments in the *Hobbit* trilogy's cinematic release, we have been able to track the transformation of audience reactions to a wide range of textual features that reflect the economic, industrial, creative and commercial imperatives and processes governing the production of a contemporary blockbuster event-film franchise. This kind of longitudinal research on audiences is highly unusual. Most studies of

film reception tend to focus in depth on responses to one particular film, even when it is part of a series. While so doing allows researchers to capture a ‘snapshot’ of receptions at a particular moment, it neglects to consider how those receptions might have evolved over time in response to repeated viewing or conversation with others, for instance. Such studies consequently tend to present reception as a fixed and static phenomenon. While our research is perhaps best thought of as a series of snapshots taken at different moments, it does allow us to hold steady and compare the responses of individuals and groups at key stages in the trilogy’s life course. It means we can objectively contrast responses elicited before the first film’s release, with those gathered following each instalment and after the final *Hobbit* movie appeared in cinemas two years later—a capacity that is exceedingly rare in the field of audience studies to date.

In effect, our longitudinal methodology has allowed us to capture evolving audience reactions to the currently dominant Hollywood production strategy of serialisation and the franchise model, in which filmmaking becomes deeply entwined with ongoing marketing and promotional efforts to ensure that a massive global audience is built and then sustained for various sequels or spin-offs. It has also afforded our project considerable flexibility. We were able to adjust and refine our research tools at each successive stage of the project and could add specifically targeted questions to the latter surveys to explore pertinent issues as they emerged, whether from our analysis of earlier survey data or wider public discussion around the films. For instance, it became clear from our first post-viewing survey that some respondents had been troubled by *AUJ*’s unusual visual aesthetic. In our subsequent surveys, we were able to add additional questions about *The Hobbit*’s pioneering use of high frame rate stereoscopic 3D. A graduate student was recruited to conduct a parallel project using an online questionnaire to gain greater insight into the views of 650 respondents from 49 different countries. This very useful information was supplemented by 39 Skype and email interviews with selected informants who represented the broad range of perspectives expressed in the questionnaire responses. Thus, our longitudinal approach allowed the project to expand and evolve to gain greater insight into the expressed interests and concerns of our respondents.

In all, then, we received 6450 responses from participants living in over 85 different countries. All were generous in contributing their thoughts and feelings about the *Hobbit* films, often in considerable depth. Several hundred respondents completed more than one survey,

while 174 participated in all three post-viewing surveys. Of these, more than 50 completed all four core *Hobbit* surveys, offering an unprecedented opportunity to compare individual responses at key moments across the life course of a blockbuster film trilogy. The generous commitment of these respondents was extraordinary, and we are grateful to them, and indeed all our participants. Their willingness to share their views has allowed us to track the evolving opinions of different groups of viewers over time, pinpoint the attributes of the *Hobbit* films that caused enchantment, disinterest or disaffection, and interpret divergent responses to the film in terms of a more general model of audience reception, about which more shall be said below. To the best of our knowledge, the rich and extensive longitudinal data provided by our respondents is unprecedented in the field of audience studies.

### A LARGE-SCALE INVESTIGATION

A second key difference from most existing studies of audience reception is the comparatively large scale of our *Hobbit* audience project. It is considerably larger than most other studies of film reception, but also smaller than two global projects led by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, for quite deliberate reasons in both cases. In particular, the decision to recruit a large number of respondents relates to concerns regarding the generalisability of the findings obtained from most existing studies of audience reception, particularly within the ethnographic tradition of British cultural studies. To date, as Morley (2006) observes, there has been a wealth of qualitative research offering detailed insights into specific encounters between viewers and particular media texts, with small-scale ethnographic case studies being typical. As Barker (2006) suggests, the field has struggled to generate easily comparable observations that might support the formulation of stronger, testable generalisations, which is necessary to develop a clearer theoretical understanding of the nature of media reception per se. While having large numbers of respondents is not in itself sufficient to achieve greater generalisability and applicability of findings beyond the particular case in question, it does increase their reliability and validity, while guarding against potential idiosyncrasies in the interpretation of data derived from small and often unrepresentative samples.

Our decision to seek large numbers of respondents also stemmed from a belief that doing so would make it possible to explore a



long-standing question concerning the degree to which individual receptions are shaped by wider social contexts of viewing. Since the early 1980s, researchers have sought to understand the influence of social positioning (in terms of gender, class, age, education, occupation and so forth) on people's receptions of media content. Seminal work includes David Morley's (1980) landmark study of the *Nationwide* audience, which identified distinct class-based differences in viewers' responses to a television news programme, Andrea Press's (1991) research exploring class and generational differences in women's receptions of American television drama and Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz's (1990) detailed study of cross-national receptions of the US primetime television soap opera *Dallas*. Continuing in this tradition, we were interested in exploring possible relationships between receptions of *The Hobbit* and potentially important dimensions of social location—and not only the traditional ones of nationality, gender, age and class, but also education, professional experience in the media industries, political and religious beliefs, pre-existing fandoms and familiarity with key texts—such as the novel on which the *Hobbit* films were based, and Jackson's earlier *LotR* trilogy.

In the past, the possible relationship between individual receptions and aspects of social location has typically been examined using qualitative methods such as interviews and more especially focus groups. As a result, it has been difficult to generate reliable evidence of the relationships between reception and aspects of social location, for two reasons. First, the number of respondents involved in interview or focus group research is usually relatively small and unrepresentative of the wider viewing population, due to the resource-intensive and often exploratory nature of such research. Second, many researchers assume in advance that their respondents are members of particular interpretive communities with shared experiences, values and related reception strategies, and hence that it is reasonable to construct focus groups comprised either of naturally occurring groups, or of unconnected respondents who share the same nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, political interest and so on (see, for instance, Mikos et al. 2008). This common, inexpensive and convenient method imposes in advance certain assumptions about which particular aspect(s) of identity will be most significant in a given context. There is a danger that such thinking can become simplistic and reductionist, all too easily sliding into an implicit notion of social or cultural determinism.

To avoid making any such assumptions, we sought an approach that would allow us to explore possible links between social location, fan affiliations and audience receptions, in a way that did not assume prior knowledge of the relative importance of any particular aspect. We were also aware of the need to avoid reifying or naturalising either ‘identity’ or ‘culture’ as somehow singular, unified and uncontested. Identity, in the postmodern era, is increasingly regarded as somewhat unstable and intersectional, in the sense that we are never *just* women or men, English or French, fan or anti-fan, but are rather *multiply* positioned across various lines of difference that are themselves becoming increasingly complex. We may be women, men or possibly transgender, of a particular nationality that may differ to that of our birth, and may lay claim to multiple ethnic origins and fandoms, and so forth. Both ‘class’ and ‘culture’ have become more fractured, fluid and mobile phenomena in an age of globalisation and unprecedented rates of cross-border migration. The exponential growth and global spread of the Internet and social media has helped popularise identity politics ‘old’ and new, while playing a key role in forging transnational *communities of interest* based around shared cultural and political affiliations, media fandoms and so on. While these communities of interest remain tenuous and are often internally divided, they are nonetheless increasingly significant—and in the realms of global media fandoms, they may be more important than ‘traditional’ and supposedly stable markers of social identity such as gender, ethnicity or nationality.

We consequently sought an approach for our *Hobbit* Audience Project that would avoid making assumptions about the relative significance of any particular aspect of identity or national culture in shaping receptions, whilst also making it possible to explore the conditions under which a person’s social or national identities, location and affiliations actually might make a difference, in what ways, and *why*. To avoid criticisms that our methodological choices shaped certain outcomes from the outset (and in particular, to avoid making presumptions about which aspects of identity would be most influential), we chose to explore such questions after the fact, working backwards from how our respondents actually made sense of the films to examine whether there were any patterns in the distribution of modes of response based on particular aspects of social location. To do this in a way that would provide statistically meaningful results, we aimed to recruit around 1000 respondents in each phase, achieving this for all but our final post-viewing survey.

## CONTRIBUTING TO THEORY-BUILDING

While attracting large numbers of respondents was important, we realised it would not be sufficient, particularly given our wider aim of contributing to understandings of the nature of audience reception *per se*. To achieve this, our research needed to be clearly linked to an existing body of knowledge on how viewers engage with and make sense of screen media texts in general. This is the third key difference between our project and most other studies conducted to date. We have employed an explicitly elucidated model of reception to interpret our findings, known as the Composite Model (Michelle 2007). The distinct viewing modes charted in this model have been empirically observed and described within the larger body of audience reception research (using a variety of terminology), including seminal studies of television and (less frequently) film, such as those cited above.

Use of an explicit analytical framework was necessary because we wanted our project to go beyond merely describing similarities and differences in our participants' responses to these particular films. We wanted to contribute not only to our knowledge of how this particular group of viewers responded to *The Hobbit*, but to theory-building about audience reception in general, and of blockbuster film adaptation franchises in particular. To facilitate this, our results needed to be made sense of in relation to an existing model or theory of reception that other researchers could likewise draw on to interpret *their* findings, so that the two sets of findings might be compared in a valid and meaningful way (see Yin 2010, for a discussion of analytical generalisation).

As well as being grounded in an extensive body of scholarship on audience reception, the Composite Model has been applied in research on receptions of James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film *Avatar* (Michelle et al. 2012), TV dramas including *Dexter* (Tager and Matthee 2014; Granelli and Zenor 2016), *The West Wing* (Zenor 2014), *Breaking Bad* (McKeown et al. 2015), and *The Sopranos* (Van Ommen et al. 2016), and reality TV shows *Rockstar: Supernova* (Michelle 2009) and *The Biggest Loser* (Holland et al. 2015). While these studies were conducted in a variety of locations—online/international, the USA, South Africa, the Netherlands and Australia—they draw on the same analytical framework, making it possible to observe parallels between their findings. Hence, there is a body of existing (and hopefully future) empirical research to which our results can be compared and insights generated

across genres and cultural contexts. This facilitates theory-building and testing, because without a common set of analytical concepts or propositions it is difficult to compare findings relating to different texts, genres, cultural contexts of viewing and audiences—particularly if the methods used also differ. As Esser and Hanitzsch (2012a, p. 7) suggest, ‘the objects of analysis need to be compared on the basis of a common theoretical framework and by drawing on equivalent conceptualizations and methods’. By using an explicitly articulated analytical framework to interpret data gathered via a standardised methodology, we hoped it would be possible to one day compare responses to *The Hobbit* with responses to other blockbuster fantasy adventure films, major literary adaptations and indeed films of entirely different genres, and to establish whether similar modes of response were evident, or not. This kind of approach, we believed, would ensure the project made a contribution to theory development and refinement, and to the progression of knowledge about audience reception per se.

To briefly outline our chosen theoretical framework, the Composite Model charts four broad modes of audience engagement and response: *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated* and *discursive* (Fig. 2.1). When watching a fictional narrative in a *transparent* mode, viewers temporarily suspend disbelief and critical distance to grant the fictional world the status of ‘real life’, entering fully into the story to derive the specific forms of pleasure and enjoyment intended by the text’s makers (Michelle 2007). Media effects researchers have gone further in elucidating this mode of engagement in relation to entertainment media, citing as a key aspect the experience of being ‘transported’ into a fictional world by the narrative (following Green and Brock 2000; see also Green et al. 2004, 2012; Hall and Zwarun 2012; Tal-Or and Cohen 2015). Viewers in this mode experience deep engagement and full immersion in the text, feel ‘swept away’ by the story and often physically present in the story-world, frequently report strong feelings of identification with the central character(s) or textual themes, lose awareness of the passing of time and may experience an intense emotional response (Michelle 2007). The transparent mode represents the preferred response to a fantasy adventure film such as *The Hobbit*, and is particularly relevant given Jackson’s stated creative intent to transport viewers back to Middle-earth.

Conversely, in a *referential* mode, the text is primarily understood in relation to viewers’ experiential knowledge(s) and perceptions of its relevance (or lack thereof) to the real world (Michelle 2007). In this mode,

DENOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING		
<b><u>Transparent Mode:</u></b> <b>Text as life</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Non-fiction texts:</i> perceived as a 'mirror' of reality</li> <li>■ <i>Fiction texts:</i> 'suspension of disbelief'; narrative transportation</li> <li>■ Ideological/discursive content is <i>implicitly</i> read 'straight' → dominant/preferred decoding</li> </ul>	<b><u>Referential Mode:</u></b> <b>Text as <i>like</i> life</b> <p><i>Comparative sources potentially drawn on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Personal experience/individual biography</li> <li>ii) Immediate life world experience</li> <li>iii) Experience and knowledge of the wider social/political/ economic/cultural/ national/international context of production or reception</li> </ul>	<b><u>Mediated Mode:</u></b> <b>Text as a <i>production</i></b> <p><i>Heightened focus on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Textual aesthetics</li> <li>ii) Generic form</li> <li>iii) Intentionality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual</li> <li>• Generic</li> <li>• Professional/ Industry-based</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
CONNOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING		
<b><u>Discursive Mode:</u> Text as a <i>message</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) <b><i>Analytical</i></b> (Comprehension of message) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Implication</li> </ul> </li> <li>ii) <b><i>Positional</i></b> (Response to that message) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Dominant/Preferred</i></li> <li><i>Negotiated</i></li> <li><i>Oppositional</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>		
EVALUATION		
<i>Hegemonic Reading</i>	<i>Contesting Reading</i>	<i>Counter-Hegemonic Reading</i>

Close/ Subjective ← -----→ Distant / Objective  
(Relationship between text and viewer)

Fig. 2.1 The Composite Multi-dimensional Model of Modes of Audience Reception (Michelle 2007; revised)

viewers often make comparisons and analogies between the depicted reality and the world ‘out there’. In so doing, they typically draw from aspects of their lives and experiences, observations and knowledges to assess the accuracy of textual depictions of people and events and the version of ‘reality’ presented. While it is certainly possible to adopt this mode when watching a fantasy adventure film such as *The Hobbit*, this kind of response is more likely to emerge when texts contain explicit allegorical content that makes overt references to objects or events within the ‘real world’—as two of us found in our research on viewers’ reactions to *Avatar* (Michelle et al. 2012).

In the typically more distanced and ‘objective’ *mediated* mode, viewers focus explicitly on the constructed nature of the text as an aesthetic object and media production that has been shaped by established media codes and conventions and created by particular authors (Michelle 2007). It is possible to identify three subcategories within this broader approach to sense-making. A mediated mode of reception with an *aesthetic* focus is one in which the viewer draws attention to and evaluates formal features of the text as a production, such as narrative construction, plot, pace, timing, cinematography, visual effects, editing, script-writing, performance, characterisation and so on. Conversely, a mediated mode of reception with a focus on *generic form* is one where viewers evaluate the text in terms of its typological conformity to certain generic conventions, or use texts of the same series or genre as interpretive frames of reference, drawing intertextual comparisons between them—as when viewers compare a film adaptation to the novel on which it is based, or to other films of the same genre or within the same franchise. This subcategory of response obviously has particular relevance given *The Hobbit*’s status as an adaptation of Tolkien’s much-loved novel, by the same director as the hugely successful *LotR* film trilogy. The *Hobbit* films were thus likely to invite detailed intertextual comparisons with at least two pre-existing cultural properties—the original novel, and Jackson’s *LotR* trilogy. The third type of mediated reception is one which draws on viewers’ perceptions of the intentions and motivations of a text’s producers in terms of meeting various textual, generic and professional or industry-based *imperatives*—such as the need to generate humour, interest or drama, to inform or entertain, or even to attract a lucrative viewing audience in order to generate profit for the television network or film studio—also highly relevant given *The Hobbit*’s status as a capital-intensive blockbuster adaptation franchise.

Finally, Michelle (2007) suggests that receptions framed in a *discursive* mode primarily and overtly address the text's propositional or 'message' content—in other words, its ideological connotations. Responses in this mode give particular credence to the text's perceived attempt to communicate a message about the wider social world and represent the viewer's reaction to that message. In assessing the connotative meaning of the text in relation to their unique stock of prior beliefs, assumptions and discursive allegiances, viewers may adopt one of the three positions theorised by Stuart Hall (1980)—preferred/dominant, negotiated or oppositional. While all texts and receptions clearly have a discursive element, some genres and texts are more clearly and immediately seeking to communicate an overt message, perhaps to persuade or inform. Thus, while it is certainly possible for viewers to adopt this mode when making sense of a fantasy adventure film such as *The Hobbit*, much depends on the emphasis given to deeper themes and messages throughout the production process.

While viewers potentially have access to all four modes and may shift or 'commute' (Schröder 1986) between them at different moments, the four modes themselves remain distinct and potentially contradictory, since they utilise different sets of cultural and discursive competencies. Much of the variability of audience response, this model suggests, is due to the tendency for different segments of the audience to adopt (and in some cases commute between) distinct viewing modes which, working in tandem with the parameters imposed by textual encoding, shape the readings that are likely to be produced (Michelle 2007). Furthermore, certain kinds of text invite particular forms of interpretive engagement. Thus, while spectacular blockbuster event films may encourage a transparent mode of reading and use a range of techniques designed to facilitate narrative immersion, we assumed that a literary adaptation such as *The Hobbit* might also elicit a mediated mode of response focused on generic form and the quality of the adaptation, particularly among viewers who were deeply familiar with Tolkien's original novel.

## A CROSS-CULTURAL EXPLORATION

A fourth key distinguishing feature of our research is that it is a study of transnational receptions of a globally disseminated transnational film production. Given that *The Hobbit* was specifically designed and intended for a global audience, we wanted to design a study that could transcend

national and cultural borders in the process of data collection, without sacrificing the capacity to subsequently analyse the possible significance of national and cultural identity in shaping receptions of this blockbuster trilogy. By widely disseminating our survey online in several languages, we hoped to attract sufficient numbers of respondents from at least a handful of nations to be able to discern any culturally or nationally distinctive receptions of *The Hobbit*, whilst remaining open to the possibility that receptions might actually be more strongly shaped by deterritorialisated communities of interest, including fan affiliations. Indeed, based on earlier research on global receptions of *LotR*, we thought it likely that certain receptions of this blockbuster film trilogy would be widely dispersed and perhaps universal, but designed the project in a way that made it possible to formally *test* this assumption, rather than taking for granted *The Hobbit*'s uniform appeal globally.

While this kind of large-scale comparative research has become somewhat more common in media and communication studies, only a few studies have focused on audience engagements with entertainment media: most notably, Liebes and Katz's (1990) landmark research on cross-national receptions of *Dallas*, Wasko et al.'s (2001) study of audiences for *Disney*, Mathijs and Jones' (2004) study of receptions of *Big Brother* and Barker and Mathijs' (2008) collaborative investigation of audiences for *LotR*. While resource-intensive and often difficult to accomplish, cross-national studies are important if researchers are to establish the wider applicability of their findings beyond specific geographical and cultural locations (Livingstone 2012), and essential to determine the 'generalizability of theories, assumptions, and propositions' (Blumler et al. 1992, p. 8; see also Esser and Hanitzsch 2012a; Stehling et al. 2016). Such an approach is especially important when studying globally disseminated media products viewed by audiences living in different countries, often in different languages: it would be impossible to make any general claims about *The Hobbit*'s reception without considering whether audiences in different countries had the same kinds of reactions to it. Indeed, Livingstone (2012, p. 417) suggests that 'it is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world'. Other scholars have noted that comparative research aids in avoiding the 'parochialism and ethnocentrism' (Esser 2013, p. 113) that can ensue when broad generalisations are made based on findings derived from a single cultural or national context.



One significant benefit of comparative research lies in its potential contributions to analytical generalisation, theory development and contextualisation (Esser 2013, p. 113). As previously noted, the *Hobbit* Audience Project applies the Composite Model, which posits the existence of four *universal* modes of reception. To ascertain whether there are indeed underlying modes of reception that transcend differences of culture, gender, age and so on, our research needed to gather observations from a wide range of individuals in different countries and regions of the world. As Esser and Hanitzsch (2012b, p. 522) argue, ‘Only comparative research allows us to test a theory across diverse settings and evaluate the scope and significance of certain phenomena’. A comparative approach was thus vital if this project was to fulfil our ambitions of contributing to theory-building in audience reception studies.

So, for each of the surveys we conducted, we endeavoured to attract a diverse sample of viewers from a wide range of geographical locations. This was particularly emphasised for the first reception survey, where invitations to participate were widely disseminated online in seven different languages (English, Spanish, German, French, Dutch, Danish and Flemish). We and our research collaborators and assistants targeted potential respondents via various fan forums such as Theonering.net as well as the Facebook pages of groups representing a diverse range of intertextual, professional and political affiliations in countries where these languages are predominantly spoken. In an effort to avoid this research being, in essence, only a study of fan receptions of *The Hobbit*, the invitation was posted on the pages of film societies and major film studios, fantasy fiction readers, political parties in several countries, film directors and cinematographers, the stars of the trilogy, online gamers and so on, as well as groups dedicated to Tolkien, the *Hobbit* novel and movies, and the *LotR* films and books in various languages. From there, a form of snowballing extended our reach as some individuals reposted the invitation on other sites, such as [www.richardarmitagenet.com](http://www.richardarmitagenet.com) and a Russian Tolkien website. Press releases generated further coverage in some of New Zealand’s national and regional newspapers and on two national radio stations, and the project received some media exposure in the USA and Canada. Finally, each member of the research team was asked to circulate the invitation through their professional, institutional and personal networks. The use of these recruitment strategies means that our respondents constitute a network-based convenience sample rather than a representative one, and this is important to bear in mind:

our findings are specific to our survey population, and do not necessarily reflect the distribution of viewpoints within the wider mainstream *Hobbit* audience.

Of course, there is more to doing cross-cultural research than recruiting multilingual respondents from a wide range of countries. Their responses have to be interpreted, and made sense of, often by researchers who do not share the same cultural or linguistic background. Much of the difficulty in conducting cross-cultural research lies in finding research tools that allow for meaningful and reliable comparisons to be made across national contexts and linguistic borders. As Schröder (2011) notes, it is particularly difficult to make comparisons and formulate generalisations across different qualitative studies conducted in different contexts. This is one of the reasons why, for this study, we decided to adopt a hybrid or mixed-method approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, using Q methodology in conjunction with conventional questionnaires administered online. This would ensure we could meaningfully compare our results, since all respondents were provided with the same ‘tools’ with which to express their unique viewpoint, and the analytical procedures used to analyse responses were the same in each case.

### GROUNDED IN Q METHODOLOGY: A QUALI-QUANTITATIVE HYBRID

For those unfamiliar with this approach, Q is a true methodological hybrid, combining the mathematical rigour of quantitative methods with a strong interpretive component more commonly found in qualitative approaches to human research. It was invented by psychologist/physicist William Stephenson in the 1930s as a structured research tool specifically designed to analyse the nature and diversity of people’s attitudes, beliefs, perspectives or subjective experiences relating to a given topic (Stephenson 1953), and is especially useful for revealing significant similarities and differences among respondents (Brown 1977). Q’s quali-quantitative approach can potentially elicit insight into people’s perspectives in the detailed and holistic way more typically associated with in-depth interviews and focus groups, whilst providing clear structure, capacity for replication, and robust measurement-based analysis (see Watts and Stenner 2012, for a detailed overview of the history and

process of Q methodology; see Michelle and Davis 2014, for a discussion of Q's application within audience studies). We believe Q methodology offers a solution to a central methodological challenge facing audience researchers, as posed by Barker and Mathijs (2008, p. 9): how to preserve the rich complexity of respondents' qualitative data while still retaining the capacity 'to generalise from it (map the whole terrain of audience responses, distinguish different groups, demonstrate patterned connections, even show trends over time).'

In Q methodology research, participants are asked to rank-order a set of statements chosen to represent a wide range of ideas and opinions about the text or topic in question according to whether they agree, disagree or are neutral about the sentiment expressed. Through the ranking process, Q methodology allows each individual to 'map out' his or her viewpoint in a multidimensional sense, and to position themselves in relation to others on a range of relevant issues. What is more, it does so in a way that is almost entirely independent and *self-referential*, in that the process relies on respondents' self-directed actions and choices as they evaluate the statements according to their subjective values and preferences (Watts and Stenner 2012).

For the *Hobbit* Audience Project, the statements that respondents were asked to sort were derived from extensive 'cultural trawls' (Stenner and Marshall 1995, p. 626) of the wider discursive terrain or *concourse* around each film. This wide-ranging trawl aimed to identify the major issues, themes and concerns being expressed in public discussions of these films, and to capture a range of perspectives on them so that each individual respondent might, in turn, use these available resources to broadly convey his or her own viewpoint. Our four cultural trawls focused on print and online news coverage of the production, media and film commentary, early professional and amateur film reviews in the case of the post-viewing surveys, commentary on social media and in key fan websites such as Theonering.net, film blogs, discussion board comments, and comments on Peter Jackson's production videos and the *Hobbit* trailers on YouTube. The kinds of statements we considered for inclusion took the form of subjective opinions rather than facts. As such, all perspectives on the films were treated as potentially suitable to include, irrespective of origins. Our primary consideration in selecting a statement was whether it clearly reflected a particular shared *sentiment* or belief expressed in a succinct way, and we aimed to obtain a broad and inclusive impression of the range of things being said about different aspects

of each film. By way of example, the cultural trawl conducted for our first reception survey sought to capture opinions relating to each of these categories:

Story/narrative structure, director/directing, the decision to make three films, editing, aspects of film craft, issues relating to adaptation, the inclusion of additional materials, continuity with the *LotR* films, responses to stereoscopic 3D, CGI/visual effects, HFR 48fps, music/score/songs, narrative transportation, suspension of disbelief, excitement/enthusiasm, emotion/affects, characters/casting, character identification, meanings/themes, real world/personal relevance, feelings of nostalgia, the social experience of viewing, opposition/dislike, disengagement, disappointment, other.

The selection of relevant statements continued until a degree of redundancy began to emerge among the themes expressed, although it quickly became apparent that certain issues were generating far more discussion and debate than others, which would need to be reflected in the final Q sample. Since sampling of the concourse and selection of the Q sample is one area where the researcher's subjective and cultural biases may influence findings in Q methodology research, we employed research assistants to undertake the cultural trawl and preliminary sampling of representative statements.

Since it is not practical to include large numbers of statements in online Q surveys (due to the risks of participant fatigue and the small size of many computer screens, which places constraints on the extent of the grid and the readability of Q items) it was then necessary to progressively whittle these statements down by eliminating repetition and redundancy in the categories and consolidating related ideas and themes. Ultimately, our surveys each contained 36–42 statements (see Appendices 3–6), which respondents read, sorted and placed into a ranked grid arrangement, as seen in Fig. 2.2.

Were completed, all the Q sorts were collectively analysed by person to identify statistically significant *factors*. A summary of the main audience segments identified in each survey can be found in Appendix A. These segments represent groups of individuals who ranked the statements in similar ways and can be said to share a similar perspective or viewpoint on the topic (Watts and Stenner 2012).

MOST DISAGREE									MOST AGREE			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9				
(33) This first film just didn't give me enough to make me dare. I probably won't watch the next two films in theatres.	(26) This film is a technological milestone, and a game-changer for the industry. I was amazed by how the...	(21) Watching this film I felt enraptured and had an overwhelming sense of joy. I laughed and smiled much of the time, and almost...	(2) The soundtrack, especially the tiny Mounties song, was very beautiful and powerful.	(26) I appreciate the message of The Hobbit, which is that no matter how small or insignificant you are, with courage...	(6) The magic of the novel was missing, and the sense of drama and cinematic delight was diminished. The film...	(13) It took me back to the days I lived the most... Middle Earth. You really get the sense that this is an old world rich in...	(22) The film was too whimsical and too silly at times. While the book relied on Bilbo's quirky nature and wit, the film took a more...	(31) The grain of film was replaced by the gloss of high definition video, giving everything and everyone a false...				
(18) Within seconds I was transported back to Middle Earth, completely immersed, and upon leaving the theatre felt like I was...	(16) The Hobbit fails to balance the demands of good cinema against catering to its hordes of fans, the film fails.	(19) I felt proud of my country's association with this film production.	(10) The sheer amount of graphic violence in the movie is far beyond what is in the book. The level of violence is...	(16) I thought the film was a great balance between fun targeted at children, and timing it to the more adult segment of Lord...	(22) I felt bored and underentertained at times. It was very long and drawn out, and lacked momentum.	(11) Time flew by so quickly, I barely noticed. I wished the film didn't have to end, so soon, I could easily have kept watching.	(27) I really enjoyed seeing this film with other fans who are important to me.	(26) The themes in The Hobbit are very relevant to the real world today. Greed, war, betrayal, and alienation from one's...				
(15) The film is not about a reluctant hero drawing courage from some deep personal well. It is just a showcase for...	(15) The film is not about a reluctant hero drawing courage from some deep personal well. It is just a showcase for...	(27) The computer generated imagery was too obvious. I wanted to be able to immerse myself in the film and not be constantly...	(25) Changes have to be made when a book is adapted for the big screen. Jackson did a great job of following the story line for the...	(28) The film was too similar to the Lord of the Rings series.	(12) The casting and editing were real strengths of this film. Particular performances were especially strong.	(14) All the hype-buildup prior to this film's release made me feel a bit conflicted about seeing The Hobbit.	(34) The commercial motivation is clear when such a short and well-crafted book is split into three films. The story was diluted.					
		(26) Watching The Hobbit was like seeing old friends again, after missing them for ten years.	(4) The Hobbit is a coming of age tale for me, of finding who you really are and breaking from social norms if need be to...	(4) Overall, it lacked much of the energy, passion and epic scale of the Lord of the Rings films, and wasn't particularly...	(26) This movie really brought back old memories and evoked a strong sense of nostalgia in me.	(14) All the hype-buildup prior to this film's release made me feel a bit conflicted about seeing The Hobbit.	(34) The commercial motivation is clear when such a short and well-crafted book is split into three films. The story was diluted.					
		(11) More editing was needed. Not only was the film too padded, but it was cramped out and expanded to fill the time. The...	(17) There was too much deviation from the book and too much emphasis on editing action scenes. I wish I had stuck...									
		(3) The scenic New Zealand landscapes were gorgeous - it seems like a beautiful fantasy land.		(5) The story related in The Hobbit focuses people about the real values in life: honesty, loyalty, friendship, sacrifice, courage...								
				(5) The film was badly let down by one or two over-the-top and unrealistic characterisations.								

Fig. 2.2 A completed Q sort

To some readers, the categories produced via factor analysis may seem somewhat reductive. Critics sometimes claim that the desire of Q methodologists to assign respondents to categories obscures the complexity and inherent ‘messiness’ of individual perceptions. This accusation, we believe, arises from a misunderstanding of Q methodology’s analytical processes, since the categories or shared viewpoints in fact emerge from the collective actions of individual respondents in independently sorting the Q statements provided to them according to their own preferences. Factor analysis is used to subsequently identify groups of respondents who sorted the statements in statistically similar ways, with very little, if any, mediation from the researcher. The viewpoints that emerged at each stage of our research can thus be said to have been naturally occurring but latent among respondents *themselves*, rather than being a product of us imposing a pre-existing schema on our data or attempting to force respondents into neat and tidy groups.

Furthermore, we take the view that analytic generalisation (and thus theory-building and testing) requires the creation of meaningful categories using a transparent, reliable and replicable process. While these categories cannot capture the full complexity of individual respondents’ perspectives, nor their final views on the topic (both because the views expressed are in response to a specific *condition of instruction* and rely on the ‘tools’ provided, and because processes of reception may be

ongoing with repeated re-engagement with both the main text and its intertexts), we nonetheless emphasise that they do reflect statistically significant and clearly meaningful distinctions in the expressed viewpoints of our respondents. As others have noted, Q makes it possible to identify and systematically compare the range of viewpoints shared by individuals within the population of respondents and to pinpoint their unique components, as well as any areas of consensus (Brown 1980; McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012). This unique capacity proved to be extremely useful for our project, especially given the volume of responses with which we were working across four distinct stages. Making sense of all that very rich material would have been virtually impossible without some means of systematically and objectively categorising several thousand responses.

Our use of Q methodology is one of the most significant distinctions between our research and previous studies of film audiences. While quite often utilised in tourism and environmental studies, political science, policy studies, psychology, education, and nursing and health research, Q is less well known within media studies (see Michelle and Davis 2014). This lack of familiarity is something we hope our project will help change, as we believe the standardised methodological and analytical approach used in Q methodology provides a robust foundation for addressing some ongoing questions in the field, and also makes it possible to overcome some of the challenges of cross-national comparative research. This is because, as Schröder (2011, p. 22) argues, Q data is both contextualised within the lifeworlds of respondents and ‘can be translated into a standardized form, which makes it possible to perform common, standardized statistical procedures and to produce generalizations in the form of typologies that are transparent and immediately comparable.’ What those typologies or viewpoints themselves mean and the underlying orientations they reflect, is, of course, subject to interpretation (see Watts and Stenner 2012). Our understanding of the factors that emerged was informed both by the extensive open-ended qualitative comments of our participants, and our chosen analytical framework—the Composite Model.

While there are considerable challenges in administering Q sorts online in a large-scale project such as this (a point to which we shall return in Chap. 10), doing so offers some significant advantages, including the ability to access geographically dispersed niche audiences for media texts, and the potential to explore cross-cultural and longitudinal

differences in audience response in a highly structured, robust manner. As our project demonstrates, parallel multilingual Q samples can be constructed and administered relatively efficiently online. Adapting and expanding the capacity of Q methodology in this way, it has been possible to compare qualitative data across languages and national contexts, as we illustrate in Chap. 9.

### BOLSTERED BY A CONVENTIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

To help us interpret the factors identified using Q methodology, we also asked our respondents to complete a conventional questionnaire, the first part of which asked several questions about levels of anticipation, enchantment and enjoyment, pre-existing fandoms and familiarity with Tolkien's novels and Jackson's *LotR* trilogy, and so forth. This section also included some open-ended questions seeking insight into the meanings our respondents' attributed to each film, what they would change, which character they identified with, their reactions to new cinematic technologies and so on. These comments are often fascinating and highly revealing, and by drawing on them in our discussion, we hope to convey a real sense of the individual personalities of the many and varied contributors to our research. In the final section, we asked questions about a wide range of socio-demographic group memberships as well as religious and political affiliations. We included several variables here, because we did not want to presume in advance which combinations would be most relevant in shaping audience interpretation and response, and also sought to explore a number of theoretically significant relationships in our analysis.

To give readers an indication of the kinds of questions asked and the wide range of data collected, we present our *AUJ* post-viewing questionnaire in Appendix B. As this shows, the surveys were relatively lengthy, which very likely contributed to a somewhat lower completion rate than might have been achieved had we chosen to use a simpler instrument. The use of a detailed questionnaire reflected a conscious decision on our part to privilege the quality and usefulness of the data collected over obtaining a potentially unmanageably large number of responses, given the limited resources at our disposal for the important analysis phase. The wisdom of this decision is, we believe, amply demonstrated by the wide range of significant insights our approach has garnered and by our

capacity to explore various theoretical issues using our data sets, as shall be illustrated in the following chapters.

Our research thus adopts a mixed-method approach (Creswell 2015; Flick 2017); we have collected quantitative and qualitative data using two distinct methods, and analyse and integrate these different data sources to gain insight into the dominant trends among our respondents. While Q methodology is inherently hybrid in nature, combining it with a detailed questionnaire extends our study's capacity to employ what is called methodological triangulation, in which the use of two or more distinct methods means that results obtained using one technique can be corroborated and validated with reference to findings derived from the other(s) (Denzin 1970). To that end, the qualitative data from the open-ended questions was coded *independently* of the audience categories derived from Q sorting. That is, all data relating to each question in the questionnaire was coded without the coders having knowledge of how individual respondents had been grouped based on their Q sorts, or even how their responses to other questions had been categorised. This separation of the different analytical processes was necessary because inductive coding has a subjective component in terms of how coders classify open-ended comments; knowing in advance which viewpoint an individual was associated with could thus potentially influence the interpretation of their remarks. Avoiding this possibility of coder/confirmation bias means that each set of results can legitimately be used to validate the others through the convergence of findings, while also allowing us to extend our understanding of key issues well beyond what might have been possible using factor analysis alone. Our research thus surpasses the more basic use of triangulation, since we consciously used multiple methods 'as a source of *extra knowledge* about the issue in question and *not* just for confirming what is already known from the first approach (convergence of findings)' (Flick 2017, p. 53; original emphasis). By gathering both qualitative and quantitative data using two methods in the same survey, our project has benefited from a more sophisticated form of theoretical, methodological and data triangulation.

Combining Q methodology's unique capacity to reveal shared subjectivity in conjunction with a detailed questionnaire has allowed us to chart the evolution of *Hobbit* audience segments, pinpoint the attributes of the *Hobbit* films that caused enchantment, disinterest or disaffection, and interpret the widely divergent receptions of these films among fans, critics and casual viewers. It also allowed us to explore relationships



between sharing a perspective on each film and sharing particular socio-demographic characteristics, intertextual affiliations and so on—and thus to offer insight into the respective roles of national cultural repertoires versus other possibly more relevant sources of difference in framing global audience receptions of this Hollywood blockbuster fantasy trilogy. For more detailed discussion of the specific procedures we followed in designing the project and analysing the extensive qualitative and quantitative data we have collected, we refer readers to the online methodological appendices for this book, available on the *Hobbit* Project website—<http://tinyurl.com/kchjtbe>.

## CONCLUSION

The findings presented in the following chapters, we contend, make a significant contribution to our understanding of viewers' receptions of the cinematic adaptation of a much-loved cultural property—Tolkien's children's novel—and their reactions to its intensive blockbusterisation by Warner Bros and Jackson's production team. In what follows, we hope to illustrate the value of Q methodology and cross-cultural online research for audience studies of blockbuster film. While we don't claim to have been successful in all respects, we believe our approach offers a useful model of how reception research can successfully synthesise theory with empirical analysis in its effort to better understand diverse forms of audience engagement and response. Our findings add to understandings of audience reception more generally, and of audience reactions to issues that will be of interest to lay readers and scholars alike—including the relationship between pre-viewing anticipation and post-viewing receptions, the politics of transnational film production, processes of adaptation and the limits of creative licence, gender representations in fantasy film, the impact of new cinematic technologies, the relationship between reception and social location and more. We also maintain that while the methodological approach we have developed would benefit from further refinement, it provides a powerful tool for gaining rich qualitative insight while retaining the capacity for rigorous and productive quantitative analysis. Drawing on a large sample size and using a survey instrument that captures rich qualitative and quantitative data, we have been able to glean clearer insight into the meaning and significance of the *Hobbit* trilogy for differently positioned and interested viewers. We have been able to identify and describe distinct audience segments whose members share

significant commonalities in their perspectives, preoccupations and (in some cases) socio-demographic characteristics. In the process, we have gained clearer insights into the respective roles of fandom, politics and idealised intertexts in shaping modes of engagement with a highly anticipated spectacular blockbuster event-film. We hope these insights might inform a more nuanced theoretical account of audience receptions of screen media, and of blockbuster film adaptations in particular.

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