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A Major Motion Picture or Just a Picture? An Analysis in Movie Tie-Ins vs. Original Cover Art

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RESEARCH QUESTION

In the last fifteen years, how have YA books with movie tie-in covers fared in paperback units sold compared to original cover art? Is it profitable to make a book cover based on the feature film adaptation?
ABSTRACT

It has been believed that the needs of consumers who are primarily readers versus moviegoers greatly differ; those who are readers are more likely to purchase a book that features the original cover art, while those who are mostly moviegoers gravitate toward movie tie-in covers. This paper examines the accuracy behind that belief by calculating the number of book sales from NPD BookScan, as well as collecting survey data from participants across all reading activity levels.

Analysis revealed that though there is a slight difference in amount of preference based on reading group, overall participants overwhelmingly preferred the original cover regardless of reading activity levels. There were instances where the votes were very close in specific case studies. These examples were likely due to the movie tie-in covers themselves, which were intentional in their compelling design and paid homage to its original art counterpart. This paper also provides the book publishing industry with suggestions on how to design movie tie-in covers to appeal to a wider range of audiences based on participant responses.
INTRODUCTION

There is nothing quite like the marketing power that results from a partnership between the book publishing and movie industries. When a book is selected for a movie adaptation, it regenerates interest for the original work; often times, publishers will take advantage of this momentum by releasing a movie tie-in edition.¹ The relationship is symbiotic—the book receives more sales from the moviegoer audience, and the movie garners more interest from book lovers.

Evidence redacted to comply with proprietary data restrictions.
Please reach out at www.vivianqnguyen.com for any questions or clarification.

While there is no doubt that the two industries benefit from one another, it does pose the question of how much consumer crossover there is between them. Movie tie-ins spark an instant recognizability factor for someone who might be more aware of the movie than the original work it was inspired by, but how much of a role does the cover art play in that correlation? Up until now, the book publishing industry has determined that those who are not usually readers would prefer a cover featuring the movie adaptation. For instance, Alan Smagler, the VP of trade sales at Scholastic, released 2.4 million copies of the movie tie-in edition of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*—more than what is usually printed for a feature film edition—because he felt “newcomers to the series [might] be enticed by the movie art cover...and bring in a lot of people who may not be big book readers.”³

Smagler was not entirely wrong in his assumption. Consumer studies have shown that those who consider themselves more casual readers largely own titles that have been adapted into feature film.⁴ But does that individual specifically seek the movie tie-in edition of the book due to the personal connection to the film? Would an avid reader consider buying a movie tie-in edition if the cover was more compelling than the original? This paper will provide an analysis for these questions by measuring the gap in sales and preference between a book’s original cover art versus its movie tie-in counterpart, as well as determining the profitability of movie adaption covers and how they connect to consumers across all levels of reading.

METHODS

This research was conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively to capture not only the consumer’s mindset, but also to understand the sales data behind which books were more popularly purchased at the time.

Quantitative data was gathered through NPD BookScan, which allowed for tracking how many books were sold from retail to date, as well as how many books were sold within the crucial time period of one year after the movie adaptation version was released. Price and book format were also recorded to determine any patterns. While NPD BookScan is a powerful tool, it is not necessarily accurate because it only covers 85% of total sales. That being said, it was the best tool for the purposes of this research.

² Bennett, “The Symbiotic Relationship Between Movies and Books.”
³ Springen, “More ‘Hunger Games.’”
⁴ Nord et al., *A History of the Book in America.*
The collection of YA titles had to adhere to all of the following criterion to allow for a reasonable amount of case studies for analysis:

- **Title had to have a movie tie-in edition.** This was determined by visually analyzing the cover in NPD BookScan, which often included text such as “Now a Major Motion Picture,” as well as verifying the date the book was released with the feature film release.

- **Title could have been classified as YA.** Because the YA reader age range varies so widely, there was some flexibility in what could be categorized as YA for the purposes of this research. NPD BookScan had to state that the title was either YA, or JV with specifications that included grades 9-12 and up or specified a grade and up with no max limit. Fiction that specified college freshmen and up (because this included eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds) was also accepted.

- **Both editions had to come in trade paperback formats.** This was to create consistency while comparing the data of the two books.

- **The feature film must have been released within the last fifteen years.** Any movie adaptation edition that was released from 2005-2020 was considered recent enough to generate relevant analysis.

- **Both editions had to be available at the time.** This is especially significant for the one-year data collection post-movie tie-in release in order to compare the sales data.

- **The movie edition must have been out for at least a year.** This was specifically to calculate the number of sales within a year after the movie edition was released in comparison to the original cover.

There was a total of seventy cases collected. After the data was gathered, charts were generated in Excel. In addition, the percent difference between the two covers was calculated to measure the gap between number of units sold per cover.

The qualitative data was collected via a Google forms survey which was distributed electronically to participants via email and social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. To encourage participation, participants had the option to leave their email to be entered into an opportunity drawing for a $10 Powell’s Books gift card and a $10 Fandango gift card.

Demographic questions were asked in order to determine any significant patterns that might arise from the data collection. These questions included age, gender, and most importantly level of readership.

Participants were asked to select which cover they preferred from a pair with ten cases total. Titles were purposefully chosen to present a variety of choices, which included pairs that mimicked the same art style, movie tie-ins that featured actors, and covers that only featured landscapes. Each pair included one movie adaptation cover and one original cover though neither was identified in the choices in order to prevent bias. The order in which the pairs were presented was also randomized so that participants couldn’t easily pick one type of cover each time and would have to pause and consider each question. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they had purchased a YA movie adaptation cover before and why; additionally, they were asked what factors might cause them to sway from their usual decision. The survey was 83.3% multiple choice with the remaining percentage being open-ended.

There were 196 total participants. The survey was closed after two weeks and the data was then collected and generated into charts. The free response answers were placed in an Excel sheet analyzed for common phrases or words.
Kate Klimo, publishing director for Random House Children’s Publishing, stated that “everybody is competing for the same customer and shelf space...more than ever, the cover is seen as packaging, the poster for the book.” Publishers believe backlist titles can benefit from a repackaging, especially when a movie adaptation is made that customers prefer the new look as opposed to the original. This indicates that book publishers may push to

5 Maughan, “PW.”
6 Maughan.
print more movie tie-in editions due to competitive and limited shelf space. This of course, is crucial during the period of time following the movie’s release when the feature film is still fresh on the consumers’ minds.

In another case, when Baz Luhrmann’s The Great Gatsby remake hit the theaters in 2013, there was a great divide among movie audiences and book readers. Bookstores were challenged with gauging which cover their customers would prefer—the iconic blue original cover, or the glamorous version featuring Leonardo DiCaprio. Both editions were available at big chain bookstores such as Barnes & Noble, but “at Walmart, only the movie tie-in edition [was] stocked, a tacit acknowledgment that...the customers want[ed] books that appear[ed] fresh and new.” On the other hand, independent bookstores took the stance that only original covers would be available, and no movie tie-ins would be stocked.8

This indicates that booksellers within the industry believe there is a sharp divide in preference between both types of consumers. The reasoning has been that the movie brings in a new kind of reader that feels a connection to the film and would therefore be more interested in the movie tie-in than the original cover.

Comparing Survey Data
The qualitative data collection of this research was vital to understand the reasoning behind the preference of one cover over the other. It was crucial to break the data down according to a potential consumer’s reading activity. Because the book publishing and movie industry has determined that there is a gap between these two audiences, it’s important evaluate that assumption in order to establish next steps of how the book publishing industry could adjust their marketing strategy to best meet the needs of both consumers.

There was a fair amount of diversity in readership level amongst the 196 participants, with the majority of respondents identifying as voracious readers. The scale was as followed, along with the breakdown of how the participants identified (Fig. 2):

- Not usually a reader (0-4 books/year)
- Casual reader (5-9 books/year)
- Average reader (10-14 books/year)
- Avid reader (15-19 books/year)
- Voracious reader (20+ books/year)

7 Bosman, “Judging ‘Gatsby’ by Its Cover(s).”
8 Bosman.
According to the overall results, participants voted for original cover over the movie tie-in for 80% of the covers (Fig. 3). When the results were broken down by readership level, participants still favored the original covers overall, and the percentages varied only slightly (Fig. 3).

The more casual readers had the lowest ratio of original cover to movie tie-in, thus indicating that the latter was slightly more popular amongst the group than the overall data. On the other hand, the more avid readers had the highest ratio of original cover to movie tie-in. This suggests that while there is a slight divide in audience, the majority of consumers still prefer the original cover over the movie tie-in. This also goes against the industry’s assumption that a consumer
who is not usually a reader and primarily a moviegoer would automatically choose a movie tie-in due to its fresh, new look over the original cover art.

**THE RECOGNITION FACTOR**

Movie edition covers have one thing going for them—that instant recognizability when a consumer sees an actor’s face on a cover and makes the connection between the feature film and its book counterpart. That connection increases the likelihood of a sale. In one survey response, the participant stated that the movie tie-in cover caught their eye and led them to the assumption that it was most likely a good book due to the fact that it was adapted into a movie. This strong association would arguably be harder to replicate with an original cover, but the question remains: does the connection change when the visual aspect of the cover is taken out of consideration?

When asked if participants would recognize the title of a book that had been adapted into a feature film without the movie tie-in edition available, 78% of the participants stated they would likely (4) or very likely (5) make that connection (Fig. 4).

The visual cue of a movie tie-in certainly helps establish that association, but the results show that the consumer’s recognizability factor is not dependent on the appearance of the book. Interestingly, the respondent whose answer was included above also rated a 4 (likely) for likelihood of title recognizability without the movie tie-in edition available.
ARE MOVIE TIE-INS PROFITABLE?

However, based on the data collected in this research with the inclusion of survey responses, the results show that regardless of the consumers' reading levels, original covers were more popular than movie tie-ins. While the exact level of profitability of movie tie-ins remains inconclusive, the preference of cover remains clear and therefore suggests that original covers are more profitable than movie tie-ins.

In fact, when asked if participants had ever bought a YA book featuring a movie tie-in cover before, 46% of the overall respondents stated they had not, with many adding that they actively avoided buying the movie edition. 52% of the remaining respondents stated that they only purchased the movie tie-in because it was the only edition available at the time, though it was not their preference. Survey responses show that most likely, if given the equal option between the two covers, consumers are more likely to buy the original regardless of how much they read. This indicates that even if movie tie-ins are profitable, it may not be due to the cover design but due to lack of options.

While the results do show that original covers are generally more popular than movie tie-ins, this does not necessarily mean that there isn’t an audience for the latter. Participants stated certain factors would likely persuade them to choose one cover over the other. By implementing one or more of the following changes in the design and marketing process of feature film editions, publishing companies can maximize their budget to meet the needs of consumers across the board.

AVAILABILITY & PRICE

Over half of the participants who had purchased a YA movie tie-in before stated they had only done so due to availability. This further suggests that in many stores, only the movie tie-in editions were stocked and that perhaps companies at the time increased their movie edition print runs to draw in a new reading audience. Two participants specifically stated that they found their movie tie-ins at big box stores like Target, which offered the books at a cheaper rate. In both cases, only the movie edition was available.

When asked if there were any factors that would sway participants to choose one edition over the other, 27% of the participants who said yes mentioned that price played a factor in their decision.

Offering an even ratio of movie tie-ins to original covers in bookstores would ensure that all consumers, regardless of reading level or regular buying habits, would have a fair choice between which cover they prefer. Even a small increase in original covers would capture at least some of the 46% of respondents who actively avoid the movie tie-in. Convenience is important in this case, and consumers may not necessarily always go out of their way to find an original cover, thus resulting in loss of sales for the publisher and bookseller. By offering both options equally, it increases the chance of purchase.
Off-ring books at a lower price is not a luxury that all publishers or independent bookstores can do, however mass-market movie tie-in paperbacks is one way to capture consumers who are looking for a good discount. By decreasing the number of movie tie-in paperbacks printed and replacing that number with mass-market paperbacks instead, publishers can save money on production while still off-ring the same content to their readers. While some may not purchase due to the quality, the steep discount would be hard to resist for someone who is swayed by price.

COMPELLING COVER ART WITH A FRESH TAKE
Among the factors that would persuade a survey participant to choose one cover over the other was the art itself. 37% of participants stated that they would be swayed to buy an edition if the cover art itself was more compelling. Often, the movie tie-in edition simply features a version of the promotional poster with the actors’ faces. Among the reasons for choosing the original cover art was to honor the author’s original intention for the book. Respondents expressed a need for the same kind of intentionality with a movie edition cover. Participants also included that if the movie tie-in edition had a better design than the original cover, they would most likely purchase the former.

Their free responses were also reflected in the data collected in the voting portion of the survey. While 80% of the covers yielded more original cover preference, there were several cases where the overall votes were very close (Fig. 5).

For instance, for *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, the answers were neck and neck until the very end. Some stated that the original cover was too minimalist and that the movie edition was more compelling by comparison. One answer included that the movie tie-in felt as though it was designed to be a book, despite featuring the actors from the movies. The similarity in bright green and uneven typeface creates a connection between the two covers—readers are not likely to forget the iconic, shocking green, and even from a glance with the movie tie-in, they’re likely to recall the original cover. Like many movie adaptations, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* generated new interest and brought in a new audience thirteen years after the original book was
published. The updated version was made for a contemporary audience and was a transformation of the original cover source, a technique that some publishers have discovered to be successful.

The movie edition of *Perks* is a fresher take on the book while still paying homage to the original cover. This intentional design could be due to the fact that Chbosky not only wrote the screenplay of the movie adaptation, but also directed it. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, he confessed the book was his most personal work to date and that he was fiercely protective of the film because of it. It would come as no surprise that the movie poster, which was also used for the cover of the movie-tie-in edition, was something he labored over because the book was “his self-proclaimed baby.” There was intentionality behind the designing movie poster and cover which likely resonated well with survey participants and audiences.

Designing a compelling, modern movie tie-in that still had ties with the original cover was something that was prevalent in many case studies, some of which were included in the survey to test how readers would respond.

In the overall cases of *The Maze Runner* and *Ender’s Game*, participants chose the movie tie-in over the original cover (Fig. 6). However, the numbers are almost just as split as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Respondents stated in their answers they couldn’t tell from a glance which of these books were the movie tie-in and which were the original books and judged solely on which visual they preferred. There is certainly a similarity in design between these pairs, as though the designer of the movie tie-in edition intentionally chose to mimic the original cover but updated it for a modern audience.

![Fig. 6: Breakdown of how participants voted in their cover preference of *The Maze Runner* and *Ender’s Game.*](image)

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9 Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture.*
10 Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower.*
11 Merry, “Stephen Chbosky Talks ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower.’”
This technique still gives a nod to the original design, which appeals to those who may be familiar with the original work or are primarily readers, while the relevancy and modern edge to brings in a new generation of audiences and moviegoers. Culture and people can dictate how a movie is adapted and revived\(^\text{12}\), and that same school of thought should be applied to movie tie-in covers. In the case of *Ender’s Game* specifically, the movie tie-in has been updated to look significantly sleeker and more modern with elements we associate with trendy sci-fi works today. By placing more thought into a compelling design that will catch a reader’s eye and even call back to the original book cover in culturally relevant way, publishers are likely to expand their consumer base with the movie tie-in edition.

### COVERS WITHOUT ACTORS/ACTRESSES

One of the other factors mentioned by survey participants was their distaste for actors or actresses on the movie tie-in covers. Of the participants who mentioned human faces in their answers, 73\% explicitly stated they did not prefer it, while the remaining percentage did not mind it or felt a personal connection with the specific actor or actress.

Many respondents felt that the actors’ faces took away from their imagination. “I want to be able to imagine characters on my own as much as possible,” said one survey participant. Another stated that they “did not appreciate having the film’s versions of the characters...projected onto [them] before [they] even open[ed] the book.”

In some cases, featuring the actor’s face does more than just take away a reader’s imagination. The movie tie-in for *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was controversial at the time of the movie adaptation’s release. The cover mimicked the original almost precisely, but swapped out the illustrated girl for the actress, who was lighter-skinned and had straighter hair. The illustrator was upset because the character’s dark skin and natural hair were very important to the themes in the book. She felt that teens who identified with the character while reading the book would find the cover “very disheartening, [and] a little damaging.”\(^\text{13}\) While this is a more extreme case of the ramifications for featuring actors on movie tie-ins, it’s a lesson to consider the themes of a book before designing the cover, which should reflect the book’s content.

Other survey participants mentioned that the addition of actors or actresses on covers cheapened the experience for them and made the book feel less timeless. As mentioned earlier, the movie adaptation for *The Great Gatsby* caused quite a controversy when the feature film was released into theaters. The movie tie-in embraced actors’ faces: Leonardo DiCaprio and friends, front and center. Kevin Cassem, an independent bookseller at McNally Jackson, felt that readers would be judged for reading the movie tie-in edition in public.\(^\text{14}\) Participants from the survey resonated with this concept, with some admitting that they often bought the original cover over the movie version because they wanted to feel special for seeming to have read the book first.

\(^{12}\) Loock and Verevis, *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions.*

\(^{13}\) Shapiro, “How The Hate U Give Book Cover Was Altered for the Movie.”

\(^{14}\) Bosman, “Judging ‘Gatsby’ by Its Cover(s).”
These participant free response answers also reflect the overall data in how the case studies resulted in original cover popularity featuring non-humans versus the movie tie-ins that did. In the cases of Twilight, Divergent, and The Fault in Our Stars, respondents overwhelmingly chose the original cover over the movie tie-in, while covers that featured human figures without an actor’s face such as in Ender’s Game, fared much better with participants (Fig. 7). The books that had the widest gap of preference were the ones that seemed more obviously like movie tie-ins such as with the three examples included above—famous actors’ faces and resembling more of a movie poster feel than the traditional cover of a book.

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. For instance, the respondents who were swayed by faces on covers stated that they particularly liked the actor or actress. One gave Emma Watson as an example, mentioning that she was a childhood crush and therefore they were more likely to purchase the movie tie-in edition because of this. However, because A-List celebrities and their likability factor change frequently, it’s really a matter of guesswork when it comes to deciding which actors’ faces to feature on a cover at a given time.

The safer route is not necessarily to eliminate all actors or actresses on movie tie-ins altogether, but to do it in such a way that still creates that connection without taking away from a reader’s experience. Ender’s Game is a good example of this with an abstract figure on the cover.
Hoot by Carl Hiaassen featured actors as silhouettes on the cover. Other ways to design a cover without featuring an actor include using landscapes (such as in Maze Runner) or symbols (as in The Hunger Games) instead. The bottom line is designing a cover that will still allow a consumer’s mind to develop their own ideas of characters while still creating something that will remain timeless on their shelf, and not found in a bulk bin within a few years’ time.

CONCLUSION

For decades, there has been the belief that there is little consumer crossover between the book and movie industry. The truth is while there is a slight divide in preference, the two groups are more alike in the choices they make when purchasing books. The gap between them is not as significant as the groups believe it to be.

It’s complicated to accurately determine how movie editions have fared in sales versus the original book, but even if there were more movie tie-ins at the time of a feature film’s release, evidence has been redacted to comply with proprietary data restrictions. Please reach out at vivianqnguyen.com for questions or clarification. This number, according to the survey responses, would most likely increase if the availability of the original book was increased to match the movie editions at the time. Those who would normally not buy a movie edition on principle or because they don’t enjoy the commercial design will then have the convenience of purchasing the original cover while the book is of interest to culture due to the feature film release.

Because recognizability was found to be not contingent on the appearance of the movie tie-in edition, other ways of establishing that connection could include a removable sticker on the original cover that indicates it’s “now a major motion picture,” something that survey respondents indicated they much preferred. Shelving books in a section with others that have recently been made into movies or including a movie poster with the book also helps strengthen that connection for the consumer and lead to a sale.

There is still a lot of done in this area of research to optimize book sales and fully take advantage of the new wave of interest and audience when a title is adapted into a feature film. Movie tie-ins still appeal to audiences, and the fact that there were covers in the survey where the vote was almost split down the middle indicates there’s still a desire to see movie editions if they’re done well. Movie tie-ins have one great advantage—they can bring something new and relevant to consumers that not only reflects current design trends, but also our culture. Book cover designs should “reflect both an author’s ideas and contemporary cultural values in a vital, intelligent, and beautiful way.” By designing movie tie-ins with the same detail that publishers do with original covers, they tap into the unique moments in our culture when book and movie audiences unite in their mutual pursuit of a timeless story.

15 Drew and Sternberge, By Its Cover.
PROCESS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this research paper was a joy in so many ways because it allowed me to combine my two passions—books and movies. For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to be around great stories and bring them to life through art. As a writer and video editor myself, I cherish both of these industries dearly and was excited to conduct this research and share my findings with colleagues from both worlds.

This research paper was written at a difficult time in for all of us due to the fact that we’ve all been safely isolated in our homes due to COVID-19. This likely affected my mentality while writing this paper, as well as prevented me from scholarly sources that otherwise would have been more accessible while libraries were open. In addition, it became clear that my original research question changed in the process of data collection and analysis, though it could not be officially changed with IRB because of the slowed process due to COVID-19. I attempted to write my paper answering my original question to the best of my ability while also examining the real focus of what this research revealed: the amount of consumer crossover between the book publishing and movie industries. That being said, I hope that I did the research justice, as this area is something I find to be fascinating and valuable for the book publishing and movie industries for the future.

I’d like to thank the wonderful faculty in the Book Publishing program at Portland State University. All of you have been immensely supportive not only during this uncertain time, but throughout my entire academic journey. A special thank you to Dr. Rachel Noorda, who was endlessly patient with my research questions and was always there to point me in the right direction—your guidance has been invaluable to me. I’d also like to thank Kelley Dodd and Abbey Gaterud for introducing me to my new love, book design, which became a huge influence in this research. To Robyn Crummer-Olson, thank you for sitting on my committee and being so creative in your teaching process; it has left an impact on all of your students, including myself. Finally, thank you to Dr. Kathi Inman Berens for being one of the first kind faces I saw when starting the program and for encouraging and inspiring me every step of the way. It feels right and serendipitous to end this with you sitting on my committee.

My final notes of appreciation go to Dylan, Krystine, Megan and Becky for supporting my dreams from the very beginning and pushing me whenever I was afraid. Thank you for believing in me.
**SOURCES**


APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What is your age?
   a. 18-24 years old
   b. 25-34 years old
   c. 35-44 years old
   d. 45-54 years old
   e. 55-64 years old
   f. 65-74 years old
   g. 75 years or older

2. To which gender identity do you most identify?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
   d. Not Listed: ________
   e. Prefer Not to Answer

3. Please select your level of reading:
   a. Not usually a reader (0-4 books/year)
   b. Casual reader (5-9 books/year)
   c. Average reader (10-14 books/year)
   d. Avid reader (15-19 books/year)
   e. Voracious reader (20+ books/year)

4. Have you ever purchased a YA book after seeing the movie adaptation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
5. Please select which cover you prefer from each pair:
6. Have you bought a YA book featuring a movie adaptation cover before? If so, please explain why you chose the movie tie-in edition over the original book.

7. If you were aware of a movie adaptation, then saw its YA book counterpart with the original cover in a store, what is the likelihood you would recognize the title without the movie tie-in edition available? (1: not likely, 3: neutral, 5: very likely)

8. Are there any factors that would persuade you to purchase the other edition over your usual preference (original cover vs movie tie-in cover)? For example, price, a favorite actor/actress on the cover, or compelling original cover art. If firm in your preference, please state so:

9. OPTIONAL: If you are interested in being entered into an opportunity drawing for the giveaway ($10 Powell’s Books Gift card + $10 Fandango Gift card), please leave your email: