

3D TV: Millennials more interested than older consumers

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USC's research finds a distinct generation gap in consumer receptiveness to 3D television.

A decade ago, I went to a 3D film festival to watch the 1953 movie *House of Wax*. I knew the cheesy special effects, like a paddle ball shooting at my face, would be silly and fun.

I wasn't expecting good acting. I was expecting to get a headache. I was given a pair of red and green paper glasses that drain the picture's color.

Fast-forward to today's 3D theatrical experience. Thanks to improved technology and a desire by studios to draw consumers into theaters in a world of myriad entertainment options, there's been a renaissance in 3D film and television. Hollywood studios are putting 3D content into more films, and TV makers are equipping sets to bring the technology into living rooms.

Beyond the trivial question of whether consumers will wear the glasses, the more important question for this new market is whether consumers will want to experience 3D outside of movie theaters, in their homes. There's a good chance it will happen. But millennial-generation consumers are more likely than older ones to embrace the new wave of 3D television.

Avatar's Influence

James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* demonstrated how 3D movies could attract a mass audience. Walt Disney (DIS) and DreamWorks Animation SKG (DWA) plan to make all their future animated titles available in 3D. Filmmakers are also incorporating the technology into broadcasts of sporting events and concerts.

A number of the technical issues that induced headaches have been eliminated, partly due to the switch to digital filmmaking. There are currently four different 3D projection technologies in movie theaters, each with its own type of glasses. In all four systems, the old red and green cardboard glasses have been replaced by tinted shades that are easier on the eyes.

Yet it's striking how divergently consumers of different generations perceive 3D entertainment. A quarter of consumers who've seen a 3D movie said they were interested in buying a 3D TV within the next three years, according to a December 2009 Web survey of 1,914 U.S. adults by the University of Southern California's Entertainment Technology Center. When you break it down by age, a whopping 44% of recent 3D moviegoers ages 18 to 29 said they expect to buy a 3D television within three years. But just 27% of 30- to 49-year-olds said so.

Furthermore, when we asked what decade comes to mind when consumers think of 3D movies, respondents most often mentioned the 1950s. Yet of the 4% of respondents who mentioned the 2000s, 85% were under 40. So the comeback of 3D hasn't dimmed entrenched perceptions of 3D's golden age among older consumers.

Millennials Receptive

For baby boomers and members of Generation X, like myself, today's version feels like the most recent recycling of something that seems to pop up every 10 or 20 years (remember *Jaws 3-D* and *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, from the '80s and early '90s?). We're interested but skeptical; we've seen this come and go.

For millennials, born after 1980, 3D programming is a natural development in their experience with technology and entertainment. The computer scientist Alan Kay once said that technology

is anything invented after you were born. It's a distinction marketers and retailers will need to pay close attention to.

The price of 3D television can be steep. The gear needed to equip a living room can run to more than \$4,000. Yet one of Avatar's greatest dividends is it exposed several generations to the new, digital 3D they hadn't yet seen. Many will likely go to electronics stores to see whether they'd like it in their homes, too.

The consumer electronics industry needs to take into account the link between life experience and receptiveness to new technology. What their ads say, and what sales associates tell customers, will make or break this emerging market. For many consumers, these messages will mean the difference between envisioning a new form of mainstream entertainment and recalling kitschy photos of '50s movie-house audiences clad in 3D glasses.

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