

A new approach to audience research to support audience development regionally and nationally

Bridgette Wessels, University of Glasgow
Peter Merrington, University of Glasgow
David Forrest, University of Sheffield



Nicole (North East interviewee)



“It’s pleasurable, it’s something that I enjoy doing, but it opens you up to different cultures, different people, different ways of living, different ideas about the world, I think it’s really important to watch things that you might not necessarily choose to watch actually because they might surprise you...”

Introduction and context

The aim of the project is to understand:

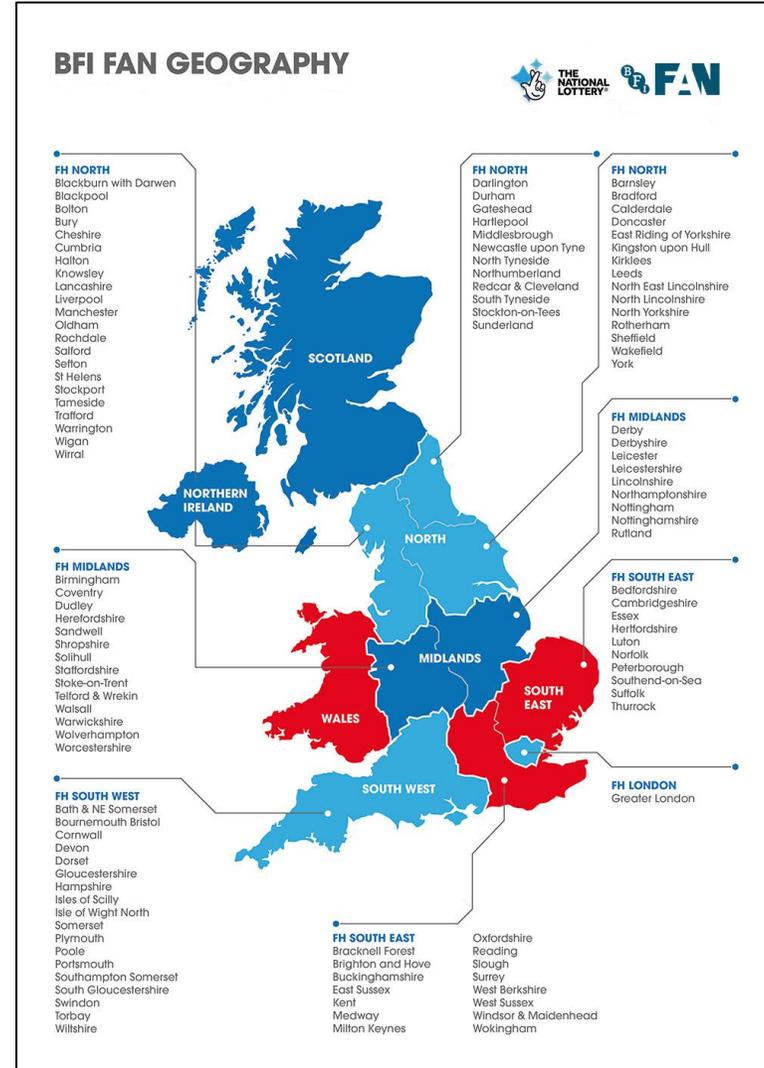
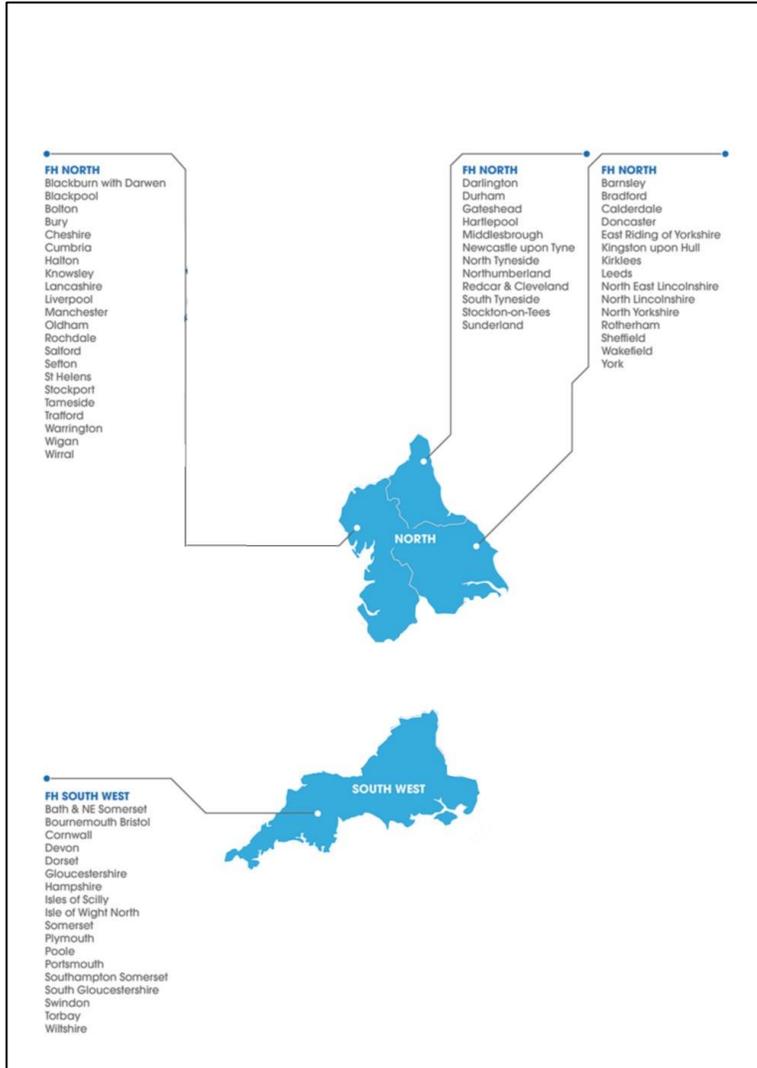
- How to enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films beyond the mainstream
- How to optimise the cultural value of engaging with less familiar films

Context: unequal regional provision of specialised film and access to diverse film culture across the UK

History of the Project

- Awareness of unequal access prompted myself, Dave Forrest and Mike Pidd (University of Sheffield) to question how to support audience development and provision through research
- A really good partnership with Ian Wild from the Showroom Cinema (Sheffield) and Anna Kime (Film Hub North), meant we could discuss the issues
- Small pilot project to test our ideas
- Working with Anna Kime (Film Hub North), Sally Folkard (Film Hub North) and Madeleine Probst (Film Hub South West) we developed the proposal
- Strong focus on collaboration and impact with regional partners

Our English regions



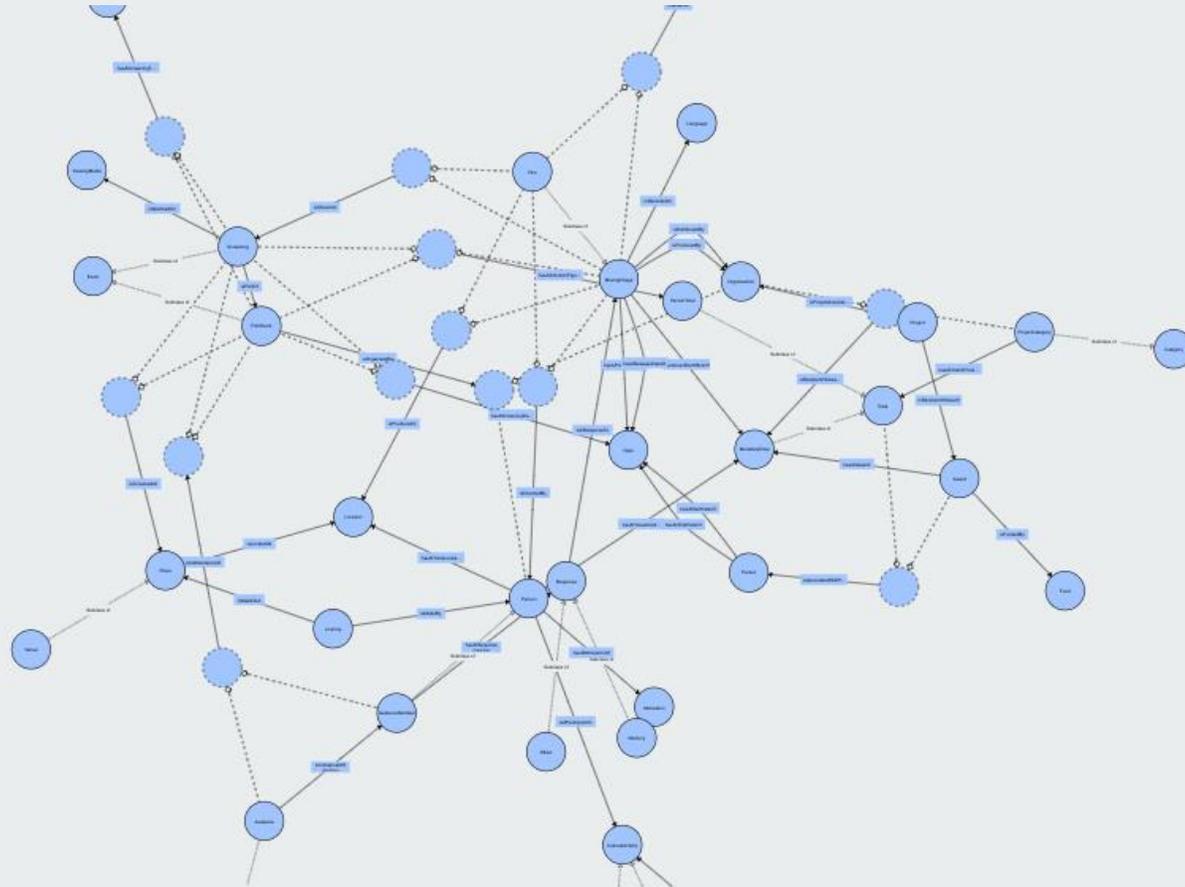
Challenge of audience research and our proposed 'solution'

- Snapshot surveys or small-scale qualitative studies do not capture the dynamics of how audiences form, their experiences or their backgrounds in regional contexts
- How to understand audiences in depth and at scale
- How to link distribution strategies, film policy and consumption at a regional level
- Therefore a multi-dimensional approach required that brings together different insights into audiences and how they are developed

Methods and data

- National film policy and industry analysis to assess regional access to film
- Secondary data analysis to develop socio-cultural backgrounds of film audiences nationally
- 200 semi-structured interviews (50 in each region) to understand film, cinema and film events from people living in English regions
- 16 focus groups (4 in each region) to explore the meaning of film for audiences
- 25 elite interviews with film policy makers, regional exhibitors, and distributors to understand the concerns and approaches to regional film provision
- A longitudinal survey (of three waves) in our regions to understand patterns of film consumption through time

Integrating the data: Computational ontology

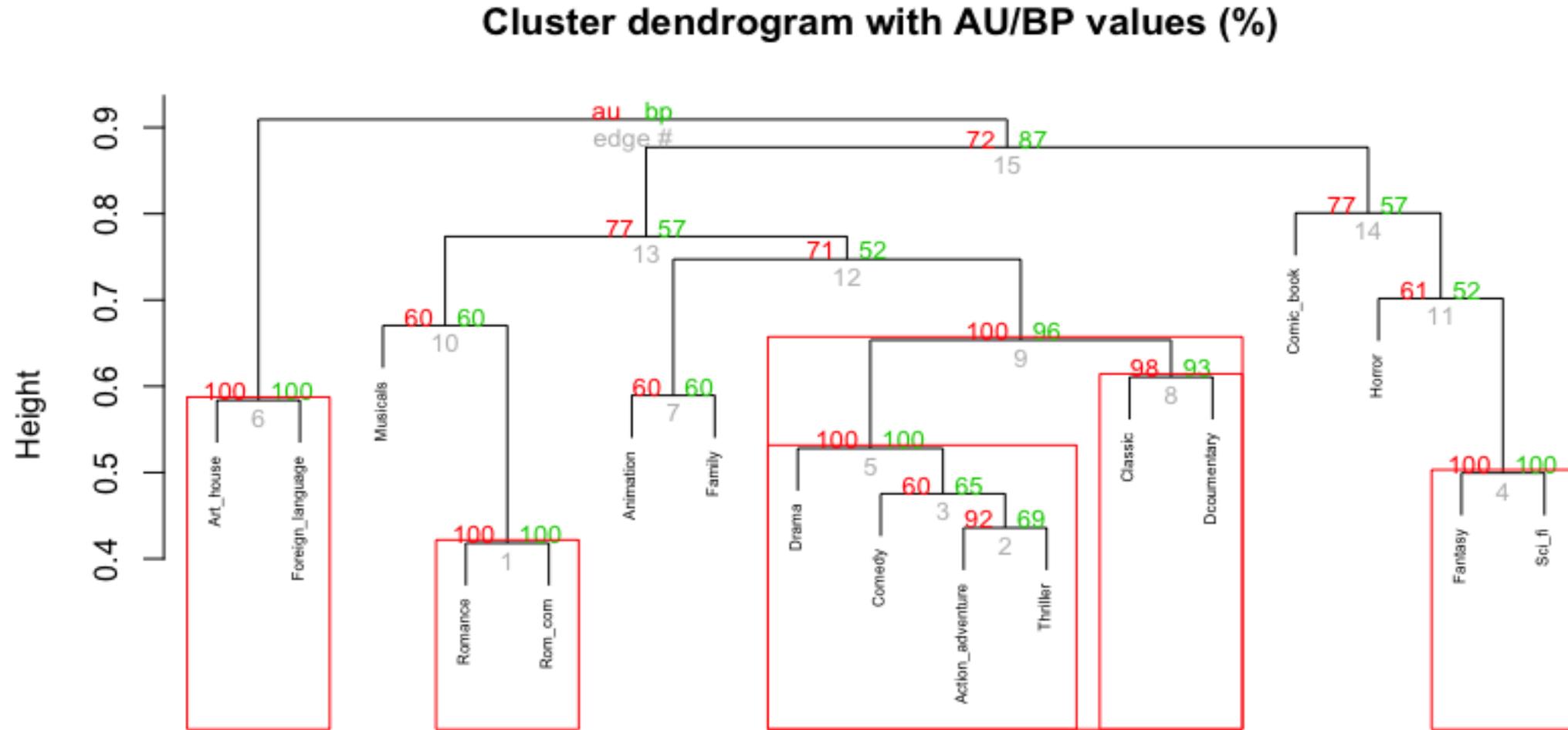


Secondary analysis: patterns of film consumption

- Film, highly popular, blurring of preferences, five clusters of genres
- Art house film/foreign language form a distinct cluster, and those who prefer such films are a distinct group that consumes film across multiple genres and formats
- Those who view film in many formats also watch art house and foreign language film, even if they do not prefer these genres
- 80.1% of those who fall in the 'Specialised' film genre group are also members of the class most likely to watch any genre of film

Sources: the UK government Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) 'Taking Part' survey 2016/2017 (DCMS, 2017); and the British Film Institute (BFI) 'Opening Our Eyes' survey (Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, 2011)

Preferences of film consumption: clusters of genres



Film consumption and audience demographics

- People who watch art house or foreign language film are likely to be: under 55, earn over £30,000 per annum, hold a degree or higher qualification, live in a city
- Higher income likely to consume 'All Film', lower income likely to consume mainstream film
- 25 to 34 years like 'All Film', 55+ are more selective
- Those with a degree or above view 'All film', those with GCSE level or no qualifications are less likely to view 'All film'
- Those living in cities view 'All film', those living in towns, villages or rural areas are more likely to view 'Mainstream'
- Patterns but still element of choice – interviews and focus groups

Audience Interviews

- 200 semi-structured interviews with audiences across the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West and the South West
- Aiming to understand how people engage with film at the regional level
- Multiple recruitment strategies, using snowball sampling through social networks and community organisations
- The interviews explored film practices and experiences regarding what people watch, relationships with venues, experiences of film events, the use of digital platforms, and the meanings audiences take away from film watching

On what people get out of different film experiences

Sharon (North West)



“again it totally depends on different films, as I’ve described liking the feeling of going to like the arty ones and I quite like feeling a bit snooty (Laughs). ‘Oh yes, I’ve just been watching a film that was made in Budapest about er...(Laughs), it was fascinating’. I do love being a bit of a snob. I love watching children’s ones because they can make me laugh and they can make me cry...”

On watching film collectively

Nicole (North East)



“Yeah, it’s a different experience because it’s a joint experience. You’re experiencing this story, this film with a group of people who all arrived at that specific time to see that specific film, so you have this collective experience. And often other people in the room can influence the way you watch the film as well I think. Because if it’s a funny film and some people finding it hilarious and laughing a lot blah, blah, blah it can alter the way you perceive it. So you might think, ‘Oh, that was hilarious,’ you know, but really it was more because there were other people that were kind of influencing your reaction. So, I guess, you as an audience member, yeah, I would feel like it was a shared collective experience with me and everybody else around me. Whereas, if you’re watching at home it’s a very individual experience and probably depends a lot on your mood as well. So I would probably, if it was a bit of a weepy film I would have a good cry if I was sat at home on my own. But I’d probably still definitely have a cry in the cinema... But try and hide it a bit more (laughs).”

On negotiating film choice

Ben (North West)



“Yeah, but I do try and get my girlfriend especially to watch these films, we usually have a choice each, so we... So we go through like, ‘it’s your turn tonight’ and ‘my turn tonight’. But I have to conservatively pick the film because I know that if it’s go too far then she’ll just lose interest or she’ll hate it and not want to watch it... So I have to kind of pick one that’s kind of almost like a crossover from like exploitation film and B movie like to sort of a film that kind of could be considered like a conventionally structured film.”

Factors influencing film choice: Interviews and Focus Groups

- **Informed choice, seeking trusted sources of information:** ‘I might go and see it, I don’t know. I just don’t know enough about it, I’d want to go and look it up and read about it first’
- **Friends and family:** ‘I go from cues from my wife as well, she’ll say, fancy watching this?’, ‘I am quite easily led, so if somebody said, stick with that, I probably would’
- **Independent cinema and trust:** ‘But every film I’ve seen here, most of them, I’ve loved. They’re just, for me, they’re aimed at not the mainstream but just off-centre and I love that, a bit of quirkiness’
- **Relationship to film subject:** ‘that’s too close to work and too close to home so I deliberately didn’t go and see it’
- **Mood:** ‘...I’d probably want to be in the right frame of mind, possibly watch it in the daytime not the night time’
- **Location:** ‘It’s the kind of film I probably wouldn’t come out to the cinema for but I would certainly watch with interest at home’

Meaning and interpretation: Focus groups

- The groups were structured using 4 clips in each group (taken from a selection of 8 films: Call Me by Your Name, Dark River, God's Own Country, Happy End, I, Daniel Blake, Loveless, The Eagle Huntress and Things to Come)
- The films were selected to represent typical independent cinema programming, with a range of British and foreign language titles
- The discussion in the groups was designed to explore the ways in which audiences interpreted and constructed meaning in and through the films
- The groups were diverse, with participants drawn from a range of social groups. Levels of participation in film culture were also mixed

Viewers tended to locate themselves within the films' landscapes

- **Pleasure in the landscape** – ‘Not in the sense that I wanted to go there, just as in purely an aesthetic thing of looking and it just being absolutely stunning, like a nice pattern might be... a joy for the eyes’, ‘I do enjoy the big landscape shots... The backdrop gives it an extra something for you to look at and enjoy’
- **Imaginative exploration** – ‘you knew you were somewhere different and that kind of made it more intriguing, it’s like an exploration’, ‘a window into a culture that you wouldn’t normally see’
- **Imaginative travel** – ‘I like the scenario, I could see myself in that kind of place’, ‘I could drive that Peugeot or whatever it was. I could smoke a cigarette, I could stay in a villa like that. Yeah, it’s something that I’d probably like to do’, ‘When they were stood up on top of the hill just surveying the scenery, just makes me wish I was stood on the top of a hill doing the same thing’

Emotional identification and investment

Relating with characters – ‘I could completely see what they were feeling, relating to my own experiences, just from the way that they hugged’

- **As parents...** ‘I was struggling to give up smoking so I used to give my son little tasks to do, to give me five minutes to have a crafty fag, which is exactly what that guy is doing. He was obviously talking to a new lover on the phone, doing something he shouldn’t be doing, and of course the kids always find you out’
- **As workers...** ‘...the long walk down the corridor in the office with one of the screens playing Solitaire, it was just like, yeah here we are again, this is what we’re doing... this is the same the world over! Everybody in a cubicle sitting in front of a screen’

A sensory appreciation of film style

- **Touch** – ‘...there’s also the tactile, the feeling of the cloth, the getting into bed, the sounds was all there, it felt as if he was breathing on her back, so there’s a tactile sense of that. The way that she opened the fence, the door... and then the piece of rope, it evoked sensations’
- **Empathy** was mentioned repeatedly and **frustration** was mentioned a number of times, eg in *I, Daniel Blake* participants felt frustration from empathising with the characters in the Job Centre
- **Physical reactions** – ‘it made me feel sick, just sympathising with the situation’, ‘The first scene was quite cold, when they were stood on the top of the hill it felt quite dark. Similarly, with the water scene I felt again quite cold’. People mentioned feeling ‘uncomfortable’, particularly when they were lingering shots. On the other hand, people mentioned feeling ‘calm’ because of the slower pace: ‘I think every shot was pretty similar and it was stationary, it lingered for a very long time... It made you take everything in a bit more than normal’

The pleasures and labours of interpretation

- **Engagement** – techniques such as longer shots led to participants focusing on multiple elements within the films – ‘I think, for me, cinema needs to actually force you to think and if you don’t quite get it then that’s probably good. Rather than having it laid out on a plate for you, it’s good to be made to think and for it to prompt thoughts and ideas’
- **Disengagement** – ‘I felt like I was just watching a different film to Mary!’, ‘maybe I was just reading into it what I wanted to read’. ‘I started focusing on little details and I felt like I was coming out of the film a little bit, kind of like, what’s going on here? Why doesn’t this feel authentic?’
- **Subtitles** – Several participants said they found it difficult to watch subtitled films: Looking down to read the subtitles meant they weren’t looking at the scene itself – ‘I was sort of dipping in and out of it, which is a bit sad because I wanted to know what the father was really saying to him’, ‘I have a choice to either read the subtitles or watch what’s on the screen, and at that point I lost interest with the subtitles’. The size, colour and speed of the text impacted on its legibility – yellow text was harder to read than white, dialogue-heavy scenes meant so much time spent reading the subtitles that the participants couldn’t spend any time looking up at the rest of the screen

The richness of film experience and patterns of cinematic engagement

- Our data provides both large-scale patterns but also very rich individual experiences
- There is both diversity of experience as well as identifiable trends
- Research at this scale and depth moves beyond organisation surveys and individual case studies
- What do these insights, facts and experiences tell us about the ways audiences develop?

Where we are and next steps

- National film policy and industry analysis to assess regional access to film (not presented here) gives us an understanding of provision and funding
- Two-thirds of longitudinal survey complete giving us regional patterns
- Building the ontology database and analysis
- Developing open access tools and visualisations for those working in film audience development

Questions and discussion

Thank you

Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for Specialised Film in English Regions. Funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Find out more about our research and sign-up to our newsletter at <https://www.beyondthemultiplex.net/>

Follow us @BeyondMultiplex

