

## **Being part of an audience: Patterns of contemporary film audience experience**

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### **Abstract:**

Although audiences are often defined as being multiple, diffuse, and fragmented, in terms of film audiences there are five distinct patterns of experience within that multiplicity. These are individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital, and people are flexible in moving between them. Drawing on Livingstone's (1998) notion of audiences being interactive and relational, we show that these patterns are created through the ways people interact with and relate to film. This is seen in the way people choose which film to watch, when, where, and with whom. People create and seek out specific audience experiences by choosing to take up opportunities to watch film at cinemas, at home, and through mobile devices. To understand how and why people create and select specific film audience experiences, we undertook 200 semi-structured interviews that explored audience members' own experiences. This identified five patterns of experience, which our large sample survey confirmed occurred at scale. In general, people enjoy film through five distinct audience experiences, selecting and moving between these experiences.

**Keywords:** Audiences, film, film audience experiences.

## **Introduction**

Film-watching is a popular cultural activity offering people a wide range of choice about how, where, and with whom they watch (DCMS, 2018). Films can be watched at cinemas, at home on television or computers, or on personal mobile devices, and people can choose to watch films alone, with friends and family, or with others. These possibilities go to the heart of current debates about the characteristics of contemporary audiences, which argue audiences are multiple, diffuse, and fragmented (Livingstone and Das, 2013). We argue there are five distinctive patterns in people's experiences of film audiences. These are individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital: each is characterised by a specific set of interactions with films, screens, and venues and relationships with other people. We draw on semi-structured interviews with audience members, eliciting rich insights about their film-watching practices and experiences and use survey data to examine those qualitative insights at scale.

The paper begins by outlining how audiences have changed over time, and the types of audiences there are, both in relation to developments in media technologies and to cultures of film-watching. Next, we discuss the methods and data that underpin our argument, including our use of interview and survey data and how we combine them. We then discuss the film audience experiences, drawing on empirical examples to highlight their key characteristics. This illustrates how people configure their film-watching to seek specific viewing experiences. We also show that people move between film audience experiences depending on what, when, where and with whom they watch to elicit specific viewing experiences. The paper concludes that although contemporary film audiences are often considered to be multiple, diffuse, and fragmented, there are discernible patterns in the way people interact with and relate to different aspects of watching film.

## **Changes in audience experience: from mass to multiple audiences**

Audiences have changed historically from single mass audiences to audiences that are multiple, diverse, fragmented, and individualised (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Livingstone, 2004). These changes are prompting renewed attention on audiences and on 'social histories of cinema' (Maltby, 2011; Bilereyst et al., 2012). In turn, this has led to a focus on the practices and experiences of audience members in what appears to be a wide range of possible film audience experiences. This includes large cinema audiences, home-based television audiences, personal mobile device and digital audiences. This breadth and variety of experience prompts questions as whether there are any patterns within people's film-watching experiences. To understand these experiences, and whether there are patterns in those experiences, requires addressing the relations and interactions of the ways in which people watch film, and how they consider themselves part of an audience (Livingstone, 2003).

The large mass audience emerged through the rise of mass media and popular entertainment in the 1940s and 1950s, with an: '... aggregate of individuals actually or

potentially exposed to what the main channels of communication had to offer ...' (McQuail, 2013, p. 10). There have been different interpretations of this type of audience: from functionalist theories that highlighted a behavioural focus on audience members' use of film-watching to satisfy personal needs and desires, through to Marxist-inspired Frankfurt School approaches that saw audiences as being subsumed within a dominant culture. British cultural studies emphasised the popularity of film and the social practices of mass audiences, with many people going to the cinema every week to watch Hollywood and British films (Richards, 1984; Turner, 1999).

Audiences were seen to fragment and become multiple through the expansion in both choice and availability of films, brought about through an increasing diversity of channels and platforms (Tewksbury, 2005). This started when television became a standard feature of the domestic sphere in the 1960s and 1970s, when people could first access films and television programmes in their own homes (Silverstone, 1994; Livingstone, 2007a). This led to the emergence of 'living-room audiences' (Livingstone and Das, 2013) with domestic household members watching together at the same time and place. The 1980s and 1990s saw more individualised and personalised forms of film-viewing emerge, which included people watching on secondary televisions in their bedrooms, away from other household members (Livingstone, 2007b).

Alongside the fragmentation and multiplication of audiences through these increased opportunities for watching film, they also multiplied through the relationships and interpretations that people have with film texts. This is exemplified in work that considers how different people watching the same film have multiple experiences (Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker et al., 2007). Audiences are also multiple in their relations with different cinema venues. For independent cinemas, Evans (2011) shows there is the possibility that audiences can form an 'indirect community' through their shared experiences at an independent film venue. Hubbard (2003) considers the popularity of multiplex cinemas and the experiences of audiences seeking leisure and recreation at these consumer venues.

In addition to the processes of fragmentation and multiplication, contemporary audiences have also been characterised as going through a process of diffusion. In this sense the audience is defined as '...no longer containable in particular places and times, but rather [they are] part and parcel of all aspects of daily life...' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, pp. 36-37) in a globalised world. In the digital age, audiences access content online – including film – through the same channels they use to engage with a plurality of media types. This revolves around people's different tastes in film and the choices they make in watching them, which lead to the generation of personal cinematic digital identities (Styliari, 2018). Their film choices can be informed by algorithmically-defined sets of recommendations based on past viewing preferences, or through the circulation of reviews on social media platforms (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018; Livingstone, 2018). People also select and stream films to personal computers or mobile devices at a time and place that suits them, generating new types of experience (Huffer, 2017). Grundström (2018) argues that contemporary film-watching encompasses various paratextual and transmedial (Atkinson,

2015) aspects, such as the promotional social media fanfare prior to and alongside the film's theatrical release. This has implications for the degree of individualisation and personalisation of people's relationship with film with audiences becoming 'reflexive' in developing new relationships with film and venues (Corbett and Wessels, 2017).

Given these changes, examining contemporary film audience experiences means looking at the interactions and relationships of the audience experience (Livingstone, 1998). Livingstone argues that audiences should be understood in a way that acknowledges the diverse range of relationships between people and media texts, rather than applying grand theories (c.f. Allen, 2006). For Livingstone, this involves looking at the interactions people have with different aspects of film-watching in choosing which films to watch, where, how and with whom. Through these interactions people develop relationships with films, cinema venues, and other people. Therefore, to understand film audience experiences it is important to examine how these relations and interactions come together in different ways. Livingstone's approach privileges attention on how people conceive their own sense of what being part of an audience means.

## **Methodology and methods**

To examine the relational and interactional aspects of film-watching requires an approach that can capture both a qualitative in-depth understanding of individual film audience experiences and the prevalence of these experiences quantitatively at scale. To do this we conducted 200 semi-structured qualitative interviews and undertook a survey of 5,071 participants. Both were conducted for the AHRC-funded project: *Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for Specialised Film in English Regions* (UKRI, 2017). This approach differs from previous social histories of cinema (and film) which have tended to draw either on small qualitative datasets (Corbett, 1999; Grundström, 2018) or that use qualitative methods to expand on the patterns found within analyses of quantitative data (Hubbard, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore topics through conversation with participants (Edwards and Holland, 2013), gathering rich and insightful data about their experiences. We used topic guides in our interviews to guide the flow of conversation. These provide consistency across interviews (Silverstone, 2010) and enable the interviewer to follow-up on any specific points of interest (Brinkmann, 2018). This generated a rich and detailed set of accounts about different film audience experiences, and the aspects of film-watching associated with them. The interviews were conducted between November 2017 and April 2018 at locations convenient to interviewees with participants recruited as a purposive sample.<sup>1</sup> All interviewees provided informed consent on the basis that their input would be confidential and pseudonymous.

To analyse the interviews, we undertook an 'applied thematic analysis', which involved taking an inductive and exploratory approach to identify recurrent themes (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). This identified the characteristics of the film audience experience, which form five discernible patterns (as its themes). To see if these patterns occurred at scale, we undertook a survey, gathering 5,071 full responses from

representative sample<sup>2</sup>. This matched the interviews coverage of four English regions: North East (NE), North West (NW), South West (SW), and Yorkshire and Humber (YH). All survey respondents were made aware that their responses would be anonymous and confidential at the start of the questionnaire, each providing informed consent to take part in the research. For this, we have generated a sixteen-digit respondent identifier for each respondent. The survey gathered socio-demographic details about each respondent (age, educational level, ethnicity, gender, and household income per annum). It also asked questions about the composition of any social groups that people watch films with, which types of venue they watch them at, the media and screens involved. and how often people had watched films over the previous 12 months (covering September 2017 to August 2018).

To combine the two datasets, we follow Crossley and Edwards (2016) in paying careful attention to how each method shapes the overall analysis. Our approach was primarily qualitative and therefore steeped within an interpretive understanding of how participants described their experiences of being a film audience member and how film featured within their day-to-day lives. The survey data strengthened this understanding as a secondary method, allowing us to evaluate how well themes identified in our applied thematic analysis of interviews scaled up. Also, to what extent (if any) different socio-demographic factors affect film audience experiences. As such, our analysis is what Mason (2005) calls a 'qualitatively driven' mixed methods approach.

### **Five film audience experiences**

This section presents five film audience experiences (individualised, group, venue-specific, global, and digital) and their prevalence. It discusses how people interact with various media, devices, and places to generate each film audience experience. It draws out details about the interactions people have with specific aspects of watching films, including various social aspects such as degrees of personal choice and immersion in film and levels of sharing the experience of films with others.

#### ***Individualised film audience experiences***

People engage with films and immerse themselves in film content in one of three highly individualised and personalised ways: (1) going to a venue alone; (2) watching at home alone; or (3) watching alone whilst on the move, e.g. via a personal mobile device such as a smartphone, laptop or tablet. In each, interviewees described feeling part of an audience. For example, Jessica (65+, Female, NW) succinctly described the experience as a feeling of being part of an '... audience of one ...'. Another went further, stating she could not '... see the point of going [to the cinema] with anyone else ... [because] watching a film is a profoundly individual activity ...' (Sarah, 35-44, Female, NE). Thus, the combination of watching alone and feeling part of an audience generates an 'individualised film audience experience'.

These can be characterised by a sense of personalised engagement with film and immersion in its content. For example, Ruth (25-34, Female, NE) explained that ‘... [y]ou take away different things from that film to the person that you’re sat next to ...’. She described a sense of personalised engagement with a film alongside an awareness that other people in the same cinema auditorium space may experience the same film in subjectively different ways. Other interviewees sought an individualised film audience experience by choosing to watch alone in order to minimise disruptions to their immersion in the film. For instance, explaining his preference for going to the cinema alone, Mutaza (18-24, Male, YH) recalled going to the cinema two years earlier with friends. He now watches alone to focus on the film without distractions from other people: ‘... they were like talking to me! Like, don’t talk – I just want to watch this film ... now, if any time I want to see a film, I go by myself ....’ (Mutaza). Others described a similar ‘... sense of independence ...’ (Pete, 25-34, Male, SW) in watching films alone, noting that ‘... when you’re sat there, watching it, you are fully engaged. There’s [nobody] leaning over and saying anything’ (Pete). Watching films alone to minimise distractions is tied to a sense of being ‘fully engaged’ and immersed within film content which many experience as being an individualised experience in which they are part of an ‘audience of one’.

Individualised film audience experiences can be associated with different screens and film-watching spaces. For instance, when Claire (45-54, Female, SW) compared watching films alone at the cinema and at home, she noted that, ‘[a]t home, I’m totally in there. I’m in, you know, living it. At the cinema, it’s a completely different experience ... dropping my popcorn on the floor and struggling to open sweeties ...’. Unlike Ruth, Mutaza, or Pete, Claire described the individualised film audience member as something she encounters at home – not at the cinema. For others, the material configuration of plug sockets and headphone jacks, free/accessible wi-fi and in-seat screens on trains and aeroplanes provide opportunities to pass journey times by watching films. For example, Michelle, (65+, Female, YH) described watching them on long-haul flights because ‘... sitting on a plane you’d have more concentration ’cause you can’t do anything else ... there with your headphones on ...’. Together, the above accounts above show that personalised engagement and immersion in film content generate individualised film audience experiences in various places and via various types of screen.

In scaling-up the individualised audience experience, our survey showed that watching films alone is something many people do – with 33.7% having done so at least once in the previous year. It is also something that people do quite frequently – with 22% having watched a film alone four or more times in the previous year. In this, we found no associations between watching alone and socio-demographic measures (e.g. age, education level, ethnicity, gender, and household income). Thus, watching alone is relatively widespread and regular for many people, and is by extension, a significant part of many people’s relationship with film.

In summary, individualised audiences are characterised by members holding highly personalised relationships with film-viewing (cf. Shimpach, 2011). These relationships are

composed of interactions with film content in various environments (e.g. homes, cinemas or whilst travelling) when watching alone. Independence from other people is important, with people often seeking to avoid distractions from other people when watching films in order to facilitate a highly personalised immersion in its content. It is an experience that many people regularly seek.

### ***Group film audience experiences***

Group film audience experiences involve people forming a 'group audience' through their shared experience of watching a film together. Here, a group refers to an identifiable unit composed of two or more people being brought together through a shared sense of togetherness in engaging in the same activity (c.f. Scott and Marshall, 2009). This includes activities prior to and after watching a film together.

The group film audience experience is a bounded one, where people watch a film together with others as a group – which can be of various sizes, e.g. as a couple, family unit, or group of friends/family members. For example, John (25-34, Male, NW) explained that his experience was '... more kind of, me and my girlfriend ... I wouldn't say I feel part of a much wider audience'. His experience involved a sense of being inside a bounded group (a couple) while other people watching in the same venue are outside it. Others watch films as part of a family-unit based group by sharing the experience of a specific film with family members. Paul (25-34, Male, SW) for instance, described watching the latest release in a franchise at the cinema with his family. Like John, he reflected on an awareness that other people – both in the same cinema auditorium and elsewhere in the world – would may have a similar experience of the film but were outside his group: '... Harry Potter was a bit of a cult ... we go as a family ...'. Paul observed that there is a 'cult' surrounding the Harry Potter film series, adding that he did not engage with it beyond his family unit – as a group audience. Both John and Paul framed their group film audience experience as one that is shared amongst a bounded group. This differs from the individualised audience experience, as Emma (55-64, Female, NE) notes, in holding that '... an individual is not an audience ... [it] has to be more than one ...'. Here, the shared activity of watching a film together is a vital part of the group film audience experience. Together, John, Paul, and Emma depicted a sense of importance being placed on sharing the experience of watching films together in a bounded group irrespective of the group's size.

When watching films together as a shared activity brings a group audience together, their members often remain within the same bounded group as they move onto other shared activities (c.f. Styliari et al., 2018). For example, Matt (55-64, Male, NE) explained that when he watches films with friends, he often '... go[es] out for a drink afterwards or bite to eat, [to] talk about it ...'. His participation in a small group audience composed of friends is '... an important part of [his] social life ...'. Thus, it is an important channel for him to build and maintain social connections in his everyday life that extend beyond the specific instance of watching a particular film.

In our survey, 66% of the respondents had watched a film with other people at least once in the previous year. The most common group size were couples, with 68% of those watching as part of a group having done so with their partner at least once in the previous year. Small groups of friends and/or family were also more common than larger groups. In socio-demographic terms, the survey showed that 18-24-year olds and people aged 55 or over were more likely to have watched films with partners only than people aged 25-54. The latter watched more often with small groups of friends and/or family. We also found that women were 3.2 times more likely to watch films as part of a small group than men (who tended to watch alone or in couples). However, we found no strong associations with any other measure. The survey showed that many people watch films in bounded groups. Although there are age and gender variations in the group size, watching films as part of a group audience is a widespread practice for many people.

In summary, group film audiences involve partners, family members, and/or friends coming together as a bounded group to share the experience of watching a film together. The relationships between people in the group and their shared interactions with a film are central to the overall experience of being part of a group audience. These relationships are also maintained throughout various interactions, such as discussing film as part of a shared activity before or after watching (Styliari et al., 2018). Thus, the interactions between group audience members often extend beyond the moment of watching a film, comprising just one aspect of a larger set of shared social activities. Overall, the main characteristic of group audiences is the sense of importance being placed on watching films and sharing the experience of doing amongst a bounded group.

### ***Venue-specific film audience experiences***

Venue-specific film audience experiences are based on relationships and interactions people have with specific venues through their film-watching – both as specific film-watching spaces and with the other people who watch films at those venues.

A strong feature of venue-specific audiences is that they are steeped within a feeling that the identity of a venue and its programming creates a shared sense of film-watching amongst the people watching there. Participation in venue-specific audiences involves sharing the experience with other people who attend the same cinema and is shaped by how those people are perceived. For example, Gary (55-65, Male, YH) described his participation in what he calls a ‘self-selected’ community at a specific cinema, which he believes is based on shared film tastes. He depicts his participation in a venue-specific audience as a decision to share films with a community composed of what he calls ‘arty’ people, who share a sensibility for watching film that are that are bound together through their affiliation with a venue rather than through personal acquaintance:

I don't go there to meet my friends ... I go there to watch films, with lots of other people. But I just feel there's a, sort of, almost like, you know, I can't

say snobbery but, you know, it's a self-selecting, arty sort of group of people.  
(Gary).

When Gary described the other people who participate in his venue-specific audience, he referred to them as 'self-selecting'. He also referred to a shared set of tastes and sensibilities about film-watching practices held by other people who watch films at the same venue.

These shared tastes and sensibilities amongst the people who go to a particular venue inform a set of relations and interactions between people that generate a sense of community. For example, comparing her experiences of independent and multiplex cinemas, Leanne (35-44, Female, SW) described a sense of belonging to a specific independent venue, and a distaste for the practices carried out by people at multiplexes. She noted that, at [a specific independent cinema] '... I'd say ... Oh, that's my kind of people ... I find it really hard going to [a multiplex] ... people bringing their kids to films that [are] ... not appropriate ... I'm a bit of a snob about it ...' (Leanne). Her account showed that she had an awareness of her own participation in a community surrounding a specific venue composed of 'her kind of people'. Like Leanne, when Gary (discussed above) reflected on his experiences of watching films at a specific independent cinema, he also portrayed his participation in a venue-specific community as being socially selective, but added that it made him feel uncomfortable: '... it's a bit, sort of, niche ... I like to mix with lots of different sorts of backgrounds of people ... I just feel that it's a bit self-selected as it were, and I don't like that aspect of it' (Gary). What Leanne and Gary both depict is a sense of community amongst the people who attend a specific venue, and who share a similar set of tastes and sensibility for watching film.

Another characteristic of venue-specific audiences is that they are configured around specific cinemas as film-watching spaces, each of which affords a different set of viewing and consumer experiences (c.f. Evans, 2011). In multiplexes, people can watch new releases, mainstream films, and Hollywood blockbusters in a generic consumer-friendly space that often contains the latest screen and sound system technologies (c.f. Hubbard, 2003). Christo noted that all multiplexes '... are generally the same ... easy to book ... cheaper to go [to] ...' adding that '... it's not the location, it's the film that I am going to see ...'. Independent cinemas offer a range of non-mainstream films, foreign language titles, as well as some mainstream films and special events. They are also often located in repurposed buildings or historic cinema spaces with 'character', having distinctive layouts, designs, and decor. For example, when Dominic (18-24, Male, NE) explained that '... there is like a community ...' at the independent cinema he regularly attended, which he explained was '... not [generated] because of the film as an object, [but] because as a whole, [the] venue is just ... an experience ... the same bar, the same café, also the environment, the interior of the place ...' (Dominic). Here, the relationship that people have with a venue is an important part of their overall experience of film, and they also feel that other people who go there appreciate the venue, and its film programming in a similar way. For some people (like Dominic, Gary, and

Leanne) this relationship with a venue has a community feel, where the people who go there share a set of tastes and sensibilities for film.

In our survey, 60% held going to their favourite cinema to be important in their overall experience of film (reported by 1.5 times more women than men). People not only had an affinity with a venue, but 60% also shared an affinity with others who attend the same venue. This affinity was most important for those aged 55 or over (at 34.9% of sample). Beyond these disparities in age and gender, we found no strong associations between choosing to watch at a venue-specific and any other socio-demographic measure.

In summary, venue-specific audiences coalesce around people's ongoing relationships with specific venues, where they often develop a particular affinity with its atmosphere, its design/building layout, and the film programming it offers (cf. Hubbard, 2003). In their interactions with specific venues people can feel a shared sense of community (cf. Evans, 2011) in the relationship they have with the other people who go there – based on a perception of shared experiences, appreciations of the venue, and film tastes.

### ***Global film audience experiences***

Global audiences coalesce around a sense of an affinity with others across the world when watching certain films. Often this revolves around newly-released films, especially when those films are part of a series or franchise (cf. Giroux, 2008), or if they are seen to be culturally, socially, or politically significant at a particular moment in time.

One of the key characteristics of global audiences is that they are composed of geographically-dispersed members holding an awareness that other people will be watching the same film within the same period of time. This is often the period surrounding the release of a new film and can be connected to the paratextual and transmedial aspects of such films (cf. Atkinson, 2015). As Henrich (18-24, Male, NW) explained '... you've got this idea that lots of people all over the world are sort of flocking to go and see this new release at the same time ...'. A second key characteristic of global audiences is a sense of connection with other people through an awareness that they hold similar film preferences (such as an affinity with a particular production studio or franchise). This often involves an awareness of how others will receive specific films. As Dean (35-44, Male, YH) commented, when a large company such as Disney release a new film, he feels part of 'something larger' than a single audience composed of aggregated individuals watching the film in a cinema auditorium together:

... Something really big, like *Star Wars* or *Avengers* ... [has] a huge following ... we have some collective expectations ... to get something out of this ... there's a tangible feeling [of] being in the physical audience there, and there is also a feeling of being [part of] something larger ...

Echoing this sentiment, Sophie (25-34, Female, YH) explained that when *Black Panther* was released in 2018 it offered a culturally, socially, and politically poignant moment:

... it [had] a huge impact ... [and] has transcended film! ... now [it] isn't about the film ... it's a movement ... [T]here are people that don't like superhero films ... going and watching that film to make a political point ... there's a whole movement online where people are just saying, 'Okay, take your kids out of school. Go and watch that film!'

What Dean and Sophie's both portray is a sense of participation in a global audience for a newly released film. For Dean this was related to the film being produced by a large studio, while for Sophie it was tied to the social, cultural, and political significance of the film and its global reception.

In our survey 51% of the respondents felt that 'watching the same film that everyone is talking about' was important to their overall experience of film. Women found it to be slightly more so than men (57.3% to 42.7%). There was also a slight gender disparity in the importance placed on watching new releases. Here, 46% of the survey respondents found it to be important, of whom 60.3% were women and 39.7% men. We found no strong associations with any other socio-demographic measure. This showed that many people have an awareness of the discussion surrounding new films, and that they find it important to watch those films within the period surrounding their release, albeit with slight gender disparities as set out above.

In summary, global audiences are formed through the experience of a geographically dispersed set of people being brought together at a global level through their relationship and interaction with a specific film. This includes an understanding of how people engage with discussion and promotional materials surrounding the release of a new film (cf. Atkinson, 2015). Members of global audiences do not necessarily directly interact with one another, instead the experience is shaped through a sense of relation to other people through watching specific films.

### ***Digital film audience experiences***

Digital film audiences involve people using various web-based technologies to access, select, watch, and discuss films. They coalesce around people being brought together through these technologies, and often involve a digitally-mediated awareness of other people's film-watching activities. Digital technology provides a diverse range of opportunities for people to access and interact with films. People can watch films on mobile devices (e.g. mobile phones, laptops, and tablets). They can also access films online (e.g. by streaming and/or illegally torrenting content on demand) as well as through traditional media (e.g. by watching films on-demand via smart television sets). Alongside access to film, digital technologies provide opportunities for geographically dispersed people to discuss, share, and learn about films, e.g. through film review websites, social media platforms, or

discussion forums (cf. Grundström, 2018). In their relations and interactions with these technologies, and with other people through them, people generate a ‘digital film audience experience’.

People often draw on digital metrics to quantify how many others have watched the same film. For example, Filip (35-44, Male, NE) perceived a limited capacity for people to engage directly with one another through a digital video-on-demand platform (Netflix). However, he noted that he could gain an awareness of others through it: ‘... if you watch film online you can see how many people online are watching at the same time ... [but] you cannot interact with them’ (Filip). His account showed that digital audience members often have an awareness of each other, even if there is no means of direct interaction. Other people draw on similar digital metrics to ascertain other people’s online film reviews and ratings, as well as algorithmically-generated ones when selecting a film. Rachel (18-24, Female, YH) for instance explained that her choice of film was influenced by the algorithmically-generated recommendations of a video-on-demand subscription service (Netflix) – which itself is based on other users with similar viewing habits – and the star ratings allocated by other viewers. She observed that, ‘Netflix has got stuff like recommendations ... [based on] what you’ve watched ... but I’ll give anything a go ... they’ve got like a star rating sometimes, and [if that’s low] I’ll be like, “hmmm, it’s not going to be that good is it”?’ Here, Rachel described being aware of how such metrics operate, and how her past viewing history informed the range of films that Netflix suggested for her.

Alongside a digitally-mediated awareness of others, participation in a digital audience can also coalesce around shared discussion and interpretation of films online. Here, websites and social media platforms are key points of connection. For example, Martina (18-24, Female, SW) notes that ‘... [although] Reddit is not a proper source ... it’s still people’s opinions. They are part of the audience’. Similarly, Louise (25-34, Female, YH) described a digital film audience experience in her discussion of films amongst a closed-circle of acquaintances in a private Facebook group. Furthermore, she considered that recommendations and reviews circulating within that group were more valuable than those gathered from elsewhere:

... my, I guess, like internet friends ... the reason that we bonded was because ... we watch the same TV shows, we watch the same films, same musicals, whatever. So, if they like a film, I’ll kind of be like, ‘Oh, that’s a good recommendation, that’s out’. And otherwise, I don’t really watch, like read reviews and stuff, I’m not really bothered about that. (Louise)

In our survey, we found that 62% of the respondents had downloaded or streamed a full-length film through a purchase or via a subscription service (e.g. video-on demand service) in the previous year. Within this figure, women were more likely to watch films via a paid subscription than men (60.2% to 39.7%). People aged under 35 were also more likely to have done so than those in any other age group (accounting for 41% of all people watching

via paid subscriptions). In their online discussion about films, word-of-mouth via social media influenced 46% of all survey respondents in their decision to watch a particular film at the cinema. This shows that not only do many people discuss films online within closed circles, but that discussion within those circles has a significant impact on the films that people choose and where they choose to do so. Here, we found a slight gender disparity, with women more likely to watch films they had discussed with friends on social media than men (60.5% to 39.4%). It also tended to be more common amongst people aged over 55 (31%) than any younger age groups (ranging from 18% to 18.9% except for 18-24-year-olds at 3.9%). What these figures showed is that although there are associations between different aspects of the digital film audience experience and age and gender, they are not strong. There are also no strong associations with any other socio-demographic measures. The digital film audience is experienced by many people, and often influences their choice of film.

In summary, digital audiences coalesce around people being brought together through their use of digital technology to watch films and/or discuss films. At times, interaction amongst members is digitally-mediated, and takes place through a paratextual (cf. Atkinson, 2015) awareness of other people's film-watching activities. At other times, participating in a digital audience involves interacting with others through an engagement with the (online) dialogue surrounding a film (cf. Grundström, 2018). Digital audience members are also often aware of how digital metrics operate and the influence that digital technologies, such as automated recommendations have on personal film choices and with what Styliari et al. (2018) have referred to as personal cinematic digital identities. Together, these aspects make up a digital film audience experience in which members engage with digital technologies in various ways to select, watch, share, and discuss films.

### **Moving between film audience experiences**

Each of the five audience experiences set out above is a distinct pattern in how people's relations and interactions with films, venues, media, and other audience members are configured. There are many ways to be part of a film audience, and people can be flexible and move between these experiences by engaging with each at different times through their everyday lives. For example, when Hugh (Male, 55-64, NW) goes to see films on his own and he goes to see films with his wife. For Hugh, watching at the cinema was primarily an individual activity when watching alone, being sat within the darkness of the cinema space provides an opportunity to immerse in the content of a film in a highly personalised way – as an individualised film audience experience: '... lights are out, you can't see anyone else ... it's more of an individual thing ...'. When he goes with his wife, his experience is different, as he describes '... if I'm with my wife ... she doesn't like, you know, very violent scene things, [then] I'll be aware of her being a bit uncomfortable beside me' (Hugh). In remaining aware of his wife's reaction to specific scenes, he shares the experience with her as a couples-based group audience in a way that differs from his experience of being part of

an individualised audience when watching alone. What this shows is that people are not fixed to a single film audience experience when watching films.

Other people describe their movement between multiple film audience experiences through their film-watching. Leanne (Female, 35-44, SW) describes moving between watching films as part of an individualised, group, venue-specific, and global audience in order to seek out a specific film-watching experience. She explains that although she watches films with her husband and her best friend as a group audience, she usually watches alone as an individualised one and sees cinema-going as a personalised experience: ‘... we do go, and I’ll go with my best friend too ... other than that, I do not see cinema as a social activity ...’ (Leanne).

As well as moving between individualised and group audiences, Leanne moves between global and individual film audience experiences in choosing to watch a specific and globally significant new release (*Star Wars*) alone. When Leanne recalls discussing this with her partner, she notes that he suggested watching the film with friends. She objected on the basis that watching as a group would disturb her from enjoying an experience of personalised engagement and immersion in the film: ‘... [h]e has got a couple [of friends], they really want to see *Star Wars* and like he said, “Should I invite them?”. I said “no”, I really, I said “that isn’t for me” ... It’s really, sort of, I wanted to be me ...’. Leanne continues by explaining how she has venue-based film audience experiences too, by watching alone at a specific cinema as an alternative way to avoid watching the film with a group ‘... or I want to watch it with people who [are] here, in just - they are going to appreciate [it]. They are going to engage with the film in the same way that I do ...’. In this, Leanne suggests that going to a specific cinema alone to watch *Star Wars* meant that she could watch it within an environment surrounded by people with a similar sensibility for film, and who she felt would engage with it in a similar way. Leanne’s account shows that people make decisions about who to watch with, and where, in order to seek out specific film audience experiences and that this can change from film to film.

In moving between film audience experiences, Leanne and Hugh (above), both highlight a degree of flexibility between multiple film audience experiences depending on who they watch with. However, this flexibility also changes throughout the course of people’s film-watching at different times. Humphry (Male, 18-24, NW), for example, watches films as part of a group audience at home with friends on a weekly basis, and alone as both an individualised one at other times:

I live in a house with eight or, now there is seven of us, and so, maybe once a week or so we watch [a] film together. We’ll normally find one to watch online or on TV. And then I do watch films on my laptop on my own, I guess not so much really, at the moment... [and]...I’ve got someone else’s Netflix account ...

By borrowing a friend’s Netflix login, Humphry also shares films (and algorithmically generated recommendations) as part of a digital audience. Thus, Humphry moves between

individual, group, and digital film audience experiences depending on who he has opportunities to watch films with at different times.

Overall, we have identified discernible patterns in how people configure their relationships and interactions with various aspects of film-watching and shown that people are flexible in moving between them. This flexibility depends on the specific film they watch, and with whom and when they watch it.

## **Conclusion**

Although contemporary film audiences are multiple, diffuse, and fragmented, there are five distinct patterns in the ways people experience being part of an audience. These patterns are characterised by the different relations and interactions people have with films, media, venues, and with other people. The patterns are: *Individualised*, where people watch alone to limit their interactions with other people in order to engage and relate with film in a highly personalised way. *Group*, when people choose to watch a film with a bounded group, with a partner, or with friends and/or family members. They interact by choosing which film to watch, and develop a relationship with film through sharing with the group. *Venue-specific*, where audiences develop a relationship with a cinema venue through its programming or building design/layout and interact with others in feeling part of the community of people who watch there, related to one another through shared sensibilities and tastes in film. *Global*, where audiences interact and connect digital with a film globally, and in so doing experience a relationship with other people across the world who are watching the same film within the same period of time. *Digital*, where people use digital media technologies to select and watch particular films interacting online through a relationship with the films that other people have watched and recommended.

By engaging with film in these patterned ways, people configure particular film audience experiences in their selection of where, when, and with whom they watch films. Choice is a key aspect of this, with people choosing between watching at a particular cinema venue or at home, with other people or alone, or whether to engage with shared discussion surrounding a film. In making specific choices and taking up the different opportunities offered for watching film, people are active in generating the five distinct types of film audience experience. People are also active in moving between those experiences, configuring their on-going and dynamic relationships and interactions with different films, screens, venues, and other people in order to seek out more than one specific viewing experience at the same time. For example, watching a film alone at a favourite cinema, can involve a venue-specific film audience experience alongside an individualised, group, and/or global ones.

The patterns within film audience experiences are not strongly influenced by socio-demographic factors such as age, education level, ethnicity, gender, and household income. There are small disparities, for instance, the influence of social media discussion on people's decision to watch a particular film can differ with age and gender. However, all five types of audience experience are widespread and regularly sought by a broad range of people.

Further research could apply the approach developed in this paper to other domains and places, for instance, to see if there are similar patterns in the way other types of audiences are experienced, e.g. for music, theatre, or television. The research was conducted in four English regions (North East, North West, South West, and Yorkshire and the Humber), so further research could also see if it is applicable to other areas of the UK such as Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, or London. It might also be interesting to see if these patterns occur in other European countries and/or worldwide. Another area of further research could be to see how useful the five audience experiences we have identified are for film distribution, exhibition, and policy, and for audience development strategies.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Interview sample: age range 18 to 85; 106 women, 94 men; 30 self-identified disabled; 9 black or minority ethnicity background; 108 in paid employment, 25 in full-time education, 29 retired; 146 with University degree, 52 with A-Levels/GCSEs/O-Levels (Wessels et al. 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Survey sample: 2,893 women, 2,174 men, 4 other; age groupings 18-24 (649), 25-34 (826), 35-44 (825), 45-54 (904), 55-64 (1,063), 65+ (804); 1325 self-identified disabled, 396 minority ethnicity background, 3,484 paid employment, 1669 with University degree, 1,114 with A-Levels/equivalent qualifications, 1,147 held GCSEs/O-Levels/equivalent, 219 held basic skills qualifications. (Yates et al. 2019).