

“Don't Portray Me As A Sexless Grandmother”

Contributed by Harris Interactive
Friday, 08 April 2011
Last Updated Friday, 08 April 2011

Major new independent study shows how the UK film industry could increase profitability by better understanding audiences

On the eve of the closure of the UK Film Council, one of the largest studies of its kind into film has revealed that the majority of the UK population believes more needs to be done to create an authentic portrayal of the country's diverse audiences that includes older women and minority ethnic groups.

The independent study undertaken by global research agency, Harris Interactive, on behalf of the UK Film Council – who funded the Oscar®-winning film, *The King's Speech* – surveyed 4,315 people to uncover their views and opinions about the portrayal of diverse groups in film. The research incorporated specific groups including older women, minority ethnic groups, lesbian/gay/bisexual audiences (LGB), and C2D social classes, and focuses on those who are into film.

The research highlights a number of stereotypes that are still being perpetuated in film, one of which is sexual behaviour. Older women in particular feel marginalised and rather than being seen as background, sexless figures they're keen to see roles in film that more accurately communicate the characteristics of the modern, sexually liberated older woman.

Three in five (61%) claim they are not portrayed as having sexual needs or desires in film and half (50%) are more than comfortable seeing themselves as being attractive to younger men – the recently identified “Cougar” phenomenon. Seventen (69%) also feel that film tends to glamorise young women and older characters – especially older women – tend to be significantly under-represented.

While a large proportion of older women would like to see their characters “sexed up” in film, by contrast, other groups were keen to see their sexuality downplayed. Four-fifths (80%) of LGB individuals felt the focus on gay characters in film concentrated too much on their sexuality, while almost two-thirds of Black African/Caribbean people (63%) felt that their characters were portrayed as overly sexual in film.

The research also delves further into some of the other negative stereotypes communicated in film. A majority (80%) of Black African/Caribbean individuals believe they are too often characterised as drug dealers in film and around three-quarters (74%) would like to see a superhero in film that isn't a white guy. Almost three-quarters (71%) of LGB audiences believe that film focuses on them as having problems rather than being everyday people.

In addition, almost three-quarters of Eastern European respondents (72%) believe they are regularly portrayed as being at the bottom of the economic ladder, while a similar proportion of Asian audiences (74%) believe that Asian religious culture is not reflected authentically. One in two C2D social grade individuals also believe that films telling stories of their lives are too often depressing.

These figures become even more important when contrasted with how powerful the general population feels the role of film has in changing behaviour. Almost 7 in 10 people (69%) believe that film has the power to tell stories that educate people about real life events, demonstrating that film doesn't merely entertain and pass the time, but is an important medium to help change ingrained beliefs and stereotypes in society.

What is also clear from the findings is that film remains one of the most popular pastimes for people in the UK and – interestingly – diverse audiences represent some of the most regular film viewers. As many as three-quarters (76%) of the general public consider watching films as a pleasurable way to fill their spare time, yet only 31% attend the cinema at least once a month.

Contrast this to minority ethnic groups who visit the cinema much more regularly with 67% of Asian and Eastern European groups, and 56% of Black African/Caribbean individuals and 55% of LGB respondents attending on a monthly basis.

While things have improved over the past decade with 71% of the general public claiming that film has become more authentic in its portrayal of diverse groups over the last 10 years, diverse audiences feel strongly that more work needs to be done – a massive 95% of Asian and Eastern European groups, 97% of Black African/Caribbean, and 90% of LGB groups believe this is the case.

An interesting finding from the study also highlights that there is considerable commercial opportunity to be reaped if diverse groups are represented more authentically in film. 59% of Asian, 66% of Black African/Caribbean, 54% of East European and 51% of LGB audiences say they would watch more films if they felt this was the case.

Mary FitzPatrick, Head of Diversity at the UK Film Council and key sponsor of the research, said, “Film remains one of the most popular pastimes for people in the UK and this research highlights the often overlooked views, opinions and needs of the diverse groups that make up an important part of the film industry’s audience. Film has the ability to change behaviour and shift opinion, so we in the Industry all have a responsibility to ensure that these findings are not ignored.

The figures speak for themselves in demonstrating there is a real opportunity for the industry to more accurately portray these groups in film. This research will form an important part of the UK Film Council’s legacy and will help make a powerful and dynamic change to the way in which diverse groups are portrayed in film going forward”.

British comedienne and actress, Jenny Eclair, supports the findings of the research and hopes the study will open the way for a more authentic portrayal of audiences on screen.

Eclair commented, “Sadly this research demonstrates that, even in our culture of supposed diversity, film - one of the key cultural mediums - is still misrepresenting large proportions of UK film goers. The industry needs to think carefully about how it portrays diverse groups - including older women - who are frustrated at still being portrayed in de-sexualised, stereotypical roles. The industry is in danger of continuing this misrepresentation where there is clearly the opportunity at hand to change opinion for good”.

About the research

The study comprised two phases: a qualitative stage followed by quantitative research. 12 qualitative focus groups were conducted among diverse audiences (selected by social grade, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation) between the 11th and 19th January 2011 – with each group focusing on a different diverse group to inform the quantitative element of the study.

A large-scale quantitative study was then conducted with two samples; general population and diverse audience groups.

The general population quantitative sample was conducted by Harris Interactive online between 9th and 14th February 2011, among a total of 2,228 adults (aged 16+) within Great Britain. Figures for age, gender education, region and Internet usage were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

The diverse audience groups sample was conducted by Harris Interactive online between 9th and 22nd February 2011, among a total of 2,087 adults (aged 18+) within Great Britain, comprised of the following groups: Older Women aged 50-75 (480), C2D Social Grade (717), LGB (231), Asian (222), Black African/Caribbean (235) and Eastern European (202). Figures for age and gender were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

About the UK Film Council

The UK Film Council has backed more than 900 films, shorts and features, which have won over 300 awards and entertained more than 200 million people around the world generating £5 for every £1 of Lottery money it has invested.

During its history, the UK Film Council has funded exciting new British films such as The King's Speech, Streetdance 3D and Tamara Drewe, and supports filmmakers at every stage of their career. The Council’s audience development initiatives get a wider choice of films to audiences throughout the UK whether through digital innovation in film distribution or by broadening the cinema experience offer to underserved audiences. They also invest in training British talent, promoting Britain as an international filmmaking location and raising the profile of British films abroad.

From 1 April 2011, the UK Film Council's funding responsibilities are being transferred to the British Film Institute (BFI) and Film London. Their training, production funding and audience development activities will transfer to the BFI and their work to attract international film production to the UK will transfer to Film London.

The UK Film Council’s Diversity Department has a single core aim, which is to help build a more diverse and inclusive workforce and film culture. The department has created and supported a number initiatives which are designed to:

- Nurture a diverse range of UK film talent;
- Integrate equality and diversity commitments into all UK Film Council activities and monitor their impact;
- Provide practical tools and information to encourage our partners and the industry more generally to promote diversity;
- and
- Support initiatives designed to give people from minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and women equal opportunities to get into and succeed in the UK film industry.

For a full list of the projects and films that have been supported by the UK Film Council, see www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/awards

About Harris Interactive

Please visit <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/>

London, UK - 28 March 2011