



INSIGHT REPORT

# HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

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# INTRODUCTION

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This Insight Report considers the success of Soda Pictures's theatrical release of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, supported by the New Models strand of the BFI's Distribution Fund for its innovative marketing campaign targeted at sections of the Black British population, including people of Nigerian heritage living in the UK.

With strong literary credentials and recognised acting talent, *Half of a Yellow Sun* could have been sold purely as a well-heeled adaptation attracting fans of the bestselling novel and arthouse audiences tempted by the prospect of a story set in Africa involving historical events rarely recounted in English-language cinema.

Yet in addition the distributor chose to target Black audiences, to test whether a grassroots marketing campaign led by a specialist agency working with community media partners could successfully sell the film to people of African and African-Caribbean descent. The campaign was one of the first to involve an English-language film specifically seeking box office returns from minority ethnic audiences.

Following its appearance at the 57th BFI London Film Festival in October 2013, and a series of preview and charity screenings in March and early April 2014, including the official premiere at Odeon Streatham, the film opened at 17 sites nationwide on 11 April 2014.

The campaign was designed to attract two broad groups with a distinct female skew (given the novel upon which it is based).

The first, comprising older, upscale, arthouse audiences and fans of the book, was addressed via conventional means involving outdoor media, print & broadcast advertising and press & PR activity.

In parallel, Soda commissioned Kush Promotions & PR (a specialist marketing and distribution agency with extensive experience reaching urban audiences) to target Black communities through pre-established email and SMS text contact lists, flyer 'shop drops' in key locations, social media activity and promotional activity via Black media outlets (including satellite TV and DAB/online radio stations).

The significance of this New Model approach lies in the fact that little is known about the cinema going habits of different Black audiences, other than that specialised titles that appeal to audiences of African descent (including Nollywood works) tend not to attract people of African-Caribbean heritage in significant numbers. There is therefore a need for more research evidence in this area.



‘The key aspect of our marketing was to bring the African & African-Caribbean film loving community together to support this release. A special emphasis was also put on targeting the UK’s Nigerian Igbo community [...] along with members of the Yoruba tribe.’

**Kush Promotions & PR,  
Marketing Report, May 2014**

The BFI awarded Soda £56,500 to meet the cost of the targeted release campaign, representing half of the total campaign spend (£111,957).

Drawing on box office data and the findings of exit polling, alongside interviews with key people involved in the campaign, this Insight Report examines what the evidence tells us about the success of Kush’s targeted campaign, and reflects on the lessons it offers for reaching Black audiences in future.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Described by one critic as ‘a Nigerian *Gone with the Wind*’, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (HOAYS) is based on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Orange Prize-winning novel. The film chronicles a 1960s-set family saga against the backdrop of Nigeria’s struggle for independence and descent into civil war.
- One obvious angle for the release campaign was to sell HOAYS as a well-heelled adaptation, to attract fans of the bestselling novel and arthouse audiences tempted by the prospect of a story set in Africa involving historical events rarely recounted in English-language cinema.
- The distributor, Soda Pictures, chose in addition to target Black audiences, to test whether a grassroots marketing campaign led by a specialist agency working with community media partners could successfully sell the film to people of both African and African-Caribbean descent.
- The release campaign had a budget of around £112,000, including an award of £56,500 from the BFI Distribution Fund: New Models strand.
- The campaign had two related elements: the first involved conventional marketing and promotion including outdoor media, print & broadcast advertising and press & PR activity. Print reviews were mixed, positioning HOAYS as a three star proposition, necessitating a focus on the film’s other assets.
- In parallel, Soda commissioned Kush Promotions & PR (a specialist marketing and distribution agency) to target Black communities via email and SMS text messages, flyers in key community locations, social media activity and promotional activity via Black media outlets.
- Soda’s approach to theatrical bookings targeted independent sites in key towns and cities frequented by upscale audiences in search of specialised films, alongside selected multiplexes to access younger, urban audiences.
- In terms of geographical targeting, theatrical bookings were sought in areas where significant Black populations are concentrated (e.g. London, Birmingham and Manchester). At a regional level, the West Midlands and the South East of England were the largest target markets after London.
- The film was released on 11 April 2014 on 17 screens, following a high profile premiere at Odeon Streatham attended by cast members and other principal talent. HOAYS took £151,783 over the course of its 13 week theatrical run across 63 venues, grossing £32,473 in the opening weekend (with a respectable screen average of £1,910).
- This total is well above Soda’s conservative forecasts for the title. London sites accounted for 69% of all the money HOAYS grossed during its theatrical run. Regionally, outside of key cities, the film performed in line with expectations.
- In terms of audience profile, the only source of hard evidence comes from opening weekend exit polls conducted by First Movies International on behalf of Soda Pictures. The survey indicates the film found a sizeable Black audience in the opening weekend: 56% of respondents described themselves as either ‘Black British’ or ‘Black other’.
- As the survey did not differentiate between Black African, Black Caribbean and other subgroups it is not possible to say if traditional supporters of Nollywood films came out in any force for HOAYS, although anecdotal evidence suggests this to have been the case.
- The question of whether an ‘urban’ promotional campaign aimed at Black communities provides an effective means of reaching minority ethnic target audiences is harder to judge in light of other factors like the high profile press coverage around Chiwetel Ejiofor and support from the book’s dedicated following.
- Findings from opening weekend exit polls suggest Kush’s grassroots marketing campaign and media partnerships helped to mobilise target audiences. However, the performance of different elements of the campaign varied widely. The Internet, personal recommendations, TV and social media were particularly important in raising awareness of the film among Black survey

respondents, while text messaging and radio (which formed important parts of Kush's campaign) had less impact on opening weekend audiences.

- Exit poll results confirm the assumption that Black audiences are less likely than other ethnic groups to rely on print media for information, which supports the general principle tested by this New Model that alternative communication channels (online, TV and social media) are important for reaching specific target groups.
- However, flyers, another prominent part of Kush's campaign, had limited impact according to the exit polls. They were cited as a source of information by only 1% of exit poll respondents, and this did not vary by ethnic group.
- Odeon's support for the title was another key factor in the film's success (the company has an established track record of Nollywood programming in London). The circuit booked HOAYS to open at seven of its venues, and the film played at it's Panton Street venue for 13 weeks. Exit poll findings indicate that cinema promotions, including via cinema web sites, trailers before films, and point of sale posters/displays/standees, were as influential on awareness of the film as newspaper and magazine articles, and

second only to word of mouth from friends or relatives.

- Yet Kush played a part here, building confidence among exhibitors that HOAYS had the potential to tap established Nollywood audiences. Kush's involvement also helped Soda to draw upon a network of pre-established connections with Black media companies.
- One potential challenge of any relationship between a distributor and specialist agency lies in negotiating differences in working practice and organisational culture. In the case of the HOAYS campaign, misunderstandings led to confusion around a preview screening in Birmingham, and also contributed to the late printing and distribution of flyers.
- Problems with the flyers resulted from a more deep-seated issue to do with expectations around the terms of trade with Black media companies, many of whom feel they are taken advantage of by distributors in search of cheap publicity. Yet good quality editorial support requires an appropriate campaign spend, and distributors are advised not take community media outlets for granted in future.



## SECTION ONE:

# PLANNING AND EXECUTION

'I think *Half of a Yellow Sun* is one of those titles that could have been released in completely different ways, which makes it an interesting one because you can only release the film once.'

**Edward Fletcher, Managing Director,  
Soda Pictures**

### 1.1 OVERVIEW

Described by one critic as 'a Nigerian *Gone with the Wind*', *Half of a Yellow Sun* (HOAYS) marked the directorial debut of celebrated playwright Biyi Bandele. Based on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Orange Prize-winning novel, the film chronicles a 1960s-set family saga against the backdrop of Nigeria's struggle for independence and descent into civil war.

Soda Pictures picked up the film in 2013, following discussions with the sales agent after it played to enthusiastic audiences at Toronto International Film Festival, which concluded for the film's appearance at the BFI London Film Festival.

'It's one of those cases of the benefits of a good ongoing relationship between sales agent and distributor. They were looking for an innovative approach for the title, and with the strengths of the key elements it presented a good opportunity to work together on a UK release.'

**Edward Fletcher, Managing Director,  
Soda Pictures**

As a historical melodrama with a largely Black cast, including Thandie Newton and Chiwetel Ejiofor (a star on the ascendant following his appearance in the Academy Award-winning *12 Years A Slave*), HOAYS resists easy pigeon-holing, necessitating a creative approach to positioning and marketing in order to sell the film to cinema bookers and audiences.

Soda was attracted to the project on the strength of the film's obvious marketing 'hooks', including the source material and creative talent involved. Adichie's novel proved a hit in 2007, making the influential 'Richard and Judy's Book Club' selection and becoming one of that year's best sellers.

'The film appealed to us for a number of reasons, but we were particularly interested in how we could effectively target two audiences, who typically respond to campaigns differently. Our forked approach involved reaching out to a Black audience and fans of the book and talent (of course, there is also a crossover between the two). Our thoughts were that a Black audience would perhaps be particularly drawn to the subject matter, the Nigerian setting and the romance of the story, whilst a more diverse audience would be specifically attracted to the film being based on the best selling novel, and the quality cast and filmmakers.'

**Nicola Milburn, Marketing Manager,  
Soda Pictures**

The property was developed with support from the UK Film Council (eventually going into production with Lottery funding courtesy of the BFI Film Fund) and the production team included Andrea Calderwood (as Producer) and Gail Egan (Executive Producer) who had previous form with two well-regarded, English-language literary adaptations set in Africa (Calderwood with *The Last King of Scotland* [2006] and Egan with *The Constant Gardener* [2005]).

Yet assessing the film's market potential was far from straightforward. Soda had released *The First Grader* (2010) on a limited run in 2011, to disappointing results:

‘We’d done a film called *The First Grader*, Justin Chadwick’s film set in Kenya, about three years ago, and there were certain similarities to this. That film struggled to perform and there were concerns whether HOAYS could work in the marketplace.’

### **Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

In the case of HOAYS, the director had an enviable reputation on stage, but was an unknown quantity on film (true of every debutant filmmaker). More concerning, the film’s critical reception lacked a raft of strong 4 and 5 star reviews necessary to break out:

‘We knew the film was not going to work at the mid-level because it was never going to get strong critical support. Even though it was a very watchable film, you knew that as a melodrama, as a film that uses historical events as a structure for a family drama, it was never going to be seen critically as a strong film. In our experience, you can’t make a film perform in the core indie circuits, the Picturehouses and Curzons, without strong reviews.’

### **Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

These factors can stymie any specialised film release, but HOAYS faced additional, very particular challenges. For one thing, there was no obvious precedent for a mid-market, prestige film with an all-Black cast. And while the setting, source novel and casting had strong potential appeal to audiences of African heritage, particularly Nigerians, little hard research evidence exists about Black cinema-going habits in general, and the specific preferences and behaviour of different groups within this wide classification. In combination, these factors placed the film deep in uncharted territory: how would a glossy literary adaptation of this order play to Black audiences, and would the level of appeal be sufficient to generate decent box office returns?

‘There was an early concern about how we were going to reach a Black minority ethnic audience for this film, how big that market was and to what extent that could form a realistic part of the release.’

### **Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

Despite Soda’s experience with *The First Grader* (2010), there were grounds for optimism. A few years earlier, Nigeria’s burgeoning film industry, the world’s second most productive after India’s, had finally broken into UK mainstream exhibition when Odeon started programming regular Nollywood screenings in London after presenting *The Successor* (2006) at four venues as part of a ‘Celebrity Premiere Roadshow’ in partnership with Film Africa. In other developments, October 2010 saw Deptford Town Hall host the Nollywood Now! film festival, marking 50 years of Nigerian independence, followed in 2011 with a West End premiere for *The Mirror Boy* (2011), at the Empire Leicester Square.

‘Audiences in Britain – who have traditionally watched Nollywood films at home on TV – are now demanding cinematic screenings of new films.’

### **Moses Babatope, Odeon Cinema’s special projects manager, quoted in 2010, [www.eastlondonlines.co.uk](http://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk)**

It is no coincidence that the emerging market for Nollywood programming in the UK (albeit on a modest scale compared with, for example, Bollywood showings) occurred alongside a rise in the number of people who identify as ‘Black African’ in the British population. In 2001, the Census for England and Wales reported that Black Caribbean people outnumbered the Black African population. When the Census was repeated 10 years later, the position had reversed: the Black Caribbean population was stable at around 1.1% of the total population, while people who identified as Black African accounted for 1.7%, up from 0.8% a decade earlier. Nigerian-born British residents alone numbered around 191,000 in 2011, out of a total Black population of 1.8 million.

The question for Soda was therefore how best to tap the fanbase for Nollywood films while also connecting with a broader audience among the wider Black population along with fans of Adichie’s novel and cinemagoers tempted by period family dramas.

## 1.2 CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

‘We needed a strategy that was a bit more bespoke to this film.’

### **Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

In view of the confounding mix of elements that made HOAYS a challenging proposition from a marketing perspective, and the many unknowns surrounding its appeal, a stratified approach, targeting different audiences with tailored messaging, was required to maximise effectiveness of the campaign spend.

Soda identified two over-lapping but distinctive audience groups following exhibitor and test screenings:

- ABC1 cinema goers and fans of the book;
- Black audiences in key cities (London, Birmingham etc.) at non-central locations.

In both cases it was felt the film had greatest appeal to the 30–44 age group, with a strong female skew, although older audiences were also considered viable targets on the strength of the book’s popularity with book clubs.

Soda’s approach to theatrical bookings followed this same logic, targeting independent sites in key towns and cities frequented by upscale audiences in search of specialised films, alongside selected multiplexes where younger, urban audiences could be served.

The campaign was designed to address the former audience group in traditional fashion for a prestige title, with a mix of press and PR activity and mainstream media spend, although the lack of strong reviews necessitated a focus on the film’s literary source and the talent involved:

‘The reviews weren’t particularly strong, which was obviously a shame, and we were aware that for most people it was a three star film so we were trying to sell the story and the cast.’

### **Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager, Soda Pictures**

Soda was optimistic about the film’s chances with ABC1 audiences outside London, given the subject matter and treatment:

‘We were quietly confident the film would perform outside of London and that a key market would be small English market towns. I think that’s where the film’s traditional approach, the melodrama and the historical subject, would be more appealing to people at Theatre Chipping Norton than at the Curzon Soho.’

### **Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

This view was not necessarily shared by exhibitors. David Sin, who attended an exhibitor screening and subsequently booked the film for Independent Cinema Office clients, remained concerned the film might struggle to connect with non-Black audiences:

‘Because the film has such a specific historical setting, which most people in this country aren’t particularly aware of or have a connection with, it was going to be much more difficult to make that film break out from a very specific audience.’

### **David Sin, Head of Cinemas, Independent Cinema Office**

Having decided to target potential Black audiences, Soda recognised the importance of hiring in specialist support. The BFI’s New Model award enabled the distributor to bring Kush Promotions & PR on board, whose expertise in marketing to urban audiences (built up over 16 years) helped inform the campaign design, challenging the idea of a single, homogeneous ‘Black audience’:

‘A lot of film distributors, and the industry as a whole, are ignorant of the diversity within the Black population. You have Africans, you have different types of Africans, you also have African Caribbean. We realised this film was a great vehicle to bring African and African Caribbean communities together. Nigerians, Ghanaians, Gambians and those from Uganda etc, are different to more ‘westernised’ Black British cinema goers. These Africans are involved in the whole new British Nollywood scene.’

I realised this could be an opportunity to bring Black communities together, increase revenues and help to educate the African audience in terms of crossing over to more mainstream cinema experiences and customs relating to that – like adhering to strict time schedules.’

### Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR

In terms of geographical targeting, examination of Census data for England and Wales revealed significant Black populations concentrated in major cities, led by London, Birmingham and Manchester (see Table 1), and theatrical bookings were sought on this basis. At a regional level, the West Midlands and the South East of England were the largest target markets after London (Table 2).

**Table 1:** Key cities and Unitary Authorities with 10,000+ Black population, 2011

City/Unitary Authority	% Black population	Black population size
London	13.3%	1,087,134
Birmingham	8.9%	95,501
Manchester	8.6%	43,269
Leeds	3.5%	26,302
Bristol UA	6.0%	25,694
Nottingham UA	7.3%	22,315
Leicester UA	6.3%	20,780
Luton UA	9.8%	19,914
Coventry	5.5%	17,433
Wolverhampton	6.9%	17,213
Milton Keynes	6.8%	16,920
Thurrock UA	7.8%	12,301
Liverpool	2.6%	12,127
Slough UA	8.6%	12,058
Havering	4.8%	11,387
Northampton	5.1%	10,816
Reading UA	6.7%	10,432

Source: Office for National Statistics

Kush’s task, working alongside Soda’s more traditional marketing and PR activity on the film, was to ensure as many members of the film’s potential Black audience heard about the release either directly or through word of mouth in the run up to the opening weekend.

### 1.3 EXPECTATIONS

Soda based its box office forecasts on three broadly comparable English language releases with African settings. At the top end of the scale, Paramount opened *Goodbye Bafana* (2007), starring Joseph Fiennes, Dennis Haysbert and Diane Kruger, across 41 screens in London and key cities. At the lower end, *The Mirror Boy* (2011), an independent release by the film’s production company, achieved around £40,000 following a limited opening on 10 screens.

Given the untested nature of Kush’s targeted campaign and the lack of precedent for an English-language historical drama with a predominantly Black cast (none of the comparable titles quite match this profile), box office estimates were conservative.

**Table 2:** Black population size by region, England and Wales, 2011

City/Unitary Authority	% Black population	Black population size
London	13.3%	1,087,134
West Midlands	3.2%	179,259
South East	1.6%	138,156
East of England	2.0%	116,939
North West	1.3%	91,678
Yorkshire & Humber	1.5%	79,256
East Midlands	1.7%	77,065
South West	1.0%	52,889
Wales	0.6%	18,381
North East	0.4%	10,388

Source: Office for National Statistics

**Table 3:** Comparable theatrical releases

Title	Opening weekend			WPR	Total box office gross
	Screens	Box office gross	Screen average		
<i>Goodbye Bafana</i> (2007) Paramount	41	£45,756	£1,100	41	£129,305
<i>The First Grader</i> (2010) Soda Pictures	18	£10,815	£600	18	£41,255
<i>The Mirror Boy</i> (2011) OH Films	10	£13,645	£1,300	10	£39,819

Source: Soda Pictures, Rentrak EDI

WPR = number of screens at widest point of release



At the upper end of its forecast range, Soda Pictures anticipated a box office gross of £80,000 (with an opening weekend of £20,000). The distributor was also aware that without key West End sites there would inevitably be a lower ceiling on returns:

‘The forecasts were cautious because in terms of taking £5,000-£8,000 a day you need core London sites and there was a strong sense the film would struggle in the West End.’

### Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures

**Table 4:** *Half of a Yellow Sun* box office gross forecasts

	Low	Medium	High
Opening weekend gross	£10,000	£15,000	£20,000
Full box office gross	£45,000	£60,000	£80,000

Source: Soda Pictures

## 1.4 EXECUTION

Soda Pictures brought in Kush Promotions & PR around five weeks ahead of the theatrical opening date. The campaign included a variety of elements, with responsibility for delivery divided between the distributor and specialist agency.

Soda handled theatrical bookings, mainstream press and PR activity, media buying (including print and outdoor advertising) and production of the trailer and poster.

- In a month crowded with specialised film openings, Soda’s chosen date, 11 April 2014, saw a number of strong releases, including eOne’s *Calvary* and *The Raid 2*, and *The Lunchbox* from Curzon. The distributor reasoned that the HOAYS target audiences were sufficiently different to those of other openers to make the date work, and its mixed booking strategy (aimed at independent venues in key towns and cities alongside selected multiplex sites) would ensure it met box office targets. Odeon booked the film to open at seven of its venues (see Table 5), while the film played at fourteen Independent Cinema Office client venues during the full run.

‘I thought it was worth booking at most of our venues but it would be largely an off date booking at the bigger venues, and I thought the smaller, full time venues would show it for 3 or 4 days and the part time venues would show it for 1 or 2 days.’

### David Sin, Head of Cinemas, Independent Cinema Office

**Table 5:** Opening weekend sites

Site	Location
Arts Picturehouse	Cambridge
Clapham Picturehouse	London
Curzon Mayfair	London
Irish Film Institute	Dublin
Odeon Birmingham Broadway Plaza	Birmingham
Odeon Greenwich	London
Odeon Lee Valley	London
Odeon Manchester	Manchester
Odeon Panton Street	London
Odeon Streatham	London
Odeon Swiss Cottage	London
Peckham Multiplex	London
Ritzy Cinema	London
Showroom	Sheffield
Tricycle	London
Vue Shepherds Bush	London
Zeffirellis	Ambleside

Source: Rentrak EDI

- Soda decided the campaign centerpiece should involve a bold, high-profile premiere at Streatham Odeon, attended by Chiwetel Ejiofor, Thandie Newton and prominent Nollywood acting talent. The idea was to stage an event with a newsworthy hook, provide PR opportunities with key cast members and involve the local Black population in activity usually reserved for London's West End:

‘That was the key element, the game changer for this film. I give Soda all the kudos for bringing Chiwetel Ejiofor, Thandie Newton and the stars of *Half of a Yellow Sun* to the community. Even I had to ask myself, ‘Why do it in Streatham?’. Other members of the Black communities also asked, ‘Why are you doing it there?’. But it was ideal, in the heart of the south-London community and because no other distributor had really ever done that.’

**Marlon Palmer, CEO,  
Kush Promotions & PR**

- Staging the premiere in Streatham involving A list talent was not without risk, and as the decision was taken relatively late in the planning process the costs had not featured in the original campaign budget. In the event,

over 400 people attended and, as hoped, the mainstream press covered the story, in no small part due to Chiwetel Ejiofor's profile following the awards success of *12 Years a Slave*:

‘Everything is riding on the crest of a wave for Chiwetel Ejiofor: he's out there at the moment.’

**Marlon Palmer, CEO,  
Kush Promotions & PR**

‘Having [Chiwetel Ejiofor] here for a couple of days delivered an instant number of interviews, lots of television and radio, as well as his attendance at the premiere which encouraged the other cast to want to attend. The daily diary coverage off the back of the premiere helped make the film more prominent and possibly had an effect on the opening weekend.’

**Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager,  
Soda Pictures**

- Soda worked with Ladbury, a PR agency with an established relationship with director Biyi Bandele, on features based around the director. This, together with Chiwetel Ejiofor's presence at the premiere, ensured consistently strong coverage across broadcast and print media:

‘There was a huge amount of coverage: we had great support from the director and Chiwetel Ejiofor.’

Because of the talent involved, and the very accessible storyline, I treated it as a mainstream campaign to cover off the national media. I was working as much as I could with the cast and really approaching those key national publications.’

**Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager,  
Soda Pictures**

- In the run up to release, HOAYS made a number of festival and preview appearances. In March 2014 the film followed it's slot

in the 'Dare' strand of the 57th London Film Festival the previous October with a screening at Glasgow Film Festival. Previews, in March and April 2014, at Arts Picturehouse Cambridge, Peckham Multiplex in London and Odeon Greenwich, featured Q&As with Biyi Bandele and Chiwetel Ejiofor, and the film was also screened as part of the Transcending Boundaries charity event in aid of Concern Worldwide.

- On 9 April, just ahead of the release, the film also previewed at Odeon Parkway in Birmingham, although attendance was low as the event only received limited promotion due to miscommunication between Soda and Kush.
- Soda's outdoor advertising campaign included bus sides in London.

Working in parallel with Soda, Kush led activity specifically targeting Black audiences, seeking to raise awareness and generate buzz through as many different channels as possible:

'I like to have different prongs to the attack so I'm creating awareness of the product from different angles. The idea was to use SMS marketing scheduled to go out at specific times in the campaign along with emails, building up towards the screening, creating awareness of the film, putting news or media clips out there and sometimes exclusive clips, running competitions to give away products. We use a combination of PR, getting DJs talking about the film, competitions, and interviews with myself talking about the film.'

### **Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

Kush's approach included:

- Promotional email and SMS text campaigns via a proprietary mailing list and marketing contact database of 15,000 Black cinema goers. Four separate promotional emails were sent out over the 5-week period of Kush's involvement, offering access to exclusive clips, notifying readers of new website content and calling on them to show support for a new 'Black film'.

In addition, two text messages were issued, one at the start of Kush's involvement and the other the day before the film opened, with a specific call to act.

'From day one of running the Kush Film Club we've always collected names at screenings so I've got a strong email and SMS database we use in all campaigns, and most distributors come to us to use the database.'

### **Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

- Social media activity via Twitter and Facebook. Kush managed the @HOAYSMovie twitter account, increasing followers from a base level of 200 to over 1,000 in a month of online activity. The film's Facebook likes grew consistently, reaching 7,190 by mid May 2014.

'A series of pre-planned tweets & posts were created, along with breaking stories, competitions, screening event news & media clips to create "Buzz talk" and attract traffic from the targeted demographic to both the film's social media pages along with Kush social media pages.'

### **From Kush's HOAYS Marketing Report, May 2014**

- Broadcast media partnerships with Colourful Radio (DAB/online station), and satellite/online television stations Vox Africa and BEN TV. Colourful Radio ran 80 advertising air-time slots between 29 March and 7 April, alongside editorial features, interviews and a promotional competition. Vox Africa provided 42 x 90 second advertising slots between 29 March and 11 April, ran a promotional competition to win tickets to the UK premiere and aired the film trailer. Finally, Marlon Palmer, Kush's CEO, and Nollywood actress/filmmaker Theodora Ibekwe appeared on BEN TV's 'Pauline Long Show' on 2 April, a popular talk show that features Nollywood film news.

The choice of media platforms was informed by research that suggested Black-oriented print publications, like *The Voice*, are less influential than online broadcast channels:



‘There’s an idea that Black people read certain publications in the UK but when it comes down to it they’re a lot less-read than you think. It is those key broadcast and online outlets that are much more relevant, like BEN television, VOX Africa and all the more specific African outlets.’

**Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager, Soda Pictures**

- Promotional material on Kushfilms.com web site, including banner advertisements, feature videos and talent interviews;
- Distribution of around 30,000 A5 flyers via ‘shop-drops’ in London and Birmingham, at participating cinemas alongside establishments serving large Black communities including universities and colleges, hair salons, hospitality sites (restaurants, bars and nightclubs), record shops and council offices, cultural events and other arts venues. Kush had originally planned to distribute 35,000 flyers but protracted negotiations around media partnerships meant final agreement of partners’ logos carried on the flyers delayed the print run, shortening the delivery window ahead of release.

‘Flyers were something I did from the party/music scene. It’s always suggested in my proposals. Although not all distributors take it up, many have. Promotional flyers can be a good way of getting the word out especially up in the regions where you’re not going to be on the ground.’

**Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

The broad headings of campaign costs are listed in Table 6:

**Table 6:** *Half of a Yellow Sun* campaign costs

	Cost	%
<b>Media</b> (includes print, outdoor, online and broadcast advertising)	£49,593	44%
<b>Publicity</b> (includes PR fees and expenses, previews & press screenings, premiere)	£37,567	34%
<b>Production</b> (includes poster, trailer, TV and radio ad production, flyers)	£8,870	8%
<b>Digital and other</b> (includes virtual print fees, exit polls and Insight Report)	£15,927	14%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£111,957</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Soda Pictures

## SECTION TWO:

# RESULTS

### 2.1 THEATRICAL BOX OFFICE

In the event, HOAYS performed well above forecasts with a gross box office of £151,783 over the course of a 13 week theatrical run. The film opened on 17 screens at number 22 in the box office rankings with a weekend tally of £32,473 (screen average= £1,910). In total the film played at 63 venues across the UK during its run.

On one level, therefore, the theatrical release can be judged a success. But Soda Pictures acknowledges its forecasts were conservative, and on reflection the film performed much as hoped in the absence of bookings at key central London sites:

‘Whilst I’m pleased with the number of cinemas it’s gone to and pleased that it’s broken our estimates, the estimates themselves were quite low. It’s over £150,000 now, and that seems a decent result for what one could expect from theatrical. I think it pegs well with

other films in this area. Precisely because it’s not breaking out in the West End, there isn’t that primary level of earnings. Without that West End drive you can’t really over perform.’

**Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures**

At this point it is worth commenting on the importance of key locations and sites to the film’s overall performance, which was dominated by London-based venues.

In all, London sites accounted for 69% of all the money HOAYS grossed during its theatrical run. Of this total, the Odeon circuit took £68,000 in London, led by a 13 week run at Odeon Panton Street, which programmes specialised titles whose runs have ended elsewhere.

**Table 7:** Box office share by city/town

City/Town	% of total box office gross
London	69.1%
Birmingham	2.8%
Cambridge	2.7%
Bristol	1.8%
Glasgow	1.6%
Sheffield	1.5%
Nottingham	1.5%
Shrewsbury	1.5%
Manchester	1.3%
Leicester	1.0%
Coventry	1.0%
Spalding, Hebden Bridge, Street, Ambleside, Evesham, Inverness, Canterbury, Belper, Mold, Saffron Walden, Bury St Edmunds, Chichester, Woodbridge, Dartington, Bath, Poole, Tewkesbury, Northampton, Derby, Newbury, Hexham, Melton Mowbray, Ludlow, Welwyn, Berwick, Wareham, Kingsbridge, Knutsford, Lewes, Barton Under, Needwood, Lincoln, Dumfries	<1.0% each

Source: Rentrak EDI

Regionally, outside London and key cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Bristol, Nottingham and Derby, the film performed in line with expectation according to the Independent Cinema Office:

**‘It achieved what I thought it would. In respect of our venues, the Kush campaign didn’t really have any effect at all on the performance of the film. We didn’t tailor the programming with reference to the Kush campaign, and the film has performed to about our expectation without taking into consideration an additional campaign. We just treated it as a regular release from Soda.’**

### **David Sin, Head of Cinemas, Independent Cinema Office**

With the exception of Zeffereellis in Ambleside, these market town and city screenings comprised off-date bookings that ran for one or two days. Across 33 such venues, the box office gross stood at £24,812, or 16% of the total, and the average run lasted a week. In short, the film performed respectably at a regional level, but no more than to be expected for a title lacking 4 and 5 star reviews.

Interestingly, the best performing regional venues (Old Market Hall Cinema in Shrewsbury, the Phoenix in Leicester and the Warwick Arts Centre in Coventry), are all in the Midlands, which correlates with the largest Black population outside London. In the absence of audience research at these specific venues it is impossible to determine whether they attracted larger than usual Black audiences, or if other factors were at play.

## **2.2 AUDIENCES**

The only source of hard evidence we have about audience demographics comes from opening weekend exit polls conducted by First Movies International on behalf of Soda Pictures. The surveys were administered at Showroom in Sheffield and Odeon sites in Streatham and Greenwich, during two performances on Saturday 12 April.

Looking across the results for all three venues combined, the survey indicates the film found a sizeable Black audience in the opening weekend:

56% of respondents described themselves as either ‘Black British’ or ‘Black other’. As expected, the audience was skewed towards young females (68% of respondents were female, and 56% were under 35; females under 35 made up 42% of the opening weekend audience). The average age of the audience was 36, which falls in the middle of the 30-44 age range anticipated by the campaign strategy.

The results confirm Kush Film’s advice to Soda Pictures to target women and those aged 30+:

**‘In all my years I’ve been doing screenings I would say 70% of my audiences are female and always have been. It is Black women that really come out and support films and spend their money. Romantic comedies, love stories, films like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, are easier to sell as a result. I’ve done many screenings where women come along with their friends & daughters. We don’t usually get 21 year olds coming along by themselves or in groups. More likely to get groups aged 30 plus and others in their 40s and 50s. You find generally within the Black community people right up to 50 years old still like to go out and watch films in a nice atmosphere with like-minded compatriots.’**

### **Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

Despite the film’s mixed critical reaction, HOAYS was rated favourably by 64% of the audience, 4% above the industry norm, and females under 35 were more likely than other groups to rate the film highly. 89% of respondents would ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ recommend the film to friends and family, rising to 93% among Black respondents, suggesting word of mouth was a prominent driver of attendances.

## SECTION THREE:

# DISCUSSION AND LESSONS

Soda's release campaign, supported by the New Models award, was intended to explore whether:

- a prestige historical drama with a predominantly Black cast could attract a significant number of Black cinema goers, including younger multiplex visitors. At Kush's suggestion, the campaign was also a test of whether Black African audiences, accustomed to seeing Nollywood films at multiplex venues in key cities, could be encouraged to attend a more mainstream, English-language title set in Africa;
- and whether an 'urban' promotional campaign aimed at Black communities and led by a specialist agency (Kush Promotions & PR) provides an effective means of reaching minority ethnic target audiences.

On the first point, the available evidence suggests audience targeting was appropriate. We cannot say for certain how many admissions were made by Black cinema goers, but exit poll data indicates this audience segment made up a large proportion of opening weekend attendances, although the numbers varied by venue (88% of respondents at Odeon Greenwich described themselves as 'Black British' or 'Black other', compared with 58% at Odeon Streatham and 21% at Showroom).

Odeon Greenwich also recorded the youngest audience profile, with 69% under 35s, compared with 50% at Odeon Streatham and 41% at Showroom, which lends credence to Soda's multiplex strategy to attract younger audiences.

As the survey did not differentiate between Black African, Black Caribbean and other subgroups it is not possible to say if traditional supporters of Nollywood films came out in any force for HOAYS, although anecdotal evidence suggests this to have been the case:

**'It would be very hard to get any direct numbers but from what I saw, the film definitely attracted African and African Caribbean audiences (especially Black British Africans). We specially used prominent British Nollywood movers and shakers to promote the**

**collaboration between them and Kush and I believe there was at least a 50:50 turnout at the premiere – Nigerians displayed their pride that this was a Nigerian/African film. And the buzz on social media shows the campaign created a lot of awareness of the need for African and African Caribbean communities to come together and support this particular film. I personally was a leading voice in this.'**

### **Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

It is harder to isolate and judge the impact of Kush's targeted campaign, not least as high profile press coverage around Chiwetel Ejiofor following the success of *12 Years a Slave* is likely to have had a bearing on the film's performance, alongside other elements like the book's dedicated following.

Print media, which included a number of features and interviews with the actor, were cited by 13% of exit poll respondents as a source of information about the film (one of the most common sources cited by respondents), and 45% of exit poll respondents said the novel was a bait to attendance (making it the single most important factor to influence decision making). But as Kush's marketing activity traded on both these elements, as did the wider PR campaign mounted by Soda Pictures, it would be unfair to exclude them from consideration altogether.

Turning to the available evidence, findings from opening weekend exit polls suggest Kush's grassroots marketing campaign supported by media partnerships linked to the black community helped to mobilise target audiences. However, as Table 8 shows, the awareness raising performance of different elements of the campaign varied widely.

The Internet, personal recommendations, TV and social media were particularly important in raising awareness of the film among Black survey respondents, while text messaging and radio (which formed important parts of Kush's

campaign) had less impact on opening weekend audiences (although we cannot rule out the possibility that word of mouth from friends and relatives was triggered by one or other elements of Kush's grassroots campaign).

The exit poll results confirm the assumption that Black audiences are less likely than other ethnic groups to rely on print media for information, which supports the general principle tested by this New Model that alternative communication channels (online, TV and social media) are important for reaching specific target groups.

Flyers, another prominent part of Kush's campaign, had limited impact according to the exit polls. They were cited as a source of information by only 1% of exit poll respondents, and this did not vary by ethnic group. Ultimately, though, isolating the success of individual elements of Kush's campaign in raising awareness of HOAYS is unhelpful, as the approach was designed to have a cumulative effect across a number of strands in a concentrated time period ahead of release.

Looking at the effectiveness of Kush's promotional activity from another angle, the importance of Odeon's support for HOAYS cannot be denied. In terms of box office returns, the circuit was critical to the film's performance in key cities. This raises an interesting discussion point, as Soda's Edward Fletcher noted in interview: did Odeon's involvement have greater influence on box office returns than the targeted campaign?

'We wouldn't traditionally get an art house film into the Odeon Streatham. But Odeon recognised that this film had interest for their local audience. One could argue just by the mere fact

that they put it in their cinema and sold it may have had more effect than Kush's targeted campaign.'

### Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures

Certainly the exit poll findings indicate that cinema promotions, including via cinema web sites, trailers before films, and point of sale posters/displays/standees, were as influential on awareness of the film as newspaper and magazine articles, and second only to word of mouth from friends or relatives. This fact, coupled with Odeon Streatham hosting the official premiere, the circuit playing the film for 13 weeks at its Panton Street site, and the company's established track record of Nollywood programming, all helped to cultivate an audience for HOAYS.

Yet Kush also played a part here, building confidence that HOAYS had the potential to tap established Nollywood audiences:

'Odeon already do regular Nollywood screenings. As soon as we said we were talking to companies involved with Nollywood releases, Odeon felt confident this shouldn't be any different to their regular Nollywood programme with its pre-existing following for African cinema.'

### Edward Fletcher, Managing Director, Soda Pictures

**Table 8:** From which sources did you become aware of *Half of a Yellow Sun*?

	Source of awareness	Black %	Other ethnic group %
More influential on Black than other respondents	Internet	31%	21%
	Friends/relatives	30%	28%
	TV	15%	8%
	Facebook/twitter	9%	4%
	Email	2%	1%
Less influential on Black than other respondents	Cinema campaigns	25%	28%
	Print	14%	22%
	Text messaging	3%	13%
	Radio	0%	8%

Source: First Movies International

Bringing Kush on board paid other dividends for Soda, enabling the distributor to draw upon a network of pre-established connections:

‘Because Kush have quite intimate relationships with a lot of the Black media companies it was helpful.’

**Nicola Milburn, Marketing Manager, Soda Pictures**

‘Having Kush enabled us to make new connections with some of the outlets that perhaps we wouldn’t have known of. I think it was essential to have someone specialist there. Having someone who can really talk up the film and generate good word of mouth was really helpful. I would definitely use an agency like that again for another film.’

**Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager, Soda Pictures**

One potential challenge of any relationship between a distributor and specialist agency lies in negotiating differences in working practice and organisational culture. In the case of the HOAYS campaign, misunderstandings led to confusion around the preview screening in Birmingham, and also contributed to the late printing and distribution of flyers.

The preview screening was a victim of a simple breakdown in communication, highlighting the importance of maintaining regular contact between distributor and specialist agency for a smooth-running campaign.

Problems with the flyers resulted from a more deep-seated issue to do with expectations around the terms of trade with Black media companies, as Kush’s Marlon Palmer explained:

‘Within the Black community and Black businesses, there’s been this argument for some time now that when Black films are released mainstream distributors never have any marketing spend to advertise films with them. Distributors are always going to The Voice newspaper, to Colourful Radio

or TV companies like Vox Africa or OH TV asking for things for free, and there’s never any budget. A lot of them are totally fed-up with this and have spoken directly to me to see what can be done as they’re not going to give free advertising or editorial any more.’

**Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

In consequence, late into planning Soda discovered that the media company relationships brokered by Kush required a budget line, and the flyers were delayed as a result of the ensuing negotiations.

‘A small but reasonable budget had to be agreed after much back and forth with Vox Africa to become an official media partner, enhancing the status of the whole campaign within the wider African community.’

**Marlon Palmer, CEO, Kush Promotions & PR**

The lesson is clear: good quality editorial support requires an appropriate campaign spend, and distributors should not take community media outlets for granted:

‘Some of these outlets would not be willing to give widespread coverage unless we were able to spend money with them. So I think that was where we perhaps came across a bit of a barrier because we didn’t have enough in the fund. In hindsight we would need more in the budget to spend with those really important Black outlets, to give us great editorial coverage but also to support them with all the promotions they want to do.’

**Olivia Jarvis, Publicity Manager, Soda Pictures**

## APPENDIX:

# RESEARCH METHODS

## METHODS

Three strands of evidence gathering were employed in researching this Insight Report:

- **Desk research**  
Review of published and unpublished sources about the film and conditions in the UK exhibition market at the time of the film's release, including exit poll data supplied by First Movies International.
- **Interviews**  
Telephone interviews, lasting up to 45 minutes, were held with key players in the release campaign: Marlon Palmer (CEO, Kush Promotions & PR); Edward Fletcher (Managing Director, Soda Pictures); Olivia Jarvis (Publicity Manager, Soda Pictures); Nicola Milburn (Marketing Manager, Soda Pictures); and David Sin (Head of Cinemas, Independent Cinema Office).
- **Data analysis**  
Site-by-site box office gross figures, supplied by Rentrak EDI, were collated and analysed for the period from opening weekend to the end of the film's theatrical run. Data was generated describing the film's opening weekend and total grosses, and performance in and outside London, by site and circuit, and over time.





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