

Exploring Recent Development of the UAE Film Industry: Insights from Interviews with Local Filmmakers

Aseel Ghalib Ali*

University of Sharjah, UAE

U21102048@sharjah.ac.ae

Wafa Khalfan Al-Ali

University of Sharjah, UAE

wafa.khalfan@sharjah.ac.ae

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Abstract:

This study examines the UAE film industry, analyzing this nascent sector's development and challenges. It sheds light on government policies and explores the interactions between government officials and local filmmakers. The study is based on ten interviews with decision-makers from governmental and private film production entities as well as local filmmakers, including producers and directors. The findings indicate that Emirati films must enhance quality to attract investors and rebuild audience confidence. Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of collaboration between the government and filmmakers as a vital step toward advancing the industry.

Keywords: Film Production - Emirati Cinema - Film Industry - Political Economy - Subsidies.

1. Introduction

Cinema is considered one of the most significant and influential art forms during the communication technology revolution. Accessing the latest cinematic releases produced by film production companies has become increasingly convenient for all members of society. Viewers can obtain films through legal avenues, such as purchasing, renting, or subscribing to various sales and distribution services, or through illegal means, including websites filled with links for direct streaming or downloading films at any time. In today's world, cinema is a vital source of recreation, leisure, and entertainment, particularly due to its profound impact and visual appeal. Scholars have drawn distinctions between film and cinema to foster a deeper understanding of these concepts.

The distinction between film and cinema is important. Film pertains to individual textual works, whereas cinema integrates various social interactions, memories, and cultural phenomena that shape the shared cinematic experience (Kuhn et al., 2017). Additionally, cinema transforms written stories into visual narratives accessible to audiences (Allen, 2006; Mahajan, 2023). Consequently, there is an increasing need to emphasize local cinema to develop a more inclusive understanding of the experience itself, along with the unique challenges and opportunities it presents to practitioners.

Local and national cinema play a vital role in reflecting a country's unique stories and ideologies while also nurturing its national identity and culture amidst globalization. This characteristic differentiates it from global cinema. Despite the rapid development of the United

* Corresponding author

Arab Emirates across various sectors, its film industry remains underdeveloped compared to other Arab countries. UAE films typically emphasize the nation's self-image and strive to preserve the country's national identity (Yunis, 2014). Despite the considerable efforts made by the country to subsidize and support the local and international film industry—through funding, provision of essential equipment, and the development of new production sites—cinema production in the UAE remains underwhelming compared to other Arab nations. This study aims to explore the film production landscape in the United Arab Emirates from a politico-economic perspective and to investigate the interactions among key stakeholders in the local film industry, including policymakers, funding initiatives, production companies, and filmmakers. The UAE has continually sought to enhance its global standing by wielding soft power in its international relationships. In this pursuit, it has strongly emphasized cultural diplomacy, with film production as a vital component of its cultural endeavors (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013).

Most studies concerning the film industry in the UAE have primarily focused on its cultural dimensions or its influence on tourism. However, there is a significant gap in research addressing the industry's production aspects and political economy. Furthermore, there is a lack of inquiry into the economic and business factors associated with film, along with limited research on the overall structure and development of the Emirati film industry. Existing studies typically concentrate on individual films, celebrities, genres, and styles rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the industry as a whole.

This study aims to explore the film industry in the United Arab Emirates through the lens of political economy. It seeks to analyze the development of the UAE's film industry in relation to both political influences and economic factors while also assessing how these elements impact local cinema production. By shedding light on the historical progression of film production in the UAE and examining relevant government policies, this research investigates the dynamic interaction between governments and filmmakers. Ultimately, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities present in the UAE film industry.

The study explores three central questions: What role does the UAE government play in fostering the development of the Emirati film industry? What primary production challenges do filmmakers in the UAE encounter? What are the prevailing themes in Emirati cinema?

The article is organized as follows: First, we offer a concise literature review of the film industry in the Arab region, placing particular emphasis on the UAE film sector and the relevant state subsidies. Next, we introduce the theoretical framework rooted in the political economy approach to cultural industries. Following this, we outline the methodology based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with various stakeholders in the UAE film sector. We then present a thematic analysis before concluding with a reflection on the analysis, findings, and the potential for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Film Industry in the Middle East

The film industry in the Arab world has experienced significant growth, yet it has also encountered several challenges, such as financial crises, high production costs, and fierce competition in the market. These obstacles have fostered increased collaboration among countries and promoted the concept of co-production between Arab and foreign filmmakers.

(Mellor et al., 2012). As a result, the film industry grew and became a successful, profitable business that attracted more attention from countries. Additionally, collaborations among Arab film productions thrived, with notable co-productions between Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon (Shafik, 2007, p28). Cinema was a significant means for Arab countries to achieve transnational connections, demonstrating the Arab world's embrace of modernity. The success of Egyptian cinema across the Arab region established it as the driving force behind Arab film production (Kassir, 2006). Arabic cinema has long been subjected to government censorship to suppress films that criticize ruling regimes, resulting in a narrow focus on specific themes. Furthermore, the industry faces several serious challenges, including security issues, film piracy, and the monopolistic practices of foreign companies, similar to those encountered in international cinema (Ghazal, 2020). Most Arab governments impose censorship through legal measures and policies. Consequently, film productions must obtain approval from a state committee before filming. To secure funding, filmmakers must steer clear of sensitive subjects closely monitored by the authorities, including religion, sexual content, and politics (Shafik, 2007).

In the Gulf region, film production emerged as a result of trade and historical connections with India, Britain, and the United States. Consequently, the film industry in the Gulf evolved into an important vehicle for enhancing the nations' images through soft power. Over the years, Gulf countries have devoted increasing attention to media and film production, focusing on advancing their efforts in this domain (Yunis & Hudson, 2021).

One of the significant challenges facing the film industry in the Gulf region is the limited allocation of resources for filmmakers, in contrast to countries like the United States, which invests millions of dollars in developing infrastructure and supporting filmmaking, which has allowed Hollywood movies to achieve global reach, alongside the productions from Bollywood. Nonetheless, the UAE has successfully attracted several high-profile Hollywood and Bollywood films to be partially filmed in the country, including “Dabangg” (Abhinav Singh Kashyap, 2010), “Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol” (Brad Bird, 2011), “Happy New Year” (Farah Khan, 2014), “Bang Bang” (Siddharth Anand, 2014), “Star Wars: The Force Awakens” (J.J. Abrams, 2015), “Furious 7” (James Wan, 2015), and “Race” (Remo D'Souza, 2018). Moreover, the country has invested in multiplex cinemas, resulting in the highest box office receipts in the Gulf region and the largest movie theater attendance in the Middle East (Obika, 2023).

2.2 UAE Support for the Film Industry

Following independence in 1971, the UAE opened its first cinemas, which predominantly screened foreign films, including Egyptian, Hollywood, and Bollywood productions. This exposure cultivated a heightened interest in cinema among the population, leading to greater support for Gulf filmmakers. In 2002, the Emirates Film Competition was launched to promote and showcase their work on the big screen (Hudson, 2020). Most research on Emirati films focuses on tourism, soft power diplomacy, cultural and identity representation, and film education in the UAE (Alwan, 2011; Gleissner, 2012; Michael et al., 2020; Saberi et al., 2018; Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011). There are presently no studies that examine film production, especially from a political-economic standpoint. Although the film industry offers a rich opportunity for research—particularly regarding the enhancement of soft power and the promotion of a nation's image—this topic has been largely overlooked.

In its early development, the film industry in the UAE was relatively small and often overlooked as a distinct sector, largely due to the limited number of filmmakers and viewers. The first feature-length film released in the UAE was "City of Life," directed by Emirati director Ali F. Mostafa in 2009. It was the country's first film, produced and funded entirely within the UAE, and was shown in theaters (Filmworks, 2009). The film was well-produced and showcased a variety of talented individuals, though not all were from the UAE. This represented a pivotal moment for the UAE film industry, inspiring producers and the government to invest further in the sector. Since then, the country has ramped up its movie production and prioritized local talent development through university film programs. Some notable Emirati films that have been released in theaters include "Hajwalah" Parts 1 and 2, "From A to B," "Rashid and Rajab," "The Shadow," "Khorfakkan," "218: Behind the Wall of Silence," and "Al Kameen," among others.

As time passed, the government began focusing more on local film production and took steps to support Emirati feature-length narrative films. To enhance the film landscape, the United Arab Emirates established four prominent film festivals: the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, the Al Ain Film Festival, and the Gulf Film Festival. These events not only attracted filmmakers from around the globe, including local talents, but also offered prize money to participants and conducted various professional workshops aimed at bolstering the industry (Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011). The UAE National Film Library and Archive was founded at Zayed University in 2013, becoming the first official national library in the Gulf region committed to documenting the development of the film industry in the UAE. It boasts a collection of over 550 Emirati films spanning a variety of genres, including comedy, horror, drama, and history, among others (UNFLA, 2013).

The number of government-owned production companies has also grown, with notable examples including Image Nation and TwoFour54. These organizations receive government subsidies and offer complimentary services to UAE citizens. They are committed to producing high-quality content by leveraging international expertise and training local talent. Furthermore, these companies provide opportunities for local filmmakers to collaborate on projects by equipping them with essential resources, thereby fostering the growth of the local industry (Image Nation, 2008). The Abu Dhabi Film Commission provides a variety of incentives to attract filmmakers to shoot in Abu Dhabi. These include a 30% cash rebate on production spending, access to a diverse range of unique locations, and competitive rates for first-class studios and facilities (ADFC, 2009). The Dubai Film and TV Commission offers services that simplify film production, establishing Dubai as a top destination for various types of productions (DFTC, 2012).

Thus, the UAE has made considerable strides in revitalizing its film industry, viewing it as a key component in shaping a modern, sophisticated image. These initiatives are designed to harness innovation and creativity, establishing the country as a premier destination for leisure and entertainment (Bodolica et al., 2020). The country has been proactively welcoming international filmmakers by simplifying the process and creating modern tourist destinations to attract their productions. Consequently, the UAE has emerged as an attractive location for filming global movies that highlight Arab culture, as mentioned above (Yunis, 2014). The industry received significant attention from the government, which sponsored several government-financed national initiatives. This support focused on promoting local film production and developing the country's national brand (Saber et al., 2018; Yunis, 2014). The support includes significant financial aid for government-funded production companies like

"Image Nation," which aims to help build the film and entertainment industry across the GCC and establish partnerships with international studios (Leotta, 2015). By promoting universal productions, these films boosted the tourism sector in the UAE, encouraging expatriates and tourists worldwide to visit destinations featured in the movies while also generating revenue from these investments (Michael et al., 2020). Regrettably, Western productions frequently perpetuate stereotypes about Arabs, whether minor or significant. This leads to unrealistic portrayals that contradict the contemporary image the government seeks to promote. Consequently, it is imperative to cultivate the local film industry and support creative talent. Such efforts are crucial for safeguarding the country's reputation and protecting the sector, especially as more local filmmakers endeavor to thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape (Yunis, 2014).

A few studies have examined the role of cinema and its vital contribution to enhancing tourism in several countries. These investigations underscore the potential of film tourism to attract visitors and foster local development, assessing the impact of the film industry on tourism and illuminating how the country's culture and environment are portrayed in international films (e.g., ABURGHIF, 2022; Koshy & Anoop, 2016; Leotta, 2015; Michael et al., 2020; Saberi et al., 2018; Valek, 2017). The UAE is usually portrayed by its landmark architecture in Bollywood and Hollywood movies. Even though the UAE encouraged from the beginning Hollywood to bring its productions to the country to revive cinema production on its land, some of these productions were not welcomed because of their usual stereotypical portrayals of the Arabs, especially locals, as retarded Bedouin people with camels to ride. For instance, Hudson (2020) criticized the Orientalist perspective and the stereotypes about Dubai portrayed in various foreign films, including those from Hollywood, Bollywood, and Chinese and Malaysian cinema. These depictions often depict the city as an undeveloped and lawless place, suggesting it's a setting where business activities violate international law (Silver Bears, 1978, or as in Vilkanundu Swapnangal 1980, Code 46 2003 and Dubai Flamingo 2012) where they made it as a material for provincial jokes and displayed it as a bitter nightmare with dangers of migration issues to the Gulf are foreground. These films depict the city as backward, showcasing stray camels crossing the highway and predominantly featuring the desert with mud houses while overlooking the city's affluence and contemporary architecture. Conversely, they also highlight several foreign films that present a more optimistic view of the city, portraying it as a place of opportunity, such as "Dubai Chalo 1979" (Gleissner, 2012; Hudson, 2020a; Yunis, 2014). Yunis (2014) also highlights that many films from the UAE often fail to represent the Emirati people authentically, as they tend to focus predominantly on the country's landscapes. This approach results in an unrealistic portrayal of local life. To enhance Emirati-directed films, it has been suggested that the nation should foster greater confidence and comfort in its representations within foreign cinema, which could subsequently improve local productions. However, this is a challenging endeavor, as the government restricts self-criticism, and the audience generally does not embrace it either. Furthermore, there are concerns about the weaknesses in story development and screenwriting in local films, which often lack appeal and rely on simplistic narratives. These films frequently depict expatriate men as antagonists, thus reinforcing the notion of scapegoats.

Generally, a notable shortcoming of support programs is their lack of emphasis on filmmaking's business and funding aspects. Consequently, many Emirati filmmakers have come to view government funding as an entitlement, which has resulted in a diminished understanding of the critical importance of securing financing and effectively managing

production (Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011). This research could yield valuable insights into existing gaps within the industry and highlight challenges that can be addressed to improve film production. This study then seeks to deepen the understanding of the processes involved in producing local cinema in the UAE, emphasizing the work of Emirati filmmakers who strive to create films with local talent. It examines the standards, conditions, challenges, and obstacles these filmmakers face. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the role of the UAE government in fostering the growth of the Emirati film industry and explores the prevalent themes within it.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Political Economy of Film Production

The political economy of film production investigates the interplay between filmmaking, law, and government. It analyzes how government policies impact the economy while exploring the intricate relationship between the economic facets of production and the political forces that shape the industry (Mosco, 2009). The political and economic sectors play a crucial role in analyzing the development of the film industry in the United Arab Emirates. Researchers have underscored that the nature of film production has a considerable impact on the content of the films, which consequently influences the narratives conveyed and how they are presented (Koushik & Reed, 2018). For instance, Martin (2012) asserted that the economic factors within a country can significantly influence and intersect with creative pursuits, thereby impacting the film industry and the types of films produced. For instance, film distribution is dominated by a few major firms that control the market, allowing them to determine the types and quantities of released films. This dynamic ultimately hampers creativity as a strategy to mitigate financial risk (McMahon, 2022).

The political economy of communication analyzes media systems' power dynamics within broader socioeconomic contexts (Mosco, 2009). Analyzing the film industry is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of its evolution. This analysis emphasizes the connections between production structures, the state, and the power dynamics within these relationships. It investigates how the government manages its citizens and markets, focusing on its role in resource production, distribution, and consumption (Mosco, 2009). This perspective underscores the significant role that financial considerations play in shaping the priorities and preferences of the film industry, frequently overshadowing concerns about racial issues and political correctness. It contends that market demands and profit motives can profoundly influence the representation of diversity and differences in cinema (Kim & Brunn-Bevel, 2020).

The political economy approach also examines global dynamics, particularly integrating cultural elements from diverse film industries. This perspective underscores the influence of political and economic forces on production decisions. By utilizing the political economy framework, we can achieve a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding film production, distribution, and consumption.

In sum, this approach highlights economic considerations and reveals the societal and political influences shaping the film industry (Heenan et al., 2022). In this context, it is crucial to examine who wields power in different facets of filmmaking: specifically, who oversees production, who manages distribution, and who acquires films in the marketplace.

4. Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative method to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich data from individuals involved in funding decisions and subsidiaries within both governmental and private film production entities, as well as from seasoned local filmmakers, including producers, directors, and writers. This approach facilitates the collection of in-depth information and can lead to unexpected insights, resulting in less biased data and more thorough analysis (Fatanti et al., 2022). It also provides insights into the participants' perceptions, viewpoints, and experiences (Pickering, 2008; Seale, 2007), and this method is used to obtain answers from individuals who possess knowledge and experience regarding a particular issue. Researchers use this approach to explore the motives, opinions, and perspectives of others, thereby broadening their understanding. (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

In this study, a series of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights from key figures involved in the decision-making processes concerning funding for film production institutions, both governmental and private. The interviewees included managers and decision-makers who oversee financial allocations within various film production entities, as well as local filmmakers, who spanned various roles such as producers, directors, actors, and writers. An interview guide was developed to ensure the interviews effectively addressed the core research questions. These inquiries were designed to explore critical aspects related to the role of government in the film industry, the challenges faced by industry professionals, the opportunities for growth and development, and prevalent themes impacting the sector.

The insights from the interviewees shed light on the current landscape of the film industry in the UAE. By synthesizing their responses, the study presents a snapshot of the industry's state, delving into the practices influenced by political dynamics and economic considerations. This exploration seeks to uncover nuances and trends that have not previously been highlighted in existing literature, thereby contributing valuable knowledge to understanding the film industry in the UAE. Through this detailed examination, the study aspires to present a more thorough understanding of the interplay between funding, creative practices, and institutional support within the UAE's film sector.

In terms of sampling, participants for the interviews were selected from film production companies, encompassing both government and private funders. Individuals involved in funding decisions, as well as company managers, were included in the process. Moreover, local filmmakers—such as directors, producers, screenwriters, and others—were invited to share their industry insights and challenges during the filmmaking process. The primary benefit of the snowball sampling method lies in its ability to identify respondents when they are scarce. This approach also cultivates a degree of trust vital for establishing initial contact. Thus, purposive sampling was made using the snowballing technique (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The appropriate sample size for this qualitative study is the one that sufficiently provides answers to the research question (Marshall, 1996). Consequently, 10 interview sessions were deemed sufficient considering the brief history of the film industry in the UAE. Also, since this is an exploratory study, we believe 10 interviews are adequate. Another reason for this limited sample size is that there are not many local filmmakers in the UAE; therefore, ten is not an

insignificant portion of the total population. Additionally, the interviews reached a saturation point, meaning that no new information would be obtained by interviewing more participants.

The sampling criteria included those working with governmental or commercial film agencies to investigate the various subsidies and funding sources obtained from governmental, semi-governmental, and private film production companies based in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah. All participants were Emirati nationals who had participated in, produced, directed, or worked in the UAE film industry. In total, 10 participants represented various Emirates and both genders.

Ethical approval was secured from the authors' institution prior to the commencement of data collection, and the necessary ethical forms were duly completed. Data from semi-structured interviews were collected either in person or via online platforms such as MS Teams, depending on the convenience of the interviewees. With participants' consent, these sessions were recorded to ensure objectivity during transcription and avoid missing crucial information. All participants received an "Information Sheet" outlining the purpose of the research project, along with an "Informed Consent Sheet" to document their agreement to participate. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was recorded only with the interviewee's consent. All participant identities were kept anonymous, and collected data was treated as confidential.

Table 1 provides an overview of all participants.

Tag	Occupation	Date of interview	Company
P1	Actor, director, scriptwriter	26/02/2024	Independent Filmmaker
P2	Actor, director, scriptwriter	05/03/2024	Independent Filmmaker
P3	Head of department	14/03/2024	Affiliated with a governmental agency
P4	Actor and producer	30/04/2024	Independent Filmmaker
P5	Director and producer	01/05/2024	Affiliated with a private agency
P6	Scriptwriter	09/05/2024	Affiliated with a private agency
P7	Producer and director	14/05/2024	Affiliated with a private agency
P8	Producer and director	15/05/2024	Affiliated with a private agency
P9	Executive producer	20/05/2024	Affiliated with a governmental agency
P10	Director	23/05/2024	Affiliated with a governmental agency

Table 1: overview of research participants

Given the limited number of participants, the data analysis process was straightforward, enabling the author to conduct multiple readings of the transcripts. This led to the identification of several themes concerning the role of the UAE government, the main challenges faced, and the prevailing themes within the industry. While maintaining objectivity in evaluating the findings can be challenging, including direct quotes from the interviews added more objectivity to the study.

The subsequent sections delve into the key findings from a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Through this analysis, three primary themes emerged that encapsulate the research findings: first, the extent and nature of government support provided to the emerging film sector; second, the various challenges and obstacles encountered by industry professionals; and third, the predominant genres that are being produced within this evolving cinematic landscape. Each theme highlights critical aspects of the film sector's current state and the dynamics that shape its development.

5. Findings

5.1 Government Support

The key support for the film industry in its early stages came from both government and private sectors, particularly through establishing film festivals that reflected participants' opinions. The United Arab Emirates hosted several international festivals in cities such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, showcasing the region's emerging film industry. These festivals provided a vital platform for filmmakers to network and share experiences with industry professionals, playing a significant role in introducing Emirati cinema to a global audience. Many participants highlighted the influential nature of these festivals, emphasizing that everyone benefited from the support these festivals offered. Furthermore, these events guided filmmakers and industry workers, helping them remain on the right path and enhance their craft. Film festivals once played a crucial role in supporting Emirati cinema by providing funding for producing Emirati short films. This assistance was a pivotal factor in the industry's development.

Unfortunately, such support has since diminished. Initially, various festivals and competitions significantly contributed to promoting Emirati filmmakers, but these opportunities have gradually faded and are now almost nonexistent. For instance, participant P6 observed that while certain institutions have initiated programs to enhance specific aspects of the industry, such as scriptwriting and cinematography, these efforts remain limited in scope and insufficient. He emphasized the need for these initiatives to be more sustainable and aligned with a long-term vision for the industry's growth.

The film industry in the UAE confronts various challenges, with a significant concern being the lack of financial support and funding. The general absence of government funding is a major issue for many Emirati filmmakers, who agree that the existing financial resources are minimal and inadequate. This deficiency hampers their ability to produce films utilizing advanced techniques. Although production funds were once available to support the industry, such as Injaz in Dubai and Sanad in Abu Dhabi, these programs have either been discontinued or canceled. In summary, the lack of substantial government funding remains a critical obstacle to the growth and success of the film industry in the UAE.

The government places considerable emphasis on the regulatory aspects of the film industry and provides various incentives to filmmakers to streamline their work processes and

encourage them to operate within the country. For example, it issues licenses to distribution and film import companies responsible for publishing and circulating cinematic works. These films must originate from licensed companies within the country, meaning that media companies importing films must also hold valid licenses. Furthermore, a dedicated film censorship department reviews films to ensure their legality and validity. This includes verifying ownership rights, confirming that the film is officially registered in the commercial registry, and ensuring that existing contracts are legitimate. The department monitors films to guarantee compliance with content standards and appropriate age classifications. Finally, film production involves reviewing scripts and films as a proactive measure of censorship for domestic projects. However, it is important to clarify that this department does not oversee film financing, as Participant P3 explains:

“We are an independent party. We cannot fund films; we only monitor or observe films. But we do not provide financial funding.”

In addition to their primary services, they provide significant support to filmmakers by negotiating favorable deals with various vendors. This includes discounts on accommodation at local hotels, rental rates for filming equipment, vehicle rentals, and other essential services. Securing these cost-effective arrangements helps filmmakers significantly reduce their overall production expenses. Consequently, local filmmakers benefit from this assistance, as it saves them money and streamlines the filmmaking process by alleviating some of the logistical burdens involved in production.

5.2 Challenges Encounter the Film Industry

From the perspective of institutions, participants highlighted several challenges encountered by the film industry and filmmakers. Primarily, filmmakers must adhere to media content standards, which can influence their projects even after completion. They need to ensure that their stories do not offend anyone; as Participant P3 put it,

“Emirati society is home to over 200 nationalities. As a result, we strive to be mindful of issues related to insulting specific nationalities, communities, or religions. These matters are important to us, and we make every effort to approach them with care and respect.”

Another concern that garnered widespread agreement is the quality of Emirati films. Many filmmakers highlighted that the adulation of certain individuals in the industry can foster arrogance, negatively impacting their work. Furthermore, some filmmakers may lack the essential vision and foundational knowledge required to produce engaging films, as further explained by P9 participant,

“Every year, people continue to produce films, but unfortunately, there is often no progress in their work. I'm not suggesting they should stop; they should keep creating. However, it is crucial that they learn from their mistakes. If they maintain the same pace with the same mindset and management practices, they won't experience growth. Filmmakers need to listen to their superiors and seek to learn more.”

They recognized that this issue is intricately linked to the lack of a sufficient budget, which hinders filmmakers from avoiding production deficiencies and flaws. When asked why they do not replicate past successful projects funded by government and private institutions, the

response was that consistently producing films with the same budget or resources would limit their ability to create more films. Furthermore, developing these projects and securing appropriate funding requires time. As such, they must find a balance between high-quality productions and medium-sized films to enable the creation of multiple projects. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of offering opportunities to emerging filmmakers to pursue their own projects, even at lower budget levels. This is particularly vital given the inconsistency of funding and the rarity of profit. Very few films generate a profit, and often, filmmakers cover their expenses out of pocket without recouping those costs. As participant P9 mentioned, they are setting new goals to support the industry,

“We now have a new goal to increase production so that we can produce at least one film every year. We must act decisively to accelerate industry progress.”

The participating filmmakers identified various industry challenges, particularly issues related to audience engagement, funding, and support for practitioners. A key concern is the erosion of audience trust. Emirati cinema productions must enhance their offerings to rebuild this trust and better align with audience preferences. In recent years, attendance for Emirati films has declined. Initially, viewers were enthusiastic about exploring these new entries into the market, but this excitement has since waned. Consequently, many individuals have lost confidence in Emirati films. P8 participant pointed out that not all locals appreciate Emirati films, and their interest in them is weak; thus, there is not a huge turnout,

“We made significant efforts to attract audiences through ticket offers, selecting convenient display platforms and implementing various strategies. However, the overall turnout for Khaleeji films remains weak.”

The film industry requires both organization and government support to flourish. It needs a clear vision and ongoing assistance to achieve success. There is a growing demand for informed leadership within the industry, guided by a qualified foundation. Unfortunately, the funding available for filmmaking is often inadequate for producing large-scale films. Although individual efforts and collaboration among producers can help raise the budget, it frequently falls short, with production costs exceeding returns. Despite these challenges, many individuals are determined to remain in the industry and continue creating, driven by passion, even when their productions may lack quality.

The participants also voiced a shared perspective on the urgent need for a cinematic academy to support the industry and equip the next generation with the necessary skills to navigate it effectively. Currently, filmmakers operate in isolation, which creates significant challenges as they are required to produce entire films independently, often financing them out of their own pockets. Furthermore, the absence of consensus among filmmakers complicates collaboration. Many individuals hesitate to pursue studies in cinema production due to the perception of a limited job market where they can apply their skills. Consequently, most professionals in the industry work voluntarily or without compensation, undermining their motivation to continue, relying solely on their passion for filmmaking.

5.3 Dominant Genre

The UAE government established a set of media content standards that outline the terms, conditions, and rules regarding what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. As different societies have varying norms, what may be appropriate in Western cultures might not be

appropriate for the UAE society, particularly regarding topics that concern children, families, and parents. For instance, P10 said,

“The Arab world differs from the Western world in entertainment preferences; they offer their own entertainment, but we tend to gravitate toward stories grounded in reality. People generally prefer narratives that resonate with them emotionally and allow for a sense of connection.”

According to Participant P9, evaluating stories involves specific criteria that reflect the institution's unique positioning as a semi-government entity. This status imposes certain constraints on the type of narratives that can be developed. A primary focus of filmmakers' efforts is to showcase Abu Dhabi, highlighting the city's distinctive features and various locations that contribute to its allure. So, in their storytelling approach, they adopt a commercial mindset, aiming to create content that resonates with the audience. While they seek to engage viewers, their emphasis is not on generating profit; rather, they are dedicated to fostering the growth and development of the film industry as a whole.

Thus, public institutions primarily champion commercial films and actively encourage projects that celebrate the rich culture and traditions of the United Arab Emirates. However, these films must prioritize commercial viability over educational or documentary styles. By doing so, they hope to create an engaging cinematic experience that effectively promotes both the local culture and the broader objectives of the film industry in the region.

In terms of genre, all participants noted that comedy and horror films are the predominant genres within the Emirati film industry, but a few are also historical. Horror films particularly captivate audiences and resonate well with younger viewers. Additionally, films centered around car culture have gained favor among viewers. Some productions highlight traditional themes, showcasing the authentic lives of Emiratis. Participant P2 emphasized that comedies tend to enjoy greater demand as they are often the most effective means of connecting with audiences. Moreover, several new horror films have recently been released. This variety significantly enriches the Emirati film landscape, or as Participant P2 put it,

“I believe that comedy is prioritized in Emirati cinema as a business decision. Filmmaking is a personal endeavor for production company owners, and they are focused on the commercial aspect. They aim to boost revenue by creating comedies, which tend to attract a larger audience.”

Participant P5 expressed a similar view,

“To compete with other cinemas, we need to improve our standards, and one area where we can excel is in comedy, as it requires a smaller budget.”

In summary, Emirati society is rich with remarkable and unique stories that deserve to be told. These narratives should be transformed into films and shared with audiences around the world. Unfortunately, the prevailing trend often favors the creation of commercial comedies with simplistic plots aimed primarily at box office success. Certain limitations can stifle creativity, leading many filmmakers to gravitate toward the comedy or horror genres. Consequently, most films produced tend to focus predominantly on entertainment value.

6. Discussion

The establishment of international film festivals in the UAE demonstrates the country's commitment to developing its film industry (Nashef, 2023). Unfortunately, these festivals did not survive and ceased their activities, which resulted in a decline in support for the industry. These festivals are essential for economic development and can help position the country as a significant player in the international film industry (Dermawan et al., 2023). Additionally, it can play a vital role in fostering cultural tourism development and enhancing city branding (Connell, 2012). Without a regulatory entity to support, fund, and organize the industry, efforts to revive it will remain largely individual. Ideally, the government should manage this association to ensure its long-term sustainability while aligning with the country's strategic goals and diplomatic initiatives, avoiding any conflicts of interest among practitioners.

The UAE has implemented policies and strategies that provide logistical support to filmmakers, which helps minimize production costs. However, these supports tend to favor foreign investments more than local ones, making the UAE attractive for external filmmakers and enhancing its reputation as a desirable location to live and work (Saber et al., 2018). Thus, government policies and subsidies fundamentally shape the film industry in the UAE.

To develop the Emirati film industry, practitioners must first address the primary challenges previously mentioned, which pertain to filmmakers and their productions. They need to elevate their work to meet the expectations of both the audience and the government in a competitive market. Collaboration among filmmakers is essential to demonstrate their commitment to advancing the industry. They can overcome these obstacles by enhancing their knowledge and acquiring the necessary skills.

Furthermore, filmmakers should focus on crafting well-written stories that reflect a rich Emirati identity, treating these narratives as commercial, cultural products aimed at entertaining audiences. It is important to consider the diverse nationalities represented in the UAE to ensure the inclusion of these groups in the audience.

As noted, Emirati audiences tend to have discerning tastes, meaning that filmmakers must be exceptionally convincing to engage them. This high-quality bar poses a significant challenge for the industry in attracting local viewers, especially given the vast array of entertainment options available today (Hudson, 2020). By enhancing production quality, audience trust in Emirati films can be rebuilt over time, leading to local success and potential international acclaim.

It is important to understand the role of censorship in developing the UAE film industry. While the country actively promotes the media industry, it maintains certain censorship standards, which may pose a challenge for foreign filmmakers compared to local ones, who have grown up respecting these standards in a country that promotes tolerance (Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Thus, local filmmakers built their stories to align with the country's regulatory standards, showcasing traditional Emirati identity influenced by rapid modernization and development (Nashef, 2023). The Media Regulatory Office in the UAE has established a comprehensive set of content standards to ensure that media productions uphold certain values and principles reflective of the nation's cultural and social framework. Among the explicit guidelines outlined are mandates to show respect for God and Islamic beliefs, uphold the dignity of the ruling regime and its leaders, and honor the cultural heritage integral to Emirati identity. Additionally,

the standards emphasize the importance of safeguarding vulnerable populations, particularly children and women, from content that may be deemed offensive or inappropriate. In sum, the specter of censorship looms large, as any deviation from these standards could result in restrictions that limit storytelling opportunities, and this creates a complex landscape where filmmakers must navigate their creative visions while remaining compliant with governmental regulations to maintain societal harmony.

Moreover, the UAE is home to a richly diverse society comprising over 200 nationalities, adding another layer of complexity to filmmaking. Both the government and filmmakers must consider the sensitivity around national identities and communal relations. Insulting or misrepresenting a nationality, community, or specific religion can elicit backlash and potential repercussions, compelling filmmakers to be keenly aware of the implications of their narratives. Consequently, filmmakers must meticulously evaluate their projects to ensure that they avoid any content that could be interpreted as offensive. This includes thoroughly monitoring the film's material to confirm that it aligns with the established media content standards and is suitable for the designated age classification.

7. Conclusion

In a country that has only recently begun to value the film industry, the UAE's efforts to develop this sector were generous. The country started to pay attention to the film industry following the success of certain Emirati films at international film festivals. In response, these festivals introduced subsidies to encourage the production of Emirati films. Many local film festivals and events were organized throughout the UAE, and the government demonstrated a strong and positive attitude towards the film industry (Hudson, 2020). However, the role of festivals declined as many of them ceased, and the decline of local initiatives has made it difficult for filmmakers in the UAE to continue their work. Consequently, these filmmakers have faced challenges in showcasing their films, relying heavily on their own financial resources and skills to participate in international film festivals instead of local ones, not to mention that the industry still imports skilled labor from Western or Arab countries (Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011). Despite efforts by UAE practitioners to promote the film industry, the production and box office performance of Emirati films have significantly decreased, resulting in a lack of widespread popularity among citizens.

Moving on, local filmmakers should focus on improving the quality of their work by engaging skilled professionals to create well-crafted movies rather than making films just to meet quotas. It is essential to invest in developing their talents and stories to revitalize an industry that currently struggles with appeal (Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011). However, the local market is insufficient for filmmakers due to the small number of residents, which does not cover their expenses and fails to generate profit. As a result, productions need to focus on the Arab or international markets to increase revenue. Additionally, Emirati filmmakers should not rely on government funding as a given, as it is in many aspects of their lives. Emirati films must achieve high quality to attract investors, both from within the country and abroad. This is a journey that both the government and filmmakers are undertaking together to advance the industry.

Finally, it is important to note that this study has some limitations, primarily due to its reliance on the perspectives of just ten stakeholders from the UAE. Future research could benefit from a larger sample size and the inclusion of Emirati audiences, which would provide

valuable insights into their expectations and preferences. Such insights would enable filmmakers to better understand what local audiences desire in films and how to restore the audience's confidence in homegrown productions and rebuild the trust between filmmakers and the government.

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