

Challenges and Sustainability of the UAE Film Industry

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Abstract:

This study explores the film value chain of the Arabian film sector, focusing on the UAE's films. Employing a value chain framework, it examines the UAE's film industry's unique challenges within its value chain in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. Empirically, the study is based on the views of nine local filmmakers through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The findings shed light on the unique case of the UAE, a wealthy small nation that shifted from providing direct subsidies to its local film industry to investing in "film tourism," such as providing logistical support to Hollywood and Bollywood productions filmed in the UAE. This shift is a significant change in the industry's approach and is a key focus of the article, which seeks to explore the underlying issues hindering the growth and development of the UAE's film industry. The article offers insights into regional film dynamics, especially in small nations like the UAE.

Keywords: Arabian films, UAE cinema, value chain, film festivals, film subsidies

1. Introduction

The survival of cinema in the unique context of small nations often relies on significant state support. This is particularly true in the case of the UAE cinema, which can be defined as a 'minor cinema,' a term often associated with the cinematic output of small nations (Hjort, 2005), based on their limited territorial and population size, which hinders market expansion through film export and international distribution (Hjort, 2005, p. ix). In cultural studies, the term 'minor' not only denotes the scale but also implies a strategy of subversion against the dominant, in this case, American culture, thereby highlighting the existence of cultural power regimes (Hjort, 2005, p. ix) with the indigenous film industry in small nations often grappling with American films' overwhelming influx and dominant presence. One radical solution might be to withdraw entirely from filmmaking, acknowledging that commercial film production is unfeasible under these conditions, while other small nations may choose a different path by offering state subsidies to their local film sector. For instance, the survival

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of local cinema in a small nation such as Denmark has been contingent upon substantial state support due to the role of film as an integral component of national heritage culture (Hjort, 2005, p. x). This substantial state support is a key factor in the survival and growth of the local cinema industry and is a significant focus of this article.

This study sheds light on the Arab film sector, which has shifted dramatically over the past two decades, with traditional players like Egypt and Lebanon taking the backseat while the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are leading new productions. In particular, this article explores the sustainability of the film sector in the UAE by utilizing the analytical framework proposed by Munoz Larroa (2020) to identify and analyze blockages within the value chain relationships, as well as those that occur among the interdependencies of various stakeholders within the industry. The analysis examines the UAE's film industry's unique challenges within its value chain, which may also resonate with other GCC states. By examining these constraints, the article seeks to understand the underlying issues hindering the growth and development of the UAE's film industry, thereby contributing to the burgeoning literature focusing on non-Western cinemas.

Historically, the influence of expatriate merchants significantly shaped the development of cinema culture in the UAE, including South Asian communities, which helped bolster the popularity of Indian films. During the 1960s, foreign oil companies also played a role in constructing film theatres, distributing movies, and organizing screenings for their employees, who included large Western expatriate communities (Alghannam, 2020, pp. 115-16). During the 1970s and 1980s, the market's growth was driven by a few key individuals, primarily expatriates. During this period, Dubai attracted many Lebanese, Iranian, and Indian expatriates who established distribution and exhibition businesses with ties to Hollywood agents in the Middle East (Alghannam, 2020). As a result, film exhibition and distribution in the Gulf states were controlled by a few national companies owned by merchant families, immigrants with connections to the ruling elite, and a handful of expatriates (Alghannam, 2020, p. 121).

However, despite the UAE's substantial wealth, which ideally positions it to subsidize local film production, recent halts in production subsidies have led to significant disruptions. These include decreased productivity and challenges in maintaining a sustainable talent pool, which, in turn, have cultivated skepticism among local audiences regarding the quality of UAE films. Further complicating the cultivation of audience support for local cinema is the demographic composition of the UAE, where expatriates make up approximately 90% of the population. This diversity influences theatrical offerings, with cinemas often favoring Bollywood and Hollywood productions that promise higher box office returns over local films, and this preference impacts the financial viability and exposure of local content. Regarding distribution, while digital technology has opened new channels, the UAE faces stiff competition from regional heavyweights like Saudi Arabia, which dominates the streaming market, and this competition creates a significant barrier for UAE films to reach broader audiences, both locally and regionally.

This article focuses on such challenges, and it is organized as follows: it begins with a reflection on the existing literature on small nations and the impact of film subsidies, establishing a foundational understanding of the film industry's value chain, categorized into three primary axes: production, distribution, and consumption. After outlining the methodology employed in this study, the subsequent sections analyze each axis of the value chain, providing a detailed assessment of the current state of the UAE film industry. The analysis draws on the views of selected local filmmakers, and this empirical evidence helps identify blockages that hinder the sustainability of the film sector in the UAE.

2. Cinema of small nations and media subsidies

Since the conclusion of World War II, global film industries have increasingly adopted subsidies as a strategic measure to counterbalance Hollywood's pervasive influence, further motivated by the recognition of film as a potent cultural medium and a tool for enhancing national soft power (Messerlin & Parc, 2017). Many nations now invest in their film sectors to cultivate national culture and bolster soft power, viewing government subsidies as essential to fortify their national film industries against Hollywood's dominance, with some countries like France and South Korea imposing import and screen quotas to support their film sectors (Messerlin & Parc, 2017).

Public film policy and subsidy rationales span multiple objectives: They aim to diminish the market dominance of major firms, support new entrants, mitigate financial challenges to sustain firms, and facilitate the orderly market exit of unviable companies. Subsidies are designed to foster growth and innovation in media companies, safeguarding values and groups considered vulnerable, such as linguistic and ethnic diversity, and reinforcing the national industry by encouraging film companies to maintain local operations (Murschetz et al., 2018, p. 15). In addition, distribution support mechanisms include aiding distributors in acquiring films for national and international markets, exhibition support, subtitling, dubbing, and creating digital content for electronic distribution. Promotion support can include various logistical aids primarily targeted at international markets as well as co-production support to foster development, production, and distribution collaborations that meet specific criteria, such as involving a minimum number of countries or distribution partners to enhance sales prospects (Raats et al., 2018, p. 199).

Munoz Larroa (2020) introduces an analytical framework to explore the distribution dynamics of the film value chain, which encompasses scriptwriting, financing, casting, location scouting, filming, post-production, marketing, and audience engagement, with each stage playing a crucial role in a film's success. Munoz Larroa (2020) argues that both vertical (along the value chain) and horizontal (between interconnected organizations) relationships are essential for the sustainability of the film industry, impacting areas such as financial health, workforce stability, productivity, infrastructure, and market access (Munoz Larroa, 2020, p. 226). Thus, the value chain in the film industry is delineated along three principal

axes: production, distribution, and consumption, each presenting unique challenges and requiring specific strategies. Production involves securing funding, developing talent, building infrastructure, and maintaining productivity. Effective consumption strategies are vital for audience development, while distribution increasingly relies on digital technology to reach wider audiences.

Despite the potential challenges, such as negative returns and production quality concerns, these initiatives are pivotal for promoting a vibrant local film industry (Meloni et al., 2018, p. 100). Considering the GCC region, for instance, the development of local cinema is influenced by dual perspectives: subsidizing films as cultural artifacts for political recognition and pursuing market-oriented investments in cultural industries linked to tourism. Numerous initiatives, including film festivals and grants, have been implemented to support the regional film industry, significantly shaping its trajectory (Alghannam, 2020, p. 127). This study delves into the perspectives of UAE filmmakers regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of state initiatives to support local content visibility and accessibility.

3. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach designed to gain a deep understanding of the UAE film sector (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). Extensive interviews were conducted with nine prominent UAE filmmakers to gather industry insiders' detailed perspectives, and these discussions aimed to explore their experiences and viewpoints regarding the value chain, including production, distribution, and consumption in the UAE. The interview format was semi-structured, allowing for in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Participants were chosen using a snowball sampling method, ensuring the filmmakers involved were well-known within the local industry. It happened that all interviewees featured in this article are male, which may indicate the dominance of male filmmakers. Before the interviews, which took place from November 2023 to May 2024, participants received detailed information about the study and the confidentiality of their statements, given the critique expressed by some of them. This is an overview of the participants:

P1: An award-winning director.

P2: A writer and director who began his career in 2015 and has contributed financially to complete some of his films.

P3: A filmmaker, actor, and production company owner.

P4: A film producer, owner of film production and distribution companies, and co-producer of most of the latest films shown in cinemas and platforms.

P5: An actor and director.

P6: A filmmaker, co-founder of a production company, and co-founder of one film festival.

P7: A writer and director of several short films.

P8: Director of one film festival.

P9: A director, producer, and owner of a production company.

The interview guide and other related materials were approved by the authors' institution, and the participants were provided with consent forms and information sheets about the study. The interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA software to identify several themes, but this article centers on the three axes of the value chain, namely production, distribution, and consumption. The following three sections will analyze each axis of this filmmaking process, backed up by relevant extracts representing interviewees' views.

4. Production: fostering local talents

In some countries like China, mainstream films were used more as tools for public education than entertainment, and this historical role has prevented policymakers from fully commercializing these films, leading to challenges in competing with international films (Zhou, 2020, p. 58). The result is that universities and colleges provide consistent and high-quality education for directors and actors, but training for professionals in other areas is either insufficient or non-existent, and there was a substantial deficit of skilled experts in music, special effects, costume design, and sound effects, among other crucial film production areas (Zhou, 2020, p. 61).

In the UAE, however, local films are not necessarily deployed for a similar educational purpose, and the state has not invested in academic institutions to train budding filmmakers. This is why, despite the rapid development of the above facilities, the film production industry in the UAE is still in its nascent stages. As a result, most productions benefiting from these new studios, along with various incentives and commissions, have primarily been international rather than local Gulf productions. The support extended by the government of the UAE to the film industry is driven by economic objectives, namely to tap into the growing film industry's economic potential, as Alghannam noted (2020, p. 126). As for state efforts to nurture local talents, they have been rather limited, with state scholarships usually directed to STEM subjects rather than arts and film, not to mention the lack of a real film sector where budding talents can work, or as P7 put it,

We lack the [academic] study of cinema ... we produced cohorts of doctors, engineers, lawyers, and accountants. How? We sent them overseas to study on scholarships, and then they returned to the country and worked in their fields ... there are universities in London, the US, Canada, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand, and even in Peru and Chile, that are very strong [academically] in cinema, but if we send [Emiratis] there, what would they do when they return to the UAE?

One notable initiative is Image Nation, set up in 2008 as a \$1 billion fund aimed to support local productions and to foster local talent, providing them with opportunities to narrate their stories and work on projects designed to equip them with the necessary tools to

sustain a local industry (Yunis, 2020, p. 18). Since its inception, Image Nation has significantly shifted its production focus. Initially established to promote narrative Emirati cinema, Image Nation gradually transitioned towards supporting films made by Emiratis that do not necessarily focus on Emirati subjects and has increasingly invested in funding Hollywood productions. By 2018, Image Nation had co-produced a total of 31 Hollywood films, including notable titles such as *Lost Christmas* (2011), *Men in Black 3* (2012), *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2013), and *Free Solo* (2018). This is reflected in the following interviewees' disappointment with Image Nation and its foreign-inclined production. One of them, P7, expresses his disappointment with Image Nation's focus on foreign themes and foreign productions:

Those managing Image Nation are all foreigners telling us they want an Emirati story. But as foreigners, how can they know what the Emirati story is? If I go to Brazil and get into a public production company, and they ask me to make a Brazilian film, how would I do it? The foreigner comes here and doesn't do any research about [our] identity, customs and traditions, or life in the Emirates ... they should at least mingle with Emiratis to understand the country. We know about Canada and America, from where? From films and from the people we have met there.

Another filmmaker (P8) laments the company's "Hollywood conditions" which are detached from its local host:

The only company that makes movies in the UAE and still makes movies is Image Nation but it has a certain orientation and conditions, mostly Hollywood conditions, that are not suitable for the UAE, or the nature of the industry in the UAE and the film industry or the film process here which does not at all resemble that in Hollywood ... most directors do not fit with the company's policy, and therefore it only produces for a certain type of filmmakers.

Another local filmmaker (P9) sees Image Nation as failing to engage with local filmmakers, thereby detaching itself from its original mission to foster local talents:

[Image Nation] has not really produced for the Emiratis... it did not serve the [UAE] cinema ... it wants to produce a commercial film of 10 million dirhams when you can, with the same amount of money, produce five films, support five directors, five screenwriters ... foreigners want to make cinema without looking at what already exists.

Thus, most of Image Nation's films are claimed to diverge from the UAE's geographical, historical, and cultural contexts and occasionally conflict with the nation's cultural norms. This evolution of Image Nation's focus reflects a pivot toward positioning itself as a significant player within the global Hollywood film industry, moving away from its original mission to foster a sustainable national cinema movement that highlights local culture and storytelling (Yunis, 2020, pp. 207-208). This explains the UAE's focus on

providing ideal filming location for major Hollywood movies, including *Syriana* (USA 2005), *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (USA 2011), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (USA 2015), *Fast and the Furious 7* (USA 2015), and *Mission Impossible—Fallout* (USA 2019). Some films, like *Star Wars*, showed the country's desert, while other films showcased the UAE's luxurious, fun-loving image, often without meaningful engagement with the local or expatriate communities. In many cases, even "traditional settings" in films are depicted through newly constructed, pristine heritage villages that resemble generic Hollywood sets of an Arabian landscape (Yunis, 2020, pp. 37-44).

In summary, the above initiatives did not compensate for the sudden halt of film festivals, which, according to P8, "When all these festivals are gone, production becomes difficult," or as P2 says, "When we didn't get support, we stopped [production].... We do not lack money ... but we need festivals to embrace these [artists] who have talent." Nonetheless, festivals, although pivotal in supporting local film productions, were also instrumental in branding the nation, with funded trips for producers, actors, directors, and journalists from across the world. These events offered lavish hospitality and showcased the country through tours, enhancing the tourism goals tied to them and contributing to the UAE's national branding (Yunis, 2020, p. 18; p. 163).

5. Distribution: the fierce competition in the Gulf market

Between 2004 and 2017, the UAE significantly shaped the landscape of Gulf media production, reducing Saudi dominance by establishing robust infrastructures and expansive production facilities. During that period, the Emirati model of hosting international film festivals markedly influenced the Gulf cultural landscape, as these festivals provided dedicated spaces and financial support specifically for Gulf Arabian filmmakers, including those from Iraq and Yemen, helping to cultivate a fertile environment for film production within the region. During that period, the Gulf States produced over 90 national feature films, along with numerous short films, mostly showcased within the circuit of Gulf film festivals, which were instrumental in drawing interest from local and regional distributors. The Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), in particular, played a crucial role by effectively packaging films for distribution. Notably, most Emirati feature films produced between 2009 and 2017 found distribution through Vox Cinemas, a strategic partner of DIFF's Dubai Distribution Program (Alghannam, 2020, p. 128). As one filmmaker, P5 put it,

The Dubai Festival was one of the strongest festivals in the Arab world, and the Gulf Festival also had a name at the Gulf level with the quality of its films and workshops. It was a regional festival, but it had a great impact... with a broad network. There were distribution companies that attended, and we got to network with other [filmmakers], we met with distribution companies ... some of [young filmmakers'] films reached foreign festivals like Berlin.

The DIFF and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF), launched in 2007, played crucial roles in funding and promoting films directed by Arab filmmakers, which garnered significant international recognition. Given the relatively limited exposure to film and lower levels of film education among Emiratis, both festivals gradually shifted their emphasis towards promoting short films by Emirati filmmakers instead of feature-length films. This strategic pivot spurred a significant increase in the production of short films, intended primarily for festival display. By the time ADFF ceased operations in 2014, the festival was becoming more selective in Emirati submissions, although it initially screened almost any film submitted to it in the first few editions (Yunis, 2020, p. 215).

Another initiative, Sanad, was established in 2010 in Abu Dhabi, provided grants for films in the development and post-production stages, and was launched to complement the ADFF. Sanad's creation was seen as a competitive response to similar initiatives in Dubai, which introduced DIFF in 2004, the Dubai Film Connection (DFC) in 2007, and Enjaaz funding program in 2009. Initially, Dubai faced criticism from Arab filmmakers for being disconnected from regional realities, but it gradually overcame these criticisms and established itself as a significant player in the film industry (Yunis, 2020). The DFC, in particular, was instrumental in fostering collaborations between Arab filmmakers and international stakeholders, promoting co-productions within the Arab world. Notable successes of the DFC include *Wadjda* (2012), the debut feature by Saudi filmmaker Haifaa Al-Mansour. The primary awards from the DFC and Enjaaz were tied to the festival and its state-affiliated sponsors in Dubai, but the side awards of the DFC were funded by Arab and international partners (El-Khoury, 2019).

However, the ADFF was officially canceled in 2015 after running for eight years, and DIFF, the most renowned of the three festivals, was the last to end in 2018, leaving the industry in disbelief. The reasons behind these cancellations have not been clearly communicated, with official statements remaining ambiguous (El-Khoury, 2019). One local filmmaker (P9) expresses his disappointment as follows,

Since 2017 or 2018, I have not seen a glimmer of hope, no productivity, no festival, no support or interest from parties, I'm speaking about government agencies. Up until 2017, we had like 25 [filmmakers] who produced quality films every year, but now there may be 10 who produce mainly commercial films, and 15 others who may be frustrated and have no production.

For P5, the quality of films declined with the decline of festivals, “after all these festivals ceased, there was a big drop.... Movies used to have to meet a certain level, but for the past 10 years, there has been a big drop, and now there are below-average films.” A senior ADFF management member indicated that the festival was initially seen as an investment but did not yield significant returns, leading to budget cuts. This statement from Twofour54 could suggest a shift in focus from supporting and developing Arab talent to

concentrating on engaging with Hollywood production giants and mainstream local artworks (Al-Hallaq, 2015) to market the UAE big cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, or as P7 put it,

The film festival has nothing to do with the film industry, it is a promotion for the city [where it is held] ... take one of the strongest festivals in the world, the Cannes Festival. Did it make the French film industry the strongest in the world? ... Cannes is a boring city with nothing to see, but this festival reinvigorates it. People go there because of the festival, the hotels flourish during the festival, and restaurants revive during the festival, which lasts for a whole month... yes, it has some funds, but not vast funding... The festival markets the city, not films. It gathers participants, directors, or production companies in this city, and what happens then? The city is pulsating.

What remains are local festivals that may have very limited impact, according to P3,

[local] festivals now accept all films to fill the days of the festival, but in the past, there were committees that chose films according to certain criteria ... people do not make films now. They make reels that can be published on YouTube.

Thus, during the period between 2004 and 2017, there were several key initiatives to promote UAE films and media productions, including Dubai Studio City (2005), Abu Dhabi's TwoFour54 Production (2008), which is a free zone located in Abu Dhabi, named after Abu Dhabi's geographical coordinates (24° North, 54° East), providing economic incentives and revamps the image of Abu Dhabi's media industry to foster the growth of the UAE's media sector (Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Generally, the advancement of the media industry in the UAE, including the creation of the media-free zone, aligns with the state policy that acknowledges that media serves not merely as a source of entertainment and information but also as a pivotal instrument for national development and international branding (Tran & Nguyen, 2020), and an investment to promote the tourism industry in the country (Youssef and Piane, 2013, p. 34) as discussed in the following section.

Concurrently, the Saudi film industry is witnessing a transformative phase, marked by the recent launch of cinemas in Riyadh and plans for more openings across the kingdom. This shift is cultural and increasingly viewed as a lucrative investment opportunity, and budding filmmakers in Saudi Arabia now have access to multiple funding sources to nurture the cinema sector. Notably, the Saudi Film Commission and the government's Cultural Development Fund—which has allocated \$234 million in grants and loans to foster film production—are pivotal in this development (Dams, 2022). One major fund is the Red Sea Fund, initiated in July 2020, which supports filmmakers through funding for project development, production, and ongoing projects, each receiving approximately SAR 1.875 million (Saudi Ministry of Culture, 2021, p. 57). Additionally, the Saudi Film Commission has been instrumental in “film tourism,” facilitating the production of three international films in 2021, including *Champions*, which featured three Saudi actors, *Desert Warrior*, and *Kandahar* (Saudi Ministry of Culture, 2021, p. 85). It also launched a strategy to attract

international production companies, develop a supportive regulatory environment, and promote Saudi films regionally and globally.

This competition interests UAE filmmakers who struggle to access Saudi funds while also lamenting the absence of similar funds in the UAE. For example, P4 mentions that,

subsidies in Saudi Arabia are no less than two million Saudi Riyals a year for each film. They have a committee that reviews scenarios and awards these amounts to filmmakers. Today, in the United Arab Emirates, we don't have production. There is logistical support in terms of services, but the financial support that can make the filmmaker form the right team for production ... doesn't exist. No specialized film institutions offer financial support and building of existing capabilities...Saudi Arabia has become a big market, and some platforms broadcast more than Saudi production because they have a large audience base in terms of subscribers, and Saudi subscribers usually outnumber those in the UAE.

Meanwhile, the streaming services are also partly dominated by Saudi Arabia. In 2023, streaming revenues in the MENA region surpassed \$1 billion, with projections indicating a potential increase of 13% to exceed \$1.2 billion by the end of the year (Layton, 2024). Such streaming services put more pressure on UAE filmmakers as they do not show films previously showcased in festivals, as P5 says,

Festivals do not allow showing a film on Netflix concurrently with the festival. Most festivals take short or long films for two years, but they should not be shown on YouTube and social media platforms while touring festivals for two years. But most festivals don't accept a film after two or three years...so filmmakers are now making films without participating in festivals. They are showing them directly on Netflix.

The Saudi streaming service Shahid, a division of the Saudi Middle East Broadcasting (MBC) Group, is at the forefront of this growth, commanding ca. 22% of the MENA streaming video market with 3.6 million subscribers in 2023 (Layton, 2024). On the other hand, local UAE filmmakers can hardly recover the cost of their films whether sold to platforms, television stations, or cinemas, as P8 says,

I do not have any guarantee that I can recover my money, neither from cinemas nor from the platforms or television. Not even from external sales. The private sector is difficult because, in the end, it seeks a return on its investment, and the public sector does not offer support anymore ... so the sector is nearly dead.

This is despite the fact that the support given to local UAE films is disproportionate to the cost of a regular TV commercial. One filmmaker, P6, lamented this situation, where a local film budget is around 1 or 1.2 million dirhams, which “equals the cost of one

commercial... of 30-second or 1-minute. How can Emirati productions compete with Hollywood, Bollywood, and even Egypt?”

In summary, the UAE's policies are designed to intertwine culture with economic development, adopting the Anglo-American approach where culture and economics are seen as interconnected and mutually dependent (Mellor, 2024). However, this overlooks the role of local films in disseminating authentic Emirati culture, as P6 put it,

We must encourage this [film] sector because it is not only about having Emirati films, but you are also disseminating your culture and strengthening your cultural presence. This is why Saudi Arabia is interested in the film sector to change the stereotype about Saudi society ... they want to change the [previous] image, so they support Saudi film and Saudi drama to change this image. As an Emirati society, we should also communicate through films ... that is why they call it soft power.

6. Consumption: Multicultural audiences

It is worth noting that the UAE's formation and development occurred in a neocolonial context, distinct from the anti-colonial narratives that have shaped the heritage discourses of many other nations. While the region experienced a form of semi-colonial influence under British oversight, there was no dramatic battle for independence or a dramatic severing of colonial ties (Yunis, 2020, p. 33). This unique historical backdrop has influenced how the UAE and its neighboring Gulf countries conceptualize and communicate their national identities and heritage, setting them apart from the more traditional post-colonial contexts. Therefore, the UAE's cinematic landscape must be understood through a lens distinct from that applied to postcolonial states such as Egypt or Tunisia. Unlike these nations, which have long histories within the traditional paradigms of postcolonial nation-building, the UAE entered the film industry during what is described as the post-cinema era, marked by the rise of digital filmmaking, notably distinct in its independence from the conventional dependencies on benefactors or substantial government funding (Yunis, 2020, p. 23).

There are, therefore, very few films based on the UAE's history or political standing save for two recent initiatives, as pointed out by one filmmaker, P4 who refers only to two films as “excellent [state] productions,” and these are *Al-Kameen* and *Khorfakkan*. In 2021, *Al-Kameen* (The Ambush), a collaborative effort between AGC International and Image Nation Abu Dhabi, is said to have garnered over 170,000 admissions, becoming the most successful Emirati and Arabic-language film in the UAE. Directed by Pierre Morel, the film dramatizes the real-life 2018 ambush on Emirati soldiers by insurgents in Yemen. Additionally, *Khorfakkan*, a historical film released in 2020 and directed by Ben Mole and Maurice Sweeney, depicts the city of Khorfakkan's defiance against the Portuguese invasion during the 16th century. However, a historical narrative such as that depicted in a film like *Khorfakkan* may not appeal to global audiences, whereas a politically charged film like *Al-Kameen* may resonate only with a certain local community due to its contemporary relevance and emotional connection with regional conflicts.

Thus, the UAE's strategies, which emphasized producing a few high-budget films, did not generate the expected market demand (Alghannam, 2020, p. 129). This is why filmmakers like P8 still see the UAE film sector as based on individual initiatives rather than a national industry:

The film sector is driven by individual efforts and specific genres, which means that not all films attract large audiences. The movies that have achieved success did so for reasons that I believe are more about their classification than the actual quality of the films. Therefore, if unsuccessful films continue to be produced, I think the public will become increasingly disappointed in Emirati cinema and may avoid watching Emirati films altogether, except for a younger audience who may not be as discerning about films.

There is also skepticism among some filmmakers about the audience's acceptance and embracing of the local film, as P3 puts it,

The audience can be unpredictable and often fails to appreciate the significance of soft power, which is embodied in art. Instead, they may perceive performing art as entertainment with a few dancers and eccentric individuals. However, they overlook that art is an industry, an economic driver, a representation of a country's culture, and a crucial part of its national brand.

Nonetheless, the UAE is a big market for movie theaters. In 2016, the UAE boasted the highest number of cinema screens in the Gulf, totaling 374. This marked a significant increase from 255 screens in 2006 to 600 in 2016 (Alghannam, 2020, p. 130). However, local filmmakers see audiences in the UAE as fragmented between local audiences that are more accustomed to watching global hits, or as P3 put it,

The [UAE] audience has grown up watching films and is familiar with actors like Shahrukh Khan, Van Damme, Mohammed Ramadan (from Egypt), Adel Imam (from Egypt), Jackie Chan, and Tom Cruise. They are used to watching a variety of films and are not ignorant about them; in fact, they watch movies on various platforms and enjoy international films as well.

The diversity of films shown in UAE cinemas and television stations has also made audiences very selective, as P1 put it,

The Gulf audience's taste in movies is influenced by the fact that we grew up watching foreign movies. Whether we were at home watching [the Saudi] MBC or [the Lebanese] LBC, we were programmed from a young age to watch American movies. This influence is particularly strong in my generation, born in the eighties and later, due to the popularity of American movies on channels like MBC. As a result, American movies have become the benchmark by which we judge other films. This is

quite different from my parents' generation, who primarily watched Egyptian and Indian movies.

In fact, the UAE boasts the largest box office revenues in the Middle East, given that a quarter of the UAE's population is under the age of 25, making youth a primary audience demographic at cinemas. However, the UAE's cinematic landscape is dominated by foreign productions, primarily from Hollywood and India, including Bollywood (Hindi-language) and Mollywood (Malayalam-language) films, as well as commercial films from Egypt. Despite the proliferation of cinemas and high attendance rates, these factors have not substantially influenced local film production or increased local viewership (Yunis, 2020, p. 211). This is why a filmmaker like P7, thinks that rather than producing a local UAE film, one should consider producing an Indian film,

There are four million Indians in the UAE, so if I make an Indian movie, it will succeed, because people will watch it. But why should I write an Emirati movie, spend millions on it, and get nothing in return? Who will invest in it? The problem is that filmmakers spend from their own pockets.

He also thinks that the UAE local filmmakers may not have a high standing among expat audiences who have not integrated within the UAE society, or as he put it,

Consider the demographics in the UAE. Many communities claim that Emiratis are not interested in working and only want to be in managerial positions. The communities here are not well integrated into our society. Instead, we need to integrate into their societies. Our schools, even the public ones, all teach in English, which poses a problem.

The popularity of Bollywood films was perhaps why Dubai authorities established BollyParks Dubai in 2016, as a unique addition to the Dubai Parks and Resorts complex, which includes global attractions such as Legoland, Legoland Waterpark, Riverland Dubai, and Motiongate Dubai. It is the world's only theme park dedicated exclusively to the Hindi film industry (Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022).

In conclusion, local films have not secured enough audience base to generate profits that may sustain the local film sector, and this means that local films hardly cover their costs, as P6 explains,

from the director's point of view, the maximum number of tickets per day is 100,000 tickets, or about four million dirhams, of which two and half million would go to theaters, distributors, and other expenses, so I would get a million and a half as a producer, which means that my film production should not exceed 1 million or 1.2 million dirhams to generate.

7. Discussion: The double-edged sword of integrating culture and economics

The UAE's strategy of intertwining culture with economic development through its film neoliberal policy reflects a broader trend, where cultural production is closely linked with economic prosperity. While this approach is progressive in exploiting the economic potential of the film industry, it inadvertently downplays the intrinsic cultural value of local films. In the case of the UAE, this is manifested in the shift from direct subsidies to a focus on film tourism aimed at attracting international productions, which risks overshadowing the development of local cinematic identity. This neoliberal approach prioritizes marketability and international appeal, potentially at the expense of nurturing a homegrown film culture that embodies local narratives and values.

For instance, film festivals in the UAE have played a crucial role in nurturing the regional film industry and promoting national branding. They have provided dedicated spaces and financial support specifically for Gulf Arabian filmmakers, creating a fertile environment for film production in the region. However, the abrupt cessation of these festivals, without adequate compensatory initiatives, has adversely affected the visibility and growth of the local film industry. This underscores the pressing need for consistent and robust support mechanisms to sustain and promote local film production amid intense regional competition and a challenging global market. Furthermore, in a globalized market, cultivating a local film industry is compounded by the UAE's demographic makeup, characterized by a substantial expatriate presence, making it challenging to compete with dominant foreign films.

Another crucial issue is the disparity in investment between infrastructure for international film productions and educational programs for local talent development. The UAE has not substantially invested in film education and training programs, missing an opportunity to nurture local talent and cultivate an indigenous film culture. This gap between infrastructure development and educational investment underscores a strategic oversight that could otherwise support sustainable growth in the local film industry and promote vibrant cultural exchanges within the region.

In the realm of distribution, the UAE's film industry faces stern competition from regional powerhouses like Saudi Arabia, especially with the expanding opportunities offered by digital platforms. This competition not only pertains to market dominance but also extends to cultural impact and the influence on regional cinematic preferences. Fueled by substantial government initiatives and positioned as a new center for film tourism and regional cinema, Saudi Arabia's burgeoning film sector presents a formidable challenge to the UAE's ambitions of sustaining and broadening its influence in Gulf media production.

In summary, despite being designed to integrate cultural and economic objectives, the film strategies of the UAE seem to overlook the role of local films in preserving authentic Emirati culture. The fierce competition with Saudi Arabia, emerging as a significant cinema hub, complicates the UAE's efforts to establish a distinct cinematic identity. Furthermore, the UAE's strategic use of cinema for nation branding, coupled with its alignment with global tourism and media-free zones, creates a complex landscape that favors international appeal

over local film promotion. This further complicates the survival and success of local cinema in a market dominated by foreign productions. Therefore, the survival of UAE cinema depends not only on state support but also on a strategic reevaluation of what constitutes viable and culturally significant film production in such a context.

8. Conclusion

Film subsidies in the UAE are shaped by a complex interplay of factors across the production, distribution, and consumption axes, each presenting its own challenges that influence the sustainability and development of the local film industry. One major issue is the lack of a common understanding of the role of the film sector in the country's story. Even if UAE filmmakers produce films about the country's past, their distribution in the UAE remains heavily influenced by the dominant Anglo-American creative economy model, which emphasizes neoliberal values and prioritizes commercial viability over intrinsic cultural value.

Moreover, the intense competition with Saudi Arabia, which is rapidly positioning itself as a major hub for regional cinema and "film tourism", further complicates the UAE's efforts to establish a distinct cinematic identity. Additionally, the UAE's strategic use of cinema for nation branding and its alignment with global tourism and media-free zones create a complex landscape that prioritizes international appeal over local film promotion.

Finally, the survival and success of cinemas in the UAE are not heavily dependent on local or regional Arab films. The country's diverse demographic makeup, with a significant expatriate population, necessitates a broad offering of international films from Bollywood, Hollywood, and other global cinemas, as well as films from the Middle East, like those from Egypt. This eclectic programming strategy serves the varied tastes of the UAE's audience but also underscores local films' challenges in gaining traction among their own national audience.

This study enriches the existing body of knowledge by focusing on two significant areas within media and film studies. First, it illuminates the underexplored terrain of non-Western cinema, specifically films from the United Arab Emirates, thereby contributing to the broader scholarly endeavor to de-Westernize media and film studies. This shift toward including diverse cinematic traditions offers a more holistic view of global film narratives and practices, moving beyond the predominant focus on Western cinema. Second, the article highlights the nascent cinema industry within the GCC states, emphasizing how this region's dynamics of production, distribution, and consumption differ. For instance, the analysis underscores the growing influence of the Saudi market, driven by Saudi Arabia's proactive media policies that support the development of its film and media sectors, with a special focus on nurturing Saudi talent. The dominance of the Saudi market presents both hurdles and potentials for neighboring countries' film industries, including the UAE. Future studies could explore effective strategies to overcome the identified blockages, reinstate consistent support for local production, and strategically promote and distribute UAE films to local and

expatriate audiences while cultivating a more robust film industry across the GCC, ultimately enriching the global film landscape.

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