



## Film Regulation and Censorship Practices in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study of GCAM

Musab Alamri

Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

**Abstract.** This article investigates the role of the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) in the policymaking, regulations, and legislation related to the licensing and oversight of the Saudi film industry. It analyzes the regulatory history that led to the establishment of the GCAM and then examines how GCAM has managed the industry. It also explores GCAM's two most significant activities: supporting the development of the film industry and censorship. Additionally, it seeks to determine whether GCAM is an overall contributor to or constraint on the industry in light of film censorship. The article examines the significant challenge GCAM faces in balancing openness and freedom of expression with its obligation to consider and respect Saudi society's culture and tradition. This examination of GCAM reveals its role in film distribution and exhibition, censorship practices, and labor laws. As an oversight body, GCAM is responsible for media freedom. The findings reveal strict censorship, the high cost of film accessibility, and an absence of employment laws to protect film crews.

**Keywords:** Saudi cinema; film regulation; film censorship; Saudi Vision 2030; film distribution.

### Article History

Submitted: January 11, 2023

Accepted: June 21, 2023

Published: June 30, 2023

### 1. Introduction

The General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's policymaker for all audiovisual media in terms of licenses, organization, coordination, and oversight. Funding and development of the film production sector are the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, which was separated from the Ministry of Media in 2018. In addition to publicly available materials as primary resources, such as official government documents (Quality of Life Program – Vision 2030, n.d.), news reports, trade magazines, and certain websites, this article gains other data from secondary studies in film studies relating to policy and censorship.

GCAM develops the film industry and provides it with new economic and ideological impetus, i.e., economically through regulatory policies in organizing the industry in terms of profit and ideologically by presenting cinema to society as a contemporary tool for art and creativity. However, GCAM's strict censorship undermines these efforts to which it somehow suppresses creativity in general. All film activities in Saudi Arabia operate under the auspices

of government authorities and the control of GCAM. The biggest challenge for GCAM is to balance openness and freedom of expression with the institution's obligation to consider Saudi society's culture and tradition. Although GCAM is moving in the right direction in terms of seeking to revive and develop the Saudi film industry, its policies are limited by economic and regulatory factors, such as licensing, while the labor rights of workers in the industry are disregarded. In March 2012, Cabinet Resolution No. 236 established GCAM as an independent legal body having financial and administrative independence. This occurred only five years before the cinema ban was lifted in 2017. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had banned cinemas in the 1980s after the 1979 attack on Makkah's Grand Mosque (Radwan, 2022).

The significance of this research lies in its exploration of GCAM's role in regulating and conducting censorship within the film industry in Saudi Arabia. It highlights the challenges GCAM faces in balancing the desire to promote creativity and freedom of expression, while also respecting Saudi society's cultural and traditional values. The research sheds light on how GCAM has managed the film industry since its establishment, its policies and regulations to support the development of the industry, and its contribution to censorship practices.

This article also examines the economic features of movie theatre operation in Saudi Arabia and the impact of GCAM's licensing fees on the growth of the film industry. It reveals how the fees and commissions imposed on movie theatres create financial pressure and limit their expansion. Furthermore, this article analyzes labor regulations in the film industry, highlighting their failure to protect workers' rights by requiring the provision of medical insurance, providing limitations on working hours.

The article contributes to the literature in several aspects. First, it provides an in-depth understanding of the challenges GCAM faces in balancing artistic expression and Saudi cultural tradition. Second, the analysis of the economic and labor regulations in the film industry highlights the challenges that filmmakers and cinema operators face. Third, the research has implications for policymakers and industry stakeholders in Saudi Arabia and beyond, providing insights into the ways in which the country's promotion of its film industry while respecting cultural traditions and protecting workers' rights.

Overall, this article provides valuable insights into the regulation and censorship practices of the film industry in Saudi Arabia. It highlights the challenges and opportunities for promoting the industry and reveals the effects of regulatory policies on economic growth, labor rights, and artistic expression. This article, thus, provides a crucial understanding of the film industry's dynamics in Saudi Arabia and provides valuable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers on film studies or creative industry in general.

## **2. Theoretical and conceptual framework**

### **2.1. Theoretical framework**

This article is based on case study research. The theoretical foundation of this case study is Habermas' work regarding the notion of public sphere. Jürgen Habermas focuses his theories on the structural transformation of public sphere and explores how the public can use it in developing opinions (O'Mahony, 2021). Habermas conceptualizes public sphere as the coming together of private individuals to become a public and regulate public authorities.

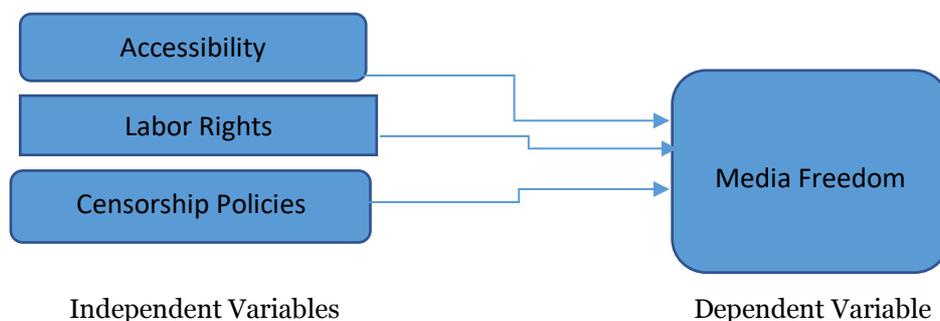
Most importantly, such private citizens debate the general rules that regulate public authorities. Scholars perceive the public sphere as a space for reasoned debate on state and politics. The classical form entails bourgeoisie public sphere, where private citizens determine what is to be used for public consumption. Since the public sphere emphasizes discursive relations, it differs from the state economy, which focuses on market relations. In the bourgeoisie sphere, the emphasis is on monitoring the legitimate power of authorities.

Habermas defines the public sphere as the realm of social life that creates a platform for the formation of public opinion by all citizens. The public sphere allows individuals to share opinions and develop perceptions without government interference. Additionally, it allows citizens to influence and criticize decisions without being influenced by the market-based economy or government. He believes that the formation of a public sphere should be based on critical and impartial debates that influence the rules from the state's leadership. The formation of public opinion is the free will of the people and not affected by intimidation from government agencies. There are three conditions for the existence of a public sphere. First, it disregards status and ranks, allowing people from different social classes to have an equal platform. Next, it involves a common concern. The issue for discussion should affect almost everyone in the community. Finally, the inclusivity of all citizens without discrimination is critical.

Therefore, in the particular focus of this study, all citizens should have access to film, have the freedom to form their own opinion, and enjoy unrestricted expression. The research examines whether GCAM follows Habermas' public sphere concept in its policies. The theory of communicative action, as Habermas has developed, emphasizes the need for consensus, cooperation, and reasoned arguments in influencing public decisions (O'Mahony, 2021). Leaders must use consensus to arrive at a decision, rather than relying on their own interests. Public dialogue, public participation, and consensus form the basis of policy development. Although many Islamic countries show minimal compliance with the Habermas model, Saudi Arabia has made some minimal progress. The main goal for Saudi Arabia is to make its film industry more attractive to foreign markets and ensure the labor force opportunities in the industry. Despite such efforts, no notable policies have been significantly issued to improve media freedom and allow journalists and film producers to entirely practice Habermas' public sphere model.

## 2.2. Conceptual framework

The key conceptual variables that guide this study include media accessibility, employee rights, and the prevalence of censorship policies.



**Figure 1. Conceptual model**

The independent variables in the conceptual framework include accessibility, consisting of distribution and costs, the labor rights of employees in the media sector, and censorship. These aspects affect media freedom, which is the dependent variable in this study. According to Habermas' concept of public sphere, the success of the media industry depends on the extent to which the government and social environment control media houses (O'Mahony, 2021).

Regarding the distribution and accessibility of audiovisual content, GCAM controls the distribution of audiovisual content through fees and licenses. Licensing policies and business costs influence the ways in which local and international film companies access and operate in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Saudi Arabia's strict policies on foreign firms and its cultural expectations affect the ways multinational film companies operate in Saudi Arabia. The two main aspects of licensing that determine film industry operations are the firm establishment and film distribution licenses. A firm establishment license determines the cost of creating a film in Saudi Arabia, and the distribution license determines who can sell, hire, and distribute films. In Saudi Arabia, film distributors include those who own film libraries, hawkers, and online distributors. The government also licenses exhibitors and when an exhibitor displays films to the public, it is usually for a fee. The government considers the certification and registration of exhibitors as a critical matter. Film distributors also include play stations, cinemas, digital billboards, and video shows. Besides licensing, the contents of a film also influence its accessibility to the public. Most countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, have policies in regulating film content. Therefore, policies on media content, licensing costs, and accessibility affect film industry developments.

Labor rights also affect the industry developments. In most countries, workers are protected through laws. It is in the intention to protect workers and ensure they receive fair pay and work in a safe environment. Such laws typically regulate contracts, the payment of interns, working hours, avoiding child labor and the employment of minors, and profit participation. A profit participation agreement is an employee's engagement in additional activities not stipulated in their contract. Even though parents can consent, the government should stipulate measures limiting workplace discrimination based on age. Such laws include pay for minors and prohibitions on minors acting in obscene scenes. Laws regarding employee contracts are also vital. Employees must know their payment rates before engaging in any agreement. Labor laws typically limit the hours employees can work, allowing for work-life balance while maintaining productivity.

The third variable is censorship, which is the level of control that the government oblige upon the film industry. Although censorship might appear to restrict freedom of speech, it is believed by the Saudi authority that this is a critical tool in limiting media freedom to protect consumers. In many cases, discussions of media freedom have focused on censorship, stating that too many restrictions on media can limit the public's freedom to criticize the government. The media acts as a public mouthpiece and agenda setter. This variable includes any laws that the government has put in place through GCAM to limit the content of films and considers the involvement of stakeholders during the creation of censorship laws and the freedom of the media to criticize such policies. Religious and social organizations are fundamental pillars of censorship because they determine social morality. Certain behaviors might be legal but immoral; therefore, the involvement of social groups in establishing morals compels film companies to operate within certain limits. Religion in Saudi Arabia is critical in determining political and economic decisions. This case study assesses the extent of religious involvement in censoring media content. Finally, self-

censorship reveals the extent of GCAM's involvement in media regulation. These three variables reveal the level of media freedom under the leadership of GCAM.

### **3. Results and discussions**

#### **3.1. Film regulations before GCAM**

The history of GCAM begins in 1954, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia brought the film industry to emerge in the country. Since 1954, the Ministry of Culture and Information has been responsible for all print, radio, and visual media activities. The Ministry issues regulations covering printing and publishing, press institutions, broadcasting radio, copyright protection, television, and, more recently, audiovisual media organizations.

In the next four decades, then, the Saudi Arabia Producers and Distributors Association (SAPDA) was established by the Minister of Culture and Information on May 30, 1994, to support artistic, radio, television, cinematic, and theatrical production activities and serve importers, distributors, and producers (SAPDA, 2020). The association performs the services that producers had been receiving directly from the Ministry of Culture and Information, such as filming permits, professional licenses, and supporting the participation of young people and new graduates in television production. Membership fees support the organization. Membership fee was \$27 for individuals, \$133 for distribution companies, and \$266 for production companies (General Union of Arabs Producers, 2020).

Despite little income and a lack of power over government organizations, the association adds value to the industry, including obtaining visas for foreign film crews from relevant authorities (SAPDA, 2020). By the beginning of the 2000s, the ministries began to support visas for media companies to employ non-resident workers thanks to SAPDA, which affirmed the international nature of media industries and the need to recruit outside workers to maximize creativity and fill the skilled-worker gaps in Saudi Arabia's workforce.

Unfortunately, the association has been marginalized, and the Ministry of Culture and Information has taken over this role. Three possible reasons account for the association's failures. First, it was established based on the aspirations of Saudi producers and not on the authorities' desire to provide a new impetus for the industry. Saudi producers demanded an association because many were members of the General Union of Arab Producers, and they wanted an independent Saudi association or union (General Union of Arab Producers, 2020). Second, despite the association deriving its legislation and regulations from the Minister of Culture and Information, it is the first civil society organization to operate under the umbrella of the Ministry (General Union of Arab Producers, 2020). Civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia do not function like those in the West. Third, the government failed to financially support the organization. As a result, in March 2012, Cabinet Resolution No. 236 established the GCAM. This made GCAM the only authority in the media and film industry. GCAM assumed full responsibility in 2015. Notably, from 2012 to 2018, the audiovisual media regulations were amended substantially, and the latest version was issued in November 2018 (GCAM, 2022). As an extension of the state, GCAM worked on the censorship policy to protect the reputations of supreme state leaders, the royal family, tribal elders, religion, and society.

This brief history shows an outline of the regulatory roles of three agencies: the Ministry of Culture and Information, SAPDA, and GCAM. The policy models of the first two organizations did not provide new impetus for the Saudi film industry, either economically

or ideologically. However, the third organization has, and from the 2018 draft of the audiovisual executive regulation, it is clear that GCAM aspires to mobilize the film industry economically and ideologically to fall in line with the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy. GCAM and the Ministry of Culture continue to operate in tandem.

### 3.2. An evaluation of film regulations

Film regulations focus on the details of distribution and exhibition, the acquisition system, and the preservation of competition between companies. This section discusses how economic factors related to cinema operations in Saudi Arabia, specifically the GCAM license fee, potentially slows industry growth by placing a significant financial burden on movie theatres. Furthermore, this section analyses the weaknesses in labor regulations regarding the rights of film crews and actors. Ultimately, this section shows how the shortcomings in current GCAM policies and priorities limit the development of the Saudi film industry.

When GCAM redrafted its regulation to include cinema, it had to consider the Quality of Life Program 2020 initiatives related to cinema. This program aims to use cinema to promote the local film sector (Quality of Life Program, 2020: 134). Thus, GCAM had to revise its regulation to present a new image of openness in Saudi Arabia and to meet international standards to attract global entertainment companies.

### 3.3. Distribution and exhibition

According to the 2018 regulations, individuals and companies can distribute films in Saudi Arabia as long as they obtain an official distribution license from GCAM. The fee for licensing films for exhibition is \$530, and the fee for a distribution license is \$8,000 (GCAM, 2022). When GCAM drafted its new regulation, it clearly focused on two things. First, this policy only allows experienced, quality operators who can expand their operations, even to small villages. Second, charging a lot of fees because most of the films shown are foreign films, and most of the operators are foreign companies. The fee for a permanent cinema operating activity license is \$56,000, while the cost of a temporary cinema license is \$28,000 (GCAM, 2022). The yearly fee for a permanent license to operate cinemas is \$5,600 for each screen, and for a temporary cinema, the fee is \$260 for each screen each day. In addition, movie theatres must pay a 25% commission for each ticket sold and 15% VAT (GCAM, 2022). Such fees, commissions, and VAT put pressure on theatres and also limit their expansion. In addition, the comparatively high-ticket prices in Saudi Arabia motivate audiences to look for other ways to watch films. In the Gulf States and the majority of Arab states, movie tickets range from \$7.89 to \$10.64, but Saudi ticket prices range from \$15.96 to \$19.96 for a standard ticket (General Union of Arab Producers, 2020). Such high costs limit viewing and audiences.

Lifting the cinema ban compelled stakeholders to develop technical standards, including for building theatres. Distribution and exhibition licenses require evidence that the applicant has the necessary expertise along with an operating and expansion plan. Tarek Alharby (interview, 2019), a Saudi actor, claims that before these regulations, movie theatres were not technically for films, and screenings were held in performing arts theatres. He points out that for *Menahi* (2008), screenings occurred in all Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. However, the screening in Saudi Arabia was in Abha city in a theatre that did not meet the technical requirements for a cinema. However, *Menahi* (2009) was screened when there was no policy for the exhibition sector. The updated GCAM executive regulation has

many requirements to make theatres' features similar to those in countries with established exhibition sectors.

GCAM has not announced what the fees imposed on distributors and exhibitors will be used for, which means that they go to the government treasury at the end of each year. However, some countries use such taxes and fees, especially from foreign films, to support their citizens and young people who work in the industry. Local filmmakers and new graduates who want to enter the industry need governmental support, and the government's support helps to stimulate the industry and private investment. So, governments use taxes "as the primary tool for financing industrial development," with the aim of increasing "private investment into the film business" (Phillips, 2004: 131). GCAM has not announced how the income from taxes and commission fees will be used but levies these fees equally on local and foreign films. Malik Nejer, a Saudi director, in an interview with the Finjan podcast, claims that these fees are huge and that he attempted to open a discussion with GCAM about canceling some of them for local films, but his request was rejected.

While many Saudi filmmakers expressed their happiness in the media when the Ministry of Culture announced its fund to support local films, Nejer was against the idea (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). This view was logical for someone who faced challenges until his film was screened in Eight Gulf and Arab countries. Although GCAM has not announced that the income from taxes and commissions go to the film support fund budget in the Ministry of Culture, many Saudi filmmakers believe that it does.

### 3.4. Labor rights

Article 18 of the executive regulations for audiovisual media is devoted to protecting worker rights from two aspects. The first relates to protections in the event of the cancellation, suspension, or non-renewal of any license; GCAM requires the company to pay workers' dues and financial benefits throughout the suspension period. The second is that GCAM reserves the right to impose restrictions and take appropriate measures to ensure that the interests and rights of employees are not compromised. These two rules treat film industry employees as if they are all administrative and not technicians such as cast and crew. Despite many complaints and criticisms by workers in the film and television industry about losing some of their financial rights, GCAM has not provided any solution to protect the interests of workers. One of the latest examples is *Najd* (2020), a Saudi film screened in movie theatres in July 2020. The lead actor Majed Mutrib retweeted a tweet by a journalist, saying that some of the actors in the film did not receive their salary from the film, including the lead actor, Majed Mutrib (Hasan, 2020). The next day, U FM Radio tweeted a video of Mutrib stating that he'll never work with the producer of *Najd* (U FM Radio, 2020). This problem has existed for a few decades without action by GCAM.

Although Article 18 of the executive regulations for audiovisual media focuses on protecting workers' rights, there is no regulation regarding the number of working hours for film crew and cast. Production companies do not follow these rules, even though the rules were made by high-level government officials. Therefore, the majority of Saudi feature films are shot in less than 30 days. A famous example is *Baraka meets Baraka* (2016), it is a 90-minute feature film that was produced in only 25 days. The leading actor, Hisham Fageeh, spoke to the media about the pressure on actors during the production process. In an interview with the Al Arabiya news channel, Fageeh said that in exterior scenes, they shot a maximum of two to three takes and lots of scenes to stay on schedule (Al Arabiya, 2016).

Long working hours for film workers is an international issue. US cinematographer Haskell Wexler directed a documentary, *Who Needs Sleep?* (2006), showing about the excess of long working hours. Film workers are at high risk because of the lack of sleep involved in long hours of filming. It affects productivity, and this issue is more acute for Muslims whose Ramadan fasting makes it much harder to maintain stamina. Moreover, most Arab TV shows are screened during Ramadan, and films are screened during Eid al-Fitr after Ramadan. While the government forces private companies to reduce working hours during Ramadan, GCAM does not force production companies to reduce working hours and has not even responded to complaints by television actors.

Although the crew and cast work more than 12 hours a day, sometimes in difficult conditions, GCAM does not require producers to provide medical insurance for workers. Also, GCAM does not require producers to pay a minimum wage for basic working hours or overtime. These are also some issues for child actors, but many parents do not allow their children to participate in films. This refusal may be a result of the lack of clarity about their rights and duties. As a result, audiences do not see many children in Saudi series or films. These issues are common across film industries, but more established industries have provisions in place due to union demands and other forms of activism.

### **3.5. Censorship practices and types**

This section investigates the way in which censorship works in Saudi Arabia and the types of censorship that films might be subjected to. Censorship includes government censorship, societal and religious censorship, and filmmaker's self-censorship. Government censorship can be found in the six chapters of the executive regulations. In the first article of these regulations, Article Four focuses on censorship. It has 26 specific points for censorship controls on audiovisual content, including films. This section discusses the impact of censorship as a governmentally, socially, and religiously sponsored practice for Saudi films. It reveals the significance of censorship as an Islamic policy that protects fundamental religious values and demonstrates how censorship can slow the development of society regarding freedom of individual expression, as far as this is permissible in Islamic society. Thus, this section provides an overview of the various perspectives on film censorship, their impact on the industry's development, and their social effects.

In many countries, extensive academic studies and discussions have taken place regarding censorship, particularly since the 1980s (Flew, 1998; Jansen, 1988; Post et al., 1998; Wood, 1997). In the Gulf States, the situation on censorship practice is different. The academic debate on media censorship in the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, has been limited because it is a sensitive and unpopular topic unless the discussion is pro-censorship or defends the censorship system. Internationally, censorship is a sensitive topic because it is viewed as the suppression of people's freedom. Nicole Moore claims that "censorship is generally understood to be the official suppression or prohibition of forms of expression" (Moore, 2013). Critics in Saudi Arabia cannot explicitly describe censorship as the suppression of people's freedom, but are trying to persuade the government to soften its censorship. Usually, censorship is carried out by government agencies, such as GCAM with or without pressure from religious organizations or organizations concerned about children and family rights. Film censorship, in general, is defined as "the systematic control of content by a government through various means" (Peleg & Wozniuk, 2019: 4). The important aspects of this definition are that the government is in charge of censorship and that

censorship involves oversight of content. In Saudi Arabia, religious groups and society have had more influence than government agencies due to the Islamic Awakening. However, with Saudi Vision 2030, which was established in 2016, the role of religious groups has been diminished, especially regarding media censorship. The diminishing influence of Islamic Awakening leaders and restrictions on their power do not mean that Saudi Arabia has stopped its film censorship, rather it is now government-only control.

In Saudi Arabia, censorship is strict, and it includes all forms of media. Before GCAM implements a regulation, it must be approved by the Bureau of Experts and the Council of Ministers. According to Terry Flew, the term censorship “is something of an omnibus for a diverse range of legal and regulatory practices, applied to quite distinct materials in very different contexts” (Flew, 1998: 91). In the Saudi context, despite comprehensive censorship regulations for media activities, regulations have not been fully implemented, and fewer than half of them are applied. Thus, “common customs” are formed so that everyone knows—implicitly, if not explicitly—what the limits are for what they are allowed to criticize.

Being subjected to the mood and understanding of officials is risky. The country is a bit more open to arts and women’s engagement in media than before. However, one particular occurrence could change the ‘mood’ and censorship practice for no reason. The most recent example was in February 2020, a film crew produced a music video for a Saudi female rapper who described Saudi females as powerful and beautiful, and the rapper was covering her hair (wearing a hijab). The song lyrics did not have any obscenity or insult, and the video did not have any pornographic scenes, nudity, or depiction of smoking. Two days later, this female rapper and the entire crew were arrested and charged with insulting the customs of the people of Mecca (BBC News, 2020). Thus, the most accurate description of censorship in Saudi Arabia is that it is strict, complex, and has many aspects, but its application is selective in terms of time, place, and topics. In other words, the Saudi censorship policy is obscure, within the contexts that the majority of Middle Eastern countries have similar practices when it comes to media censorship.

### **3.6. Government censorship**

Tribal and religious factors have significant consideration explaining censorship in the executive regulations for audiovisual media. For example, in the 26 points of censorship, many rules emphasize tribes and society, such as point eight, that any media content must avoid subjects related to folklore and tribes. Enhancing national cohesion and preserving the social fabric is clearly stated in point five. Preserving values and virtues, promoting social values, and maintaining the family as the cornerstone of society are obviously mentioned in point six. These three points are considered a red line, and therefore no filmmakers can mock or even simply show a critical view on the social values, tribes, or families. Before the implementation of these regulations and during the Saudi cinema ban, many film and television producers used comedy to criticize aspects of the behavior of tribes. At the time, using comedy was an effective way to deliver messages to society and avoid punishment.

The government uses censorship to regulate social morality. The study conducted by (Kraidy, 2006) shows that the government used different measures to control the media. For instance, the government bought major media houses and enacted strict laws. Having control of major TV stations allowed the government to control what media content that the public might consume. However, the emergence of mobile phone and the internet presented a challenge to the government because people have potentially alternative sources of

information nowadays. GCAM faces the challenge of managing media censorship in light of such technological developments.

GCAM censorship policies are not unpredictable; they have released a regulation in this matter as well. Despite the previously discussed on the negative experiences with GCAM censorship, Malik Nejer, the director of *Masameer: The Movie* (2020), had a different experience with GCAM, which he discussed in an interview with the Finjan podcast. *Masameer: The Movie* (2020) is a Saudi animation film for children that was screened in movie theatres across all of the Gulf countries (except Qatar, due to the political conflict), Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq in January 2020. The film is based on one of the most successful YouTube cartoons shows in the Middle East. The director of this film, Malik Nejer, stated that before *Masameer* was produced, he was afraid GCAM would force him to delete some scenes from the film. Nejer said that he feared double standards as he had expected GCAM to allow American films more freedom regarding profanity (Thmanyah Radio, 2020). Nejer was surprised that GCAM allowed them to screen the film without any restrictions or comments on the screenplay. He considered this experience with *Masameer* as indirect support from GCAM.

### 3.7. Social and religious censorships

The second major factor in censorship is the response of social commentators and religious authorities. If the state is lenient in allowing any media activities, including films and television series, to contradict Islamic teachings or social traditions in Saudi Arabia, social commentators and religious scholars put pressures to the government to prevent such films or TV series production and circulation. Societal and religious pressure to control film content is common in many countries around the world. In countries such as the United States and Australia, “church groups and women’s organizations” demanded controls on film content to protect “children and social morals” (Walker, 2011). Such organizations include the Catholic League of Decency in the United States (Jowett, 1991) and the Protestant Council for Civic and Moral Advancement in Australia (Bertrand, 1978).

In Saudi Arabia, the government has already implemented censorship. Yet, some groups, especially religious ones, demand additional restrictions on film content. Although anti-censorship groups in Saudi Arabia are not prominent, many international academics support anti-censorship perspectives. Richard Collins, who wrote the foreword for Frank Caso’s *Censorship*, claims that “everyone’s duty” is to oppose censorship and that opposing censorship is necessary to “obtain truthful information” to allow freedom of expression (Caso, 2008). Through a careful examination of the executive regulations, it is clear that there is no indication of support for freedom of expression, even implicitly. Among the most famous columnists who fought against extremists and supported cinema and free expression are Khaled Al-Suleiman and Raja Al-Mutairi.

### 3.8. Self-censorship

Self-censorship among Saudi filmmakers is common for various reasons. According to Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann, self-censorship “means that individuals internalize some aspects of the public censor and then censor themselves,” and in some cases, it arises when “a public censor is either absent or irrelevant” (Cook & Heilmann, 2013: 178). Many filmmakers believe their patriotism includes a duty for not criticizing the government,

religion, or the royal family. Therefore, many filmmakers avoid any topic that might conflict with the Saudi regime or security. This means films and television series must avoid criticism or irony regarding the roles of traffic officers, firefighters, emergency forces, and the security and intelligence services.

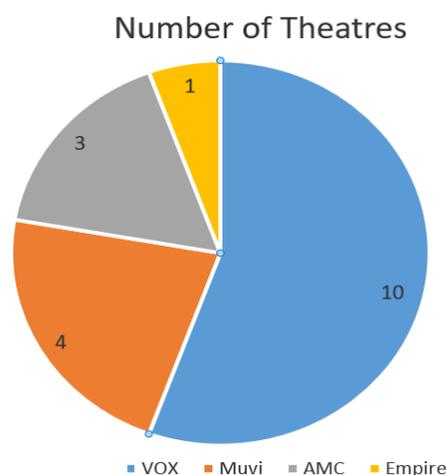
Although some filmmakers engage in self-censorship out of patriotism, others use self-censorship to avoid criticizing religious scholars, their practices, or the general public, even if the criticism is aimed at fixing a defect in society. Klausen (2009: 6) points out that those who engage in self-censorship do so “out of respect for other people’s religious beliefs or from a desire not to hurt people’s feelings.” Without a doubt, the majority of people in Saudi Arabia consider any discussion of religious practices or religion itself unacceptable, and it hurts their feelings. Consequently, some filmmakers avoid any topic that might conflict with or criticize Islamic teachings, even though the government has become more lenient on films and television operas in criticizing religious practices and religious extremism. Any discussion concerning religion is still difficult and sensitive things, as criticizing the practice of Islam is considered a debate of Islam’s values.

### **3.9. The Quality of Life Program 2020 and the new opening of movie theatres**

The aim of the Quality of Life Program 2020 is to improve the lifestyles of Saudi Arabian people by developing an ecosystem to support their participation in art, cultural, environmental, and sports activities. GCAM was responsible for implementing some of the program’s initiatives, which were supposed to be completed by 2020. GCAM achieved most but not all of the initiatives. GCAM’s primary goal was to unlock the exhibition sector, which happened in September 2017, and the first theatre opened on April 18, 2018. Opening theatres was a difficult and momentous decision. Eight months earlier, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh had stated on his weekly television program that there is no good in cinema. Al-Sheikh claims that films may “broadcast shameless, immoral, atheistic or rotten films.” He also has concerns about the risks of mixing of sexes and the rotten influence of cinema on people (Sharman, 2017). Therefore, unlocking the cinema ban after such religious statements was not easy, but it only took a few months for GCAM to make it happen.

The second major mission for GCAM was to draft the regulation for building the infrastructure required to open cinemas. GCAM worked on this matter starting when the decision was made by the Ministry of Media in September 2017 until March 2018, when the draft regulation was released, allowing businessmen and companies to apply for a movie theatre license. Taking six months to unlock the cinema and drafting the regulation for opening cinemas was considered a success, because GCAM overcame tremendous religious and cultural challenges. The draft regulation contains specific requirements and many details for the exhibition sector which were based on the latest experiences of other countries, but there was no explanation whatsoever related to the production sector. The old regulation for television productions was added to the draft regulation to regulate film production. Therefore, GCAM succeeded in implementing what was required by creating exhibition sector regulations but neglecting another important aspect, the production sector. One explanation is that the government evaluates GCAM leaders’ performance based on their achievement of the goals set by the government’s vision programs. As a result, GCAM’s highest priority was doing what they were required to do, and the focus of the Quality of Life Program 2020 does not include regulating the production and distribution sectors.

Unlocking the cinema and drafting the related regulation was not the only job for GCAM. The Quality of Life Program 2020 also sets specific targets to measure success. For example, one goal was for Saudi movie theatres to sell 3.8 million tickets from the opening of cinemas in the second quarter of 2018 until the end of 2020. At the end of 2019, the Ministry of Culture issued a report on the Saudi cultural situation, stating that from April 2018 to December 2019, movie theatres in Saudi Arabia have sold more than four million tickets (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture, 2020: 123). GCAM successfully achieved that goal, and moreover, this indicated the people’s acceptance of cinema despite the limited number of movie theatres in the country. The four million tickets were sold from only 12 movie theatres and considering the high-ticket prices. Saudi investors were not keen to invest in movie theatres despite government programs to support local investors. Investor apprehensions were due to the lack of official statistics about the extent of Saudi interest in cinema and its demand. In addition, the religious and conservative groups have long promoted the idea that Saudi society does not like cinema and that few people want it. So, the government, through the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, went to foreign companies such as AMC and VOX Cinemas. In April 2018, AMC opened its first movie theatre in Riyadh. One month later, VOX cinema opened its first theatre in Riyadh as well. In 2020, more information is available, and investors can predict the market before delivering their investments.



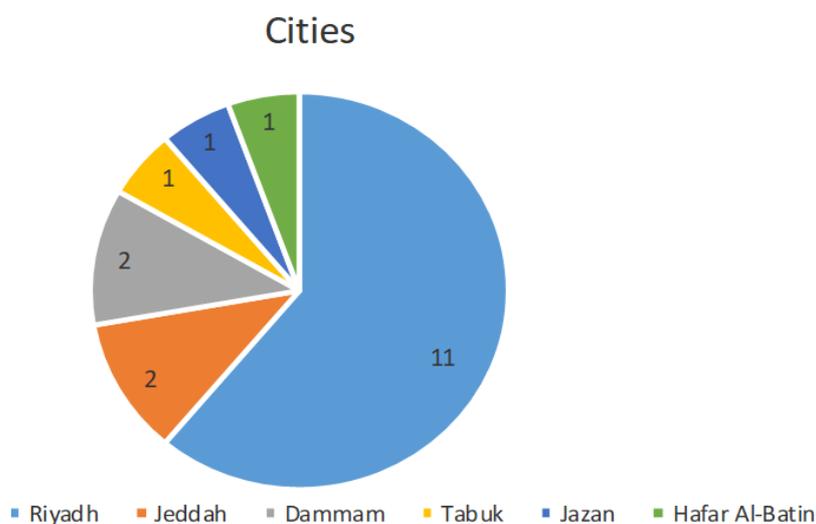
**Figure 2. Number of movie theatres in Saudi Arabia based on the investor**

Figure 2 shows the domination by foreign commercial theatres than the home-grown cinema brands, and there is only one national brand, Muvi Cinemas. Muvi Cinemas owns only four of the 18 commercial cinemas in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Culture’s report indicates that Saudi Arabia has only 3.3 screenings for every one million people (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture, 2020: 123). GCAM was supposed to open 45 movie theatres through the private sector by 2020. GCAM has licensed eight operators, but only four of them eventually opened movie theatres.

Overall, GCAM’s initiatives in the Quality of Life Program 2020 were highly successful considering the history of the film industry in Saudi Arabia. For 40 years, the country was divided over the presence of cinema. The development of the industry in the early 2000s was very slow compared to what GCAM achieved in less than three years. Thus, GCAM is in line with Saudi Vision 2030, and for the exhibition sector, it has made a huge

difference by facilitating the opening of movie theatres. The GCAM draft regulation provided a new economic and ideological impetus to the industry: economically through regulatory policies in organizing the industry in terms of profit and ideologically by presenting cinema to society as a contemporary tool for art and creativity.

A positive aspect of the GCAM regulation is that it did not ignore smaller cities in its efforts to open movie theatres, despite government agencies have tendencies to neglect them in previous development projects regarding social openness. The GCAM regulations forced operators to include expansion plans for medium and small cities, such as Hafar Al-Batin and Tabuk, reaching a total target of 350 movie theatres by 2030. In small cities, GCAM faces a greater challenge because they have to deal with the very conservative and tribal citizens there. Figure 3 shows the geographical diversities of cinemas in Saudi Arabia in 2020.



**Figure 3. Number of movie theatres across cities in Saudi Arabia in 2020**

#### 4. Conclusion

This case study reveals and discusses the ways in which film censorship, accessibility, and labor rights affect media freedom in Saudi Arabia. GCAM is the national government agency that entail the main task to ensures media freedom by regulating these variables. This study shows that strict censorship from the government and religious organizations remain in place, while the absence of laws protecting film crews and high costs for the film industry continue to exist.

Therefore, GCAM policies have insufficiently developed the industry. High taxes, fees, and licensing rates – compared with other Gulf countries – put strong pressure on film producers. GCAM has not explained clearly on the funds received from these taxes, fees, and licensing are used. Moreover, GCAM has not addressed the labor rights of film workers and child actors; namely, it does not regulate working hours or the provision of medical insurance. This is a significant shortcoming of GCAM’s policy which leads to polarization among film professions and fewer actors willing to work in the industry.

This article also examines the censorship's impacts on the development of the emerging, contemporary Saudi film industry. In particular, censorship is based on respect for the tradition and religious values of Islamic society as well as unwavering respect to the government. As discussed, government censorship, social censorship by particular groups, and self-censorship by film directors or producers are three main regulators in the Saudi film industry, which ensure the purity and high moral value of films. Meanwhile, the evidence show that the excessive censorship limits the creative freedom of directors and actors, reducing their creative potential, and inhibiting the development of the film industry and society in general. Current trends in GCAM policies are considered in relation to the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy. Overall, the impact of GCAM on Saudi Arabia's film industry has been positive, but its policies are somewhat one-sided, which ultimately slows the development of Saudi filmmaking and puts film industry workers in an unequal position compared to the creatives in other cultural sectors, such as the arts and tourism.

### Notes on contributor

**Dr. Musab Alamri** is an Assistant Professor at the College of Media and Communication, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He holds a master's degree in Filmmaking from the New York Film Academy in Los Angeles, USA, and a Ph.D in Film and Television Studies from the University of Nottingham in the UK. Alamri's research interests focus on Saudi cinema and industry structures, developments, regulations, and policies.

Email: [alamri.musab@gmail.com](mailto:alamri.musab@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3930-5867>

### References

- Al Arabiya. (2016, January 27). هشام ققيه وفاطمة البنوي في ضيافة تفاعلكم "بركة يقابل بركة" بطلا. Youtube.
- BBC News. (2020, February 22). *Saudi rapper faces arrest for Mecca Girl music video*. BBC News.
- Bertrand, I. (1978). *Film censorship in Australia*. University of Queensland Press.
- Caso, F. (2008). *Global issues: Censorship*. Infobase Publishing.
- Cook, P., & Heilmann, C. (2013). Two types of self-censorship: Public and private. *Political Studies*, 61(1), 178–196. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00957.x>
- Flew, T. (1998). From censorship to policy: Rethinking media content regulation and classification. *Media International Australia*, 88(1), 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X9808800112>
- Hasan, N. (2020, July 10). [social media post]. X.
- Jansen, S. C. (1988). *Censorship: The knot that binds power and knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- Jowett, G. (1991). The "facts" of the "censored" film: Theoretical and history approaches. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 159–166.
- Klausen, J. (2009). *The cartoons that shook the world*. Yale University Press.
- Kraidy, M. M. (2006). Hypermedia and governance in Saudi Arabia. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v0i0.1610>
- Moore, N. (2013, May 1). *Censorship is Australian humanities review*.

- O'Mahony, P. (2021). Habermas and the public sphere: Rethinking a key theoretical concept. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 24(4), 485–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020983224>
- Peleg, I., & Wozniuk, V. (2019). *Patterns of censorship around the world*. Routledge.
- Phillips, R. (2004). The global export of risk: Finance and the film business. *Competition & Change*, 8(2), 105–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1024529042000271425>
- Post, R., Post, R. C., & Roth, M. (1998). *Censorship and silencing: Practices of cultural regulation* (Vol. 4). Getty Publications.
- Radwan, R. (2022, March 12). *How reopening of cinemas in Saudi Arabia has proved a film-industry game-changer*. Arab News.
- Sharman, J. (2017, January 15). *Saudi Arabia religious chief says legalizing cinemas risks 'mixing of sexes' and 'rotten' influence*. The Independent.
- Thmanyah Radio. (2020, July 8). *مالك نجر خارج صندوق مسامير | يودكاست فنجان* Youtube.
- U FM Radio. (2020, July 11). *U FM Radio*. Twitter.
- Walker, S. (2011). Regulating film content in the United States and Australia, 1900–1940. *Media International Australia*, 140(1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1114000110>
- Wood, J. (1997, December 12). *Censorship lobby denies diversity*. The Australian.

*This page intentionally left blank*