Cinema Attendance and Cinema-Going Audience in Malaysia

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Cinema audiences' behavior interests both industry professionals and academics. Cinema-going is still indisputably popular form of entertainment in Malaysia. This study discusses cinema-going in the era of omnipresent screens. It aims to verify Malaysians' cinema going behaviors and the sustainability factors contributing to the Malaysian film industry. The various factors affecting cinema and movie-going behavior would include encouragement, theme, motivation, perception, gratification, and genre. The local filmmaking industry fell into a decline after 2014 based on observation of annual film production. In the context of westernization, this small market presents a challenge for the government in promoting local popular films. With the influx of genre films from abroad, Malaysian cinema is struggling to the hilt to survive. To understand this situation from the perspective of the audiences, this study, using data from surveys conducted in Malaysia in 2018, discusses the fandom of Malaysian cinema, their cinema-going behavior, and the association with their identities.

Keywords: Malaysian cinema, audience studies, cinema-going behavior, descriptive statistics

Malaysian cinema is itself an aggregated form that denotes a varied, multilinguistic source of films and having grown up with it. From the beginning of the 2000s, Malaysian filmmakers who protected indigenous culture were increasingly encouraged and supported in their attempts to enter the mainstream cinema. Feature directors from diverse backgrounds were more likely to showcase the diversity of the country on screen. The National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (Malay: *Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional*, abbreviated FINAS) was 'established under the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia Act 1981 to promote, nurture and facilitate the development of the country's film industry' (Saw, 2013 p. 19). FINAS, on a broader basis, provides financial assistance, production faculties and equipment, and training to local filmmakers. FINAS has carried out several measures to monitor the development of the local film industry. In recent years, this government body also facilitated the marketing and promotion of Malaysian films to overseas film buyers at international film festivals' film market sidebars. It leads the path which directs Malaysia's film industry into global recognition and respect, catalyzing poignant works that are filled to the brim with potential and promise.

The yearly reports by FINAS on box office from 2008 to 2019 reveal that local films that are made, distributed and exhibited in commercial venues are overwhelming of a certain particular genre (i.e., gangster, thriller, action) films. In his *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*, Barry Keith Grant (2007) stated that "popular cinema is organized

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almost entirely according to genre categories – science fiction, horror, thriller, pornography, romantic comedy, and so forth" (p. 1). The idea of genre informs every aspect of popular cinema from production to consumption. Nevertheless, the local filmmaking industry declined after 2014 according to the observation of annual production. Malaysian audiences demonstrate their particular preferences for local films. This study attempts to measure Malaysian cinema-goers' genre preferences and variables which determine their consumption of local feature films. Attendance and ticket-buying at cinemas are more easily measured and monitored than the choices of broadcast radio and television audiences. Filmic consumption in this study is the sum of information and local films taken in by an individual or group. It includes activities such as interacting with new media, watching television and film, and listening to the radio.

Malaysia is a multiracial and multireligious country of thirty-one million people. One of the outstanding characteristics of its multi-ethnic population today is its highly variegated ethnic mix. Many ethnic groups in Malaysia maintain separate cultural identities (Wang & Jamilah, 2018, p. 321). The ethnic groups of Malaysia consist mainly of the Malay community, the Chinese community, and the Indian community. In a multi-racial and multi-religious context, the film plays a pivotal role in facilitating intercultural dialogue in a country. Mathew P. John (2017) stated that "it introduces us to the life of 'the other' in an entertaining yet engaging fashion, creating cultural bridges that foster a sense of unity amid our diversity" (p. 6). As one among many other cultural artifacts, local cinema inevitably addresses issues of cultural identity.

Literature Review

The Malaysian cinema is considered a popular national cinema, and to a certain extent, this industry is a popular 'Malay' cinema. However, in recent years, a notable group of local Chinese and Indian filmmakers has been actively producing Malaysian films that reach out to mainstream audiences. The related publications on Malaysian cinema and popular cinema are limited, but they provide a solid background for this study.

Malaysian Popular Cinema

The Malaysian film industry is reflective of a society that is governed with a high degree of social order and ethical intervention. Since the very first local silent film, *New Friend* (directed by Kwok Chiu-man) was made and released in 1927 in Singapore and Malaya, the film has been recognized as a historical source attached to a very different evidential value rather than aesthetics. The value of the film is not to be found in its artistic or formal properties but in what it reveals about social and historical conditions of the time in which it was made. The presence of 'multiple sounds' and 'multiple orthographies' in this film"play an important role in constructing the history of Singaporean and Malaysian Sinophone films" (Hee, 2014, p. 258).

William Van der Heide (2002), in his book *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*, argued that "Malaysian film culture can only be satisfactorily understood using analytical approach quite different those that have typically been applied to national cinemas" (p. 21). His book details the characteristics and complexities of the Malaysian film industry and film culture. However, Heide's book did not engage in any detailed audience analysis, other than to refer to some primary and secondary source that comments on the complex nature of the audience when he looked at the context in terms of cultural difference.

In her, *The globalization of film business and its effect on the Malaysian film industry*, Herwina Rosnan (2007) examined the impact of globalization of film business on the Malaysian film industry. Her research provided insights into the Malaysian film sector and other organizations of a similar structure on how they could manage business strategies for improved business performance. It also looked at the impact of globalization on the Malaysian film industry.

The latest book on Malaysia cinema is written by Hassan Muthalib, who studies animation industry, history, and development, and is widely regarded as the Father of Malaysian Animation. His book *Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle* shows the general reader how Malaysian cinema has its roots in the traditions of the oral storyteller, *wayangkulit* (shadow play) and Malay opera, and how these art forms have influenced filmmaking. Hassan (2013) placed his anxiety on the local production and stated that "I hope that this book will result in a reflection on this state of affairs especially when viewership for Malay films had fallen dramatically this year" (p. vi). He examined some films in the context of the socio-cultural and political condition of their times.

The author published his research on the Malaysian top-grossing film– *The Journey* (directed by Chiu Keng Guan, 2014) in 2017. He had discovered that "the list of top-grossing films was dominated by tales of blood and guts (e.g., *KL Gangster*), the success of a film as subtle and personal as *The Journey* may signal a growing maturity among cinema-goers" (Wang & Chen, 2017, p. 3077). Cinema-going has not yet been labeled as an outdated mode of viewing films in Malaysia. Many of Malaysian films "illustrated urban archaeology that uncovers repressed historical and alternative futures" (Wang, 2018, p. 34). Reflecting the complex makeup of Malaysian society, the film brought together the indigenous popular culture forms, and the local production complex created a massive demand for product, "making space for both high- and low-budget films and favoring the development of popular genres through which films based on recognizable conventions could be produced quickly and cheaply" (Marlow-Mann, 2012, p. 14). Filmmakers of different ethnic backgrounds frequently worked together for re-shaping national cinema in Malaysia (Wang, 2018, p. 79).

These publications typically cover the history of Malaysian cinema and film production from different perspectives. Aziz et al. (2014) pointed out that the Malaysian film industry is relatively small… and this small local market presents a challenge for the government in promoting the industry as part of the creative industry with great economic potential (p. 36). All of the challenges should be measured. However, these publications neglected audiences as a significant factor to measure the trajectory of the local film industry.

Malaysian Cinema-Goers' Consuming Behaviors

It is acknowledged that the approaches to audiences and cinema-going experiences offer an alternative mode of studying key issues in film history. A key issue in the "critical reconsideration of cinematic modernity and its relation to tradition, community and everyday life, is the role of the audience" (Meer and Biltereyst, 2012, p. 129). Some studies on cinema-going experience among Malaysian audiences had suggested measurable variables to verify their consuming behaviors.

Abdullah et al. (2014), in their *Behavioral and Viewing Patterns of Cinema-goers in Malaysia*, attempted to provide some strategic guide for a filmmaker to lure cinema fans back to viewing films in cinemas. Though there are various factors affecting cinema and cinema-goers, their study identified significant determining factors on these patterns which are mathematically

modeled using the multiple regression (MR) technique, focusing on the development of model-building, multicollinearity remedies, and removals of insignificant factors.

Tony Wilson's *Media Consumption in Malaysia: A Hermeneutics of Human Behaviour* presents its major philosophical proponents, showing how close attention to their writing can now inform and shape research on ubiquitous screen users. Though this book examines media consumption in a general term, it mainly explores the horizons of understanding from which Malaysians enter their mediated malls and concludes by positioning media practices theory within a spectrum of philosophical ideas (Wilson, 2015, p. 66). However, film consumption is not discussed in this book.

Identities of the Malaysian Cinema Audience

'*Audience*' is such a significant component of film history. Most Malaysian filmmakers are primarily concerned with appealing to the local audience, spanning different ethnic groups, and the diversity of peoples within each state. The film demonstrates the difficulty of divorcing the spirit of creative resistance from a distinct racial identity and from practices considered counterproductive to the goals of the revolution.

There are some studies which look at the association between the content industry and the cultural identity of the audience in Malaysia. Rahim et al. (2010) found that the expeditious growth of the local content media industry is a catalyst to the escalation of the local content industry (p. 215). They argued that in the globalization process, the growing sentiment of concern is that the unrestricted flow of media content may unconsciously influence the younger generation into incorporating foreign culture into the current environment. Their study mainly focused on both local and foreign television content and their attribution to impact on the young generation in Malaysia.

Asiah Sarji's *Malaysian National Cinema: An identity Crisis* pointed out that issues of national cinema had sparked much debates and discourses in the context of Malaysian cinema. She brought forward the definition and conception of what constitutes a 'Malaysian film' remain vague and unclear (2006, p. 143). Her study considered policy, language, the speech of a film, story, and authorship as dimensions of challenges which local cinema encounters. Historically, concepts of national cinema and national identity have never strongly existed as issues in the Malaysian film world. Therefore the concepts need to be scientifically tested and redefined.

Objectives

This study aims to position the future of Malaysian popular cinema by examining Malaysians' cinema going behaviors and the sustainability factors contributing to the Malaysian film industry. The various factors affecting cinema and movie-going behavior would include encouragement, theme, motivation, perception, gratification, and genre. In the context of westernization, this small local market presents a challenge for the government in promoting local popular films. With the influx of genre films from abroad, local cinema is struggling to survive.

Methodology

To accomplish the objective of the study, a survey is employed. It is an essential methodological component of audience analysis, based on the collection of data on current audience members using a standardized framework and question set. The survey of local

film consumption gives information about these audiences: "the NRS (National Readership Survey) and the TGI (Target Group Index)" (Nicholas & Price, 1998, p. 62). The investigations include the kind of people who visits the cinema, how often, and other characteristics of the audience. Within this framework, this study will discuss the fandom of Malaysian cinema, their cinema-going behavior, and association with their identities. Sample size determination is the act of choosing the number of observations or replicates to include in a statistical sample. However, this paper just provides some preliminary findings based on a pilot test with 275 respondents for the survey.

Findings

According to AsiahSarji (2006), "the types of audiences who go to the movies have changed, and they are now more educated, and most of a younger age group" (p. 144). In the mid-2000s, the Malaysian film industry saw an increase in the number of domestic film production, from only seven films in 1999 to 26 films in 2009. The number of local productions after 2010 kept increasing till 2015. 2016 saw a dramatic drop in the total number of local films. Film fandom is the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture.

Fandom and their Identities

Film fandom is the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture. Fandom has intrigued a generation of scholars who are interested in the expression of social and personal identity in the context of media culture (Duffett, 2013, p. 2). This paper attempts to measure respondents' frequencies of film viewing on the following bases: daily, weekly, fortnightly, once a month, once every three months, once half a year, rarely, never, and *it* depends. Just under half of the respondents (49%) are within the age range of 18 to 23 years old. And 18.2% are within the age range of 24 to 29 years old. A quarter of these respondents watch movies every day or every week. The respondents who are under 18 also displayed a high frequency of watching movies though they consist of a smaller proportion of all respondents (see Figure 1). According to Webster (2018), the hallmark of the *use and graticulations* (U&G) approach is an active audience member whose media use is 'goal-directed' (p. 94). These age groups mentioned above demonstrated a high frequency of movie watching.

Based on the survey result (see Figure 2), gender identity cannot be viewed alone to determine the frequency. The chart below illustrates the frequency of watching movies among male and female respondents, respectively. Male respondents show a slightly higher frequency every week. But female respondents show a higher frequency daily.

The demographics of Malaysia are represented by multiple ethnic groups, with an estimated population of about 32 million. As a multiethnic country, Malaysia has citizens that are of various races, culture, and background. These include Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other indigenous Bumiputra groups. This multicultural context makes Malaysia a highly diverse society. Malay respondents demonstrate a higher frequency of watching movies than other ethnic groups. More than 35% of them watch a movie on a daily and weekly basis (see Figure 3). It also reflects the number of local Malay film production that is higher than the others.

The majority of respondents are working adults with completed college and university education qualification, and college/university students as well. A quarter of these two groups watch movies on a daily and weekly basis. More respondents from the

group which has obtained college and university qualification watch movies once a month (see Figure 4). This paper also indicated dramatic frequency difference of watching films among cinema-goers with different categories of monthly income. The behavior of watching films daily mainly falls into three comparatively lower monthly income categories, especially within the population whose monthly income is below 1000 Malaysian Ringgit (approx. 240 USD).

Behavior Patterns of Malaysian Cinema-Goers

In Malaysia, the screening slots are very much determined by the number of audiences for each film. Building audience is not an easy task; it requires great content and a dedicated marketing effort to promote that content. The film also shapes audiences. This explains today's keen interest in, and increasingly sophisticated uses of data that can be gathered about audiences' media consumption processes, in efforts to develop more predictive models of audience behavior. Most of the social scientific theories that bear on audience behavior can be fairly described as agent-based approaches (Webster, 2018, p. 93). Under the rational choice of U&G, cinema-goers in this study are cognizant of their motivations and act accordingly.

According to Webster (2018), motivated individuals determine which media they will consume, whether they're aware of those motivations or not (p. 97). In his *Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age*, Webster (2014) brought forward the agent-based model. This framework (see Figure 5) provides a rich theoretical vocabulary to describe the motivations of individual media user. However, Webster also addressed the two weakness when it came to explaining audience behavior: (1) "they either ignore or greatly oversimplify the media environment within which users operate... (2) while these approaches all put a premium on people's preferences in explaining media choice, they invariably assume that these are 'exogenous' preferences, which people bring into media environment" (Webster, 2018, p. 97).

Figure 5 depicts the factors which affect the Malaysian audience's choice of cinema-going. It shows what motivates them to see a particular movie in a film theatre. The plot is the cinema-goers' primary concern. The other significant factors include the actors in the film and recommendations from their friends. Screen presence in the film is the product of a double performance: at one level, framing, editing, and camera movement create the performance of the medium; at a secondary level, there is the performance of the actor, whereby his/her actions create a character and so contribute to the making of narrative meaning. According to McDonald (2012), as the actor uses the voice and body to give material substance to those actions and characteristics, so acting contributes to the making of the narrative world and the creation of the story (p. 169). The story and the actors become the most significant factors which affect Malaysians' decision of watching a film in the cinema.

Although the factors may affect Malaysian cinema-going behavior, the other medium and platforms also enrich the approaches for the appreciation of the film. The popularity of cinema-going in Malaysia has experienced several peaks and troughs in recent years. According to the statistics provided by FINAS, 2015, and 2017 experienced a decline in box office gross. The Internet has become a collective place where online audiences could share content and experiences. And the Internet becomes most respondents' preferable channel. As Figure 6 indicated, 92.78% of them watch films online. However, less than half (49.82%) respondents go to the movie theatre. In future research, the phenomenon of film-viewing in isolation will be observed across some popular film platforms in Malaysia.

Most of the respondents were born during the advent of the online creative industry, and they are becoming more familiar with its mechanisms. "This word of mouth phenomenon was instrumental in creating networks such as the growing communities" (Poujol, 2019, p. 325) on social media. "Global engagement has driven changes" (Wang, 2016, p. 92) on digital and linear media platforms. The influence of converging communication networks in the adoption of Internet platform enriches marketing strategies of film and also changes the traditional way through which audience watch a film.

There are some arguments about online-video platforms. Poujol (2019) believes online-video streaming "allows a greater level of control in terms of accounting how many times the content was watched" (p. 279). He also noticed the growing acceptance of mobile phone as a film-viewing screen. However, it is undoubtedly 'a box office success means that a movie has generated more revenue than the film production had cost' (Roesch, 2009, p. 88). Film theatres in Malaysia are still expanding; the number of silver screen is increasing from year to year. With that, the price for each film and film quality mainly affect Malaysians' choice to see a film in the cinema (see Figure 7). In Malaysia, different cinemas have their strategies to attract more audiences. For example, Golden Screen Cinemas (GSC) introduces 'awesome deals and promotions on movie tickets, food, and beverage' regularly. Low ticket prices during the day are mainly dedicated to student audiences. TGV Cinema also has its general promotion (i.e., birthday treats, weekend deal). These companies in Malaysia understand that ticket pricing determines audiences' consumption in cinemas.

In a multiracial country, genre dynamics can inform discourses which address to different ethnic groups. In Malaysia, language is indicated clearly for each local film – Chinese film, Tamil film, and Malay film. However, 'some genres offer for reimagining multiracial contexts and identities' (Knee, 2008, p. 178) in the popular cinema. The survey discovered the popular genres include comedy, family, and action (see *Figure 8*) when Malaysia's most beloved and versatile entertainer – P. Ramlee – popularized comedy genre in Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s, comedy became favored by audiences from multiethnic groups. "Comedy trivializes the pain of the human battle - that comedy's pain and dangers are not of a greatly serious nature because they focus on personal embarrassments and temporary loss of face" (Selbo, 2015, p. 78). The number of comedy production in recent years is in alignment with audiences' preference.

In his *Language and Cinema*, French film theorist Metz (1974) stated that "language open to the thousand perception aspects of the world, but also language forged in the very act of the invention of a singular art" (p. 287). Malaysians grow up in a richly diverse multi-ethnic nation, the whole notion of developing varying linguistic and cultural identities to suit different contexts is a competency that many of them speak different languages and dialects. Most Malaysians "are fluent in the national language (*Bahasa Malaysia* or Malay), can function in English, and speak one other language as well (their 'mother tongue')" (Philip, 2014, p. 126). The respondents show the greatest preference for English-language films. Upon reviewing several Malaysian films, it was found that only one Malaysian-produced English-language film was released in recent years, which was *The Spiral* (directed by Peter Wong, 2018). The survey shows that most Malaysian audiences prefer to watch imported English-language films instead of local ones.

Conclusion

Audiences' attitudes will start to enter the picture when taking about or researching audience. The survey identifies Malaysian audiences' broad preferences for films. The various variables used include viewing frequency, encouragement, motivation, perception,

gratification, and genre. While Malaysian do share *Bahasa Malaysia* as a common means of communication, the linguistic terrains are deeply fragmented in terms of film appreciation. It was discovered that more gratified cinema-goers were found to be from the lower income group compared to those from the middle and upper-income group. With the influx of genre films from abroad, local cinema is utterly struggling to survive. Malaysian audiences demonstrate great interest in film consumption. However, they are more keen on foreign English-language films instead of local films.

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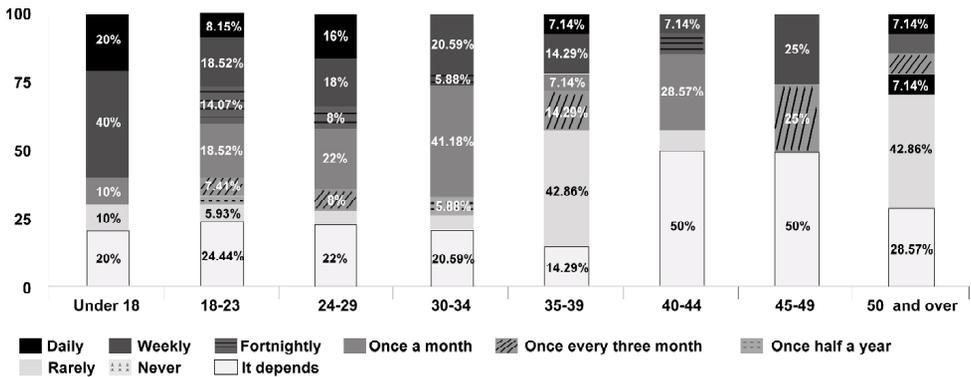
Appendix

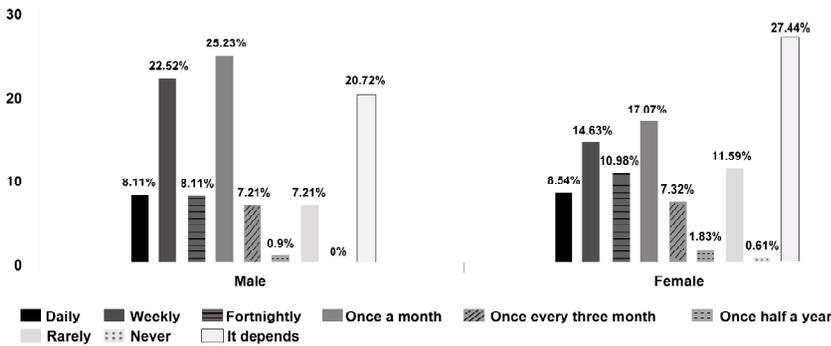Figure 1. The correlation between ages and frequency of watching movies

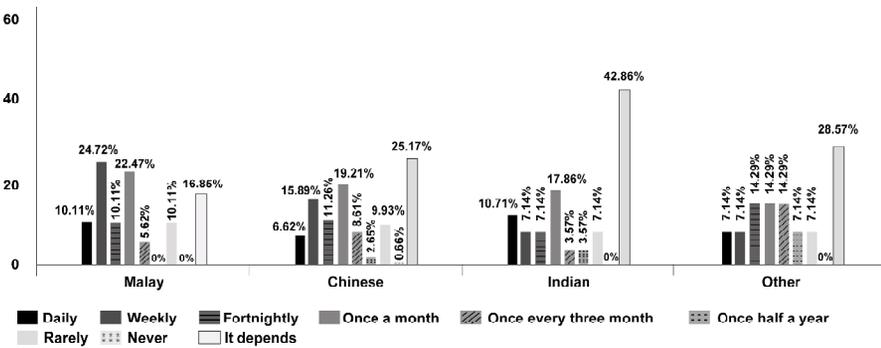Figure 2. The Correlation between gender identities and the frequency of watching movies

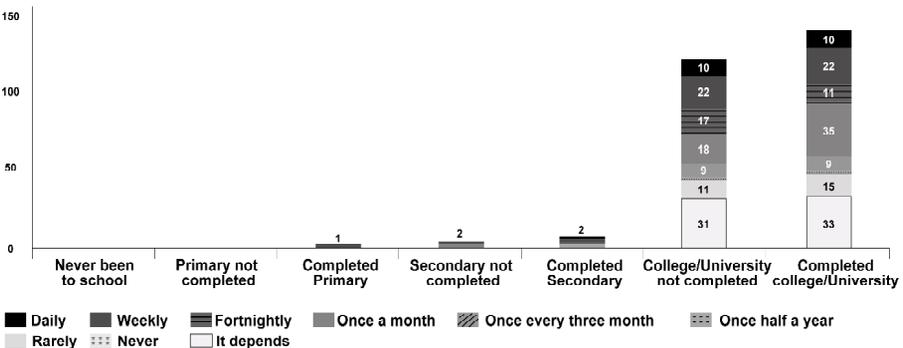Figure 3. The Correlation between ethnic identities and the frequency of watching movies

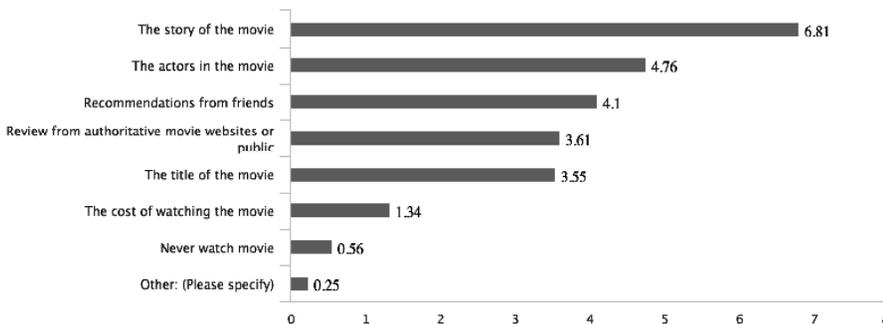Figure 4. The Correlation between educational levels and frequency of watching movies

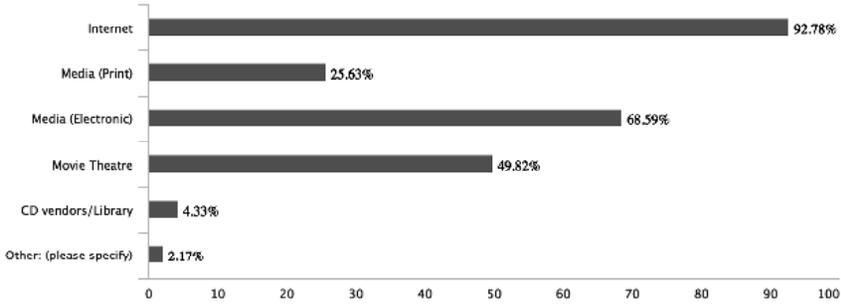Figure 5. Factors which affect the Malaysian audience's choice of cinema-going

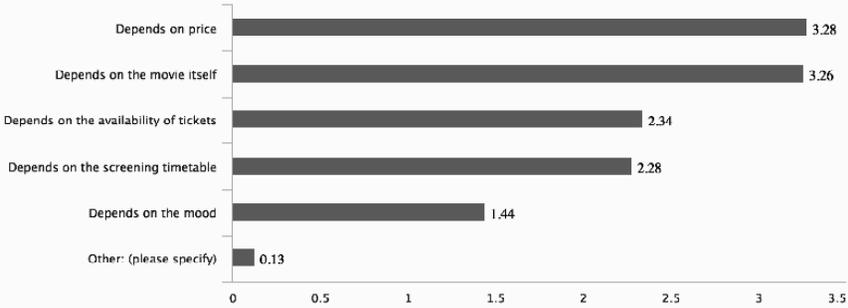Figure 6. The places and channels where Malaysia audiences watch a film

Figure 7. Factors affect audiences' choice to watch a film in the cinema
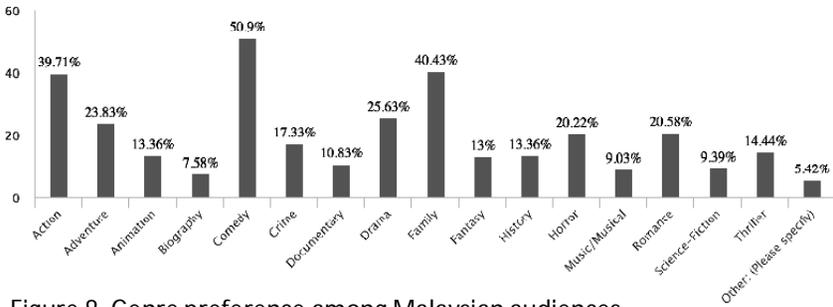

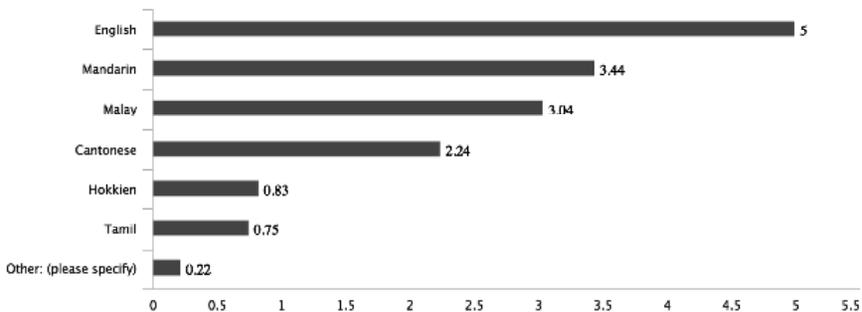Figure 8. Genre preference among Malaysian audiences

Figure 9. Language preference while choosing a film to watch at the cinema

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