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Banality in the Iranian Cinema

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Abstract

This study employed grounded theory methodology to dissect and classify the elements influencing the purported downturn in the artistic merit of Iranian cinema from 1978 to 2023. The investigation zeroes in on the discourse of distinguished Iranian filmmakers, government figures, and critics, aiming to distill the pivotal determinants and motives for the perceived increase in the mediocrity of the national film output. Data comprises public declarations by key cinematic influencers across a spectrum of media outputs, including but not limited to interviews, articles, and social media. A meticulous compilation process sourced these insights from an array of outlets, ensuring accessibility and public domain status. The research methodology unfolds in

three critical phases: Open coding, to fragment and earmark emergent phenomena; axial coding, to interlink and refine these insights; and selective coding, to underscore and validate central themes, thereby crystallizing a theory firmly rooted in empirical evidence. The results reveal a constellation of systemic challenges and artistic impediments. Central to these findings is the thematic recurrence of institutional control and censorship, mirrored in the creative restrictions reported by industry professionals. Moreover, the research uncovers a profound concern among stakeholders over the erosion of storytelling quality and diversity, leading to an increasing homogenization of cinematic content.

Keywords: Iranian Cinema, Banality, Iran, Artistic Decline

Introduction

The course of Iranian cinema has long been celebrated for its rich content and artistic brilliance. However, in recent years, a troubling shift has occurred, one that has raised concerns among respected filmmakers and critics. As noted by filmmaker Mohammad Reza Honarmand, "there's a growing argument that Iranian cinema is veering towards shallowness or "banality." This shift is particularly evident in the increasing dominance of comedy in contemporary films. This emphasis on humor and absurdity has started to overshadow the depth and substance that Iranian cinema was once known for" (Shahrvand, 2020) [59]. Comedy cinema, originally a source of laughter and fleeting emotions, has evolved over time into a realm of uncontrolled absurdity, as highlighted in a report by *Fars News*. This devolution is especially troubling when considering cinema's demonstrated capacity to shape societal discourse—whether by legitimizing or challenging dominant narratives (Emamzadeh & Sabbar, 2017) [13]. Research demonstrates how media narratives significantly influence behavioral patterns and professional decision-making processes, with visual platforms particularly effective at shaping perceptions and practices (Soroori Sarabi *et al.*, 2020) [61]. This excessive and often disturbing humor paints a worrying picture of an industry that may be losing its unique identity and artistic depth. Honarmand, in his remarks to *Shahrvand* suggests that this shift towards "sick and excessive" comedy is seen by many as a calculated move driven by profit and the exploitation of societal trends" (Shahrvand, 2020) [59]. This shift away from the core values of Iranian cinema, the abandonment of thought-provoking narratives, and the promotion of shallowness in storytelling have raised concerns about the future of this cherished cinematic tradition - especially given how powerfully narratives shape public perception and understanding of social realities (Kharazmi & Mohammadi, 2020) [31]. Renowned director and editor Sadegh Sadegh-Daghighi expresses disappointment over the declining presence of works that stimulate intellectual engagement and cater to refined tastes. An article in *Fars News* dated April 21, 2023, echoes these sentiments, emphasizing the prevalence of works that prioritize triviality over substance. In light of these troubling trends, Abolghasem Talabi, another respected figure in Iranian cinema, offers a stark warning. He foresees a bleak future for these

films, suggesting that they will not only fail to secure a place in Iranian cinematic history but will instead be forgotten (Fars, 2018) [16].

This research aims to explore the reasons behind the increasing shallowness in Iranian cinema and seeks to shed light on the factors driving this transformation. Furthermore, it aims to provide practical insights and suggestions for industry officials. To understand this issue, it is enlightening to adopt the perspective of the Frankfurt School intellectuals, who considered the prevalence of "vulgarity" as a form of depoliticization in the realm of culture and art. According to this viewpoint, the politics of consumption is closely tied to the concept of "banality." In Persian, "banality," as defined by the Mo'in Dictionary, refers to the repeated use of something to an extent that diminishes its value. This definition aligns closely with the perspectives of critical theorists.

Conversely, "banality" can also denote anything ordinary, commonplace, uninteresting, and devoid of new ideas, as described by the Longman English Dictionary. Unfortunately, this characteristic is often evident in many Persian cinema productions, which frequently adhere to established patterns and clichés, lacking innovation and freshness in thematic content, narrative structure, character development, and visual presentation. Another interpretation of "banality" in Persian suggests offering oneself openly and without reserve, a characteristic often seen in Persian cinema. This form of cinema leaves nothing hidden, avoids illusions and mysteries, and presents all its assets to the audience without requiring deep thought or interpretation. Films like *Qarun's Treasure*, *Golden Heel*, *lasagna*, *Side Mirror*, or *50 Kilos of Cherries* exemplify this simplicity and straightforwardness, requiring minimal effort from the audience, as their form and structure are quite transparent (Jahed, 2019) [26].

Throughout history, low and "banal" art and cinema have consistently clashed with high and noble culture, art, and cinema. A significant portion of Persian cinema production has thus been labeled as "banal" cinema, drawing criticism for embodying vulgarity, lowliness, and decadence. Filmmakers associated with such "banal" films are often considered to lack artistic taste and aesthetic sensibility. They seem to comprehend only vulgarity and "banality," continuously reproducing these elements. As a result, the production of shallow and "banal" films continues to persist in Iranian cinema, akin to a contagious affliction.

In light of these diverse interpretations and perspectives on "banality," this study will adopt a straightforward and pragmatic approach, defining "banality" in the context of Iranian cinema as "low quality." Educational research highlights challenges of definitional ambiguity and limited standardization in emerging fields, creating fragmented approaches and inconsistent evaluation frameworks (Khodabin *et al.*, 2022) [32]. This definition allows for a focused exploration of factors contributing to the perceived decline in the quality of films, aligning with the aim of this research to provide clarity and insight into the multifaceted concept of "banality" within Iranian cinema. Nematollahi & Sayyad (1401) With a descriptive-analytical method and using library sources, the present paper tries to study the depiction of new woman in the two films related to new wave cinema in Iran, *Mr. Naive* and *The Balooch*. It concludes that new woman, like other phenomena of modern life, takes away the old patriarchal control and that

persuades filmmakers to portray her as an attractive, superficial, and dangerous commodity of modern metropolis. In other words, new woman becomes a phenomenon that, in line with other modern phenomena and even at the top and most important of them puts down Iranian men and culture.

Research Question

The current study aims to answer the following question.

RQ: What are the primary factors contributing to the perceived shift towards banality in Iranian cinema, as identified by specialists in the field?

The importance of this research lies in its potential to shed light on the critical issues facing Iranian cinema and, in turn, offer insights for industry officials and stakeholders. While this study does not aim to definitively quantify the level of banality in Iranian cinema, its focus on exploring the opinions expressed by specialists in the field is instrumental in understanding the underlying challenges. By delving into the root causes of the perceived shift towards banality, we can provide a constructive model that offers actionable steps to tackle these issues.

Methodology

This study employs a grounded theory approach to identify and categorize the factors contributing to the perceived decline in the quality of Iranian cinema. The analysis focuses on statements made by Iranian esteemed filmmakers, government officials, and film critics during the period from 1357 to 1402 (Iranian calendar, 1978-2023 in Western calendar). The primary aim is to uncover and categorize the key factors and reasons behind the -possible-increasing banality of Iranian cinema. The data for this study consists of statements made by Iranian esteemed filmmakers, government officials, and film critics in various media, including interviews, public speeches, articles, and social media posts. These statements have been collected from a wide range of sources, such as newspapers, magazines, online platforms, and archival records, and are publicly available and accessible. In grounded theory, the coding procedure is pivotal in analyzing qualitative data. It commences with open coding, where data is dissected into discrete parts, allowing the researcher to identify and label phenomena (Cutcliffe, 2000) [9]. This phase involves careful examination, leading to the emergence of categories. The subsequent step, axial coding, connects these categories. It involves a reanalysis, seeking relationships and patterns, refining and integrating categories. Finally, selective coding is undertaken, focusing on core categories, systematically relating them to other categories, validating these relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement. This iterative process continues until a substantive theory is grounded in the data. Such a rigorous approach ensures scientific integrity, which aligns with the principles important in academia, specifically in the realms of research and university-level instruction. This emphasis on systematic, interdisciplinary frameworks resonates with recent educational models in Iran that stress holistic learning and reflective understanding through virtual platforms, particularly in environmental and cultural domains (Dastyar *et al.*, 2023) [12]. This parallels the broader architectural landscape in Iran, where globalization has deeply influenced not only the physical structure of urban housing but also cultural and aesthetic patterns, reflecting lifestyle changes

and the growing dominance of Western models in architectural practices (Dariush *et al.*, 2021)^[10].

Findings

The axial coding carried out in this grounded theory study lays out a complex framework of issues impacting “banality” in the Iranian film industry. The codes hint at a cinematic landscape grappling with both internal artistic constraints and external socio-political influences. Profitability and societal conditions suggest a tension between creative expression and market-driven or societal norms. Codes regarding superficial imitation and limitations in selecting film subjects reveal a struggle for authentic storytelling amidst influences from foreign works and restrictive cultural parameters. Critically, the axial coding addresses concerns over censorship and artistic freedom, with references to limitations in critical approach and the taboo of certain character portrayals. This extends to specific limitations on film genres, possibly pointing to a lack of diversity in the types of stories that are permitted to be told. Additionally, the revocation of screening licenses and accusations of unfair screenings touch upon institutional control over film distribution, possibly reflecting underlying power dynamics within the industry. Issues like money laundering and accusations of “blackening” in Iranian cinema introduce complex narratives of ethics and racial representation, suggesting underlying socio-economic and cultural challenges. The mention of limited skills and knowledge among filmmakers raises questions about educational and professional development opportunities within the country and how it might be related to the issue of banality. Lastly, restrictions on women's visibility and limitations in emotional expression signal deeper societal and ideological battles played out through the medium of film. Table 1 lists our findings in a more concise way.

Table 1: Axial codes

Number	Code
1	Profitability and Societal Conditions
2	Superficial Imitation of Foreign Works
3	Limitations in Selecting Film Subjects
4	Limitations in Critical Approach
5	Limitations on Expressing Historical Religious Narratives and Figures
6	Limitations on Film Genres
7	Taboo of Attractive Character Outcomes
8	Revocation of Screening Licenses
9	Unfair Screening of Movies
10	Money Laundering
11	Accusations of “Blackening” in Iranian Cinema
12	Limited Skills and Knowledge Among Filmmakers in Iranian Cinema
13	Restrictions on women's visibility
14	Limitations in Emotional Expression or Emotional Scenes
15	The Normalization of Vulgarity

The above table gives the impression that our data reveals a widespread consensus among the Iranian cinema people and personalities that the Iranian cinema is going towards banality. Let us review how each category represent this trend.

1. Profitability and Societal Conditions

Shahrokh Dolkou, a respected film critic in Iran, highlights “profitability” as the primary catalyst behind the sustained production of such films. He asserts, “Given the prevailing

societal conditions, there has been an unprecedented surge in the audience's interest in comedy films. The desire for two hours of pure enjoyment and entertainment in the cinema, regardless of all else, has turned comedy into a lucrative genre. This profitability, in turn, elevates the production of such films to the forefront of priorities for cinema producers.”

At present, individuals in Iran confront formidable economic and social challenges. These conditions are further compounded by inadequate infrastructure across multiple sectors - including education, cultural development, and professional training systems - that collectively fail to support meaningful artistic growth (Mohammadi & Kharazmi, 2021)^[38]. Research on emerging economies demonstrates how technological disruption reshapes power structures, creating both opportunities for advancement and concerns about dependency in developing nations (Rahmatian, 2025)^[48]. Filmmakers are keenly attuned to this unique milieu. Commercial filmmakers within the country, those who regard their creations as commercial commodities, leverage these extraordinary conditions in Iran. Research shows that organizational or industry innovation often brings both new opportunities and unexpected risks, highlighting the need for proactive risk management and strategic planning (Soroori Sarabi *et al.*, 2023)^[62]. So, they recognize that comedy films are enjoying substantial success. Why is this the case? It is due to the prevalent stress and anxieties experienced by the populace. Audiences flock to cinemas in pursuit of solace and happiness, if only for a brief respite. According to Reza Dorostkahr, a cinema critic, this outcome arises unintentionally from these exceptional circumstances, giving rise to commercially shallow productions. He, himself, regards these works as devoid of substantial value. Audiences consume these films, experience mirth, and promptly consign them to the realm of forgetfulness. Ultimately, cinema stands as the sole refuge for the public in search of diversion and entertainment.

2. Superficial Imitation of Foreign Works

Filmmakers, hampered by censorship and severed from the pulse of real-life experiences, often find themselves compelled to mimic foreign cinematic creations. This imitation of foreign cinema, in fact, is an inadvertent byproduct of a cinema ensnared by censorship, one that unconsciously borrows from its international counterparts, gradually eroding its native identity. Alireza Davoodnejad, a distinguished film director, articulated this sentiment in an interview with a correspondent from the Culture and Arts Department of the *Borna* news agency: “The enduring outcome of cinema censorship has been the injection of foreign perspectives into our cinematic landscape. With Iranian cinema somewhat detached from the actualities of daily life and inundated with films from countries bearing no societal relevance to our own—such as Turkish, European, American, Indian, Korean, among others—it becomes susceptible to the influence of foreign sensibilities, potentially leading to the manifestation of vulgarity.”

The human being has an intrinsic intention towards learning (Shahghasemi *et al.*, 2023)^[58] and the remedy for countering vulgarity in cinema primarily lies in education and re-education. This aligns with findings on the influence of global communication, which highlight how access to media can elevate public awareness and behavioral tendencies,

especially in relation to cultural and environmental values (Mousavi & Dariush, 2019) [37]. Filmmakers must acquire the skills necessary to authentically portray the unfolding realities of their immediate milieu within engaging narratives. Furthermore, the cultivation of filmmakers who are deeply connected to their surroundings and infuse their cinema with local and national flavors can play an instrumental role. This idea echoes findings in urban architecture, where lifestyle changes in Iranian society—such as increased individualism and reduced collective space—have reshaped domestic environments and, by extension, cultural production more broadly (Darvish *et al.*, 2019) [11]. In their works, a reflection of the people's identity and lived experiences can come to the forefront (Borna, 2021) [7].

3. Limitations in Selecting Film Subjects

The constraint of selecting film subjects stands as a significant hurdle in the world of filmmaking. Within the realm of Iranian cinema, the process of choosing film topics is subject to a web of restrictions and taboos rooted in cultural, social, political, and religious factors. Iran is a religious country with a religious government (Sarfi *et al.*, 2023) [56] and topics that challenge religious norms or venture into worldviews beyond the boundaries of Islam are frequently regarded as taboo. The production of films centered around such subjects often encounters substantial limitations. Another noteworthy example is the film "Offside," directed by Jafar Panahi. This film, despite participating in the Fajr Film Festival in 2005, failed to secure a screening permit. It remained banned from public exhibition due to its sensitive subject matter, which scrutinized the prohibition against women entering stadiums. Consequently, it was left unshown, and Jafar Panahi himself faced a ban on his filmmaking endeavors.

4. Limitations in Critical Approach

Within Iranian cinema, the creation of films that offer a critical perspective on government organizations, political positions, or religious institutions poses a formidable challenge. This constraint, in turn, exerts substantial pressure on filmmakers and stands as a primary contributor to the degradation and devaluation of cinematic works. Ali Reza Khamseh underscores the importance of criticism in comedy and the ramifications of its absence: "When critical analysis is rendered impossible within comedy cinema, a vital element of comedy is lost, rendering everything tasteless and mundane. Comedy thrives when comedians can scrutinize behaviors, highlighting them in a humorous performance. However, certain subjects remain off-limits for comedic examination, including professions like doctors, lawyers, artists, and even representations like the 'king of the jungle'—the lion. This censorship hampers the scope of comedic expression. For instance, if I were to critique a portion of a script that involves the police or a particular community, I'd face insurmountable challenges. Consequently, in my comedies, I'm restricted to narratives about my own family, for even a step beyond that can lead to acting bans" (Shahrvand, Shahrvand, 2020) [59].

Afshin Aliar, a film critic, emphasizes the role of comedy as a director's sharp and critical gaze at society. He highlights that the language of comedy serves as a narrative for a nation. However, within many commercially successful works, the essence of such a sentiment is often lacking.

Audiences tend to swiftly forget the narratives, struggling to recall the core storyline shortly after leaving the theater. The films appear to lack enduring significance, with some even appearing to prioritize commercial viability over genuine comedic content. It is as if, in the 1990s, there was an upsurge in pseudo-comedies engineered primarily for the sake of marketability rather than as authentic expressions of humor (Iran Economist, 2022) [22].

5. Limitations on Expressing Historical Religious Narratives and Figures

Despite the stated support from the country's cultural authorities for such cinematic endeavors, the production of films centered around religious narratives and figures in Iran has consistently encountered profound challenges. A notable example is the film "Resurrection," among several religious films, which, despite acquiring the necessary permits for public screening from film authorities, faced suspension due to controversies and disputes surrounding its content. As of the time of writing, its future remains uncertain. On one hand, filmmakers receive encouragement to create religious films, but, on the other hand, the persistence of inconsistencies and managerial and structural impediments results in a squandering of time, creative energy, budgets allocated to religious film projects, and the nation's resources. *Resurrection* embarked on its journey to Iranian cinemas in the summer of 2015 following a decade-long production process. However, it swiftly came under scrutiny from specific religious authorities and was withdrawn from theaters. Criticisms were chiefly directed at the portrayal of the face of Imam Abbas (AS) within the film's narrative.

This duality in approach—encouragement on one side and the presence of substantial inconsistencies and administrative hurdles on the other—results in an unfortunate misallocation of time, resources, and creative efforts devoted to religious films. The director of *Resurrection* expressed his apprehension about the implications of the film's experience, stating: "With what transpired during the course of 'Resurrection,' undoubtedly these circumstances will exert a chilling effect, deterring filmmakers from exploring religious figures in the future" (Farhadi, 2018) [15].

6. Limitations on Film Genres

The cinematic landscape in Iran faces a significant constraint in terms of genre diversity. As Mohsen Mohseni-Nasab, a prominent director, notes, "Today, beyond melodrama and tales of misery, little room remains for other genres in our cinema. Melodrama often targets profitability, while the 'misery genre' seeks recognition on the international festival stage. Occasionally, a few social films emerge alongside these, portraying the marginalized and impoverished, exposing the somber and grim facets of Iranian society." This has become the prevailing theme in the country's cinema over the past two decades (Alef, 2023) [3].

This decline in genre diversity is increasingly tilted towards comedy in Iranian cinema. Producers, distributors, and cinema owners, in the pursuit of enhanced sales, exhibit a strong inclination towards comedy films. This prevailing imbalance exerts a considerable influence on overall production in Iranian cinema, while government officials and planners inadvertently compound the issue through their inattention.

This limited range of genres in Iranian cinema is perpetuated by a cinematic "mafia" that wields significant influence over the filmmaking process. It is notable that genres such as horror or mystery, which are generally lucrative on the global stage, have struggled to gain a foothold in Iranian cinema. Despite the technical capability to produce films in these genres, the creative abilities of filmmakers in these areas often fall short, compelling some to resort to unscrupulous methods, particularly chemical ones, to eliminate potential competitors from the scene (Tasdigh Moghadam, 2022)^[65].

7. Taboo of Attractive Character Outcomes

In Iran the government put in place restrict rules regarding sexuality (Aeini, Zohouri & Mousavand, 2023)^[1]. In the realm of Iranian cinema, the creation of impactful works that captivate audiences and ignite their curiosity is a daunting challenge, as asserted by Iraj Zad. He articulates, "Numerous constraints encumber Iranian cinema, stifling the exploration of diverse genres. Consequently, we witness a proliferation of comedy films that have regrettably fallen to a lower standard of quality. These constraints have the additional effect of transmuted characters within social cinema into mundane individuals, ultimately culminating in a repetitiveness of narratives. A critical evaluation is warranted to assess the feasibility of expanding the narrow boundaries and restrictions enforced by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Film Organization." In Iranian films, it is a common expectation that characters who engage in wrongful acts should confront the consequences of their actions or even meet their demise by the film's conclusion to avoid the promotion of immorality. Nonetheless, this very expectation has resulted in a surplus of clichéd and predictable narratives film.

8. Revocation of Screening Licenses

It is not uncommon for a film to secure a production permit but then encounter insurmountable obstacles in obtaining a screening permit, particularly in the wake of changes in leadership, officials, and legislative representatives. Diverse interpretations of laws and regulations foster contrasting perspectives, to the detriment of filmmakers. This predicament often prompts producers to gravitate towards films featuring clichéd and superficial themes in a bid to mitigate the risk of censorship and confiscation.

One illustrative case is *The Report of a Celebration*, released in 2010 by Hatami-Kia, which delved into the events surrounding the 2009 elections in Iran. Despite participating in the Fajr Film Festival in 2010, the film was subsequently confiscated by the Film Organization, never gracing the screens of cinemas, nor even seeing a video release. Another poignant example is *The Wind Will Carry Us*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami, which never secured the opportunity for public screening despite obtaining a screening permit.

According to a report from the *Tasnim* news agency, a substantial number of films are produced in Iran annually, with the majority financed by government and national resources. Hojjatollah Ayyubi, the Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Head of the Cinema Organization, underscores, "Approximately 90 films are created within the country each year, with an estimated cost of around two trillion rials." Nonetheless, various films, for diverse reasons, find themselves barred from public

screening and release. During each cultural management period, officials typically acknowledge the existence of numerous suspended films that have attracted various criticisms. The creators of such works occasionally strive to keep their titles in the public consciousness by periodically releasing updates about their prospective screening. For instance, *Aram Street*, helmed by Kamal Tabrizi, is one of the films that, despite obtaining a screening license before production, has repeatedly failed to receive the necessary permission for public screening despite the Cinema Guild Council scheduling it multiple times (Tasnim News Agency, 2016, June 7)^[66].

The unfortunate reality is that the suspension or lifting of film bans is often more a byproduct of personal relationships and informal connections between film producers and officials within the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as well as affiliated factions. Such reliance on informal networks and personal connections exemplifies the fragmented governance structures and institutional silos that characterize policy implementation across multiple Iranian sectors (Soroori Sarabi, 2025)^[63]. This intricate web of lobbying efforts, often motivated by minimal investment and maximum profit, might temporarily appease certain sensitivities. However, over time, it risks diminishing the significance of these issues, eventually leading society to exhibit diminishing concern for these matters. The need arises to scrutinize the rationale behind the dearth of oversight exercised by responsible officials within the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance concerning films characterized by absurdity in form and content, in order to comprehend the underlying reasons (Taromi, 2020)^[64].

9. Unfair Screening of Movies

Manijeh Hekmat, the director of Iran's social cinema, vehemently opposes the discrimination in the screening of social films. She laments that priority is consistently accorded to comedy films, which are often financed through unconventional means. This unfavorable practice casts a shadow of doom over Iran's social cinema (Radio Zamaneh, 2018). The term "distribution mafia" in Iranian cinema is one that evokes strong reactions within the film industry. Some individuals, like Mostafa Shayesteh, argue that "those who struggle to secure the distribution of their films are the ones vocal about the existence of a cinema mafia." Others contend that no one denies the presence of such a mafia in Iranian cinema except for those who themselves face accusations of involvement (Jalalizadeh, n.d.)^[27].

The influence of the mafia has permeated various stages of film production in Iranian cinema from before the revolution to the present day. This mafia operates by prioritizing the sale of its products through the elimination of competitors, often resorting to chemical methods rather than endeavors to enhance the quality of their works. Many cinema enthusiasts have pondered why the duration and screening opportunities for each film appear predetermined based on genre and cast, with certain films receiving disproportionately fewer chances for screening despite audience interest. Behind this lies a group that, in collaboration with distribution managers, actively shapes public taste in alignment with their preferences, limiting the emergence of alternatives. They dictate the scheduling, the number of theaters, and the frequency of screenings for films, imposing their choices and stifling diversity (Iran, 2022)^[23].

These groups have cultivated strong relationships with numerous distribution managers and have established a grip on cinema theaters. In the current cinematic landscape, each film necessitates approximately one million viewers to recoup its production costs, making it a challenge for most films to achieve acceptable sales. Ebrahim Darougeh-zadeh, the former Deputy for Evaluation and Supervision at the Film Organization, once voiced concerns on Twitter about the monopolistic practices prevalent in the cinema hierarchy. Abdolreza Saatchifar, a film producer, adds to the criticism: "Today, instead of allowing the audience to determine the merits and commercial viability of films in theaters, cinema owners and distributors pre-determine a film's destiny even before its release and dictate its sales quotas... A more equitable screening system would initially allocate a minimal number of showtimes to each film and subsequently adjust based on audience interest. However, the current system disproportionately favors specific films from the outset while relegating others to a few showtimes" (ILNA, 2017) [19].

To promote a fair and just screening system for films, it is imperative to implement a more organized and planned framework to replace the existing one. Perhaps it is time for the Ministry of Guidance to play a more active role in addressing this issue, particularly in the battle against the film mafia, enabling cultural and artistic films to secure more time and opportunities for public viewing.

10. Money Laundering

Mehdi Karampour highlights that illicit funds have permeated Iranian cinema from multiple channels, with both officials and media outlets seemingly turning a blind eye to the issue. The influx of unidentified funds has been a driving force behind the descent of Iranian cinema into vulgarity (Radio Zamaneh, 2018). Within the parliamentary sphere, a representative from Tabriz has drawn attention to the detrimental consequences of capital inflow from capitalists, particularly due to nepotism, into Iranian cinema. This influx of resources has resulted in a proliferation of low-quality films in cinema box offices. These films, fueled by substantial capital, often rely solely on the allure of renowned stars rather than substantive thematic or artistic (Alef, 2019) [2].

In the broadest sense, money laundering encompasses activities aimed at concealing or altering the appearance of the illicit origin of income, rendering it seemingly legitimate. Money laundering represents a process whereby the form, origin, attributes, and ultimate beneficiaries or destinations of tainted funds undergo a transformation (International Banking and Economy, 2019) [20]. The strategic manipulation of financial flows to shape cultural narratives has been documented across industries as a method of exerting indirect control (Sarfi *et al.*, 2021). Suspicious capital infiltrating the cinema industry has raised concerns among the Iranian Directors Guild. They caution that these investments, marked by the alteration of production dynamics, pose a severe threat to the very existence of Iranian cinema. Concerning the matter of questionable funds, the names of individuals referred to as "Aghazadeh" in media circles, who are often the offspring of influential political figures, have surfaced. It is suggested that a segment of the capital invested in the cinema industry by these individuals is derived from their connections and the influence exerted by their fathers.

Seyed Jamal Sadatian, a seasoned film producer, underscores that, under the present circumstances of Iranian cinema, there are limited avenues available to deter individuals from sourcing funds external to the industry (Sاداتian, 2018) [51]. Money laundering within the realm of cinema is an area of particular concern. The profusion of roles within this industry offers ample opportunity for such illicit practices.

11. Accusations of "Blackening" in Iranian Cinema

The term "blackening" is a derogatory expression used by conservative critics to denigrate Iranian films that portray a negative image of the country. These films often depict harsh and dark aspects of Iranian society, shedding light on its struggles, suffering, and challenges. Manijeh Hekmat, a director of social films in Iran, sees it as her responsibility to address societal abnormalities and engage in dialogue to find solutions. She acknowledges the increasing prevalence of challenges like violence, addiction, AIDS, bribery, and corruption in Iranian society and believes it's the duty of every Iranian, along with 70 million others, to take responsibility and work towards solutions (KhabarOnline, 2015) [30].

Critics argue these films undermine national values by presenting negative societal images that disturb public consciousness. Yet comparative research on festival-winning Iranian and South Korean films reveals such portrayals constitute legitimate sociopolitical critique rather than intentional defamation (Sabbar *et al.*, 2023) [49]. Despite this evidence, authorities frequently suspend or prohibit screenings of films labeled as 'blackening' Iran's image. However, Manijeh Hekmat believes that critical films are an expression of interest in Iran's specific context and are a way to engage with questions about Iran's past and present. In contrast, she contends that superficial comedies lack such engagement (Iran Economic News, 2018) [21]. The fear of being accused of "blackening" has led to the dominance of shallow and vulgar comedies in Iranian cinema. Social and critical films often face greater scrutiny from the Film Production and Screening Council, creating insecurity for filmmakers who wish to create more serious works with specific messages (ISNA, 2017) [24]. Manijeh Hekmat criticizes the Islamic Republic's approach to art, stating that it values positive propaganda over critical exploration of Iran's history and present. She argues that committed filmmakers cannot remain silent and compromise their artistic integrity for the regime's benefit (Iran Economic News, 2018) [21].

The theory of "blackening" is often used to dismiss films that challenge the status quo or offer alternative narratives. It reflects a lack of cultural self-confidence and freedom of expression in the artistic landscape. These accusations can lead to the suspension or banning of films, limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives in Iranian cinema. Addressing this belief requires fostering cultural confidence, promoting open dialogue, and protecting freedom of expression (Latifpour, 2017) [35]. For example, *Triangle of Inversion* by Hossein Rajabian, was accused of portraying a negative image and offering a personal interpretation of existing issues, as well as the absence of relative hijab (veiling) of the female actress in certain scenes. The film's materials and international soundtracks were confiscated by Iranian security forces after editing, and its director was sentenced to six years in prison for his unauthorized artistic

activities and promoting against the system (Salam No, 2019)^[54].

Circle directed by Jafar Panahi was made after obtaining the production license, but after completing the production stages and submitting it to the screening license, it was banned by the deputy director of cinema in 2010. The only Iranian film to win gold. Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2000. However, it was banned in Iran on charges of blackness (ISNA, Detained films, 2019)^[25]. Director of *Private Meeting* Omid Shams stated in an interview with Etemad newspaper, "They tell us to show everything perfect in our films, as if our society is really like that" (Etemad, 2022)^[14].

Masoud Farasti said, "*Leila's Brothers* is an anti-family film, especially against the father of the family, and full of negativity" (AsrIran, 2023)^[5]. Furthermore, Saeed Roustai was sentenced for the production and screening of his film at the Cannes Film Festival (Radio Farda, 2023)^[44].

12. Limited Skills and Knowledge Among Filmmakers in Iranian Cinema

Some people say talent is not necessary to succeed in the cinema (Sarfi, Nosrati & Sabzali, 2021) and if we accept their controversial idea, we will have to acknowledge that there are many people in the cinema industry who have no talent. The presence of limited skills and knowledge among filmmakers in Iran has been a concern within the industry. Research demonstrates that without relevant structured education, both creators and audiences lack the analytical frameworks to evaluate content quality (Sakhaei *et al.*, 2023)^[52]. Such educational gaps reflect broader challenges in developing comprehensive literacy frameworks, where fragmented curricula and unequal access to resources limit critical evaluation capabilities (Khodabin *et al.*, 2024)^[33]. Social pathology research further indicates that individual personality types fundamentally shape decision-making processes and behavioral patterns, influencing how people perceive and evaluate cultural content (Moein *et al.*, 2023)^[36]. According to Mohammad Taqi Fahim, a veteran cinema critic, this issue is reflected in the disorder and lack of understanding of social, historical, and geographical contexts in Iranian cinema. He attributes this problem to the lack of educational value among cinematographers, which results in a lack of literacy in the overall cinema. This educational deficit extends beyond cinema to broader media sectors, where research reveals widespread digital literacy gaps and limited professional development opportunities across Iranian media institutions (Khodabin *et al.*, 2023)^[34]. Fahim suggests that when the cinema as a whole is illiterate, it cannot produce significant and valuable works (*Cinema Press*, 2023)^[8]. Dr. Chista Yatharbi, a university lecturer, film critic, and theater director, also highlights the problem of illiteracy within the artistic society. She notes that some artists openly express pride in not reading books and claim they have no time for study and research. She laments the transformation of values into anti-values in society and the decline of Iranian cinema, which was once highly regarded in the 1980s and early 1990s. Yatharbi expresses concern about the younger generation's lack of interest in reading books and the resulting negative impact on society (*Cinema Press*, 2023)^[8].

Raziye Tajari, a prominent writer and lecturer, further elaborates on how the absence of reading habits has contributed to the production of shallow and superficial

films in Iranian cinema. This deficit in critical engagement mirrors broader patterns in media consumption, where insufficient training in contextual analysis leads audiences and creators alike to accept simplistic narratives at face value (Hosseini *et al.*, 2025)^[18]. She criticizes cultural managers for not preventing the production and promotion of such works and highlights the profit gained from the sale of these films. Tajari emphasizes that these films contribute to a superficial outlook and are often promoted through media propaganda in the virtual space. She also laments the lack of culture and literacy among certain individuals involved in filmmaking (*Cinema Press*, 2023)^[8]. This generational gap in artistic development mirrors findings that younger professionals across fields receive less institutional support, leading to diminished quality outputs (Toosi, 2025)^[67].

13. Restrictions on Women's Visibility

The topic of hijab in Iranian cinema has been a longstanding subject of discussion. Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a mandate required women to appear in films adhering to Islamic hijab. This regulation had significant consequences. Initially, it led to a noticeable reduction in the presence of women in front of the camera, particularly in the early years, as many shifted to behind-the-scenes roles. Additionally, it had the unintended effect of diminishing the realism of films (Azimi Dolatabadi & Davari Moghadam, 2019)^[6].

The enforcement of a specific dress code for women in Iranian cinema was accompanied by strict guidelines. These rules dictated that women's hair should remain concealed, allowing only their hands and faces to be visible. Furthermore, women's physical movements were subject to constraints, restricting actions like running to prevent any undue shaking of their bodies (Kermani, 2010)^[29].

Critics have often satirized the claim of producing "realistic" films in Iran while depicting women emerging from bathrooms and bedrooms wearing headscarves (Foturehchi, 2015)^[17]. This satirical commentary highlights the challenges filmmakers face in achieving authenticity due to the pervasive presence of hijab in the country's films. Over the four decades since the Islamic Revolution, what might be considered unusual in any other cinematic context has become the norm in Iranian cinema. This includes women appearing with hijab in front of male family members, donning hijab while using the bathroom, wearing it during wedding scenes, and even sleeping with hijab in the bedroom. These scenarios, once seen as unusual, are now widely accepted by filmmakers.

The presence of hijab in Iranian cinema also impacts how women's femininity is portrayed. This dynamic mirrors broader societal patterns where idealized beauty standards commodify femininity at the expense of mental well-being (Nosraty *et al.*, 2020)^[42]. In films geared towards mass appeal, actresses often resort to excessive makeup, cosmetic procedures, such as surgery and Botox, in an attempt to restore their perceived femininity. Paradoxically, this can limit actors' abilities to authentically convey emotions like sadness and discomfort. In contrast to Iranian cinema's emphasis on cosmetics and surgical enhancements to counteract the effects of hijab, European films often favor simplicity and naturalism in the appearance of female actors. This contrast reflects different cinematic traditions and approaches to portraying women. For instance, the use of

surgically altered appearances to depict characters, such as a girl from a lower social class with an altered nose, can compromise the authenticity and relatability of films for the audience. Even strong performances may not compensate for these inauthentic portrayals. The presence of hijab in Iranian cinema has introduced various complexities and challenges, impacting both the representation of women and the overall authenticity of films. These challenges have led filmmakers to employ creative solutions, and the debate over the role of hijab in cinema continues to be a topic of discussion and reflection within the industry.

14. Limitations in Emotional Expression or Emotional Scenes

According to religious laws, men and women are not allowed to touch each other. Therefore, scenes depicting a mother hugging her son or showing intimate moments between husband and wife are not permissible. This restriction leads to a scarcity of emotional or affectionate scenes in films or renders them unnatural, distancing the audience from the atmosphere and emotions at a time when they need to be more engaged with the film.

15. The Normalization of Vulgarity

We live at a time in which it has become hard to distinguish the reality from the unreal (Sabzali *et al.*, 2022) [50]. Psychological research demonstrates that personality types significantly influence individual behavioral patterns, extending to how people interpret, engage with, and evaluate artistic works (Jamali *et al.*, 2022) [28]. The unbridled release of silly comedies creates concerns in cultural fields and concerns have been expressed that this condition might culminate in disabling people in determining what is true or false. Psychological research confirms that constant exposure to superficial content can compromise mental well-being by fostering anxiety, social comparison, and eroded self-worth (Nosraty *et al.*, 2021) [41]. Other Research shows that unfiltered exposure to low-quality content demands robust critical literacy to prevent cultural degradation (Arsalani *et al.*, 2022) [4]. Systematic analysis reveals that developing analytical frameworks for content evaluation is equally vital for maintaining artistic standards in cinematic works (Sakhaei *et al.*, 2023) [52]. In recent years, the wide range of cinema audiences and its amazing power to influence have not been taken into consideration. Of course, the meaning of this influence is not the kind that we know from important cinematographic works, but rather a negative aspect that leads to the normalization of vulgarity. "Whatever common-sense dictates is ugly, in low-level comedies, it is assumed to be interesting and funny and harmless; in other words, whatever the responsible and caring people in the field of culture, art, and education are teaching, rude cinema. And manners make cotton. Civilized societies take help from cultural works and tools to elevate culture; novels, stories, films and theaters, although they are supposed to entertain the audience in the first place, but in a deeper layer, the property of awareness and They encourage reflection and thinking. When cultural institutions neglect this reflective purpose - resisting ethical evolution while clinging to outdated frameworks - creative degradation inevitably follows, as seen across artistic and educational systems alike (Rahmatian & SharajSharifi, 2022) [47]. Cinema is not a school of morality, but it is not going to become a school of

secret and immoral style" (Sohaili, 2023) [60].

Moreover, it is regrettable that those responsible for culture have accommodated such demands without making any earnest effort to enhance the discernment of their audience. Until we direct our attention to exemplary instances, and lend our support to them, the audience, particularly the younger generation, remains incapable of distinguishing the refined from the mundane. They erroneously believe that comedies of the same kind are created and presented every year. According to Hooshang Tavakoli (Artist) "Audiences who have not been exposed to the works of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and other comedic luminaries of global cinema, or have never traversed the realm of "Renters," "Buses," "Pickpockets," etc., lack the ability to appreciate the art of comedy in its entirety. This cultural impoverishment extends beyond entertainment - studies show how exposure to curated digital personas can reshape even intimate life decisions, privileging superficial values over substantive qualities (Nosrati *et al.*, 2023) [40]. If such audiences are accustomed to watching subpar works, they may become emotionally detached and disengaged when confronted with more meritorious works. Their tastes deteriorate to the point where they seek mere dialogues and erotic scenarios even in comedies."

A cinema that lacks intellectual depth and indulges in the web of sexual humor deviates from the essential essence of cinema and gradually contributes to the moral and cultural decay of society. Psychological research confirms that prolonged exposure to shallow content systematically erodes critical judgment and reinforces harmful norms (Zamani *et al.*, 2021) [68]. These films are not products of contemplation. Cinema ensnared by sexual innuendos is no longer cinema; instead, it becomes a vessel for dismantling societal culture (Parsapour, 2020) [43]. Another scourge of this abandonment should be found in the audience's desire for cultural products and food from other countries. In the sense that the government and suppliers of cultural goods do not provide the cultural and artistic needs of the people, it can have harmful consequences.

In the void of local cultural and artistic masterpieces, it is predictable that teenagers and young people rely on the artistic productions of other countries to supply their needed artistic goods. After all, with the decrease in the level of perception and reception of art in the audience, the works that are not just for the market and have a higher artistic quality are not noticed by the audience, because the general audience has not gained the literacy to understand it and therefore does not enjoy it.

Conclusion

This grounded theory research offers an extensive portrayal of the intricate challenges afflicting the Iranian film industry over nearly half a century and even beyond that, contributing to a perceived decline in the quality and diversity of its cinematic output. Drawing from the testimonies and opinions of prominent filmmakers, government officials, and film critics, the study elucidates a cultural and political impasse reflected in the recurring themes of artistic restraint and thematic homogeneity. The empirical data reveals a strong undercurrent of institutional governance and censorship, asserting a significant influence over the artistic direction and narrative content of Iranian cinema. These controls manifest not only in explicit restrictions on subject matter, particularly with historical

and religious narratives, but also in the subtler, yet equally impactful, limitations on genre variety and character portrayal. Such constraints, as the research indicates, have not only stymied the diversity of content but also have stifled the critical voice and creative freedoms essential to the artistic growth and cultural relevance of cinema. Furthermore, the study brings to light issues of profitability and societal conditions that heavily dictate the nature of films produced. This underscores a conflict between the need for financial viability and the aspiration for artistic integrity, suggesting that market forces and societal norms significantly shape cinematic practices. This complex nexus of financial imperatives and creative aspirations often leads to a prioritization of commercial success over innovative storytelling, potentially contributing to a dilution of artistic quality.

Ethical concerns within the industry also emerge as a poignant theme, particularly with regards to practices labeled as money laundering and unfair screenings, reflecting broader socioeconomic and governance issues within Iranian society. Such revelations speak to the intricate relationship between the film industry and the sociopolitical fabric of the nation, implicating the broader societal mechanisms that may inadvertently perpetuate these ethical challenges. The axial coding of the grounded theory process has been particularly revealing, connecting discrete categories to form a coherent narrative regarding the industry's struggles. For instance, the limitation on expressing historical religious narratives and figures illustrates a specific instance of a broader issue of censorship and control, which in turn ties into concerns over the critical approach filmmakers can adopt. Similarly, the taboo of attractive character outcomes reveals cultural norms that shape on-screen narratives, influencing not just the portrayal of characters but also the kinds of stories that can be told.

The concern over limited skills and knowledge among filmmakers, alongside the imposed restrictions on visibility, particularly regarding women, indicates systemic educational and professional development barriers. These limitations not only impact the quality of film production but also reflect the restrictive socio-cultural norms regarding gender roles and the visibility of marginalized groups. Moreover, the data speaks to a significant underrepresentation and limitation in emotional expression and the portrayal of emotional scenes within Iranian cinema. This points to a cultural reticence or reluctance to explore the full spectrum of human emotion, which is a fundamental component of compelling storytelling. The impact of such limitations is profound, potentially leading to a cinema that fails to resonate deeply with audiences, both domestically and internationally.

The convergence of these thematic strands paints a portrait of an industry at a crossroads. While it contends with the pressures of censorship, societal norms, and commercial imperatives, there is an evident yearning for artistic evolution and expression that is true to the human experience. The need for systemic reform is palpable, requiring a concerted effort from all stakeholders to foster an environment where creativity can thrive unencumbered. The perspective, however, is not that promising and it is more likely that the Iranian cinema will be even more banal in the coming years.

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