

# A Quantitative Study on the Stages of Cinema Development in Saudi Arabia and the Role of Media in Supporting This Development in Light of Agenda-Setting Theory

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**Abstract**—In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed remarkable cultural and media transformations, most notably the resurgence of cinema as a key element supporting cultural life and creative industries, in line with the goals of Vision 2030. This study aimed to identify the stages of development of Saudi cinema and examine the role of traditional and digital media in supporting this development and enhancing public acceptance of cinema and its local content. The study employed a quantitative methodology using a survey approach. Data was collected through an online questionnaire administered to a sample of young people to measure their engagement with cinematic content and determine the role of media in shaping their attitudes towards Saudi cinema. The sample was selected randomly, and appropriate statistical tools were used to analyze the data and draw conclusions. The study concluded that Saudi cinema has undergone several developmental stages, most notably a limited beginning, a period of stagnation and societal debate, and then a phase of openness and institutional empowerment after 2018. The results also showed that digital media, particularly social media, has significantly contributed to increasing young people's interest in Saudi cinema, improving its public image, and supporting the dissemination of local productions. In light of these results, the study recommended the need to enhance integration between media and film institutions, intensify awareness content related to film culture, and support youth participation in the Saudi film industry.

**Keywords**—Saudi cinema; media role; agenda-setting theory; digital media; social media; cultural development; Vision 2030; film industry; youth attitudes

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is one of the most important cultural mediums that contributes to shaping societies' consciousness and crafting their visual narratives. It simultaneously serves as a platform for artistic expression and innovation. In Saudi Arabia, cinema has undergone a fundamental transformation that has made it one of the most prominent pillars of contemporary cultural development, in parallel with the sweeping changes the country is experiencing across all sectors. The return of cinema to Saudi Arabia came within the context of a national vision that elevates the standing of creative industries and grants youth space for expression, innovation, and engagement in diverse artistic fields.

The journey of Saudi cinema was neither straightforward nor simple. It passed through numerous transitions: from early attempts by filmmakers and those passionate about the visual arts, to a prolonged absence of public cinemas, and then a powerful return with the establishment of official institutions dedicated to supporting and developing the field—most notably the Saudi Film Commission and the Red Sea International Film Festival. This development coincided with a clear role for media in rebuilding the image of cinema, directing public opinion toward renewed acceptance of its presence, and highlighting the achievements of Saudi talents on both regional and global stages.

The study proceeds from the premise that the development of Saudi cinema was not solely a product

of cultural transformation, but also resulted from media support that contributed to enhancing its image and promoting its works. The study therefore aims to analyze the historical stages of this development systematically, and to investigate how Saudi media has contributed to supporting the industry and raising societal awareness of it. This research represents a scholarly step toward understanding the relationship between media and creative industries in a contemporary Arab and Gulf context, and contributes to a growing body of literature on the intersection of cultural policy, media influence, and public perception.

Cinema occupies a unique position among cultural industries because it simultaneously functions as entertainment, art, social commentary, and economic activity. Its development in any society is therefore never purely a matter of aesthetic preference or technological capacity; it is also a reflection of the regulatory environment, the cultural policies in place, the social attitudes of potential audiences, and the media ecosystem that mediates between filmmakers and the public. Understanding the development of Saudi cinema requires engaging with all of these dimensions simultaneously, recognizing that the industry's trajectory has been shaped by the interplay of policy decisions, institutional investments, cultural attitudes, and sustained media engagement over several decades.

The research problem stems from a clear gap in the academic literature: despite the significant development that Saudi cinema has witnessed in recent years, there remains an absence of comprehensive academic studies that address this development from an integrated perspective linking the historical stages of the industry to the role of media in supporting it. The rapid changes in the sector—including the emergence of official cinematic institutions, the proliferation of digital media platforms, and the intensifying media engagement with Saudi film—make it both timely and necessary to understand the broader context within which this transformation has

taken shape. The research problem is thus defined as the absence of an integrated study that clearly illustrates how Saudi cinema has evolved across different temporal phases and simultaneously reveals the role that media has played in supporting that evolution and enhancing its societal acceptance.

The study carries scientific significance by adding to the Arabic library through the analysis of Saudi cinema's development using a quantitative approach that complements previous studies focused largely on qualitative or purely descriptive methods. Its societal significance lies in advancing understanding of the role of media in shaping the Saudi public's attitudes toward cinema during a period of profound cultural change. Its applied significance resides in the practical recommendations it offers to media and cinematic institutions for strengthening collaboration and developing the industry. The study's objectives include: analyzing the historical phases of cinema development in Saudi Arabia; studying how traditional and digital media have supported this development; identifying the impact of media coverage on shaping societal attitudes toward cinema; and understanding the relationship between cinematic and media institutions in the current phase.

### ***Literature Review and Theoretical Framework***

The existing body of scholarship on Saudi and Arab cinema has grown substantially since the commencement of official interest in the creative industries, though studies specifically focused on Saudi cinema remain limited relative to the broader Arab cinematic literature. The available studies nonetheless provide a framework that helps understand the transformation the sector is undergoing and the forces driving it.

Al-Harbi (2019) conducted one of the earliest studies to discuss the state of Saudi cinema before its official return, focusing on the social and cultural obstacles that had limited its spread, and noting that the absence of supporting institutions was among the most important factors in its decline. Al-Suwaidan (2020)

examined Saudi cinematic production from an economic angle, affirming that the industry possesses substantial growth opportunities if provided with an appropriate regulatory environment. Hassan and Shahab (2021) addressed the role of media in shaping the image of the arts in Saudi society, concluding that media played an important role in changing the public's view of cultural activities—including cinema—particularly with the expansion of digital platforms.

Al-Khathlan (2022) found that digital media contributed to the emergence of a community of enthusiasts, critics, and influencers who have come to play a visible role in shaping audience engagement with local films. A study by the London Centre for Film Studies (2023) documented the accelerating growth of Middle Eastern cinema with considerable attention given to Saudi Arabia, noting that institutional support and media promotion were the two fundamental factors that helped establish Saudi cinema as a new player in the region. Hansen (2023) examined the impact of film festivals on promoting local production, focusing on the Red Sea International Film Festival as a turning point in the global visibility of Saudi films, and demonstrating that festival media coverage inside and outside Saudi Arabia helped construct a positive image of Saudi cinema and its role in national cultural narrative. Al-Ajmi (2024) focused on the role of visual and digital media in building cinematic awareness among Saudi youth, showing that directed media content contributed to enhancing societal acceptance of cinema as a cultural and artistic field rather than merely entertainment.

Further relevant international studies include Alamri (2021), who analyzed the evolution of the Saudi film industry following the lifting of the cinema ban using a descriptive analytical method, concluding that government support and media coverage together accelerated industry growth. Shesha and Yusuf (2021) addressed the role of cinema in promoting Saudi Arabia's cultural economy, finding that digital media

was a key factor in promoting local films and increasing audience engagement. Smith (2022) studied the role of social media in forming cultural attitudes among Arab youth through interviews and content analysis, confirming that digital platforms have become the primary source for the formation of cultural orientations including cinema. Al-Anazi (2023) examined the impact of cultural media in supporting the visual arts in the Arabian Gulf, concluding that media contributed to changing the stereotypical image of modern arts including cinema.

The theoretical framework adopted by this study is Agenda-Setting Theory, which holds that media does not directly tell the public what to think, but rather influences what they think about by highlighting certain issues and neglecting others. Originally formulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) through their study of the 1968 US presidential election, agenda-setting theory has since been extended to encompass digital media, social platforms, and the construction of cultural salience. In the context of this study, traditional and digital media contribute to spotlighting Saudi cinema through news coverage, promotional campaigns, and cultural content, thereby raising the level of societal attention toward cinema and supporting its development as both a cultural and economic component. The theory is well-suited to the nature of the research because it helps interpret the role media has played in reshaping Saudi cinema's image among the public—not by directly prescribing public opinion, but by determining which aspects of the cinematic landscape become salient and consequential in public discourse.

The developmental phases of Saudi cinema provide essential historical context for understanding the present media-cinema relationship. The first phase, which can be characterized as limited beginnings, spans the earliest decades of the twentieth century through the 1970s and was marked by the production of a small number of documentary and short films, primarily produced by government entities or as personal projects by individual filmmakers, without

any systematic institutional infrastructure. The second phase, characterized by suspension and societal debate, saw the closure of public cinemas in the early 1980s and the relegation of cinematic activity to private home viewing and informal settings, a period during which cinema became a site of cultural and religious controversy. The third phase, representing institutional openness and empowerment, began in earnest with the lifting of the cinema ban in 2018 and has been characterized by rapid institutional development: the establishment of the Saudi Film Commission, the launch of the Red Sea International Film Festival, significant foreign investment in multiplex cinemas, and a sustained government commitment to developing the creative industries as part of Vision 2030.

### ***Research Gap, Research Questions, and Hypotheses***

Despite the growing body of literature on Saudi cinema and media influence in the Gulf, a significant gap remains: the available studies tend to address either the historical development of Saudi cinema or the role of media in shaping cultural attitudes, without systematically integrating both dimensions within a single analytical framework. Moreover, most prior studies relied on qualitative or descriptive approaches, with limited quantitative investigation of how specific media channels are perceived by youth audiences as contributors to Saudi cinema's development. The present study bridges this gap by combining historical analysis of Saudi cinema's developmental stages with quantitative measurement of media influence on youth attitudes, grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory.

The study addresses four research questions: RQ1: What are the stages of cinema development in Saudi Arabia? RQ2: What is the role of media in supporting this development? RQ3: How has digital media contributed to shaping audience attitudes toward Saudi cinema? RQ4: What are the most prominent forms of media support provided to Saudi cinema?

Four hypotheses are advanced: H1: There is a significant relationship between media coverage and

the development of cinema in Saudi Arabia. H2: Traditional media contributes to supporting the cultural image of Saudi cinema. H3: Digital media contributes to increasing audience interest in Saudi cinema. H4: Forms of media support for Saudi cinema differ according to the media channel used.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a quantitative approach as its primary methodological orientation, selected for its suitability to the research objectives, which include measuring the attitudes and opinions of a youth sample in a numerical and statistically analyzable form. The quantitative method enables the researcher to examine the relationship between media exposure and attitudes toward Saudi cinema in a systematic and objective manner, while allowing for comparative analysis across demographic subgroups. The survey method was used through the distribution of an electronic questionnaire to a sample of youth, with the aim of gathering data that helps understand the role of media in supporting the development of Saudi cinema.

The choice of a quantitative survey approach is also grounded in the study's theoretical orientation. Agenda-Setting Theory makes testable predictions about the relationship between media exposure and the perceived salience of issues in public consciousness. Quantitative measurement is the most appropriate method for testing these predictions, as it allows for the systematic assessment of whether higher levels of media engagement with Saudi cinema are associated with more positive attitudes, greater perceived media support, and higher levels of cinematic interest. The survey instrument was therefore designed to capture both behavioral dimensions—frequency of engagement with cinematic content across different media channels—and attitudinal dimensions—participants' subjective assessments of media's impact on their cinematic interest and mental image of Saudi cinema.

### ***Research Design***

The study belongs to the category of quantitative descriptive research, aiming to measure youth attitudes toward the development of cinema in Saudi Arabia and to identify the role of traditional and digital media in supporting this development. The survey design was adopted as an appropriate research framework, given its capacity for collecting numerical data amenable to statistical analysis and its ability to explain the relationship between media and the formation of audience attitudes toward Saudi cinema. The descriptive-analytical dimension of the design allows for systematic identification of patterns in media consumption, attitude formation, and perceived media influence across the study sample, while also enabling the testing of the study's four hypotheses.

### ***Sampling***

The study population was defined as youth who engage with media content related to Saudi cinema, including news reports, cultural programs, digital content, and festival coverage. A simple random sampling method was adopted, whereby respondents were selected from youth aged 18–30 years, ensuring that all members of the study community had an equal opportunity to participate. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via social media platforms, enabling access to a diverse range of participants representative of the target population's characteristics. The final sample was concentrated in the 23–26 age group, which constituted 72.7% of respondents, with 81.8% at the university educational level, and an approximately equal gender distribution reflecting the diversity of the study community.

### ***Data Collection***

The primary data collection instrument was an electronic questionnaire designed to serve the study's objectives, consisting of closed-ended questions that facilitate obtaining clear and precise answers. The questionnaire was structured around four principal axes: demographic data; level of engagement with cinematic content; nature of interaction with cinematic content; and the role of media and social media platforms in influencing participants' attitudes. The

questionnaire was reviewed by specialists in media studies to verify the clarity of questions and their appropriateness to the research subject. Reliability was verified by applying the questionnaire to a pilot sample and calculating the reliability coefficient using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a high reliability coefficient indicating the instrument's dependability for data collection.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and arithmetic means, with the aim of interpreting the directional tendencies of sample members' responses and answering the study's research questions and testing its hypotheses. Likert scale items (scored 1–5) were employed to measure participants' attitudes toward statements about media influence on Saudi cinema, with means calculated to identify the direction and strength of agreement. Microsoft Excel was used for data organization and analysis. Simple comparative analysis was conducted across demographic categories to identify general differences in patterns of media usage and attitude formation.

## **III. FINDINGS**

The study produced eight substantive findings based on analysis of survey responses from a youth sample, collectively addressing the multiple dimensions of media's role in supporting Saudi cinema development and shaping youth attitudes.

Finding 1 — Saudi Cinema Content Following: The results showed that 72.7% of respondents follow content or news related to Saudi cinema, compared to 27.3% who do not follow this type of content. This finding indicates the presence of a general and significant interest in Saudi cinema among the youth demographic, suggesting that media coverage of Saudi cinema has been successful in creating a broad and engaged audience. The high following rate is consistent with the broader societal transformation that has accompanied Saudi Arabia's cultural opening since

2018 and validates the study's premise that media has played a meaningful role in making Saudi cinema visible and relevant.

**Finding 2 — Dominant Age Group:** Data showed that the 23–26 age group constituted the highest proportion of the sample at 72.7%, reflecting that this cohort is the most actively engaged with cinematic and media content. This finding is significant for understanding the dynamics of Saudi cinema's audience development: the concentration of interest in the young adult age group suggests that generational change is a key driver of cinema's growing societal acceptance, and that digital media platforms—which are most heavily used by this demographic—are particularly central to cinema's expanding reach.

**Finding 3 — Educational Level:** Results revealed that 81.8% of participants belong to the university educational level, which reinforces the reliability of the findings given the elevated media awareness of this group. University students represent a culturally attentive and media-literate segment of the youth population, and their strong engagement with Saudi cinema content suggests that educational level may be a significant variable mediating the relationship between media exposure and cinematic interest.

**Finding 4 — Dominant Media Channel:** Results showed that 63.6% of respondents believe social media platforms are the channel that contributes most to supporting Saudi cinema, while 36.4% believe support comes from both traditional media and social media combined. No respondents identified traditional media alone as the primary support channel. This finding provides direct empirical support for H3 and H4, confirming that digital media—and specifically social media—has emerged as the dominant vehicle for Saudi cinema's public promotion, surpassing traditional broadcast and print media in its perceived impact on youth audiences.

**Finding 5 — Interaction Levels:** Results showed that 81.8% of participants have a medium to high level of interaction with cinematic content (liking,

commenting, sharing), which is a positive indicator of the effectiveness of cinematic media content. This finding suggests that Saudi cinema is not merely passively consumed but actively engaged with through social media participation, amplifying its reach through peer-to-peer content sharing and recommendation. The high interaction rate is consistent with Agenda-Setting Theory's insight that media salience translates into audience engagement.

**Finding 6 — Digital Media and Increased Interest:** The Likert scale results showed that the mean response for the statement 'Digital media has contributed to increasing my interest in Saudi cinema' was 3.45, indicating a moderately positive attitude tending toward agreement. This finding partially confirms H3, suggesting that while digital media's contribution to increasing cinematic interest is real and measurable, it is not yet at the highest levels of influence, potentially because the Saudi cinema ecosystem is still developing and building its audience base incrementally.

**Finding 7 — Mental Image Improvement:** The mean for the statement 'Social media has improved my mental image of Saudi cinema' reached 3.55, reflecting a clear impact of digital media in improving the public image of Saudi cinema. This finding is particularly significant in the context of Saudi cinema's historical trajectory: given the decades during which cinema was absent from Saudi public life and associated with social controversy, the measurable improvement in mental image among youth represents a meaningful cultural shift attributable at least partially to sustained positive media framing. The mean of 3.55 suggests that this shift is ongoing but not yet complete.

**Finding 7b — Influencer Impact:** The mean for the statement 'Influencer opinions affect my decision to watch Saudi films' was 3.36, indicating a notable but moderately influential role for social media personalities in shaping viewing decisions. While this score is lower than those recorded for general media impact and mental image improvement, it nonetheless confirms that the influencer ecosystem has become a

meaningful component of Saudi cinema's promotional media environment. The finding is consistent with the broader literature on digital media and cultural consumption, which documents the growing importance of peer recommendation and parasocial engagement with influencers in shaping cultural choices among young adults.

**Finding 8 — Overall Media Support:** The statement 'I feel that media supports Saudi cinema development in a clear way' recorded the highest mean at 3.91, confirming that the majority of participants perceive the positive role played by media in supporting Saudi cinema. This is the strongest finding in the study and provides the most direct confirmation of H1 and H2. The mean of 3.91 places this statement at the upper end of the moderate-to-high agreement range on the Likert scale, reflecting a broad and clear perception among youth that media—across both traditional and digital channels—is an active and consequential force in Saudi cinema's development. Taken together, the Likert scale results confirm that media plays a facilitative and image-building role in Saudi cinema's ongoing development, with social media emerging as the most salient and impactful channel in the perceptions of the youth sample.

#### **IV. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study is subject to several methodological and contextual limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the geographic scope of the study is confined to Bahrain as the research location, while the subject matter concerns Saudi cinema. Although Bahraini youth—like other Gulf youth—have significant exposure to Saudi cultural content through shared digital media platforms, the findings may not fully represent the attitudes of youth who are embedded in the Saudi cultural and social context directly. The perspectives of Saudi youth living in Saudi Arabia, who experience the cinematic transformation firsthand through access to local cinemas and direct participation in the cultural life described, could differ meaningfully from those of Bahraini respondents.

Second, the sample size, while yielding internally consistent results, was relatively modest. A larger sample with broader demographic representation across age groups, educational levels, and geographic locations within the Gulf would strengthen the statistical reliability and generalizability of the findings. Third, the study relies entirely on self-report questionnaire data, which is subject to standard limitations including social desirability bias and the inability to verify the accuracy of participants' self-assessments of their media usage patterns and attitude formation processes. Fourth, the study's temporal scope is limited to 2025, capturing a single cross-sectional snapshot of attitudes that are in a state of continuous evolution alongside the ongoing development of the Saudi cinema industry.

Fifth, the study's reliance on a convenience sample drawn from a single university-educated, urban youth demographic limits its representativeness of the full range of Saudi and Gulf youth attitudes toward cinema. Rural youth, older adults, and those with lower educational attainment may hold substantially different attitudes toward cinema and media's role in its development. Sixth, the study's focus on attitudinal and perceptual outcomes means that it does not capture behavioral outcomes such as actual cinema attendance rates, streaming subscription patterns, or engagement with local film production, which would provide a more complete picture of media's concrete impact on the Saudi cinematic ecosystem.

Future research is recommended in several directions. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in youth attitudes toward Saudi cinema over extended periods would provide more robust evidence of the long-term effects of media framing on public perception. Comparative studies examining attitudes toward Saudi cinema among youth living inside Saudi Arabia versus Gulf diaspora populations would clarify the role of direct cultural exposure in shaping cinematic attitudes. Content analysis studies specifically examining how different categories of media—news media, entertainment media, social media influencers, and

official institutional communications—frame Saudi cinema and what agenda-setting effects they produce would provide a richer picture of the media ecosystem supporting the industry. Studies incorporating qualitative methods such as focus groups and in-depth interviews alongside quantitative surveys would capture the nuance of cultural attitudes that survey instruments cannot fully access. Finally, research examining the economic dimensions of Saudi cinema's development—including investment patterns, box office performance, and the financial sustainability of local production—would complement the cultural and attitudinal focus of the present study.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the stages of development of Saudi cinema and the role of media in supporting this development, grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory and employing a quantitative survey methodology. The findings confirm that Saudi cinema has undergone a significant and multi-phased evolution: from its early limited beginnings, through a period of societal debate and institutional absence, to the current phase of institutional empowerment and cultural openness that began in earnest following 2018. Each phase has been shaped not only by policy and institutional decisions but also by the media environment within which those decisions were communicated, debated, and socially processed.

The empirical findings of the study provide clear and consistent support for the central claim that media plays a facilitative and image-building role in Saudi cinema's development. With 72.7% of respondents following Saudi cinema content, 63.6% identifying social media as the primary supporting channel, and the highest mean score (3.91) recorded for the statement affirming media's visible support for Saudi cinema development, the data collectively confirm the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory to this cultural context. Media—and particularly digital social media—has not simply reported on Saudi cinema's development but has actively contributed to it by creating audience awareness, shaping positive mental

images, and generating the social interaction and discussion that builds cultural salience.

Agenda-Setting Theory's explanatory power in this context lies precisely in its emphasis on salience transfer: by consistently covering Saudi cinema, featuring Saudi films and filmmakers, and promoting cinematic events such as the Red Sea International Film Festival, media outlets have elevated cinema on the Saudi cultural agenda, making it a topic of broad public interest and discussion. The theory also helps explain why digital media has emerged as more influential than traditional media in this specific domain: social media platforms offer not only one-way agenda-setting but interactive amplification, allowing audiences to participate in the construction of Saudi cinema's cultural salience through their own sharing, commenting, and recommending behaviors.

The study's recommendations include strengthening integration between media and cinematic institutions to produce coordinated and mutually reinforcing communication strategies for Saudi film; intensifying media content related to cinema culture, film criticism, and behind-the-scenes perspectives to deepen audience engagement beyond surface-level awareness; encouraging youth participation in cinema production through media-amplified programs and initiatives; raising media literacy among audiences to help them distinguish between credible and unreliable cinematic information online; and supporting collaborative frameworks between media organizations and filmmakers to expand the reach of local production.

The study's findings also carry important implications for the practical management of Saudi cinema's continued development. The dominant role of social media identified in the data—with 63.6% of respondents identifying social media as the primary supporting channel—suggests that media strategies for promoting Saudi cinema need to be primarily oriented toward digital and social platforms rather than traditional broadcast media. The relatively moderate Likert means for digital media's contribution to



increased cinematic interest (3.45) and mental image improvement (3.55), compared to the higher mean for general media support perception (3.91), suggest that while audiences broadly perceive media as supportive of Saudi cinema, the specific mechanisms of attitude change and image formation are still developing and may benefit from more deliberate and systematic media engagement strategies by cinematic institutions.

In conclusion, Saudi cinema's remarkable transformation over the past decade represents one of the most significant cultural developments in the contemporary Arab world. This study has demonstrated that this transformation is inseparable from the media ecosystem that has accompanied, promoted, and in important ways enabled it. Understanding the precise mechanisms of this media-cinema relationship—and continuing to document its evolution as both the industry and the media environment develop further—represents a rich and consequential agenda for future scholarship in Arab media and cultural studies.

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