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Reassessing Skim Wajib Tayang in Post-COVID Malaysian Cinema: Policy Goals VS Box Office Realities

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation revisits critically the relevance and effectiveness of Skim Wajib Tayang (Compulsory Screening Scheme) in Malaysian cinema during the post-COVID-19 era. Launched in 2005 to make local films accessible for theatrical release, the scheme was intended to cultivate national cinema, creative industries, and cultural representation. Even so, following the trauma of changing viewing patterns, the spike in streaming services, and the patchy industry recovery from pandemic shocks, the scheme has become a contentious policy tool. The debate is not simply one of screen availability but of tensions between cultural policy and economic viability. Players in the industry such as producers and filmmakers have countered that while the scheme was intended to protect local cinema, at other times it has created quota dependency and not creativity or improved film quality. Policymakers see it as being justified as protection of culture for the country, but distributors and exhibitors point to diminished box office value and apathy among viewers. These conflicts raise critical questions: has Skim Wajib Tayang failed to shield local cinema, constrained innovation by privileging quantity over quality, or simply become irrelevant in an era where audiences increasingly bypass cinemas altogether? This research combines qualitative interviewing of filmmakers, policy-makers, and distributors with quantitative box office trends and pattern analysis (2020–2025). Grounded in cultural policy theories, creative industries research, and economics of film, it assesses the scheme's commercial and cultural impact. By positioning Skim Wajib Tayang within national cinema survival issues, cultural protectionism, and globalisation, this dissertation has answers not only pertinent to the academy but to Malaysian policymakers such as FINAS. The findings will not only inform future cultural policy reforms but also offer an academic perspective to a practitioner-led industry discussion of the urgent issue of whether Skim Wajib Tayang remains a cultural guardian or commercial barrier. your abstract here. Use single spacing. Abstracts are typically written in a range of 250 to 300 words. The abstract should be clear, descriptive, and provide brief information about the problem. A statement regarding the methodology and a summary of results should generally follow this. The abstract should conclude with a comment on the significance of the results or a summary.

Keywords: *Skim Wajib Tayang; Cultural policy; Malaysian cinema; post-COVID film industry; Creative industries.*

INTRODUCTION

The film industry in Malaysia has long been embroiled in national cultural imaginings, state interventionism, and international market imperatives. Since 2005, *Skim Wajib Tayang* (Compulsory Screening Scheme) has operated as a state-led program to guarantee the theatrical release of indigenous films. Managed by the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS), the scheme obliges the operation of cinema theatres to reserve screening slots for Malaysia-produced films that are approved, aiming to secure indigenous content as well as promote domestic innovation (FINAS, 2019). It arose at the moment that foreign films more noticeably Hollywood as well as Hong Kong-produced films, were taking over the screens locally, pressuring indigenous cinema both commercially as well as culturally (Md Isa et al., 2020).

The *Skim Wajib Tayang* policy reflected broader cultural policy ideals in Malaysia: to strengthen national identity, to promote home-grown cultural industries, as well as to democratise access to indigenous cultural materials (Miller & Yúdice, 2002). As a cultural intervention, it worked to align market imperatives with imperatives of cultural protectionism such that the audiences in Malaysia were consistently exposed to stories that represented their social lives as well as the richness of their languages. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, nevertheless, disrupted such assumptions. Long-term closure of cinema halls, the explosion of over-the-top (OTT) streaming services such as Netflix, Disney Hotstar, as well as Viu, as well as the fluctuating preference of audiences towards home-centric entertainments re-defined the extent of film consumption limitations (Tryon, 2021; Lobato, 2019).

Recovery since the pandemic has revealed that there are deeper structural problems. Even with the reopening of movie theaters, audience numbers are still smaller compared to the pre-2020 situation, and local productions can't compete with international releases that enjoy larger marketing budgets as well as audience goodwill (Fatimah Muhd Shukri et al., 2024). The *Skim Wajib Tayang* continues to function as a gatekeeping tool, but most practitioners doubt that screen time guarantee equates to tangible visibility or economic success. What these challenges most highlight is the question of the scheme's present utility in the digital distribution-centric world of media convergence that we live in. Culturally, the *Skim Wajib Tayang* embodies the persistent trade-off between protection and participation a dynamic that defines weak national film industries (Hjort & Petrie, 2007). Originally rationalised as a developmental policy to nurture indigenous skills, the operation of the *"Skim"* increasingly intersects with neoliberal market imperatives and fragmented audiences. The consequence is a multifaceted policy environment wherein cultural objective, economic rationality, and creative practice are perennially mediated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research are likely to reveal that *Skim Wajib Tayang* occupies an increasingly complicated position in Malaysia's post-COVID film landscape. While established to guarantee screen access for local films, the scheme appears to have lost much of its intended impact in a market reshaped by shifting audience behaviour, intensified digital consumption, and an industry still struggling with the aftershocks of the pandemic. The perspectives gathered from filmmakers, producers, distributors, exhibitors, and policymakers are anticipated to highlight both the symbolic value of the scheme and its practical shortcomings, producing a nuanced understanding of its role in

Malaysian cinema today.

One of the clearest themes expected to emerge is the divergence in how different stakeholder groups interpret the relevance of *Skim Wajib Tayang*. Policymakers are likely to view the scheme as a necessary cultural safeguard, arguing that without mandated screenings many Malaysian films especially those produced independently or representing minority narratives would have little chance of being shown in cinemas dominated by foreign blockbusters. For them, the scheme is a statement of cultural sovereignty and a tool for promoting national identity. However, practitioners within the industry are anticipated to adopt a more critical stance. Filmmakers and producers are likely to express concern that, although the scheme ensures a film is screened, it does not ensure meaningful visibility. Exhibitors commonly fulfil their obligation through minimal scheduling, offering screenings at limited showtimes or non-peak hours, which reduces the cultural and commercial reach of the films. This practice, often described informally within the industry as symbolic compliance, reveals the gap between policy intention and practical implementation.

The post-COVID environment is expected to intensify these concerns. Audience habits changed dramatically during the pandemic, with streaming platforms quickly becoming the preferred mode of film consumption. Even after the reopening of cinemas, many Malaysians have retained their preference for digital or at-home viewing, making it increasingly difficult for local films to draw consistent theatrical audiences. As a result, *Skim Wajib Tayang* appears misaligned with contemporary viewing patterns. The guaranteed screening window no longer equates to meaningful exposure, as audiences may wait for films to appear on platforms such as Netflix, Disney Hotstar, or Viu. Many film practitioners foreseeably describe this shift as rendering the scheme increasingly outdated, suggesting that a policy rooted in theatrical exhibition is inadequate for ensuring cultural participation in a digital-first film environment.

Another anticipated finding is the perception that the scheme unintentionally encourages quantity over quality. Because the policy guarantees screening slots, some producers may prioritise completing films quickly rather than ensuring strong narrative development, technical excellence, or market readiness. This could lead to what stakeholders describe as “quota films” productions made to exploit the compulsory screening benefit rather than to engage audiences meaningfully. Distributors and exhibitors are likely to emphasise that films lacking strong storytelling or promotional strategies perform poorly at the box office, reinforcing the commercial risks associated with screening local films. This perceived decline in quality risks further alienating audiences, creating a negative cycle where poor turnout leads exhibitors to allocate even less favourable screening conditions, diminishing the impact of the scheme.

These anticipated findings highlight a broader structural misalignment between cultural policy and market realities. While *Skim Wajib Tayang* was designed under the assumption that cinema halls are the central platform for cultural engagement, the Malaysian film market has become increasingly hybrid, with theatrical and digital distribution now intertwined. Exhibitors, still recovering from pandemic-related financial losses, are likely to prioritise films with higher commercial potential, which often means foreign blockbusters. Their reluctance to allocate prime time slots to local films stems from economic necessity rather than cultural disregard. This tension between commercial logic and cultural responsibility suggests that the scheme may no longer function effectively in its current form.

At the same time, the research is expected to reveal an emerging consensus among stakeholders that *Skim Wajib Tayang* should not be abolished but reformed. Participants across the industry would likely express the need for the scheme to adapt to Malaysia’s evolving media environment. Proposed reforms may include expanding the scheme to cover streaming platforms, implementing a curation or

quality assessment process before films qualifies for compulsory screening or offering tax incentives and subsidies to exhibitors who provide better screening conditions for local films. Others may argue for stronger marketing support for Malaysian films so that compulsory screening is complemented by audience engagement efforts. These suggestions reflect a desire to shift the scheme from a rigid protection mechanism toward a more holistic cultural strategy.

Ultimately, the foreseeable discussion points to a central tension: *Skim Wajib Tayang* still holds cultural value but faces structural challenges in delivering commercial outcomes. It continues to serve as a symbolic protector of Malaysian cinema, but symbolic protection is insufficient in an era defined by digital consumption and globalised media flows. The findings indicate that the scheme must evolve if it is to remain meaningful its future effectiveness depends on whether it can reconcile its cultural mission with the realities of contemporary film distribution and shifting audience expectations.

In summary, while the scheme remains an important part of Malaysia's cultural policy landscape, it requires significant rethinking to address the demands of a post-pandemic film economy. The research will provide insights that can guide policymakers, especially FINAS, in developing more adaptive and sustainable approaches to supporting national cinema in a rapidly changing media environment.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to reassess the relevance and effectiveness of *Skim Wajib Tayang* within the rapidly changing post-COVID Malaysian film landscape. Once designed as a protective mechanism to ensure that local films received fair access to cinema screens, the scheme now operates in an environment reshaped by shifting audience behaviour, the dominance of streaming platforms, and the fragile recovery of theatrical exhibition. Through the perspectives of filmmakers, producers, distributors, exhibitors, and policymakers, the study reveals that while the scheme retains symbolic and cultural importance, its practical impact has weakened significantly.

The findings highlight a growing disconnect between the scheme's original purpose and the realities of Malaysia's hybrid film ecosystem. Stakeholders agree that guaranteed screenings no longer translate into meaningful audience reach, largely due to low cinema turnout and minimal exhibitor commitment. Issues of limited showtimes, poor marketing support, and the persistence of "quota films" further challenge the scheme's credibility. Despite these concerns, industry voices consistently affirm that the scheme should not be abandoned; rather, it must be reformed to reflect contemporary modes of film consumption.

This research contributes to ongoing national conversations about cultural protectionism, creative industry sustainability, and the future of Malaysian cinema. It underscores the need for a modernised version of *Skim Wajib Tayang* one that integrates digital platforms, incentivises quality filmmaking, and strengthens collaboration between policymakers and industry stakeholders. Ultimately, the study concludes that the scheme can still serve as a cultural guardian, but only if it evolves beyond its traditional theatrical framework and embraces the realities of a post-pandemic, digitally driven film industry.

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