FILM CENSORSHIP AND ITS RELEVANCE
IN MODERN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The censorship within films can be identified through the modifying of certain contents in films that are regarded inappropriate by the censors, and the value judgment for the suitability of the contents to be censored vary depending on the country. The Malaysian Censorship Board believes that censorship is integral in upholding moral stands and in avoiding sensitive issues, which might stimulate unrest in the country. To function along line with the government’s needs, censorship plays the gatekeeper in what information and cultural value is being transmitted to the viewers. With the advancement of technology, it has made censorship harder to be controlled. The creation of DVD and video releases has increased the challenge of film censorship. It has caused a greater risk of underage viewing in a less controlled domestic environment. Despite the censorship, Malaysians today are still able to access the original films easily through the internet. With that in mind, is film censorship still relevant in Malaysian today compared to the past decades? The present study shows that film censorship is still very relevant in this modern society and is essential in the country. Not only in protecting the upcoming generation but also to avoid the outbreak of obscenity in films. Instead of abolishing film censorship which is important to the society, audiences should understand the film censorship system more.

Keywords: Film, Censorship, Malaysia, Relevance, Importance.
INTRODUCTION:
The infancy of the Malaysian Film industry is dated to as far back as the 1930s. The very first Malaysian film production was Laila Majnun which was directed by B.S.Rajhans in 1933 (Amizah, Chang, Jamaluddin, 2009). This particular industry has grown tremendously over the decades with an impressive tally of over 400-500 film productions up till this date. According to the FINAS official site, FINAS, known also as the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia has been a solid backbone to the Malaysian film industry since the 1980s under the Film Development Corporation Act, 1981 (Act 244) as they aim to advance and propel the industry by any means possible. Initially placed under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage in 2004, followed by Unity Culture, Arts and Heritage in 2008, FINAS was ultimately placed under the watch of the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture in April 2008.

The censorship within films can be identified through the modifying of certain contents in films that are regarded inappropriate by the censors, and the value judgment for the suitability of the contents to be censored vary depending on the country. It is common knowledge that in the world, North Korea ranks first when it comes to censorship. (World Press Freedom Index Ranking, 2011) Given that every media outlet there has no form of autonomy and is owned entirely by its government added with the anti-West propaganda it practices, films there have the utmost stringent censorship policies and international films are practically non-existent. Comparatively, Malaysia does not incorporate such severe measures in its censorship policies. Nonetheless, it is still an issue that is slowly but surely taking precedence in the country as it tries to adapt to a modern, globalizing country.

Malaysia can be reputed for being one of the states with the strictest media censorship, having more than 100 movies banned over the past decade solely on the pretence of upholding morality for the sake of its community of viewers. Nevertheless, given the accelerating pace of technological advancement, the Malaysian media is placed in a precarious predicament, as it has been immensely difficult to contain and fully practice film and media censorship properly. Film censorship in Malaysia had been believed to stem from two main factors, which are politics and religion (Fuziah Kartini & Raja Ahmad Alauddin, 2003). As a result of those factors, Malaysia was ranked 141 in the Worldwide Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders and was deemed —Partly Free[ on the Freedom in the World report by Freedom House, 2008. The Film Censorship Board of Malaysia, which was established in 2008, is the government agency responsible for granting licenses to international films for viewing in the country. Malaysia believes that censorship is integral in upholding moral stands and in avoiding sensitive issues, which might stimulate unrest in the country. (Amizah, Chang, Jamaluddin, 2009). As a country that is in the state of pushing to modernize into a First World Country, Malaysia has to juggle between keeping abreast with the bloom of incessant information exchange necessary for growth and maintaining grip on its cultural tenets, which is a perplexing situation. Striking a balance in censorship that brings all stakeholders into acquiesces and doesn’t compromise any party is the ideal outcome in handling censorship issues in Malaysia.

The censorship board in the country has little tolerance for nudity, sex, strong language, graphic violence or religious sentiments. Films are fundamentally divided into 3 categories of permissibility which are; U, for general viewing, PG-13; for age 13 and above and 18, which are further divided into 4 subcategories, namely 18PL, 18SX, 18PA, and 18SG. These different categories signify different elements that are censored which are deemed unfit for particular audiences. (terramedia.co.uk). Although there are these film censorship categories to filter Malaysian audiences that are 18 years of age, who are deemed not yet rationally matured, there still exists censorship for movies labeled 18+ and above. This is definitely an obstruction of Malaysians’ rights to enjoy full entertainment privileges. However, the ever-growing prominence of the Internet has facilitated easy access to most forms of unfiltered and unadulterated media.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has made the Internet even more important as means for accessibility to entertainment with the promise of no Internet censorship in the nation. (Clara Chooi, 2011). Hence piracy and downloading media from the internet is escalating as a means to appease the unsatisfied Malaysian audiences. Modernization has caused film censorship in Malaysia to lose its core purpose. Despite having censorship, audience are still constantly being influenced by the international films from all around the world. The present study aims to determine the role and effectiveness of censorship in Malaysia in correlation to the rapid growth in technology apart from reconsidering its relevance in today’s world. The study will also aim to find out the benefits of eradicating censorship in Malaysia and what such move will do for its country and its people.

Film censorship has many areas where its efficacy can be questioned and the way censorship has been done in Malaysia has not been remodeled to reach higher effectiveness in the current society. This study will explore...
and explain film censorship in Malaysia thoroughly while pursuing a better model for the audience. This study is designed to cover the understanding of the Malaysian film censorship system and its governing body thoroughly. Besides that, it studies the understanding of this system from the general public as well as how the public perceive the system which directly affects the effectiveness of the system. It also covers the relevance of film censorship from the pass till today.

INTRODUCTION OF MALAYSIAN FILM CENSORSHIP:
According to Amizah, Chang, Jamaluddin (2009) film censorship has gone through a long evolutionary process. Since the times of classical theatre, censorship has existed indirectly. One of the earliest theatrical plays that had gone through the censorship system in Malaysia is bangsawan, (Malay classical theatre) and Chinese Mendu theatre (Kadir, 1988).
Censorship later implemented as a form of control after a publication which became the catalyst for Malaya’s censorship system and policy, namely an article entitled —The Cinema in The East: Factor in the Spread of Communism] by Sir Hesketh-Bell in The Times dated September 18, 1926 (Bell 1926). Any decision to ban or to cut parts of a film shall be informed to the owner of the film in writing, and details shall be provided on the scene to be cut. The owner then replies in writing whether he agrees to the cuts and that the scenes to be cut by himself or by the censor. If he chooses to cut the scenes himself, the film has to be submitted to the Censorship Board again for review. If the owner disagrees with the cut, he has the rights to appeal to the Censorship Appeal Committee (Koeck, C., 1954-1958).
According to Amizah (2008), most films are censored by the Film Censorship Board dealt to three sensitive issues which are religious, cultural and moral values. Some of the shows that were censored and banned due to religious issue were Noor Islam in 1960, RumahItuDuniaku in 1964 and Fantasia in 1991. In the cultural aspect, Durjana (around 1960's) and Amuk in 1995 were censored. Contradicting moral values was AkademiSeni(totally banned) in 1988.

AUTHORITY BEHIND FILM CENSORSHIP IN MALAYSIA:
The authority behind film censorship in Malaysia is known as the Film Censorship Board which is directly under the Home Ministry of Malaysia. The Film Censorship Act in Malaysia has gone through a long evolutionary road since the day the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia was established.
According to Nichols (2006), the Malaysian government realized that the film industry plays a big role in educating and impacting the society. With that said, the government sees the need to control all the forms of films screened in public by filtering the content that might impact lives of Malaysian citizens indirectly and directly to avoid a potential harm to the Malaysian society. This is why the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia plays a huge role in film censoring matters related to sensitive issues such as the religion, sexual and violence since the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia was established.
Films that are censored in Malaysia are usually based on its content that touches sensitive issues such as the religious and cultural issues which might offend certain parties, immoral and indecent scenes that are unsuitable for viewing especially to the younger crowd, or even violent acts that might influence or impact the child growth of the younger generation in Malaysia. It has been proven that children who are growing and maturing tend to seek and to learn through what they see and what they hear. Such acts portrayed by films might indirectly stunt the growth of a healthy child by inserting negative images and thinking. Therefore, the Film Censorship Board plays a huge role in filtering and censoring films to avoid severe damage done to the growth of the younger generation. Moreover, they play an important role in ensuring that such sensitive issues are censored to avoid displeasure and dissatisfaction from any parties of the public. (Amizah, Chang, Jamaluddin, 2009).

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURE:
The Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture (MICCCM) is a newly formed ministry which combines three previous ministries together, namely the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage and also the Communications sector from the Ministry of Energy, Water and Communications. This was decided by YB Dato’ Sri Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak who became the 6th Prime Minister of Malaysia on 3 April 2009. YB Dato’ Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim is currently the Minister of MICCM. He has been in charge of the post since 2009.
This Ministry is divided into three sectors: Information Sector, Culture Sector and Communications Sector. The management and support services of the ministry on the other hand are placed under the control of the
Management sector, which is a separated administration based subdivision. Each sector branches into different divisions so as to provide better services according to each affiliate. Besides that, the Ministry also comprises quite a sum of departments and agencies related to its industry. Malaysian National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) and Malaysian National Film Department are agencies under the umbrella of the ministry.

WHY IS CENSORSHIP NEEDED?

The government in Malaysia is set to control all forms of films shown to the people as they are afraid the contents might enter intimately into the lives of the people and impacts them closely (Nichols, 2006). To function along with the government’s needs, censorship plays a role as a gatekeeper in what information and cultural value is being transmitted to the viewers. A socially-ill representation in a film influences the minds of viewers. Being exposed to such culture, allows the thought that it is a social norm to behave so. Depiction of graphic violence on film shapes social behavior, especially in young people, and that therefore its circulation needs to be controlled. (Kochberg, S., 2007). Media violence is recognized as a potential contributor to the increase of antisocial attitudes in children and adolescents (Ledingham, Ledingham, & Richardson, 1993). Censorship or control of religious, cultural and moral values in films has to be done in Malaysia. In Malaysia, films are regarded as a government arm, and therefore films must function in line with the government’s needs (Kartini & Alauddin, 2003). If a film was found hostile towards the government’s policies and aspirations, the films had to be censored or banned from public viewing. Film censorship systems and policies in Malaysia were created when the government wanted to control all forms of entertainment shown to the people. From the days on what can and cannot be staged by bangsawan and continued into films, censorship remained and grew along (Amizah, Chang, Jamaluddin, 2009)

Censorship is not only being a form of control of the flow of public information in Malaysia but in other countries too. With the beginning of World War II, The Ministry of Information was set up in the UK to control the flow of public information. They had direct role in film censorship for the sake of national security. It also functions to prepare the public at home and abroad for the preparation and issue of national propaganda. The Films Division of the Ministry of Information even conveyed the _do-s and don’t-s_ to commercial film-makers (Kochberg, S., 2007).

Ireland also censored films and newsreels during World War II, fearing that the portal of events or nations in any light could inflame public opinion and thus compromise Irish neutrality (Rokett, K., 2004). Not only Ireland, the United States of America has a need for censorship as well. Catholic groups in the US go against films they feel are an affront to Catholicism. They believe these films would cause moral panics. Two recent films that were crusaded by the Catholics are Priest (1995) and Dogma (1999). This shows the need of censorship in films around the world (Kochberg, S., 2007).

According to Poole (1993), it is rational that one should try to impose censorship with regard to children. People may have different thoughts and judgment on pornography but they come as one in protecting children in such obscenity. Censorship is to restrict access, because it is illogical to say that one considers something obscene while maintaining that it may not be obscene for someone else. Obscenity is a moral judgment.

THE ROLE OF FILM CENSORSHIP IN MALAYSIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES:

In Malaysia, film censorship is controlled by the Film Censorship Board which is placed under the power of the Home Ministry. The role of film censorship was revised in 2002, an updated version of the Film Censorship Act. Any film that is to be screened by the cinemas in Malaysia must be certified by the Board of Film Censorship. Under the legal law, no one is to be allowed to watch any film that isn’t licensed by the Board. As for the people who do, they will stand a chance in facing legal sanctions. This Board would watch all the films to censor films which might infringe any religious, political, cultures and moral values before the film is screened and check whether its content is acceptable for Malaysians. Once the film is of the standards of the Film censorship board of Malaysia, only then will they be approved and will be allowed to be screened in Malaysia. There are some films that are banned by the Board of Film Censorship such as “Bruno” and “The Prince of Egypt” to name a few. This is because those following films are deemed not to have satisfied the rules of Film Censorship of Malaysia.

Since April 2010, there are specific categories set by the Board to categorize the different types of audiences such as U is for all age to watch and can be screened at anytime. While PG13 which is needed parental guidance for the audience who under 13 and is not allowed to screen between 6.00 am to 10.00 am (weekdays) and 6.00 pm to 12.00 pm (weekends). The last type is the 18 which is only allowed for aged of 18 and above and only
allow been screened between 10.00 pm to 6.00 am. The 18 series consists of 18SG, 18PL, 18PA and 18SX. Here are some examples of the reasons behind the films being censored. For example, Piranha 3D in 2010, about 6 minutes of sexual content, naked and frightening scene have been censored and the 3D version was deemed to be not suitable for Malaysians. The film, the ‘—Mechanic’ [Titles are to be quoted] in 2011 faced the same violation as Piranha 3D as many parts of the film contains sexual and nudity content. As for Scream 4 in 2011, the Board feels that it has too many bloody and violent scenes and hence it was censored heavily. All About Love in 2011 which heavily discussed about the topic: lesbian, it was also deemed to be illegal in Malaysia, and hence, it was censored partially.

Even the Board has a set of rules for the aged 18 and above category. Even if the censorship category has been divided into several age groups, for the aged 18 and above, who are believed to be able to make their own judgments, films from this category are still being censored especially when it comes to nudity and sexual contents. This very point is heavily objected by the audiences who are aged 18 and above as they feel that it is meaningless to have the different categories of censorship altogether. A full entertainment experience is not achieved at the end of the day as it is too strict of a rule that has been set by the government. This resulted in a very dissatisfied consumer al over Malaysia.

The film censorship section in the United States has an association with the Motion Picture Association of America, similar with the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia which ultimately functions to censor films accordingly before its screened. They too have different categories of audiences to differentiate and rate the types of films suitable for different types of audiences; only, it has slight differences with the categories in Malaysia. The difference is that in the United States, people of the age 17 are allowed to watch films which contain strong violence and nudity content.

The scope of United States in censorship is a lot different compared with Malaysia. Westernized culture of the United States allowed for the nudity, sexual, violent, bloody content to be widely accepted by all as only part of entertainment. This includes topics of films that include sensitive issues such as lesbian, gay, political and religious issues. In the United States, some states even legally permit the marriage of the same sex. This is because the United States is society which practices freedom of speech, equal rights and individuality.

In Singapore, all the films must be based of the Films Act of 1981 through the importing, making, distributing and exhibiting of the films. Singapore's film censorship has similar categories to differentiate the types of film just like United States and Malaysia. However, in Singapore, there is a slight different category which is the R21, whereby it is only for the aged 21 and above and also the NC16, for audiences aged 16 and above. This has proven that Singapore practices a more strict regulatory for film censorship. Besides that, according to the Singaporean film censorship, if the film contains any issues that are likely to cause controversy in Singapore, it would be immediately banned. Not only is Singapore very strict with its films, its government has also enforced certain acts against the films which contain sensitive issues.

PROBLEMS FACED BY CENSORSHIP:

One of the problems is that the film industry is an industry of ambiguity and uncertainty. There are a number of small, independent financed digital filmmakers without license, shooting permitors state support. These filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, James Lee and Ho Yuhang lack experience in the guidelines for censorship, their standards are volatile and inconsistent. Their processing is inefficient, slow, not transparent, unprofessional and unfriendly. (Wee. G.L.H., 200x).

Besides so, Malaysia is a country with multiple religions and races. In the midst of deciding parts to censor or approve, there are multiple types of publics that they will have to please. For example, Noor Islam was censored on the grounds that it was derogatory to the Hindu religion (Hussin, H., 2004). Another film named Fantasia was banned on the other hand for contradicting Islamic principles. Even after appealing, the four religious advisors and mufti (Muslim clerics) still had the film banned (Hassan, W., 1994). Even in the States, Catholic groups pressures films to be banned and censored. They pressured the film makers to the point that they boycott the parent company that produced those films. In this case, it was Disney, the parent company of the US distributor Miramax (Kochberg, S., 2007).

With the advancement of technology, it has made censorship harder to be controlled. The creation of DVD and video releases has increased the challenge of film censorship. It has caused a greater risk of underage viewing in a less controlled domestic environment (Kochberg, S., 2007).

In Malaysia and many parts of the world, humans live with the freedom of expression. This includes the freedom of expression in films. Some films are made in the sense of documentaries to portray to the world on what is really out there in the world. However, every film has to go through the censorship board. The question
is how just is the censorship board? All media are government-controlled, directly through ownership, or indirectly through politically-connected individuals. Only officially sanctioned viewpoints are aired, and little space is given to marginalized groups and communities (Randhawa, Puah and Loone, 2005).

Censorship is said to control the flow of information that would be viewed by the public. It is to avoid causing moral panics, to protect national security or even to be in line with government motives but people now are their own gatekeepers. Humanity has evolved from being weak willed robots to individual gatekeepers. The audiences have alternate choices to satisfy their own needs and gratification (Katz, 1959).

Not only that people are becoming more selective towards the information that they take in, it becomes a question on what is right and wrong. The audience judges for themselves. According to John Grogan (1981), the subject of sex and violence in the media generates controversy at whatever level and from whatever angle it is approached: Does it harm the reader or viewer? How far ought the law to go in imposing controls? Where is the dividing line between art and pornography? These were questions stated by Grogan (1981) and indeed what is seen as art to someone may seem total different to someone else. Even if they are from the same society, living under the same culture, every human being has different level of acceptance. Public opinion about censorship issues changes frequently, but legislation on film and video classification only changes when politicians perceive a critical mass of public opinion, or if another political jurisdiction is making changes which are attracting media attention (Home, G. S., 1997). He states that the resistance to change is due in part to the failure of the polity to deal constructively with representations of sex and violence in entertainment media, and with censorship. Some people tend to overreact to issues and people who step forward in the public arena to discuss censorship are attacked, sometimes on a personal level. In these issues, the media tend to be biased as well (Home, G. S., 1997).

Working along the lines of the uses and gratifications theory, Malaysian audience is slowly growing whereby internet has become an aid where Malaysians would get any form of media at anytime and anywhere that has internet access. This theory is meant to have a user/audience-centered approach. In other words, even with the existence of film censorship, the audience is still able to watch any film of their choice without censorship through the internet or by downloading the film. Through other form of media besides the cinema, people are actually enjoying a more convenient and cheaper method despite it is questionable on its legitimacy. Another drawback would be the audience would not be able to enjoy the ambience of a theatre which comes with great sound and visual effects.

U&G (Users & Gratification) theory states that the audiences are active compared with the Magic Bullet theory. It is assume that audiences to be active to interpret and integrate media into their own lives. People have the responsible in choosing the type of media to meet their needs and requirements. Even Malaysia as a country which has one of the strictest media censorship compared with other countries, the approach suggests that people would use alternative media to fulfill specific gratifications. This shows that people start to be more active to search for what they desire. They can select the film of their choice which is censorship free to enjoy the original film entirely. This is because censorship on the internet is not as strict compared to on theatres and downloads are easily accessible through numerous websites. The theory suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. This theory also assumes that the audiences have alternate choice to satisfy their needs and gratification. (Katz, 1959)

There have been more than 100 films censored in the past decade such as "The Mechanic", "Underworld: Awakening" and plenty more. Despite the censorship, Malaysians today are still able to access the original film easily through the internet. With that in mind, is film censorship still relevant in Malaysian today compared to the past decades?

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

In this study, a comprehensive set of questionnaire consisting 29 questions with 4 separate sections were given out to a total of 250 respondents from five different cinema locations all over Malaysia. The first section of the questionnaire consisted the Section A: Demographics; leading to a filter question at question 12, dividing the focus group into people who thinks that film censorship is either necessary or not. The next section, Section B: Film Censorship is Necessary in Malaysia. This section aims to learn why Malaysians think its necessary to
apply a strict film censorship regulation in Malaysian entertainment industry. Section C: Film Censorship is Not Necessary in Malaysia. This section aims to gather data for Malaysian audience who believe that Film Censorship in Malaysia is irrelevant. Insights about why they think its unnecessary and whether or should be abolished. Section D: Control Questions; requires all respondents to answer questions from this section. This section is to learn about the level of exposure of Malaysians to film censorship in Malaysia.

KEY FINDINGS:

After analyzing film censorship in Malaysia and the awareness of the public in film censorship, it could be concluded that most people do not understand how does film censorship really works. It is agreed that film censorship is still relevant to this modern society.

Film censorship is still very important today to protect the younger generation from scenes with too much violence or too much sexual explicit. The older audiences may be able to accept or even understand that films are a form of entertainment, children may still act according to what they have learned in the theatres. Revealing too much to them at a young age may result to horrible social outcomes. Imagine kindergarten students killing each other as they are revealed to “Happy Tree Friends”. They learn and imitate the killing methods and the gore of the filmed animation.

Adding to that, respondents reveal that people misunderstand film censorship, especially in the differences of classification and censorship. Classification of class is not film censorship. Categorizing films for different age groups solely mean that children below that age are not mentally prepared to understand the show. They will not be matured enough to accept the show as entertainment only. For example, pre-marital sex usually does not appear in U class (for general viewing) as they avoid kids or teens to be involved in pre-marital sex, aside from ensuring a wider audience base. The Film Censorship Board would not want teenagers today to see it as a social norm.

Censorship is not only meant for the audience but is directed to film producers, scriptwriters, film directors, cinematographers, media importers etc. With censorship guidelines for them, the films will not cross the boundaries which are set by the Malaysian law. Indeed with the upcoming of self-censorship, local producers and film importers would know what to be filmed or what shows are suitable to be imported. Despite audience may want more spice in a show, there is a need to have certain restrains or all shows will have elements of pornography to increase its amount of ticket sales. It is a sad truth that sex appeal is one of the most appealing methods and film makers do make use of this point.

Instead of abolishing film censorship, film censorship board should raise its awareness on what do they really do to the public. Without better understanding on how film is actually censored or why are they censored, audience would not understand why the film censorship board spend so much time and money in censoring a film. It is to protect the next generation and to stay incline with the governmental laws and policies. Besides so, Malaysia is an Islamic country and therefore, films have to follow to a certain level of Islamic guidelines and boundaries.

The film censorship board can actually hold exhibitions and fairs at universities and high schools as most cinema goers'falls are under that category. Besides that, these students will someday grow up to young adults and adults who would still watch films in the future. Educating them on the importance of film censorship and the reason behind every move in the film censorship board would make the audience value the censorship system.

Another alternative to increase awareness of film censorship is providing articles in the newspapers on what does the film censorship board does. They can even include what are the recent censored films and how much they really censored and reasoning behind every censored scene. This will allow audience to understand why a scene is censored and also understand that the Film Censorship Board does not really censor a lot of scenes but just a little. Not a whole lot of a show is actually taken out of the show.

CONCLUSION:

In a nutshell, the study shows that film censorship is still very relevant in this modern society and is essential in the country. Not only in protecting the upcoming generation but also to avoid the outbreak of obscenity in films. Instead of abolishing film censorship which is important to the society, audiences should understand the film censorship system more.

As for censorship guidelines, it will be wise to ensure that censorship do not take away the essence of any film that undergoes censorship. Certain scenes of violence or nudity in films hold important pieces of plot points in
the progression of the entire film. To ensure audience does not miss scenes such as these, appointing the right people of the right caliber in the censorship board would be critical to discern the best way or method to implement an unbiased level of censorship that would benefit Malaysians as a whole.

REFERENCES:


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