

The Motivation to Watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) among Malaysian Audiences

Mohd Syuhaidi Abu Bakar*, Nur Izzah Musfirah Musyadi

Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Selangor Branch,
Puncak Perdana Campus, 40150, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: izzahmusfirah528@gmail.com

Corresponding Author Email: mohdsyuhaidi@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

This study analyzes the motivations behind Malaysians' decision to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020). The aim is to examine whether aspects such as genre, actors, and directors influence viewers' choices to watch the film. *Prebet Sapu* (also known by its English title, Hail, Driver!) was selected as Malaysia's entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 94th Academy Awards in Los Angeles in 2022. The film portrays the realities of Malaysian life, addressing societal issues, including political concerns. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted interviews with 10 informants to explore various perspectives on why Malaysians are motivated to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020). The findings reveal that genre, actors, and several other factors such as the film's trailer, the film's review, the film's poster, the film's storyline, audience feedback, the color usage, and the film's marketing contribute to the motivation to watch the film. The study concludes that viewers are drawn to *Prebet Sapu* (2020) for its genre, cast, and a range of additional influencing elements.

Keywords: Oscar, *Prebet Sapu*, Film, Malaysia

Introduction and Research Problem

According to M. Fazmi Hisham et al. (2019), films serve as a medium that effectively conveys messages and moral values to audiences. As highlighted by Muhd Al-Khawarizme Mohamed Zawawi (2021), the global film industry has continuously evolved since the 1960s, originating from moving images. The first recorded motion image, capturing a running horse, was discovered by a British photographer, marking the transition of film quality from rudimentary beginnings to more sophisticated advancements.

Prebet Sapu (2020) is a local production and the debut film of Muzzamer Rahman, narrating the story of a young writer who loses his source of income and resorts to working as a modern taxi driver to sustain his livelihood in Kuala Lumpur. According to Serimah Mohd Sallehuddin (2021), despite being produced on a modest budget of only RM500,000 (approximately USD 113,765), the film was selected by the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia

(FINAS) to represent Malaysia at the 94th Academy Awards in Los Angeles, United States, in 2022.

Audiences are the backbone of Malaysia's film industry, and in order for a film to reach greater heights, it must be able to captivate and sustain viewers' interest. As noted by Low and Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud (2018), a compelling film genre plays a crucial role in attracting audiences. Additionally, given that films are a form of entertainment, audiences are willing to spend money on films that provide them with enjoyment. Among local film enthusiasts, the most favored genre is action. This is evident from the record-breaking box office earnings of *Mat Kilau* (2022), directed by Syamsul Yusof, which grossed more than RM97 million. As widely recognized, *Mat Kilau* (2022) is an action film. Other action films such as *Polis Evo 2* (2018) and *Paskal* (2018) also achieved significant box office success, earning RM22.45 million and RM28.98 million, respectively. Despite the introduction of various genres, action films continue to dominate Malaysia's film industry (Azma MI, 2022).

According to Ubong Imang (2015), the increasing audience turnout for a film is influenced by the cast. As noted by Maszuhaira Sarimin (2022), film producers place great emphasis on selecting actors, considering not only their talent but also their physical appearance and on-screen presence. Actors with appealing physical features often have a large social media following, which can significantly contribute to film promotion. However, there is ongoing debate regarding the emphasis on appearance in casting decisions. Critics argue that relying solely on an actor's looks, rather than their acting skills and experience, can negatively impact character portrayal and the overall storyline (Syafiqah Jalal, 2022).

Jantin (2007) highlights that directors hold significant authority over all aspects of film production, including conceptualization and narrative development. Consequently, audiences often recognize a director's signature style based on recurring elements in their works. For instance, director Syamsul Yusof is renowned for consistently delivering box office hits, despite working across different genres. His horror film *Munafik* (2016) grossed RM19.04 million, while his action film *Mat Kilau* (2022) achieved RM97 million in revenue. This demonstrates that a director's popularity and distinctive style significantly influence audience motivation to watch a film. However, emerging directors, such as *Prebet Sapu* (2020) director Muzzamer Rahman, often struggle to establish themselves in the local film industry due to the audience's unfamiliarity with their directorial approach.

The exploration of audience motivation for watching *Prebet Sapu* (2020) is both pertinent and consequential, as it provides critical insights into the determinants influencing local film consumption in Malaysia. In a time when the national film industry contends with intense competition from international movies, it is crucial to comprehend the reasons fans opt to endorse a local film, especially one chosen to represent Malaysia at the 94th Academy Awards. *Prebet Sapu* (2020) is distinguished by its social realism, monochromatic cinematography, and genuine representation of Malaysian socio-political conditions, rendering it a pertinent subject for analyzing the impact of genre, cast, and other artistic decisions on audience participation. This research is significant for filmmakers, producers, and policymakers, as it offers empirical information on factors that captivate audiences, therefore informing future film production and marketing methods. The results will be beneficial to industry professionals as well as scholars and students in film studies by enhancing

comprehension of the relationship among creative direction, star influence, and audience perception. This study enhances the conversation on cultural identity and representation in cinema, underscoring the function of local films as both entertainment and social critique. The research emphasizes the usability and effectiveness of *Prebet Sapu* (2020), illustrating its capacity to engage audiences within Malaysian film.

Research Objective and Research Question

This study aims to :

- Explore whether genre, actors, and directors serve as motivating factors for Malaysian audiences to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020).

The study specifically seeks to answer the following research question:

- Do genre, actors, and directors influence the motivation of Malaysian audiences to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020)?

Literature Review

The history of Prebet Sapu (2020)

According to ML Studio (2021), *Prebet Sapu* (2020) is a film that falls within the social realism or drama genre, centering on the struggles of Aman, a young man trying to survive in the vast metropolis of Kuala Lumpur following his father's death. To sustain himself, Aman takes a chance by working as a driver for an e-hailing service. However, due to his lack of financial stability, he is forced to operate illegally, as he does not possess a valid public transportation driving license, and his vehicle is not legally recognized as public transport. His situation is further complicated by the fact that he is color-blind, which prevents him from obtaining a driver's license, compelling him to run an unauthorized ride-hailing service.

Genre As A Motivation To Watch Films

Genre plays a crucial role in film production, serving as a structural framework that guides the development of a storyline. It also functions as an essential marketing tool, attracting audiences based on their genre preferences. Studies have shown that in Hollywood, genre serves as a primary determinant in audience decision-making regarding film selection. Viewers form expectations about a film's narrative and themes simply by recognizing its title and genre (Altman, 2021).

Furthermore, McGregor (2013) emphasizes that genre selection is a critical factor in audience engagement, as each genre resonates differently with various demographic groups based on factors such as age, interests, and gender. For instance, romantic films tend to attract a predominantly female audience, as this genre often portrays themes of emotional dependency on male characters. This appeal is rooted in intrinsic characteristics commonly associated with women, such as emotional sensitivity, shyness, affection, and gentleness, which make the romance genre particularly relatable (Jarrah Mohd Jan, 2003).

Actors as a Motivation to Watch Films

Actors frequently serve as cultural icons and role models, particularly among younger audiences. Many actors lead luxurious lifestyles, which fans admire and seek to emulate. Additionally, actors often portray fantasy-based characters that exist beyond the realm of reality, allowing audiences to engage in imaginative escapism. This aspirational quality

enhances an actor's ability to attract viewers to films in which they star (Hamidah Hamdan, 2013).

Siti Qoriatun Sholihah (2011) asserts that actors influence audience behavior, as their performances can shape viewers' perceptions and cognitive frameworks. In some cases, audiences may attempt to mimic or recreate the behaviors of their favorite actors, incorporating certain mannerisms or styles into their own lives. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among children, who, due to their developmental stage, are highly impressionable and prone to adopting behaviors they observe in films, often perceiving them as normative and acceptable.

Directors as a Motivation to Watch Films

Behind every great cinematic work is a director who plays a pivotal role in shaping the artistic and narrative direction of a film. Directors are responsible not only for storytelling but also for overseeing various production elements, such as cinematography, costume design, and editing. Every organization requires a leader to coordinate tasks and make critical decisions, and film production is no exception (Alvarez et al., 2004).

One of the primary challenges faced by directors, particularly in independent filmmaking, is securing financial resources. The filmmaking process demands significant investments of time, energy, and capital. Budget constraints are not unique to Malaysia but are also prevalent in international film industries. For instance, Francis Ford Coppola, the renowned director of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), was forced to sacrifice personal assets to fund the completion of his film (Abdul Razak Haja Mohaideen & Mohd Syuhaidi Abu Bakar, 2018).

Consequently, modern filmmakers have adopted commercial strategies to establish their personal brands before producing films. Many directors now engage in multiple fields, such as acting and television hosting, to enhance their public recognition. This approach is based on the belief that having a distinct directorial style alone is insufficient; directors must also build a recognizable identity to ensure that their works receive widespread attention (Abdul Razak Mohaideen, 2016).

Research Methodology

There are various methodological approaches that can be employed in conducting a research study, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches. For this study, the qualitative method was deemed the most appropriate. According to Sulaiman Tahajuddin et al. (2021), qualitative research methods ensure transparency and logical coherence in data collection, making them suitable for exploring complex phenomena.

Additionally, Kamarul Azmi Jasmi (2012) argues that qualitative research is an approach designed to gather and analyze data through in-depth examination of individual perspectives and ideologies. This method prioritizes the quality and depth of the information collected, focusing on meaningful insights rather than numerical data.

Creswell (1998) suggests that a sample of 6 to 10 informants is sufficient for qualitative interviews, as this range often reaches a saturation point. Data saturation occurs when additional informants begin to provide responses that are repetitive or similar to those

previously collected. This indicates that no new insights are emerging, confirming that the sample size is adequate for comprehensive analysis.

Research Findings

*Genre as a Motivation to Watch **Prebet Sapu (2020)** among Malaysian Audiences*

Drama genre: a fresh breath for the film industry

According to Informant 1, 2, and 10, genre serves as one of the primary motivations for watching *Prebet Sapu (2020)*. Informants 1 and 2 expressed that the drama genre of *Prebet Sapu (2020)* was novel to them, as they had not previously encountered films categorized explicitly as drama. This sense of novelty piqued their interest in the film.

Informant 10, on the other hand, noted that drama films like *Prebet Sapu (2020)* are relatively rare in Malaysia. The informant found the genre appealing due to its honest and realistic portrayal of Malaysian life, making it distinct from other local productions. Similarly, Informant 4 highlighted that the drama genre in *Prebet Sapu (2020)* offers an unfiltered and candid representation of societal issues and challenges faced within the country. The film does not shy away from addressing real-life problems, making it an authentic and thought-provoking cinematic experience.

Actors as a Motivation to Watch *Prebet Sapu (2020)* Among Malaysian Audiences

Outstanding Cast

In any film or narrative, actors play a pivotal role in driving the storyline and conveying underlying messages embedded within the director's vision. Several informants, including Informants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10, agreed that the cast was a significant motivating factor in their decision to watch *Prebet Sapu (2020)*.

The film features a distinguished cast, including Amerul Affendi and Mei Fen Lim, with cameo appearances by top local stars including Bront Palarae, Nadiya Nissa, Namron and Chew Kin Wah, all of whom are highly talented actors who have won multiple awards at both local and international levels. Additionally, Informant 7 highlighted the exceptional acting performances in the film and expressed a preference for experienced, senior actors who have been long established in the industry. This suggests that the credibility, skill, and reputation of the cast significantly influence audience interest in the film.

Talent and Physical Appearance of Actors as a Factor in Film Success

Actors serve as the face of a film and play a crucial role in shaping public perception. Informants 1, 3, and 7 agreed that, apart from acting talent, an actor's physical appearance is also an important factor in attracting audiences to a film or drama. According to Informant 3, while acting skills are essential, an actor's visual appeal can significantly influence audience interest.

A relevant example is the global popularity of the South Korean entertainment industry, particularly K-Dramas, where actors' attractiveness is often a key factor in their widespread appeal. Supporting this notion, a study conducted by Nor Hashimah Jalaludin and Zaharani Ahmad (2011) found that 18.1% of respondents considered an actor's physical appearance and overall presentation as primary reasons for watching a drama.

However, Informants 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 disagreed that physical attractiveness is a decisive factor in audience engagement. They argued that talent should take precedence, as an actor without strong acting skills would struggle to portray a character convincingly. Informant 6 emphasized that if an actor possesses genuine talent, they will be able to deliver an exceptional performance, regardless of their physical appearance, aligning with the vision and expectations set by the production team and director.

Director as a Motivation To Watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) Among Malaysian Audiences

Lesser-Known Director

The director serves as the backbone of any film or drama, overseeing all aspects of production, from conceptualization to post-release execution. While actors often take center stage in attracting audiences, the director also plays a crucial role in shaping a film's success. A well-known director can generate audience interest and encourage viewership based on their established reputation.

All informants agreed that a director should have a dedicated fan base, as this following can directly contribute to the film's audience engagement and overall success. A director's popularity, similar to that of actors, can influence audience motivation to watch a film under their direction.

However, Informant 5 expressed a contrasting viewpoint, arguing that a truly talented director does not need to seek popularity actively, rather, recognition will naturally follow based on the quality of their work. According to this perspective, a director's uniqueness and distinct creative approach should be the primary factors that establish their reputation, rather than self-promotion or widespread publicity.

Other Factors As Motivation To Watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) Among Malaysian Audiences

The Film's Trailer

Beyond genre and outstanding actors, several other factors serve as motivations for audiences to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020), one of which is its trailer. Informant 2 highlighted that the film's trailer stood out due to its distinctive style, setting it apart from other local film trailers.

Additionally, Informant 6 was particularly intrigued by the visual presentation of the trailer, which led to curiosity about the director's artistic decision to present the entire film in black and white. This curiosity motivated Informant 6 to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) in order to uncover the rationale behind this creative choice.

The Film's Reviews

In the digital era, numerous YouTubers create content reviewing both local and international films that have recently been released in cinemas. One of the well-known Malaysian YouTuber in this niche is Zhaf Vlog. Film reviews serve as an important reference point for audiences, providing initial insights and setting expectations before they decide to watch a movie.

This perspective was supported by Informants 3, 4, 5, and 9, who agreed that YouTube film reviews significantly influence audience motivation. These reviews help potential viewers

gauge whether a film aligns with their preferences, ultimately contributing to their decision to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020).

The Film's Poster

Another factor influencing audience motivation to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) is its film poster. Informant 4 identified the poster as a key attraction, stating that its unique and compelling design played a role in generating interest in the film.

The informant was particularly drawn to the poster's color choices and the visual representation of the actors, both of which contributed to striking and visually appealing promotional material. This suggests that a well-designed film poster can serve as an effective marketing tool, capturing audience attention and encouraging viewership.

The Film's Storyline

The storyline of *Prebet Sapu* (2020) also serves as a significant motivational factor for audience engagement. Informants 4, 7, and 9 agreed that the film's narrative was one of the key reasons they chose to watch it.

The film presents a bold and honest depiction of various social issues, addressing relevant and thought-provoking themes. The depth and authenticity of the storyline resonated with viewers, making it an appealing choice for those interested in films that offer meaningful social commentary.

Audience Feedback and Recommendations

Audience feedback and recommendations also serve as significant motivations for watching *Prebet Sapu* (2020). According to Informant 6, positive reviews and suggestions from close friends influenced their decision to watch the film, as they wanted to personally experience what others had praised.

Similarly, Informant 10 was encouraged to watch the film after reading audience feedback on Twitter (now known as X), where many users described it as a must-watch movie. This highlights the impact of word-of-mouth and social media discourse in shaping audience interest and influencing film viewership.

The Use of Color

The black-and-white aesthetic of *Prebet Sapu* (2020) sets it apart from other contemporary Malaysian films, evoking a nostalgic feel akin to the classic works of the late Tan Sri P. Ramlee. Given that black-and-white cinematography is rarely used in modern films, especially in the 2020s, this stylistic choice adds a unique artistic appeal.

Informants 7 and 8 found the monochrome visual approach intriguing, prompting curiosity about the director's intention behind this creative decision. This element of mystery and artistic differentiation further contributed to their motivation to watch the film.

The Film's Marketing

Lastly, the marketing strategy of *Prebet Sapu* (2020) also played a role in motivating audiences to watch the film. The film was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when many viewers were hesitant to visit cinemas due to health concerns. Informant 9 expressed particular interest in how the film was marketed despite these challenges. During the pandemic, numerous YouTubers produced film reviews, helping to increase awareness and generate interest among audiences. This highlights the significance of digital marketing and online reviews in promoting films, especially during periods of restricted cinema attendance.

Conclusion

Overall, as no prior research has explored the motivations behind watching *Prebet Sapu* (2020) among Malaysian audiences, this study was conducted to examine and analyze the key factors influencing audience engagement with the film. The study explored three primary factors that contributed to audience motivation: genre, cast, and other external factors. These elements seem to be frequently considered by audiences when selecting a film to watch, making them essential variables in understanding local film consumption patterns.

To ensure comprehensive and high-quality findings, interviews were conducted with 10 informants who have watched the film in the cinema. The results revealed that audience motivation to watch *Prebet Sapu* (2020) was not solely based on genre and cast but also on several other factors that contributed to their decision. However, the study found no conclusive evidence to support the notion that the director played a significant role in motivating audiences to watch the film. The findings suggest that audiences were primarily drawn to *Prebet Sapu* (2020) due to its genre, cast, and other influencing factors, rather than the director's reputation or style.

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