

Frames of Change: A Systematic Review of Film's Role in Malaysia's Political Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Films are powerful communication tools, combining audio and visual elements to convey messages and achieve objectives. Beyond entertainment, they act as agents of political change, shaping public opinion and serving as instruments of national propaganda. Despite inconsistent public interest in Malaysia, films exert substantial influence as a soft power instrument. This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to analyse the role of films in Malaysia's political transformation, addressing the absence of systematic synthesis despite growing scholarly interest. Five research questions addressed influence, censorship, audience interpretation, thematic focus, and narrative strategies. Guided by the 27 PRISMA checklist items hybridised with SPIDER framework criteria, searches across Web of Science, Sage Journals, Scopus, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley yielded 11,506 records, of which 18 qualitative and mixed-method studies (2015–2025) met the eligibility criteria and passed critical appraisal using the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT). The findings reveal recurring themes of censorship, propaganda, political expression, and media regulation, underscoring the entanglement of film and state power. Cinematic influence operates through ideological reinforcement, narrative contestation, and symbolic mediation; filmmakers negotiate an opaque censorship regime through anticipatory self-censorship, allegory, and circumvention via festivals and digital platforms; and audiences act as active interpreters rather than passive recipients. Thematically, the corpus traces a shift from Golden Age nation-building narratives to a fragmented, contested cinema shaped by Islamisation and post-reformasi activism. This study contributes to scholarly discourse on politics and cinema in Malaysia, with implications for censorship reform, independent platform support, and media education.

Keywords: *Films, Malaysia, media, systematic literature review, political transformation.*

INTRODUCTION

Films can be simply and briefly defined as a sequence of moving images with a beginning, middle, and end accompanied by specific information. However, the true essence of film goes beyond mere entertainment: it is a complex artistic expression through symbolism, metaphor, and imagery that is capable of transcending time and space in the delivery of messages. Boggs and Petrie (2008) discussed how films possess the ability to overcome the limitations and static nature of paintings by manipulating and interweaving sounds, movements, and visuals. The boundlessness of film allows it not only to present abstract ideas or falsities but also to create an almost-real sense of reality for subjects otherwise unreachable by human senses. Beyond its role as an artistic and cultural institution, film has intersected with industrialisation and technological advancement, elevating its global standing, as exemplified by the Hollywood film industry in the United States. Integrating

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networks among directors, producers, film companies, and actors has established Hollywood as a dominant global film institution (Prince, 1997; Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008).

How are these films connected to politics? Drake (2016) states that films have been political since their inception. From the controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D.W. Griffith to WWII propaganda films and postcolonial documentaries in Third World countries during the 1950s and the 1960s, film has long served as a projection of political objectives. Ironically, a film can sometimes have the opposite effect on its intended purpose. For instance, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, which depicts the Algerian liberation struggle against French colonial rule by the National Liberation Front (FLN), significantly influenced the Black Panther movement in the United States and subsequently transformed American sociopolitical dynamics (Cheraitia, 2023). The same film was also used as a blueprint for U.S. counterinsurgency strategies, including interrogation and torture practices (Royer, 2011; Chanan, 2007). In the pre-independence context of Malaysia, the British employed Griersonian documentary film styles to disseminate propaganda across their colonies. After WWII, the *Malayan Film Unit* (MFU) was established to improve the British image as a “caretaker” concerned with its colony’s welfare. It produced more localised films in response to rising independence movements, and as a propaganda tool during the communist insurgency in Malaya (Aitken, 2016; Gunaish et al., 2022).

Based on this intricate relationship between film and politics, it is logical to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of the role of film in Malaysia’s political transformation. Traditional literature reviews are rigid, narrow in scope, and too specific, thus limiting a comprehensive understanding of the overall body of work. Existing SLRs on films and politics do not focus on political transformation, especially in the Malaysian context. For example, Aksoy (2023) examined the resurgence of Marxism through film, Sánchez Auñón, Férez Mora, and Monroy Hernández (2023) explored the use of films in teaching English as a second language, and Cardoso et al. (2017) focused on the influence of films on the tourism sector.

In Malaysian political cinema, existing studies are isolated and unit-based, with no dedicated SLR, even though relevant research questions have been raised. These include:

- i. How do films influence Malaysian political landscape?
- ii. How do local filmmakers navigate the complexities of political messaging and censorship?
- iii. How do audiences respond to and interpret these films?
- iv. How has the thematic focus of political films in Malaysia evolved over time across different political eras?
- v. What filmmaking techniques and narrative strategies are commonly used in Malaysian political films to convey dissent or critique governance?

Notable studies include Wei, Pillai and Liu (2018) on inter-ethnic relations in local films during Malaysia’s Golden Age (1950s–1960s), and Ahmad, Beng and Kim (2017) on how the Freedom Film Festival (FFF) became a platform for activist filmmakers to convey sensitive messages and ideas. The lack of an SLR restricts a broader understanding of thematic trends and methodological approaches in the current literature. Therefore, we propose that the SLR provides a structured and in-depth analysis of how films function as political tools in Malaysia. This study aims to identify key thematic trends, such as censorship, political messaging, audience reception, and propaganda, expanding the discourse not only within film or political studies but also within the broader Southeast Asian context. The adoption of a systematic literature review is particularly appropriate in this context, as it enables a rigorous,

transparent, and replicable synthesis of otherwise fragmented scholarly outputs across the inherently multidisciplinary domain of film and political studies. Unlike conventional narrative reviews, which are often subject to selective inclusion and interpretive bias, an SLR employs structured search protocols, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and standardised quality appraisal tools, thereby producing a more comprehensive and methodologically defensible account of the extant literature (Xiao & Watson, 2019; Shaffril et al., 2021a, 2021b). Given the diversity of methodological approaches and thematic concerns in Malaysian political cinema scholarship, a systematic framework is essential to map the field coherently, identify convergences and gaps, and lay the groundwork for future empirical and theoretical enquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between cinema and politics has been extensively theorised in communication and cultural studies scholarship. Scholars such as Kellner (2010) have demonstrated that films are not merely reflective of social reality but actively participate in the construction and contestation of political identities, ideologies, and power relations. In the context of post-colonial states, film has served both as a tool of nationalist consolidation and as a medium of counter-hegemonic resistance, a tension that has been extensively documented across Asian and African cinema traditions (Shohat & Stam, 1994). The use of cinema as soft power, particularly to project national identity and manage political narratives, has similarly been discussed in the context of state-sponsored media systems in Southeast Asia (Chua, 2012).

Within Malaysian studies, a growing body of scholarship has examined the intersections of cinema, ethnicity, and governance. Ahmad and Lee (2015) traced the “Malaynisation” of P. Ramlee’s iconic films as vehicles for post-independence nation-building, arguing that mainstream Malay cinema was consciously shaped to reinforce the political and cultural supremacy of the Bumiputera community. Complementing this, Wood, Guan, and Ayavoo (2022) have provided a critical examination of Malaysia’s formal censorship apparatus, specifically the Film Censorship Act 2002, revealing how the institutional framework operates as a gatekeeping mechanism that limits political expression and creative autonomy. These studies collectively point to a cinema landscape in which state power is pervasive, yet never completely unchallenged.

The independent film movement in Malaysia has attracted scholarly interest as a political-resistance site. Ahmad, Beng, and Kim (2017) demonstrated how the Freedom Film Festival served as a critical alternative platform for activist filmmakers denied access to mainstream distribution. Similarly, Wang (2015) analysed Amir Muhammad’s documentary films on the Communist Party of Malaya as exercises in counter-memory, a cinematic practice that recovers suppressed historical narratives from state-sanctioned amnesia. These independent works sit alongside the broader tradition of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, which scholars such as Kuan (2019) and Hee (2019) have interpreted as articulating a localised ethnic identity that resists both Malay ethno-nationalism and mainland Chinese cultural hegemony.

Despite the accumulation of individual studies, the field lacks a comprehensive synthesis that maps the full landscape of political themes, methodological approaches, and findings across the existing literature. Existing systematic reviews in related areas, such as Aksoy’s (2023) review of Marxist film studies and Cardoso et al.’s (2017) film-induced tourism review, do not address political transformation in a specific national context, such as Malaysia. This gap is significant because isolated studies cannot reveal overarching patterns,

divergences, or cumulative insights across the scholarly corpus. Thus, a systematic and transparent synthesis is warranted to consolidate knowledge, identify thematic convergences, and propose directions for future enquiry in this underexplored but politically vital area of communication studies.

METHODOLOGY

a. Review Protocol

This SLR study was guided by the protocol settings of the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA). The latest update, PRISMA 2020, contains 27 items on its checklist, each of which specifies the elements required for reporting. Although originally developed as a protocol specifically for health-related studies, the approach used by PRISMA applies to studies beyond the health field (Page et al., 2021a, 2021b). While PRISMA sets the highest standards for systematic studies by emphasising replicability, transparency in searches, and clear inclusion/exclusion processes, the PRISMA protocol also acknowledges the need for additional reporting guidelines to complement systematic reviews, particularly those involving qualitative and mixed-methods studies, as stated below:

The PRISMA 2020 items are relevant for mixed-methods systematic reviews (which include quantitative and qualitative studies), but reporting guidelines addressing the presentation and synthesis of qualitative data should also be consulted (Page, et al., 2021b, p. 2).

Therefore, based on the literature review that had been done, this review strongly believes that there is a need to hybridise the PRISMA protocol with an additional protocol, namely “*SPIDER*” (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type). The inherent qualitative sensitivity of SPIDER is effective as a filtering and structuring tool for systematic reviews in the social sciences, as SPIDER allows for including a broader scope of research findings by encompassing different elements, such as subject perspectives, discourse, political interpretation, and policy framing (Methley et. al, 2014; Tawfik et al., 2019).

Based on the hybrid PRISMA-SPIDER protocol, this systematic review process begins with the formulation of research questions based on thematic gaps identified through a literature review and general observations, as highlighted in the Abstract and Introduction sections. These questions are then refined and addressed through the elements within SPIDER, as shown in Tables 1, following the example of Cooke, Smith, and Booth (2012) and as proposed by Shaffril et al (2021a, 2021b):

Table 1: Refinement of research questions using SPIDER framework

RQ	Initial Research Question	S – Sample	PI – Phenomenon of Interest	D – Design	E – Evaluation	R – Research Type	Refined Research Question
RQ1	How do films influence Malaysia's political landscape?	Malaysian films (2015–2025) with political themes	Political narrative construction, propaganda, and resistance messaging	Qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis	How films reflect or critique political realities	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	How do Malaysian films (S) produced between 2015 and 2025 influence or reflect (E) the country's political landscape (PI), as understood through qualitative and mixed-methods research (R) applying thematic or discourse analysis (D)?
RQ2	How do local filmmakers navigate the complexities of political messaging and censorship?	Malaysian filmmakers	Negotiation of political messaging under censorship pressures	Interviews, content or thematic analysis	Adaptation strategies under censorship	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	How do Malaysian filmmakers (S) negotiate or adapt (E) their political messaging under censorship pressures (PI), as explored through qualitative and mixed-method research (R) using interviews, content, or thematic analysis (D)?
RQ3	How do audiences respond to and interpret these films?	Malaysian audiences	Audience reception and interpretation of political themes in film	Focus groups, reception analysis	Audience response and interpretation	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	How do Malaysian audiences (S) respond to and interpret (E) political themes in films (PI), as revealed through qualitative or mixed-methods studies (R) using focus groups or reception analysis (D)?
RQ4	How has the thematic focus of political films in Malaysia evolved over time across different political eras?	Malaysian political films (2015–2025)	Thematic evolution across key political eras	Longitudinal or historical discourse analysis	Shifts in political focus over time	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	How have the thematic concerns in Malaysian political films (S) evolved across key political eras from 2015 to 2025 (PI), as documented through qualitative and mixed-methods studies (R) employing longitudinal or historical discourse analysis (D), to show shifts in political focus (E)?
RQ5	What filmmaking techniques and narrative strategies are commonly used in Malaysian political films to convey dissent or critique governance?	Malaysian filmmakers (2015–2025)	Filmmaking techniques and narrative strategies of political critique	Semiotic or filmic textual analysis	How films critique governance and express dissent	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	What filmmaking techniques and narrative strategies (PI) are employed by Malaysian filmmakers (S) between 2015 and 2025 to critique governance (E), as identified through qualitative and mixed-methods research (R) using semiotic or filmic textual analysis (D)?

SYSTEMATIC SEARCHING STRATEGIES

The systematic search strategy for this study was developed based on the framework set by PRISMA, which comprises several phases (Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion) and was further supported by the SPIDER tool in formulating and refining the research questions, search terms, and inclusion and exclusion criteria that are more suitable for qualitative and mixed-method studies.

a. Identification

The identification phase was conducted to obtain relevant academic studies through a structured search and formulation of a strategy aligned with the SPIDER tool. This phase begins with the selection of keywords based on the research questions recommended by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). Based on the research questions, this review identified the following main keywords: film, Malaysia, politics, transformation, and censorship. However, according to Shaffril et al. (2021a, 2021b), these keywords must be enriched by identifying related terms, variations, or synonyms. Using the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, several additional keywords were identified, including movies, filmmaking, motion pictures, transition, shift, change, media control, and suppression. These keywords were then refined using the SPIDER tool, particularly elements [D] and [R], which included the addition of keywords such as qualitative, interview, case study, discourse analysis, focus group, and mixed-methods. Based on these keywords, a series of search strings was constructed by combining various search functions, including field code functions, phrase searching, wildcards, truncation, and Boolean operators across the Web of Science, Sage Journals, Scopus, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley databases (refer to Table 2). This range of databases was aimed at enhancing the comprehensiveness of the search as recommended by Xiao and Watson (2019).

Table 2: Search string used in the selected database

Database	String
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY("Malaysia") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("film*" OR "movie*" OR "motion picture*" OR "filmmak*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("politic*" OR "transformation" OR "transition" OR "shift*" OR "change*" OR "censorship" OR "suppression") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("qualitative" OR "interview*" OR "discourse analysis" OR "ethnograph*" OR "case study" OR "mixed method*"))
Web of Science	TS=("Malaysia") AND TS=("film*" OR "movie*" OR "motion picture*" OR "filmmak*") AND TS=("politic*" OR "transformation" OR "transition" OR "shift*" OR "change*" OR "censorship" OR "suppression") AND TS=("qualitative" OR "interview*" OR "ethnograph*" OR "discourse analysis" OR "case study" OR "focus group" OR "mixed method*")

To achieve more comprehensive data saturation, we employed forward and backward citation tracing in Google Scholar, supplemented by manual selection of relevant articles. A total of 11,506 articles were retrieved using this search strategy.

b. Screening

The second phase involved screening, where articles were selected for inclusion or exclusion based on several sets of criteria (refer to Table 3), conducted both manually and through search engine automation in the databases. The selection of the timeline from 2015 to 2025 was based on a discussion of the maturity of the study, as informed by Kraus et al. (2020). Original research articles from peer-reviewed journals were chosen as the sole type of document because they were deemed sufficient to meet the study's findings. To avoid confusion during analysis and data extraction, only research articles in English were selected. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the study topic, the chosen research articles cover specific fields in the social sciences, such as political science, media, and communication, as well as in the arts and humanities. The selected articles must focus on Malaysia or at least be related (e.g. films produced or published abroad but directed by Malaysians or that touch on Malaysia). At this stage, 11,103 articles were excluded, leaving 403.

Table 3: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2015-2025	2014 and earlier
Document type	Original research article from peer-reviewed journal	Review article, chapter in a book, book, conference proceeding, etc
Language	English	Non-English
Subject Area	Social Sciences (Political Science, Media and Communication), Arts and Humanities	Non-social sciences and non-arts and humanities studies
Geographical	Malaysia	Non-Malaysian studies

c. Eligibility

The titles, abstracts, and full texts of the remaining articles were reviewed manually. In this phase, 9 articles were removed because of duplication. A total of 362 articles were excluded because they did not meet the established research criteria, such as general discussions on media without a focus on films, focusing on the pre-independence film industry that was not related to Malaysia's political transformation, and concentrating specifically on animation and other technical and topical reasons. The number of articles remaining at the end of this phase was 32.

d. Critical appraisal

To ensure a more comprehensive and rigorous study finding, we conducted a critical appraisal using the *Mixed Method Appraisal Tool* (MMAT) by Hong et al. (2018). MMAT's adaptability enables researchers to conduct a rigorous appraisal of chosen articles, including qualitative research, randomised controlled trials, non-randomised studies, quantitative descriptive studies, and mixed-methods studies. However, this study only examined qualitative and mixed-methods research. To guarantee the high quality of the selected articles, aligned with their respective study types, the MMAT established specific criteria. In qualitative research, rigorous research questions are paramount to ensuring both data sufficiency and alignment with research objectives. Mixed-methods studies are evaluated for integrating qualitative and quantitative research, including the justification for their inclusion and the efficacy of their combined use (Shaffril et al., 2021a, 2021b). Before conducting the critical appraisal using the MMAT, the articles were re-evaluated based on the criteria set by SPIDER to refine the study, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Eligibility criteria and SPIDER alignment

SPIDER Element	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
S-Sample	Studies focusing on Malaysian political context, local filmmakers, or audiences	Studies outside Malaysia or not related to political issues	Ensures focus on Malaysian socio-political environment and relevance to national discourse
PI-Phenomenon of Interest	Films as a medium of political expression, messaging, censorship, or resistance	Films purely for entertainment or without political/censorship elements	Narrows to political and activist themes aligned with research questions
D-Design	Qualitative designs (e.g. interviews, textual analysis, case studies)	Purely quantitative studies without interpretive elements	Prioritizes depth and contextual understanding in film-politics relationships
E-Evaluation	Studies evaluating influence, perception, audience reception, or censorship impacts	No evaluation of political impact or interpretive component	Relevance to how films shape or reflect political values and discourse
R-Research type	Peer-reviewed qualitative or mixed-method journal articles, in English, published between 2015–2025	Conference proceedings, opinion pieces, editorials, or non-English texts	Ensures academic rigour, accessibility, and relevance within a contemporary political decade

Guided by the MMAT, the evaluation process was conducted using its standardised criteria, with a particular focus on the methodological rigor and data analysis processes of each study. All included articles were assessed based on five criteria corresponding to their study type, with responses recorded as “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know/can’t tell” (refer to Table 5 and 6). To ensure a critical and consistent appraisal, three co-authors assisted the corresponding author in conducting evaluations at each stage to ensure consistency and minimise any bias. Only articles that fulfilled at least three of the MMAT’s five criteria were included in the review. The evaluation summary and scheduling were adapted from the examples provided by Shaffril et al. (2021a, 2021b). In cases of ambiguity or borderline inclusion, the SPIDER criteria were revisited to support the decision-making process. A total of 18 qualitative studies met the final selection criteria and were critically appraised for inclusion in this review. The complete acquisition and selection processes are illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 5: Assessment criteria based on MMAT

Research type	Assessment criteria
Qualitative	QA1—Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question? QA2—Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question? QA3- Are the findings adequately derived from the data? QA4- Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data? QA5—Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?
Mixed methods	QA1- Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question? QA2- Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question? QA3- Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?

QA4- Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?
 QA5- Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?

Source: Hong et al. (2018)

Table 6: Results of the quality appraisal

Study	Research Design	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	Number of criteria fulfilled	Inclusion in the review
Zainal (2019)	QL	/	/	/	X	/	4/5	/
Tan, Balaya & Goh (2024)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Yusof & Esmaeil (2017)	QL	/	/	X	X	/	3/5	/
Wei, Pillai & Liu (2018)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Ahmad, Beng & Kim (2017)	QL	/	/	/	/	C	4/5	/
Wood, Guan & Ayavo (2022)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Hee (2019)	QL	/	X	/	/	/	4/5	/
Kuan (2019)	QL	/	/	/	X	/	4/5	/
Aziz (2020)	QL	/	/	X	X	/	3/5	/
Ahmad & Lee (2015)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Wang (2015)	QL	/	X	/	X	/	3/5	/
Driskell (2025)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Lim (2015)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Lee & Emang (2016)	QL	/	/	/	/	X	4/5	/
Hassan, Tan & Chong (2024)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Konior (2015)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/
Cheang (2022)	QL	/	/	/	X	/	4/5	/
Changsong & Kerry (2022)	QL	/	/	/	/	/	5/5	/

Note: QA=Quality assessment; QL=Qualitative; MX=Mixed-Method; C=Can't tell

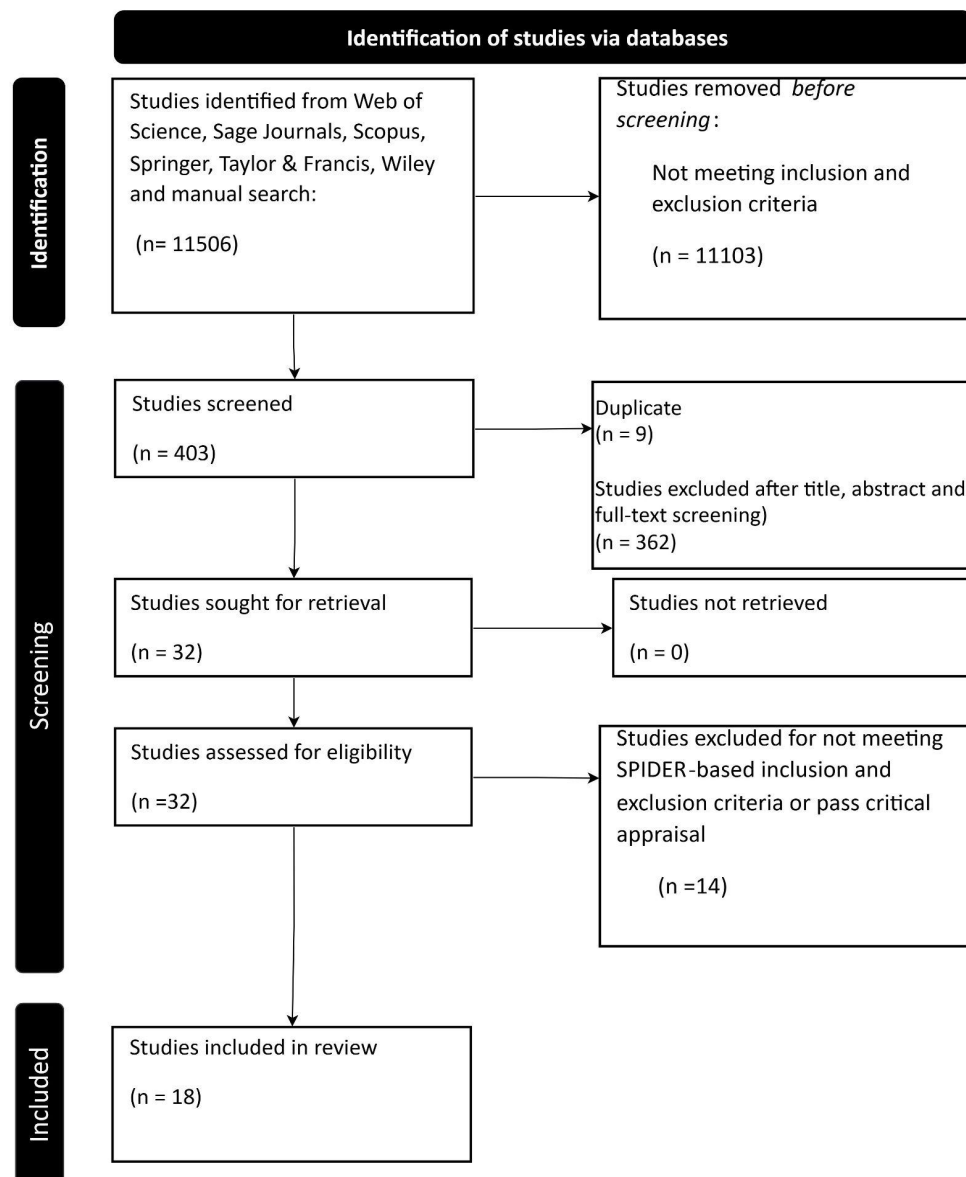


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the searching process

RESULTS

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including *Web of Science*, *Sage Journals*, *Scopus*, *Springer*, *Taylor & Francis*, and *Wiley*, as well as through manual searches, yielding 11,506 records. Following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria during the initial filtering phase, 11,103 studies were excluded, leaving 403 records for further screening. Nine duplicate records were removed during the screening. Of the remaining 394 studies, 362 were excluded after reviewing their titles, abstracts, and full texts owing to their irrelevance to the research focus. Consequently, 32 studies were identified for full-text retrieval, all of which were successful ($n = 0$; not retrieved). These 32 studies were then evaluated for eligibility based on the established SPIDER inclusion and exclusion criteria and assessed for methodological quality through critical appraisal. Fourteen studies were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, the final systematic review comprised 18 studies, which served as the basis for the synthesis and thematic analysis presented in this review as shown in Table 7.

a. Characteristics of Included Studies

The 18 studies comprised a varied collection of academic methodologies and thematic issues related to Malaysian cinema and its interplay with politics, identity, and censorship, as shown in Table 8. The studies extend from 2015 to 2025 and utilise diverse qualitative methodologies such as critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, historical-cultural analysis, interviews, feminist critique, and ontological or theoretical frameworks.

b. Research Focus and Methodology

A diverse array of methodological approaches was employed to illustrate the interdisciplinary character of the field. Numerous studies have focused on specific filmmakers or films (for example, P. Ramlee, Yasmin Ahmad, Suhaimi Baba, Amir Muhammad, Namewee), whereas others examined overarching trends in Malaysian visual culture and film reception. Textual, narrative, and thematic analyses were frequently utilised, with certain studies integrating interviews with filmmakers or employing reception studies to comprehend audience impact.

c. Key Political and Cultural Themes

Recurring political themes encompassed nation building, ethnic identity and exclusion, multiculturalism, censorship, Islamisation, gender representation, and memory politics. Numerous studies have examined the conflict between state narratives and alternative or dissenting viewpoints in independent or activist cinema. Others have examined Malay cultural norms, inter-ethnic relationships, anti-China centrism, and post-feminist representations.

d. Audience Reception

Audiences' reception varied and was reported inconsistently across studies. Certain works (e.g., those concerning Yasmin Ahmad, Suhaimi Baba, Jins Shamsuddin, and Namewee) exhibited significant public engagement or elicited polarising reactions, whereas others suggested ideological impact or indicated restricted reception among minority or niche audiences. Young individuals and intellectual circles were frequently recognised as primary advocates for films that posed political or cultural challenges.

e. Censorship and Barriers

Censorship has emerged as the primary focus of numerous studies, encompassing various forms: official state prohibitions (for example *The Last Communist*), self-censorship, financial constraints, and ideological marginalisation. Certain filmmakers, including Namewee and Amir Muhammad, often face political censure and prohibitions. Others traversed the system through digital platforms (for example, Freedom Film Fest) or adhered to state-sanctioned narratives. Several studies have indicated a lack of formal censorship while emphasising implicit pressures, including religious conservatism, policy limitations, and ideologically motivated award influences.

Table 7: Characteristics of included studies

Study	Year	Author(s)	Focus/Title	Methodology	Key Political Themes	Audience Reception	Censorship/Barriers
(Ahmad & Lee, 2015)	2015	Mahyuddin Ahmad & Yuen Beng Lee	The 'Malaynisation' of P. Ramlee and his films	Critical discourse analysis of P. Ramlee's films	Nation-building, ethnic exclusion, cultural nationalism, "modern Malay" identity	Not directly studied; implied ideological influence on majority Malays	No censorship noted, but ideological conformity to post-independence nationalist agenda
(Wang & Kerry, 2022)	2022	Wang Changsong & Lucyann Kerry	Filmic Depiction of Malay Subjectivity in the Late Yasmin Ahmad's Films	Thematic analysis + interviews with production crew	Interracial relationships, religious tolerance, critique of Malay cultural norms, multiculturalism	Strong resonance with general Malaysian public; also acclaimed internationally	No formal bans reported, but tackled taboos like race, gender, and religion
(Tan et al., 2024)	2024	Lee Ooi Tan, Sarata Balaya, Peng Hooi Aaron Goh	Creative Struggle in Malaysia: A Case Study	In-depth interviews with industry workers	Indirect: Government neglect, lack of infrastructure, limits on freedom of expression	Not measured	Indirect censorship via lack of funding, talent drain, limited creative autonomy
(Ahmad et al., 2017)	2017	Mahyuddin Ahmad, Lee Yuen Beng, Wang Lay Kim	Democratisation of Cinematic Space: Digital Film Activism and FFF	Critical media analysis using Third Cinema theory	Film as activism, censorship resistance, democratic space, alternative media	Community-centered, participatory; strong support from civil society	State censorship bypassed through independent digital platforms like FFF
(Kuan, 2019)	2019	Chee Wah Kuan	Anti-China-centrism in Sinophone Malaysian Films	Textual/narrative analysis of 5 films	Ethnic identity, anti-China centrism, local Sinophone nationalism	Celebrated among local Chinese Malaysian communities	No direct censorship noted, but ideological distancing from PRC state narratives
(Lim, 2015)	2015	David C. L. Lim	Social Constructions of Hetero-Men in LGBT Contexts in Film	Textual analysis + interview narratives	Political Islam, heteronormativity, gender invisibility, sexual suppression	Not formally studied; implied marginalization	Strong cultural/religious censorship; invisibility driven by state discourse
(Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017)	2017	Noraini Md. Yusof, Esmaeil Z. J.	Reconstructing Multiculturalism through Visual Culture	Theoretical and critical analysis of visual culture in Malaysia	Ethnic hierarchy, nationalism, paradox of multiculturalism, Malay-centric identity	Not directly addressed	Cultural dominance of one ethnic group limits plural expression

(Hassan et al., 2024)	2024	Raja Rodziah Raja Zainal Hassan, Huey Pyng Tan, Eu Choong Chong	In-depth Interviews with Malaysian Documentary Filmmakers	Thematic analysis of interviews with 5 directors	People's history, counter-memory, nationhood, generational memory, censorship	Strong engagement among youth and intellectual communities	Bans (e.g. The Last Direct Communist); state pressure; self- censorship
(Aziz, 2020)	2020	Jamaluddin Bin Aziz	Suhaimi Baba's Films & Malay- Muslim Auteurship	Critical textual and feminist analysis of 9 films	National identity, female empowerment, Islamization, censorship, racial tension	Generally well- received; box-office and international acclaim	State censorship: forced reshoots, delayed releases, political pushback
(Konior, 2015)	2015	Bogna M. Konior	Relational Politics of Animism and James Lee's Histeria	Ontological film analysis using animism theory	Animism, modernity critique, ontological disruption, nonhuman agency, anti-colonial knowledge systems	Not the focus of the article; assumes niche/art-house reception	Not directly discussed; implication of ideological marginalization due to nonmodern themes
(Zainal, 2019)	2019	Humairah Zainal	The Irony of Islamization: Sexuality, Piety and Power on Malaysian Screens	Reception studies, cultural analysis of film/TV	Islamization, sexuality, gender/class/ethnic hierarchies, religious morality, media politics	Didactic Islamic films unpopular; sexual content in commercial films widely accepted by audiences	Tension between Islamic norms and audience preferences; no direct censorship cited, but moral policing implied
(Driskell, 2025)	2025	Jonathan Driskell	Jins Shamsuddin and Malay Film Stardom in the 1960s	Historical-cultural analysis; star persona study	Malay modernity, youth culture, collectivism vs individualism, postcolonial identity, nationalism, Westernisation	Jins were extremely popular, especially among youth; reflected shifting audience values	Not explicitly discussed; implied tensions with traditional norms and expectations in cultural values
(Cheang, 2010)	2022	Sim Chee Cheang	Are We in the Post- Feminist Era? Representation of Malay Women in Award-Winning Films (2010–2019)	Feminist film analysis; qualitative thematic critique	Post-feminism, gender representation, female agency, cultural semiotics, state endorsement of womanhood via awards	Award-winning performances suggest critical and institutional acclaim; public reception not deeply explored	No explicit censorship discussed; ideological shaping through state- endorsed recognition (e.g., FINAS awards)

(Lee & Emang, 2016)	2016	Yow Chong Lee & Candida Jau Emang	Selling the Past in Films: Shaw Brothers and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya	Textual and contextual analysis (historical + promotional) materials	National memory, historical trauma, postcolonial identity, wartime occupation, ethnic inclusivity in cinema	Sergeant Hassan had broader appeal and wider success; Matahari received more limited engagement	No direct censorship discussed; film popularity influenced by ethnic targeting and sociopolitical conditions
(Wood et al., 2022)	2022	Simon Wood, Saw Tiong Guan, Magesan R. Ayavoo	Film Censorship in Malaysia: Key Issues and Challenges of the System	Qualitative analysis; interviews with film practitioners	State control, legal frameworks, creative suppression, freedom of expression, policy reform	Not the central focus; indirectly inferred through practitioner frustration	Central focus: opaque censorship process, lack of judicial review, harsh and inconsistent decisions under the 2002 Act
(Wei et al., 2018)	2018	Angeline Wong, Shanthini Pillai, Ong Puay Liu	Cross-cultural Dialogue in Golden Era Films	Film analysis of Sesudah Suboh (1967) and Gerimis (1968)	Inter-ethnic relationships, multiculturalism, identity negotiation	Implied as positively received during the Golden Era	No formal censorship reported; reflects more open cultural discourse of the era
(Wang, 2015)	2015	Chih-ming Wang	Amir Muhammad's Memory Films on the CPM	Textual/political analysis of The Last Communist and Village People Radio Show	Memory politics, communism, race, national identity, historical censorship	Mixed: intellectual acclaim; state backlash	The Last Communist was banned in Malaysia; official historical suppression
(Hee, 2019)	2019	Wai-Siam Hee	Accented Style in Namewee's Film and Rap	Theoretical analysis (Sinophone + accented cinema)	Chinese–Malay relations, Sinophone identity, cultural exclusion, localization vs diaspora	Broad public following; polarizing among political authorities	Recurrent bans, censorship, political condemnation of Namewee's works

DISCUSSION

This systematic review synthesised 18 qualitative studies to examine the role of films in Malaysia's political transformation. Five research enquiries were conducted using the PRISMA-SPIDER protocol and MMAT evaluation. The results indicate that Malaysian films function as intricate political objects, navigating censorship, ideology, audience interaction, and creative defiance.

Numerous films, especially those from mainstream or government-approved sources, serve as instruments of soft power to bolster nationalist ideologies. According to Ahmad and Lee (2015), P. Ramlee's films were pivotal in expressing the "*modern Malay*" identity and strengthening the prominence of Malay culture within the national consciousness. Suhaimi Baba's body of work (Aziz, 2020) integrates nationalistic motifs with historical narratives, incorporating Islamised moral frameworks and gender roles. Conversely, independent filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad (Wang, 2015) and Namewee (Hee, 2019) employ a critical approach that utilises satire and historical reinterpretation to challenge prevailing narratives. The disparity between Malaysia's official multicultural discourse and the cinematic elevation of the Malay identity has been apparent in numerous studies. Yusof and Esmaeil (2017) contended that state-controlled visual media systematically marginalised ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, more inclusive representations are evident in films from the Golden Era (Wei et al., 2018) and Yasmin Ahmad's oeuvre (Wang & Kerry, 2022), which depict interethnic relationships and multicultural harmony. Sinophone Malaysian films (Kuan, 2019; Hee, 2019) offer alternative perspectives by opposing both Malay ethno-nationalism and Chinese state centrism, thereby affirming localised identities.

The omnipresent impact of censorship, both institutional and cultural, is consistent. Although overt censorship is evidenced in studies such as Wang (2015), which detail the prohibition of *The Last Communist*, indirect suppression is evident through financial neglect and ideological filtering (Tan et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Zainal (2019) and Lim (2015) underscored how political Islam and moral policing contribute to the marginalisation of *LGBTQ+* themes and sexual minorities. Filmmakers frequently engage in self-censorship or alter their scripts to satisfy the *Film Censorship Board* (Aziz 2020; Wood et al. 2022).

A complex depiction of gender representation has emerged. Certain films, such as those examined by Cheang (2022), present post-feminist representations of empowered Malay women, albeit frequently in traditional or state-sanctioned contexts. Zainal (2019) revealed inconsistencies in audience reception, wherein sensual content is embraced despite the prevailing Islamic norms. Simultaneously, Suhaimi Baba's female protagonists confront patriarchal norms while functioning within an Islamised cinematic framework (Aziz, 2020). Nonetheless, *LGBTQ+* representation is significantly constrained, as Lim (2015) notes, in the presence of coded or symbolic portrayals influenced by political Islam. Films often function as mnemonic tools, particularly when institutional history is disputed or obliterated. Documentary filmmakers (Hassan et al., 2024) and activists associated with the *Freedom Film Festival* (Ahmad et al., 2017) emphasise the narratives of individuals historically marginalised in educational texts. Konior (2015) and Lee and Emang (2016) examined the reintegration of animism and World War II trauma into public memory through allegorical narrative and genre cinema. Amir Muhammad's work (Wang 2015) illustrates how cinema can serve as a counter-archive that contests state-sponsored historical suppression.

The public's reaction to politically charged cinema differs based on its content and presentation. Yasmin Ahmad's films (Wang & Kerry, 2022) and those produced by the Golden Era (Wei et al., 2018) garnered positive recognition of their authenticity and inclusiveness. Simultaneously, the works of Namewee (Hee, 2019) and Amir Muhammad (Wang, 2015) elicited polarised responses applauded by progressive factions, yet denounced by political authorities. Zainal (2019) observed that audiences frequently harmonise piety with sensual or subversive material, underscoring the disparity between public sentiment and state policy. In addition to censorship, systemic challenges significantly obstruct political filmmaking. Tan et al. (2024) elucidate that governmental neglect, insufficient talent pipelines, and inadequate financial investment hinder innovation and risk taking. Independent filmmakers have frequently restricted access to mainstream platforms, depending on the film festivals or digital venues to connect with audiences. Nonetheless, venues, such as the *Freedom Film Festival*, offer alternative avenues for political expression (Ahmad et al. 2017).

Addressing RQ1 on how films influence Malaysia's political landscape, the reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that this influence operates at least on three levels: ideological reinforcement, narrative contestation, and symbolic mediation. At the ideological level, films produced or supported by state-affiliated bodies have functioned to legitimise dominant political arrangements. Ahmad and Lee (2015) showed that the cultural reframing of P. Ramlee's cinematic legacy served to consolidate a specifically Malay-centric nationalism in the post-independence period, effectively naturalising ethnic hierarchy as a feature of national identity. Aziz (2020) similarly illustrated how Suhaimi Baba's commercially successful films embedded Islamised moral frameworks within accessible cinematic narratives, thereby normalising conservative social values for mass audiences. At the level of contestation, however, independent cinema has consistently pushed back against these dominant framings. Wang (2015) and Hee (2019) each demonstrated how filmmakers operating outside state-funded channels, especially Amir Muhammad and Namewee, utilised satirical, documentary, and accented cinematic styles to challenge prevailing historical narratives and ethnic hierarchies. This dual function of Malaysian cinema as both ideological instrument and platform of resistance aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding framework and with Gramsci's (1971) theorisation of cultural hegemony as always provisional and contested.

In response to RQ2 regarding how filmmakers navigate censorship and political messaging, the evidence points to a spectrum of adaptive strategies ranging from outright defiance to tactical compliance. Wood, Guan, and Ayavoo (2022) provided the most systematic account of this landscape, identifying the opaque decision-making process of the Film Censorship Board as a structural impediment that compels filmmakers to engage in anticipatory self-censorship. This "chilling effect" means that the suppression of political content does not always require direct state intervention; the mere existence of an unpredictable censorship regime is sufficient to discipline creative output. Aziz (2020) documented instances in which Suhaimi Baba faced forced reshoots and delayed releases, suggesting that even commercially viable and critically acclaimed directors are not immune to state pressure. By contrast, Ahmad, Beng, and Kim (2017) illustrated how the Freedom Film Festival offered a circumvention strategy in which digital distribution and festival screenings allowed politically sensitive films to reach audiences outside the reach of formal censorship mechanisms. This tension between institutional suppression and strategic circumvention reflects a broader pattern observable across authoritarian and semi-authoritarian media systems, wherein the boundaries of permissible expressions are constantly renegotiated by both regulators and cultural producers (Flew, 2007).

Regarding RQ3 concerning audience reception and interpretation, the reviewed studies reveal a more complex picture than simple acceptance or rejection of political messaging. Zainal (2019) observed that Malaysian audiences are not passive recipients of state ideology but active negotiators who simultaneously consume piety-oriented content and sensually charged material, effectively reconciling apparently contradictory cultural norms. This finding resonates with audience reception studies that emphasise the active construction of meaning by viewers (Morley, 1980). Wang and Kerry (2022) noted that Yasmin Ahmad's films garnered both domestic and international acclaim precisely because they offered emotionally resonant representations of interethnic solidarity that departed from official multicultural rhetoric without triggering direct censorship. The polarised reception of Namewee's work (Hee, 2019), often celebrated by progressive urban audiences and condemned by political authorities, further illustrates that politically charged cinema in Malaysia activates divergent interpretive communities (Fish, 1980), whose readings are shaped by ethnicity, generation, and political orientation. Notably, Hassan, Tan, and Chong (2024) found that documentary films resonated particularly strongly with youth and intellectually engaged audiences, pointing to the political potential of non-fiction cinema as a vehicle for civic consciousness-raising among younger generations.

Regarding RQ4 on the evolution of thematic focus across political eras, this review identifies a discernible trajectory from nation-building narratives in the 1950s and 1960s toward a more fragmented and contested political cinema in the contemporary period. Wei, Pillai, and Liu (2018) demonstrated that films of Malaysia's Golden Age (1950s–1960s) were relatively pluralistic, foregrounding cross-ethnic dialogue and shared postcolonial aspirations in a period when the national project was still being collectively imagined. By contrast, from the 1980s onwards, the progressive institutionalisation of Bumiputera policies and the Islamisation programme under Mahathir Mohamad's administration are reflected in a cinema increasingly structured around Malay-Muslim identity frameworks (Aziz, 2020; Lim, 2015). Driskell (2025) noted how even star persona construction in the 1960s, as exemplified by Jins Shamsuddin, navigated the tension between Westernised modernity and Malay cultural nationalism, a tension that would subsequently intensify. The post-reformasi period from 1998 onwards introduced a new wave of political documentary and activist filmmaking (Ahmad et al., 2017; Wang, 2015; Hassan et al., 2024), suggesting that political opening and civil society mobilisation stimulated a corresponding diversification of politically engaged cinematic expression. This periodisation, while provisional, points to a productive area for future longitudinal research into the co-evolution of political conditions and cinematic form in Malaysia.

Regarding RQ5, with respect to filmmaking techniques and narrative strategies used to convey dissent, this review identifies several recurring formal and strategic approaches. Allegory and metaphor constitute the dominant mode of political expression in contexts where direct critique is foreclosed by censorship. Konior's (2015) analysis of James Lee's horror film *Histeria* illustrates how ontological frameworks drawn from Malay animism are deployed to mount an implicit critique of modernity and colonial epistemologies. Hee (2019) shows how the "accented style" characterised by linguistic hybridity, generic mixing, and the foregrounding of minority cultural codes, functions as both an aesthetic and political statement, affirming diasporic identities while contesting ethno-nationalist narratives. Documentary filmmakers adopt a testimonial mode that prioritises the voices of historically marginalised communities, as evidenced by Hassan, Tan, and Chong (2024), who showed how

oral history and intimate interview formats construct counter-narratives to official accounts of nationhood and historical memory. Yasmin Ahmad's films (Wang & Kerry, 2022) employ melodramatic conventions and cross-ethnic romance narratives to imagine multicultural solidarities that elude official political discourse. Together, these strategies suggest that political cinema in Malaysia operates through indirection, symbolism, and formal innovation precisely because direct political commentary remains structurally foreclosed by state censorship mechanisms.

This review illustrates that cinema in Malaysia serves both as an instrument of state ideology and a platform for dissent. Themes such as race, religion, gender, and memory are highly politicised, compelling filmmakers to traverse a complex landscape of opportunity and suppression. Censorship bodies engage in ideological gatekeeping exacerbated by systemic underinvestment. However, counternarratives persist in the independent arenas. Malaysian political cinema embodies the nation's contradictions between religious orthodoxy and artistic liberty, pluralism and ethno-nationalism, and historical narratives as dictated by the state and as experienced by individuals. Future policies and scholarship should endeavour to reconcile these disparities by endorsing diverse perspectives and safeguarding creative liberty. The findings of this systematic review have significant implications for cultural policies, freedom of expression, and democratic participation in Malaysia. This study indicates that politically charged films, particularly those that deviate from mainstream narratives, are essential for cultivating civic awareness and alternative histories. Consequently, policymakers should consider revising censorship legislation and promoting greater pluralistic representation in cinema in order to foster cultural discourse and political enlightenment. Second, the data indicate that digital platforms and independent festivals, such as *Freedom Film Fest*, are crucial venues for marginalised voices, thereby requiring institutional support or safeguarding to maintain these creative pathways. This review emphasises the necessity of reevaluating media education frameworks to facilitate critical engagement with political narratives, particularly for youth and minority groups that are disproportionately impacted by media representation.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review underscores the crucial function of films as a mechanism of state ideology and a medium for political dissent in Malaysia. An analysis of 18 qualitative studies revealed how filmmakers navigate censorship, express resistance, and reflect contested national identities. Recurring themes encompass multiculturalism, religious ethics, gender politics, and historical memory, all of which are influenced by intricate power dynamics. Although independent platforms provide opportunities for alternative narratives, systemic obstacles such as censorship and institutional disregard remain. This review emphasises the necessity of policy reforms that safeguard creative freedom and foster diverse cinematic expressions, providing significant insights for scholars, cultural policymakers, and media professionals.

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