

An Analysis of the Reasons for the Continuous Development of Vietnam's Film Industry

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Abstract: In recent years, the Vietnamese entertainment industry has seen an increase exceeding the world's average growth rate. The growth reflected the Vietnam government's long-term goal to build its cultural industry and entertainment industry from 2020 to 2030. The entertainment industry will include a broad range of interrelated industries that produce entertainment products and services, especially the film industry, which has seen significant growth throughout the years. To dive deeper into the development of Vietnam's film industry, this study presents a comprehensive analysis of the drivers behind the growth trajectory of Vietnam's film industry, examining the interplay of cultural, political, and economic factors. The research methodology employed in this study involves an extensive review and synthesis of existing scholarly literature and reputable sources pertaining to the development of Vietnam's film industry. This shift in the film industry is attributed to factors such as the abolition of censorship, the industry's appeal to a broader demographic, the diversification of content, and the transformative impact of streaming platforms. Additionally, while the industry exhibits notable progress, challenges persist, including the need for policies to nurture emerging talent and address the shortage of skilled professionals in various production roles.

Keywords: Vietnam Film Industry, Cinematic Development, Censorship Abolition, Cultural Renovation, Streaming Platforms Impact

1. Introduction

The Vietnamese film industry might become the next pivotal entertainment content creation hub. Even in the face of the pandemic, when the film industry suffered everywhere else, Vietnam has witnessed an unprecedented surge in box-office sales. The most intriguing aspect is that most box-office earnings have been generated by local Vietnamese films. There is a growing appetite among the audience for relatable Vietnamese content, according to Victor Vu, a seasoned director known for films such as *Dreamy Eyes*, which were submitted by Vietnam for consideration at the Oscars [1]. Currently, there have been discussions on the growth potential of the Vietnamese film industry. Wong details several films with local production that have been successful in both the local and international markets, showing the growth potential in the market after the alleviation of censorship [1]. There has also been detailed discussion on the transitory implications of a specific Vietnam film, from focusing on educational topics to ones that fit young audiences' tastes [2]. Some studies also show a less positive perspective and focus on the previous film industry's lack of diversification. This analysis

will provide a more comprehensive examination of the multifaceted drivers compelling the evolution of Vietnam's film industry. By examining past papers and research on such a topic, this analysis aims to shed light on pivotal elements contributing to the Vietnam film industry's growth and offer a fresh perspective on its future trajectory.

2. Alleviation of Censorship

Based on Vietnam's Constitution, it has a socialistic-oriented commodity economy where both the market mechanism and the state's management come into play [3]. A great deal of political correctness is embedded in the culture, especially on the topic of war. To ensure political correctness in the media, censorship played a huge role in the entertainment industry in Vietnam. The ministry's Department of Cinematography needed to approve the script before the movie began rolling in cinemas. Despite the hope to spark artistic creativity and have more diverse contents in the Vietnam film industry, some artists were punished for their work, which demotivated them to explore other artistic themes. The censorship led to films that lack originality and innovation; most of them chose traditional topics like war memories and socialism building to have a better chance of getting funding and approval from the state.

Luckily, partly pressured by the grassroots resistance to centralized planning and the liberalization process in the former Soviet Union, the progressive factions of the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to promote cultural renovation [4]. They hoped to invite more alternatives to the single artistic expression of social realism, which produced too many films with the same theme of having the working class as the vanguard when building the nation and fending off Western enemies. The Vietnamese government abolished the censorship of films and scripts and allowed private film studios to revitalize the industry. With the end of the Indochinese wars and the opening of the market to international investment, entertainment commodities and products from Asia, the United States, and Europe flooded into Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communist Party referred to the time period as the era of liberation in arts and culture. The film themes also moved away from the country's war and fighting against foreign enemies to stories about individuals' daily lives and market liberalization [4].

One film that has shaken the Vietnam film industry is *Gai Nhay* (Bar Girls) by the director Le Hoang. It became the first locally made blockbuster, earning over \$1 million. The film, containing elements of drugs, sex, and STDs, portrays the story of several young prostitutes, a topic that the Vietnamese film industry barely touches upon. In an interview with the 23-year-old student by the World Press Review, the young audience contended that this was her first time seeing such dark scenes in a Vietnamese movie. Her reaction was exactly what the director, Le Hoang, wanted from his audience. He and his crew changed their movie-production approach: rather than showing what the audiences want to see, they focused on "the most pressing but exciting aspects in our society." The success of the movie showed that film themes that reveal realistic everyday-life drama are more appealing than the old war themes. Films discussing interesting topics that appeal to people are the key to attracting young audiences, rather than conventional topics that were able to secure the state's approval. *Gai Nhay* (Bar Girls) was a vindication of the success of censorship abolition in reviving the film industry.

3. Appealing to a Bigger Audience Base

Normally, to secure funding and the state's approval, Vietnamese films were often used to educate the masses on traditional subjects such as war and socialism building, and the film contents were often "overly serious" and "predictably dull". This is exemplified by films like *Ai Xuoi Van Ly* (Going Along Vietnam), *Luoi Dao* (The Knife), and *Chiec Khoa Vang* (The Golden Key). However, this is not what appeals to the public. Broadening the customer base is crucial to invigorating the film

industry for several key reasons. Essentially, a larger customer base translates to higher box-office revenue and potential for international recognition, providing the industry with the financial resources and visibility needed for sustained growth and development.

The film *Gai Nhay* (Bar Girls) shows a more realistic side of society, revealing some of the most pressing yet overlooked social issues in society [2]. *Gai Nhay* (Bar Girls) struck the audience as an unconventional story, highlighting the public's craving for local films about daily life instead of grand narratives about wars and revolutions. With a mere \$78,000 in funding, the film managed to meet the public's needs and gain profit many times the original budget [5]. With its dark scenes, such as gang rapes and a young girl injecting heroin into her arm, the film seems to have outcompeted other films and caught the attention of young audiences; the seats were filled for four weeks straight at the cinema.

Besides appealing to the younger generation, the Vietnamese film industry has also gradually made its way into the international market. The new cinema law also permits Vietnamese cities to host their own film festivals without the purview of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. For example, the Da Nang Asian Film Festival marked the pioneering instance of such a regional event. More local film festivals help cities collaborate with the international film industry, connecting local cinemas to the international market [1]. There seems to be a growing international market for Vietnamese films. *Dad, I'm Sorry* was one of the Vietnamese films that entered the US market, becoming the first Vietnamese-made film to exceed \$1 million in revenue at the US box office. Thien A Pham, the creator of the California-based distributor 3388 Films, notes that in the past, there would only be one or two Vietnamese films released in North America every few years. However, now there are four to six films released annually, indicating a positive trend and suggesting that there is still significant untapped market potential. After "Dad, I'm Sorry" premiered on nearly 50 screens in 2021, which was a record for a Vietnamese-produced film at that time, this screen count has now become the standard, and it is expected to continue increasing in North America [2].

4. Diversification of Contents

Better contents are needed in order to attract more audiences, especially younger generations. Before the change in policies, independent filmmakers in Vietnam created films using their independent funds and with license from state-owned film companies. To recoup expenses and generate profit faster, the independent studio's production content tended to be straightforward and lighthearted plots, such as romantic soup operas, which were referred to as "instant noodles" by filmmaking communities [2].

Granted, due to the recent changes and shifts in regulations, independent filmmakers have been less bothered by fundings and gained more freedom in content creation, which revived the Vietnamese film market. With a larger budget, filmmakers now can explore a wider range of genres. An example would be Timothy Linh Bui's *Daydreamers*, marking the country's inaugural notable vampire feature. According to Director Bui, *Daydreamers* represents the first vampire narrative in a Western style produced in Vietnam. Many believed it couldn't be accomplished due to cultural disparities and censorship regulations. However, the timing is opportune as censorship is loosening restrictions on horror and specific themes. Additionally, there are other sci-fi projects in the works [1].

5. Impact of Streaming Platforms

Interestingly, with the development of streaming platforms, movies are rendered extended life than they are used to when they were only played in cinemas. This is an exciting time for Vietnamese moviemakers, especially given the high growth of the streaming industry in Vietnam. More streaming video provider platforms have been eyeing Vietnam as a potential market to expand into due to its

growing population and media consumption. In recent years, Vietnam has also seen an increase in media consumption. Over “70%” of people are more active on social networks, even over the last 12 months. 49% of the people have an increase in their consumption of music streaming, and “41%” of them started to use streaming websites like Netflix more frequently: a higher growth in music streaming driven by “Gen Z” and in video streaming driven by “Millennials” [6]. In fact, Vietnam’s internet user population ranks 18th globally according to Internet World Stats. Netflix entered Vietnam in 2016, collaborating with Skyline Media to expand its Vietnamese movie selection [7].

Iflix, a Malaysian-based video streaming startup, also tapped into the Vietnam market, planning on exploiting the large internet user population in Vietnam. Compared to the invasion of competitors by American conglomerates, Vietnam has a huge number of potential users and limited exposure in the video on demand industry. The CEO of Fim+ has a more welcoming attitude towards potential new entrants, explaining that Vietnam needs to engage to educate consumers and raise awareness of the concept of video on demand services [7]. Vietnam streaming platforms like Fim+ have more advantage over conglomerates like Netflix due to the low price and market knowledge. While Netflix’s customer base are medium-to-high income who are more interested in Western TV shows and films, Fim+’s contents are mostly from Southeast Asia. Fim+’s customers are mostly those who are unwilling to pay for Netflix’s subscription fee: Netflix charges “\$7.7”, compared to Fim+’s “\$2.5”. However, Netflix shifted its strategy to include more regional content to cater to their tastes. “We have dedicated thousands of hours to Vietnamese dubbing and subbing for our content in order to bring users the best possible viewing experience,” explained Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix [8]. Yet Netflix proved its international competitiveness again: holding a “16%” market share at the beginning of 2021, Netflix grew to a “22%” market share by the end of 2021. The top paid streaming service provider in Vietnam, however, was still FPT Play, a local streaming service provider [8].

6. Discussion

Fierce competition from Hollywood and other foreign film studios put pressure on the local film industry. The cheap one-dollar pirated Hollywood film copies can be easily found on the internet, and state-run TV channels often play popular U.S. films, as Ben Stocking of the Associated Press pointed out. More foreign video streaming providers like Netflix have also started to connect with users in Vietnam [6]. Besides the fierce competition, local studios like Ding Do Video and Nha Trang started to produce more “instant noodle” and soap operas; they were producing over forty annually. However, these films were criticised as “low culture” productions. Overall, the industry is underdeveloped [9]. Diving deeper into the problem with the Vietnam entertainment industry, film journalist Le Hong Lam further explained that the Vietnam film industry lacks films that are relatable and thought-provoking to the audience. The cause is that the government lacks supporting policies for new talents in the film industry. Without a strong supportive policy, many directors have to halt their careers in their 50s, which should have been the golden age for directors [4].

Film producers found it hard to secure high-quality talent for their productions. Phan Gia Nhat Linh explained that all the good production designers were fully booked by other production teams. The limited number of talents poses a challenge to the industry. In fact, few universities in Vietnam offer proper training for theatre and cinematography. Often, the graduates would not end up working in the industry [10]. To solve the lack of talents, Tran Luân Kim, the Chairman of the Vietnamese Cinema Association, explained that Vietnam can send some people to study abroad while allowing private studios to outsource talents. Due to the lack of actors and actresses and the fast-growing film industry in Vietnam, some models become actresses to fill the blank space [10].

In tandem, industry stakeholders should advocate for the diversification of film content, encouraging a wider array of genres and themes beyond the conventional. This not only caters to a broader audience base but also sparks creativity and innovation, distinguishing Vietnamese cinema

in the global market. Ultimately, a collective commitment from the government, educational institutions, industry professionals, and international collaborators is essential to overcome these obstacles and propel Vietnam's film industry towards sustainable growth and artistic excellence.

7. Conclusion

The alleviation of censorship emerges as a pivotal catalyst, liberating filmmakers from historical constraints and enabling the exploration of diverse themes beyond conventional narratives of war and socialism. Additionally, strategic efforts to appeal to a wider audience base, particularly the younger generation, have yielded notable successes, challenging traditional approaches to film production. The influence of streaming platforms further extends the reach and impact of Vietnamese films, presenting new opportunities for global exposure and revenue generation. Amidst these transformative dynamics, the industry grapples with challenges ranging from fierce competition to the imperative of nurturing a robust talent pool. This paper only examined past analysis and research on such a topic to provide a more compressive insight into the development of Vietnam's film industry. However, the reliance on past literature may entail a potential lag in capturing the most current developments and trends within the industry. Given the rapid evolution of the film landscape, particularly in the context of technological advancements and shifting cultural dynamics, there exists a possibility that certain recent developments or emerging paradigms may not be adequately represented in the reviewed literature. In the future, primary research methods, such as interviews, surveys, or field observations, may be able to provide a more granular and context-specific understanding of the industry's dynamics, which may not be fully captured through the compilation of past studies alone.

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