

## Why We Don't Go to the Cinema: A Qualitative Study in Iran

Maryam Khaleghipour  
University of Tehran, Iran  
Azam Ravadrad  
University of Tehran, Iran

### Abstract

*One of the most important problems of the cinema industry in Iran is the lack of audiences in the cinema halls. Dezful -the second most populous city in Khuzestan province with a population of around 400,000- has one cinema and it is the field of study in the present research. In this city, the cinema-goers are very limited and there isn't much research to show why people don't tend to go to the cinema. This paper is a qualitative study and we did semi-structured interviews with 40 persons in Dezful who don't go to the cinema. We used purposeful sampling and the sample included both genders with different ages (21-56) and different social, cultural and economic contexts. The main themes of the interviews were 1) the reasons for not going to the cinema, and 2) alternative ways for watching films instead of watching in the movie theater. The results showed although some people don't go to the cinema because of the lack of quality of the cinema hall, some people don't go to the cinema because cinema is considered as individual entertainment. Most people believed that the traditional culture in many small cities is spending time with family and relatives in their free time as a collective culture. Importantly, some people had a negative view about individuals who prefer to go to the cinema in their spare time instead of meeting their family. Other individuals, structural and cultural obstacles are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Cinema, Dezful, Iran, Audiences, Cultural Obstacles

### Introduction

The global film industry shows healthy projections for the future. worldwide box office revenue has grown for years and in 2019 before the coronavirus pandemic, this amount had increased to more than 42 billion U.S. (Watson, 2020). Because of the profitability of the film industry, large media companies around the world compete for the production and distribution of motion pictures (Ravadrad 2012, 32-33). Cinema as an industry can be very profitable for society, depending on the number of spectators who watch movies in cinemas. The Iranian film industry has greatly progressed in recent years, and Iranian films have made numerous appearances and obtained awards on the international scene. There is a film festival in Iran namely The Fajr International Film Festival which is the only and very significant cinematic event in Iran and has some considerable audiences in Iran particularly in Tehran. Although the cinema industry in Iran has interested audiences, the statistics show

that about half of the audiences are in Tehran, which is the capital of Iran and the cinema industry doesn't have considerable audiences in other cities especially in small cities in Iran (Titre Bartar, 2020). The question of the present study is why most people in the small cities in Iran don't tend to go to the cinema for watching films? And which factors or obstacles decrease the tendency for going to the cinema? Dezfoul as the second most populous city in Khuzestan province with a population of around 400,000 is the study field of this research. Although this City has one active cinema hall, the number of audiences is very limited.

### Literature Review

There is narrow literature about the reasons for not going to the cinema in Iran, especially in the small cities. Research has reported that people don't tend to go to the cinema for the reasons such as: not knowing the director and producer of a film, the high price of a cinema ticket, low quality and lack of facilities of cinema halls (Najafi Siahroudi & Alavi 2014, 60). On the other hand, there are some investigations about the motivations of audiences in Iran for going to the cinema which reviewing them makes a suitable conceptual framework for this study. Research in Iran about the effective factors for going to the cinema has been focused on the audiences of cinema in Tehran-as the capital of Iran-and they have examined this subject through economic and Socio-demographics perspectives. The results of research with an economic perspective show that there is a direct relationship between individuals' income and the number of times they go to the cinema. The result of one of these research is that increasing the number of household members decreases demand for cinema, and increasing income increases the demand for cinema (Garaiee nezhad et.al. 2010, 148). Rahimi et.al. (2011, suggested that cinema is known as a luxury good and has a direct relationship with the income of people but it hasn't any relationship with the ticket price. Overall, People in Tehran go to the cinema more than all citizens in other cities in Iran. However, watching films at home is a favorable choice in their free time for those families who have more population because this activity is cheaper than going to the cinema (Azma 2007, 70-80).

In addition to the effect of income and ticket price, cinema facilities also have a positive effect on the tendency of individuals for going to the cinema. Various cinema halls, showing different films, and employing professional equipment encourage audiences to go to the movie theaters (Azma 2007, 53). Famous stars, recommendations from friends and acquaintances,

and getting rewards in the Fajr Film Festival have an effect on the tendency of people to watch a film in the cinema (Bikaranlou & Saie 2010, 48-49).

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International investigations which have examined the demand for cinema can be classified into multiple groups: research which has been studied the effect of cinema stars, awards, the origin country of a film, the popularity of the director and movie reviews on motivation for going to the cinema; research which has been focused on the economic and demographic features of the audiences; and investigations which have been reported the effect of rational addiction hypothesis on going to the cinema (Irandoust 2017, 1-2).

In line with the results of research in Iran, the results of international investigations show that demand for cinema has a positive relationship with increasing income (Blanco & Baños Pino 1997, 70; Irandoust, 2017; 3). Improving the quality of movies and increasing the number of films and cinema halls, have a great effect on the demand for cinema (Kim 2009, 36). The result of research in Australia proposed that the discount on cinema tickets on special days in a week has grown the number of cinema-goers (De Roos & Mckenzie 2014, 106).

Other factors such as age, gender and marital status influence the tendency of individuals to go to the cinema. Young people have more tendency to go to the cinema. Although being a woman increases the likelihood of going to the movies, being married decreases the likelihood of going to the movie theaters. Furthermore, having a child under 18 and having a job diminish the motivation for watching a film in cinema halls; because those families who have young children prefer to watch films without sexy or violent scenes (Lee & Bhargava 2004, 272; Rodondo & Holbrook 2010, 303). In addition, women movie-goers expect a convenient, comfortable and secure environment in cinema. For example, the cinema halls which have been located in public spaces increase the motivations of women to go to the cinema (Srinivas 2010, 294).

Moreover, based on the rational addiction hypothesis, patterns of cinema-going may be partly driven by habit or addiction. Moviegoers often develop a preference for their favorite actors or directors. They also search for a specific genre based on their previous experiences. For this reason, many sequels or remakes of commercially successful movies are successful again (Kim & Park 2010, 16-17). On the other hand, some audiences of cinema consider watching a film in the cinema hall as entertainment and they try to experience relaxation by watching a film

in movie theaters in their free time (Ravadrad 2012, 52). Audiences consider cinema as a social site of film consumption instead of service for film distribution. They go to the cinema to spend their time in the form of social leisure, but if they feel any pressure due to the economic conditions, they prefer to watch the film with a free download through a small screen in their home (Van Di Vijver 2017, 135).

Importantly, the values and lifestyle of individuals which have roots in their culture and society influence cinema-going patterns (Díaz, Gómez, Molina, & Santos 2018, 86-89). For example, research in Malaysia showed with increasing age, the tendency for going to the cinema decreases because watching a film in a cinema hall in adulthood is against the Malaysian cultural norms as a Muslim. However, adult watch those films via TV or DVD in their homes (Saleh & Abdullah, 2014)

All in all, in previous research the focus was on the factors which lead to an increase in going to the cinema for those audiences who currently sometimes go to the cinema. In fact, this group is the audience of the movies. However, in the present study, the focus is on the individuals who never go to the cinema. On the other hand, almost all previous studies have been quantitative, but this research is a qualitative study and wants to examine the reasons for turning away from cinema through the lens of people who don't go to the cinema. These two features show the innovation of the present study.

## Method

The recruitment and interviews were conducted in the second-largest city in Khuzestan, Dezful in Iran. The intention of the research design was to contain individuals who don't go to the cinema. For selecting individuals for interviewing purposeful sampling was used and the interviews were continued to achieve "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) until no new data was added. We interview people from different socioeconomic statuses. Additionally, the age, gender and education of participants were considered. Interviews were carried out with 25 women and 15 men between 21 and 56 years old with different levels of education from high school diploma to doctoral degree.

The main themes of the interviews were 1) the reasons for not going to the cinema, and 2) alternative ways for watching films instead of watching a film in the movie theater. Interviews were conducted through social networking sites via voice messages. The data collection resulted in a final sample of 40 interviews. As the interviews were audio-recorded, they transcribed verbatim. The lengths of the interviews were different depending on the length of the informants' answers. Overall, interviews lasted 30-40 minutes.

We used thematic analysis for data analysis. Qualitative approaches are complex and diverse (Holloway and Todres, 2003), and thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the present study, we used MAXQDA 18 software for coding and analyzing

data. MAXQDA is a product of Verbi software (www.maxqda.com) and it is designed for use in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research. But the emphasis on going beyond qualitative research can be observed because of the ability of the program to deal relatively quickly with large numbers of interviews (Maietta, 2008). Firstly, audio documents were transcribed. After that, all written files were entered into this software and were coded and categorized.

## Analysis

The purpose of the present study is to understand the individuals' reasons for lack of tendency to watching a film in the cinema hall. But it is clear that not going to the cinema does not mean not watching a movie. Some people watch Iranian and foreign films from television; some people provide DVDs of films and others prefer to download a film on the Internet. One of the possibilities of the present study was that watching a film at home through television or other devices can play an important role in decreasing the motivation of people for going to the cinema. For this reason, in addition to a question about the reasons for not going to the cinema, we asked a question about the alternative ways for watching a movie. 53 codes were obtained from analyzing the content of informants' answers. Using MAXQDA software, similar codes were classified into 7 general categories and finally, 3 main categories were obtained.

### 1- Individual factors

#### *Not having enough time to go to the cinema*

Some of the informants claimed that they don't have enough time to devote to going to the cinema. For women, "being married", "parenting" and "husband's job" were the reasons for not having time. Some of the women noted that they went to the cinema before they got married and particularly before they had a child. Also, women whose husbands were at work for a long time or during the night claimed that although they would like to go to the cinema, they can't. On the other hand, some men said they are "busy" and when they come back home after a long day at work they are "tired".

"I went to the cinema about 6 times a year before I got married. After that, I went to the cinema around 2 times a year, but after having a baby I never went to the cinema because I don't have enough time to do that" (female-26 years old-married)

#### *Impossibility of going to the cinema with a young child*

Contrary some women who claimed they don't have enough time because of parenting, some women believed that they can't watch a film in cinema with a young child because of the "Lack of patience of a child to sit in the cinema hall" and "inappropriate content of some movie" for children.

"It is impossible to go to the cinema with a child. One time we went to the cinema with my young daughter. She was tired and said I want to go out or she wanted to go to the toilet. It was difficult for us to go out while the movie was playing. After that we decided to don't go to the cinema" (female-31 years old-married)

"I would like to go to the cinema but I have two young children and I really don't like my children to see sexy or violent scenes. So I prefer to not go to the movie theater" (male-32 years old-married)

#### *Possibility of watching a film via home media*

Participants expressed that they prefer to watch a film at home. They saw advantages of watching a movie at home in "ability to set the time of watching a movie", "no-cost", "without spending time for going out of home", "watching a film with family" in a "more convenience" environment compared to the cinema. They mentioned that DVDs, television and the Internet facilitate the condition of watching a film.

"I don't have any tendency to go to the cinema because it is possible and easy to watch a film through television and DVDs at home" (male-38 years old-married)

## 2- Structural factors

#### *Lack of facilities in cinema*

Some interviewees said that "low quality of screen and audio equipment", "single-screen cinema" and "few movie releases" have a negative impact on the tendency of people to go to the cinema in Dezful. Moreover, Dezful has one cinema hall and it is far from the city center and people can go there only by private vehicles. As mentioned before, women like easy access and safe cinema. So the remoteness of the cinema from the city center made it difficult for women to go to the cinema especially during the night. Also, some people believed that the environment of cinema in Dezful is not interesting. They said that "lacking entertainment" and "shopping center" decrease their motivation to go to the cinema.

"I think the cinema in Dezful is not interesting. So I only go to the cinema when I travel to Tehran" (male-47 years old-single)

#### *Delay to the film release*

Some people commented that films release firstly in Tehran and after a while, they are distributed in small cities. They believed it decreases the number of cinema-goers in Dezful because of "disclosing the story of the film" and "decreasing the excitement of audiences" for watching the film in the cinema. In fact, we can claim that sometimes the interval between movie releases in the cinema of Dezful and the distribution of the movie on the online platforms or in the form of DVDs is so reduced that people prefer to watch the movie at their home.

“Because all films are shown in Tehran firstly and after that, they are distributed in small cities, people consider them as “second-hand movie”. I think if all movie is shown in Tehran and other cities simultaneously, it can increase the motivation of going to the cinema in small cities” (female-36 years old-single)

### 3- Cultural and Social Factors

#### *Negative attitude towards cinema-goers*

Some informants expressed that in some small cities like Dezful, there is a negative attitude towards cinema-goers particularly those who go to the cinema constantly. They are known as “prodigal” and “jobless” persons. They also believe that some people consider cinema as a place for young people, so people’s viewpoint towards elderly cinema goers is negative. It seems that these opinions have roots in the traditional culture about cinema and Cinema audience attendance patterns in Dezful. Furthermore, some participants proposed that cinema is considered a luxury good that is related to modern culture. All these attitudes and beliefs about cinema had a great impact on decreasing the number of cinema audiences in Dezful.

“I don’t like to go to the cinema because going to the cinema is not a common practice for old people in the culture of Dezful” (female-50 years old-married)

#### *The tendency for collective leisure*

The tendency for collective leisure is one of the important findings of the present study. Most of the participants expressed that in Dezful most people tend to spend their free time with their family and relatives. For this reason, they are interested in visiting their relatives or going outside the home for example to a park or nature around Dezful together. They said that in the culture of Dezful, going to the cinema is considered as an individual activity and for this reason, people don’t tend to experience it and if they want to watch a film they prefer to stay at home and watch the movie with their family.

“In small cities, people are interested in visiting their families in their spare time and this behavior is considered as a positive value. In fact, some people don’t like to go to the cinema because they don’t consider cinema as a collective entertainment” (male-28 years old-single)

### Discussion

Although previous research considered the price of cinema tickets and people’s income as effective factors in whether people go to the cinema or not, the results of the present study showed that individual, structural, and social factors are more effective than economic factors to not going to the cinema in Dezful.

According to the research literature, marriage and having children decrease the demand for cinema among women. In the present study, some women

said that although they had gone to the cinema in the past, after getting married and having a baby they didn’t have enough time to go to the cinema. On the other hand, several women proposed that having a baby is an obstacle for going to the cinema because it is difficult for a young child to sit in the cinema hall for a long time and sometimes parents don’t like their children to see sexy or violent scenes. Furthermore, some individuals believed that watching a movie at home through DVDs, television, or on the Internet is more interesting because they could watch a film with their family and in a more convenient environment.

In addition to individual factors, some people mentioned that the lack of quality and facility of cinema in Dezful decreases their motivation to go to the movie theater. As the cinema in Dezful is far from the city center and there isn’t any public transportation for going to the cinema, some women believed that the location of the cinema has an effect on their motivation for going to the cinema. On the other hand, some informants expressed that single-screen cinema in Dezful, lack of variety in film release and delay in showing movies in small cities compared to the capital of Iran drop the number of audiences. They believe it decreases the excitement of audiences for going to the cinema because some people understand the story of the movie through reviews and criticisms, so they prefer to stay at home and watch a film without spending their money.

The result of the present research showed that cultural and social factors play an effective role in people’s motivation to go to the cinema. Negative attitudes towards adult cinema-goers decrease adults’ tendency for going to the cinema. On the other hand, some of the young people don’t go to the cinema because they escape from negative labels as prodigal and jobless. Importantly, going to the cinema is not considered as collective leisure. In the context of a community where most of the people prefer to meet their families and relatives in their free time or going out of home together, going to the cinema is not the priority of the free time activities for individuals. It seems that having children and negative views towards adult cinema-goers made cinema an individual entertainment especially for single young individuals.

As mentioned, a few people focused on the economic factor for not going to the cinema. While the results of some of the previous research showed that discounts on cinema tickets can increase the tendency for going to the cinema, it seems that sometimes the cost of a ticket is not the concern of people. Structural, cultural and social factors have been more effective in turning away audiences in Dezful. Some of these obstacles such as structural factors can be improved in a short time, whereas cultural and social obstacles can be decreased in the long term.

### Conclusion

This inquiry provides information for understanding reasons for not going to the cinema in a city in Iran. But it seems that some of the findings and solutions can

increase the number of cinema-goers in every context. For example, making an entertainment environment for children in cinema might be effective. Currently, there are entertaining environments for children in chain stores where children play under the supervision of an adult or an educator. Therefore, parents can shop easily and without their children. This method can be implemented in cinemas and in addition to playing, children can watch animations. In this way, parents can watch the movie with ease, and children can be acquainted with the culture of cinema and watching movies in the cinema from childhood, and this can increase the demand for cinema in the future. Modifying negative attitudes towards cinema takes a long time. It seems that children's involvement with the cinema environment can change the negative attitude of the traditional culture toward cinema in the future.

Currently, cinema in Dezfoul is managed by the government, not the private sector, so cinema managers do not make much effort to attract people to go to the cinema. On the other hand, this assumption that people in Dezfoul don't like to watch a film in the cinema has caused the private sector to construct shopping malls and Indoor entertainment centers without cinema. The result of this research showed that some people would like to go to the cinema but they need facilities to make going to the cinema easier for them. On the other hand, a new multiplex cinema should be constructed to attract people who complained about the low quality of the cinema in Dezfoul. Importantly, we need to make a unique environment based on the pattern of the collective culture in the new cinema for local audiences.

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