



Why Karachi Stopped Going to the Cinema: A Quantitative Study of Audience Behaviour, Access, and Attitudes

1. Taimoor Ahmed Khan

PhD Candidate, Department of Mass Communication, University of Karachi

2. Dr. Naveed Iqbal

Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, University of Karachi

3. Dr. Taha Shabbir

Associate Professor, Hamdard University, Karachi

Article Details:

Received on 20 Nov, 2025

Accepted on 27 Dec ,2025

Published on 29 Dec, 2025

Corresponding Authors*:

Abstract

Karachi once had a thriving cinema culture, but most of its cinema houses have now closed. This paper looks at the audience side of that decline. Using a structured survey of 476 residents of Karachi, it measures how often people go to the cinema, why they have stopped or cut back, how they spend their media time, and what they think about cinema as part of city life. The results show that cinema going is now rare: about 64 percent of respondents go once a year or not at all, and only about 16 percent go six times or more. The most common reasons for staying away are the rise of streaming services, the cost of tickets, and concerns about safety. People now spend far more time on streaming and social video than on any screen outside the home, with reported cinema time close to zero. At the same time, respondents still value cinema. They agree strongly that it is part of the city's cultural identity and they support public investment and cheaper tickets. A factor analysis confirmed four clear attitude dimensions (cultural value, social experience, accessibility, and institutional trust), and all scales were reliable. The strongest predictor of how often a person attends was their socio economic status, not their attitudes. A person's class position, their perceived safety, and their gender shaped access more than their feelings about film. The paper argues that the decline of cinema in Karachi is mainly a problem of access and affordability rather than a loss of interest, and that any revival policy should begin there.

Keywords: cinema, Karachi, audience behaviour, streaming, accessibility, cultural value, media consumption



1.1 1. Introduction

Cinema was for most of the twentieth century one of the main forms of public entertainment in Karachi. The city had a large number of single screen cinema houses that drew audiences from across classes and neighbourhoods. Over the last three decades, this picture has changed sharply. Many of the old cinema houses have shut down, some have been demolished, and the land has often been turned over to commercial use. The few venues that remain are mostly small multiplex screens inside shopping malls, which serve a narrower and wealthier audience. The question this paper asks is simple: from the point of view of ordinary residents, what has actually happened to cinema going, and why?

Most existing accounts of the decline of Pakistani cinema focus on the industry, on film production, on censorship, or on the loss of particular landmark buildings (Gazdar, 1997; Ahmad, 2015; Kazmi, 1999). These accounts are valuable, but they tell the story from the supply side. They explain why fewer films were made or why cinemas closed as businesses. They say much less about the audience. We know that attendance fell, but we have little systematic measurement of who stopped going, how far their habits shifted to other screens, and what reasons they would give themselves. This paper addresses that gap with survey evidence.

The study treats the decline of cinema as a measurable change in behaviour and attitude. It asks four questions. First, how often do residents of Karachi now go to the cinema? Second, what reasons do they give for going less or not at all? Third, how does cinema compare with other ways of watching films and video, such as streaming, television, and social media? Fourth, how do people feel about cinema as part of the city, and do those feelings predict whether they actually go?

These questions matter for both scholarship and policy. For scholarship, they help move the study of Pakistani cinema beyond the industry and toward the audience, which is where cultural change is finally felt. For policy, they help separate two very different explanations of decline. One explanation is that people have simply lost interest in cinema and prefer screens at home. If this is true, there is little that policy can do. The other explanation is that people still value cinema but can no longer reach it easily, safely, or affordably. If this is true, then the decline is a problem of access that policy can address. The findings reported here support the second explanation far more than the first.

1.2 2. Background and Prior Work

The decline of single screen cinema is not unique to Karachi. Across South Asia, the shift from neighbourhood cinema houses to mall based multiplexes has reshaped who watches films and how. Studies of India describe how the multiplex turned cinema going into a premium, class filtered activity, pricing out the audiences that once filled the stalls (Athique & Hill, 2010; Dickey, 1993). The same pattern of a cultural form retreating into guarded, commercial space has been noted in other settings as well (Zukin, 1995; Larkin, 2008). This paper draws on that literature to read the Karachi case as part of a wider story about cities, class, and leisure.

A second body of work concerns the rise of streaming and the way audiences now assemble their own media diets at home. Platform based distribution has changed the economics and the geography of film viewing, making the living room, the phone, and the laptop the default screens (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Uses and gratifications theory suggests that audiences choose media that meet their needs for enjoyment, information, and social connection (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). But a purely choice



based reading can hide the fact that choices are shaped by what is available. When a safe, affordable, nearby cinema does not exist, choosing to stay home is not a free preference but a constrained one.

A third strand concerns space, safety, and gender in the South Asian city. Research on women and public space shows that access to leisure is unequal and that fear of harassment keeps many women out of public venues (Phadke, Khan, & Ranade, 2011; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Karachi's own history of uneven urban development adds to this (Gayer, 2014; Hasan, 2008). These ideas lead to the expectation that access to cinema in Karachi will be patterned by class and gender, not spread evenly. The survey was designed to test that expectation directly.

1.3 3. Methods

3.1 Design

The study used a cross sectional survey design. This design is well suited to measuring the current state of a behaviour and set of attitudes across a population at a single point in time (Bryman, 2016; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The survey formed the quantitative part of a larger mixed methods thesis; this paper reports the quantitative results only.

3.2 Participants and sampling

The sample consisted of 476 adult residents of Karachi. Respondents were recruited through a combination of online and in person distribution across different parts of the city, with attention to including a range of ages, education levels, and socio economic backgrounds. Because respondents were not drawn through strict random selection, the sample is a non probability sample. Its results describe strong and consistent patterns within the sample and should be read as indicative rather than as exact population estimates. Table 1 summarises the profile of the sample.

The sample was 59.7 percent male, 38.2 percent female, and 2.1 percent non binary or preferred not to say. Most respondents were young adults: 29.0 percent were aged 18 to 24 and 31.3 percent were aged 25 to 34, so six in ten were under 35. In education, 44.3 percent held a bachelor's degree and 26.5 percent a master's, meaning the sample was more educated than the city as a whole. In socio economic terms, the largest groups were middle (34.0 percent) and lower middle (31.3 percent), with smaller shares in the lower (16.6 percent), upper middle (13.4 percent), and upper (4.6 percent) categories.

Table 1. Profile of the sample (N = 476)

Characteristic	Category	Count	Percent
Gender	Male	284	59.7
	Female	182	38.2
	Non-binary / Prefer not to say	10	2.1
Age group	18–24	138	29.0
	25–34	149	31.3
	35–44	108	22.7
	45–54	58	12.2
	55+	23	4.8
	Matriculation / O-Levels	31	6.5
Education	Intermediate / A-Levels	81	17.0
	Bachelor's	211	44.3
	Master's	126	26.5
	PhD / Postgraduate	27	5.7



Characteristic	Category	Count	Percent
Socio-economic status	Lower	79	16.6
	Lower-middle	149	31.3
	Middle	162	34.0
	Upper-middle	64	13.4
	Upper	22	4.6

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire. It had three parts. The first part recorded demographic details: gender, age group, education, and socio economic status. The second part measured behaviour: how often the respondent had been to the cinema in the past twelve months, their reasons for reduced attendance, and the number of hours per week they spent on different screens. The third part measured attitudes through twelve statements rated on a five point agreement scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These twelve statements were written to capture four underlying ideas, with three statements each: the cultural value of cinema, the social experience of going, the accessibility of cinema, and institutional trust in how cinema is run and supported.

3.4 Analysis

Analysis moved from simple to complex. First, frequencies and percentages described the sample and its behaviour. Second, the reliability of each attitude scale was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which should ideally reach 0.70 or above (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Third, exploratory factor analysis was used to check whether the twelve statements really grouped into four dimensions, using the Kaiser Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity to confirm the data were suitable (Kaiser, 1974; Bartlett, 1954; Field, 2018; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019). Fourth, group differences were tested with an independent samples t test, a one way analysis of variance, and a chi square test of association. Finally, a multiple linear regression tested which factors predicted how often people attended. The level for statistical significance was set at the usual 0.05.

1.4 4. Results

4.1 How often people go to the cinema

Cinema going is now an occasional activity at best. As Table 2 shows, 30.0 percent of respondents said they had not been to the cinema at all in the past twelve months, and a further 33.8 percent had gone only once or twice. Together these two groups make up 63.8 percent of the sample. Only 20.6 percent had gone three to five times, 9.9 percent six to ten times, and 5.7 percent more than ten times. In other words, fewer than one in six respondents (15.6 percent) could be called regular cinema goers. For a city of this size and history, this is a striking level of disengagement, and it sets up the central puzzle of the study: has interest disappeared, or has access?

Table 2. Cinema attendance in the past twelve months (N = 476)

Attendance	Count	Percent
Never	143	30.0
Once or twice	161	33.8
3–5 times	98	20.6
6–10 times	47	9.9
More than 10 times	27	5.7



4.2 Why people stopped going

Respondents who had reduced or stopped attending (402 respondents) were asked to select the reasons that applied to them. The results point clearly to access and cost rather than loss of interest. The most common reason was the convenience of streaming at home, chosen by 65.9 percent. The second was ticket price, chosen by 60.4 percent. The third was safety and security concerns, chosen by 51.0 percent. After these came lack of nearby cinemas (45.3 percent), the poor quality or absence of good films (44.8 percent), poor cinema facilities (37.8 percent), traffic and transport problems (37.3 percent), family and social obligations (24.1 percent), and harassment concerns (21.6 percent).

Three points stand out. First, the top three reasons are all practical barriers: a cheaper substitute at home, the price of the ticket, and worries about safety. Second, more than four in ten pointed to the absence of cinemas near where they live, which is a direct spatial barrier. Third, safety and harassment together touched roughly half of the respondents who cut back, which signals that for many people, and especially women, the problem is not the film but the journey and the venue.

4.3 Where media time actually goes

The survey also measured how many hours per week respondents spent on different screens, and the contrast is sharp. Social media video drew the most time, at an average of 11.41 hours per week. Local streaming services followed at 9.00 hours, and international streaming services at 8.40 hours. Television drama accounted for 6.84 hours. Pirated or downloaded content added 2.24 hours, and other viewing 0.95 hours. Cinema, by contrast, accounted for just 0.56 hours per week on average, the lowest of every category measured. This is perhaps the clearest single finding in the study. The screen has not lost; it has moved. People are watching a great deal of film and video, but almost entirely at home and on their phones. The home and the handset have replaced the cinema house as the default place of viewing, exactly as the literature on platform distribution would predict (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017). The cinema now occupies a tiny slice of a large and growing media diet.

4.4 What people think about cinema

If interest had truly collapsed, we would expect attitudes toward cinema to be negative. They are not. Table 3 reports the mean scores and reliability of the four attitude scales. All four scales were reliable, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.81 for cultural value, 0.78 for social experience, 0.76 for institutional trust, and 0.74 for accessibility. The overall scale reliability was 0.74, which is acceptable for research of this kind (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Table 3. Attitude scales: reliability and mean scores (five-point scale)

Attitude scale	Items	Cronbach's alpha	Mean
Cultural value	3	0.81	3.83
Institutional trust	3	0.76	3.78
Social experience	3	0.78	3.46
Accessibility	3	0.74	2.52
Overall	12	0.74	—

The pattern of the means is revealing. Cultural value scored highest at 3.83 on the five point scale, showing that people see cinema as part of the city's identity. Institutional trust scored 3.78, but this score is driven by strong support for action rather than satisfaction with the present: respondents strongly agreed that the government should invest in cinema (mean 4.08) and that cheaper tickets would bring them back (mean 4.18). Social experience scored



3.46, still on the positive side. Accessibility scored lowest by a wide margin, at 2.52, the only scale that fell below the neutral midpoint. Within that scale, agreement that cinemas are safe (2.64), affordable (2.56), and conveniently located with good options (2.36) were all low. The attitude data therefore tell a consistent story. People value cinema, want it supported, and would return if it were cheaper, yet they rate its current safety, affordability, and availability poorly. The gap between high cultural value and low accessibility is the attitudinal signature of a constrained audience, not a bored one.

4.5 Confirming the structure of attitudes

Before using the attitude scales further, exploratory factor analysis checked whether the twelve statements really measured four separate things. The data were suitable for this analysis: the Kaiser Meyer Olkin measure was 0.765, above the common 0.60 threshold, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, with a chi square value of 1704.4 and a probability below 0.001 (Kaiser, 1974; Bartlett, 1954). Four factors had eigenvalues above 1.0 (3.383, 1.966, 1.660, and 1.318), and together they explained 54.2 percent of the total variance, which is a satisfactory level for attitude research in the social sciences (Hair et al., 2019).

Each of the twelve statements loaded clearly onto its intended factor, with loadings on the correct factor ranging from about 0.66 to 0.75 and low cross loadings elsewhere. The three cultural value items grouped together, as did the three social experience items, the three accessibility items, and the three institutional trust items. This confirms that the four attitude dimensions are real and distinct, and it justifies treating them as separate measures in the analysis that follows (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999).

4.6 Differences between groups

The study then tested whether access and attendance were spread evenly across groups, or patterned by gender and class.

On gender, an independent samples t test compared perceived accessibility between men and women. Men rated accessibility higher than women (mean 2.60 versus 2.38), and the difference was statistically significant, with a t value of 2.447 and a probability of 0.015. The effect size was small (Cohen's d of 0.234), but the direction is important: women experience cinema as less accessible than men do, which fits the wider evidence on women and public space in South Asian cities (Phadke et al., 2011; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007).

On class, a one way analysis of variance compared perceived accessibility across the five socio economic groups. The difference was large and highly significant, with an F value of 22.16, a probability below 0.001, and an eta squared of 0.158, meaning that socio economic status alone explained about 16 percent of the variation in how accessible people found cinema. Higher status groups rated cinema as much more accessible than lower status groups. Access to cinema, in short, is stratified by class.

A chi square test then examined whether attendance frequency itself was linked to socio economic status. The association was significant, with a chi square value of 81.53 on 16 degrees of freedom and a probability below 0.001, and a Cramer's V of 0.207 indicating a moderate relationship. The pattern behind the test is clear in the data: in the lower group, 48 of 79 respondents never attended, while the small upper group contained a disproportionate share of frequent attenders. Cinema going rises steadily with class position.

4.7 What predicts attendance

Finally, a multiple linear regression tested which factors predicted how often a person attended the cinema. The predictors were the four attitude scores and socio economic



status. The model was statistically significant overall, with a probability below 0.001, and it explained 12.6 percent of the variation in attendance (adjusted R squared of 0.117).

The most important result is which predictor mattered. Socio economic status was the only significant predictor, with a coefficient of 0.403 and a probability below 0.001. None of the four attitude scores, including cultural value, significantly predicted attendance once class was taken into account. In plain terms, how much a person values cinema does not determine whether they go. Their class position does. This is strong evidence that the barrier to attendance is structural and material rather than a matter of taste or interest. People across the class spectrum value cinema, but mainly the better off can actually attend.

1.5 5. Discussion

The results combine into a single, consistent account. Cinema going in Karachi has fallen to a very low level, with nearly two thirds of respondents attending once a year or less. Yet this fall is not explained by a loss of interest. People still rate cinema highly as part of the city's cultural identity, they support public investment in it, and they say clearly that cheaper tickets would bring them back. What they rate poorly is access: safety, affordability, and the simple availability of a cinema nearby. The reasons people give for staying away are led by the convenience of home streaming, the price of tickets, and safety concerns. Their media time has shifted almost entirely to screens at home. And when attendance is modelled directly, it is predicted by class, not by attitude.

This account fits the idea that the decline of cinema is a problem of constrained access rather than free preference. Uses and gratifications theory holds that audiences choose media to meet their needs (Katz et al., 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). But the data here show that the choice to stay home is shaped by barriers that fall unequally on different groups. For a lower income resident, or for a woman worried about the journey, streaming at home is not simply the preferred option; it is often the only practical one. This is choice under constraint, and reading it as pure preference would miss the point (Lobato, 2019).

The findings also match the spatial and class based reading of the city. The strong class gradient in both perceived access and actual attendance echoes the way the multiplex turned cinema into a premium activity elsewhere in South Asia (Athique & Hill, 2010; Dickey, 1993). The gender gap in perceived access echoes the evidence that public leisure space is unequally open to women (Phadke et al., 2011). The retreat of cinema from the neighbourhood into the mall is, in effect, a retreat from the wider public into a narrower and wealthier one (Zukin, 1995; Gayer, 2014).

For policy, the implication is encouraging rather than bleak. Because the problem is access and not interest, it is open to action. The respondents themselves point to the levers: lower ticket prices, safer and better located venues, and public investment. Measures that reduce the cost of attendance, that place screens closer to where ordinary people live, and that make venues feel safe, especially for women, would address the exact barriers the data identify. The high scores for cultural value and for government investment suggest there is public support for such measures.

Several limitations should be kept in mind. The sample was a non probability sample and was younger and more educated than the city as a whole, so the exact percentages should be read as indicative rather than precise. The data are self reported, which can introduce bias, particularly on sensitive topics such as safety and harassment, where the true figures may be higher than reported. The design is cross sectional, so it captures the situation at one moment and cannot by itself prove cause and effect. Future work could use a probability



sample, add longitudinal measurement to track change over time, and link audience data to the supply side of venues and films.

1.6 6. Conclusion

This study set out to understand the decline of cinema in Karachi from the audience's point of view, using survey evidence from 476 residents. The results show that cinema going has become rare, that home based streaming and social video now dominate people's media time, and that the main reasons for staying away are the convenience of streaming, the cost of tickets, and concerns about safety. At the same time, residents continue to value cinema as part of their city and support its revival. The decisive finding is that attendance is predicted by socio economic status rather than by attitude: people across classes value cinema, but mainly the better off can reach it. The decline, therefore, is best understood not as a loss of love for cinema but as a loss of access to it. That distinction matters, because a problem of access is one that policy can solve. Restoring affordable, safe, and nearby cinema would meet a demand that, on this evidence, has not gone away.

1.7 References

- Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments* (E. Jephcott, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1944)
- Ahmad, M. (2015). *Lollywood: A history of Pakistani cinema*. Oxford University Press Pakistan.
- Athique, A., & Hill, D. (2010). *The multiplex in India: A cultural economy of urban leisure*. Routledge.
- Bartlett, M. S. (1954). A note on the multiplying factors for various chi square approximations. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series B*, 16(2), 296–298.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press.
- Dickey, S. (1993). *Cinema and the urban poor in South India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fabrigar, L. R., Wegener, D. T., MacCallum, R. C., & Strahan, E. J. (1999). Evaluating the use of exploratory factor analysis in psychological research. *Psychological Methods*, 4(3), 272–299. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1082-989X.4.3.272>
- Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS Statistics* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Gayer, L. (2014). *Karachi: Ordered disorder and the struggle for the city*. Oxford University Press.
- Gazdar, M. (1997). *Pakistan cinema, 1947–1997*. Oxford University Press.
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate data analysis* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Hasan, A. (2008). *The unplanned revolution: Observations on the processes of socio-economic change in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Kaiser, H. F. (1974). An index of factorial simplicity. *Psychometrika*, 39(1), 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02291575>
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 19–32). Sage Publications.
- Kazmi, F. (1999). *The politics of India's conventional cinema: Imaging a universe, subverting a multiverse*. Sage Publications.
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. New York University Press.



- Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A treatise on internet-distributed television*. Michigan Publishing.
- Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Phadke, S., Khan, S., & Ranade, S. (2011). *Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets*. Penguin Books.
- Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0301_02
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Tavakol, M., & Dennick, R. (2011). Making sense of Cronbach's alpha. *International Journal of Medical Education*, 2, 53–55. <https://doi.org/10.5116/ijme.4dfb.8dfd>
- Viswanath, K., & Mehrotra, S. T. (2007). 'Shall we go out?' Women's safety in public spaces in Delhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(17), 1542–1548.
- Zukin, S. (1995). *The cultures of cities*. Blackwell Publishers.