

Right to Screen: Communication Justice and Marginalized Access to Urban Cinema in Indonesia

Muh. Bahrudin^{1,a}, Yunanto Tri Laksono^{2,b}

¹ Universitas Dinamika, Jalan Raya Kedung Baruk 98, Surabaya, 60298, Indonesia

² Universitas Dinamika, Jalan Raya Kedung Baruk 98, Surabaya, 60298, Indonesia

^a bahrudin@dinamika.ac.id *; ^b yunanto@dinamika.ac.id

* Muh. Bahrudin

Abstract: Urban cinema is frequently imagined as a democratic cultural space that enables participation, visibility, and cultural exchange. However, access to cinematic infrastructure in Indonesia remains deeply unequal. Commercial cinemas are heavily concentrated in metropolitan shopping centers, leaving peripheral communities facing spatial and socio-economic exclusion, while independent and regional creators struggle for screen access. This research examines cinema access inequality as a fundamental problem of communication justice. To analyze this dynamic, the study introduces the concept of the “Right to Screen” and proposes the Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF), structured around three interrelated dimensions: access justice, circulation justice, and representational justice. Employing a critical qualitative approach, the methodology integrates literature review, policy document analysis (including Law No. 33/2009 and cultural strategic plans), and comparative spatial cinema mapping across three major metropolitan hubs: Jakarta, Tangerang, and Surabaya (collected between January and February 2026). The findings reveal a double exclusion: spatial concentration in high-income urban spaces and structural gatekeeping within concentrated commercial networks (dominated by Cinema XXI at 61.4%). Consequently, non-mainstream, regional, and independent narratives suffer symbolic annihilation within exhibition circuits. The paper operationalizes the SAJF into actionable empirical indicators, establishing the “Right to Screen” as a key conceptual framework to advance cultural democracy and mediated citizenship in screen studies.

Keywords: Right to Screen, Communication Justice, Cinema Ecology, Urban Cinema, Screen Access Justice Framework

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian film industry has experienced substantial growth over the past decade, reflected in increasing film production, audience attendance, and the commercial performance of nationally produced films. At the production level, the number of nationally produced feature films increased significantly from 222 titles in 2020 to 565 titles in 2023 (Kementerian Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2024). Concurrently, national box-office records demonstrate accelerating audience engagement: Warkop DKI Reborn: Jangkrik Boss! Part 1 (2016) reached 6.85 million admissions, KKN di Desa Penari (2022) achieved 10.06 million admissions, and Agak Laen (2024) recorded 9.1 million admissions (Film Indonesia Database, 2026). By 2024, total national cinema attendance peaked at approximately 80.65 million admissions (Liputan 6, 2026), with industry projections for subsequent releases such as Jumbo (2025) reflecting sustained high attendance levels. These historical figures indicate that Indonesian cinema has entered a period of significant industrial expansion in terms of production, consumption, and market volume.

However, this industrial growth has not necessarily been accompanied by equitable access to cinematic spaces. Commercial cinema infrastructure remains concentrated in urban centres and middle-class consumption spaces, while many peripheral regions still face limited access to permanent cinema facilities. The expansion of cinema therefore reveals a structural contradiction between the growth of the national film industry and the unequal distribution of the infrastructure through which films become accessible to audiences. In addition to geographical barriers, access is shaped by economic conditions because contemporary cinemas are increasingly integrated into shopping malls and other commercial consumption spaces (Ageza et al., 2018). Consequently, the expansion of cinema screens does not automatically produce an inclusive cinema ecosystem; rather, it may reproduce existing spatial and socio-economic inequalities.

The concentration of cinema infrastructure is closely associated with the transformation of urban space through mall-based cinema development. Major exhibition chains, including Cinema XXI, CGV,

and Cinépolis, have expanded primarily in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, and Medan, where purchasing power and commercial activity are concentrated (Zahra et al., 2026). From a spatial perspective, cinemas should therefore not be understood merely as neutral sites of film exhibition. Following Lefebvre (1991), cultural spaces are socially produced through economic, institutional, and social relations. Similarly, Harvey's (2006) concept of uneven geographical development highlights how capital tends to concentrate infrastructure and investment in locations considered economically advantageous. Applied to cinema, these perspectives suggest that the geographical distribution of screens reflects broader processes of spatial capitalism in which access to cultural infrastructure becomes unevenly distributed.

This spatial inequality also has implications for the circulation of films and the diversity of voices that become visible within cinematic culture. Existing scholarship on film exhibition has predominantly examined distribution systems, exhibition practices, industry structures, and audience experiences (Merrington et al., 2021). Other studies have addressed spatial and geographical dimensions of film and screen culture, but the relationship between the social production of cinematic space, uneven geographical development, and unequal access to cultural infrastructure remains insufficiently developed, particularly in the context of Indonesia (Carey, 1989; Lukinbeal & Sommerlad, 2022; Trifonova, 2013; Zhou, 2022). Moreover, although Lefebvre's concept of the production of space and Harvey's theory of uneven geographical development have been influential in spatial and cultural studies, their combined application to cinema exhibition as a question of communication justice remains limited.

This gap suggests the need to move beyond understanding cinema primarily as an industrial or entertainment infrastructure and to examine it as a communicative and cultural space in which access, participation, circulation, and visibility are unequally distributed. From this perspective, the issue of cinema inequality is not simply a question of where cinemas are located or how many screens exist, but also of who is able to participate in cinematic culture, whose films can circulate through exhibition networks, and whose stories gain visibility within the cultural public sphere. Such questions extend the problem of spatial inequality into the domain of communication justice.

In response to this gap, this article introduces the concept of the Right to Screen, defined as the right of individuals, communities, and filmmakers to access, participate in, and be represented within cinematic spaces as part of broader cultural and communicative rights. Building on this concept, the article proposes the Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF), consisting of three interconnected dimensions: access justice, which concerns equitable access to cinematic infrastructure; circulation justice, which addresses unequal opportunities for films and cultural narratives to enter exhibition and distribution networks; and representational justice, which concerns the distribution of visibility, recognition, and symbolic presence within cinematic culture.

The connection between spatial inequality and communication justice is central to the conceptual argument of this study. The unequal distribution of cinema infrastructure is not simply a geographical condition; it reflects how cultural space is produced through economic and institutional relations. In Lefebvre's (1991) terms, cinema spaces are socially produced rather than neutral containers of cultural activity, while Harvey's (2006) concept of uneven geographical development helps explain why such infrastructure tends to accumulate in economically advantageous locations. These spatial processes have communicative consequences because the location and organization of exhibition infrastructure shape who can access cinematic culture, which films can circulate, and whose stories can achieve public visibility. Cinema inequality can therefore be understood simultaneously as a problem of spatial inequality and communication justice.

Accordingly, this study examines unequal cinema access in Indonesia as a problem of communication justice by connecting the spatial production of cinematic infrastructure with the uneven geographical development of the film industry. Rather than treating cinema growth as an indicator of inclusion in itself, the study asks how the expansion of cinematic infrastructure may coexist with unequal patterns of access, circulation, and representation. Through this perspective, the article contributes to cinema and communication studies by conceptualizing the Right to Screen and the SAJF as a framework for understanding screen inequality not merely as an industrial problem, but as a broader question of cultural participation, communicative visibility, and spatial justice.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative critical approach to examine screen inequality in Indonesia as a socially produced condition shaped by economic, institutional, and spatial relations of power. Critical qualitative inquiry is particularly useful for investigating how inequalities are embedded within cultural and communication systems rather than treating them as merely empirical phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

The research combines three complementary methods: literature review, policy review, and descriptive cinema mapping. The literature review was conducted to establish the conceptual foundation of the study by synthesizing scholarship on communication justice, urban cinema, cultural infrastructure, the production of space, and spatial inequality in cultural industries. Literature reviews are useful for identifying theoretical patterns, conceptual gaps, and emerging research agendas within a field of inquiry (Snyder, 2019).

The policy review examined Indonesian film policies and regulatory frameworks, including the Film Law and related cultural policies, with particular attention to screen equity, cultural participation, and the distribution of exhibition infrastructure. This analysis was used to assess the extent to which existing policies facilitate or constrain equitable access to cinematic spaces.

To examine the spatial dimension of screen inequality, this study conducted descriptive cinema mapping across three major metropolitan areas in Indonesia: Jakarta, Tangerang, and Surabaya. These cities were selected as comparative urban cases because they represent the highest concentration of exhibition infrastructure in national commercial datasets. Data collection was conducted between January 15 and February 15, 2026.

Secondary data were systematically extracted from official government and industry databases, including the FilmIndonesia.or.id database registry, DataIndonesia.id exhibition reports (2023–2025), and statistical publications from the Ministry of Culture (Kementerian Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2024). Policy analysis focused on Law No. 33/2009 on Film (Undang-Undang Perfilman) and the Ministry of Culture's Strategic Plan 2024–2029 concerning screen distribution and cultural equity.

The primary unit of analysis was the individual cinema venue (theater complex). Data extraction recorded five specific operational variables per venue: (1) geographical location/city administration, (2) spatial integration type (mall-based vs. standalone), (3) screen complex size (number of auditoriums), (4) operational corporate chain (Cinema XXI, CGV, Cinépolis, NSC, Platinum, or Independent), and (5) ticket pricing tiers relative to local minimum wage.

The collected data were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The city-level mapping results were interpreted alongside the broader findings from the literature and policy reviews. In particular, the spatial patterns were examined through Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space and Harvey's (2006) concept of uneven geographical development. These findings were subsequently interpreted through the three dimensions of the proposed Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF): access justice, circulation justice, and representational justice.

By combining literature review, policy review, and comparative cinema mapping, the study provides a multidimensional understanding of screen inequality as a problem of communication justice within Indonesia's contemporary cinema ecology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Access Justice: Unequal Access to Cinematic Spaces

The findings indicate that the distribution of cinema screens in Indonesia remains highly uneven across geographical regions. According to data from the Indonesian Film Board (Antara, 2024), only approximately 115 out of more than 440 regencies and municipalities have direct access to permanent cinema facilities. Consequently, a substantial proportion of the Indonesian population remains outside the reach of formal cinematic infrastructure. Although the number of cinema screens has continued to increase in recent years, their distribution remains heavily concentrated in major urban centres, particularly on the island of Java. Indonesia also continues to exhibit one of the lowest screen-to-population ratios in Southeast Asia, suggesting that industrial growth has not been accompanied by an equitable distribution of access.

This inequality is not merely geographical but also socio-economic in nature. Ageza, Priyatna, and Mulyadi (2018) demonstrate that contemporary cinemas in Indonesia have become increasingly integrated into shopping malls, transforming film-going into a component of urban consumption culture. Under these conditions, access to cinema is determined not only by the presence of screens but also by the economic capacity to enter the commercial spaces in which cinemas are located. As shopping malls become increasingly segmented according to consumer purchasing power, the costs associated with accessing cinematic experiences also rise. Consequently, lower-income communities face significantly greater barriers to cinema participation than urban middle-class audiences.

This condition is further reinforced by Sasono's (2026) observation that cinemas have remained among the few resilient anchor tenants within shopping malls despite the decline of several retail sectors. The continued importance of cinemas within commercial developments illustrates their integration into urban consumer economies and middle-class lifestyles. However, the sustainability of cinema operations within these commercial spaces does not automatically translate into a more equitable distribution of access. Instead, cinemas continue to be concentrated in areas characterized by high purchasing power and strong consumer demand.

From a communication justice perspective, these findings reveal what may be described as a form of double exclusion. First, physical exclusion occurs because a large proportion of Indonesian regions still lack permanent cinema infrastructure. Second, economic exclusion arises because access to cinematic experiences is increasingly tied to the ability to participate in urban consumption spaces. Screen inequality, therefore, extends beyond the uneven distribution of cultural infrastructure; it also reproduces broader social inequalities in access to public communication experiences and cultural participation. In this sense, access to cinema becomes not only a question of entertainment provision but also a question of communicative inclusion within contemporary cultural life.

4.2 Circulation Justice: Unequal Opportunities for Film Distribution

The mapping of Indonesia's exhibition industry reveals that screen inequality is not only geographical but also structural in nature. Based on baseline national exhibition datasets from January 2023 (Data Indonesia, 2023), a total of 500 operating cinemas were recorded nationwide across six main exhibition chains. Cinema XXI dominated the market with 307 cinema venues, accounting for approximately 61.4% of total domestic venues. This was followed by CGV with 70 venues (14%), Cinemaxx/Cinépolis with 60 venues (12%), independent operators with 28 venues (5.6%), New Star Cineplex with 25 venues (5%), and Platinum Cineplex with 10 venues (2%). Although total screen counts have expanded in subsequent reporting periods (Antara, 2024; Kementerian Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2024), this ownership proportion illustrates a persistent structural concentration of exhibition power held by a small number of corporate entities.

This structural concentration closely mirrors the spatial distribution of venues recorded in primary market hubs: Jakarta hosts 88 cinemas, followed by Tangerang with 36, and Surabaya with 26 (Data Indonesia, 2023). The majority of these facilities are situated within high-density metropolitan areas driven by upper-middle-class consumption. By contrast, as of late 2024, over 325 regencies and municipalities still lack permanent cinema infrastructure (Antara, 2024). These reconciled figures indicate that screen expansion continues to follow the logic of capital concentration and private urban markets rather than public cultural distribution.

Beyond issues of access, screen inequality also manifests itself at the level of film circulation. Iswahyuningtyas and Hidayat (2021) demonstrate that film distribution in Indonesia remains heavily dependent on conventional cinema networks that are limited in number and concentrated in major urban centres. Such a structure creates a concentration of power among dominant industry actors who possess the capacity to determine which films gain exhibition opportunities and which fail to reach national audiences.

These findings are consistent with international scholarship that identifies distribution as a strategic arena within the cultural industries. Kehoe and Mateer (2015) argue that distribution is not merely a technical process connecting producers and audiences; rather, it functions as a mechanism of selection that determines the visibility of cultural products within the marketplace. Distribution therefore operates

as a form of gatekeeping through which certain films gain access to public audiences while others remain marginalized within exhibition systems.

This condition is further reinforced by the logic of market-driven selection. Harris (2018) argues that contemporary distribution systems tend to privilege films perceived as commercially viable and economically low-risk. In the Indonesian context, the limited number of screens intensifies this tendency because cinema operators are compelled to prioritize films expected to generate the highest audience turnout within a short exhibition window. As a consequence, independent films, regional productions, and alternative cinematic works face significantly greater barriers to securing exhibition space than films supported by established industrial networks and substantial promotional resources.

From the perspective of communication justice, these findings suggest that not all films enjoy equal opportunities to reach the public. When distribution operates primarily through market-oriented gatekeeping mechanisms, participation in cultural public life becomes unevenly distributed. Screen circulation, therefore, constitutes more than an industrial issue; it is also a communication justice issue because it determines whose stories can enter public circulation and whose voices remain excluded from broader cultural discourse. In this sense, inequalities in film distribution ultimately translate into inequalities in communicative visibility and cultural participation.

4.3 Representational Justice: Unequal Visibility on Screen

Screen inequality concerns not only who can access cinemas and which films can be distributed, but also whose stories become visible within the cultural public sphere. The literature reviewed in this study indicates that exhibition systems governed primarily by commercial considerations tend to privilege narratives perceived as possessing high market appeal, often at the expense of alternative, local, or marginalized perspectives. Under such conditions, inequalities in distribution inevitably produce inequalities in representation.

Media scholarship has long conceptualized representation as a question of symbolic power. Tuchman (1978) introduced the concept of symbolic annihilation to explain how particular social groups become marginalized through absence, invisibility, or highly limited forms of representation within media systems. Subsequent research has demonstrated that media visibility is closely linked to social recognition and participation in public life. Cottle (2007) argues that media function as arenas of recognition through which certain groups gain legitimacy and visibility within public discourse. Similarly, Klein and Shiffman (2009) contend that persistent underrepresentation constitutes a form of symbolic exclusion that can reinforce broader patterns of social inequality. More recent studies further suggest that processes of symbolic annihilation remain evident within contemporary film industries, particularly among communities that have historically possessed limited access to cultural and media resources (Marr & Luchies, 2023).

Within the Indonesian film ecosystem, the limited distribution opportunities available to independent films, community-based productions, and works rooted in local perspectives contribute to a narrowing of the diversity of voices present within cinematic public culture. Films that fail to secure screen access do not merely lose economic opportunities; they also lose the ability to introduce alternative experiences, identities, and social perspectives to wider audiences. As a result, cinematic spaces become increasingly dominated by narratives that have already achieved market legitimacy, while stories emerging from outside mainstream cultural circuits remain largely invisible.

Empirical evidence from contemporary Indonesian cinema underscores this representational imbalance. While commercial mainstream films – predominantly high-concept horror (e.g., *KKN di Desa Penari*) and urban comedies (e.g., *Agak Laen*) – secure widespread screen allocation across multiplex chains, non-mainstream narratives face systemic invisibility.

For instance, critically acclaimed regional and independent films such as Yuda Kurniawan's *Nyanyian Akar Rumput* (2018) or Ismail Basbeth's autobiography-driven works experienced extremely limited theatrical runs (often restricted to a few screens for less than a week) despite receiving international recognition. Furthermore, films centered on peripheral identity, indigenous oral histories, or socio-political critiques (such as localized documentaries supported by regional film boards) are almost entirely excluded from commercial exhibition circuits. This structural gatekeeping results in a

homogenized public sphere where urban, middle-class, and commercially safe narratives dominate screen time, reinforcing the symbolic annihilation of peripheral social realities.

This dynamic demonstrates that screen inequality is simultaneously a form of symbolic inequality. When access to screens and opportunities for circulation are distributed unevenly, cultural visibility is likewise distributed unevenly. The struggle for screen access, therefore, is not merely an economic or industrial struggle; it is also a struggle for recognition, representation, and the right to be present within the cultural public sphere. In this regard, representational justice becomes an essential dimension of communication justice because it concerns the equitable distribution of visibility, recognition, and symbolic presence within contemporary media culture.

4.4 Right to Screen as Communication Justice

The findings concerning unequal access, circulation, and representation suggest that screens should not be understood merely as technological devices or exhibition facilities. Rather, screens constitute communicative spaces through which cultural meanings are produced, circulated, negotiated, and contested. Access to screens therefore carries implications that extend far beyond the film industry itself, as it is closely connected to the capacity of individuals and communities to participate in cultural life and public communication.

The concept of communication justice emphasizes that justice involves not only the distribution of information but also the distribution of opportunities to speak, to be heard, and to be seen within public life. Communication inequalities emerge when particular groups encounter barriers to accessing communicative infrastructures, sharing their experiences, or obtaining recognition within public discourse. From this perspective, screens can be understood as communicative resources that shape who is able to access cinematic culture, whose stories are able to circulate, and whose identities become visible through mediated representation.

The findings of this study demonstrate that screen inequality in Indonesia operates across three interconnected dimensions. First, unequal geographical distribution of cinemas limits opportunities for citizens to access cinematic experiences. Second, concentrated ownership structures and market-oriented distribution systems create unequal opportunities for films to circulate within exhibition networks. Third, these inequalities contribute to uneven patterns of cultural visibility, in which certain identities, perspectives, and experiences are more likely to be represented than others. Taken together, these dimensions reveal that screen inequality functions not only as an industrial problem but also as a broader problem of communication justice.

To address this issue, this article proposes the concept of the Right to Screen. The Right to Screen refers to the right of individuals, filmmakers, and cultural communities to access, participate in, and be represented within cinematic spaces as part of their broader cultural rights. This concept expands existing discussions of communication justice by recognizing screens as critical infrastructures through which cultural participation, symbolic recognition, and mediated citizenship are negotiated.

Building upon this concept, the study develops the Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF) as a multidimensional framework for understanding screen inequality. The framework consists of three interrelated dimensions. Access justice concerns the equitable distribution of cinematic infrastructure and opportunities for audiences to engage with screen culture. Circulation justice addresses the equitable distribution of opportunities for films and cultural narratives to reach public audiences. Representational justice focuses on the equitable distribution of visibility, recognition, and symbolic presence within cinematic culture. Together, these dimensions suggest that screen justice cannot be measured solely by the growth in the number of cinemas or screens. Rather, it should be evaluated according to the extent to which access, circulation, and representation are distributed equitably across society. To facilitate future empirical application of the framework, the operational indicators for each dimension are systematically operationalized in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF)

Dimension	Conceptual Focus	Key Operational Indicators	Empirical Variable and Measures
Access Justice	Spatial availability & socio-economic accessibility of cinematic infrastructure	• Spatial Screen Density • Economic Affordability • Mall Integration Ratio	• Screen-to-population ratio per regency/municipality • Average ticket price relative to local minimum wage • Ratio of mall-integrated screens vs. standalone cultural spaces
Circulation Justice	Equity in distribution systems & exhibition opportunity structures	• Ownership Concentration • Exhibition Window Fairness • Geographical Distribution Density	• Market share (%) of screens controlled by major corporate networks • Screen holdover duration for independent vs. studio productions • Distribution breadth across non-metropolitan regions
Representational Justice	Diversity of cultural narratives & visibility in the public sphere	• Narrative & Genre Diversity • Peripheral Narrative Visibility • Symbolic Inclusion	• Proportion of total screen time allocated to regional, indy, or documentary films • Geographic & socio-cultural origin of protagonist narratives in top box-office titles

In this sense, cinemas and screens can be understood as forms of civic cultural infrastructure that enable citizens to participate in democratic cultural life through the exchange of stories, identities, and social experiences. Consequently, the Right to Screen is not merely a claim to entertainment access but a claim to communicative participation and cultural citizenship within contemporary media societies. From this perspective, screen inequality is also communicative inequality because unequal access to screens ultimately produces unequal opportunities for participation, visibility, and recognition within cultural democracy.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that screen inequality in Indonesia extends beyond the issue of cinema availability and reflects a broader distribution of power within the contemporary cinema ecosystem. The findings reveal that inequality operates through three interconnected dimensions — access, circulation, and representation. While the concentration of cinemas in major urban centres limits geographical access to cinematic experiences, the dominance of commercial exhibition and distribution networks creates unequal opportunities for films to reach public audiences. These inequalities, in turn, contribute to uneven patterns of cultural visibility in which not all identities, communities, and social experiences receive equal representation within cinematic public culture.

Based on these findings, the article argues that screens should be understood not merely as entertainment infrastructure but as forms of communicative and cultural infrastructure. Through the concepts of the Right to Screen and the Screen Access Justice Framework (SAJF), this study extends communication justice scholarship into the field of cinema studies by demonstrating that access to screens is fundamentally linked to access to cultural participation, visibility, and recognition. The article, therefore, contributes a new conceptual framework for understanding cinema not only as an industry but also as a communicative space through which democratic cultural life is organized and negotiated. Ultimately, achieving screen justice requires more than expanding the number of cinemas. It also requires more equitable access to exhibition infrastructure, more inclusive opportunities for film circulation, and greater diversity of representation within cinematic culture. Screen inequality is also communicative inequality because unequal access to screens ultimately produces unequal opportunities for participation, visibility, and recognition within cultural democracy.

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