

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF SELF-CENSORSHIP AMONG ARTISTS AND CULTURAL WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

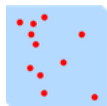
Findings from Focus Group
Discussions & Interviews

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Disclaimer

This report presents findings from focus group discussions with artists and cultural workers in Malaysia, conducted as part of a study on self-censorship in the arts. The views expressed here are those of the respondents and do not necessarily reflect the positions of ArtsEquator Ltd. or Merdeka Center. While the study highlights recurring themes and shared experiences, it does not claim to represent the views of the entire arts and cultural sector. The insights should therefore be read as indicative rather than exhaustive. This report is intended to spark dialogue, inform advocacy, and contribute to ongoing efforts to safeguard artistic freedom.

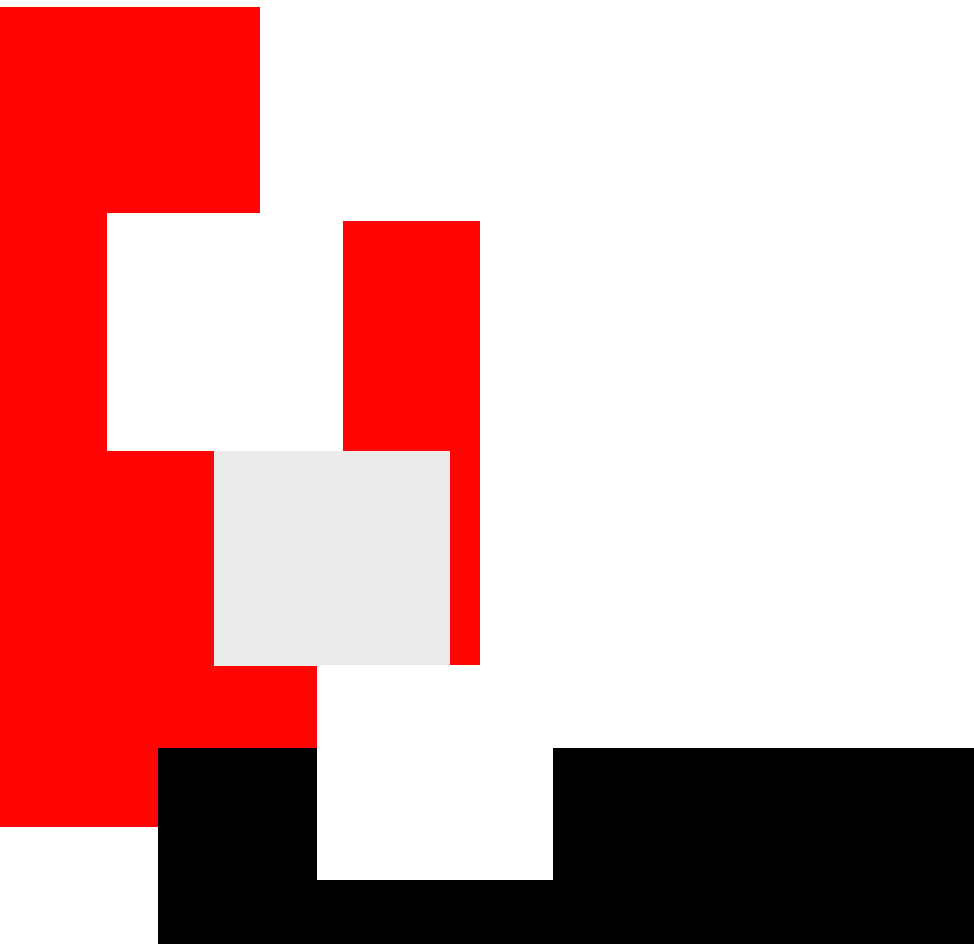
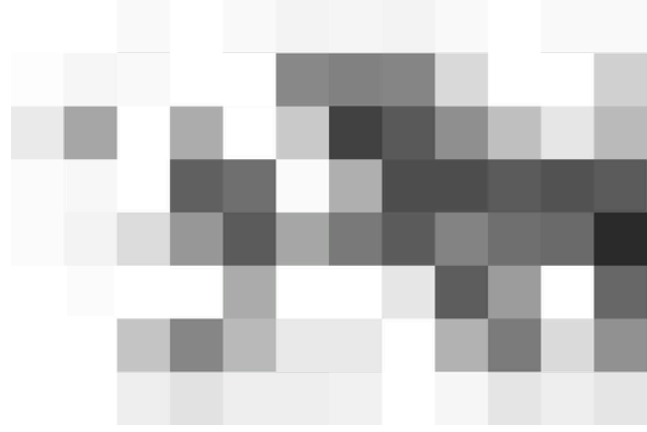


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Executive Summary



This study explores the impact of self-censorship among artists and cultural workers in Malaysia, focusing on how it shapes creative practices, personal well-being, and broader cultural discourse. Drawing on five focus group discussions conducted in July 2025, the findings reveal both the pervasive influence of self-censorship and the diverse strategies employed by practitioners to navigate restrictive environments.

Key Insight

- **Self-censorship is widespread and normalized**

Artists across disciplines—film, publishing, music, visual arts, and performing arts—acknowledged adjusting or withholding their work to avoid backlash. Sensitive topics included religion, politics, sexuality, and ethnicity. While motivations varied, most linked these adjustments to fear of state action, reputational damage, or jeopardizing funding opportunities.

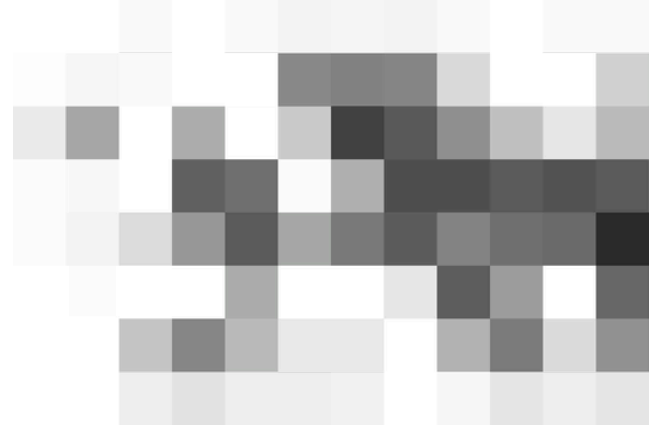
- **Mental and emotional strain is significant**

Respondents described heightened anxiety, creative frustration, and in some cases, disillusionment with their professions. Younger or emerging artists expressed greater uncertainty about long-term sustainability in the sector when self-expression feels consistently curtailed.

- **Direct censorship reinforces self-censorship**

Many respondents had personally experienced or witnessed changes imposed on artistic work by authorities, institutions, or venues. These encounters not only restricted specific works but also created a ripple effect—encouraging ongoing self-policing of future creative ideas.

Executive Summary



Key Insight

- **Trade-offs between authenticity and survival**

Artists perceived stark differences between their censored and uncensored work. While self-censored pieces were often seen as more “acceptable” to mainstream audiences, many felt these outputs compromised authenticity and diluted the intended message. Satisfaction with censored work was generally low.

- **Fears and consequences shape choices**

Across groups, respondents feared financial repercussions, bans, or public controversy. For some, self-censorship was framed as a pragmatic strategy to ensure livelihood, while others saw it as an existential threat to creative integrity.

- **Coping strategies exist but remain fragile**

To resist or soften self-censorship, respondents shared approaches such as coded expression, shifting to alternative platforms (e.g., online spaces, international festivals), or building supportive peer networks. However, these strategies were unevenly available and often insufficient against structural pressures.

Implication

The discussions indicate that self-censorship is shaped not only by individual choices but also by the wider cultural and institutional environment. Moving forward, there may be value in considering how collective support systems, advocacy efforts, and enabling policies could help lessen the burden on individual practitioners. Creating spaces that allow for open dialogue, protecting artistic experimentation, and fostering collaboration across communities may provide pathways to strengthen artistic freedom while respecting the sensitivities of the local context.

Introduction

Purpose of Study

Artistic freedom is central to a healthy and democratic society, enabling the exchange of ideas and critical engagement with social and political issues. In Malaysia, however, artists and cultural workers often navigate environments where creative expression is shaped by societal, institutional, and political pressures.

This pilot is part of a larger project, the Southeast Asian Artistic Freedom Research and Documentation Resources ([RADAR](#)), launched by ArtsEquator and Five Arts Centre in 2022, which documents challenged to artistic freedom in Southeast Asia by external agents such as the state, members of the public, corporations and faith-based institutions.



This study seeks to understand how self-censorship affects practitioners in the arts and cultural sector. By documenting their lived experiences, the research **offers insights into how censorship—direct or indirect—influences artistic practice, professional growth, and personal well-being.**

Why Self-Censorship in Arts and Culture Matters

Self-censorship is **less visible** than state or non-state censorship but equally impactful, often occurring during the creative process itself. It may involve altering, withholding, or abandoning ideas to avoid potential repercussions.

Self-censorship practices can result in:

- Creative stagnation: Restricting experimentation and diversity of expression.
- Personal strain: Contributing to stress, frustration, and diminished artistic satisfaction.
- Societal impact: Weakening art's role in challenging norms and amplifying underrepresented voices.

Recognising these effects is vital for sustaining both artistic freedom and a vibrant cultural ecosystem in Malaysia.

Objective

This study will explore the impact of self-censorship among artists and cultural workers in Malaysia, with a focus on the following aspects:



Assess how self-censorship affects the mental health and emotional well-being of artists and cultural workers.



Investigate the connection between experiencing direct censorship or witnessing censorship and the degree of self-censorship practiced.



Identify respondents' fears regarding the consequences of not engaging in self-censorship.



Examine how respondents perceive the difference between their current censored work and how their creations might appear without self-censorship.



Measure levels of satisfaction with censored versus uncensored artistic output.

Together, these objectives aim to shed light on the multifaceted impact of self-censorship and to inform discussions on how artists and cultural workers can be better supported in their pursuit of authentic creative expression.

Data Collection

Overview of Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of self-censorship among artists and cultural workers in Malaysia. The primary methods used were focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). Through group discussions and individual narratives, the study sought to document how censorship is experienced, internalised, and negotiated in different artistic contexts.

Data Collection

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

A total of five FGDs were held in July 2025. Four of these corresponded to the main clusters of practitioners identified in the study design, while the fifth was a mixed group bringing together respondents across clusters for comparative dialogue.

Table 1 : Details of Focus Group Discussion Sessions

Cluster	Date	Time	Venue	Number of respondents
1	26 July 2025	10am-12pm	Rendezvous Garden, PJ	8
2	26 July 2025	2pm-12pm		9
3	27 July 2025	10am-12pm		9
4	27 July 2025	2pm-4pm		7
Mix Group	27 July 2025	2pm-4pm	Zoom	4

Data Collection (cont..)

- **In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)**

To complement the group discussions, four IDIs were conducted in September 2025, with one representative from each cluster. These interviews allowed for deeper exploration of personal experiences and provided the basis for the case vignettes presented later in this report.

Sampling and Recruitment

Respondents were recruited based on their engagement in one of four clusters of artistic practice:

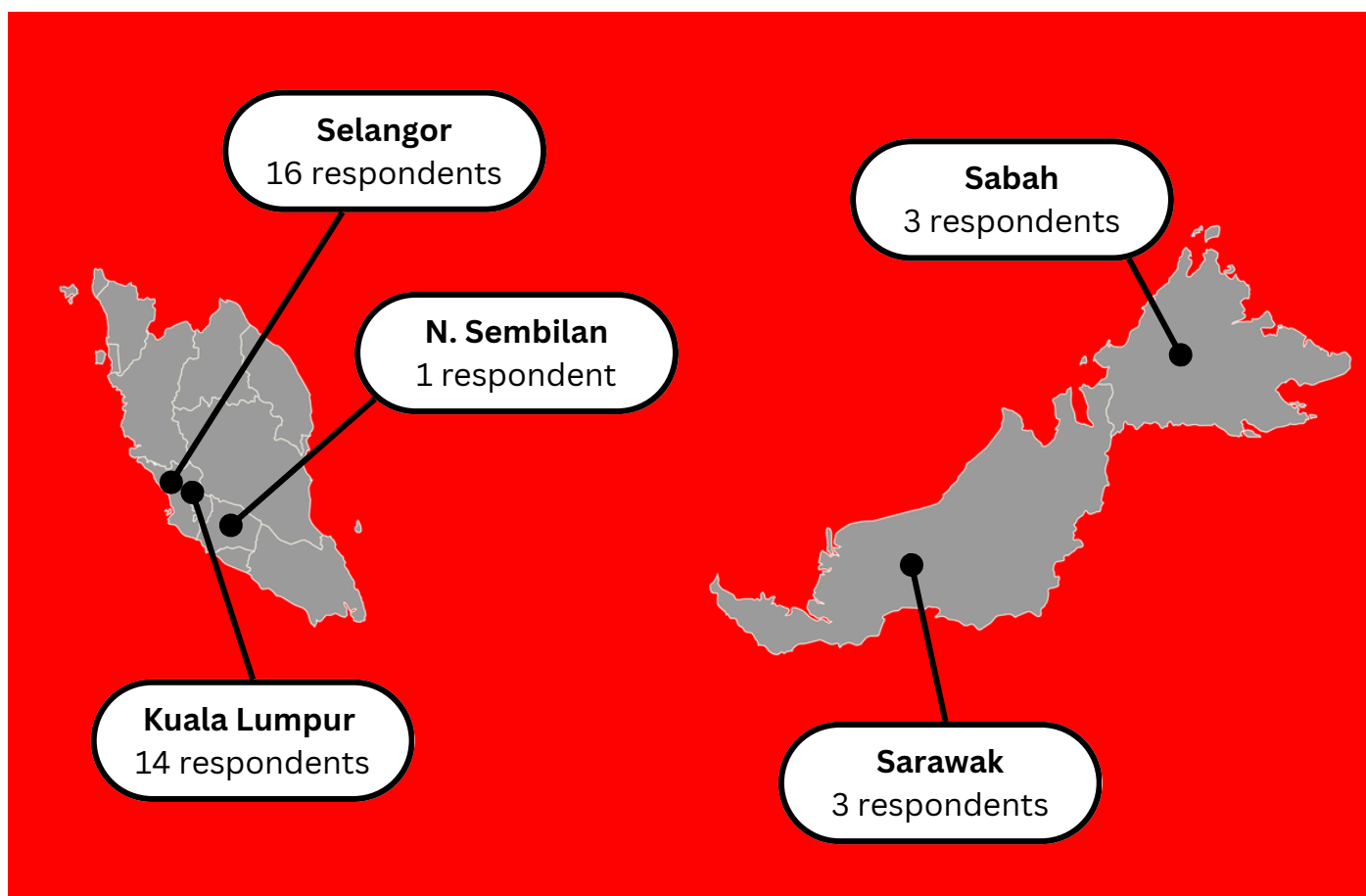
CLUSTER 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Film & Broadcasting• Publication
CLUSTER 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performing arts• Music
CLUSTER 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interactive Media• Design & Creative Services
CLUSTER 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visual Arts• Heritage, Custom & Culture



This cluster-based sampling ensured diversity across mediums and practices while allowing insights into how self-censorship manifests differently depending on artistic domain.

Respondent Breakdown

Cluster	Age	
	Youth < 35 years old	Adult > 35 years old
1	2	6
2	3	6
3	6	3
4	4	3
Mix	1	3



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SECTION 4 : FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION FINDINGS



4.1 Understanding of Self-Censorship

Key Findings at a Glance



Self-censorship is seen as an **inevitable part of artistic work** in Malaysia.



It is understood as **restraint, adjustment, or negotiation** rather than outright suppression.



The practice is **learned and reinforced by past experiences** of direct censorship or backlash.



Artists hold mixed views: For some it is a **necessary survival strategy**, for others a **compromise of authenticity**.



There are **generational differences**, with younger artists more resistant but also more anxious, while older practitioners accept it as a norm.

Self-censorship was consistently described by respondents as something that cannot be separated from artistic practice in Malaysia. It was not understood as an occasional compromise but rather as a **constant presence in the creative process**. Artists across film, publishing, performing arts, music, visual arts, and digital media acknowledged that they often anticipate potential restrictions before even beginning a work. This anticipatory adjustment, whether conscious or unconscious, becomes ingrained in how they create.

1. Self-censorship is ever-present in creative practice

Respondents explained that self-censorship is not an exception but the rule. It is something they carry with them as part of their professional reality. For many, this meant calculating risks before expressing ideas that might provoke authorities, funders, or audiences.

"Many authors self-censor out of fear their work might be banned. I want to publish GL and BL literature, but I'm always calculating the risk." (Cluster 1, Publishing)

"I didn't initially think much about censorship. But once I started exhibiting, I realised how cautious I had to become." (Cluster 4, Visual Arts)

This shows how self-censorship is deeply internalised, shaping decisions long before works reach the public.

2. Characterised as restraint, adjustment, and negotiation

The way respondents spoke about self-censorship suggested a spectrum of practices: from consciously avoiding taboo subjects, to quietly softening messages, to cleverly negotiating content so it can still "pass through" gatekeepers.

"We think about what can be staged without trouble. Sometimes the script changes before rehearsal, not because we want to, but because we know the venue won't approve." (Cluster 2, Performing Arts)

Here, self-censorship is not always a total silencing of expression, but often a strategic recalibration in order to survive within restrictive contexts.

¹ GL (Girls' Love) refers to romantic or emotional relationships between female characters while BL (Boys' Love) refers to romantic or emotional relationships between male characters.

3. A learned practice shaped by past experiences

Respondents emphasised that self-censorship is reinforced by lived experiences – both personal and observed. Direct censorship, such as bans, heavy edits, or platform removals, created lasting lessons that made artists more cautious in subsequent work.

*“The film *Sepet* had seven cuts imposed on it. That experience taught us how far authorities could go.” (Cluster 1, Film)*

These experiences serve as constant reminders that risks are real, and so self-censorship becomes a preventive measure.

4. Pragmatism vs. compromise

Artists differed in how they evaluated self-censorship. For some, it was simply a pragmatic necessity – the price of being able to continue producing and sharing work. For others, it felt like a compromise that undermined authenticity and artistic purpose.

“Money is life support. Sometimes you can’t risk it.” (Cluster 3, Actor/Game Designer)

“Challenging censorship can sometimes bring more attention, but the personal cost is heavy.” (Online Group)

This duality shows how self-censorship is simultaneously a strategy for survival and a source of frustration.

5. Generational differences in perspectives

Generational divides also emerged in how self-censorship was perceived. Younger practitioners, especially those using online platforms, expressed greater resistance and frustration, but also more fear of consequences. Older practitioners, in contrast, tended to normalise self-censorship as part of the professional landscape, something one learns to navigate with time.

This generational lens highlights how attitudes towards self-censorship are not fixed, but shaped by exposure, experience, and position within the creative field.

For Malaysian artists and cultural workers, self-censorship is understood as an **integral, almost inevitable condition** of creative practice. It is defined in terms of restraint, adjustment, and negotiation, learned through experience, and reinforced by institutional and societal pressures.

While some see it as a pragmatic survival mechanism, others regard it as a compromise of integrity – a tension that shapes their artistic identity. Generational differences add another layer, revealing how younger and older practitioners relate differently to the same challenge.

² *Sepet* is a Malaysian film released in 2005, portraying the love story between a Malay girl and a Chinese boy as they navigate cultural differences and societal expectations.

4.2 Drivers of Self-Censorship

Key Findings at a Glance



Self-censorship is shaped by **external regulations and institutional controls** (laws, permits, approval boards).



Public commentators and societal expectations play a major role, especially around religion, politics, sexuality, and race



Economic and professional survival pressures (funding, permits, venue access, platform risks) push artists to self-censor.



Peer and other stakeholder dynamics also influence decisions – through both collective caution and collective resistance.



Digital platforms bring new forms of pressure (de-platforming, demonetisation, online backlash).

Self-censorship is not only an individual choice but also a product of broader systems of control, expectation, and survival. Respondents highlighted a range of drivers – from state regulations to digital platform rules, from public expectations to economic realities. Together, these factors create an environment where artists pre-emptively limit themselves to avoid risks.

1. Regulatory and institutional pressures

Artists across clusters described formal censorship bodies and approval processes as central drivers. Film, theatre, publishing, and live music are subject to licensing, reviews, and potential bans, shaping creative decisions even before work reaches the public.

“The film board and the Printing Presses Act make you think twice before writing. Sensitive topics like politics, race, and sexuality are almost impossible without cuts.”

(Cluster 1, Filmmaker/Publisher)

“Performances require permits. If the script has even a hint of religion or politics, we adjust it first to avoid rejection.” **(Cluster 2, Theatre Practitioner)**

Such requirements act as gatekeeping mechanisms, encouraging artists to self-edit in anticipation of official scrutiny.

2. Audience and societal sensitivities

Beyond regulations, respondents emphasised the influence of public expectations and social norms. Fear of conservative backlash, misinterpretation, or reputational damage shaped decisions about content.

“Lyrics or performances with political or religious themes are quickly attacked. Sometimes the public reaction is harsher than the government.” **(Cluster 2, Musician)**

“Street art can disappear overnight if it’s seen as provocative. You don’t always need authorities – the community itself polices you.” **(Cluster 4, Visual Artist)**

This demonstrates how self-censorship is reinforced by societal pressures that extend beyond state control.

3. Economic and professional survival

Respondents repeatedly linked self-censorship to their ability to sustain careers. Access to funding, platforms, and audiences was conditional on staying within acceptable boundaries.

"Money is life support. If your work is seen as too risky, you won't get venues or grants."

(Cluster 3, Game Designer/Actor)

Economic precarity amplifies the cost of crossing boundaries, making self-censorship a pragmatic safeguard.

4. Peer and community influence

Artists also described how their peers and networks influenced their decisions. At times, they reinforced caution, encouraging safer choices to avoid collective risk. In other cases, solidarity offered protection against backlash.

"In collectives, we discuss what's too risky. Sometimes we decide together to tone it down."

(Cluster 4, Artist Collective)

"I rely on peers to push me. Alone, I'd probably censor more. With others, you feel braver."

(Online Group)

This highlights how self-censorship is negotiated not only individually but also collectively.

5. Digital platform constraints

For those active online, platform policies and the threat of backlash were major concerns. Fear of demonetization, account removal, or viral criticism shaped how digital creators navigated content.

"I've seen friends lose accounts overnight. Watching that made me more careful about what I post." **(Cluster 3, Digital Creator)**

"Online, you're judged instantly. Even if authorities don't come after you, netizens can destroy your career." **(Cluster 2, Musician)**

These digital dynamics constitute a powerful new driver of self-censorship, often faster and less predictable than traditional state regulation.

4.3 Impact on Mental Health & Wellbeing

Key Findings at a Glance



Self-censorship contributes to **stress, anxiety, and creative frustration.**



Artists often experience **emotional conflict** between staying safe and staying authentic.



Repeated self-censorship leads to **burnout, disillusionment, and loss of motivation.**



Younger or emerging practitioners show greater emotional **vulnerability**, while more established artists report **resignation and detachment.**



Despite challenges, some described **resilience and adaptive coping**, using restrictions as creative prompts

Self-censorship carries significant psychological and emotional weight for artists. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the toll it takes on their well-being, as they navigate the tension between survival and authenticity. The effects range from stress and frustration to deeper feelings of burnout, disillusionment, and, for some, a loss of faith in their role as cultural workers.

1. Heightened stress and anxiety

Respondents often linked self-censorship to constant worry about whether their work would be accepted, banned, or attacked. This anticipation of rejection creates ongoing stress.

"I've become more protective of myself after facing online trolling. Over time, it makes you more cautious, but also more anxious." (Cluster 1, Editor)

2. Emotional conflict between safety and authenticity

Many artists described the internal struggle of wanting to express themselves fully but feeling compelled to hold back. This created emotional dissonance and dissatisfaction with their own work.

"When you know a piece has been softened, you feel like you've betrayed your own message." (Cluster 4, Visual Artist)

"You're constantly weighing between being true to yourself and being able to keep working." (Online Group)

This tension deepens the sense of compromise in artistic practice.

3. Burnout and disillusionment

For some respondents, repeated experiences of self-censorship led to exhaustion and feelings of hopelessness. Over time, this eroded their motivation and belief in the value of their work.

"I've seen peers leave the arts entirely because it's just too draining to keep censoring yourself." (Cluster 3, Interactive Media)

"Sometimes you feel like, what's the point of creating if it's never what you really want to say?" (Cluster 2, Theatre Practitioner)

4. Generational patterns of vulnerability

Younger artists reported greater emotional strain, often expressing fear about their sustainability in the sector. More established practitioners, by contrast, tended to adopt a pragmatic, detached stance, accepting self-censorship as “part of the job.”

“My students avoid topics like gender or sexuality not because they don’t care, but because they already feel the pressure. They’re only 20 and already censoring themselves.” (Cluster 1, Lecturer)

This highlights how emotional toll manifests differently across career stages.



The impact of self-censorship on mental health and well-being is profound. Artists experience heightened stress, internal conflict, and in some cases burnout and disillusionment. Younger practitioners are particularly vulnerable, while older ones have developed pragmatic detachment. While some turn restrictions into creative prompts, this resilience cannot mask the broader emotional strain that self-censorship imposes on the arts community.

4.4 Censored vs Uncensored Work

Key Findings at a Glance



Censored work is often seen as **technically safer** but **less authentic**.



Artists report feeling **less satisfied** with censored work compared to uncensored pieces.



Self-censorship can dilute artistic **message and impact**, but sometimes **increases accessibility to mainstream audiences**.



Some artists believe censored work may be **more acceptable commercially**, but it undermines creative intent.



There is a strong sense that **uncensored work better represents the artist's true voice**, even if it risks rejection or backlash.

Artists were candid about how censorship – whether external or self-imposed – alters their relationship with their work. Most distinguished sharply between censored and uncensored outputs, describing differences in satisfaction, authenticity, and impact.

1. Censored work feels safer but less authentic

Many respondents recognised censored work as “safer” to produce and distribute, especially for securing funding, permits, or audience approval. Yet, they often admitted it came at the expense of artistic truth.

“When you censor yourself, the work feels incomplete. It’s like delivering half the message.”

(Cluster 1, Publisher)

“The censored version might be allowed on stage, but it doesn’t feel like my real voice.”

(Cluster 2, Theatre Practitioner)

This reflects a trade-off between protection and authenticity.

2. Uncensored work brings greater satisfaction

In contrast, respondents expressed pride and fulfilment when describing uncensored works, even if they faced obstacles in presenting them. The sense of authenticity outweighed the risks.

“When the work is uncensored, even if it’s rejected, I know it is mine in full.”

(Cluster 4, Visual Artist)

“The audience might be smaller, but the satisfaction is greater when I don’t compromise.” **(Cluster 3, Digital Creator)**

Uncensored work was consistently described as more genuine and personally meaningful.

3. Dilution of meaning in censored pieces

Respondents stressed that censorship — especially on sensitive issues like politics, religion, or sexuality — diluted their intended messages. Sometimes, the essence of the work was lost.

"You can remove words or scenes, but what you really lose is the emotion behind them." (Cluster 1, Filmmaker)

"The version that gets approved is usually just a shadow of what we wanted." (Cluster 2, Musician)

This sense of dilution left many feeling disconnected from the censored product.

4. Mainstream acceptance vs. creative compromise

Some respondents acknowledged that censored versions reached wider audiences and avoided controversy. However, this mainstream accessibility was often framed as a compromise of integrity.

"The censored version is easier to market, but I don't feel proud of it." (Cluster 3, Game Developer)

"Sometimes you take the safer route because you want the show to go on — but deep down you know it's not your best work." (Online Group)

Thus, while censorship may help secure visibility, it undermines satisfaction.



For artists, censored and uncensored works differ profoundly in meaning and impact. Censored work is seen as safer and more accessible but diluted and less authentic. Uncensored work brings greater satisfaction and a stronger sense of artistic identity, even when it carries risks. This contrast illustrates the emotional and professional compromises artists navigate daily, balancing survival with the pursuit of authenticity.

4.5 Fear and Consequences

Key Findings at a Glance



Artists fear **legal action, bans, and censorship** from authorities.



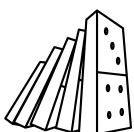
Financial loss and career setbacks are major concerns, especially when funding or venue access depends on “safe” content.



Many worry about **social backlash** from conservative groups or online communities.



Fear leads to **anticipatory self-censorship**, where artists avoid risk before it even arises.



Consequences extend beyond individuals, sometimes affecting **collectives, institutions, and communities** connected to the artist.

Fear is one of the strongest drivers of self-censorship. respondents across clusters described a range of possible consequences that shape their creative decisions. These fears – legal, financial, and social – often overlap, creating an environment where many feel it is safer to hold back than to risk confrontation.

1. Legal and institutional consequences

Respondents expressed fear of laws, bans, or state sanctions. Many had seen peers face censorship boards, confiscations, or sudden restrictions.

"If the board bans your film, all the money and time is wasted. That fear is always at the back of your mind." (Cluster 1, Filmmaker)

"Even if the work is not banned, the threat of investigation is enough to stop you." (Cluster 4, Visual Artist)

These possibilities make legal repercussions a constant worry in the creative process.

2. Financial repercussions and career risks

Artists spoke about the high stakes of financial loss – from losing grants to losing venues. For many, avoiding sensitive themes was a way to protect their livelihoods.

"Money is life support. If your work is labelled controversial, venues and sponsors don't want to touch you." (Cluster 3, Interactive Media)

"Sometimes you censor yourself just so your festival or collective can survive another year." (Cluster 2, Event Organiser)

This shows how financial fears extend beyond individuals to institutions and communities.

3. Social backlash and reputational harm

Respondents also feared public backlash, especially from conservative groups or online communities. These reactions could damage not only careers but also personal reputations.

"Online, you're judged instantly. Netizens can destroy you faster than the authorities." (Cluster 2, Musician)

The immediacy of backlash made many cautious before sharing work publicly.

4. Anticipatory self-censorship as prevention

Because of these risks, respondents often censored themselves in anticipation. Even if no one explicitly demanded changes, the fear of possible consequences was enough to shape decisions.

"Sometimes the fear is worse than the reality. You change things just in case." (Cluster 1, Writer)

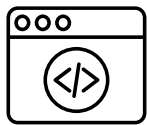
This pre-emptive restraint highlights how fear functions as an internalised regulator.



Fear of consequences plays a central role in self-censorship. Legal restrictions, financial risks, and social backlash intersect to create a high-stakes environment. These fears not only influence individual choices but also shape the survival strategies of collectives and institutions. The result is a culture of anticipatory self-censorship, where artists hold back to avoid risks that may never materialise but feel too dangerous to ignore.

4.6 Strategies for Coping/Resistance

Key Findings at a Glance



Artists adopt **coded expression** (symbols, metaphors, indirect references) to bypass restrictions.



Alternative platforms – international festivals, online channels, and independent spaces – provide outlets for riskier work.



Collective action and peer support give artists confidence to push boundaries.



Self-imposed boundaries are sometimes reframed as creative challenges rather than limitations.



Despite these coping strategies, most admitted that resistance remains **fragile and unevenly accessible**.

Faced with multiple pressures, artists develop strategies to cope with and, at times, resist self-censorship. These strategies are not uniform: some are subtle, others more confrontational. Together, they represent ways of navigating restrictive environments while still seeking to preserve creative authenticity.

1. Coded and indirect expression

Artists frequently use symbolism, allegory, or metaphor to communicate sensitive ideas without overtly triggering censorship. This allows them to retain meaning while avoiding immediate rejection.

"Instead of saying it directly, I use symbols. It pushes me to think more creatively."

(Cluster 4, Multimedia Artist)

"In literature, we layer meanings. Those who know will understand, and those who don't will just read it as a story." **(Cluster 1, Publisher)**

This illustrates how restraint can spark alternative forms of expression, though always under constraint.

2. Turning to alternative platforms

Respondents described shifting to spaces beyond mainstream approvals – whether through international festivals, underground performances, or online platforms – to present less censored work.

"If it can't be staged locally, we bring it abroad. Sometimes it's the only way the full work can exist." **(Cluster 2, Theatre Practitioner)**

"Online gives some freedom, but it's still risky. You learn to balance visibility with safety." **(Cluster 3, Digital Creator)**

Alternative platforms provide room to manoeuvre, but access often depends on networks and resources.

3. Collective support and solidarity

Artists emphasised the value of peers and collectives in resisting censorship. Working together not only reduced risks but also gave courage to take bolder steps.

"In collectives, we decide what can be pushed. Alone I'd censor more, but with others I feel braver." (Cluster 4, Artist Collective)

"Sometimes solidarity is the only protection we have. If one of us is attacked, the rest rally." (Online Group)

These accounts highlight how resistance often relies on collective backing rather than individual action.

4. Reframing boundaries as creative prompts

Some respondents explained that restrictions, while frustrating, occasionally stimulated creative problem-solving. Self-censorship, in these cases, became a challenge to innovate within constraints.

"The limits force you to be clever. You learn how to say things without saying them." (Cluster 2, Musician)

Though adaptive, this framing cannot fully mask the structural barriers artists face.



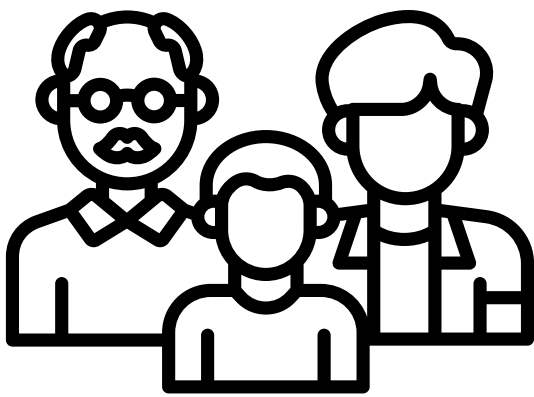
Coping and resistance strategies among Malaysian artists range from coded expression to alternative platforms, from peer solidarity to reframing limits as creative challenges. These practices allow some degree of agency within restrictive environments, but they remain unevenly available and do not replace the need for systemic support. Resistance, while resourceful, is fragile — dependent on networks, opportunities, and personal resilience.

SECTION 5 : COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS



While experiences of self-censorship cut across all participants, the data reveal meaningful differences in how it is understood, internalised, and negotiated. Among the various demographic and professional factors that surfaced, two stood out consistently across clusters – generation and gender. These dimensions fundamentally shaped the way artists perceived risk, made creative decisions, and coped with pressure.

5.1.1 Generational Difference



Across all clusters, participants described how the awareness and acceptance of censorship differ by age and career stage.

Younger artists who also happen to be students and early-career creators, showed clear signs of internalised caution even before entering the professional arts space. Many said they “already know what not to say” based on what they observe online. For them, self-censorship is not a reactive act but a learned instinct – one reinforced by constant exposure to digital outrage.



“You learn from seeing what happens online. If someone gets attacked, everyone else just goes quiet. It’s easier to play safe.”

(Cluster 3, Digital Creator)

Mid-career practitioners typically in their late 20s to 30s – approached self-censorship as part of professional survival. They were more pragmatic, constantly balancing creative ambition with economic responsibilities, family expectations, and the desire for career longevity. They spoke of choosing when and how to challenge boundaries, developing what one participant called “a system of quiet rebellion.”

“I still want to push, but I have to think of my family. If my work is banned, it’s not just me who suffers.” (Cluster 2, Filmmaker)

Meanwhile, practitioners with over two decades of experience expressed a form of resigned pragmatism. Having worked under varying regulatory and political climates, they described censorship as part of the professional routine rather than a crisis. Instead of resisting, many have learned to navigate it efficiently, internalising what topics or expressions are considered “off-limits.”

**“SOMETIMES YOU JUST LEARN TO WORK
WITHIN THE LINES. AFTER YEARS, YOU
KNOW WHAT WON’T GET PAST, SO YOU
STOP WASTING ENERGY.”**

(Cluster 2, Theatre Practitioner)

This generational continuum — from fear to negotiation to accommodation — demonstrates how self-censorship becomes institutionalised over time. For younger artists, it manifests as anxiety and self-restraint; for mid-career artists, as pragmatic balance; and for senior practitioners, as professional adaptation. These distinctions underline the need for tailored interventions: mentorship and confidence-building for younger creators, and reflective advocacy roles for senior artists.

5.1.2 Generational differences - Consequences by career stage

The practical consequences differ: Young practitioners risk early withdrawal or long-term risk aversion; Mid-career practitioners risk compromising major works for marketability; Senior practitioners risk normalising a constrained creative environment.

"My students don't even try some topics in class anymore." (Cluster 1: Film & Publishing)

Analysis:

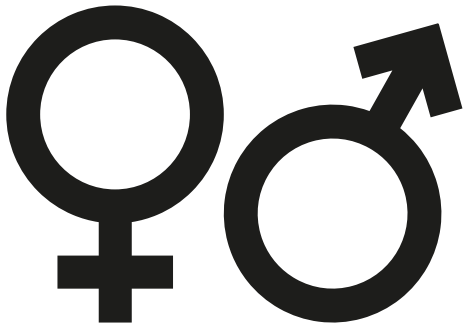


- **Young Practitioner (early 20s):** Early self-censorship can stunt creative identity formation and reduce willingness to pursue contentious topics in future projects. This cohort is therefore at higher risk of leaving the sector before contributing more challenging work.
- **Mid-career practitioner (late 20s–30s):** The main consequence is selective compromise: they may shelve or soften larger projects to maintain income streams, which reduces the sector's overall diversity of content.
- **Senior practitioner:** The main consequence is a perpetuation of a "This is how things are done" culture that transmits cautious practice to younger artists.



"Sometimes you take the safer route because you want the show to go on – but deep down you know it's not your best work." (Cluster 3: Digital & Interactive Media / Millennial respondent)

5.2.1 Gender Difference



The data also reveal a **gendered pattern** of self-censorship, where women bear a disproportionate emotional and safety burden. Across clusters, **female artists described facing online harassment, moral policing, and threats of violence** that went beyond professional critique. Unlike male peers who framed censorship as bureaucratic or reputational, women spoke of personal attacks targeting their identity, morality, or safety.

"After I spoke about gender issues online, I got messages threatening to rape me. That's when I stopped posting about it."

(Cluster 1, Film and Publishing)

"The scariest part isn't the government – it's netizens. Once they start, it doesn't stop. As a woman, you feel completely exposed."

(Cluster 3, Digital Creator)

Respondents also mentioned receiving **death and rape threats** after producing or commenting on gender-related work, while several others spoke of **feeling unsafe in public or online spaces**. These gendered threats created a chilling effect that extended beyond the immediate incident – leading some to withdraw from social media, self-limit in content, or avoid public visibility altogether.



"You start thinking: maybe I'll just stay quiet. It's not worth the attacks."

(Cluster 2, Performing Arts and Music)

"There are so few safe spaces for women artists. Even when something happens, there's no one to report to. (Cluster 4, Visual Arts)"

5.2.2 Gender differences - Downstream effects

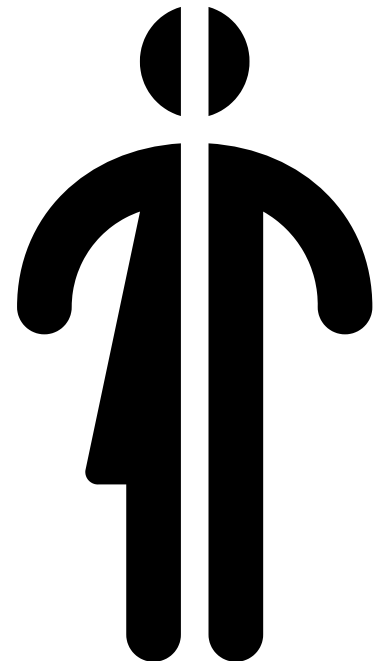
Gendered harassment reduces women's willingness to show work publicly, accept high-profile commissions, or engage on open platforms, narrowing career pathways.

“I STOPPED TAKING INVITATIONS TO PANEL TALKS AFTER THE HARASSMENT ESCALATED – IT WASN'T WORTH THE SAFETY RISK.”

(Cluster 2, Performing Arts)

Analysis:

- Women articulated that risk calculations extend beyond a single work: threats influence choices about venues, collaborators, and even the decision to remain public figures. Where male counterparts may accept controversy as a career hazard, women more often weigh potential physical and sexualised harm as part of their calculus. As a result, women may opt for smaller, private showings or coded expression rather than overt public critique.
- This withdrawal has long-term implications for representation: fewer visible women voices on contentious issues reduces the sector's plurality and reinforces gendered silences.



“I show certain works only in closed circles now, not public exhibitions.” (Cluster 4: Visual Arts)

SECTION 6 : CASE VIGNETTES



Case Vignettes

Introducing the Vignettes

While the thematic findings in this report highlight broad patterns, they do not always capture the depth and texture of individual experiences. To complement the analysis, this section presents **four case vignettes**, each drawn from the in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted in September 2025.

Case vignettes in the context of this study are **narrative snapshots** that illustrate how self-censorship is lived, negotiated, and understood by different practitioners. They are not intended to represent the entire sector, but to provide human-centred insights that bring the research themes to life.

Each vignette is based on one respondent from the four clusters engaged in the study. They highlight:

- **The respondent's background and artistic practice.**
- **Their personal experiences of self-censorship.**
- **The challenges they face, including fears and consequences.**
- **The strategies they use to cope, resist, or adapt.**
- **Reflections on how censorship shapes their artistic identity and aspirations.**

Together, these stories offer a **ground-level view** of the complexities behind self-censorship. They show how broader patterns – fear of regulation, social backlash, financial risk, and mental strain – intersect with individual lives in unique ways.

By including these vignettes, the report moves beyond statistics and themes, **foregrounding the voices and realities of artists themselves.**

Character Profiles

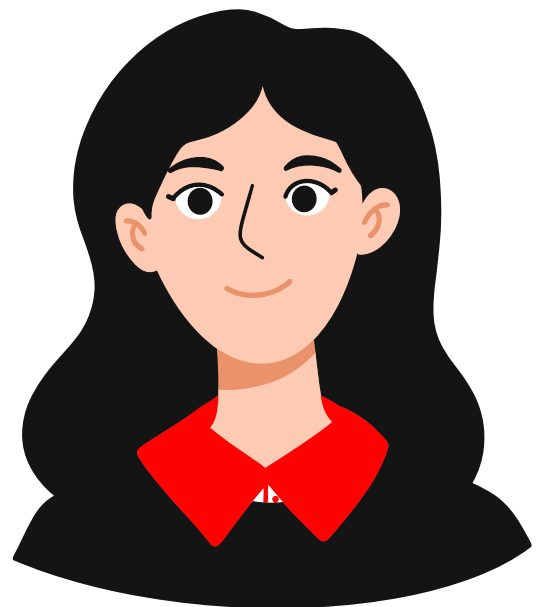


Junoh

For Junoh, censorship is both a barrier and a catalyst. It causes stress, creative blocks, and compromise, yet also pushes him to explore new mediums and uncover hidden potential. Junoh's story illustrates the paradox of the resilient activist-artist: censored at home, celebrated abroad, always negotiating between authenticity and survival, yet determined to use art as a tool of truth and resistance.

Aruna

For Aruna, censorship is a constant negotiation between honesty and sensitivity. It forces her to navigate cultural taboos with care, sometimes diluting the authenticity of her storytelling. Yet it also pushes her to experiment with ambiguity and creative subtlety, finding ways to let audiences interpret stories for themselves. Aruna's story illustrates the resilience of the boundary-pushing filmmaker: constrained by sensitivities, yet committed to opening conversations through film, transforming limits into new narrative possibilities.



Character Profiles

Daniel



For Daniel, censorship is both suffocating and sharpening. It frustrates him, leaving some plays feeling incomplete or compromised, yet it also compels him to innovate—embedding critique in humour, metaphor, and coded language. His story reflects the balancing act of the critical playwright: caught between institutional obligations and artistic honesty, constrained by taboo topics, yet determined to use theatre as a space for laughter, reflection, and resistance.

Joshepine

For Joshepine, censorship is a question of purpose rather than prohibition. It frustrates her when it silences critical voices, yet she sees power in reframing, in choosing clarity over confrontation. Her story reflects the pragmatism of the strategic storyteller—one who balances truth-telling with tact, believing that the art of speaking carefully can sometimes reach farther than speaking loudly.



Vignette 1: Junoh (The Resilient Activist-Artist)



Junoh

- **Occupation:** Independent artist and social advocate
- **Mediums:** Multidisciplinary creative projects and collaborations
- **Core Themes:** Social reflection, personal expression, and creative freedom
- **Career:** Over ten years of experience engaging diverse local and international audiences

“Every time I do my artwork, I feel I should do more. When I put my work in galleries, it’s not what I’m fully happy with. I want it to be more challenging, to make people think.”

Creative Background & Trajectory

Junoh’s artistic identity is grounded in the desire to use creativity as a tool for awareness and change. Early in his journey, university provided an environment of creative freedom—space to experiment without the pressure of markets or censorship.

“At that time, I didn’t need to sell my work. I just wanted to explore, so I felt much more freedom”

That freedom shifted upon entering the professional art scene, where institutional gatekeeping and market pressures constrained Junoh’s work. Organizers often rejected themes tied to sensitive topics. Junoh was often told not to focus on certain issues deemed sensitive, suggesting his art would be “too niche” to succeed. The memory of such moments continues to shape how Junoh think about self-censorship today.

Despite these barriers, Junoh broadened his practice by engaging in collaborative projects and addressing universal themes such as climate change, connecting them to global audiences and recognition.

Motivations



- **Authenticity:** Staying true to cultural identity and values.
- **Responsibility:** Using art to highlight injustice and provoke reflection.
- **Transformation:** Turning censorship into a catalyst for innovation.

For Junoh, art is not just an individual pursuit—it is a social responsibility and a form of resistance.

Challenges



- **Institutional Gatekeeping:** Galleries restrict what is deemed “appropriate” or “marketable.”
- **Internalized Self-Censorship:** Past criticisms act as an “internal filter” during the creative process.
- **Fear of Repercussions:** Risk of online harassment, legal action, or gallery exclusion.
- **Digital Dilemmas:** Social media provides reach but also surveillance and pressure to self-censor.

For Junoh, every creation becomes a balancing act between **truth-telling and self-preservation.**

“Censorship can break you down,
but it also pushed me to explore
new things I didn’t imagine
myself doing before.”

Coping & Adaptation

- **Expanding Mediums:** Exploring activism, and new collaborations.
- **Global Recognition:** Seeking international platforms as validation and support.
- **Peer Solidarity:** Building informal networks of artists facing similar struggles.

These adaptive strategies allow Junoh to preserve authenticity while navigating constraints.

Emotional Impact

Censorship leaves clear marks on Junoh's wellbeing. Stress and creative block often arise when anticipating backlash. Finished works sometimes feel diluted, leaving a sense of incompleteness.

"Sometimes it makes it hard to sleep, thinking I should have done more."

At the same time, controversial projects bring paradoxical outcomes. Junoh shared that one particular project of his drew severe local backlash—including threats and police reports—but was celebrated internationally. This duality underscores the uneven terrain of artistic freedom: restricted at home, recognized abroad.



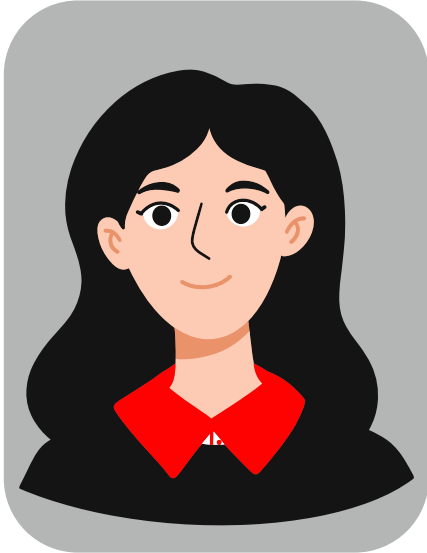
Future Vision

Junoh aspires to a cultural ecosystem where:

- Institutions defend artists, not abandon them in times of controversy.
- Policy safeguards freedom of expression, ensuring artists are protected from punitive censorship.
- Bravery is normalized, allowing younger artists to challenge boundaries without fear.

He admires global figures who resist censorship, drawing inspiration to continue their own practice with courage.

Vignette 2: Aruna (The Boundary-Pushing Filmmaker)



Aruna

- **Occupation:** Independent filmmaker
- **Mediums:** Short films, documentaries, feature films and etc.
- **Core Themes:** Everyday social realities
- **Career:** Over ten years of experience producing short and feature-length creative works

"I feel triggered and uncomfortable at first everytime I receive criticism or being told to censor my work. That's why I take time to think."

Creative Background & Trajectory

Aruna is a filmmaker who balances academic work with independent creative practice. Her filmmaking journey began through short films and competitions, later supported by grants and collaborative projects. Over the past decade, she has steadily built a body of work exploring untold or sensitive social issues, culminating in the release of a feature film.

This was a turning point. The film explored themes often avoided in mainstream storytelling. The project challenged unspoken boundaries and revealed how creative risks can quickly become sensitive in the local context. During the process, Aruna became increasingly aware of how easily artistic intention could be misinterpreted. Feedback from collaborators and funders underscored the delicate balance between artistic curiosity and perceived controversy.

Motivations



- **Authenticity:** Rooting films in community experiences.
- **Dialogue:** Using cinema to open up difficult conversations.
- **Transformation:** Venturing into untold stories in local cinema.

For Aruna, film is both personal and political.

"Most of my films are based on personal experiences. I don't think I'll avoid any topic, since I have my own way of approaching storytelling."

Challenges



- **Social Boundaries:** Navigating unspoken limits on what stories can be safely told.
- **External Pressure:** Managing expectations from collaborators and institutions.
- **Inner Conflict:** Balancing personal expression with professional caution.
- **Unclear Standards:** Dealing with unpredictable interpretations of acceptability.

These challenges mean that each film becomes a careful balancing act between honesty, vision and navigating external sensitivities.

Coping & Adaptation

- **Subtle Storytelling:** Using ambiguity and open-ended narratives to invite interpretation.
- **Peer Feedback:** Consulting trusted collaborators to gauge sensitivities before release.
- **Creative Framing:** Presenting complex issues through multiple perspectives to reduce risk.

"In the final cut, I left it ambiguous...and I think that made it more interesting."

These strategies allow Aruna to retain narrative integrity while avoiding outright conflict.

Emotional Impact

Self-censorship often leaves Aruna feeling less authentic:



Some projects lose emotional depth when toned down, creating a quiet sense of dissatisfaction. Yet these limits also spark introspection and push her to think more strategically about storytelling. The tension between freedom and restraint has become both a creative challenge and a source of personal growth.



Future Vision

Aruna imagines a creative ecosystem with:

- **Peer Support:** Stronger networks among filmmakers to share strategies for navigating censorship.
- **Policy Reform:** Clearer and more consistent standards from regulators.
- **Brave Storytelling:** A new generation of filmmakers tackling themes once considered too sensitive.

She admires established directors who deal with censorship through creativity and subtlety, as well as storytellers who make sensitive issues feel natural and relatable.

Vignette 3: Daniel (The Balancing Playwright)



Daniel

- **Occupation:** Playwright and director
- **Mediums:** Stage productions, performance writing, and creative workshops
- **Core Themes:** Society, identity, and human behaviour
- **Career:** Nearly two decades of experience spanning independent theatre and teaching

"Sometimes I feel I can't let go. Self-censorship makes me less satisfied, but it also forces me to be more inventive. I want people to laugh, but also to know exactly what I'm talking about."

Creative Background & Trajectory

Daniel's creative journey began with performance-based work before evolving into writing, directing, and mentoring others in the arts. What started as an open space for experimentation gradually became shaped by institutional and social boundaries. Over time, he noticed that certain themes—once freely discussed—were now approached with caution.

His practice focuses on reflecting everyday realities and prompting audiences to think critically, often through accessible, relatable storytelling.

"It's easy to make people laugh, but harder to make them think. That's what I wanted—to use humour as criticism."

Today, Daniel continues to balance honest expression with strategic restraint, aware that every creative choice can carry personal and professional consequences.

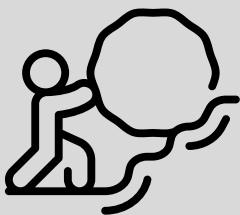
Motivations



- **Critical Reflection:** Using creative work to question assumptions and prompt dialogue.
- **Integrity:** Staying truthful to ideas and values despite external pressures.
- **Responsibility:** Guiding emerging creators to think independently and ethically.
- **Adaptation:** Viewing limits not as barriers, but as challenges that sharpen creativity.

For Daniel, creativity is both an act of expression and responsibility—an effort to speak honestly while navigating complex boundaries.

Challenges



- **Institutional Role:** Working within structured environments that limit creative freedom.
- **Social Sensitivities:** Avoiding themes that could be misunderstood or provoke backlash.

“If you mix the two (sensitive topic & humour), it can explode. That’s where I know I cannot go too far.”

- **Fear of Repercussions:** Anticipating how work might be perceived by authorities or peers.
- **Inner Conflict:** Balancing the desire for honesty with the need for professional security.

These pressures weigh heavily. Daniel confesses that before staging any new work, he spends days asking himself:

“Will this be safe? Will I get called in?”

Coping & Adaptation

- **Strategic Framing:** Instead of direct confrontation, Daniel uses allegory, metaphor, and humour.

"It's the art of choosing words. You criticise, but softly."

- **Alternative Spaces:** He saves more experimental or critical pieces for smaller, independent stages where audiences are more open.
- **Language Play:** Embedding critique through coded references that resonate with attentive audiences but slip past censors.
- **Audience Curation:** Sometimes restricting access or keeping performances low-profile to reduce risk.

These tactics allow Daniel to continue pushing boundaries without placing himself in direct danger.

Emotional Impact

Self-censorship leaves Daniel conflicted. On one hand, he feels compromised:

"I feel less authentic when I have to tone down my characters. Sometimes the work feels incomplete, like it doesn't represent the reality I wanted to show."

On the other hand, he sees these restrictions as creative challenges. They force him to innovate linguistically, to embed critique in humour and metaphor.

"Censorship makes me angry, but it also sharpens my creativity. I find ways to say things differently."

This balance, however, is emotionally taxing. The constant fear of crossing invisible lines brings stress and a lingering sense of inauthenticity.

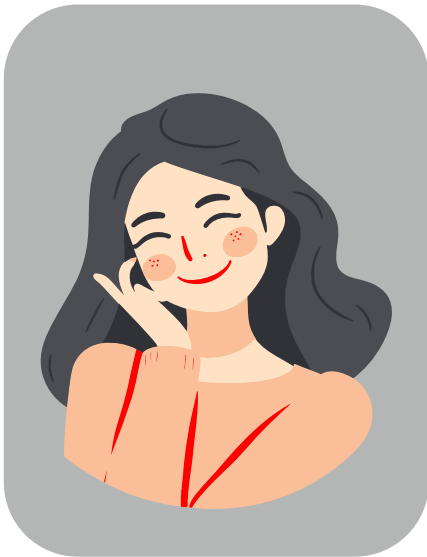


Future Vision

Daniel envisions a cultural environment where:

- Legal Protections for artistic work are applied fairly, without depending on who is in power.
- Dialogue, not punishment, becomes the response to controversial works.
- Comedy as critique is celebrated –not censored–because it challenges burning issues and abuse of power rather than targeting the vulnerable.

Vignette 4: Joshepine (The Strategic Storyteller)



Joshepine

- **Occupation:** Editor, content creator, and communication trainer
- **Mediums:** Writing, storytelling, and collaborative media projects
- **Core Themes:** Expression, ethics, and social awareness
- **Career:** Over ten years of experience in creative communication and project development

"It's not always censorship—it's framing. Sometimes, to be heard, you have to choose the right time, the right words, and the right audience."

Creative Background & Trajectory

Joshepine's creative path has always been driven by a fascination with how stories shape understanding. Starting from small-scale projects, she gradually moved into developing content that connects everyday experiences with broader social questions. Over time, her work evolved from direct commentary to more reflective storytelling—choosing nuance over confrontation.

Early experiences navigating restrictive environments taught her to communicate with care.

"I used to think freedom meant saying everything. Now I think it's about saying it well—so that it actually gets heard."

This shift from reaction to reflection has defined her current approach: thoughtful, deliberate, and deeply aware of how context influences meaning.

Motivations



- **Thoughtful Communication:** Ensuring stories are shared with clarity and care.
- **Moral Integrity:** Balancing honesty with awareness of context and audience.
- **Critical Reflection:** Encouraging deeper thinking through creative work.
- **Strategic Framing:** Presenting difficult ideas in ways that invite understanding.

For Joshepine, communication is both creative and ethical—an ongoing effort to express truth responsibly within complex boundaries.

Challenges



- **Context Sensitivity:** Navigating social and cultural expectations that shape what can be said.
- **Editorial Pressure:** Adjusting content to meet institutional or audience comfort levels.
- **Self-Restraint:** Filtering ideas to avoid potential misunderstanding or backlash.
- **Emotional Fatigue:** Managing the stress of constant self-monitoring and caution.

For Joshepine, the challenge lies not in silence, but in how to speak—finding ways to express meaning without losing intent.

“You can question religion, sometimes even race—but the monarchy? That’s still untouchable.”

Coping & Adaptation

- **Editorial Framing:** Reframing sensitive messages rather than erasing them.
- **Selective Anonymity:** At times, withholding her byline to protect herself from backlash.
- **Diversifying Platforms:** Using freelance and collaborative projects to explore riskier ideas outside her full-time role.
- **Strategic Patience:** Waiting for the right moment or medium to discuss delicate issues.

These strategies allow Joshepine to stay true to her message while adapting to the realities of her professional environment.

"It's not censorship; it's responsibility. I don't want my audience to feel vilified when they read."

Emotional Impact

While Joshepine doesn't describe self-censorship as traumatic, she acknowledges its emotional toll. Earlier in her career, she often felt "inauthentic" after toning down a piece under editorial pressure. Over time, she has learned to transform those feelings into reflection:

"It used to make me feel small, but now I see it as strategy. There's no point shouting if no one stays to listen."

However, she admits frustration when others—especially interviewees—self-censor.

"What breaks my heart is when people silence themselves before I even hit record. It's like watching the truth shrink in real time."



Future Vision

Joshepine dreams of creating more historical works that question the way Malaysians remember their past—colonial legacies, borders, and pre-independence alliances.

She also envisions better protection systems for cultural workers:

- **Interdisciplinary Support:** Teams that include historians, lawyers, and communication experts.
- **Peer Networks:** Spaces to exchange lessons and coping strategies among filmmakers, editors, and activists.
- **Smarter Policy:** Frameworks that govern why speech matters, not just what is forbidden.

Implications

For Artists and Cultural Workers



The findings highlight that self-censorship is deeply internalised within the Malaysian arts ecosystem. For practitioners, this means:

- A constant balancing act between **authenticity and survival**, often at the expense of mental health and long-term sustainability.
- **Younger artists** are particularly vulnerable, with high levels of anxiety and disillusionment emerging early in their careers.
- Coping mechanisms (e.g., coded expression, alternative platforms) provide some agency, but these are **fragile and unevenly accessible**, depending on networks, resources, and exposure.

Implication: Without targeted support, the sector risks losing younger talent, narrowing diversity of voices, and deepening cycles of burnout.

For Cultural Organisations and Institutions



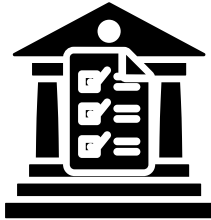
Cultural organisations – including festivals, collectives, and arts spaces – play an important role as intermediaries between artists, audiences, and regulators. The findings suggest:

- Organisations are themselves **constrained by permits, funding rules, and reputational concerns**, which can filter down into cautious programming.
- However, they also hold potential as **protective buffers**, offering solidarity, shared risk, and alternative platforms for more daring work.

Implication: Organisations must find ways to balance compliance with advocacy, providing safe spaces for experimentation while actively negotiating with authorities and funders.

Implications

For Policymakers and Regulators



The research underscores how **formal regulatory frameworks** (e.g., permits, licensing, censorship boards) shape anticipatory self-censorship across the sector. Policies intended to maintain order, at times, create climates of fear.

Implication: Policymakers need to acknowledge the chilling effect of current practices, and consider reforms that protect public sensitivities without stifling artistic freedom. A more enabling environment would not only safeguard democratic space but also strengthen Malaysia's cultural industries.

For the Arts Ecosystem and Society



Self-censorship has ripple effects beyond individual artists:

- It limits the **range of cultural narratives** available to audiences, narrowing exposure to alternative perspectives.
- It diminishes art's potential to **critically engage with social and political issues**, weakening cultural discourse.
- It fosters a culture of silence and conformity, with implications for **creativity, diversity, and democratic resilience**.

Implication: Addressing self-censorship is not only an artistic issue but also a societal one. The ability of art to provoke dialogue, challenge norms, and reflect plural realities is essential for a healthy democracy

Conclusion

This study highlights how self-censorship operates as both a personal survival strategy and a systemic condition within Malaysia's arts and cultural sector. Across disciplines and generations, artists described a reality in which creative decisions are shaped not only by inspiration but also by fear of regulation, financial loss, and social backlash.

The findings reveal that while self-censorship protects careers in the short term, it carries long-term costs: diminished authenticity, weakened artistic impact, and significant emotional strain. At a societal level, the widespread normalisation of self-censorship narrows cultural expression and limits the role of the arts in fostering dialogue, critique, and pluralism.

Yet, the study also surfaces resilience. Artists continue to find ways to adapt — through coded expression, alternative platforms, and collective solidarity. These strategies, while imperfect, demonstrate a commitment to sustaining creative voice under constraint.

The challenge ahead is not only for artists to cope, but for institutions, policymakers, and society at large to create conditions in which censorship is no longer the default backdrop of cultural life. Supporting artistic freedom is not simply about protecting individual expression; it is about nurturing the vitality of Malaysia's cultural ecosystem and strengthening its democratic fabric.