

# Exploring the tension between cultural export and localization in global media platforms

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**Abstract.** In the era of digital globalization, international media platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, TikTok, and YouTube Originals have expanded beyond traditional national borders, reshaping cultural consumption patterns worldwide. These platforms face a crucial challenge: how to export their home culture's values and narratives while simultaneously addressing the cultural identities and aesthetic preferences of local audiences. The tension between cultural export and localization becomes particularly pronounced in politically sensitive, religiously diverse, or ethnically complex regions. This study explores how global media platforms navigate this dynamic, analyzing case studies to examine how these platforms either harmonize, strengthen, or exacerbate cultural friction. By delving into the intersection of cultural export, economic interests, identity politics, and platform algorithms, the research highlights the complexities of balancing global appeal with local resonance in an increasingly interconnected and fragmented media environment. This study is limited by its focus on a few case studies, which may not fully capture the diversity of global media experiences. Future research could explore a broader range of regions and platforms, considering audience reception and the long-term evolution of cultural dynamics in global media.

**Keywords:** global media platform, cultural export, localization, digital globalization, media flow

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid acceleration of globalization and the advancement of digital technologies, global media flows have expanded in both scope and depth, presenting new challenges and opportunities [1]. International media platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, TikTok, and YouTube Originals have quickly expanded into global markets, transcending traditional national borders and reshaping cultural consumption patterns. This global media flow not only facilitates the cross-border dissemination of cultural products but also fosters daily encounters and collisions between diverse cultures. However, as these transnational media platforms enter local markets, they are confronted with a key issue: how to simultaneously export their home culture's values and narrative structures while addressing the cultural identity and aesthetic preferences of local audiences.

Transnational media content inevitably carries specific ideologies and cultural value systems, with cultural export often viewed as a form of soft power [2]. Audiences do not passively accept foreign cultural content but instead reinterpret and resist it based on local social, historical, and political contexts [2]. As a result, these media platforms must navigate the delicate balance between global uniformity and local diversity, creating a tension between cultural export and localization. This tension manifests not only in the fluidity and mutation of cultural meaning but also in the intertwining of economic interests, identity politics, and platform algorithms. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in politically sensitive, religiously diverse, or ethnically complex regions, where audiences may be attracted to, identify with, or resist transnational media content. This study aims to explore how global media platforms manage this tension in different cultural contexts. Through case studies, it will analyze how these platforms either harmonize, strengthen, or exacerbate the cultural friction between cultural export and localization. The research will further investigate the potential pathways and challenges for transnational media in global dissemination, highlighting the complexities of balancing global appeal with local resonance in a rapidly changing media landscape.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Cultural globalization and media flow

Cultural globalization refers to the phenomenon that cultural products, concepts and lifestyles of different countries and regions can be quickly spread, exchanged and integrated with the advancement of transportation, communication and technology. In this context, media flow has become one of the most important manifestations of cultural globalization [3]. Media forms such as film and television series, music, short videos, and social platform content have crossed geographical, linguistic and political boundaries and entered the daily lives of consumers around the world. Media not only transmits information, but also carries values, social customs and aesthetic tastes in a specific cultural background, thus triggering new cultural interactions and changes on a global scale.

Contemporary media flows are marked by two defining characteristics. First, the scale of distribution is unparalleled—audiences across the globe can now access media content from diverse cultural origins almost instantaneously. Second, the direction of media circulation has become increasingly complex. Rather than following the traditional one-way model of cultural transmission from the West to other regions, today's media flows exhibit a multidirectional pattern, characterized by cross-cultural exchange, hybridization, and reciprocal influence. At the same time, media flow has also exacerbated the imbalance of cultural flow. Some cultural groups have stronger communication power and discourse power, while smaller or weaker cultures are easily marginalized or homogenized. Therefore, media flows not only bring about the display of cultural diversity, but also trigger concerns about cultural hegemony and identity crisis.

### 2.2. Cultural output and soft power

Cultural output refers to the dissemination of specific values, worldviews, and social norms through cultural products, symbols, and narratives, thereby shaping a favorable national image and enhancing international influence. With the global expansion of transnational media platforms, cultural output has increasingly become a subtle yet strategic form of international competition. Unlike traditional forms of power such as economic strength or military force, cultural output functions through the logic of soft power. Soft power, a concept developed by political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to a country's ability to influence others through cultural appeal, political ideals, and credible institutions, rather than through coercion or payments [4]. Through attractive content such as films, television series, music, and social media, countries can shape global public opinion, foster cultural affinity, and promote their political and economic interests in a more persuasive and less confrontational manner. For example, cultural narratives that emphasize individualism, free competition and diverse tolerance are widely spread in many international popular contents. Such cultural output not only increases the visibility of the mother culture in the world, but also reshapes the audience's social imagination and value judgment standards to a certain extent. Cultural output does not always proceed smoothly. Audiences from different cultural backgrounds may have different degrees of resistance, misunderstanding or reinterpretation of foreign cultural products. Cultural output may also trigger accusations of cultural imperialism, that is, the dominant culture suppresses or homogenizes the local culture through media hegemony. With the increase of global awareness, more and more regions have begun to realize the importance of cultural autonomy, which requires more sensitivity and flexibility in the process of cultural output to avoid causing cultural conflicts or identity crises.

### 2.3. Localization strategy for media communication

Localization strategy is the process by which transnational media actively adapt to local culture, language, aesthetics and social environment in order to improve content acceptance and market competitiveness when entering new markets [5]. Through localization, media content extends beyond basic translation or dubbing. It requires adaptation of narrative structures, character portrayals, and value expressions to match the cognitive frameworks and cultural expectations of the target audience. Rather than simply altering existing material, localization seeks to produce culturally resonant content that reflects local identities while maintaining the dynamics of global communication [3]. This approach not only strengthens the cultural relevance of multinational brands but also fosters a deeper sense of cultural identity among local audiences. For instance, global platforms increasingly invest in local original productions and collaborate with domestic creators to embed themselves more meaningfully within local cultural ecosystems.

Localization is not uncontroversial. In some cases, localization only stays on the surface and is actually still conveying the core values of the mother culture. In addition, even if localized operations are carried out, the communication logic controlled by the platform (such as algorithm recommendation standards and content review mechanisms) may still cause flattening and homogenization of cultural expression. Therefore, a truly effective localization strategy requires transnational media to produce and disseminate content in a more inclusive and dialogical manner, based on respect for local cultural subjectivity and autonomy, rather than simply applying global standards or making superficial cultural changes.

### 3. Case analysis

#### 3.1. Cross-cultural communication strategy of *Squid Game*

As an original Korean drama produced by Netflix, *Squid Game* has quickly become a global phenomenon since its launch in 2021, demonstrating a typical successful case of cross-cultural communication [6]. The drama is deeply rooted in local social issues in South Korea, such as the debt crisis, social class differentiation and competitive pressure, which well demonstrates the localization model in cross-media culture. The incorporation of traditional Korean children's games as narrative elements in the drama not only enriches its cultural specificity but also imbues the story with a unique visual and emotional tension [6]. This storytelling technique, rooted in local traditions, provides the content with a distinct regional cultural identity. In terms of communication, Netflix implemented a localization strategy that included multilingual subtitles and dubbing, effectively reducing language barriers and allowing audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with the plot seamlessly. In addition, through a global simultaneous launch and large-scale marketing promotion, Netflix effectively shaped *Squid Game* into a global pop culture event, allowing the work to be widely disseminated and discussed in a short period of time. This decontextualised communication method strengthens the portability of content, allowing the work to retain the local cultural roots while being accepted and resonating with audiences from different backgrounds around the world.

The international dissemination of *Squid Game* also exposes the challenges of cross-cultural communication. On the one hand, some international audiences lack a deep understanding of the social criticism and cultural metaphors in the play, and tend to consume the symbolic elements in the series (such as green sportswear and game props) in a fashionable and commercial way, weakening the original social criticism. On the other hand, audiences from different cultural backgrounds may reinterpret the plot based on their own experience, resulting in the flow and deviation of meaning. Therefore, *Squid Game* successfully demonstrates the potential of cross-cultural communication, while also revealing the inevitable misunderstanding and symbolic consumption problems in the process of cultural output.

#### 3.2. TikTok's localized content recommendation system in the Southeast Asian market

TikTok's rapid expansion in the Southeast Asian market is a typical example of the combination of localization strategies of multinational platforms [7]. Faced with the highly diverse languages, religions, and ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, TikTok has quickly integrated into the cultural daily life of users in various countries through localized interfaces, multilingual support, cultivating local content creators, and launching topic challenges that are in line with local cultural festivals and popular trends. This strategy not only enhances user stickiness, but also effectively reduces cultural barriers. In terms of content recommendation, TikTok relies on a highly personalized algorithm mechanism to accurately push content based on users' viewing habits, geographic location, and interaction data, and superficially presents a rich and diverse local content ecology. For instance, in the Indonesian market, TikTok promotes the use of traditional costumes and folk music in content creation, while in Thailand, it emphasizes local humor and the influence of celebrities. This strategy of fostering "locally driven" content creates a strong sense of cultural connection and platform loyalty among users [7].

Behind TikTok's localization strategy lies the overarching logic of the global platform. The platform's algorithm tends to prioritize content that generates high engagement, which often leads to local cultural expressions in the Southeast Asian market becoming more superficial, entertaining, and even homogenized. As a result, this can diminish the richness and depth of cultural diversity. In addition, TikTok's content review and recommendation standards are often implemented in accordance with global unified rules, which to some extent suppresses the expression of politically sensitive or challenging topics. Therefore, although TikTok has achieved rapid localization in the Southeast Asian market through both technology and content, local culture is still under the reshaping and discipline of the global platform logic.

#### 3.3. Case comparison

The Southeast Asian market strategies of *Squid Game* and TikTok show obvious differences in cultural output and localization paths. *Squid Game* relies on strong local narratives and emotional themes to be globally disseminated through Netflix's platform, which belongs to a cross-cultural flow model driven by content originality. Although the work has been adapted in language and marketing, the core content has not been significantly adjusted due to international dissemination, retaining the unique perspective of Korean social issues. In contrast, TikTok actively shapes the localization and localization of content through platform mechanisms, and adopts a technology-led cultural adaptation strategy. TikTok does not rely on specific local original stories in the Southeast Asian market, but manipulates the circulation of content through algorithms, allowing users to perceive the local cultural atmosphere while unconsciously accepting the global communication logic designed by the platform.

Overall, the cross-cultural communication of *Squid Game* emphasizes content originality and emotional resonance, while TikTok pays more attention to the flexible adjustment of dissemination forms and the data-based management of user behavior. The former shows the global translation challenges of content and meaning in cultural output, while the latter reveals the trend of local cultural expression being disciplined and standardized under the dominance of platform capital. This comparison shows that

different types of transnational media platforms have adopted distinctive but equally limited strategies in dealing with the tension between cultural output and localization.

#### 4. Discussion

The tension between cultural output and localization faced by transnational media in global communication stems from the fundamental conflict between economic interests and cultural respect. On the one hand, with the goal of maximizing profits, transnational media platforms tend to promote standardized and large-scale operating models to achieve rapid global diffusion of content. This global logic emphasizes efficiency and unity, and often ignores the complexity and uniqueness of local culture. On the other hand, the audience's demand for local cultural identity and identity politics is increasing, requiring transnational media to not only provide entertainment consumption, but also to show respect and understanding for local social values and cultural traditions.

In this tension, the interactive relationship between media organizations and audiences becomes particularly critical. Audiences have evolved from passive content recipients to active participants in the construction of meaning and cultural reproduction. They may accept, adapt, resist, or even challenge the cultural content presented by transnational media. This dynamic interaction makes the process of cultural output more intricate and multifaceted, compelling media organizations to adjust their strategies and respond more attentively to the sensitivities and demands of local cultures. Looking ahead, the development trend of transnational media will pay more attention to the investment in local original content, the protection of cultural diversity, and in-depth cooperation with local creators. The balance between a unified global logic and respect for local cultures is not only crucial for market success, but also for fostering genuine mutual trust and symbiosis in cross-cultural exchanges. Ensuring the preservation of cultural diversity and local autonomy within the framework of globalization will be an essential challenge that transnational media must navigate.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study explores the tension between cultural output and localization that transnational media platforms face in the process of global communication. Through case studies such as Squid Game and TikTok's strategies in Southeast Asia, the research demonstrates how these platforms attempt to balance global reach with local relevance. The study's key findings suggest that while global media platforms effectively harness economic interests through mass content distribution, they are increasingly challenged by the need to respect local cultural identities and respond to diverse audience preferences. This tension manifests in the global standardization of content, which often undermines the richness of local cultures and causes friction with local audiences' values and identities. One of the significant contributions of this research is highlighting how the interaction between media organizations and local audiences has evolved. Audiences, once passive recipients, now actively engage with, adapt, or resist the content provided, further complicating the dynamic of cultural output. Transnational media platforms are forced to navigate this interaction by integrating local cultural elements while maintaining their global appeal. The study also reveals that while some platforms, like Netflix, can retain strong local narratives through strategic localization, others, like TikTok, tend to impose a global communication logic that risks homogenizing local content and reducing its cultural depth.

However, this research also has its limitations. First, the case studies focus primarily on the media landscapes in specific regions (South Korea and Southeast Asia), which may not fully represent the diversity of global media flows. The study also emphasizes content and platform mechanisms without sufficiently exploring how audiences in other regions, particularly those outside the major media hubs, interact with these platforms. Future research could expand by investigating how media flows affect non-Western and marginalized cultures, as well as exploring the role of new platforms and emerging media technologies in shaping the future of global communication.

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