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Cross-Cultural Appeal in Contemporary Screen Media: Why Do Certain TV Series and Films Break Through Global Audiences?

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Abstract. With the global expansion of streaming media platforms, the cross-cultural communication pattern of film and television content has undergone profound changes. More and more non-English dramas have broken through language and cultural barriers and received wide attention around the world. However, the systematic explanation of this phenomenon is still insufficient in existing research. This research has built a cross-cultural attractiveness analysis framework that integrates the three dimensions of "content characteristics - platform mechanism - audience participation". Taking the three global hit dramas Squid Game (South Korea), Money Heist (Spain) and Lupin (France) as a case, the case analysis method is used to systematically examine the intrinsic mechanism of film and television works to achieve cross-cultural breakthroughs. The study found that the organic combination of the universality and cultural specificity of the narrative constitutes the content basis of cross-cultural attractiveness; the algorithm recommendation of the streaming media platform, the global synchronous launch and the localized subtitle strategy provide structural communication conditions; and the audience amplifies the cross-cultural influence of the work through the participatory cultural practice of social media. This research enriches the applicability of cross-cultural communication theory in the context of digital media and provides practical reference for the internationalization strategy of film and television content.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, Global circulation of screen media, Cross-cultural appeal, Streaming platforms, Participatory culture

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology and streaming media platforms is reshaping the production and consumption pattern of global film and television content. Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and other platforms have covered more than 190 countries and regions around the world, enabling film and television works from different languages and cultural backgrounds to reach the global audience at an unprecedented speed [1]. In 2021, the South Korean TV series *Squid Game* attracted more than 142 million users within 28 days of its launch, becoming the most popular non-English content in the history of Netflix [2]. Similarly, the Spanish TV series *Money Heist* and the

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French TV series *Lupin* have also topped the ratings list in many markets around the world [3, 4]. These phenomena show that the cross-cultural circulation of film and television content is no longer limited by the traditional "center-edge" communication model, and non-English content is showing strong global appeal. Streaming platforms not only change the distribution channels of content, but also fundamentally reconstruct the way global audiences discover and consume different cultural content [5].

However, existing research shows obvious shortcomings in explaining this phenomenon. The traditional theory of cultural proximity [6] cannot explain why Korean or Spanish dramas succeed in culturally distant markets. Platform research [7, 8] and audience studies [9] remain largely separate, lacking a unified analytical framework for the interaction between content, platform, and audience dimensions.

Based on the above research gaps, this study raises the following core questions: In the era of streaming media, what factors can enable specific film and television works to break through cultural boundaries and gain wide recognition from global audiences? This article builds a three-dimensional analysis framework of "content characteristics-platform mechanism-audience participation", selects three representative global blockbuster non-English dramas as cases, and reveals the generation mechanism of cross-cultural attractiveness through comparative analysis.

2. Literature review

The research of cross-cultural film and television communication can be sorted out from the following three main lines.

2.1. The theory of cultural proximity and its evolution in the era of streaming media

The theory of cultural proximity proposed by Straubhaar [6] has long dominated the study of cross-cultural media consumption. However, cases in the streaming media era pose challenges to this theory. Jin [2, 10] put forward the concept of "transnational proximity", emphasizing that digital platforms enable cultural products to establish audience connections beyond geographical and language restrictions. Berg et al. [11] further show that audience perception of "cultural authenticity" has replaced simple language proximity as a key driver for cross-cultural consumption. Park et al. [12] found that social network connections predict cross-cultural content dissemination even more strongly than language similarity.

2.2. Global distribution mechanism of streaming media platforms

The rise of Netflix has fundamentally changed international content circulation. Lotz et al. [1] pointed out that Netflix's global library strategy freed content distribution from traditional country-by-country licensing. Wayne [13] and Wayne and Uribe Sandoval [3] analyzed how Netflix constructs "global hit" narratives through viewing data discourse. At the algorithm level, Pajkovic [7] and Gaw [8] reveal how recommendation systems simultaneously shape cultural taste and promote cross-cultural content visibility, while Khoo [14] notes the platform's dual role as cultural curator and technology intermediary. Lobato [5] and Chalaby [15] examined the structural power dynamics behind platform globalization.

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2.3. Audience participation and cross-cultural meaning production

The role of the audience in cross-cultural communication has shifted from passive recipients to active participants. Ju [16] analyzed the "de-territorialization" of Netflix Korean dramas, noting that social media discussions and secondary creations accelerate global circulation. Han et al. [17] discussed how Netflix leverages "cultural authenticity" to attract global audiences, while Yoon and Lee [18] found that genre fusion strategies help reduce cultural discounts. Ben Moussa et al. [9] revealed audience negotiation practices between algorithmic recommendations and cultural identity.

In summary, existing research has generated valuable insights from content, platform, and audience dimensions separately, but systematic studies integrating all three remain scarce. This study aims to fill this gap through a multi-dimensional framework and multi-case comparison.

3. Main body

3.1. Research method

The analysis framework of this study is shown in Figure 1. It adopts a comparative case analysis method to select three non-English Netflix dramas that have achieved cross-cultural breakthroughs in the global market as research objects: *Squid Game* (South Korea, 2021), *Money Heist* (Spain, 2017-2021) and *Lupin* (France, 2021). The case selection follows the principle of "maximum difference system design": the three works come from different countries, different language systems and different cultural traditions, but all of them have achieved a global audience breakthrough on the Netflix platform. This difference makes the analysis results have stronger theoretical explanatory power.

Data sources include Netflix's official audience data, academic analyses of the three works, and audience discussion trends on major social media platforms. The analysis revolves around three dimensions: content characteristics, platform mechanisms, and audience participation.

3.2. Comparative analysis results

3.2.1. Content characteristic dimension

In terms of narrative universality, all three works adopt a theme framework with global resonance: *Squid Game* focuses on social inequality and competition for survival, *Money Heist* revolves around resistance to oppression and collective action, and *Lupin* focuses on class mobility and racial identity. These themes transcend specific cultural contexts and can stimulate the emotional resonance of audiences in different social backgrounds [2, 16].

However, cross-cultural attractiveness does not simply depend on the universality of narrative. At the same time, the three works maintain distinct cultural specificity: the hierarchical pressure of Korean society, the tradition of resistance in Spain, and the class and racial tension in France, which are marked to provide a "heterogeneous experience" for the global audience [17]. As shown in Table 1, this combination of "universal theme + cultural anchor" constitutes the content basis of cross-cultural attractiveness.

3.2.2. Platform mechanism dimension

Figure 2 shows the intensity of interaction between four platform mechanisms and five attractive indicators. Analysis shows that the algorithm recommendation mechanism plays the most prominent

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role in the content "discovery" link (interaction coefficient 0.91) [7, 8]. Netflix's recommendation system accurately pushes non-English content to interested audiences, effectively reducing the "discovery cost" caused by language and cultural barriers. The global synchronous online strategy enables audiences to participate in discussions synchronously (0.84 and 0.88 respectively) [1, 3], while high-quality subtitle localization lowers the cognitive threshold of cross-language consumption (0.92). The social media integration mechanism promotes the audience's in-depth interpretation of cultural connotations (0.85) [9].

3.2.3. Audience participation dimension

The audience's participatory cultural practice shows differentiated characteristics in three cases. *Squid Game* has triggered a large number of imitation challenges and secondary creations on TikTok, among which the global playback of the "Red Light" game video has exceeded billions of times [2]. This highly visualized participation mode has greatly improved the recognition of the work among non-Korean audiences. *Money Heist* has stimulated fans' theoretical discussion and role-playing culture, and the fan community has formed a continuous content production chain around the plot. The audience's participation in *Lupin* is more reflected in the comparative discussion of the original work and adaptation in the literary community. This differentiated participation shows that cross-cultural amplification is jointly shaped by content types, audience characteristics and social media ecology [9, 19].

3.3. Discussion

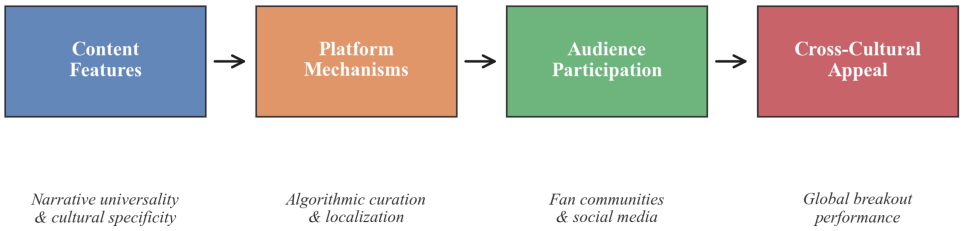

Figure 1. Analytical framework for cross-cultural appeal of screen media

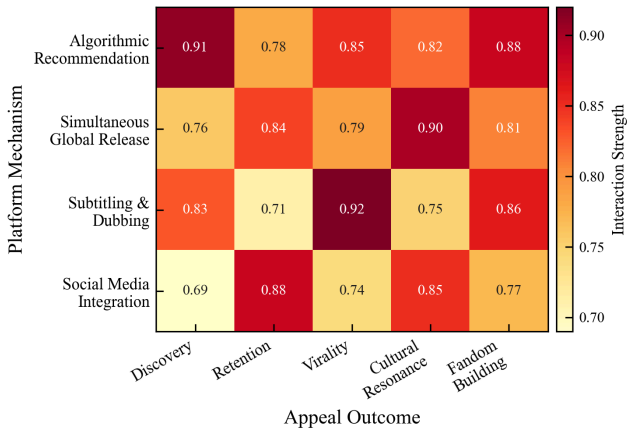

Figure 2. Interaction strength between platform mechanisms and appeal outcomes

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Comparative analysis reveals that cross-cultural attraction emerges from the coordination of content, platform, and audience dimensions, forming a mutually reinforced positive feedback loop. This finding revises traditional cultural proximity theory: in the streaming era, cross-cultural circulation depends on multi-dimensional coordination rather than cultural distance alone [10, 12]. As "technology intermediaries" [15], streaming platforms bridge cultural distance through algorithmic recommendation and global synchronous distribution [16, 18].

Table 1. Comparative analysis of three global breakout series

Dimension	*Squid Game* (S. Korea)	*Money Heist* (Spain)	*Lupin* (France)
Genre	Survival thriller	Heist thriller	Mystery thriller
Cultural markers	Korean social inequality	Spanish resistance identity	French class & race dynamics
Platform strategy	Global simultaneous release	Re-branded for global push	Targeted European rollout
Peak ranking	#1 in 94 countries	#1 in 69 countries	#1 in 13 countries
Fan engagement	Viral TikTok challenges	Fan theories & cosplay	Literary fan community

4. Conclusion

This research focuses on the core issue of "why specific film and television works can break through the boundaries of the global audience". It builds a three-dimensional analysis framework that integrates content characteristics, platform mechanisms and audience participation. Through the comparative case analysis of the three global hit dramas *Squid Game*, *Money Heist* and *Lupin*, it reveals the generation mechanism of cross-cultural attraction.

The study draws the following main conclusions: First, the organic combination of the universality of narrative and cultural specificity is the content basis of cross-cultural attraction, and the key is the tension relationship between the two rather than the maximization of a certain pole. Second, the algorithm recommendation, global synchronous launch and localization strategy of the streaming media platform provide structural conditions for cross-cultural communication, among which algorithm recommendation plays the most prominent role in reducing the "discovery cost". Third, the audience's participatory practice through social media not only amplifies cross-cultural influence, but also reshapes the acceptance of works in different cultural contexts through meaningful consultation in online communities.

Limitations include the exclusive focus on Netflix and reliance on secondary data; future research needs to critically examine the global power structure behind the streaming platform and its monopoly ambitions [20], and supplement it through audience interviews or experimental methods.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authorship Contributions

Zekang Li: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing the original draft, and review & editing.

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