

2024

Netflix as A Transverse Transnational Media In Southeast Asia: Exploring the Philippine Context

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ABSTRACT

NETFLIX AS A TRANSVERSE TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: EXPLORING THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

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This thesis examines how Netflix as a transnational Internet TV disrupted the media flow in Southeast Asia. As subscription to streaming platforms grew exponentially, the limited linear flow of contents in traditional TV was transformed into a more personalized viewing experience. Consumers binge-watching on a subscription video on demand service were given the agency to view diverse contents at a time and on a gadget they prefer while also being offered recommendations from the platform's curated list. As Netflix expanded to over 190 countries around the world, it has employed localization strategies to provide culturally authentic contents through co-production with local partners and translation of media products in various languages.

In this thesis, I argue that prior to the coming of Internet TV, when transnational media flow is limited, majority of the media available in Southeast Asia were from the West contributing to cultural imperialism. However, the coming of Netflix reshaped the media ecosystem and I argue that their partnership with local producers in the Philippines provided an opportunity for a contra-flow. Looking more closely at some transnational contents, I argue that the appeal of popular Thai media products to Filipino viewers is affected by multiple layers of cultural proximity. Lastly, with the diversity of contents, I argue that Netflix brings a transverse transnational media flow in the Philippines.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2024

NETFLIX AS A TRANSVERSE TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
EXPLORING THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

BY

LADY AILEEN ORSAL
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis Director:
Dr. Mehdi Semati

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not be possible without the continued support of my thesis chair, Dr. Mehdi Semati, who generously helped me in finding relevant resources and guided me in the whole process of writing. I would also like to thank the members of the thesis committee, Dr. Andrea Guzman and Dr. Kathryn Cady, for patiently reviewing the manuscript and sharing valuable insights for its improvement. Their guidance was very essential in helping me find a direction, not only for this thesis, but also for my future research plans.

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to the faculty members of the Department of Communication whose classes serve as meaningful spaces for me to share my experiences and develop my skills. I thank my co-officers in NIU GradComm, Amaka and Esther, and our Graduate Studies Director, Dr. Bill Cassidy, for helping me work on some organization events amidst the thesis preparation.

I would also like to take this chance to thank my parents for always supporting me and for my husband, Carlo, for always encouraging me that things will go well. I also thank my friends and mentors from the Filipino-American community for the support they had given me which is instrumental in the completion of the paper. I also thank BTS music for keeping me inspired and awake while finishing the paper. More importantly, I would like to thank the Lord Almighty for His grace made everything possible. Indeed, as it says in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Substantial changes in the media ecology brought by technological advancement like the Internet TV and streaming services have given rise to new media industry practices (Luders, 2020). Global media platforms facilitating transnational flows and producing new cultural sites are becoming centers of research agenda as they shape a new televisual geography of transnational media (Pant, 2022). Local television industries have been adopting global media technologies to expand reach (Khan, 2018) while global television industries adopt localization strategies to target more diverse audiences. In this age of Internet TV, Netflix, which initially started as a technology company, has now offered a more varied programming for global media consumption (Havens, 2018) expanding its operations with the brand of *#netflixeverywhere*. While based in California, opening its regional office in Singapore in 2016 increased its production and partnerships attracting more regional audience in Southeast Asia (Barker, 2020), including an estimate of 400,000 Filipino subscribers.

A 2022 Media Partners Asia (MPA) study revealed that the Asia-Pacific region is considered the biggest market for global online video industries (Frater, 2022). Numbers also show that 42 percent of the overall viewership in the region is attributed to Netflix compared to the 13 percent for Viu, which is a Hongkong-based service (Kameke, 2023). Among all the competitors in the subscription video on demand (SVOD) services, Netflix continues to gain subscribers particularly in the Philippines (Fidaul, 2022). Dropping the price of the cheapest plan

to half a daily wage (Villanueva, 2023), the Filipino audiences find Netflix an affordable source of entertainment both for foreign and local contents (Villanueva, 2023). In a recent report of Netflix Philippines for November 2023, *Can't Buy Me Love*, a Filipino TV series, ranks first in the TV show category (Manila Bulletin, 2023) on top of other Asian contents like *Attack on Titan* and *Jujutsu Kaisen* from Japan and *Strong Girl Nam-soon*, *Castaway Diva* and *Doona!*, which are all South Korean drama series and are considered Netflix originals (FlixPatrol, 2023). Meanwhile, the top movies are dominated by Western contents like *The Killer*, *The Juror*, *Love Again*, *Wingwomen*, and *Locked In*, except for *Murderer* from South Korea and *Tia Madre*, a 2019 Filipino horror film. Further data analysis shows that the changing dynamics of these international, regional, and national contents reflect the possible important role Netflix plays in facilitating the flow of media products in the Philippine context. Though recent studies have been focused on Netflix as a global Internet TV, most research are focused on South Asia's Indian Bollywood and East Asia's Japanese, Chinese and Korean media products. Not much has been explored yet on the context of Southeast Asian nations where Netflix has recently built a regional center. This research attempts to explain the media flow in Southeast Asia in general and the transnational media flow in the Philippines in particular since the coming of Netflix in the region. I argue that since most Southeast Asia countries have similar colonial history, majority of the media available are mostly from the West contributing to cultural imperialism. I also argue that though transnational media may have been observed in some Southeast Asian countries that are neighbors to each other, such transaction is limited prior to Internet TV. I explain how the coming of Netflix in the region made media flows more borderless while also contributing to the regionalization efforts of Southeast Asia.

Historically, importing foreign contents is not new to the Philippines as a former colony of the United States. Filipinos have been consuming American contents since television came to the country (Espiritu, 2011). With film and other media products, the US was able to develop layers of culture and ideologies as Filipinos were exposed to more foreign elements and Western movies (Tofighian, 2008). This was even made more impactful when the US started a public school system, making English an official language of the country. Considered as the largest educational project of the US in its colonies, the massive instructional apparatus through the American teachers influenced how the Western culture was incorporated in the Filipinos' way of life from media to governance even after post-liberation (Schueller, 2022). Despite gaining independence from the US since 1946, Filipinos' media dependency to the US is still a topic of debate considering that satellite television exists, and local theaters and media companies still showcase numerous Western contents. The existence of a US-based global TV operating through the Internet like Netflix seems like advancing cultural imperialism or creating a new wave of media imperialism (Straubhaar, *et al.*, 2021). However, with its localization strategies combined with its global operations, there could be a slight chance for a reverse effect. As more national contents from the peripheries are made available beyond its geographical boundaries, the possibility of Netflix facilitating instead a contra-flow is not far from reality. If Netflix can serve as a platform to increase domestic productions within the Philippines and even among its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, such emerging transnational flow must be investigated. Though Netflix is from the West, I argue that its partnership with local producers and extending its infrastructure for Filipino contents to be streamed to international audience facilitates a contra-flow.

On a regional level, it is significant to understand that though rankings may vary weekly, a closer look on the data shows that what is popular to the Philippines is also popular to its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This goes mainly for Asian contents like those from Japan and Korea. For example, *Attack on Titan* ranks first in the Philippines the same time it is very popular for audiences in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The popularity of *Doona!* is also evident across the same countries, in addition to Singapore streaming the said Korean drama. Asian contents have become more prevalent since Netflix became a more preferred streaming service. Since Netflix started growing its investments and partnership with Southeast Asian countries in 2016, popularity of transnational media products streamed from other Southeast Asian countries to the Philippines can be affected by multiple factors.

For example, Thai drama has been reportedly influencing the preference of Filipino audiences (Langahid, 2021). With viewing increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thai Boy Love series *2gether* has been a major hit leading to the production of additional special episodes and a movie version. *Girl from Nowhere*, a Thai drama series, also became popular afterwards along with newer contents like *Hunger*, which topped Netflix Philippine list for seven weeks. Through a case study, I argue that the transnational appeal of Southeast Asian contents, like Thai programs to the Filipino viewers, is influenced by multiple layers of cultural proximity.

While English remains to be an “always available” option for dubbing and subtitling, more contents are now available in Southeast Asian languages. *Seasons*, a popular Filipino movie released in July 2023, is not only streamed in Filipino, but is also available in Indonesian, Malay, Thai, and Vietnamese. With these Netflix innovations, the regional dynamics of media products in Southeast Asia has been more dynamic becoming an option along with the prevailing

contents from the West. While contra-flow through increased domestic productions has become a reality, and cultural proximity facilitates transnational media consumption, I argue that the diversity and multidirectional flow of media products in Netflix brings a transversal flow in the country.

As an overview, this research examines the growth of transnational programming in Southeast Asia made available to the Philippines through media flows facilitated by Netflix. The consumption of national and regional contents of the Filipino audience will be examined in a theoretical framework built on concepts of contra-flow, multiple layers of cultural proximity, and transverse flow (Straubhaar, *et al.* 2021). While contra-flow accounts for the increased production of media products from the Global South as opposed to the cultural imperialism of the West, cultural proximity explains how consumers eventually prefer contents that are closer to their national culture (Straubhaar, 1991). With Netflix as a disruptive TV that is both global and transnational, multiplicity of cultural layers creates a transverse flow that cuts across existing flows beyond national boundaries (Straubhaar, *et al.*, 2021).

Generally, the study explores how Netflix facilitates this transverse transnational flow in the Philippine context with case studies on some Thai media products that are popular to Filipino viewers. This thesis argues that while Netflix serves as a platform for Filipino audience to counter the domination of US programming through increased production and streaming of local contents, it still exposes them to multiple levels of culture that include regional contents from Southeast Asia and foreign contents from the West, hence, facilitating a transversal, transnational flow.

To provide background information before advancing my arguments, an overview of Netflix as an innovative SVOD platform and a disruptive technology is discussed in the second

chapter. Along with it is the description of Southeast Asian consumers, particularly the Filipino viewers, and the popularity of Netflix in the region. The latter part of the review of related literature focuses on key theoretical concepts of contra-flow and cultural proximity necessary in the analysis.

The third chapter discusses the flow of media products in Southeast Asia prior to the coming of Internet TV, particularly Netflix. This includes understanding the international flow of media products from the West, the status of production of national and local themes, and the regional dynamics in Southeast Asia before Netflix expanded its operation in the region. This section also explains the long effect of cultural imperialism in the Philippines as a former colony of the United States and having English as an official language embedded in the daily lives of the Filipinos. In this chapter, I argue that before the coming of the Netflix to the Philippines, media dependency to US and cultural imperialism has been a long-standing reality in the media landscape. On a regional level, I argue that transnational media in Southeast Asia before has not been as dynamic as it is now with Netflix operations.

The fourth chapter focuses on the nature of Netflix as an innovative, disruptive Internet TV and its features that appeal to more diverse audiences. This also explains the localization strategy of Netflix that allowed increased national and local programming from the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries. In this chapter, I argue that Netflix serves as a platform for more Filipino contents contributing to the emerging contra-flow that influence changes in the context of Philippine media. While some streaming services are available too in the country, I further argue that it is Netflix that paved the way for a more globalized streaming of services even to diasporic communities in the West.

The fifth chapter focuses on the regional perspective of the subject and how Netflix affected the media dynamics in Southeast Asia. This includes discussion of the existing regional flows when Netflix started its operations in 2016 and how it curated and streamed authentic narratives in the region. This also explains the intention of Netflix to invest further in the growing audience in Southeast Asia through co-productions and multilingual audio and subtitling features. I argue in this chapter that though the Philippines appears closer to the US than its neighboring countries due to its colonial history, Netflix is able to bring it closer to its geographical neighbors in Southeast Asia through the streaming of transnational contents made comprehensible through the English language. Despite the influx of US contents that became inherent in the Philippine media landscape, Netflix was able to offer a different path and influence the regional dynamics in Southeast Asia. I also argue in this chapter that cultural proximity plays an important role in this transnational flow making Southeast Asian contents part of the preference of the Filipino audience. I will further explain the concept of multiple layers of cultural proximity by taking Thai contents as examples of transnational hits on Netflix Philippines in the recent years.

The sixth chapter includes a discussion of the multiple directions Netflix offers through its diverse programming from foreign contents from the West and the regional contents in Southeast Asia to the increasing national and local production from the Philippines while still remaining a US-based tech company. I argue in this chapter that since Netflix is a US-based company, it not only provides an opportunity for a contra-flow through more national contents or facilitates transnational flows within the region through transnational products but it also still offers a wide catalogue of foreign contents from the US and other Western countries. This exposure to multiple programming happening at the same space and time in this Internet TV

creates the transverse flow of media products in the Philippines. I will also explain in this chapter how this multidirectional and multivocal catalogue of Netflix influenced the viewers to not only choose culturally proximate contents but to also be interested with the “other” as cosmopolitans and cultural omnivores. The last part of this chapter argues that the recommendation system of Netflix and the availability of the English facilitates a mix of localization initiatives.

After presenting relevant data and analyzing their importance in making the arguments, the seventh chapter provides the conclusions and discusses the implications of these in the study of Netflix as a disruptive Internet TV in Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines. Recommendations for future researchers to further investigate the concept of transverse transnational flow and other concepts mentioned in the thesis will also be included in the last chapter.

CHAPTER 2

NETFLIX AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN CONTEXT

To provide the basis for understanding the scope of the Netflix's role in Southeast Asia, it is necessary to discuss the contexts in which Netflix has become a major player. As communication research, this study is focused on the unique nature of Netflix as a global and transnational TV employing localization strategies in its expansion to diverse regions like Southeast Asia. Being the new focus of Netflix initiatives, it is essential to describe the region as a multicultural, multiethnic community working towards its regionalization even prior to the age of Internet TV. Taking the Philippine media as the major case in this research, understanding the media environment of Filipino viewers is a relevant point of discussion. Lastly, an overview of the definitions of contra-flow and cultural proximity that affect media consumption and media flows are included in this chapter.

Netflix History as a Media Company

Building itself from a DVD rental business in its early days, Netflix grew from trying to rescue the company from possible loss to effectively using data to provide a more accessible and customer-oriented service in a global scale (Burgess, 2020). As Osur (2016) summarizes, there are four phases Netflix as a company had to go through before becoming a global Internet TV. Its first phase as a rental company since 1997 would initially send DVD to customers by mail. From 2007, it has used the syndication business model before emerging as an Internet TV since

2012. This phase allowed them to give more agency to the viewers. The strict schedule of television viewing controlled by network owners before shifted to a more personalized viewing experience for movie and TV fans through Netflix. Its offering as a subscription video on demand platform provided doors of binge-watching an entire series back and forth (Burgess, 2020). As it continues to innovate, it no longer just pays for the use of contents. It also stepped into becoming a media company that produces its own media products. These Originals may pertain to those it co-produced and those it has exclusive rights to stream. It has entered its current phase where it also adapted TV production format for some of its programming towards distribution through the Internet. Scrolling through the recommendations, the red logo of Netflix on the content signifies how it tries to provide original content for different groups of people.

As reviews concerning the quality of its contents arise, it stepped further into enhancing quality and using data to predict the preferences of its subscribers. As it globalized, it also utilized localization strategies to ensure authenticity of contents from the storytellers themselves across various cultures around the world. The way it curates a list per geographical location proves how diverse its catalogue is offering a combination of foreign, regional, and local films and series. As Lobato and Lotz (2020) explains, “For media scholars, these conditions present empirical and conceptual challenges related to the general problem of how to study a video service that is experienced differently in each country. They also open up possibilities for comparative research grounded in specific contexts to better understand Netflix in its diverse geographic manifestations” (p.132).

With such diversity, Netflix calls itself the future of television (Baker, 2017). As it goes beyond temporal spaces and viewing time, it has also endorsed a new kind of viewing that encourages consecutive watching depending on one’s own preference and availability. Though

its Netflix Originals are few compared to numerous contents it acquired from others, its branding and advertisements are encouraging viewers to binge-watch and move from one to another with the seemingly limitless catalogue presented to them. Even if its expansion to foreign countries have faced a number of challenges due to restriction, Internet access limitation, increasing competition, and possible government censorship, the positive reception of Netflix as a preferred platform has been observed worldwide.

McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2016) explain how the transformative effect of Netflix to consumer-content provider relations has led to not only increased viewership but the understanding of how impactful technological changes can be. The convergence of technology and media development in the context of Netflix has been gaining an increased attention among scholars in the recent years. For example, studies on evolution of media industries are attempting to describe the direction media companies are heading to consistently innovate. Meanwhile, reception studies are becoming more interested in the increasing engagement of viewers across borders as streaming platforms make more diverse cross-cultural contents available. This thesis is more concerned with the intersection of media and culture in the context of Netflix as a disruptive Internet TV. More details on the innovative features of Netflix will be discussed further in the next chapters.

Southeast Asia as an Imagined Community

Southeast Asia as a region can be viewed through various lenses. Political studies work on its complex government structures and attempt for regionalization. Economic researchers focus on how industries have been developing in these countries and the factors contributing to its international trade. Cultural studies, on the other, takes into account the diversity of its people

with hundreds of languages and ethnic backgrounds. Fifield (1983) traces back the origin of Southeast Asia as a region in the idea of convenience since geographical entities in a map must be named for easy identification. After the World War II, the term became more prominently used, no longer for military or government concerns, but were also recognized by the academic community. As scholars conducted research on “area studies,” the regional concept became more prominent and accessible. Studies on decolonization also viewed the region as a collective geographic area of primary concern. At the heart of all these scholarly works are 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Established in August 8, 1967, the first five countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Philippines signed to collaborate to boost a regional community building process (ASEAN website, n.d). Later on, Brunei Darussalam join in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. Meanwhile, Timor Leste is granted an observer status but is on the process of its membership to the association to further regional relations.

A comparative look on the making and unmaking of Southeast Asia as a region emphasizes the value of regional construction in the international relations of its member countries (Acharya, 1999). The collective identity of its member countries is often studied in terms of their physical proximity and cultural and historical backgrounds. Another approach includes identification of pre-modern political structures, their trade relations and their commercial interdependence prior to colonization from the West. Describing the phrase, unity in diversity, Southeast Asian countries are able to promote similar ideals despite the varied ethnicities present in their communities. The use of “the ASEAN way approach” in conducting consultative mechanisms for negotiations is a way to emphasize their regionalist perspective. On the other hand, this regional concept is facing another set of challenges in the era of

globalization. First, integration and economic relationships with other regions like the Asia-Pacific may affect the previous networks the region tried to work within itself. Second, the emergence of Asian concept of modernity in the context of more globally popular communities like China, Japan, and Korea affects the way Southeast Asian embraces authenticity and hybridity from their region. As with studies on nation-states particularly focusing on Southeast Asia like that of Benedict Anderson, regions may be imagined as its communities continuously interact and share a sense of regionalism even in the diaspora (Gonzalez, 2013).

Aligned with this concept of regionalism, how can Southeast Asia be then described as a region in terms of media studies in the age of Internet TV? With media products crossing borders through streaming platforms, the transnational and global flow of Southeast Asian programs within, towards, and outside the region has been more complex.

To look more closely into the context of Southeast Asian media, Tanyag (2019) divides regional actors into three categories: those who produce, those who consume, and those who regulate. The first set are not only the major filmmakers but would include the technical staff in the Southeast Asian production team. The consumers also play an important role because they do not only watch contents that are affordable and accessible for them. They are also able to spread these contents in the age of Internet when social media is a primary tool people use to communicate. Commenting on the themes present in transnational media products also reflect how consumers take part in a regional community of Southeast Asian consumers. Lastly, the regulators are important because they have the key as to whether these transnational media will be allowed or banned in certain communities. With the diversity of governments in Southeast Asian countries, the regulations and cultural implications of these policies vary from one to

another. Even with such complexity, majority of the expansion of Netflix to the region has been received well by the Southeast Asian viewers.

Building up on the growing transnational appeal of Southeast Asian media products, it is necessary to understand the regional identity from the story of its member countries instead of the externally imposed regional identity from the Western influence (Acharya, 1999). This thesis contributes to the scholarship in Southeast Asia by focusing on media production and consumption facilitated by Netflix within the region.

Philippine Media as a Media-Rich Landscape

One of the parameters in viewing the impact of transnational media products in certain communities is through the response of the audience and the changes in its media landscape. Receptivity is reflected whenever a society receives non-domestic contents like transnational films. Understanding how audiences consume these media products help in describing the attitude and behavior of viewers towards foreign products that may serve as a complement or a competition to the local ones. While others argue about threats of forming a global culture that is more inclined to the prominent culture of a more developed country, contextualizing these media products in terms of the response of the local viewers provide a better understanding of how reception may vary from one society to another (Kluver & Fu, 2008).

In the Philippines for example, the first films are introduced by Western influence until television reached Filipino communities. ABS-CBN, considered as one of the largest broadcasting companies in the Philippines, along with other big networks and regional centers, provided more local contents to bring authentic stories from various communities in the archipelago. Internet infrastructures also begin to develop in the early 2000s paving way for

more cable TV and streaming subscription in urban areas. More of this media history in the country will be discussed in the next chapters. What is important to understand in this overview is how certain situations in the country affected the state of Philippine media.

For instance, the shutdown of ABS-CBN in 2020 due to a number of complex political-industrial reasons affected the whole media landscape (Maulion & Perez, 2022). While most regional networks reaching far-flung areas in the country were also closed, ABS-CBN, like other companies, further its efforts in digitization and Internet distribution. Aside from using their Youtube *Kapamilya* Channel, their iWantTFC also reached diasporic communities. They also collaborated with other channels like A2Z and TV5 to air their programs that are well-loved by Filipinos. The pandemic also encouraged more people to find contents through the Internet (Changsong, Kerry & Marta, 2021), hence, digitization initiatives are also fruitful and made the media ecosystem more dynamic. While a local station turned international like ABS-CBN was trying to continuously provide local contents and the viewers constantly find entertainment even during lockdown, the expansion of Netflix in the Philippines brought even more diversity in the media products consumed by Filipinos.

In 2020, Netflix announced that it has expanded its offering of Filipino contents in partnership with media companies like ABS-CBN, Viva, TBA Studios, The Idea First Company, Regal Film, Mavx Productions, and Globe Studios. This move provided a platform for national and transnational streaming of Filipino-themed productions. Aside from distributing diverse contents, Netflix has also been engaging in trainings to increase the quality and enhance the potential of local talents they find in the region. It has recently sponsored a filmmaking project called “Indiegenius” aiming to give access to Filipino filmmakers on various resources in producing narratives with strong regional perspectives (Kudus, 2023). In partnership with

iACADEMY, the winning film concepts after a four-weekend workshop were awarded production grants. This reflects how Netflix does not only export contents to the Philippines but also provides opportunities for original local contents to be streamed internationally through Netflix. From depending on Western contents to producing more local stories, exploring the role of Netflix in facilitating contra-flow in the context of Philippine media is a relevant focus of this study.

Contra-Flow and Cultural Proximity Defined

Considering media's role in spreading information and supplying entertainment across nations, it becomes more than a channel of values but also a social infrastructure where interaction among cultures happen. Instead of mere cultural dependence to the West by countries who have not yet fully developed their media industry, globalization may give a chance for more interaction with other cultures that can supply diversity of contents, making the peripheries an equally important supplier of media products that may not be locally available yet. Analyzing the source of media products consumed by a particular society will provide insights on the depth of cultural integration one has towards another nation. Kluver and Fu (2008) emphasized that products from cable television and satellite channels must be included in such analysis as these infrastructures provide more opportunities for transnational media flow. In the age of globalization and the era of Internet TV, studying these changes in media flow has been more essential.

As technology evolved and the means of global distribution of media contents changed, there was a shift in the international flow from West to the peripheries and now, to countering this direction through the increased production of national contents. But the changes have been

constantly evolving as Internet TV became transnational going beyond geographical boundaries. From the usual linear to a syndicated operation, TV programs are now made available in diasporic communities (Pant, 2022). With this, the former dependence to the West and the domination of products from the Global North, referred to as cultural imperialism, is being countered. As Thussu (2007) explains, contra-flow provides an opportunity for a local content to be understood even outside its original context. When more media products from the peripheries are gaining global attention, the contents from the Global South are starting to compete against the popularity of Western products. *Hallyu* wave from Korea, for example, has seen an evident popularity, not only in Asia, but even in Europe (Yoon, Min & Jin, 2020).

As the Philippines rebuilds its national identity in a post-colonial era, it has to counter the influence of Western products in its media landscape. Though complete elimination of the Western influence is impossible, increased production of media products in the local setting will be helpful. This entails not only digitization efforts by national TV networks, but the emergence of growing subscription to and collaboration with streaming platforms that will provide opportunities for broader audiences, both domestic and diasporic. Transnational media also provide opportunities for competition through availability of more regional products. For example, as Netflix provided its infrastructure to more Southeast Asian countries, the availability of these regional contents are made more possible. The options for Filipino viewers are no longer limited to Western-fed products but are now mixed with local contents and regional films and series. Contra-flow, though not absolute at all times, still reflects the effort to counter the dominant flow and make the peripheries a new media centers (Thussu, 2006).

When given such options, audiences tend to choose the contents closest to their local culture (Straubhaar, 2007). This concept of cultural proximity has affected the preferences of

viewers from national to global, to the emerging regional before choosing the global. As the consumers are given the agency to choose in streaming platforms, unlike traditional TV, the decisions are influenced by proximity in multiple layers. Viewers tend to be more attracted to films and programs that are of similar style as to their own culture (Straubhaar, *et al.*, 2021).

These feeling of closeness may not only be attributed to local communities but even in transnational spaces like the Asian community or the Southeast Asian region, for example. The relationship of cultural proximity to transnational media flow in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippine context will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Meanwhile, the vast diversity of cultures present in Southeast Asia cannot neglect the fact that unique patterns may still arise and a lens of multiple proximities might be needed to understand a more complicated transnational appeal. For example, most of the Filipino viewers who love Japanese BL are women who can access the Internet regularly and are brought up in religious and homosocial settings. Growing up with a conservative upbringing, majority of these audiences have the desire to break from concepts of patriarchy and submissive femininity (Fermin, 2013). Meanwhile, the characteristics and reason for viewing of Filipino consumers of Thai BL are different and will also be elaborated in Chapter 6 of this thesis. This is a proof that while almost parallel contents of similar genre are being viewed by consumers from the same community, the reception and interpretation may still vary, hence, a closer analysis must be made.

CHAPTER 3

MEDIA FLOW IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

IN THE PHILIPPINES

The concept of media flow has a long history throughout the years starting from Wilbur Schramm's explanation of one-way flow of information on television to Tapio Varis and Kaarle Nordenstreng's discussion of a one-way street in international flow (Thussu, 2007). While international flow refers to the media being exported to other countries, global media only truly refers to those that have launched in the age of world media creating a significant impact to a greater global audience (Straubhaar, 2015). Meanwhile, transnational flow spans the boundaries of one's own country and creates a sense of popularity to geographic regions and cultural-linguistic spaces. For example, Brazil's telenovelas produced by in-country media companies are national contents but have also reached to regional spaces in Latin America. Because of globalization, activities across borders have been increasing and media flow has been more dynamic (Jalli & Setianto, 2020).

Aside from political and economic lenses used in understanding the effects of globalization, it is also important to see the cultural exchange that transpires. The transnational media products also affect the social and cultural identities of individuals in a region. Taking an example from Southeast Asia, multiple facets of culture in Singapore are also observed in the Philippines and Thailand having a number of industries open to both regional and international consumers and producers.

Transferring values, ideas, and beliefs to another society in a form of media product can facilitate regionalization or ASEAN integration. Since culture is often described as symbolic representations found in the way people live, manifestations of this cultural impact can be found in its influence to the consumers' fashion, choices, and media preferences. Kluver and Fu (2008) proposed the importance of studying media flow in terms of music, books, television, and films to assess the effect of cultural globalization. Because of the fast distribution of these media products channeled through innovative technology, its impact to a society's beliefs standards of morality and modernity has been more evident. To further understand how the technological changes affected the media flow in Southeast Asia, it is essential to discuss the existing media dynamics before streaming platforms powered by the Internet were made available.

Southeast Asian Media prior to Internet TV

To understand the media flow in Southeast Asian countries, media history and technological development particularly in the context of television and the Internet have to be revisited. Looking at how media products were disseminated in these nations bring into discussion the influence of a society's culture, politics, and industry in redefining the media landscape. After introducing broadcast media in the region during colonial occupation (Jalli & Setianto, 2020), government regulations and networks established by private companies and ruling powers also affected the type of contents made available to the audience. Wagstaff (2010), in his survey of ten Southeast Asian countries, described their media landscape in the post-colonial era.

Myanmar. TV came to Myanmar in 1980 when only a small portion of the country has electricity, hence, TV households were previously only found near Yangon. Satellite TV can be

accessed through communal or paid viewing. Though TV stations were primarily controlled by the government, an English-language channel was introduced by Myanmar TV International in 2001 with a web-based version in 2002. Eventually, more local channels were offered to serve as a counter against satellite TVs from foreign companies. Internet penetration has also been regulated and has been consistently affected by political and social factors. However, even with strict media regulations, the Democratic Voice of Burma initially founded in 1992 was able to facilitate information flow from a network established in Oslo, Norway and a studio in Thailand. The back and forth movement of contents from Myanmar to Oslo and Chiang Mai, and then back to Myanmar was made possible through a radio, a website and a satellite TV (Pidduck, 2012).

Cambodia. Though access to television was initially limited in Cambodia, this improved in 2008 when a local satellite provider increased access to more local TV networks. Decho TV, made possible through Cambodian DTV Network Limited, eventually made more local Khmer channels accessible (Wagstaff, 2010). This development through the years also included foreign channels and pay-TV programs through satellite TV which back then were still expensive. This was also reflected in the poor Internet infrastructure affecting connectivity among users. As development progresses, almost 60 percent of the Cambodian population was reported to be using television by 2010 (Oldag, 2015) and more than 30 percent claim to use Internet in their mobile phones primarily for entertainment purposes (Phong & Sola, 2015).

Indonesia. After experiencing state oversight for a number of years, Indonesian media had grown to be more diverse. Aiming to enhance national identity, Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI) run by the state was first established in 1962. Its monopoly ended when Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI) became the country's first pay-TV in 1988 until more private TVs emerged between 1989 to 1995 (Surya, 2008). Since then, more national channels became

available and TVRI eventually became a public service broadcaster in 2005 (Wagstaff, 2010). Regional commercial stations also increased since the passing of the 2002 Broadcasting Law that gave birth to around 65 stations in Indonesia. Gaining 80 percent viewership, television became the most popular medium for information and entertainment (Surya, 2008). With a fast growing economy, it was recorded that almost 70 percent of Indonesia's population are already Internet users by 2023 giving access to more contents around the world (Kemp, 2022).

Laos. Television was specifically introduced in Laos in 1983 and the first three channels are controlled by the government (Wagstaff, 2010). National media was not easily accessible due to a number of factors like problems with electricity and competition with media from other countries. These contents include Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese broadcasts near the borders. One of the three provides French programs in partnership with TV5 International of France. When Lao National Television was established in 1993, its programming also included some French and English contents. Meanwhile, transnational media from Thailand comprehensible due to similarities in language were possible for Laotians living near the borders. It is also essential to note that prior to IBC channel becoming a state-owned station in 2000, it was initially a joint-venture company with Thai interests (Duangsavanh, 2002). Digital television was eventually introduced in 2015. However, Internet penetration faced challenges in accessibility and affordability.

Malaysia. Prior to the popularity of online media, Malaysian media are mainly related to their government. In 1963, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) started as a single channel network run by the state and was followed by a second channel four years after (Nain, 2002). The first commercial TV was allowed in 1984 yet the succeeding privatization of stations still show links to the government. However, since MegaTV opened as the first subscription-based

pay-TV in 1995, more channels and programs were made available to a greater Malaysian audience. While television remains to be a popular media, growing consumption from the Internet was observed starting with the urban population. Digital television was tested through RTMi since 2006 while a direct-to-home satellite broadcasting offered by Astro included 116 pay-TV channels (Wagstaff, 2010). Eventually, IPTV came to the landscape with MiTV, Fine TV, and Malaysiakini that offers interactive video content on demand. Mobile TV was then made available in 2008 in addition to an evident increase in the availability of broadband connection from 2003 to 2008.

Philippines. From the introduction of television to the country in 1952 came the first telecast of the Alto Broadcasting System which eventually merged with Chronicle Broadcasting Network known as ABS-CBN. Aside from being the media provider with the greatest reach in the country, ABS-CBN also offers diverse programs in its cable channels including SkyCable (Wagstaff, 2010). Eventually, more television stations were established in the 90s giving birth to GMA Network, Inc., and other popular TV networks. A different competition was seen between 2007 and 2008 when viewers rented local DVDs and VCDs instead of watching TV. Efforts to improve digital infrastructure was also observed from migration to Digital Terrestrial Television to 70 percent Internet penetration among Filipinos (Kemp, 2023).

Singapore. Local television channels in Singapore were operated by MediaCorp Pte Ltd while a prominent cable TV offers an addition of 150 foreign channels (Wagstaff, 2010). By 2009, analogue transmissions are terminated and most channels are high-definition (HDTV). Through the years, MediaCorp has done a number of innovations. It introduced TV Mobile as an outdoor TV using Digital Video Broadcasting to increase quality of the mobile programs it offers. It then introduced its own IPTV for easy access on computers. Having one of the most

advanced IT infrastructures in the region, it deployed Digital Subscriber Line in 1997 to Singaporean households. It was also noted that even as early as 1970, Television Singapore's broadcasting can already reach southern parts of West Malaysia (Blackburn, 1971).

Thailand. Like other Southeast Asian countries, politics have affected the media landscape in Thailand. The 1955 Radio and Television Broadcasting Act required all possible broadcasting to be licensed by the government to ensure that contents will help build national identity (Lewis, 2003). MCOT started operating both Channel 9 and Channel 3 while The Royal Thai Army also owned broadcasting channels. While TV stations are mostly indirectly controlled by the government since 2007, non-terrestrial channels like those in ASTV also served as source of various programs (Wagstaff, 2010). To aid development, the digital TV masterplan of its National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission from 2012 to 2016 set directions and provided more opportunities for Thai providers and audiences (Lin & Oranop, 2016). Internet penetration also paved way for widened multi-screen and mobile TV services.

Timor-Leste. The socio-economic development in Timor-Leste through the years may have affected its media landscape but it is still progressing with broadcast media as its most preferred source. Since 2007, the government conducted efforts to have satellite dishes and TV in most units though electricity and affordability of services remains to be hindrances to this continuous initiative. The United Nations helped establish Radio-Televisão Timor Leste (Wagstaff, 2010) yet the live broadcast is only available to Dili. Other places have to rely on delayed broadcasts instead. In terms of programming, TVTL also offers media products in Portuguese, Indonesian, and English in addition to its domestic contents. TVTL improved the quality of productions, but the sustainability of its operations has an effect to the ongoing improvement in the country's media landscape (Kalathil, 2006). By 2010, Internet is seen to be

helpful in promoting campaigns though the larger portion of the population still do not have regular access to the said digital technology (Siapno, 2010).

Vietnam. Television is also the most popular medium in Vietnam with the media being regulated by the government. Since 1962, the creation of a national TV network was being planned with assistance from the United States while a National Motion Picture Center was established in Saigon as early as 1957 (Hull, 1971). However, the initial contents shown came from a mix of productions from Thi Sach center and French distributors. In 1966, airborne transmission from US Navy facility was used prior to the construction of ground stations at Saigon, Hue, and Can Tho for THVN. Eventually, Vietnam Television which started in 1990 not only offers local channels but also handles the cable network and the direct-to-home satellite service that has both domestic and international channels reaching to about 40 (Wagstaff, 2010). In 2001, DVB-T became standard for digital broadcast. In terms of online development, it has become at par with Thailand.

While Wagstaff's study (2010) and other literature presented a quick grasp of how each country's media landscape looks like, some similarities help describe Southeast Asian media landscape as a region. First, broadcast media is the most popular with television households increasing as more regional stations are established. Second, initial developmental problems like limited access to electricity and IT infrastructure challenged Internet penetration with urban center initially as primary consumers. Third, affordability of cable TV affected the diversity of contents offered to the general public. Fourth, political influence reflected in both government censorship and ownership of elite families has an impact to the consumption of local and foreign media products. Even with challenges in strengthening Internet infrastructures, growth in the use of mobile technologies and Internet-based platforms become more evident making social media

and other websites a competitor of television. The increasing use of Internet not only helped in addressing censorship and political restraints but was also observed to redefine media. However, with the countries being in different stages of development, the improvement of Internet infrastructures also come gradually. Wagstaff (2010) further explains that “Singapore was still way ahead of other Southeast countries with Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines grouped in the middle of the next tier. Indonesia and Vietnam were bottom of the tier. Overcoming these divides will be critical to the next phase of Southeast Asia’s media evolution” (p.11).

Meanwhile, foreign media products often consumed not only include contents from former Western colonizers but also from neighboring countries giving rise to transnational media in the region. Transnational media, according to Gher and Bharthapudi (2003), refers to information and communication related to electronic media which allows it to cross borders of national territories. Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg (2009) further classified this into not only national media that has reached greater audience beyond borders but may even extend to pan-regional media that can operate within a certain region. This media allow imagining of other nations beyond one’s own territories. Transnational media in the Wagstaff’s survey (2010) is marked by either geographical proximity through satellites or collaborations and inclusion of such media in a domestic channel.

Jalli and Setianto (2020) further described the transnational media flow within Southeast Asia itself before 2010 by exploring the context of Malaysia and Indonesia. The similarities in both countries in terms of religion, language, geography, and history were reflected in the way they consume and appropriate media products from each other. Two ways in which transnational media flows between Indonesia and Malaysia include both intended through collaborative media projects and unintended media exchange through satellite dishes near borders. One example of

Indonesian content received well in Malaysia and Singapore is *Terang Boelan* since 1930s.

Though export of Malayan movies was not as easy as it seemed due to national policies, inviting collaborations with Indonesian actors and directors became helpful in a smoother transnational flow of media products between the two countries. Co-productions begin to grow in 1967 through ASEAN agreements which were made possible years after. In the early 1980s, Malaysian programs may feature Indonesian contents along with local contents as they purchase rights for showing in local channels. *Sinetrons*, dramas from Indonesia, are found to be cheaper than Western products which contributed to its popularity as a substitute to fill spaces for local films or to address needs for foreign contents. While these contents come from other countries, threats from cultural imperialism are reduced since they come from Indonesia, a country of similar characteristics in almost the same geographical region. This also contributes to a more dynamic flow of regional contents at the expense of purchasing rights for local TV airing. Because of similar religious themes, relatable narratives, almost identical language, and a more diverse media offering, Indonesian media products became transnational hits in Malaysia. However, similarities and relevance leading to consumers' favorable reception of such media products can still be faced with challenges when national regulations and limitations take place.

Aside from Malaysian viewers, transnational flow was also observed in border communities of Indonesia and Timor-Leste (Andung, *et al.*, 2018). Indonesian contents are accessible to the people of Bobometo in Timor-Leste and the Napan community in Indonesia can watch Timor Lestean contents. Television viewing in these areas are not only seen as a daily routine but are essential in their unique social contexts. While these transnational media products are seen as similar cultural symbols, Indonesian viewers perceive Timor Lestean contents as an

escape and source of relief from domestic problems. On the other hand, Timor Lestean audience use Indonesian contents in tightening social relationships and in symbolizing economic success.

Since 2011, Vietnamese viewers are also enjoying transnational media from Thailand and the Philippines through cable TV (Anh, 2016). Thai *lakorn* and Filipino *teleseryes* offer relatable storyline and good presentational style in addition to attractive cast. The sequential climax keeps the audience watching while fan meetings are also organized by sending famous artists to Vietnam. Making these media products available not only proves transnational flow outside borders but also emphasize the increase in people-to-people interaction to foster a regional community. Expanding the analysis across four nations, Maharam (2021) argues that films from Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia all possess cross-border sensibilities and were therefore transnational. Though the movies from each country are nationalistic, the existence of regional inhabitants living across land and water, the growing regional migration, and the critical links in history and cultural identity makes critical transnational film studies possible in these Southeast Asian nations.

While the quality and quantity of Southeast Asian contents are yet to be increased as the development continues, shifting from Western to Asian contents help strengthen their regional sociocultural identities. In such case, media products from East Asia have already been a popular choice for Southeast Asian consumers. Peichi (2013) explains how consumption of *Hallyu* or Korean wave has catalyzed regional interaction within Asia and how it has shifted interest from the contents from the West to the Korean culture. Aside from regional integration through various economic initiatives like the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), active consumption of media products from the same region drives this global media trade across borders. With the media industry playing

an important role in the regional dynamics, the growing media market for Korean and even Japanese and Chinese contents contribute to a more interactive exchange of contents within Asia. This type of regionalization temporarily unlinks the global and instead reconnects the regional to the local brands and interests. “Asian popular cultures such as J-pop, K-pop and Mandopop are able to cross national boundaries to extend their cultural influence to regional consumers in Asia” (Peichi, 2013, p. 197).

Rebuilding national identities after years of colonial rule, the history of Southeast Asian media is marked with increasing local production while also accessing transnational media. This transnational flow is possible either through domestic channels offering Asian contents or through accessing Southeast Asian products using satellites in border communities. However, it cannot be underestimated that Western foreign products are still offered mostly to address desire for quality production, audience reception, and economic consideration. These foreign products are made available to local channels through collaboration or additional subscription services in pay-TV or cable television. Having television networks operating with ties to foreign companies or infrastructures established with the help of experts from more developed nations, the Western influence to Southeast Asian media cannot be left unnoticed. These context leads to discussions on threats of cultural imperialism in the region.

Cultural Imperialism and Media Dependence

Tracing back to the 19th century when transnational media emerged in the context of colonialism, it is not surprising that media flow was once dominated largely by countries from the Global North like the United States to the global South. Before the advent of the Internet and other technological breakthroughs that facilitated contra-flows, the US, along with other

economically powerful countries, dominated exports of media products (Thussu, 2006). Such domination in the global media traffic led to the creation of the concept of cultural imperialism referred to as the exporting of media products “from the West to the rest”, (Lobato, 2018, p.138) which often was said to lead to “cultural domination” or even “cultural dependency” (Tomlinson, 1991). This concept argues that US, including UK and Europe have been dominating global media making them the center while others are just receiving in the periphery. International contents that predominantly flow from the US are deemed more important (Guo & Vargo, 2020). The Hollywood industry, for example, is known globally for its films with high production values and spectacles with high entertainment factor. This global dominant flow reached the non-Western countries through international film screenings or global media companies partnering with local distributors. The circulation of such media products to other nations contribute to the increasing soft power of Western countries with their ability to influence international audiences.

This sense of cultural imperialism in a post-colonial era was more often observed in decolonized countries that are trying to build national identities but still seem to be dominated by the culture of the West (Ang, 2001). Even after declaring independence, many of these countries still depend on former colonizers for industrialization that include media production. This situation contributes to both economical and ideological relationships and dependencies (Straubhaar, 2007).

As early as 1970s, Blackburn (1971) has described media flow and programming in certain Southeast Asian countries to be pre-dominantly foreign. Though efforts to dub some films in Malay were done, these projects initially produce low quality dubbing, hence, Malay subtitles are a better choice for Western contents while others remain to be in English or in other original audio. A survey with the Malaysian audience in 1968 even showed that English-

language contents are more dominant than local ones in terms of viewership and broadcast hours. The media products consumed by Malaysian audiences are presented in multiple languages and mostly in their original, foreign versions, while still allotting a portion for local productions that also encourage national integration. Meanwhile, most Thai programs during that time are primarily for a unilingual audience and are dubbed into Thai though some English shows are still occasionally made available. For Myanmar, though domestic film productions are sufficient from 1961 to 1963, easing restrictions on foreign films in 1965 led to these imports exceeding local contents (Blackburn, 1971). In most countries, deregulation of media may lead to an influx of foreign programming (Keng, 2002). In the case of Indonesia, local programs are competing with foreign contents like those from Hollywood and other Asian productions, whichever may be cheaper at the moment (Ida, 2012). Though the initial distribution for a government-run media like TVRI focuses on 80 percent domestic, private TV channels have the freedom to change this proportion. Having high ratings as that of domestic productions reflect good reception from the Indonesian audience.

On the other hand, the television history of Vietnam provides a background of why American contents are also available along Vietnamese products. After the continuous assistance of United States from airborne transmission to distribution of TV sets, staff training, and programming (Hull, 1971), it is not a surprise that Western media products are also popular to the Vietnamese audience. Even studies on media systems have always followed a Western-based approach. With this, countering imperialism requires broader knowledge of the context of the “rest” like the countries in Southeast Asia. Radue (2022) addressed this need for cultural contextualization in describing media models in Myanmar, Malaysia, and Thailand. It is believed that Southeast Asia is of great interest because of so much diversity in its religious, cultural, and

social background and “these factors impact the variety of formations of social systems, including media systems, and provide diverse explanations for multidimensional mechanisms that result in highly diverse forms of political communication” (p. 159).

To focus on Southeast Asian context, it is necessary to look into various initiatives to addressing media-related challenges prior to the age of Internet TV. Ragsdale (1960) summarized the recommendations outlined in a Program for Developing the Media of Southeast Asia as an output of the UNESCO Conference in Bangkok in 1948. This event was participated by 22 countries including Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Though a regional news agency was initially thought of, it was not recommended due to the lack of knowledge in its operation and the complications that may arise due to translation. In terms of cinema, a catalogue of educational, cultural, and scientific films is recommended to be available along with a plan for an annual meeting of representatives from Southeast Asia. It was also suggested that film personnel be trained or that exchanges be possible to further capacitate the staff in movie production across the region. Meanwhile, since television is considered an essential tool, trainings and innovative telecommunication plans relevant to experimental TV are also suggested. Having international linkages on top of expanding national coverage of television was even highlighted in the report. This shows some of the early plans to regionalize efforts in advancing media in Southeast Asia instead of fully depending on Western influences. As the impact of Western programming to Southeast Asian media may be limited in some areas (Heng, 2002), it is still necessary to look at specific contexts and have a deeper analysis of how imperialism and dependency may be rooted in a nation’s media landscape.

Understanding the Philippine Context

With the Philippines being colonized by Spain for more than 300 years and later by the US before becoming an independent state in 1946, the domination of Western contents has been a “naturalized” scenario. This greatly contributed to a Western orientation of media dependency among Filipino audiences that grew from a historical foundation to a diverse programming and consumption.

To start, the National Commission on Culture and Arts laid out the history of broadcast media in the Philippines discussing stages when English or the West has been influential. Since it was just starting to broadcast TV products, economic factor made the early years more dependent on US programming. In those days, it is cheaper to import programs than create original ones. In some ways, colonial mentality might still have played a role in this type of dependence in the early years of TV in the country (Tuazon, n.d.). Love for TV grew fast with it being the most common medium used in all socio-economic settings during that period (Dayag, 2004). Notable educational shows for children like ABS-CBN’s *Batibot*, *Hirayamanawari*, *Bayani*, and *Math Tinik* also became popular catering to younger audiences along with other educational shows facilitated by government TV network. Philippine Media Factbook reported that by 2000, 1.83 out of about 2 million homes in Manila, the capital, have TV sets. When pay TV emerged, an estimate of 900 thousand households nationwide are subscribed to cable TV like Sky Cable, Home Cable, and Destiny Cable. Aside from ABS-CBN establishing more stations around the Philippines, it has also connected to Pan American Satellite to provide more contents through cable technologies. It has brought contents to Filipinos in the US like those in San Francisco, California. Meanwhile, followers of GMA 7 programs from Southeast Asia and other parts of the US and Canada can watch through Mabuhay satellite. Other options like those

accessible through UHF TV broadcasting were made available. This includes SBN Channel 21 providing global oriented program and Channel 23 that aired MTV.

Eventually, the Philippines is known to have been consuming more media products from radio and television compared to newspapers and magazines (Estella & Loffelholz, 2019). Prior to the Internet age, regular TV programming has been very popular from early morning newscasts to noontime shows and evening soap operas. The 2015 data shows that there are 100 television stations in the country with GMA and ABS-CBN as the two biggest networks (Guioguo, 2015).

Going further back to media history in the Philippines, the newspaper industry that preceded broadcast media are also English dailies circulating in the country even before the 1940s (Coronel, 2001). The successful US-style education propagated English as an official language in the country affecting the convenience of consuming foreign products. This consumption culture mixing a lot of foreign programming with domestic ones led to colonial mentality as majority preferred and adopted Western habits. Enjoyment of Hollywood films and the orientation of urban leisure influenced the way identities and communities are constructed (Khor, 2012). Even with the current opportunity to bring Philippine films in the US for diasporic communities, American motion pictures still came earlier and dominated the local market. Having such condition prior to the period of increasing migration, this created in the Filipino viewers a deeply embedded orientation of the US cultural products. This is no longer characterized by a media flow across physical territories but of symbolic power through information and images, primarily delivered as cultural and media products (Ang, 2001). Because of this imperialism and dependence in the US media, Americanization of the Philippine

society has been a challenge and an indication of a questionable independence for some critics (San Juan, Jr. 2017).

Audience research focused on understanding the perception of Filipino viewers on rural areas show how foreign programming is still essential despite availability of domestic programs. (Kenny,1998). Local productions originating from the urban Manila have been commonly watched but audiences are dissatisfied with the quality of these programs. In addition, many provincial viewers perceived foreign programs as more interesting than Manila-based contents. In search for these quality media products, those who can afford to pay become cable subscribers desiring foreign contents. This were thought to have contributed to the possible forming of a group of media elites. In addition, desiring for local programming or geographical localism is also evident among the viewers. Being a diverse country of various ethnic identities, languages, and shared interests, it is a natural desire to consume media products that reflect local themes from people living in rural areas. Having this gap, foreign programming seemed to be still relevant to the provincial viewers.

Dayag (2004) wrote an account of how English language has been the vehicle of Philippine media in different form through the years. Believed to be an extension of linguistic imperialism, American values were further disseminated through the media like TV programs (Zeng & Yang, 2022). In a multilingual country like the Philippines, the media do not only become channels of communication and information but also plays a major role in representing the nation in a linguistic perspective. While the case of radio and TV programs are mostly articulated in Filipino, the channels are not necessarily free from English contents particularly in the emergence of MTV and cable TVs (Dayag, 2004). Even the Golden Age of Cinema in the

1950s was characterized by not only the popularity of Filipino entertainment, but also of the “regular importation of influential US American entertainment media” (Pertierra, 2021, p. 68).

Deocampo (2007) explains how US colonization and imperialism are connected to the production of cinema in the Philippines. While his analysis is mostly about portrayal of the Philippines in the early American films, the study showed the colonial discourse of how Filipinos act during those years and how the US reigned supreme during the war. This imagery in cinema reflected the power the Western gaze has over the newly acquired territory. According to Deocampo (2007), “During that time, the American system of government slowly introduced the American school system, organized civil courts, strengthened a capitalist market and established local governments in towns and provinces. The American occupation also meant more movies” (p. 150).

The eventual fame of Hollywood showcased how movies as a global commodity can be an instrument of Western power and of the American dream. As Deocampo (2007) describes, the colonization that happened was “not only marked by a conquest of territory but also by a conquest of fantasy and imagination, led in part by these early cinematic shows” (p.169).

In his study of the postcolonial image of US in selected Filipino-made post-World War II films, Capino (2010) described the subjects as reflections of American fantasies in the image of Filipino migrants or Filipino-Americans. While some of the films show the power of US through militarization in the country and the interracial relationships, other movies try to decolonize its themes by workers choosing homeland over the American dream. The film *Merika*, for example, shows the life of a Filipina nurse whose unsatisfying life in New Jersey and the feeling of alienation made her reflect on coming back home and joining a more patriotic cause. The dilemma faced by the characters reflect the polarized concepts of either following the American

dream or joining a nationalist cause in the Philippines. However, Capino argued in the end that amidst these efforts, it might still be difficult for the Philippine cinema to move away from the existing imperialism as the ambitions of being recognized by the film festivals still contribute to a portrayal that meets that Western gaze. For them, US is both a great nation and one of the “most culturally familiar foreign country” (Capino, 2010, p. 107).

Another critique of the imperialism in mainstream cinema was found in Garcia’s (2021) analysis of the film of Lav Diaz. Considered as a representation of Third Cinema, Diaz films are a contrast to the domination of Hollywood (First Cinema) and the European wave (Second Cinema) along the Japanese media products. The Third Cinema represents the films made to represent post-colonial states from Latin America, Africa and even Asia. These are believed to be intersections of culture and cinema in the context of nation-building, “at the mercy of Hollywood, a machinery of US imperialism” (Garcia, 2021, p. 132). Contrary to dominant films silencing voices from the peripheries, Third Cinema aims to overcome the barriers set by commercial films and acknowledge the attempts for decolonization through anti-imperialist efforts in filmmaking. In the case of the films of Diaz, they portray the narratives possible in a third world country like the Philippines while also addressing the Western gaze.

Even though local programming grew through the years with more stations being established nationwide, most productions are still modeled from the Western formats. Also, more urban-oriented themes are prevalent and local stations are frequently relay stations from those originating from the city, though some local and provincial themes are also being aired at times. It has been observed that most entertainment programs are in Filipino but contents that were recognized internationally like *The Probe Team* and *Firing Line* are in English language that can be packaged as news magazines, talk shows, or documentaries. Limiting recognition to these

formats led to a misconception that Filipino as a language, unlike English, cannot be used for higher level of discourse (Tuazon, n.d.).

It is important to note that this concept of imperialism limits not only the presence of Southeast Asian contents, but more importantly the participation of viewers in the process. Prior to the age of Netflix, more than appearing as a receptive audience of Western media contents, viewers are characterized by production teams as mere watchers and consumers and will only be able to provide feedback if selected as part of television ratings or broadcast surveys. Raymond Williams in the 1970s even argued that because of cultural imperialism, global village consumers may not be able to speak but just to receive what is being disseminated (Lobato, 2019). Even if national televisions exist, their reach is limited to geographical locations until paid satellite TVs broadened their impact and until the Internet made streaming services like Netflix extended in digital spaces 'to and from' the Philippines. Internet statistics in 2012 show that in Southeast Asia alone, the Internet consumption continues to grow in Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia contributing to improving transnational media consumption and countering media imperialism in the region.

CHAPTER 4

NETFLIX EXPANSION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE FILIPINOS' CHANCE FOR CONTRA-FLOW

Technological expansion has brought an immense change in the flow of media products (Seifert, Clemet & Otten, 2020). The proliferation of streaming television became a global phenomenon. This is due to a number of factors that includes advancement in the number and type of devices, VOD services being part of daily viewing habits, cooperation with local markets, and freedom from commercials, among others (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2023). Offering themes that resonate across cultures is also an important factor of streaming's global popularity. The changing systems allow for going beyond national flows and exploring the characteristics of both international and transnational media. With access and control distributed to more nation-states, the concept of contra-flow comes into light. As Thussu (2007) explains, contra-flow is evident when media content is disseminated and understood outside its immediate local context where it is produced.

In Spain, for example, some viewers were immersed in Korean contents through an encounter with K-pop music in global media (Yoon, Min & Jin, 2020). Fan clubs formed afterwards are also not only into Korean culture but are also engaged in other popular Asian contents which reflect how consumption of one could lead to understanding more of its neighboring cultures. This also contributes to an increasing representation of Asians in a non-Asian country addressing threats of stereotyping and racial discrimination. Generalizing Asians

in most non-Western countries lead to unfair representation of other cultural and linguistic groups. Relevant and popular media can possibly influence and contradict this. The fame of *Hallyu*, a term to describe Korean contents, in Spain in this case, is an example of an evident contra-flow from a non-Western to a Western nation. While *Hallyu* is originally produced as a local content, it was able to transcend boundaries and to captivate the hearts of a global audience.

Historically, the centers of power in Europe and North America have dominated media markets. However, these countries are slowly transitioning to renegotiations of their dominance as transnational media overtake the system (Rao, 2011). These new media are considered conveyors of transnational cultural flows (Ogone, 2021). Catering to more international consumers, media products were eventually distributed in the transnational arena. Extending media products to become more popular, US-led Western countries initiated the glocalization process outsourcing digital media or partnering with local organizations (Thussu, 2006). Combining the elements of global and local, threats of cultural homogenization are addressed through localization on a global extent. From state-centric or national flow, transnational flows can also be observed in the case of India's Bollywood or Latin American's telenovelas. Proving strong presence in their regions and even outside of them, they represented sub-altern flows. The geo-cultural flows provide for audiences of various cultural-linguistic backgrounds while also addressing the media needs of the growing diaspora. These contribute to the emergence of contra-flow in a number of dimensions with peripheries becoming new cultural and media centers reversing the flow. Pant (2022) explains this as a neo-global flow as it does not necessarily compete with the dominant flow, but it acts independently as nations learn to become more autonomous producers of media products. These localized packaging of contents are made possible through innovations adopted by transnational media companies. Because of such

changes, more studies are shifting to understanding the media landscape in the context of other countries in the Middle East and Asia.

With contra-flow reshaping global media dynamics and reconfiguring multidimensionality of media forms and practices, studies on how transnational media contents from the Global South could provide new understanding of global audience viewing patterns and practices (Thussu, 2010). Further investigation on these topics are even more necessary since streaming services like Netflix have continuously influenced the way global audiences consume media across nations and regions like Southeast Asia. To understand how Netflix offers an opportunity for a contra-flow specifically for Filipinos, it is important to describe its features as a disruption, its strategies in expansion, and how it invested in production and collaboration.

The Netflix Innovation

From being an online DVD rental service to becoming an Internet subscription service for films and television shows, Netflix has expanded reach in various regions like Asia (Burgess, 2020). In 2016, Reed Hastings and Ted Sarandos of Netflix announced that it has switched on Netflix in 130 countries with special mention of Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. Hastings referred to such moment as the “birth of a global TV network” (Lobato, 2019, p. 2), a major leap since it started streaming contents within the US in 2007. Prior to this expansion, Netflix has extended to Canada in 2010, then Latin America, some European countries, Australia, New Zealand and Japan afterwards. It also started to operate in United Kingdom in 2012 (Theodoropoulou, 2017) and increased demand for broadband television and streaming services. It has to be noted that Canada is close to the US with English as a major language while Latin America has Spanish-speaking market familiar with pay TV. Among these states, it does not include China and three other countries prohibited due to current

US relations namely North Korea, Syria, and Crimea. Making Netflix accessible to the rest of the world, he further described it as “internet TV revolution,” which offers contents at the customer’s own availability and convenience.

Aligned with its tagline “*Revolutionary. Disruptive. Fearless.*”, Netflix has changed the way television distribution is envisioned across nations. As an innovative platform of personalized schedule of contents (Lobato, 2017), it was able to influence global media flows providing diversity through its international catalogs. Considered as successful in “Long Tail economics”, Netflix thrive in an age when broadcast, film, and Internet are converging (McDonald, 2016), leading to transitions in the way global entertainment is presented. It does not only contribute to the evolution of digital media but it has also focused the attention of producers and viewers to redefining television (Anindita, 2021). It currently takes the lead in the streaming TV industry being the first to move in the said direction and being a constant innovator (Snyman & Gilliard, 2019).

Disruptive Technology. As a tech company, it has disrupted the regular scheduled television viewing in expanded markets. Amanda Lotz, in her scholarly works, discussed how changes in TV models affect its programming, production, and circulation (Lobato, 2019). Though television started its history in linearity, the current Netflix model shifted into more of like a library where people can do self-curation, time-shifting, or personalized access to contents. Netflix has been disruptive because of the filtering and recommending features it offers. The internet technology was able to empower consumers to personally choose a content at their own convenience and that is what sets it apart from the traditional one. It even gave the audience a chance to know an upcoming content even before it is released through its feature “See What’s

Next”. Its tales leverage on its “stack” of global contents representing its infinite list of media products available for distribution through subscription and the power of Internet.

Netflix, with a good use of technology, presents itself as an innovation which can be both a process and a product (Luders, 2020). The resulting company streams media worldwide and the process was made more interactive through considering consumers’ preferences. Along with tech giants like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Apple, and Facebook, the streaming service offered by Netflix was able to provide accessible programs like TV series and films in packages that encourage consumers to ‘binge-watch’. It was able to combine elements of television and Internet and growing as a mediator in cultural representations. It has transitioned from a simple DVD rental bound by geographical locations to a global streaming platform transcending national boundaries. As Barker and Wiatrowski (2017) described, Netflix started as a producer and distributor which, through its innovative means, became a disruptor, a cultural institution, and a eventually, a global player. It has become a disruptor to a traditional TV attaining both low-end market entry and new market footholds (Anindita, 2021). Focusing more on flexibility of content, it has been offering a “watch-all-you-want” habit in low prices while also establishing a new group of binge-watchers as an SVOD company.

Like successful transnational companies, they boast of good marketing mix of product, price, promotion, and place (Seifert, Clement & Otten, 2020). For example, Amazon as a disruptive innovation made online shopping both efficient and convenient (Anindita, 2021). It is centered on customers and allows for exploration at the comfort of their homes. Netflix offers the same experience but in the context of media products. With fast-paced technology and evolving audience needs, Netflix used these as opportunities instead of threats and transformed their SVOD business. As explained by Paap and Katz (2004), “disruptive” is not a feature of

technology itself but the effect it creates on markets when companies focus on customers and innovate their operations based on such discoveries. Christensen, *et al.* (2018) further explains that disruptive technologies do not only improve performance of incumbent technologies but also offer new unique features that changes the experience for customers.

In the case of Netflix, redefining the way viewers consume TV and even providing access to their all-time favorite contents seal its disruptive effect. Taking the advertisements away, Netflix provided a no-distraction experience that challenged the mainstream way of TV viewing (Anindita, 2021). It does not only serve consumers who cannot afford cable TV subscription. It also allowed TV viewing in their mobile phones. Depending on the package purchased by a viewer, contents can be in multiple devices like tablets ,smart TVs, set-top boxes, and other streaming media gadgets where Netflix app is downloaded (Kamarudin, *et al.*, 2022). This convenience and accessibility viewing methods is an advantage for Netflix. Flexibility became a major selling point enabling richer media products to be delivered to a person’s gadget (Changsong, Kerry & Marta, 2021). Moreover, its access to a bulk of consumer data through programming and algorithms help them provide more relevant and meaningful customer experience. Reed Hastings, co-founder of Netflix, once told New York Times that his recognition of the power of personalization came from how evident it is in Netflix (Burgess, 2020). This is also reiterated by Ted Saranados, chief content officer, stating that the brand of the company is built on “personalization” (Havens, 2018). These features make choosing from a long list of titles an exciting experience for the viewers.

Diverse Programming. The company history itself takes pride in its diverse programming (Havens, 2018). These contents are arranged in categories and genre that include action, classic, comedies, documentaries, dramas, horror, music, sci-fi and fantasy, sports, and

thrillers among others (Moore, 2023). It has presented itself both as a product and a service brand, and with its global operation across cultures and nations, it has been referred as not only transnational but also “translational” (Havens, 2018). While the issue of digital divide has been continuously asked because of the question of who gets to access Internet, Netflix presents itself as someone who bridges that gap by making more contents accessible worldwide (Donica, 2017) and by allowing the audience to take hold of their own viewing experience.

With more options that both include global and local contents, viewers’ choices became sites of exploration on the parallel concepts of cultural proximity and cultural discount in media consumption. Straubhaar (1991) used cultural proximity to explain why audiences prefer TV shows that they find relevant and close to their cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, Hoskins and Mirus (1998) explain cultural discount as the tendency to dislike or reject products that are not similar or very different from their own. Instead of becoming passive recipients of dominant flows from the West or economically powerful countries, cultural proximity builds up on a sense of cultural identification that leads people to choose local and national products (Straubhaar, 2007). However, because cultures often interact, adoption of similar ideas, customs, beliefs, and even symbols are possible. Audiences tend to get attracted to TV programs that are close to their own lifestyle, historical reference, style, and even humor. While dissemination of local themed products are made possible, the media can also help build national identities.

Viewers’ Preferences. In a broader sense, media producers have eventually shifted their priorities to consumer preferences and consumption patterns leading to binge-watching (Grandinetti, 2017). This gives a sense of importance to subscribers as agents of their own viewing experience. Either by dropping all episodes for one season or releasing some episodes on a regular schedule, Netflix created an addicting effect to the audience (Anindita, 2021).

In traditional television, the production team sets the power with the temporal spaces determined by the media companies. However, what the culture of binge-watching Netflix allows is different as it gives the audience the control over their own viewing schedule and spaces. With undistracted viewing, it gives the viewers the convenience of watching a film even without the best seats in a movie theater or an advertisement trying to sell something in between. As Pilipets (2019) explains, binge-watchers can watch multiple episodes in one sitting. The ad-free streaming encourages viewers to continuously look at the narratives being presented without the threat of missing out, particularly with the post-play button allowing the viewers to see the next episode without even clicking the next button. This feature encourages continuous playing by default though still giving the subscribers the power to change settings according to their viewing style. Viewers can watch contents according to their desires and preferences innovating the face of home and mobile entertainment through a time- and place-shifting technology (Theodoropoulou, 2017). They have handed the power from networks to the audience (Burgess, 2020).

Looking more closely into its features, Pilipets (2019) considers recommendation, attention and attachment as valuable elements of the binge-watching culture Netflix creates. Through a database of recommendations, Netflix packages binge-watching, not as a lazy habit, but as an interactive and participatory approach in consuming media products. Tagging contents depending on location, plot, genre, and even tone or emotion gives the audience an idea of what to watch next along the lines of the same preference. Attention, on the other hand, is reflected when Netflix asks for the audience's action on a regular basis. For example, the "Skip Intro" feature not only allows the viewers to skip the first part to jump to the main content but also allows Netflix to effectively catch the viewers' attention and a more active engagement.

Meanwhile, attachment to this platform and its contents is an unavoidable element after a series of enjoyable binge-watching that makes Netflix a global household brand.

Netflix has clearly innovated the viewing experience by enhancing personalization through understanding preferences and interactions with users (Arnold, 2016). Viewers are now deemed as people who are actually making choices and are creating a unique catalogue of their viewing priorities. Taking it from traditional broadcasting platforms, the conventional broadcast schedule of each program is now turned into a content catalog that allows viewers to watch at their convenient time. The linear sequence became interactive and curated (Lobato, 2018). As Jenner (2018) explains, Netflix taught viewers and reinvented the idea of “binge-watching” (Burgess, 2020) which eventually led to “fannish-viewing” (Bury and Stevens, 2021). This cultural shift occurred as technologically empowered consumers are given a space in the transition process between old and new media (Sim, 2016). It is also essential to note that traditional rating surveys took into account a sample of viewers whereas Netflix considers all audience members’ engagement. In this context, the audience agency became more evident enabling the viewers to control their viewing experience. For example, tagging some contents under “Because you watched..” gives the viewers a notion that the audience is part of the decision-making and that the user agreed to this customer-tailored streaming experience (Pilipets, 2019). This feature took another turn when they started offering contents that allow viewers to choose the course of narrative. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* was produced as an interactive film in 2018 with features of a video game. This content gives the audience the decision on what path to take in contrast to the usual linear, one-way flow of narratives traditional films offer. The control and free will that is passed on to the audience makes them more connected to the narratives they see unfold (Holmes, 2018).

Glocal Reach. While Netflix is a global company, it understood that the way to reach more audiences is to adopt a localization strategy. As a producer, indigenization has reached the Netflix office when it expanded into more than 130 countries. It has even engaged in original productions through the years called *Netflix Originals*. From an initial 500,000 subscribers in 2002 (Burgess, 2020) to its almost 75 million paid subscribers in 2023 (Stoll, 2023) and an ever-increasing viewership across the globe, Netflix expanded its production following its successful *House of Cards*, *Stranger Things*, and *The Crown*. In essence, an *Original* can either be: 1) a show produced or commissioned by Netflix; 2) a show on which they have acquired exclusive international rights for streaming; 3) a co-production with another company; or 4) a canceled show that is to be continued (Robinson, 2018). All these four categories reflect how Netflix tried to move away from a simple streaming company to a production company that builds more connections globally through its local media production partners to provide a better customer experience. In essence, glocalization refers to how global media ideas and models are packaged in local expressions like the hiring of local hosts for *MTV* or the local version of reality shows like *Big Brother* (Straubhaar, 2007). Netflix, as a company, figured a way on how to tap the local audience, facilitate bundles or subscriptions, and monetize contents like the *Originals* they are creating for various nations.

With its continuous expansion to cater to more audiences around the world, the global content distribution of Netflix operates in more localized catalogues making it appear “glocal” instead of mere global. Looking at it in different ways, it can be viewed as a global company with local versions or a number of local productions streamed together across the globe (Lobato & Lotz, 2020). As Lobato (2019) explains, this friction between global and local trying to attend to the distinct taste of audiences in local communities prompts Netflix to move towards

localizing its contents. Glocalization, as an approach in international advertising, targets the simultaneous global feed of campaigns while also targeting specific audiences in local contexts where these campaigns take place. Being glocal is a response to the fear that due to globalization, other cultures might disappear, hence, adapting to local context while embracing parts of the global perspective led to such idea. Mihr (2022) explains glocalization as a bridge between the dominating way of life like that of Western countries to a non-Western response at the local level. In the context of Netflix, its ability to share international contents while also saving space for local productions makes its approach different from traditional media companies (Lobato, 2018). Understanding how Netflix works on the blending of local and global elements through their catalogs can lead to various insights on how transnational streaming of contents works in the age of Internet (Lotz, Eklund & Soroka, 2022). While keeping up-to-date with necessary business models to ensure sustainability, global media organizations have also explored paths of hybridization to promote both adaptation and localization fit for the needs and preferences of global consumers like what Netflix does. Working as a chief product officer, Greg Peters from Netflix emphasized that because majority of their million global subscribers are living outside the US, they are offering programs reflecting both universal themes and local culture (Jha, 2019). There is also an immense effort in both dubbing and subtitling contents in various languages. This strategy undoubtedly sparked innovation in ways that differentiated it from linear television or a traditional global content producer (Lindsey, 2016).

The Netflix Expansion in Southeast Asia

Statistics in 2012 show that in Southeast Asia alone, the Internet consumption continues to grow in Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia contributing to improving

regional and transnational media consumption. This growing digital access also provide opportunities for a more global flow of contents through subscription to streaming channels like Netflix (Jalli & Setianto, 2020). The number of subscribers grew more as Netflix became a popular hit in Southeast Asia during the lockdown (Anindita, 2021). Because people had to comply to restrictions, entertainment at home became the only possible recreation. With this, subscription to Internet-based platforms accelerated and caught the attention of the viewers in the said region (Changsong, Kerry & Marta, 2021). Also, Southeast Asian region has been a growing market in terms of media products because of its relatively young population and increasing utilization of mobile services (Kasim, *et al.*, 2020). Digital media users from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Philippines show that age can be a determinant for obtained gratification from streaming platforms. Interestingly, the obtained gratification showed to be different per country, hence, the impact of media products has a connection with the context of its viewers.

Kamarudin, *et al.* (2022) analyzed the preferences of Southeast Asians on Netflix contents. Though catalogue and viewing habits vary from country to country, the results from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and Singapore reveal how much interested viewers are with the contents on Netflix. Drama movies are a top choice for majority of the Southeast Asian viewers. International films are also very popular among the audience from the five countries. In addition, Singaporean viewers like TV shows that are mostly about crimes while Thai subscribers value horror contents. Romance is also a popular option for both Indonesian and Filipino viewers. While this previous study is mostly about the location and genre, the analysis of Kania, *et al* (2022) studied the influences that may have affected the Indonesian audience in particular. This considered Netflix as the first SVoD provider before Iflix, HOOQ, and Amazon

Prime came as a competition. Aside from increasing subscription during pandemic, it highlighted how social influence can affect viewing behavior both directly and indirectly. This means that with social characteristics varying from one to another, a closer look into a country's context is necessary to further describe the disruptive impact Netflix has on their citizens.

Focusing more closely on Netflix as the most preferred platform by the Indonesian market (Febriana, Rosanensi & Rahmawati, 2021), the company was also faced with some challenges related to Indonesia's social values. During its early years, an internet provider company initially blocked Netflix because of its pornographic and radical elements and the large amount of internet data it needs. Eventually, Netflix was fully allowed by adjusting to the demands of the market and their industry partners. Inappropriate contents were limited and feedbacks from the Internet providers were considered. While Netflix is not censored by the government, they had to comply with what the Indonesian society allows. It has to consider labels in terms of age and maturity of the content in addition to tagging if it contains nudity, violence, adult language and other elements possibly considered inappropriate for the Indonesian viewers. Narratives should consider a country's situation. When cultural sensitivities are triggered, these may cause governments to ban contents. This can also happen in Malaysia and Cambodia when products show violence, immorality, religious offense, or at times, strong political elements (Tanyag, 2019).

Netflix also invested on Indonesian filmmakers for a scriptwriting workshop in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Culture. Though other streaming platforms and local companies may want to compete with Netflix, they are not able to be at par with its infrastructure, particularly its capacity to provide diverse programming that includes a mix of Western media, Asian products, and Indonesian contents. Aside from adding Indonesian subtitles

to popular contents like *For All the Boys I've Loved Before*, Netflix also featured Indonesian contents like *Ada Apa With Cinta*, *Juni & Kopi* and other media products that Indonesians enjoyed.

In Malaysia, university students are mostly binge-watchers because they find Netflix as a good source of entertainment during the pandemic (Chan, *et al.*, 2022). In addition, it somehow gives them a sense of emotional connection to fill the gap in the physical interaction due to lockdown. For some, it also becomes a source of escape since students are at home for online classes and streaming contents from Netflix helps them release stress. Meanwhile, video streaming for the general Malaysian audience is also popular because the platforms, either Netflix or their local iFlix, provides high quality Western and Asian contents that are not pirated and that are less censored (Hanchard, 2016).

In Thailand, Netflix gained the largest market share in its first two years beating Hooq and iFlix (Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). Part of its continuous popularity was attributed to its affordability, global contents, and data-driven strategies. The recommendation system works well and the overall Netflix experience is satisfying for most Thai viewers (Songkijsub, 2020). It also offers fresh contents that viewers can always resume watching anytime and wherever they are (Chavalitcheevuin, 2018). Its improved infrastructure that provided better quality is also a plus factor for the audience.

In 2018, Netflix Thailand catalogue includes 5800 titles (Ramasoota & Kitikamdhorn, 2021). As it has just started its operation in Southeast Asia, it is understandable that contents are mostly from the US but there is also a noticeable quantity of products from India, Korea, Japan, and UK. In addition, Thai contents also rank as very popular ones even though these were faced by much competition. This indicates that Netflix also caters to the local taste of Thai audience.

Most of the contents include syndicated ones, new ones which has rights purchased by Netflix, and original contents made in collaboration with local partners. One of the contents, *The Maid*, was made by Thai production team. However, since it was not screened in theaters due to COVID-19 lockdown, its rights was bought by Netflix, hence, a Netflix original label was also attached. *The Stranded* was its first attempt as a totally original product of local collaboration but its initial airing did not meet their expected rate of success. Made in 2019, it was believed to have been patterned to US content and the formula used was based mainly on the metadata Netflix has. This made the team pursue further understanding of the Thai context and preferences.

Eventually, more local contents from local providers and studios were included and having them on Netflix make filmmakers feel that their audience is expanding to an international scale. This also helped break the monopoly in the Thai film industry because small producers were given a platform to showcase their crafts as long as they partner with Netflix. A lot of filmmakers saw Netflix as an opportunity instead of a threat because it offered a much-needed alternative for the creative media industry to grow. A new and bigger market has opened for local filmmakers while also maximizing the potential international impact of the productions that became national hits. According to Ramasoota and Kitikamdhorn (2021), “A movie like *The Maid*, which was struggling to find a showcase in theaters, has more than recouped investment after Netflix decided to purchase its copyrights and turned it into Netflix original. Several independent movie producers with international exposure and experience have also found solace in OTT platforms for display of their works” (p. 13).

In the Philippines, the increase in the consumption of services from streaming companies was also recorded. To understand the Netflix viewing for Filipinos, Faminiano and Yango (2023)

studied the habits of high school students in a province. Majority of the participants watch Netflix atleast twice a week, four hours a day. Drama appeared to be the most popular genre followed by romance, action, and horror. Along with Netflix are other options like Iflix, YouTube Premium, Discovery+, HBO GO, Amazon Prime Video, Vivamax, iWantTFC, WeTV, Viu Premium, and Iqiyi (Lim, 2023). However, not all of these are similar to Netflix since some like YouTube, WeTV and Viu can offer free streaming but with ads that can only be avoided with subscription. It is also important to note that the other streaming platforms are based in Asia yet viewers still find Netflix more appealing. For example, Iflix is from Malaysia, Viu is from Hongkong, and iQiYi is from China. Meanwhile, Vivamax and iWantTFC offer mostly Filipino contents. With this, Netflix Philippines remain to be a unique offering ad-free entertainment with a mix of foreign contents and original Filipino productions. Even with a lot of these options, data support the popularity of Netflix compared to other platforms in Southeast Asia. The diverse programming on top of convenient form of enjoyment during the COVID-19 lockdown contributed to this streaming popularity.

The Netflix Philippines Production as Contra-Flow

In many ways, Netflix Philippines to the Filipinos provide opportunities for both the audience and the local producers. Viewers are now able to choose from the mix of titles presented to them with the capacity to enhance their viewing experiences through their own preferred settings. Given a long list of national and local options, Filipinos are now becoming more independent viewers contrary to their US-dependent status prior to the enhancements offered by Netflix. It not only disrupted the traditional Philippine media landscape, it has also empowered Filipino viewers with the power to choose countering the cultural imperialism.

Describing the contra-flow in the Philippine media in the age of Netflix includes the aspects of dominant media flows, “subaltern” flows, and diasporic flows. Dominant flows come from the global North like the United States while the contra-flow emanates from the peripheries of dominant media spheres (Thussu, 2006). With the availability of sources on the Internet, contents are re-embedded in new settings, and these do not necessarily only come from the dominant countries but may emerge from anywhere in the world. This process of dis-embedding and re-embedding is necessary in further exploration of how media contents flow or (re) circulate. Also termed as contra-flow, new streaming sites like Netflix have provided a platform for more cultural products from the Global South, countering “media imperialism” of the Global North (Straubhaar, *et al.*, 2021). As Netflix with a global infrastructure goes to the peripheries, it does not only offer an opportunity for a larger scale but also needs to adapt to the domestic context.

In its localization strategy, Netflix made adjustments when it offered its service to the Filipinos. When it first launched in the Philippines, 93% of the titles available in the US catalogue are not offered to the subscribers (Barreiro, Jr., 2016). However, some titles that are already pulled out in the US catalogue are still listed in the Philippine catalogue considering the series that are popular to Filipinos like *Lord of the Rings*. In 2020, there are 5,507 titles in Netflix Philippines (Yap, 2020). Netflix also catered to the economic status of its Filipino viewers. In 2020, the Philippines has one of the lowest Netflix packages across the globe. In 2023, Netflix lowered the price more and even asked a famous Filipino girl group to share the announcement to the audience (CNN Philippines, 2023).

In terms of physical setup, A Netflix office was also opened in Makati City in the Philippines in 2023 (Purnell, 2023) to cater to more transactions. Aside from meeting rooms

named after *Squid Game* and *Stranger Things*, a separate room was named after *My Amanda*, a Netflix original based in the Philippines. This original content also stars Piolo Pascual and Alessandra de Rossi who are both popular Filipino artists. Pascual and de Rossi were featured again in the first Christmas station ID of Netflix Philippines along with Sam Milby, their co-lead in *Replacing Chef Chico*, Zanjoe Marudo and Elijah Canlas of *Keys to the Heart*, Donny Pangilinan and Belle Mariano of *Can't Buy Me Love*, Miles de Ocampo, Chie Filomeno and Kelvin Miranda of *Missed Connections*, and JM de Guzman of *What If* (Tuazon, 2023). With majority of the population being Christians, Christmas is one of the most celebrated seasons of the year. In addition, the station ID was released on September 18, 2023 because Filipinos' Christmas season starts from September and ends in mid-January. To produce a station ID like the tradition of prominent broadcast channels in the Philippines is a clear localization strategy that considers the values and meets the expectations of the Filipino viewers.

Analyzing the titles mentioned also brings a deeper understanding of how Netflix collaborates with the local filmmakers. This also reflects how these contents gain attention while also presenting Filipino themes. Before the hit series *Can't Buy Me Love*, DonBelle's loveteam also had *An Inconvenient Love* on Netflix. Produced by Star Cinema, it is considered the first hit movie by the well-known production company since the pandemic started and local theaters have reopened (Rappler, 2023). Aside from sharing the content to a bigger audience, it has also rekindled the love of Filipino viewers for loveteams (Oquiza, 2022). In the Philippine entertainment industry, the loveteam culture is very evident in sticking with the same pairs of celebrities who have good onscreen chemistry and are shipped as real-life couples. Such loveteams are able to build loyal fanbase that consumes any media product where the loveteam is featured, hence, is a vital element of the local TV and film culture. In the case of DonBelle, their

loveteam first became a hit on *He's Into Her* featured in iWantTFC in 2021 before the theater release of *An Inconvenient Love* and eventually, their Netflix debut. *Can't Buy Me Love*, on the other hand, was first aired on Netflix and iWantTFC before people can watch them on *Kapamilya* Channel, *Kapamilya* Online Live, A2Z and TV5 (Perez, 2023). iWant, operated by ABS-CBN, added more local contents in 2018 and later became *iWant TFC* as it merged with *iWant Online* (Changsong, Kerry & Marta, 2021). This happened after ABS-CBN, the biggest network in the Philippines, was not granted a legislative franchise. With a great demand for online contents and to address the lack of franchise, shifting to a streaming media platform is a good transition for the company. In addition, collaborating with Netflix gave their products greater audience and better infrastructure. In essence, Netflix did not necessarily compete with the local but provided an alternative or a complementary channel.

On the other hand, the Netflix original *Keys to the Heart* is a Filipino adaptation of a Korean film (Trinidad, 2023). With Korean contents becoming very popular to the Filipino audience, collaborating for this type of media products facilitated by Netflix is a multicultural attempt to bring original productions to the Filipino viewers. Aside from choosing award-winning Filipino cast, it was led by a Filipino director from Cebu who wants to highlight the culture of Filipino families. These localization efforts take the Korean brand but highlights the Filipino touch to a localized story. Another trending content is *Replacing Chef Chico* which is considered as the first Filipino-produced series focused on Philippine cuisines (Trinidad, 2023). The show is a project headed by three well-known Filipino directors – Dan Villegas, Joi Bayan, and Antoinette Jadaone. Entangled in a love story that takes place in a restaurant called *Hain*, each episode features Filipino food from different parts of the country matched with a unique story of a featured diner. The series reflects a lot of cultural values from the places where the

ingredients are acquired to the stories of the food themselves. With the Filipino culture valuing food as a social event, this series entices viewers with a lot of domestic elements.

Also included in the considered best offerings of Netflix Philippines on December 2023 is the series *Maging Sino Ka Man: Season 1* and the film *A Very Good Girl* (Cabral, 2023).

Starring famous Filipino loveteam David Licauco and Barbie Forteza, *Maging Sino Ka Man:*

Season 1 is a remake of a classic Filipino movie in 1991 that featured Sharon Cuneta and Robin Padilla. This romantic story is filled with comedic and action-inspired scenes that showcases a timeless love story for Filipino viewers (TVMAS, 2023). This is similar to the appeal created to the audience when Netflix offered the remake of the Filipino's classic *Pangako Sa 'Yo* in 2021.

It was originally produced in 2000 featuring Jericho Rosales and Kristine Hermosa. A remake was then aired in ABS-CBN in 2015 before finally airing the same remake on Netflix six years after. Like *DonBelle*, Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla is a product of the loveteam culture that appeals to the Filipino audience. These two classics are a staple to Filipino viewers who love the same formula but in this case is viewed on Netflix at their convenience. Meanwhile, *A*

Very Good Girl features two famous internationally-recognized Filipina actresses, Dolly de Leon and Kathryn Bernardo (Rappler, 2023). It was first screened in theaters four months before its Netflix debut. Its first two weeks in cinema already proved to be blockbuster and airing it on Netflix make it accessible even to Filipino diasporic communities across the globe. These added titles on Netflix Philippines show how it becomes a platform for local productions that allow remake of classic Filipino contents or a rerun of popular contemporary media that appeal to the domestic market. In addition, having it on Netflix increases its reach making it available even to other countries.

Also remarkable for Netflix is the airing of GMA 7's hit *Maria Clara at Ibarra*. This a millennial-meets-history adaptation of a Jose Rizal's novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. Gaining the top spot on Netflix viewership, the series recorded 22 million viewing hours though it was not released globally (Carbonilla, 2023). Like *Replacing Chef Chico*, this content provides authentic elements of Philippine history and literature. Similar to other love team drama, it became a successful hit on national TV before airing on Netflix. For the Philippine context, such domestic TV-cinema-Netflix collaboration proved to be effective.

Netflix also tried to address the cultural sensitivities of the Philippine Market. In 2021, it deleted spy episodes of the drama *Pine Gap* because it showed a map China uses in an island dispute against the Philippines (Reuters, 2021). The Department of Foreign Affairs reacted to such scenes and pointed out that it is not fit for the public. It has been a common understanding that whatever is on Netflix reaches a greater audience. On another note, stories of Filipinos are also distributed through a number of titles that are produced in the US. For example, a Filipino American family from Texas is featured in a new Netflix documentary (Quillen, 2023). The film centers on the Filipino concept of "kapwa" and the value of family and community to the Filipino culture.

Understanding these realities in an archipelago like the Philippines with more than a hundred languages and diverse ethnic groups, national preferences are being developed instead of the usual reliance to foreign contents. Becoming a community of fans at the national level contribute to the formation of a national identity. Because of this, it is not surprising why streaming award-winning Filipino contents on Netflix like *Birdshot* and *Heaven's Waiting* contribute to the Filipinos' sense of pride (Co, 2021) and lead to successful contents like *Miss Granny*, *Eerie*, and *The Girl Allergic to Wi-Fi*. As former FDCP Council Liza Diño stated, the

showcase of Filipino titles on Netflix shows the diversity of Philippine cinema and gives an assurance that national and local products are marketable on the global stage (*Adobo Magazine*, 2020). In the Film Industry Conference 2020 hosted by the FDCP, Diño reiterated that many local filmmakers wanted to be connected to Netflix to stream their contents. In response, Raphael Phang, acquisition manager of Netflix, emphasized that they value authentic stories from various countries making partnerships with local producers truly essential. Some of these releases have been in celebration to important events like the Philippine Independence Day, which showcases that the streaming of these media products are not merely for economics or production but are essential in the Filipinos' sense of cultural independence. Netflix Philippines allowed Filipinos to enjoy more of local and national themes that have been attempting to counter not only the foreign contents in the catalogue, but the imperialism in the nation as well.

Because of these innovations and opportunities, the Filipino audience has the chance for a contra-flow particularly in how Netflix adopts glocalization, how it reflects Filipino viewers' preference for national and local contents, and how it offers an alternative channel catering to a bigger audience. This affected the dynamics for an audience that has been mostly passive recipients of US contents prior to the Internet TV.

CHAPTER 5

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONTENTS AS TRANSNATIONAL HITS TO FILIPINO AUDIENCE

While it is evident that Netflix helps increase national and local productions for consumption, it also offers an opportunity for regional contents to be streamed across nations, hence, its transnational effect. But what makes a media product transnational in Southeast Asia and what influences its popularity? The global media system not only allows structural factors to attract international attention, but the transnational dimensions also affect the preference of media consumption as transnational television crosses borders (Lobato, 2019). Prior to this era, television often operated on national territories and within national boundaries. While others are only transnational and not global, Netflix is considered both. Transnational television like Netflix entails three dimensions: “the cross-border mobility of television content, talent, and formats; the interaction of international broadcasters, regulators, and institutions; and the cosmopolitanization of television audiences, styles, and viewing habits” (Lobato, 2019, p.53).

There has been considerable interests in regional media as transnational media companies facilitate the circulation of regional products. In the case of television in Latin America, for example, Straubhaar, *et al.* (2023) explain that initially, though more national programs have been produced combatting cultural homogenization, the imported contents from the US remain to be a second preference until regional products from other Latin American or European countries are made available. This is also observed in the context of Filipino viewers. While

Netflix partners with local companies in the Philippines for increased production, data show that the next preferred products are still US contents. However, with the increasing investment of Netflix on Southeast Asia, there is a potential for this to change as multidirectional media flows have increased opportunity for transnational arena (Thussu, 2006).

In a broader sense, Asian contents are not new in the global market. Bollywood contents from India, Japanese animation and manga, and Chinese and Korean dramas have already captured the imagination of global consumers (Thussu, 2006). Asian penetration also continues since Asian market is one of the largest in terms of population, emerging economy, and considerable attractiveness (Jin, 2021). But while these media products come from both South and East Asia, contents from Southeast Asian countries are also starting to break through. With a digital system that caters to a global audience, Netflix is facilitating a dynamic regional flow through authentic stories from and within other Southeast Asian countries. As it built a regional office in Singapore in 2016, the expansion allowed for the growing of a multivocal view of consumption defined by Southeast Asian consumer interest. The potential of smaller countries to rediscover their significance in transnational flows start to arise as the media become more fluid, networked and multilayered (Guo & Vargo, 2020). Thussu (2006) describes this as a multi-vocal and multi-directional landscape emerging from the 21st century. With satellite digital systems, streaming global contents have produced more consumers across countries and within the region. Before such phenomenon, most audiences were bound by domestic limitations consuming national media only made available by their national broadcasting companies. In the Netflix era, the regional flow of Southeast Asian contents has been more dynamic. Like how East Asian contents become appealing to the region, more Southeast Asian titles are also gaining popularity within its regional audience. One way of explaining why these products become

transnational hits is through the use of multiple layers of cultural proximity. As explained by Straubhaar (2007), audiences tend to choose media products that are closer or similar to their own culture and this cultural proximity affects the regional flow of contents. Looking more closely on the case of Thai media products that became popular to Filipino audience, these multiple layers will be further discussed and analyzed in this chapter.

Consumption of Transnational Media in Southeast Asia

Though the changes are impactful, transnational media have to consider not only the economic and technical side of the tasks but also the cultural contexts in many countries (Rimscha & Moller, 2020). Since the chain of production and distribution transcends legal borders, transnational media companies have to take into account many elements in their decision-making processes. Aside from understanding the why and the how of crossing boundaries to produce media content, part of the greater discussion would be the role of language and culture in all the transnational trade. A lot of push and pull factors contribute to why and how media companies cross borders (Rimscha & Moller, 2020). When a company reaches its growth limit in its country, it expands to other markets in the world. This push factor happens because growing media companies need to accept the challenge of diversifying to cater to a greater global audience. On the other hand, national media products are becoming more attractive to foreign markets not only because of economic reasons but also because of the increasing number of citizens moving to other countries for education, livelihood, or relationships. Expounding on the concepts of migration and diaspora, a person's movement from one area to another leads to deterritorialization or the loss of connection between their own culture and geographies and locations (Thussu, 2006), which can now be addressed because of

transnational media. Though migration is oftentimes attributed to job opportunities, the growth of educational hubs and the proliferation of multiple dating sites further contribute to growing diasporic communities expanding transnational media markets.

Because of these factors, media consumers tend to take the role of becoming global citizens or cosmopolitans. The willingness to subscribe to access more foreign contents challenges transnational media dynamics with initial assumptions of prioritizing national contents over global (Lotz, Eklund & Soroka, 2022). Streaming platforms like Netflix deterritorialize contents delivered beyond national boundaries with the aid of language translation positioning as a creator of transnational spaces. Believing that they are members of a single global community as cosmopolitans do, an increased interest in understanding foreign culture, travelling to other countries, or engaging in international events prompt people to consume foreign media, which Netflix delivers through a more customized catalogue system. The concept of being global citizens affect the way viewership is studied in the age of Netflix (Stolz, 2021). Moving from nationalists to cosmopolitans has been facilitated by Internet in many ways (Thussu, 2007). Sinclair and Straubhaar (2013) elaborated that geo-cultural regions are not only defined by geographical boundaries but also of culture and language of the region (e.g., the Arabic-speaking world, Latin America) implying that Netflix contents tend to facilitate audience orientation toward other countries within the region. Because of the diverse geo-cultural linguistic groups, media products being offered have to be multi-vocal with viewers transitioning from their state-centric view of media consumption to a broader lens of transnational contents made possible by technology. Straubhaar (2008) argues that as global media continue to develop, cultural spaces are being restructured and transnational identities are

being redefined through multiple layers. This leads to complex media consumption patterns and practices that need further study.

While audiences are still provided with national contents, offering more regional products lead a new trajectory for media flows (Pant, 2022). To do this, expanding a media company to other countries need a good evaluation and selection process towards a successful market entry (Rimscha & Moller, 2020). Aside from trying to export media products, finding a local partner to either facilitate product distribution or help in the production process is a valuable step. More than the monetary implications of foreign investments or expanding a media company's operation to foreign countries, the cultural modifications in the media product is also a consideration. A product with a general content versus one that contains more local elements appeals differently to a global audience. Balancing the need for programs with universal appeal and addressing the need for local adaptation are considerations in the two-dimensional typology for a transnational media company (Bartlett & Goshal, 1989). Adaptation made by Netflix through language and marketing concepts is a common modification whenever a content is being adapted to a local market. Understanding the role of culture in transnational processes, producers have to consider the interplay between the society, technology, and culture across borders to successfully penetrate a local market like Southeast Asia. Considering these theoretical foundations of successful transnational media products in the context of popular Asian contents will help describe the preferences of the Southeast Asian audience.

In the case of cinema for example, Tanyag (2019) enumerates relevant factors that will help visualize films in the region. First is historical narrative. This is essential in shaping the context of where the films are coming from. Understanding the story behind the surface level of the performance will help connect the viewers to the setting of the film. The shared colonial

history of Southeast Asian countries contributed to the reshaping of the region's culture. This included how filmmaking was done in such countries. After introducing noir movies in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, silent films in 1950s and full-length movies in 1960s developed in the region. This was followed by experimental and independent cinema from 1980s to the present utilization of advanced technologies for increased quantity and enhanced quality of films. The growth of film culture through the years eventually led to not only strengthening local cinema but also to the consumption of films within the region.

The second factor is government support. The aid and support from the institution in each country has an important role to play in enhancing the quality of the contents and in increasing the quantity in a dynamic film industry. The authorities play a very important role in directing the path for TV programs and cinema in each country. Aside from promoting its local culture and supporting its local workers in the creative industry, it also implements regulations that facilitate the flow of local media to the global market and the entry of transnational media to the domestic market. A "culture drain" may happen if it will not allow a more dynamic production and flow of the society's cultural aspects through media products. Aside from preserving culture in their own local contexts, promoting it to global tourists also affect the way media consumption is being redefined. Instead of describing the single layer of either local consumption or the consumption of foreign products, watching transnational media has been playing a major role due to the goal of travelling to such countries. In such situations, countries that are geographically proximate with lesser government requirements become the go-to travel destinations. Singapore Film Commission, Film Development Council of the Philippines, and the Thailand Film Office grants opportunities for foreign filmmakers but only in partnership with the local filmmakers. The government allowing such type of collaboration also helped in fostering

transnational media production within the region while ensuring that the local industry will not be compromised.

The third factor would be the social issues existing in the region. Having a theme that resonates within the whole regional community helps make a content transnational hit. These themes may also be found in the programs the region has been promoting. To foster unity within the region despite its very diverse nature, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) drafted policies that include an agenda relevant to its “Socio-Cultural Community”. This promotes the understanding and inclusion of the social realities of other Southeast countries in the media products of its member countries. For example, the National Commission on Culture and Arts of the Philippines launched in 2017 the concept of “ASEAN *Tingin* Film Festival” which aims to spread awareness on the common struggles faced by Southeast Asians. With streaming platforms like Netflix, films locally produced get to be watched by the audience even after the screenings in local theaters. The product life of the media products is stretched while allowing more Southeast Asian viewers to watch them.

The fourth is related to the cultural sensitivities in the region and in each individual country. These may be related to tradition, religion, political conditions, and other cultural factors that are considered when a country welcomes or bans a film. Contents that are offensive to some societies affect the flow of transnational media in the region. It is necessary to consider how media products portray and treat religious, gender-based, and ethnic groups in different nations. Being a very diverse region, themes related to these social groups are important concepts that need evaluation as they can influence the way audience will receive the said contents. In terms of religion, Islam is a predominant religion in most Southeast Asian countries though in the Philippines, Christianity is the belief of the majority due to its colonial history. Meanwhile,

Buddhism is the predominant religion in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. With much influence in their communities, contents that tap on themes considered offensive by the religious groups may hinder a content from being entertained in different countries in the region. Gender-based groups, on the other hand, may affect portrayal of themes like homosexuality. While still connected to religious beliefs, traditional values and generational gaps may also affect this perception. Thailand and the Philippines are two countries which are more open to these themes. The celebration of Bangkok Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is an example of how such themes are welcomed in Thailand. While the Philippines is slowly starting with the Pride International Film Festival, its film industry is starting to entertain similar themes and the audience's consumption of boy love series from Thailand show a growing acceptance for such in certain gender groups and generation of viewers. Social response to nudity and violence also affect the reception of transnational media across the region. With numerous ethnicities present in Southeast Asian countries, it is important to see that transnational media will not misrepresent them if their cultures are included in the products.

Lastly, competition in the market is also a necessary consideration. The quantity of films available increases competition but also encourages healthy improvements in the quality of the films. Oftentimes, when a certain country is not able to produce a quality material of a genre like horror or comedy, the audience resorts to transnational media that have better quality. With the regional flow made more dynamic through the streaming platforms, viewers are now provided with more choices from different countries. According to Tanyag (2019), "The emergence of streaming applications such as iflix, Netflix, and Amazon Prime further increased the competition in the market, thereby affecting the viewing of locally-made films and television

programs in the region... Interestingly, more and more films that are featured in cinema houses across the region are produced by Southeast Asian filmmakers” (pp. 14-15).

To further understand Southeast Asian consumers’ response to transnational media, studying the popularity of Korean contents in Asia is a relevant starting point. Before *Hallyu* became popular to Europe and US, it also became a transnational hit to its Asian neighbors. One factor that is believed to greatly contribute to the Korean wave popularity to Southeast Asian consumers is cultural proximity (Ariffin, *et al.*, 2018). Consumers are able to relate to the narratives experienced in Korean societies. It becomes a regional media that connects to pan-Asian consumers and communities built of fandoms. With the growing market for Korean media products, it has transitioned from a national to a transnational phenomenon. Korean drama can provide satisfaction because Asian viewers find it easy to relate to that similar lifestyle they portray. According to Ariffin, *et al.* (2018), “Korean dramas had been proven to successfully fill the emptiness feeling that could not be filled by Western dramas” (p. 13).

Appreciation of Korean contents also translate to cultural diplomacy. Malaysians who consume Korean dramas tend to view Korea more favorably which helps build relations between the two countries. The same was observed in Singapore where a Korean group participated in a local event. Aside from Korean influence in local groups in Indonesia, local TV channels in Vietnam and the Philippines allotted time slots for the airing of Korean drama (Peichi, 2013). Prior to Southeast Asian contents being available, East Asian contents like Korean drama and Japanese anime were already broadcast in Philippine television.

The first local broadcast of a Korean drama to Filipino viewers occurred in 2005 (Jang & Song, 2017) with *Winter Sonata* as one of the most trending contents followed by numerous Korean drama series and musical performances called *Hallyu*. These contents are called

Koreanovela taking it from the Spanish telenovelas to popular Korean TV series (Peichi, 2013). Two of the biggest TV networks are few of the first who aired Koreanovelas like *Lovers in Paris*, *Jewel in the Palace*, *Full House*, and *Stairway to Heaven* and all these received great feedback from the Filipino audience. What is more notable in Korea's regionalization of their dramas is the inclusion of Southeast Asian elements in the production like mentioning Thailand or the Philippines in some of the scenes (Peichi, 2013). One of the most recent examples is the movie *The Childe* with Kim Seon Ho, a popular Korean actor. The lead character is described to have Filipino roots while some of the scenes portrayed to be Philippines were actually shot in Thailand. This strategy not only increases the relevance of their media products even to non-Koreans but also emphasizes the similarity of Thailand and Philippines as Southeast Asian countries. Meanwhile, Korean-produced *City Hunter* in 2011 also included a scene in Myanmar. This resonates with how Chinese elements are also seen in Filipino titles. Films play a role in the construction of identity in the age of transnationalism like how Chineseness is negotiated in Chu's (2011) analysis of selected Filipino films like *Mano Po* and *Crying Ladies*. Aside from East Asian Contents, Southeast Asian titles were also given better opportunities to participate in the regional dynamics since streaming platforms came and cultural proximity played important roles in their growing popularity.

Anh's study (2016) explains the fame of Thai and Filipino contents to Vietnamese audience. In relation to the ASEAN Economic Community programs, this transnational flow of media products is seen as part of the regionalization process. This enables citizens of one country to have a better understanding of the culture of another particularly to bind Southeast Asia as a region. Both the similarities and differences in culture contribute to why Vietnamese consumers are attracted to contents from the Philippines and Thailand. Along with such cultural factors is

the political-economic condition that allows and promotes flow of media products among members of ASEAN. This growing interest in Southeast Asian contents have been observed in the Vietnamese viewers through the years. Prior to the age of Internet TV, satellite or cable TV has already been sharing Thai *lakom* and Filipino *teleseryes* to Vietnam. Some of these were eventually uploaded in the Internet with Vietnamese dubbing while newer ones are with Vietnamese subtitles. With Thai contents also being exported to Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, it is believed that next to Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, Thai can be the next big wave in the Asia market. Having a good storyline, utilizing an appealing style, and employing attractive actors and actresses are some of the production-related factors contributing to the popularity of both Thai and Filipino contents. Thai contents have also been popular in Myanmar and in Hmong community (Jirattikorn, 2008).

With the accessibility and affordability of streaming platforms like Netflix, watching such transnational media products has been made more possible and convenient. Media products from Thailand and Philippines consumed by the Vietnamese audience may be viewed as intercultural exchanges that contribute to increasing acceptance and the needed cultural integration to motivate ASEAN member states to interact with each other. In this way, the regionalization process goes beyond just a mere policy from the political or economic perspective but also becomes a socio-cultural integration in which members or citizens of the regional community can participate in. With the digital infrastructure Netflix offers, this process of connecting countries within the same region has been more dynamic and evident. The enhanced flow of transnational media within the region also helped in representing unique Southeast Asian values and in fostering ties among its member countries (Moreno, *et al.*, 2023).

Cultural Proximity and Filipinos' Consumption of Netflix

After the establishment of a regional center in Singapore in 2016, Netflix became a new platform for diverse Southeast Asian programming. New contents made available include *The Headshot* and *The Night Comes for Us* from Indonesia, and the originals like *Ghost Bride* from Malaysia, and *The Stranded* from Thailand. It also partnered with local productions like Mediacorp in Singapore, ABS-CBN in the Philippines, Media Prima in Malaysia, and GMM Grammy in Thailand in an attempt to forward authenticity (Netflix, 2019). Featuring casts from specific countries and using narratives from the region, Netflix has expanded to appeal to Southeast Asian consumers despite having other competitors. A viewership report from Southeast Asia Online Video Consumer Insights & Analytics conducted by Media Partners Asia revealed that Netflix led in all five markets, namely Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia (Frater, 2022). A more recent MPA analysis shows that Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and India will continue to contribute to the increased subscription and revenue per user (Frater, 2023) with an observed surge in demand from Southeast Asian viewers. Numbers in the recent years proved how strong Netflix has penetrated in Southeast Asia and despite having rivals, it keeps securing its top spot (Fidaul, 2022).

While some of the contents are branded as *Netflix Originals*, the company also repackages locally produced films and series as cultural exports. Some of the co-produced ones bring into conversation the concept of hybridization. With this, they also conduct workshops on film and writing in Southeast Asian countries through local partners who have production teams in each nation like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. These partnerships in various forms have been instrumental in securing quality contents even with local partners (Jin, 2021).

Even in translation, it originally started with English, Spanish, and Portuguese and has now expanded into more than 20 more languages (Lobato, 2019).

In the Philippines, the local industry has been very open to transnational media facilitated by streaming platforms particularly when the country faced challenges in its local content providers. One of the most intriguing moments in Philippine media in the recent years is the denial of the franchise renewal for ABS-CBN (Pertierra, 2021). Being the largest network with multiple regional centers, its failure to secure a new franchise affected its traditional programming that led to more digital contents being produced on top of other forms of media products they air through other channels. Since digital media has been made accessible in the Philippines from upper to lower income Filipinos, even the middle class has allotted budget for content subscriptions. Though still able to access traditional TV programs from other channels, the closure of a big network led to finding the streaming platforms as providers of more diverse contents that cater to Filipino taste.

Moreno, *et al.* (2023) studied the factors influencing the repurchasing behavior of Filipinos in terms of SVoD services that include Netflix. Pricing is the first factor considering that there might be other options that may be accessible. With this, the SVoD services like Netflix have to offer affordable packages for the audience to enjoy their viewing experience without being guilty of paying an amount for entertainment. The second factor is ease of use. Consumers remain loyal to a technology that they find less complicated. Being able to use them in multiple gadgets is also a plus factor. The third factor is the quality and diversity of contents. Having a long list of cross-cultural contents make the audience excited and continuously interested in binge-watching. Content exclusivity and superiority influences the consumer's choice of platform. The last factor is the purchase intention which is greatly affected by the

customer experience. Whenever the audience is satisfied with the viewing experience, it prompts them to stay loyal to the platform.

With the current accessibility to Southeast Asian contents through Netflix Philippines, the streaming platform is also becoming a channel for Filipinos to be closer to their neighboring countries. Following the theory that satellites facilitating transnational flow can help build nations (Straubhaar, 2019), it is not impossible that Netflix as a popular streaming platform is also able to build Southeast Asia as a region presenting it as a distinct and thriving geo-cultural media market. Filipinos' preference for Southeast Asian contents can be influenced by cultural proximity since these are media products of their regional neighbors.

Straubhaar (2007) defines cultural proximity as the reason why the audience would prefer a content that is close to them in terms of language, dress, style, knowledge, and history. When Korean contents became popular in intra-Asian flows, one of the factors that contributed to their domination is the consumers identifying with the similarities in their geo-linguistic and cultural themes (Yoon, Min & Jin, 2020). Guo and Vargo (2020) also named proximity as one of the factors significantly predicting media attention along with geographic closeness, trade and population. Cultural proximity does not only reflect its multidimensionality in terms of media preferences outputs but it also has the power to create an audience (Ksiazek and Webster, 2008). In the case of Southeast Asia, and even in the Philippines alone, a multicultural society is a breeding ground for such type of audience. With the abundance of media in a digital era, the concept of cultural proximity has been a valuable aspect to explain why people tend to gravitate towards one transnational product over the other. Customers' decisions tend to be affected whether the other country has analogous culture or ideas as the other (Thang, 2022). A certain society's open-mindedness on another which affects proximity is also influenced by the

frequency and intensity of their contact with each other. These cultures may not directly be symmetrical, but their cultural links develop over time.

Clearly, the Philippines is geographically proximate to its Southeast Asian neighbors, which makes it a member of the said region. The physical proximity facilitated relationships and sharing of commonalities like cultural-linguistic heritage drawing the countries together (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Their shared colonial history could also play a role like how Brazil, Italy, and Mexico became culturally proximate because of their shared historical experiences. Most of the Southeast Asian countries have a shared history of Western colonization (Tanyag, 2019). The Dutch once took over Indonesia, the French ruled in Vietnam and Cambodia, the British conquered Malaysia, Laos, and Myanmar, and Spanish and Americans governed the Philippines.

This historical narrative affects cultural shareability referring to common values they may share even across boundaries. In terms of the economic aspect, most countries in Southeast Asia fall under the category of developing, which imply similarities not only in industrial characteristics but also in lifestyle and even social issues. Although Singapore is excluded from this category and Indonesia and Thailand are continuously showing remarkable economic growth, the shared regional experience of economic capital is still present in most countries like the Philippines.

Multiple Layers of Proximity between Thai Titles and Filipino Viewers

A closer look at the recent data shows that among all Southeast Asian countries, contents from Thailand are the most popular among the Filipino audience. Before analyzing some Thai

titles that have been transnational hits in the Philippines, it is also important to see how the popularity of Thai dramas have been growing in the region.

As Jirattikorn (2017) argues, Thai drama started becoming popular in Asia since late 2000s). Aside from becoming a trend in China, it has also reached Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Philippines. Though the language is different, subtitles made it possible for the Southeast Asian audience to understand Thai contents. Aside from enhanced accessibility through advancements in mobile technology, cultural proximity played a role in the popularity of Thai dramas. Media products from Thailand are also commended for their high quality yet their export prices are affordable. In terms of demographics, it was found out that the previous popularity of Thai dramas in China were because of housewives that are interested to watch such contents while being at the comfort of their homes. On the contrary, the viewers of the renewed popularity of Thai contents are young, well-educated millennials in urban areas that actively seek for global contents and are no longer passive receivers of contents fed by television to them. They prefer such contents for relatable themes of everyday life while also being fascinated by the beauty of the Thai actors and actresses. The Chinese viewers are recently attracted to boy's love (BL series) which portrays romantic relationships between two male. Originally influenced by the manga from Japan, the BL series became a new interesting them for young Chinese audience. Though recently banned by China due to issues of piracy and censorship, BL contents from Thai have also captured many fans in Vietnam and Indonesia and the Philippines.

Though elements of cultural proximity may have their role in this popularity, this case between the Philippines and Thailand still provide an interesting point of investigation.

Geographically, Thailand is in the main region of Southeast Asia while the Philippines is in the

insular which means bodies of water separate it from other countries that are closely connected like Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Economically, Thailand is considered an upper-middle economy while the Philippines is lower-middle economy. Historically, Thailand is also the only country in Southeast Asia that has not been colonized by the West (Tanyag, 2019). How then does this transnational appeal come to existence?

One possibility is found in Straubhaar's explanation of multiple layers of cultural proximity. As cultural proximity builds up on traditional identities, it is also understandable that audience preferences are dynamic and may not necessarily only stick to those closest to its orientation, hence, multiple layers are reflected (Georgiou, 2012). Common love for horror films, an indicator of genre proximity, may have affected *Pee Mak's* popularity to the Philippines. Another example is the popularity of the Thai Boy Love (BL) series. As a pre-dominantly Christian country, Filipinos may have found Thai Boy Love contents as a desired proximity making the *2gether* series a pattern for modern love era. The third one is thematic proximity which brings storytelling of relevant themes across nations. The thematically proximate concept of poverty reflected in *Hunger*, a Thai film, resonated with Filipinos making it a transnational hit in 2023. Even language barriers have been bridged by English audio and subtitles provided by Netflix. Filipino audiences may have found a second layer of linguistic proximity through English mediating the communication between in Thai contents and the Filipino viewers. Each of these layers of cultural proximity will be discussed further in the following sections.

Thai's horror quality as genre proximity. Filipinos are known to love horror contents. Tabanera (2021) made a list of eight Thai movies on Netflix Philippines that feed the Filipinos' obsession for horror contents. Considering Thailand to be a top producer of horror films, the list includes *The Maid*, *Shutter*, *Ghost Lab*, *Laddaland*, *Phobia 2*, *Nang Nak*, *Still* and *Train of the*

Dead. While the list was published in 2021, the oldest on the list was produced in 1999, which was considered the inspiration for a popular Thai hit called *Pee Mak*. The way Netflix offers a plot and how it tags a content to contain horror helps in feeding the need of Filipinos for good scary movies. Stories of such contents involve haunted houses, supernatural inhabitants, ghosts, folk tale, paranormal, and death. In a study about Kris Aquino who is considered as the Philippine Box Office Horror Queen, Sanchez (2016) describes Philippine horror as that filled with fear rooted from the tradition of ghosts, monsters or any evil forces that cause repression. These qualities are directly reflected in the Thai folktales on Tabanera's (2021) list. The popularity of horror as a genre to Filipino viewers is also reflected in the successful franchise of *Shake, Rattle and Roll*. Since its first release in 1984, it has consistently been sought after until its 15th series in 2014 (Tolentino, 2016). The growth of horror films was also evident in how the number of horror contents in the country grew from 26 in the 1990s to about 70s in the next decade (Campos, 2014). While considered as one of the most understudied genre in Philippine cinema, the fear of anxiety in these horror films are believed to be enjoyed by Filipino viewers who also possess anxious emotions over familiar places like homes and small communities (Tolentino, 2016). It is also interesting to note that some horror films associated to Thai folktale connects to Filipinos' affinity to superstitious beliefs having supernatural characters attacking people (Corbita & Saministrado, 2019). While the horror cycle in the Philippine cinema is previously connected to that from Hollywood, the concept of Asian horror is a popular genre that is visible in horror remakes of South Korea, Japan, Hongkong (Campos 2014) and in this case, the rising popularity of Thai horror contents.

La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) explains that genre can be shared across cultures and that these genres can fit to specific broader audiences or can create subgenres that resonate with

subgroups in some cultures. When Lu, Liu and Cheng (2019) describe the Chinese viewer's transnational consumption of Korean and TV dramas, it highlighted the role of cultural proximity, particularly genre proximity with emphasized interest on action or crime-related contents. Similar archetypes contribute to genre proximity like how forms of storytelling resonate across nations. Romance dramas also proved to be more proximate than fantasy-based narratives that are far from reality. With Asian horror being proximate to the concept of Filipino horror, quality Thai contents became transnational hits in the Philippines.

Because Philippine cinema still has material and structural limits for better horror productions, Thailand, known to have quality horror films, becomes a very good option. Looking into media flow in a regional or transnational level, viewers may look for contents outside their media environment when a material is not adequately produced in a certain society (Cattrysse, 2017). As Ancuta (2011) explains, Thai horror films are important in entering international cinema. Known as *nung phi* or ghost movies, the production of horror films are both top in quality and quantity as it reached almost a third of the overall films in Thailand in the late 2000s. With Netflix showing even the old Thai horror films, it is no doubt that this genre of Asian horror has captivated the Filipino viewers. Along with other Thai contents, *Ghost Lab* and *The Maid* were included in the top ten most watched Thai contents on Netflix Philippines in 2022 (Reyes, 2022) showing how horror-themed contents will always be a choice for the Filipino audience.

Thai BL's popularity through desired proximity. According to La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005), the second form of proximity called desired proximity is relevant to what the audience dreams about like how Asian viewers love the aspired modernity shown in Japanese contents. Aspiring the normalcy of male-to-male relationship in a predominantly Christian

country like the Philippines is a possible reason for the popularity of Thai Boy Love contents to Filipino viewers.

The concept of 'Boy Love' originally came from Japan's *yaoi*. It refers to romantic relationships between boys in a media product that are commercially produced like drama or series (Lilja & Wasshede, 2017). To qualify as a BL, there should be coupling or pairing of two male characters that have unique bond enough to qualify for sexual or romantic relationship (Fermin, 2013). Each character has assigned attributes that will make the person either the more mature or the more childlike one. The two characters also possess great and noticeable visual features attracting more fans. At times, the story being portrayed by BL detaches from reality as it tries to break traditional gender roles.

The interest of Filipino viewers for BL series is first shown through Japanese contents. Fermin (2013) explains that such popularity is because of the similarities in the Japanese and Filipinos' experiences of patriarchy. This makes BL an alternative media for the Filipino fans. However, the differences in societies also lead to some differences in reception that include Filipinos' position on homosexuality. BL, for some Japanese viewers represents a strong desire to be free from the expectations of a patriarchal society instead of just a desire for sexual pleasure (Lilja & Wasshede, 2017). In terms of gender orientation, masculinity in Thai society is not measured in assertiveness or competitiveness but in terms of being a good person who cares and is respectful (Pimpa, 2012). It appears that Japanese BL or *yaoi* are often watched by Filipina women while Thai BL in the Philippines is watched by mostly gays (Baudinette, 2020).

Though Thai BL emerged later than the Japanese *yaoi*, the Filipino fan community considered BL as a form of popular culture from Thailand and separated from that of the Japanese (Baudinette, 2020). Having a product that is recognizable, as explained by Iwabuchi

(2002), is an influential factor in how these products can be transnational. However, Baudinette (2020) argues that when these cultural products are transnationalized, the possible misunderstandings that may arise from differences in context can be considered sites for producing new knowledge relevant to the culture of the receiving country.

Living in a society where it is not traditional to seek or learn about sexual desires and drive, BL series provide an alternative for Filipino fans (Fermin, 2013). The Filipino concept of *hiya* or shame, in addition to the religious upbringing experienced by the majority, makes it difficult to talk about sexual fantasies. It also acts as a venue to move away from the objectification of a woman's body by using male characters in the narratives. BL contents also serve as relatable media for people who have developed homosexual desires. Popularity of BL opens discussions on the Filipinos' concept of homosexuality. Considered as a gay-friendly society, the Filipinos in the modern generation are seen to be more accepting and tolerant of the homosexual themes. However, non-heteronormative identities are still considered a minority who experiences discrimination in different layers. According to Fermin (2013), "Thus, a great tension exists: while traditional categories of homosexuality remain to this day: they are tolerated only in certain instances and spaces but are never fully accepted. The existence of people who subscribe to non-heteronormative sexual desire and orientations will always be relegated to their margins because notions of their abnormality persist in the social consciousness of most Filipinos" (p. 11).

The BL fan communities become safe space for fans who have the same cultural experience as the characters. Fans in the community page talk about their reflections on the shows and understanding of these Thai products they are reviewing are heavily assisted by subtitles. Aside from reactions on BL episodes, fans also talk about the information related to the

Thai actors. Thailand, for BL fans, is considered a gay paradise, hence, visiting shooting locations in Thailand and experiencing Thai culture is a goal for the viewers (Baudinette, 2020). While the Philippines is becoming more open to understanding the concept of BL in real societies, having Filipino BL contents are still not as many and as popular as how Thai contents on Netflix Philippines are. Some Filipino-themed BL series like *Gameboys*, *Gaya sa Pelikula*, *Ben x Jim and Hello Stranger* are available on Netflix, Thai BL like *2gether the series* and *Still 2gether* are still considered some of the most popular ones (Yap, 2021).

Hunger and poverty as thematic proximity. When *Hunger* was released in April 2023, it easily became a top film on Netflix Philippines (Melliza, 2023). *Hunger* is centered on the story of Aoy who once ran their family's noodle restaurant before being hired for fine dining under Chef Paul, a celebrity chef. The story shows the image of poverty in Thailand that also resonates to the Filipino viewers. The stir-fry noodle restaurant of the Aoy's family looks very similar to that of the Filipinos' called "*karinderya*" which offers affordable food to the customers on the streets. The movie shows the difference between the rich and the poor in the context of food. A number of scenes also reflect poverty in the Philippine context. One of the scenes in their family restaurant shows the worries of Aoy's friends regarding unemployment and the frustrations after finding out that graduating from college is not enough to land in a good-paying job. One of the reasons why Aoy accepted the offer to work under Chef Paul is because she was tired and overburdened with handling the family business being the eldest which is a common scenario for Asian families. This is a shared experience with Filipinos being "*panganay*" or eldest child in their families who are expected to stay with the family and continue the business even if it means not pursuing their own plans. Like the Philippines, Thai society is believed to be collectivist as they have high regard for family and extended

relationships. Each member of the society is expected to be responsible to other members as shown in loyalty to family and friends (Pimpa, 2012).

The hospital scene when Aoy's father was sick also portrays a familiar scenario in poor communities in the Philippines when people are not attended well due to poor facilities and lack of healthcare workers. The scene depicting the rich doing illegal hunting and getting favors from authorities in terms of parking also reflect the disparity between the rich and the poor. Though Chef Paul got arrested, he left with a message that he will still be able to get away with it with money and with the rich backing him up. The power distance in a Thai society is also reflected in how symbols of social status are being displayed. Influential and powerful people who are members of high society are distinct and show a different lifestyle from those of the lower social classes (Pimpa, 2012). In one of Chef Paul's events, the waiters also talked about how privileged the rich kids are to have a luxurious lifestyle while they remain to be hardworking servants until they grow old. As Aoy went home, the scenes of poor eating in the streets of Bangkok are familiar scenarios of streets in Metro Manila sealing the theme of poverty as a resonating topic for both Thai and Filipino viewers. As Jackson (1997) explains, production and circulation of images often show much of Thai public life. The portrayal of urban communities in Thailand also reflects the case of the Philippines as a developing nation.

As Straubhaar (2007) explains, a lot of themes can cut across cultures and societies, especially for developing countries. For example, themes of hard work and patience leading to success may be a recurring theme across films of countries that are undergoing economic and technological changes. Other themes that can be relevant to certain societies include rural or urban life or industrial work, or middle-class life challenges. According to Tanyag (2019), "If we wish to visualize the region in such a way that it reflects the actual situation present in the

community, one must take into account of those who are being portrayed in the movie. Say, the urban poor has been a common staple in most independent films in the region, however one shall look closely as to whether it actually reflects to what is going on in the community or not” (p. 21). Tapping on the same theme of poverty, Thai contents like *Hunger* may resonate to Filipino viewers through a clear layer of thematic proximity.

English subtitles as a second layer of language proximity. Language plays an important role in influencing the behavior of viewers (Ksiazek and Webster, 2008). Though still working on minority languages, the range of languages available on Netflix demonstrates that it is one of the most multilingual television globally. This translation process is a collaborative effort of a global team. Netflix’ director for international dubbing, Debra Chinn, explained how committed their team is in delivering the contents closer to the audience (Jha, 2019). First, the content has to be watched to understand its local themes and to analyze it in terms of both translation and dubbing perspectives. Their dubbing partners also came from a specific language market. In addition, they have a global team who speaks 36 languages and have immersive experiences in countries where the contents will be offered. The ultimate goal is to help produce a meaningful content that will resonate with the audiences. They use language to effectively relay human emotions to a target audience of a local setting.

In 2019, Netflix included Thai, Bahasa, and Vietnamese in their dubbing and subtitling options (*Made in Asia, Watched by the World, 2019*). For example, *Seasons*, a Filipino production, is also dubbed and subtitled in Indonesian, Vietnamese, Malay, and Thai. Clearly, the growing investment of Netflix in the region paved the way for a transnational flow of media products that appealed to the Filipino audience. Out of all the local languages being made

available is the existence of English as an international language that is always a ready-made option for Netflix subscribers.

Existing in the same cultural linguistic or geo-linguistic space is an element necessary to understand cultural proximity. It is also important to consider that linguistic ability as part of the broader cultural capital may be affected by education or other experiences. Viewers who know more languages have the ability to have more diverse choices of media. This is in contrast to the idea of cultural polarization which may limit one's ability to consume media due to linguistic differences. In the study of Ksiazek and Webster (2008), English-speaking Hispanics have multicultural fluency which allows them to shift to either English or Spanish. Being in the middle ground enabled them to transition from one content to another.

In the case of Filipinos, having English as an official language which is also embedded in schools make it easier for them to consume Southeast Asian media with English subtitles. Building on this principle, anything Netflix offers is consumable in terms of language for Filipinos since English is a second language for most viewers in the country. This makes Filipinos cultural omnivores which means they do not only consume one type of media product but can move from one to another as long as English language can bridge that language gap. Filipino as a language may be totally different from Thai language but having English as a mediating factor makes a second layer of linguistic proximity beneficial for Filipino viewers to understand and enjoy Thai contents.

Aside from these four, other cultural elements may have played a role in making Thai contents on Netflix a transnational hit for Filipino audience. Georgiou (2012) explains the existence of a more complex cultural role by studying transnational television. Results highlighted the emotional value of media products give viewers a "sense of belonging in a

transnational community” (p. 869). This sustained cultural attachment facilitated by a media product is important in the concept of cultural proximity. This is directly connected to the historical and linguistic profiles of audiences and linked to the media products they consume. Cultural proximity can help oppose cultural imperialism as viewers choose the products from nearby culture. But since culture in itself is too complex, understanding cultural proximity may entail multiple layers (Cattrysse, 2017). With this, the next chapter will include a discussion of the multiple layers of culture Netflix offers through its diverse programming. This includes multidirectional flows from foreign contents from the West and the regional contents in Southeast Asia to the increasing national and local production from the Philippines while still remaining as a US-based tech company, hence, creating a transverse transnational effect.

CHAPTER 6

TRANSVERSE TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA FLOW THROUGH NETFLIX PHILIPPINES

Though multiple layers of cultural proximity may have played a role in the transnational flow of media products in the region, it cannot be overlooked that a number of complex changes happen when the contents move across cultures. Instead of looking with a simple lens of transnationalism, it is necessary to understand the multiple layers of factors at work. As Netflix presents itself both as a global and a transnational company operating in a multicultural country like the Philippines, it continues to disrupt and redefine media consumption in the age of Internet TV.

To address these concerns, Straubhaar, et al. (2021) introduced the concept of transverse flow explaining how Netflix targeted audiences across nations and cultures. They summarized the development of TV flows based on the notion of “appointment television” offered by network television, then the subscription-based cable and multichannel TV age, and finally, the Internet TV age. In this last stage where diverse programming is made available through global streaming, more complex patterns have been emerging both in the production and consumption perspectives. Foreign programming is still evident in the catalogues of global media players bringing into debate the possibility of new wave of media imperialism. However, these companies also offer cultural products from other countries outside the US, which reflect contra-flow. The concept of transverse flow referring to the “intersection of spaces of existence” (p.

160) attempts to explain how streaming services like Netflix cut across existing flows of media and cultural products.

First, the emergence of regional programs did not totally eliminate the liking for US programs. With the long history of cultural penetration, research shows that it remains to be the second most preferred after the national media products (Gitlin, 1998). Economic factor also played their role as it was found out that audiences who belong to the elite and upper middle backgrounds still tend to prefer foreign contents while those in the lower middle to low-income families enjoy national programs. While Netflix collaborates with local partners increasing domestic production and creating opportunities for contra-flow, it still operates as a US-based institution offering a large catalogue of Western products.

Second, while regional media products offer more culturally proximate contents, the nature of viewers themselves and the goals of media consumption also influence their viewing decisions. In the age of globalization, consumers take the roles of being cosmopolitans interested with the offerings from different sides of the world. Instead of choosing only the products that resonate with their own, they consider viewing products they are curious about. Studies also show that viewers are no longer fixated on only one type of media but tend to be omnivores consuming different global contents. Straubhaar *et al.* (2023) explained how cultural distinction and being cultural omnivores could possibly affect the popularity of Netflix to audiences different from where the contents have originated. Because of the availability of culturally heterogenous programs, most viewers may choose films and contents that reflect the cultural other, or those opposite from what they are used to in Latin America (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013).

Third, because of the algorithms Netflix uses, it has the ability to analyze data from various cultures and study their preferences and viewing habits. Netflix has the technology to recommend to the user a global content that is relevant to the individuals tastes and complex demographics. Unlike traditional television bound by location, this modern TV allows virtual spaces beyond national boundaries to be cultural spaces presenting local, regional, national, and transnational products. While personalization is empowering the audience, the recommendations offered by Netflix still play a role in the viewers' consumption decisions. Even the use of English as a mediator amidst all local languages possibly present represent the hybridity that happens in the transnationalisation process.

If a very diverse Southeast Asian region produces transnational products to an equally diverse archipelago like the Philippines, it is impossible to account the resulting preferences and consumption patterns to a single factor. Clearly, the potential influence of all these possible factors have to be investigated to better describe how Netflix disrupted the flow of media products in the context of Filipino audiences.

The next sections are attempts to explain the transversal transnational flow of media products as affected by: 1) the multiple layers of sources and contents available in the streaming platform; 2) the shift of agency from the Western source to the global consumers with multiple identities in multicultural and diasporic communities; and 3) the cycling back of influence to Netflix as a US-based company leading Western-mediated media flow. This chapter describes the complexity of the media flow in various directions and how all these flows can happen in the same platform at the same time through Netflix Philippines.

Netflix as a Provider of Multi-directional, Multi-vocal Media

As Epstein (2016) explains, Netflix is like a global TV channel that acts like a chameleon. The diversity of its contents makes it a choice for almost every viewer in different parts of the world who has access to this platform. Stoldt (2021) describes it as a unique audience fragmentation which now divides viewers to more than a hundred options in comparison to the traditional nature of viewers who only have very few choices of channels before. Neira, Sanchez-Navarro & Clares-Gavilán (2021) argue that Netflix was able to create a new media ecosystem with the exponential increase of contents available in any gadget preferred by the consumers. Because of these changes, audience measurement can no longer use traditional techniques. Understanding consumption now needs to consider engagement, new subscriptions, and customer retention as new elements of a subscription video on demand service. According to Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2015), “At the same time, a benefit of Internet TV is that it carries videos from a broader catalog appealing to a wide range of demographics and tastes, and including niche titles of interest only to relatively small groups of users” (p. 2).

The flow of contents Netflix offers is continuous to 90t tarct viewers to enjoy and keep watching in any screen they want to use (Ortega, 2023). It also ensures that the products available resonate with their daily mood or life rhythm. The Autoplay feature also lessens the actions needed to be done by the user to continue binge-watching. An option for downloading is also made available to further offer continuous watching even when Internet access is not available at certain times. This offline consumption breaks the barrier of Internet infrastructure that even though a viewer can only access the Internet for a time, the subscriber can still watch the show and will keep wanting more due to such convenience. Ortega (2023) further argues that the key to the success of Netflix is its “appearance of limitlessness, of making users believe the

service has everything they may want, shrewdly hiding or downplaying the temporality of licensing agreements by constantly delivering new content” (p. 139).

However, with a mix of foreign, regional, national, and local contents in one platform, it is not unusual to have some frictions in the platform. Because locally-produced texts contain national themes streamed transnationally in a platform like Netflix, viewers from another culture may also interpret it in different perspectives and this can cause friction in the interpretation of the contents (Stoldt, 2021). It is also difficult and complex to fully understand the international flow in Netflix because the algorithmic personalization orders contents in different ways per person. Every country also has a different catalogue, hence, the flows are multidirectional. Migration also creates more complexity because it creates diasporic flows in communities living across borders. For example, the comedy specials of Joseph Glenn Herbert, known as Jo Koy, has been popular in Netflix and one of its episodes feature the Philippines entitling it *Jo Koy: In His Elements*. This is not only a representation of what the culture of Manila is but also the narratives of Filipino-Americans anywhere in the US.

Jeff McBride, in his article on diversity published in the Netflix website in 2023, highlighted how the company champions underrepresented groups featured in their “My Story, Our Story” event in Asia-Pacific. Along with the empowerment of 150 local filmmakers in a series of workshops is the screening of three films from the said region. The Thai drama *Dear You*, the Indian fantasy-drama *Soul-Kadhi*, and the Vietnamese short film *Pao's Forest* were all part of the big event organized to showcase how Netflix promotes diversity and how it equips local partners in the process. The panel composed of filmmakers emphasized that more than tokenism, the films have to portray true representation from the communities they are trying to feature. Keith Sicat, the director for *Indigenius*, considered as the first film project collaboration

of Netflix in the Philippines, stated that inclusion of storytellers from the communities themselves add authenticity to the representation.

Aside from workshops in the region, Netflix also partners with national agencies to further enhance production of local stories to be included in their catalogues. In 2020, the Film Development Council of the Philippines published a story on how Netflix incorporates and advocates for Filipino narratives. Along with the partnership the streaming platform has with local companies like Viva, ERJ Found Films, Black Cap Pictures, and Changehe Films, two of the movies it will include in its new releases are *lola Igna* and *Pamilya Ordinaryo*. While the first film won in the local film festival of Filipino contents, the second one won in Venice International Film Festival. Their inclusion in the Netflix Philippines extends both the time it can be watched and the type of audience who can view the said contents. Mikhail Red, the director of *Birdshot* featured on Netflix, emphasized how his film has been getting new reactions and online engagements from viewers even if it has been three years since its first release on the platform. Meanwhile, Raphael Phang, one of the managers of Netflix in Southeast Asia, was confident that the new film, *Dead Kids*, written and produced in the Philippines under Red's direction, will also resonate to communities both inside the country and abroad. Red further explains that having *Dead Kids* on Netflix testifies that the Filipino productions are world-class and that it will the movie help gain international spotlight.

The increasing list of contents from both the domestic sources and the regional producers add to the longer list of media products Netflix acquired from its global partners. With such diversity, the consumption of Filipino audience reflects how much is being offered in exchange of their continuous subscription to the platform.

The current social condition in different countries have also influenced the popularity of contents from Internet TV. Though allowing outside activities after a two-year pandemic has affected TV viewing, most of the audience still show interest in watching more diverse contents from new channels that have emerged with the help of digital technology. Stoldt (2021) studied the top 10 lists in 79 countries in 2020 and got 244,380 records appearing in the analysis with some appearing multiple times. In Southeast Asia, the record shows 15 in Indonesia, 167 in Malaysia, 167 in the Philippines, 167 in Thailand, 190 in Singapore, and 105 in Vietnam in nine months. Analyzing the data, more than 50 percent of the 2777 films are American co-productions dominating the international flow. Meanwhile, the regional flow data show varying results though it has been evident that Asia-Pacific is the only region that have been consuming more regional products. This is greatly attributed to the multi-regional co-productions and the cultural proximity affecting preferences. According to Changsong, Kerry and Marta (2021), the virtual showcases a unique cross-platform regional partnerships during the pandemic.

Even after the pandemic, this multidirectional flow of diverse contents is still observable in the list of most popular media products among Filipino viewers. Tables 1 and 2 show the Top 10 films and television programs on Netflix Philippines from December 4 to 31, 2023.

Generally, the list contains some Filipino productions and a mix of American and Asian contents. Under the film category, majority of the list is dominated by US contents while some Philippine-based productions like *Kidnap for Romance*, *A Very Good Girl*, *I love Lizzy*, *The Hows of Us*, *Mamasapano: Now It Can Be Told*, *Video City: Be Kind, Please Rewind* also made it to the trending contents. Some regional contents became interesting for Filipinos like the film adaptation of the anime *One Piece* from Japan and the documentary from India, the *Curry & Cyanide – The Jolly Joseph Case*. Meanwhile, the list for popular TV series reveal grater

inclination to Asian contents that very few American contents are observed. The four-week list is dominated by Korean drama, often referred to as *Koreanovela* like *My Demon*, *Welcome to Samdal-ri*, and *Sweet Home*. Along with the Korean contents is the increasing number of Japanese anime like *Yu Yu Hakusho* and *Jujutsu Kaisen*. Filipino productions like *Can't Buy Me Love* and *Replacing Chef Chico* are observable on the list for the whole month. Unlike films that can be finished in one viewing, TV series calls for more binge-watching, hence, contents stay longer on the top list indicating not only their popularity, but also the loyalty of the viewers on the said program. *Replacing Chef Chico* as discussed in the previous chapters is the first Netflix original that focuses on Philippine Cuisine. Meanwhile, *Can't Buy Me Love* is already a household name being streamed in other platforms like local TV and cable TV channels, together with its Netflix release. This latter drama appeals to the Filipinos' desire for the traditional soap opera portraying themes of romance, family, and social status. It is interesting to note that only three contents from the US and one from Spain made it to the December list. While quality films from Hollywood are still a top choice for many Filipino viewers, the diversity and appeal of regional contents, along with some domestic ones, are already satisfying for them. This resonates the concept of cultural proximity stating that viewers tend to choose contents closer to their own especially when they are satisfied with its quality.

The nature of the contents also matter. Since films are easier to finish and needs shorter viewing time, it is easy for viewers to explore more contents and entertain Western-produced media products. Meanwhile, a TV series takes times before its completion, hence, until some of the programs on their current watchlist are finished, there might not be enough room to entertain contents from further countries. The lists of popular shows on Netflix Philippines show a quick view of how Filipino viewers consume diverse contents and how the media flow cuts across

various directions making it both transnational and transversal. While both international contents from the US, local contents from the Philippines, and transnational contents from Korea and Japan are gaining popularity, the regional contents from Southeast Asia are yet to secure positions more consistently. Thai contents like *Girl from Nowhere* (Tabanera, 2021) and *Hunger* (Netflix, 2023) have secured spots in the top list during their first months of release but the competition with other Asian and Western contents is still present.

With all the diverse contents available, online streaming has clearly paved the way for more diversity and Netflix's localization strategy made the mix more multicultural. For example, a Netflix Original can range from a content that is acquired or co-produced and can either be released globally or specifically for local markets they are targeting (Roig, Clares-Gavilan & Sanchez-Navarro, 2020). This means that aside from origin, the nature of the contents themselves can already portray multiple layers. However, even with this diversity of contents, Western contents still get good reception as shown on the previous consumption of Filipino viewers. Meanwhile, the contraflow from the emerging centers are in the processing of reshaping the global contents. Even US viewers are binge-watching Korean drama because of a number of elements like stories of class, race, and gender, that they enjoy in a well-directed Korean content.

In terms of Filipino audience, Umali (2006) explains that though Western contents are traditionally preferred by earlier generations and nationalists opted for Filipino-themed contents, the new generation of viewers considers both while also opening themselves to other foreign contents like Asian productions. In terms of transnational products within the region, Southeast Asian contents being made more available through Netflix is slowly gaining popularity as they resonate with the Filipino audience. Contents with themes related to problems of developing countries like poverty and social justice or those of genre that are interesting for Filipinos like

romance and horror are slowly building up popularity in the recent years. As Netflix disrupts the traditional linear flow and presents all these multidirectional, multivocal media products, the consumption behavior of Filipino viewers have been more complex.

Table 1. Top 10 films on Netflix Philippines (December 4 – December 31, 2023)

Date: December 4-10, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Kidnap for Romance</i>	Philippines
2	<i>Mamasapano: Now It Can Be Told</i>	Philippines
3	<i>Sing 2</i>	United States
4	<i>Leave the World Behind</i>	United States
5	<i>The Hows of Us</i>	Philippines
6	<i>Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse</i>	United States
7	<i>Underwater</i>	United States
8	<i>The Fast and The Furious: Tokyo Drift</i>	United States
9	<i>Family Switch</i>	United States
10	<i>The Fast and The Furious</i>	United States
Date: December 11-17, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Leave the World Behind</i>	United States
2	<i>Underwater</i>	United States
3	<i>Kidnap for Romance</i>	Philippines
4	<i>Sing 2</i>	United States
5	<i>Mamasapano: Now It can be told</i>	Philippines
6	<i>I Love Lizzy</i>	Philippines
7	<i>Clifford the Big Red Dog</i>	United States
8	<i>Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid</i>	United States
9	<i>One Piece Film: Red</i>	Japan
10	<i>The Fast and The Furious: Tokyo Drift</i>	United States
Date: December 18-24, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Rebel Moon- Part One: A Child of Fire</i>	United States
2	<i>The Marine</i>	United States
3	<i>I love Lizzy</i>	Philippines
4	<i>Clifford the Big Red Dog</i>	United States
5	<i>Leave the World Behind</i>	United States
6	<i>A Dog's Way Home</i>	United States
7	<i>Sing 2</i>	United States
8	<i>Video City: Be Kind, Please Rewind</i>	Philippines
9	<i>One Piece Film: Red</i>	Japan
10	<i>Underwater</i>	United States
Date: December 18-24, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>A Very Good Girl</i>	Philippines
2	<i>Rebel Moon- Part One: A Child of Fire</i>	United States
3	<i>Scream</i>	United States
4	<i>The Book of Life</i>	United States
5	<i>Pretty Woman</i>	United States
6	<i>Sing 2</i>	United States
7	<i>I love Lizzy</i>	Philippines
8	<i>Curry & Cyanide – The Jolly Joseph Case</i>	India
9	<i>Clifford the Big Red Dog</i>	United States
10	<i>The Marine</i>	United States

(Source: <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/philippines>)

Table 2. Top 10 TV programs on Netflix Philippines (December 4 – December 31, 2023)

Date: December 4-10, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>My Demon: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
2	<i>Sweet Home: Season 2</i>	South Korea
3	<i>Replacing Chef Chico: Season 1</i>	Philippines
4	<i>Welcome to Samdal-ri: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
5	<i>Can't Buy Me Love: Season 1</i>	Philippines
6	<i>Sweet Home: Season 1</i>	South Korea
7	<i>Obliterated: Season 1</i>	United States
8	<i>Squid Game: The Challenge: Season 1</i>	United Kingdom/ United States
9	<i>Castaway Diva: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
10	<i>World War II: From the Frontlines: Season 1</i>	United States
Date: December 11-17, 2024		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Yu Yu Hakusho: Season 1</i>	Japan
2	<i>My Demon: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
3	<i>Single's Inferno: Season 3</i>	South Korea
4	<i>Can't Buy Me Love: Season 1</i>	Philippines
5	<i>Welcome to Samdal-ri: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
6	<i>Sweet Home: Season 2</i>	South Korea
7	<i>My Life with the Walter Boys: Season 1</i>	United States
8	<i>Replacing Chef Chico: Season 1</i>	Philippines
9	<i>Sweet Home: Season 1</i>	South Korea
10	<i>Obliterated: Season 1</i>	United States
Date: December 18-24, 2024		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Yu Yu Hakusho: Season 1</i>	Japan
2	<i>My Demon: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
3	<i>Gyeongseong Creature: Season 1</i>	South Korea
4	<i>Single's Inferno: Season 3</i>	South Korea
5	<i>Can't Buy Me Love: Season 1</i>	Philippines
6	<i>Welcome to Samdal-ri: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
7	<i>That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime: Visions of Coleus</i>	Japan
8	<i>Sweet Home: Season 2</i>	South Korea
9	<i>Replacing Chef Chico: Season 1</i>	Philippines
10	<i>Jujutsu Kaisen: Season 2</i>	Japan
Date: December 18-24, 2023		
Rank	Title	Origin
1	<i>Gyeongseong Creature: Season 1</i>	South Korea
2	<i>Yu Yu Hakusho: Season 1</i>	Japan
3	<i>My Demon: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
4	<i>Berlin: Season 1</i>	Spain
5	<i>Can't Buy Me Love: Season 1</i>	Philippines
6	<i>Welcome to Samdal-ri: Limited Series</i>	South Korea
7	<i>Single's Inferno: Season 3</i>	South Korea
8	<i>Sweet Home: Season 2</i>	South Korea
9	<i>Jujutsu Kaisen: Season 2</i>	Japan
10	<i>Replacing Chef Chico: Season 1</i>	Philippines

(Source: <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/philippines>)

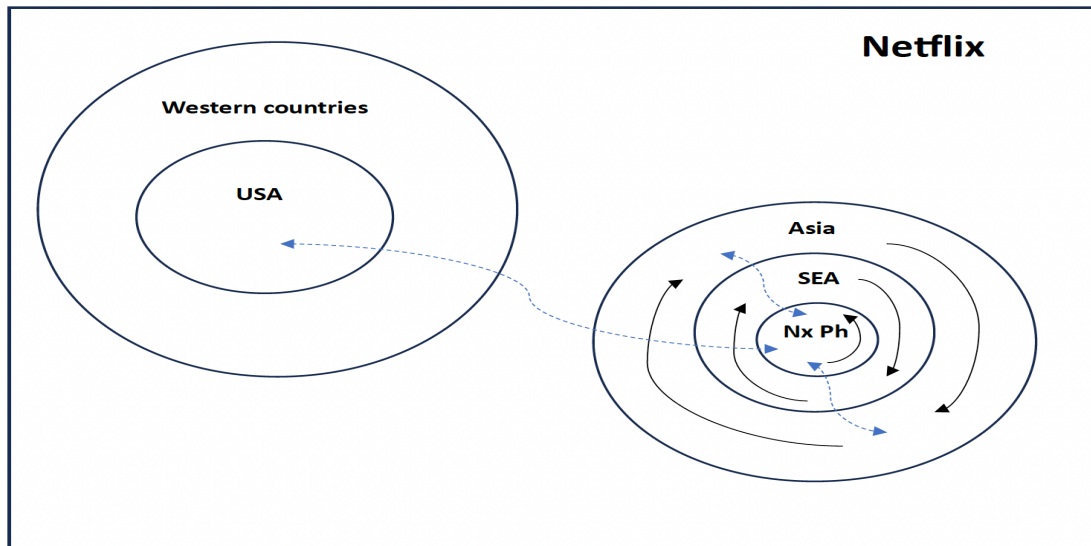


Figure 1. Transverse transnational flow on Netflix Philippines

Figure 1 attempts to illustrate the multidirectional flow of media products available to Filipino viewers through Netflix Philippines. Double arrows show that contents may come from a certain place of origin in the same way that it may also receive such. Dashed lines represent the transnational flow as these products cross national borders. Meanwhile, a domestic flow is also reflected as more local productions are circulated within the country. Regional flows are also visible within both Southeast Asia and Asia in general. While it provides an opportunity for more local contents distributed to a broader audience through streaming, Southeast Asian and other Asian contents like the Korean dramas and Japanese anime are also being consumed in the country. Though a contra-flow is observed in increased local production and even its global streaming to diasporic communities, Western contents that are deeply embedded in the culture are still popular. The local, regional, international and transnational flows are observable in all directions and portray diversity and perceived limitlessness of Netflix catalogues recommended to the Filipino audiences.

Netflix as a Platform for Cultural Omnivores and Cosmopolitans

The global strategy of Netflix has been effective in its expansion of services. First, it extended to the closest markets like Canada, then to markets known to be media consumers like Latin America and Europe, until it reached more diverse and complex societies like that of Southeast Asia in 2016 (Roig, Clares-Gavilan & Sanchez-Navarro, 2021). The global product is localized and the local product is globalized. This is a cultural dynamic that has been happening in the age of globalization. Instead of providing a linear way of TV viewing, Netflix was able to present a unique and more enjoyable option for consumers through experiencing an interactive and personalized viewing (Ziska, 2015). Netflix has the ability to give a satisfying internet experience instead of just providing a streaming opportunity like other platforms (Guadiana, 2020).

Due to all the factors at play and the emergence of both global and regional cultural products, Straubhaar et al. (2021) argue for a complex multiplicity of flows in a complex range mix of identities. The wide variety of choices from local to national and global media and cultural products contribute to reinforcing multiple aspects of identity while also acquiring new ones. While the distribution of television programs grow to broader cultural geographic areas, acculturating to the language, lifestyle, and other cultural elements of the new place lead to further development of multilayered identities and increased access, even changing preferences of media products. All these layers of identity and culture may influence preferences, consumption practices, and viewing habits. Subnational cultural-linguistic identities may also be formed especially in a multicultural archipelago like the Philippines, hence, a single explanation of a transnational appeal to the Filipino audience seems impossible. To describe the new identity of audiences formed in the streaming era, the term *atawad+ac* is being used to refer to people

who watch anytime, anywhere, in any device and any content (Neira, Sanchez-Navarro & Clares-Gavilán, 2021). In the words of Ortega (2023), Netflix does not necessarily create a new character but it helps subscribers find themselves by using personalization.

In the recent studies, viewers are found to be not only nationalistic patrons of local or culturally proximate products. They can also be cosmopolitans or cultural omnivores, and at times, even roamers.

Chalaby (2021) explains how an SvoD platform like Netflix become more cosmopolitan than a traditional network. Because of the ability to access more international contents, users are able to not just consume diverse media products but are also able to engage in cross-border conversations about such. In a utopian version of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," television can dissolve the territorial boundaries and connect people together from around the planet (Marchessault, 2005). This tendency grows as electronic media is used in disseminating media products from various nations and the distance is changed because of technology. While remaining global, the infrastructure brings communities closer like a village. Even non-fans are observed to also look for fresh media products. The cross-mobility of cultural products are creating transnational fandom that overcomes linguistic barriers (Ju, 2020). According to Chalaby (2021), "When viewers are given the opportunity to share content and interact, they form cross-border connections. These interactions raise awareness of transnational communities, changing how viewers think about them" (p. 237).

An example in the Asian context would be Lin and Tong (2008)'s study on Korean dramas, Their study revealed that Korean dramas also possess such modern qualities shown in the lifestyle of the characters in urban communities. Another observable factor is the appearance of beautiful sceneries which is not only attributable to the settings and the camera angles but also

leads to a desire for tours to filming locations. Media consumption eventually influences a consumer culture in other aspects like food and fashion. The concept of modernity does not only gear away from tradition but presents an image of a life of diverse stories, personal choices and representations of success in different forms. This includes an individual's freedom over love, equality in the society, or personal efforts towards metrics of modern success or any concept related to a modern culture Lin and Tong (2008). All these representations are admired by consumers from various parts of the world as modernity, tourism, and societal themes of love and success resonate to every culture. The representation of what cosmopolitan living means, or how to run after love or justice, can go beyond borders, hence Asian viewers are having a shared attraction for such themes. Lin and Tong (2008) further explains that in some cosmopolitan cities in Southeast Asia and East Asia, the consumption of globally trending products is a phenomenon that the origin of these products can sometimes be overlooked. The media facilitates and influences this transnational cultural flow because it is through media that the images and representations of these cultural products are portrayed. The decentralization of globalization from Western to regional influences affect the popularity of media and cultural products either from local sources or regional leaders.

In the case of Filipinos, the popularity of Hallyu wave has also been reflected in what Sanchez (2014) calls "diasporization" of the Filipino. The consumption of Korean dramas in the Philippine media has led to incorporating some Korean aesthetics in local productions as the Filipino character and conditions portrayed become combinations of contemporary realities and their positions in a global culture. The growing consumption of contents from outside the borders and the establishment of diasporic communities around the globe due to migration, employment and education influenced the cosmopolitan perspective of Filipino viewers.

Aside from these multiple layers, cultural openness which makes people more receptive to another culture may have also influenced preference beyond proximity. For example, the popularity of Korean *Hallyu* in Spain cannot be attributed to proximity as the two countries are different in many ways. In such cases, Spanish consumers appreciate Korean contents as a set of non-Western cultural forms (Yoon, Min & Jin, 2020) and mainstreaming it in Europe is presenting a culturally authentic material from the other side. For example, while Korean drama appeals to global audience through Netflix' expansion in Asia, the universal archetype of romance is a genre that is accepted and loved by global audience. However, though genre proximity plays a role on this, the uniqueness of the image of the male role in the Korean drama compared to that of Western perspective is part of the diversity the audiences are loving. The male roles in the Korean contents are more feminine and their handsome features are considered "beautiful" which is opposite from the usual Western image of strong and powerful guys (Salsabila, 2021). In another Asian context, the popularity of an Indian content called *Balika Vadhu* to the Vietnamese audience led to the understanding of how cultural deprivation can lead to the Vietnamese audience immersing themselves in a media product different from what their society reflects or allows (Pant, 2022).

As Roig, Clares-Gavilan and Sanchez-Navarro (2021) explains, Netflix serves the so-called "communities of tastes" (p.133). A consumer study suggests that a typical Netflix subscriber browses 10 to 20 titles recommended on Netflix and will lose interest in about 90 seconds if no interesting content will come up (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). Though most subscribers are influenced by the recommendation, 20% of the streamed contents are the ones that came from the 'search' which means that those viewers are actively seeking for a content that they have in mind and that they decided to pursue. In such cases, these media products they

are interested in are no longer limited to those culturally proximate to them but also to those that are different from their own. Consumers often rely to media when asked about images of a culture distant from them (Hetsroni, 2008). This shows that by being a cultural omnivore, the audience also becomes more aware of the realities in societies that are from the other side.

In the case of Thai BL series, Filipinos calling Thailand a “gay paradise” portrays how they want to see and experience how such male-to-male relationship is perceived in another Southeast Asian community. While there is the desired proximity at play, the differences in culture, religion, language, and even government structure shows that Thailand remains to be a culturally different society from the Philippines. With this, popularity of Thai BL in the Philippines cannot just be accounted to the similar desire for this modern love but may also be influenced by the cultural openness of Filipino viewers.

This desire to consume a product from a different society might be considered a natural tendency for Filipinos living in a multicultural country of more than a hundred languages. The archipelagic nature of the country contributing to the diversity of culture and languages make Filipinos omnivorous even in the local context. For example, *Iti Mapukpukaw*, the Philippines’ entry to the 96th Oscars, is a Filipino-produced animated film set to be released on Netflix on 2024. It is based on Ilocano culture from the Northern part of the Philippines. This may be a domestic production but for Filipinos living in other areas in the country, some elements may seem like cultural other they are willing and excited to consume as Ilocano, like other linguistic groups, is part of the nation as a whole.

In terms of platform, the current list of streaming technologies allows for the intersection of broadcast media and entertainment sites. This not only allows mobility to move from one to another but to also digest multiple concepts leading to another identity of viewers called

“roamers”. Hill and Lee (2022) described the audiences as “roamers” who have different routes in multiple entertainment platforms like cable TV, local TV, and Internet-based platforms that include Netflix, Disney Plus, Amazon Prime, YouTube and Twitch. Because of the flexibility streaming platforms allows, audiences are able to move from one to another further customizing their viewing experience. This is because the consumers are not just doing a downstream flow of contents but the various entertainment flows allow them to move within and across platforms. To the viewers, the Netflix Park is a “gated community of subscribers with access to a range of uncensored transnational content” (Hill & Lee, 2022, p. 99).

Audiences from Indonesia, Malaysia, and US who participated in Hill and Lee (2022)’s study of “roamers” described their viewing habits prior to the age of streaming platforms. They would skim schedules of programs to be broadcasted in local TV or cable TV. Sometimes, they even go to sites to access foreign contents that are either high quality or not aired on TV due to censorship. These narratives affect the way they consume media products in streaming platforms like Netflix. Movers usually find interesting video on Facebook or other social media sites and would check clips from YouTube before settling to watch Netflix while studying or eating. They also commit to shared TV viewing with family and peers, known as Netflix Party. Aside from limited options before, programs on local TV can be regulated depending on a country’s policy. According to Ju (2020), the Netflix Park shows how platforms have been in competition against each other in a media ecosystem.

In this case, Filipinos heavily invested on Facebook and YouTube are eventually encouraged and led to consume more media as they move from these networks to their streaming subscriptions. Therefore, the media flows in the Philippine context, is not only described by the origin of the contents, but also entails discussions on how these contents move from one platform

to another. For example, even though ABS-CBN stopped airing on local channel due to its non-renewal of franchise, its production, *Can't Buy Me Love*, was made available on free TV like A2Z and TV5, cable TV like iWantTFC, but was also streamed on Netflix. Various clips of this popular content is also found in YouTube and Facebook making the viewers more interested with it. The videos also contain English subtitle making it also available for non-Filipinos.

Aside from audience identities and cross-platform viewing, watching media products from Internet TV can also be attributed to multiple voices reflected in its themes or contents. Media can reflect reality, but it can also be an escape from it. For example, Iwabuchi (2002) explains that one of the appeals of Japanese contents is the representation of the experiences resonating with young viewers. These representations have transnational appeal that is also observed in Korean and Taiwanese dramas. While the power of TV drama to convey social realities is a known appeal of this type of media, romance as a theme can also be a means of escape from tough realities making it popular to Asian viewers. For example, Korean “Hallyu” wave, like Japanese contents, become leading source of Asian modernity (Lin & Tong, 2008). Ju’s (2020) study revealed that there is also an emotional involvement in these cultures where media serve as commodities.

It is notable how viewers tend to stick with the online entertainment platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic when movements in the physical space are limited. Because of this “criss-cross” direction of viewing habits in various streaming platforms, consuming diverse themes not only create multiple layers of new identities but also affect the media flow in the Philippine context, creating Netflix parks around the country.

Netflix as a US-based Recommender for Viewers

One of the advantages of Netflix over other platforms is its personalized nature considering the preferences of its viewers. Their personal choices guide their viewing experience from the list of contents to watch to the time they want to spend in watching. However, while it is a preference-driven Internet TV, using a different lens in understanding its recommender system also reveals how it can be platform-directed in a number of ways and this affects the direction of media flow Netflix facilitates.

Looking closely at the recommendations, it also indicates that the viewing preferences of the audience are already mediated by Netflix (Pilipets, 2019). Arnold (2016) argues that while viewers can personalize their catalogs, algorithms used by Netflix provide predictions enabling the streaming company to recommend contents that can still influence viewers' preferences. As a technology company, Netflix uses big data analytics to understand their viewers and provide a better viewing experience and a more relevant recommendation. Part of the data are the audiences' location, the contents they are interested in, the time they spent watching, the device they are using, and the ratings they are giving (Maddodi & Prasad, 2019). This means that the recommendation system uses both the information from the user and the information from their choice of contents (Fernandez, 2018).

Recommendations are the first things a viewer will see upon coming to Netflix (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). Aside from information about the subscribers' interests, it also considers the profile of the viewer as an important element (Maddodi & Prasad, 2019). When a new subscriber logs in, the system immediately asks the viewer's preferences through some tiles of certain genre to serve as initial inputs of their choices. If the subscriber did not declare any preference, a set of popular contents will be the initial parameters. The first contents chosen to be

watched by the customer will be the basis for the next recommendation and the process continues. In this case, the system of Netflix is a hybrid recommendation system with a mix of content-based and collaborative filtering. While content-based filtering uses search and watch history, collaborative history looks into possible similarities in the preferences of a group of viewers. For example, if two subscribers have the same profile and both like one genre, the other genre watched by one subscriber will be recommended to another. For Netflix, it looks into the result of both filtering system and provides final recommendations to the viewers. Instead of the usual star rating system before, Netflix now uses various algorithms describing the viewing experience of a subscriber (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). The limitation a recommendation may have is that if there is a very few data about the subscriber to begin with, the recommendation may be limited, hence, diversity in the recommendation is a consideration (Maddodi & Prasad, 2019).

These recommendations appear as landing cards or image teasers that attract viewers to click and binge-watch them. Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2015) describe further how the recommender system of Netflix looks like on the side of the viewers. A personalized video ranker is used showing a maximum of 40 rows and 75 videos in a row. These numbers vary on the device used by the subscribers. Since it is personalized, two viewers who love the same genre like horror might still get a different ordering of contents. The Top N video ranker, on the other hand, produces the list of videos found on Top Picks and combines the elements of personalization and popularity. The Trending Now portion also proposes popular contents but are more inclined to short-term temporal trends which viewers might find interesting to watch. The continue watching ranker, unlike other unviewed titles, lists down contents that may have been watched and recommends that the viewers resume watching. The order of contents is a

result of considering the time that has passed since last viewing, the point when the viewer stopped watching, and other relevant data. It is interesting to see that the fourth algorithm called video-video similarity focuses on what the system thinks. In 2015, it shows that 80 percent of the hours streamed on Netflix was influenced by the recommender system. Though the remaining 20 are actually searching for contents they like, the system still recommends something after a failed search, though it offers something close to what the user is looking for.

In its early years, Netflix organized a one-million-dollar competition for participants who can improve their recommendation system by 10 percent. While this strategy of constantly seeking to improve their service proved to be good for the company, the 2010 competition was not able to push through due to privacy issues since the participants are given a dataset from the company before creating a possible improvement in the system (Maddodi & Prasad, 2019). In 2021, a new feature called Downloads for You that rids the consumer of browsing by just allowing Netflix to download contents based on the user's watch history (Ortega, 2023). This is similar to Play Something feature that gives the platform to automatically decide on what to play and the subscriber just needs to watch what the interface selects. These two new features provides a clearer picture of how the platform can mediate the preferences of viewers while still allowing personalization to exist. Knowing that a viewer is in the Philippines, part of the possible recommendations are not only local contents or popular contents from the West but even programs from the same geographical region like those produced in Southeast Asia. This recommendation of transnational content may be further offered when a regional content of an interesting theme or genre is became part of their watch history.

It is also interesting to note that Netflix is not only able to use the recommendation system to enhance viewing experience but it was also able to use it to study on where it will

invest its Originals. Deciding on a Netflix Original through big data analytics from viewers' preferences helps the success rate of the contents they are releasing. The popularity of a content helps in increasing prestige for the brand, in retaining existing customers, and in attracting new subscribers (Neira, Sanchez-Navarro & Clares-Gavilian, 2021). However, the release of Netflix originals also reflect how the platform balances its desire to allow diversity while still remaining to be a Western-based company.

Though branded as "original", Netflix Originals also refer to contents to which Netflix has exclusive rights to air or include in their catalogues in certain areas (Roig, Clares-Gavilian & Sanchez-Navarro, 2021). The number of Netflix Originals doubled from 2015 to 2018 showing the large catalogue of contents it offers. Aside from deals with companies and project pitches, a big number of these productions came from film festivals. It is notable that some of these festivals include Sundance in the US, Cannes in France, South By Southwest (SXSW) in Texas, Berlin in Germany, and TIFF in Canada. While contents are diverse, these film festivals are still organized by Western countries and are dominating the catalogue. Records in 2018 show that majority of the Netflix originals are in English language with 58 recorded contents in the said language while products from other languages range only from 1 to 7 including three Indonesian films from Southeast Asia. Salsabila (2021) argues that the claim of Netflix to be a global TV network is an attempt to cultural diversity but still caters mainly to American audience that even its diverse contents reflect American perspectives. Though it allows local producers to have greater audiences, the dependence on the use of Netflix as a platform reflects the power American infrastructure can bring to other countries. Stoldt (2021) explains that while contra-flow is represented in the diversity of contents, it did not fully diminish the power of America and its position in the global media. According to Salsabila (2019), "Those consequences are the

homogenization in European-made Netflix series, where they appear to be fully Americanized with American lifestyle or American perspective, and heterogenization in Asian-made Netflix series with its collaboration of Asian culture and American popular culture. The claim of a global TV network does not leave the American cultural power” (p. 15).

The localization strategies of Netflix may have contributed to countering the flow of hegemonic Western contents through providing underrepresented narratives as a transnational media (Yanders, 2019), but may not be purely free from Western influence due to the origin of Netflix itself. For example, it may present a material authentic as it was produced and created in a specific country, but to call it *Original* means that there is a percentage of Western input through the production process which contribute to the discussion of hybridity. It is also important to see that since Netflix offers the local producers a chance to have their contents available to a greater global audience, their local production must not only cater to the local taste but must also consider the global consumers’ perspectives. This is also the reason why a local production or a collaboration made in the Philippines is also geared towards international and transnational consumption. For example, *Seasons* is also dubbed in Vietnamese, Malay, Indonesian, and Thai which implies that these areas in Southeast Asia are some of the priority markets for this content. Though a lot more languages are available for the subtitle option, dubbing requires more complicated processes and having them in other Southeast Asian languages promote the consumption of *Seasons* among other viewers within the region.

Language is no doubt a key issue in reaching a global market (Pant, 2022). An element of the West through English as an international language is still presented and in fact mediates the transnational process. The use of English represents a big part of the hybridity that is needed in producing transnational media products. With a number of languages available, English remains

to be a needed element to appeal to a global audience. Understanding translations as cultural interpretation, a careful process of translation must be done to ensure that a dubbed or subtitled product is not too far from the authentic. Salsabila further argues (2019) that “Netflix, nevertheless, offers itself as the media for the dominant culture to define its consumers’ demands to be the standard of global consumerism, illustrating the importance of English language to be the main requirement as a successful commodity” (p. 20).

Whether dubbed in another Southeast Asian language or not, English subtitles is an option that is readily available to all viewers. While this is part of the nature of Netflix being a US-based company, it continues to develop inclusion programs to cater to the global audience. It addresses diversity in its official website as it publishes “inclusion reports”. In its 2023 report, it is revealed that next to the White race or ethnicity who occupies a little more than 50 percent of their workforce, the next largest group (about 18%) are Asians (Myers, 2023). Whether through the cultural translation process facilitated by a lot of languages or through the composition of the production team and the workforce in its headquarters, it is clear that Netflix is a product of multiple factors and all these are voices portrayed in their contents. This shows how complex the nature of Netflix is as a global and transnational TV facilitating transverse flow in its cultural markets like the Philippines.

From Transnational to Transversal

The exposure of Filipino audiences to multiple programming happening at the same space and time in this Internet TV is what creates the transverse flow of media products in the Philippines. Along the lines of doing so, multiple identities are being formed influencing viewers to not only accommodate culturally proximate products but even the cultural other as they

consume media as cosmopolitans, cultural omnivores, or roamers. Ultimately, Netflix as a US-based company has an influence over the processes involved in its streaming function from production to translation and these also contribute to the hybridity of the contents aimed to be presented as close to authentic. Though the multiple layers of cultural elements at play exist long before Netflix expanded in the region, the existence of this streaming platform offering diverse programming has evidently disrupted the pre-SVOD media flow in Southeast Asia and the Philippines, in particular. It is also important to understand that though Netflix remains to be the top choice for streaming media, media streaming in Southeast Asia has been continuously accelerating (Changsong, Kerry & Marta, 2021). The list includes meWatch and Cathay CineHome from Singapore, Tonton and dimsum from Malaysia, iWant TFC and Upstream from the Philippines, AIS Play, Doonee, MONOMAX, and TrueID from Thailand, Vidio, Genflix, Goplay and Vision+ from Indonesia, K+ and Viettel TV from Vietnam, and SingMeng TV from Cambodia. With all the local and transnational options within the country and across the region, the transversal flow of media in the Philippine context requires more in-depth and comprehensive discussion in future scholarly works.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing and taking into account various scholarly works, texts, reports and reviews related to the Netflix operations in Southeast Asia and the media production and consumption in the Philippines in the age of Internet TV, the following conclusions were made in relation to the arguments advanced throughout the thesis.

First, Southeast Asia, prior to the age of Internet TV, has been experiencing transnational flow of media products in two ways. First, communities living near the borders are able to receive signal from the other country, hence, transnational programs are being consumed in such manner. Second, collaborations among TV networks allow airing of transnational contents in domestic channels, but still, on the basis of traditional TV programming decided upon by networks. Also, more restrictions apply on this process since ownership of national TVs depend on the policies of countries. In certain situations that a government assessed a content to be contradicting their national values or threatening the formation of national identity, the airing of these programs may be limited or censored. This is contrary to distribution through Internet which, though still facing censorship, provides a more flexible infrastructure than a domestic TV network. It is also notable that most of the history of television and film in Southeast Asian countries, like the Philippines, is influenced by Western companies. This is partly because the transition towards being an independent state is often assisted by the former colonizers. In the same way, the countries from the West are often more industrialized and developing economies

rely on their expertise on advanced technologies to integrate development in their own communities. Cultural imperialism and media dependencies observed because most countries are still trying to produce better quality contents. In pursuit of entertainment of good quality, the availability of Western products gratify the needs of the Southeast Asian consumers. More importantly, Western culture is deeply embedded in the lifestyle of the former colonies, hence, consumption of media products are rooted in their societies.

Second, Netflix as an innovative streaming service does not only provide a personalized experience to its global consumers but it has also encouraged a contra-flow among its local partners particularly in the former colonies in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, the collaboration it promotes through local filmmakers is seen as a positive growth in the local industry because Netflix has the infrastructure to give contents a global audience. It is also seen as enhancement to the quality of media products as it conducts local workshops that are supported by national film agencies. In its campaign to drive authenticity, local producers and consumers, as well, feel that their local stories and voices are being heard from the perspective of the storytellers themselves. In some instances, some contents are released during events that are important to nation building like Independence Day. Local partners feel honored to be featured on Netflix which appears as a global stage for their productions that deserve global recognition. This also provides as an additional platform for contents that are loved by Filipinos but are no longer available for TV or film screening due to limitations in temporal spaces and time which Netflix as a platform was able to break. While the Western contents are already globally powerful and presence of local contents is not enough to compete such dominance, Netflix was still able to provide a bigger avenue for Filipino contents to be made more available in more communities, hence, contributing to a contra-flow.

Third, the availability of more Southeast Asian contents on Netflix gave options for Filipino viewers to also consume regional products that are culturally proximate to them. Instead of resorting to Western contents due to limited options, Filipinos are given the chance to explore Southeast Asian context through the transnational products made available since Netflix expanded in the region in 2016. The localization strategies employed by Netflix in Southeast Asia not only brought authentic stories from local communities to its neighboring countries but it has also provided more ways of consuming media products in various languages. Cultural proximity played a role in understanding why Filipinos are attracted to contents coming from their neighboring countries to which they share the same geographic region and colonial history. Complexities in a diverse region still show in the context of Thai production and Filipino consumption. However, multiple layers of proximity were observed in such instances making some Thai transnational products resonate to Filipino audience. The lack of quality horror films in the Philippines made Filipinos watch good productions from Thailand satisfying their love for horror as a genre. Meanwhile, similarities in the theme of poverty, common in developing economies, have affected Filipinos' desire to watch a Thai film called *Hunger*. In the same way, while the Philippines has been generally accepting the non-binary descriptions of gender, the desire for modern love reflected in Thai BL series has made Filipinos binge-watchers of these contents. Though Thai and Filipino language are different, the use of English as a second layer of language proximity played an important role in the consumption process.

Lastly, the emergence of a transverse transnational media flow in Southeast Asia, in the context of Filipino viewers is affected by many factors. First, the multidirectional media flow arises from the immense diversity of foreign, regional, and local contents available in the Netflix catalogue. While local and regional contents are popular due to cultural proximity, the influence

of Western contents to the former colony is still evident. Aside from having high quality, Netflix catalogue is also dominated by Western products since it has access to these contents as a global Internet TV. Meanwhile, recent studies also show that globalization has helped in the development of multiple identities among viewers. Instead of being branded as solely consumers of domestic products, consumers are becoming cultural omnivores open to understanding the culture of the “other”. Also, cosmopolitanism emerging from continuous migration, international education, and interracial marriages influence the interest of viewers over the culture of other countries. In the advent of competitions across various platforms, viewers also tend to be roamers shifting from one platform to another prior to binge-watching in the “Netflix Park”. Despite all these seemingly limitless diversity and complex identities, the influence of Netflix as a US-based recommender is still present. Though viewers are given the agency to choose, the recommendation system utilizes their data to present possible options and this can still affect the decisions viewers make. Also, the use of English as a language available to all contents seals the importance of Western power in global consumption.

Because of all these factors at play, it is impossible to account the Netflix phenomenon in Southeast Asia, or the Philippines, to a single factor. Future studies may dig more deeply on each of the factors and include audience analysis to further explain certain relationships and consumption patterns. Also, researchers may focus on each of the existing media flows and use case studies to further establish the applicability of contra-flow and cultural proximity in various products. Regional media studies may also examine the localization strategies of Netflix in Southeast Asia and describe its impact to its regionalization efforts. Meanwhile, additional analysis of Netflix catalogue in various geographical contexts may also be explored to describe the composition made available to local audiences. In some cases, cultural translation occurring during

the dubbing and subtitling processes may also be analyzed to evaluate authenticity and hybridity in transnational products.

Undoubtedly, there are multiple areas to unpack in a single Netflix study like this. While trying to describe it as a media company facilitating transverse, transnational flow in certain regions like Southeast Asia, the peculiarities of each context in a diverse community like the Philippines will always play a role in the processes involved. Although Netflix as a private business might vanish one day, the infrastructure that sustains it will remain, thus making further studies of platforms and infrastructure necessary. Studies like this show that the age of Internet TV also creates more complexities in terms of multiple layers of socio-cultural factors and technological mediation. Interestingly, amidst all the emerging realities portrayed in transnational contents and mediated by Internet TV like Netflix, the concepts of imperialism, contra-flow and proximity will always be relevant concerns in the convergence of media and culture studies.

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