

Cross-cultural Communication Mechanisms and Cultural Meaning-Making on Digital Platforms

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Abstract: What happens to the cultural connotations of songs, gestures, jokes, political symbols, etc., when they leave their original contexts of production and spread across digital platforms? Most existing studies have addressed only part of this problem. Research on representation examines the construction of cultural difference; research on participation traces users' remixing and discussion of content; platform studies explains how data, ranking and governance structure visibility. Treating these processes as independent, however, cannot explain the changes that occur during circulation. This conceptual paper proposes a trajectory-based framework linking three dimensions of platform-mediated meaning-making: the representation and translation of cultural materials, their participatory and affective recirculation, and the infrastructural allocation of attention. The framework is recursive rather than sequential. Translation invites responses; those responses generate signals for recommendation systems; the resulting pattern of visibility affects subsequent translations and representations. This framework can explain why the same circulation can produce creative hybridity and mutual recognition while also enabling decontextualisation, appropriation and unequal interpretive authority. The article puts forward analytical questions for tracing who determines the "legibility" of culture, whose interpretations spread, and how platforms reinforce certain meanings while marginalising others. It presents comparative and longitudinal research designs that can test these relationships across multiple languages, communities and platform environments.

Keywords: Digital platforms, cross-cultural communication, cultural translation, platformisation, participatory media, algorithmic visibility.

1. Introduction

A cultural object rarely reaches a platform in the form in which it was first understood. Before a viewer sees a dance clip, a proverb, a protest image or a piece of music, someone has selected the extract, chosen a caption, decided whether to translate it and placed it in a recognisable format. Other users then add reactions, explanations and disputes. Recommendation systems organise these responses and make some versions easier to encounter than others. Therefore, cross-cultural communication begins before the moment of reception and continues after the first post has gone out of fashion.

Platforms therefore do not simply serve as channels that promote cultural exchange. Speed and reach are important, but they do not explain what is conveyed across linguistic or cultural boundaries. A short video can spread widely precisely because it has been separated from the history that gave it meaning. Translation can make unfamiliar material more accessible while reducing ambiguity. A reaction video can debunk a stereotype, but the correction may spread much less widely than the original claim. What moves is not a stable cultural object but rather a succession of situated versions.

Several research traditions have studied this process. Cultural studies treats representation as productive rather than reflective [1]. Scholarship on global cultural flows shows that cross-border movement results in both imaginative opportunities and disjunctions [2]. Research on convergence, networked publics and affect examines the work audiences perform when recirculating media [3, 7, 8]. Research on hybridity also considers unequal political and economic relations [4]. Platform scholarship has studied how datafication, markets and governance shape cultural production [5, 9-13]. Recent studies in translation have shown

that social media translation is often multimodal, collaborative and shaped by platform conventions [19-21].

The problem is that these literatures often start from different objects. A representation-centred analysis may remain close to the text but say little about ranking. A participation-centred analysis may describe creative uptake while assuming that visibility results from user interest. An infrastructure-centred account may show the platform's power but not how translators, creators and audiences change meaning in practice. The problem is not a lack of concepts, but the absence of an account that follows cultural material across these sites of intervention.

This article addresses two questions. How do translation, participation and platform infrastructure work together to spread cultural materials among communities? Under what conditions does that interaction support recognition rather than misrecognition or unequal visibility? The answers offered here are theoretical. The article selects research with explanatory power from relevant fields and builds a conceptual framework for subsequent empirical studies. It is not a systematic review and does not claim to test causal effects.

The argument is that cross-cultural meaning is produced through a mediated process. Three kinds of intervention recur in this process: representational choices make an object legible; participatory practices multiply and contest interpretations; and infrastructural arrangements allocate attention among these interpretations. None has priority in every circumstance. Each changes the conditions under which the others operate. Therefore, the task of analysis is to trace both the content and the circumstances under which a cultural object appears popular or representative.

2. Conceptual Approach and Theoretical Foundations

The framework links traditions that currently operate at different levels. Representation and translation studies focus on signs, language and framing. Participatory media research focuses on audiences, identities and practices. Platform studies examines institutional design, markets and governance. Cross-cultural circulation occurs at all three levels. It requires a form that can be recognised, actors who take it up, and an environment that increases or decreases the probability of particular encounters. The following sections present the strengths and limitations of each perspective before combining them.

2.1. Meaning Does Not Travel Intact

Hall's theory of representation provides a foundation for this argument: cultural meanings are generated through signs and practices rather than being inherent in objects themselves [1]. Words and images gain comprehensibility within systems of classification, narrative and power. Therefore, a platform post cannot be considered a transparent sample of the culture in which it was produced. It is already a selection, organised for an expected audience and shaped by the conventions of a particular medium.

Appadurai's account of disjunctive global flows extends the argument beyond the individual text [2]. Cultural forms move in tandem with people, technology, capital and political ideas, but these movements do not happen at the same speed or in the same direction. Platforms increase disjunction by promoting units that are easy to detach and recombine: a few seconds of video, repeated sound, a hashtag or a screenshot. Such fragments may provide a path to an unfamiliar culture, although the path will be partial. It is not simply that context has been lost; rather, a new context is being constructed around what is left.

Translation is also a site where that reconstruction occurs. On platforms, translation includes subtitles and lexical choices, as well as editing, image selection, emojis, sound, explanatory captions and analogies. Kotze argues that social media is a computational and performative space in which the idea of translation is itself negotiated [19]. Liang shows that transcreation can combine translingual English, visual performance and a playful register instead of pursuing word-for-word equivalence [20]. Chen's study of Xiaohongshu also shows how user-generated translations link source texts with poetry, memes and older translations to form new intertextual networks [21]. These practices do not merely carry meaning. They suggest what should be considered relevant meaning for a new audience.

Creativity should not be mistaken for equality. Kraidy's critique of celebratory accounts of hybridity is applicable here [4]. A hybrid form may be inventive and widely circulated, but the community associated with the source may remain unnamed or economically disadvantaged. Translation can broaden access and redistribute cultural authority at the same time. Any analysis of recontextualisation must therefore ask two questions simultaneously: what new expression has been enabled, and who now has the right to define the source culture through that expression?

2.2. Participation Is Structured, Not Free-floating

Jenkins's work on convergence culture moved beyond the

passive-audience model by showing how users spread, discuss and reconfigure media across platforms [3]. Platform features have turned many once-specialised fan practices into routine behaviour. A repost adds a frame; a duet connects performances; a reaction video places interpretation next to the object of interpretation. Participation is not an after-effect of communication. It is one of the places where the object is altered.

The same post can therefore support incompatible cultural readings. One group may regard it as an expression of admiration; another may see it as mockery; a third may consider it commercial appropriation. Comments and remixes do more than show these positions; they also provide new material for circulation. A correction can be added as a new post, a dispute may become a meme, and an explanation can be detached from the original thread. Meaning accumulates through this chain of responses, and no single item contains it.

Identity shapes who enters the chain and how an intervention is interpreted. Boyd's account of networked publics includes persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability [7]. These affordances collapse boundaries among imagined audiences that may have different histories, linguistic repertoires and political expectations. A creator speaks to a local community and may later have to explain the same idea to strangers. Therefore, cultural identity online is performed under conditions of uncertain address: users speak from a situated position and anticipate audiences they cannot fully know.

Affect gives some interpretations greater momentum. Papacharissi shows how networked publics cohere through feeling as well as argument [8]. Admiration, amusement, anger and sympathy can draw attention to experiences that have gone unnoticed. At the same time, emotional intensity can compress cultural difference into a familiar emotional script. A culturally specific conflict becomes an easy-to-identify story of victims and villains; a complicated ritual becomes a source of admiration; an ambiguous joke becomes a sign of moral deficiency. Emotional response is not the opposite of interpretation; rather, platforms can give more weight to emotions that are easily recognised.

Interface design gives this participation a patterned form. Zulli and Zulli describe TikTok's reusable sounds, templates and performance conventions as a system of technological mimesis [17]. Imitation can bridge language differences because users recognise the format before understanding all the references. It can also strip a gesture or sound of the historical associations that made it intelligible. Participation is thus neither unlimited user freedom nor an automatic result of design. It is a creative act that uses a menu of platform-specific options.

2.3. Visibility Is Governed

Platform activity becomes culturally significant partly because it is measured. Van Dijck argues that likes, follows and shares are engineered forms of connectivity embedded in commercial logics [5]. Couldry and Hepp likewise argue that media participate in constructing social reality rather than simply reporting it [6]. Counts, trends and recommendations do not merely describe attention; through repeated exposure, they help establish what appears popular, typical or representative.

Platformisation is the wider institutional process that gives rise to this ordering [9-11]. Helmond emphasises

programmability and the conversion of activity into platform-ready data [9]. Nieborg and Poell describe cultural commodities that are modular and continuously adapted in response to data-driven feedback [10]. Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck extend this argument to the restructuring of cultural practices and imaginaries [11]. Thus, a cultural post is not simply published and disseminated. Creators continually change its form according to what they expect the platform will promote.

Platform governance also sets limits on circulation. Gorwa locates platform governance in the relationships among companies, states, advertisers, users and other political actors [13]. Moderation is one visible expression of these relationships, although much of its work remains hidden. Gillespie and Roberts show that decisions to remove, label and restrict content involve policy, human labour and automation [23, 24]. Cross-cultural materials present a particular problem because humour, reclaimed language,

political symbols and religious images can have different meanings in different communities. A rule may be consistent at the level of wording while uneven in its cultural effects.

These infrastructures are also geopolitical. Jin's account of platform imperialism links digital power with ownership, capital and global inequality [12]. Recent studies have cautioned against applying concepts derived from Anglo-American and north-western European platforms universally [22]. The Douyin/TikTok comparison shows why this is necessary. Kaye, Chen and Zeng describe related applications operating in different regulatory and commercial environments [16]. Their interface features may be similar, but their governance, monetisation and cultural expectations are not. Infrastructure is not only technology; it is also an institutional route through which culture travels. Figure 1 shows how representational, participatory and infrastructural interventions are connected along that route.

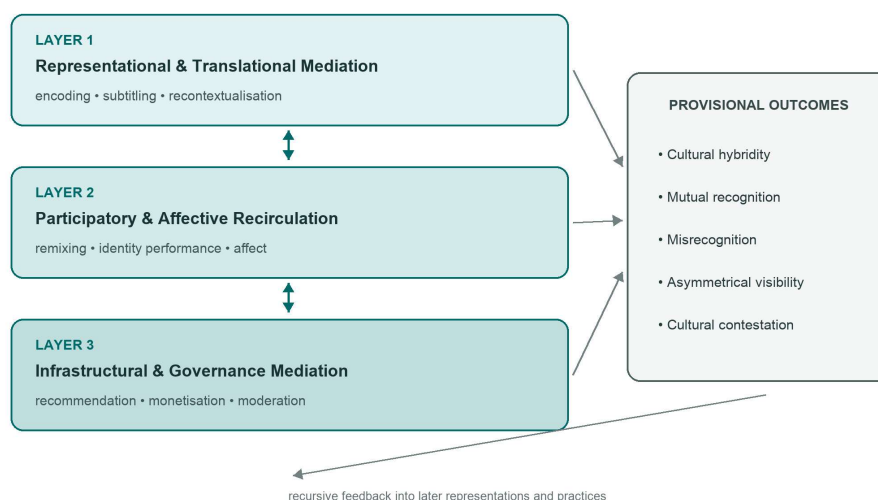


Figure 1. A trajectory-based framework for cross-cultural meaning-making on digital platforms.

3. Following the Trajectory of Cultural Meaning

The three perspectives can be combined by changing the unit of analysis. Instead of using a single post as the subject, the framework follows a cultural work through multiple acts of mediation. It asks how the item is made legible, where users position it in their lives, and when those positions become visible. The layers in Figure 1 are analytical distinctions, not stages that every item must pass through sequentially. In practice, a subtitle can be representational, participatory and infrastructural simultaneously; that is to say, it can be automated, corrected by users and integrated into recommendation data.

3.1. Representation and Translation: Making Culture Legible

The first is a practical problem: what needs to be done for people outside the original setting to recognise this cultural work? A creator may shorten a story, select its most visually striking part, substitute a local expression with a familiar analogy, or leave a term untranslated. These are not cosmetic decisions. They set the boundaries of the object that users will discuss later.

Legibility always involves a trade-off. Condensation can remove historical detail, but it can also make an encounter

possible. Subtitles may flatten tone while allowing viewers to access an argument that would otherwise be unavailable. Transcreation can preserve humour by using non-literal expressions [20]. User-generated translations can expose interpretive choices to public correction [19, 21]. Therefore, the relevant standard is not a simple opposition between faithful and distorted versions. Researchers should determine what kind of relationship to the source a version claims and whether the audience has received sufficient information to judge that claim.

Authority enters at precisely this point. Professional translators, automated systems, bilingual fans, journalists and influencers do not have equal credibility or reach. A polished caption may be accepted as definitive even when its original source is uncertain; however, a community correction may be deemed partisan if it contradicts a popular account. The apparent clarity of a translation may hide the decisions involved in its production. Making these decisions visible reveals how cultural power is distributed.

A few questions can be used to investigate this level. What was selected as representative, and what disappeared from view? Which words, images and sounds were regarded as self-explanatory? Who translated or adapted the material, for which imagined audience, and with what claim to expertise? Answering these questions can help reconstruct the circumstances of legibility and avoid the assumption that cultural differences have been resolved.

3.2. Participation and Affect: Multiplying Interpretations

Once a version is released, users relate it to other texts, identities and events. They may share the work with approval, quote it in criticism, add their own subtitles, alter a piece of music or create a video critique. These practices extend participation, but they may also change the basis for later viewers' judgements.

Short-form videos make this multiplication easier to observe. Split screens, reusable audio and templates maintain sufficient formal continuity to help viewers recognise a trend while allowing each participant to diverge from it. The resulting imitation public can connect people who do not share a language [17]. Formal recognition does not imply cultural agreement. The same performance may signify solidarity in one community and ridicule in another.

Affect helps determine which of these readings becomes visible. Posts that organise attention around anger, admiration or amusement are more likely to prompt interaction. At the same time, this immediacy may bring overlooked experiences into view. It becomes restrictive when contextual explanation cannot compete with a simplified emotional frame. The empirical question is not whether a response is emotional, but which emotions the interface, metrics and surrounding narratives make easier to feel and express.

Users can interrupt dominant readings. They can correct subtitles, add dates and sources, challenge stereotypes and explain the meaning of cultural activities. Such interventions show real agency, though not agency exercised on equal terms. Linguistic competence, follower networks, technical knowledge and platform ranking affect whether the correction reaches the same level of visibility as the original post. A reply that is available is not necessarily a reply that will be seen.

Therefore, the analysis at this level should consider the relationships among posts rather than counting reactions in isolation. Which actors were able to change the object? Did the explanatory context travel to a community unfamiliar with it? Which affective frame organised the discussion, and who benefited from this frame? Attention to subtitlers, fan communities and other intermediaries is essential because they can make temporary interpretations durable.

3.3. Infrastructure and Governance: Allocating Attention

The third layer concerns the allocation of encounters. Ranking, recommendation, search, monetisation, archiving and moderation all change the probability that a particular version will be viewed. They seldom instruct us on what to think. Their power lies in making some interpretations repeatedly available while keeping others technically present but socially obscure.

A recommendation system infers a user's interests from behaviour and then adjusts distribution accordingly. Thus, a feedback problem arises. A culturally simplified version may be easier to recognise at first, so the corresponding data support broader recommendation and offer further evidence of its apparent relevance. Creators develop practical theories of visibility in response. Cotter's work on the visibility game for influencers demonstrates how creators' interpretations of algorithms affect promotional strategies and cultural output [14].

Commercial pressures intensify this feedback. A creator may use a dominant language, compress explanations or

imitate a successful aesthetic to improve reach. Platformised cultural commodities are designed to be continuously updated in response to metrics [10]. Therefore, visibility should not be considered an objective measure of cultural value. It is shaped by audience behaviour, platform algorithms, creator strategies, advertising goals and policy restrictions.

Moderation is a different form of selection. Rules against hate speech, dangerous behaviour and misinformation are necessary; however, their application must take cultural context into account. The same sign can carry extremist, religious, historical or ironic meanings in different contexts. Human reviewers face organisational pressure, and automated systems depend on categories and training data that may not adequately cover minority languages [23, 24]. Moderation may reduce harm, but it can also unintentionally narrow legitimate cultural expression.

Douyin and TikTok make the institutional dimension especially clear. Related technologies operate under different regulatory, commercial and cultural arrangements [16]. Content also moves between them through practices of transfer and optimisation [18]. The platforms should not be compared by appearance alone. Analysis should ask how ownership, policies, local markets and creator strategies combine to produce different routes of cross-cultural visibility.

3.4. The Feedback Loop

Consider a culturally specific video that starts to spread outside its original circle. A title and subtitle establish an initial reading. Users then add jokes, criticism, expressions of identification and corrections. Recommendation and moderation systems rank these responses, changing which interpretation later viewers see first. The most visible reaction may lead to an updated caption or an added explanation. What seems to be a single act of communication is, in fact, a chain of interventions in which each change affects the next.

The loop also goes beyond the platform. Journalists, brands, educators and activists can help the public form a stable narrative of the dispute. Their accounts are added to the platform as new content, and engagement with previous posts serves as input for recommendation. Interpretation provides data to infrastructure, and infrastructure organises the circumstances for interpretation.

This account does not give excessive power to either algorithms or users. Algorithms do not produce cultural meanings independently, and participation does not occur outside institutional control. Meaning is generated through relationships. Therefore, research should follow the path through which an object is selected, translated, circulated, ranked and retrospectively explained, rather than using its most popular version as the starting point.

4. When Does Circulation Lead to Recognition?

The framework does not predict that cross-cultural circulation will be either emancipatory or harmful. The same mechanisms can promote curiosity, solidarity and hybrid creation or intensify stereotyping, appropriation and symbolic conflict. The results depend on who has linguistic resources, recognised expertise, technical knowledge and control over the infrastructure of visibility.

4.1. Unequal Resources and Interpretive Authority

Cross-cultural circulation starts from unequal positions. Content in some languages reaches large commercial audiences and receives good technical support. Some creators use translators, production teams and cross-platform promotion. Others use marginalised languages, rely on unstable networks or face irregular connectivity. When metrics present the resulting differences in reach as popularity, prior inequality is converted into an apparently unbiased judgement of relevance.

Ownership and market structure increase this asymmetry [12]. Global platforms adapt to national regulations and local practices but have centralised technical and commercial infrastructure. Therefore, the call for more research on genuinely global platforms is not simply a demand for more regional cases [22]. Research should explore how local cultural practices, state institutions and transnational corporations cooperate in shaping the conditions of visibility.

Interpretive authority is a result of this organisation. Dominant-language fluency, professional status and an existing audience make some actors more likely to define a practice for outsiders. Members of minority communities are expected to provide explanatory labour without enjoying corresponding reach or material benefits. Therefore, the conflict of meanings is closely related to the question of who is deemed an authorised interpreter.

4.2. Hybridity, Misrecognition and Dispute

Digital circulation regularly produces hybrid forms. Users combine languages, sounds, visual styles and narrative conventions that cannot be assigned to any single cultural system. Translingual and transcultural practices on social media show that boundaries are lived and negotiated rather than simply inherited [20, 21]. These combinations can create affiliations that were not possible within older media systems.

Hybridity is politically ambiguous [4]. A well-known creator may turn a minority aesthetic into monetisable content without giving credit to its origins. A sacred or historically significant practice may be recoded as a universally available style. Claims of appropriation may ignore the longer history of exchange and internal conflict in the community. The framework does not settle these cases in advance. Instead, it identifies where attribution, context and authority have been modified so that the corresponding claims can be assessed more accurately.

Misrecognition generally accumulates and does not occur in a single instance. An initial caption may remove context; an affective response may convert ambiguity into certainty; a recommendation system may amplify the most engaging version. Contestation can reverse this process by offering alternative translations, histories and identity claims from users. Its success depends on whether the corrective material enters the same circuits of attention, not solely on whether it is factually accurate.

4.3. Time, Archives and the Stabilisation of Meaning

Publication is not the end of platform meaning. Posts return through search, recommendation, anniversaries and renewed political controversy. An archived item can acquire associations that were unavailable when it first appeared. Comments, screenshots and remixes are interpretive records

that later viewers may encounter before they see the original context.

Time can therefore further decontextualise a work if it circulates without a date or other contextual information. Correction remains possible when participants add evidence and alternative accounts. Intermediaries matter in this process. Journalists, educators, influencers, activists and others spread short accounts of platform activity through their own channels. Repetition may stabilise a particular interpretation so that its contingent origin becomes obscured.

A temporal approach should trace when an item reappears, which new event triggers it, and which parts of the earlier discussion remain relevant. This approach differs from taking a high-engagement snapshot. It views archives and recommendation systems as active agents in the continuous organisation of cultural memory.

4.4. From Individual Literacy to Institutional Responsibility

Platform literacy should involve more than recognising misinformation. Cross-cultural literacy also requires users to compare translations, notice missing context, distinguish between popularity and representativeness, and recognise recommendations as organised selections. Creators and intermediaries also bear responsibility for addressing attribution, source disclosure and the impact of adapting cultural works to metric-driven formats.

An individual's skills cannot replace institutional responsibility. Platform companies select language support, interface options, moderation resources, data practices and the transparency of recommendation systems. They can offer multilingual reviews, contextual annotations, explanations of changes in distribution, and accessible paths for communities to appeal against culturally inappropriate decisions. Platform governance should treat cross-cultural interpretation as an ordinary operational problem rather than a special case [13, 23].

The purpose is not to eliminate disagreement or establish a single authorised meaning. Cross-cultural communication necessarily involves partial knowledge and contested claims. A more defensible goal is to make the circumstances of interpretation open to scrutiny and to reduce avoidable disparities in whose accounts are visible.

5. Discussion

5.1. What the Framework Adds

The first contribution of the framework is to replace the idea of transmission with trajectory analysis. Cultural materials are not sent once and then decoded. They are repeatedly selected, translated, performed, classified and governed. Therefore, the research question shifts from how far a message travels to which interventions make a particular version travel.

Its second function is to link people's interpretive agency with infrastructural power without merging the two. Recommendation, metrics and moderation shape the spread and durability of meaning, but users operate in this environment, adapt their behaviour and occasionally defy platform classifications. Power operates through this relationship and does not come from a single source.

Third, the framework positions translation more centrally and specifically within platform research. Linguistic transfer, subtitling, transcreation and multimodal adaptation are

different practices, but they all involve choices regarding cultural legibility. Treating translators, bilingual creators and subtitling communities as intermediaries helps prevent the assumption that digital connectivity automatically overcomes linguistic differences.

Together, the three layers are in a recursive relationship. Representation establishes the first field of legibility; participation adds multiple readings; infrastructure distributes attention among them; and the resulting pattern of recognition or dispute affects subsequent representations. This framework is not intended to provide an all-encompassing sequence, but rather to focus research attention on places where the source of cultural authority shifts.

5.2. Research Design and Limitations

The framework can direct research at various levels. A micro-level project could trace one cultural object through subtitles, comments, remixes and reposts. A platform comparison could examine how the same material spreads on Douyin and TikTok or among short-video, streaming and messaging services. Community-based work could explore how migrant or diasporic users negotiate belonging through multilingual practices; digital migration research shows why mediated activity must be connected to everyday life, politics and inequality [25]. Institutional research can examine moderation rules, explanations of recommendation and creator policies in different countries.

Methodological pluralism is needed because a single dataset cannot cover the entire trajectory. Textual and multimodal analyses can reconstruct representational choices. Discourse analysis addresses problems of interpretation. Interviews can reveal the practical reasoning of creators and translators. Walkthrough and interface analysis can document the possibilities created by platform design [15, 16]. Longitudinal data collection is also needed to trace changes in content and dissemination paths over an extended period.

The article also has some limitations. It provides a selective conceptual synthesis, not a systematic review, and the proposed connections have not been empirically tested. The separation into three layers is analytical. Automated captioning can simultaneously translate content, invite corrections and generate platform data. Empirical research should determine when these distinctions clarify a case and when additional categories are required.

Future research should also avoid using a small number of Anglo-American platforms as the standard model. Adding case studies from Asia, Africa or Latin America is not enough if these environments are only presented as regional variations of a supposedly universal system [22]. Comparative work should instead investigate how histories of media regulation, linguistic hierarchy and cultural production have changed the relationship among translation, participation and infrastructure.

6. Conclusion

Culture does not cross a border just because it appears on a digital platform. It is given legibility through selection and translation, placed in new relations through participation, and granted uneven visibility through infrastructure and governance. Each intervention leaves a trace and thus shapes what later viewers take the object to be.

This process can be viewed as recursive; platform circulation can therefore generate creativity and misunderstanding, solidarity and stereotyping, recognition

and appropriation simultaneously. Meanings remain contestable, and the capacity to influence that contest differs greatly. Therefore, the scope of analysis should include messages and audiences, translators, intermediaries, ranking systems, commercial incentives and governance institutions.

The framework above shows how to organise analysis by following a trajectory instead of isolating the post. Its value will depend on empirical application across particular languages, communities and platforms. Such research can replace broad claims about frictionless global connection with a more specific explanation of how cultural meanings are made legible, visible and authoritative.

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