

# Platform Algorithms, Cultural Proximity, And Audience Engagement: How Chinese Variety Shows Navigate Cross-Cultural Transmission in Malaysia's Multi-Ethnic Media Landscape

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## Abstract:

Against the backdrop of streaming media platforms that deeply reconfigure the global media ecology, this study takes Malaysia as the research field, and systematically examines the interactions between platform algorithms, cultural proximity and audience engagement in the cross-communication process of Chinese variety programmes through an interpretive mixed-methods research approach. Based on 304 valid questionnaires (covering three ethnic groups: Chinese, Malays and Indians) and 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews, the study integrates cultural proximity theory (Straubhaar, 1991), use and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973), and platform algorithms as a research framework. The quantitative results showed that the perceived cultural proximity of Chinese audiences ( $M = 4.12$ ) was significantly higher than that of Malays ( $M = 2.76$ ) and Indians ( $M = 2.63$ ), and that the differentiation in viewing motivation among the three ethnic groups was focused on the dimension of cultural identity rather than the dimension of entertainment motivation; after controlling for demographic variables, the platform algorithm perceptions had a higher independent explanatory power of audience engagement ( $\beta = .38$ ) than that of cultural proximity perceptions ( $\beta = .29$ ), and the moderating effect was particularly significant among Malay and Indian audiences. Qualitative analyses identified three modes of cultural identity negotiation in the interview texts, namely 'cultural mirroring', 'entertainment consumption', and 'critical distance', which revealed the inherent hierarchy of audience meaning-making practices across communication processes. This study proposes an integrated concept of 'algorithmically mediated cultural proximity' to bridge the gap between streaming media platform research and cross-cultural communication theory, and provides empirical evidence for a precise international communication strategy for Chinese media content.

**Keywords:** variety programmes; algorithmic moderation; cultural proximity; cross-cultural communication; Malaysia; multi-ethnic audiences; streaming media platforms

## I. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of a profound reconfiguration of the global media landscape, cultural content from non-Western countries is flowing overseas at an unprecedented rate. As an important vehicle for the dissemination of China's soft power, Chinese variety shows have accelerated their penetration into Southeast Asia in recent years with the technological empowerment of streaming media platforms. This phenomenon not only reflects the power displacement of the global media industry pattern, but also reveals the new tension and complexity of the theory of cultural proximity in the era of digital communication.

Malaysia, as a typical representative of multi-ethnic countries in Southeast Asia, constitutes a unique field for studying Chinese variety across communication. In terms of demographic structure, Malaysia consists of three major ethnic groups, namely Malays (about 67.4%), Chinese (about 24.6%) and Indians (about 7.3%) (Ong, 2025). This multi-ethnic pattern has given rise to highly differentiated media consumption habits and cultural identity systems, making it an ideal field for testing cross-cultural communication theories. At the same time, Chinese streaming platforms such as iQIYI (爱奇艺) and WeTV (腾讯视频) have become deeply embedded in Malaysia's digital media ecosystem - at one

point in 2021, iQIYI was the most downloaded streaming app in Malaysia (Rest of the World, 2023), signalling the strong presence of Chinese media content in that market.

However, there are obvious theoretical gaps in existing research to explain this phenomenon. For one, cultural proximity theory (Straubhaar, 1991), which has long dominated transnational television audience research, is largely rooted in assumptions of linguistic and ethnic homogeneity, making it difficult to adequately explain differential reception behaviour within Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups. Second, most of the existing studies on Chinese media's overseas communication focus on soft power narratives at the political level (Marsh et al., 2023) or macro-industrial strategies (Sarkar & Yang, 2025), and few studies have examined in-depth how algorithmic recommender systems regulate cultural proximity in specific audience practices. Third, variety programmes, as a special television genre that combines entertainment, interactivity and cultural representations, have not yet received sufficient academic attention for their cross-communication logic, which is different from that of TV dramas (Zhang, 2025).

In view of this, this study takes Malaysia as the research site and Chinese variety programmes as the research object, integrating cultural proximity theory, use and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973), and the platform algorithm research framework to formulate the following core research questions:

- **RQ1:** How does cultural proximity affect the exposure and engagement behaviours of Chinese variety arts programmes among multi-ethnic audience groups in Malaysia?
- **RQ2:** What is the role of the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of streaming platforms in the cross-distribution process of Chinese variety programmes?
- **RQ3:** What kind of cultural identity negotiation strategies do different ethnic groups in Malaysia present when watching Chinese variety programmes?

The academic contributions of this study are threefold: theoretically, it attempts to construct a new concept of 'algorithmically mediated cultural proximity' to bridge the theoretical gap between platform research and cross-cultural communication research; empirically, it provides first-hand empirical data from multi-ethnic contexts in Southeast Asia; and practically, it provides an opportunity for the Chinese cultural communication community to explore the role of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms in the cross-cultural communication process of Chinese variety shows. empirically, to provide first-hand empirical data from the multi-ethnic contexts in Southeast Asia; and practically, to provide policy references for the precise overseas dissemination of Chinese cultural content.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Cultural Proximity Theory: Classical Framework and Contemporary Challenges

Proposed by Joseph Straubhaar in 1991, the theory of cultural proximity is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding transnational media consumption. The central proposition of the theory is that audiences tend to choose media content that is similar to their own cultural background on dimensions such as language, history, ethnicity, religion and geography (Straubhaar, 1991). In other words, cultural similarity constitutes a priority principle for audience media choice, a principle that largely explains why locally produced programmes tend to be more popular with local audiences than foreign imported content. La Pastina & Straubhaar (2005) further developed this framework by proposing the concept of multiple proximities, which suggests that cultural proximity plays a role not only at the national level, but also at the regional, subcultural and even genre levels.

However, in the age of digital media, the explanatory validity of cultural proximity theory has been challenged in many ways. Lu et al. (2019) found that cultural proximity was effective in predicting audience involvement, but failed to significantly predict audience enjoyment, revealing the complexity of the relationship between cultural proximity and media enjoyment through an empirical study of Chinese audiences' behaviour in watching American and Korean dramas. Dogru (2016) further found that the effect of cultural proximity varies significantly across educational backgrounds, with not all culturally similar individuals preferring "familiar" cultural content, through a study of media consumption behaviour among Turkish immigrant audiences in Germany. A more fundamental

challenge comes from the rise of global streaming platforms, which, with algorithmic recommendation as their core mechanism, have systematically broken the behavioural assumption that 'audiences actively search for culturally similar content' - to what extent does the filtering logic of cultural proximity still hold true when the platforms actively 'push' content to their users is a theoretical question that needs to be answered. This is a theoretical question that needs to be answered (Straubhaar et al., 2021).

The theory of cultural proximity has taken on a particularly complex dimension in the lineage of diaspora studies of Southeast Asian Chinese. Sun et al.'s (2002) ethnographic study of the Malaysian Chinese audience shows that there is a constant tension between the strong emotional identification of this group with Chinese cultural media content and the distinctive localisation of their daily media practices. This dual relationship of 'closeness and alienation' constitutes an important prerequisite for understanding the acceptance of Chinese variety programmes by the Malaysian Chinese audience.

## **2.2 The Overseas Spread of Chinese Variety Programmes: Industrial Expansion and the Logic of Soft Power**

The overseas dissemination of Chinese variety shows is driven by both national strategies and market logic. Since 2012, the Chinese government has elevated the strategy of 'going out' to the centre of its cultural policy, pushing media organisations to actively expand their overseas communication channels (Zhang, 2025). At the same time, Chinese streaming platforms such as iQIYI, Tencent Video, and Mango TV have begun to systematically deploy in the Southeast Asian market by virtue of their capital accumulation and technological advantages. Sarkar & Yang (2025) point out that Chinese streaming media platforms in the post-New Crown era have explicitly prioritised cultural proximity regions (especially Southeast Asia) for overseas expansion, and have taken countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia as the key targets for their layout, a strategy that is evidenced in the market data of iQIYI's first profitability in 2022. is corroborated.

In terms of content strategy, the overseas distribution of Chinese variety shows has gone through a three-stage evolution from 'content output' to 'format output' to 'platform ecology output'. Lin (2025) points out through textual analysis and interviews with producers of programmes such as *The Amazing Magician* and *This is Street Dance* that the format export of Chinese variety shows emphasises the three major cultural mechanisms of professionalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, which remove the entertainment content from specific national cultural contexts, and give it a stronger cross-cultural adaptability. Zhang (2025), through a case study of the YouTube platform, further found that in cross-cultural communication, Chinese variety programmes should transform 'cultural discount' into 'cultural premium', and enhance the communication effect by strengthening linguistic adaptability and universal value expression.

However, as a TV genre that relies heavily on context, emotional resonance and real-time interaction, variety programmes face more challenges than TV dramas in terms of cross-cultural communication. The sense of comedy, comprehensibility of game rules, cross-border recognition of celebrity popularity, and the specific cultural rituals and collective memories carried by the programme are all key variables affecting the acceptance of overseas audiences of variety programmes (Li, 2024). In the Malaysian context, the historical and cultural symbols, language puns, and social humour involved in the programmes constitute a considerable 'cultural discount' for non-Chinese audiences, which makes the ethnic background of the audience an important dimension in understanding the differences in the acceptance of variety programmes.

## **2.3 Streaming Media Platform Algorithms and Audience Participation: A New Infrastructure for Cross-Cultural Communication**

Platform algorithms have become the core infrastructure of contemporary media consumption practices. Recommender systems based on collaborative filtering (collaborative filtering) and content-based filtering (content-based filtering) generate personalised content recommendations for users by analysing multi-dimensional data such as viewing history, length of stay, rating behaviour, etc. (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). In the context of Over-The-Top (OTT) streaming, algorithmic recommendations not only influence the audience's choice of 'what to watch', but also fundamentally reshape the

audience's path of 'discovering' new content, thus unconsciously intervening in the mechanism of cultural proximity (Fu & Wang, 2025).

In terms of Chinese streaming platforms' algorithmic practices in Southeast Asia, iQIYI and WeTV have adopted localised algorithmic strategies that are different from those of Netflix. Fu & Wang (2025) point out that Chinese streaming platforms intentionally benchmark Netflix in terms of interface design and navigation logic in their international versions, while embedding a priority for local language content in their recommendation algorithms to lower the cultural barrier to entry for users. In the Malaysian market, iQIYI has developed more than 12 original Malay-language series and significantly increased the proportion of localised content recommended by the algorithm in 2024 (Fu & Wang, 2025), demonstrating the active intervention of the platform's algorithms across communication.

On the other hand, the filter bubble effect of algorithmic logic also raises new theoretical concerns. Pariser (2011), a prominent researcher on media algorithms, first pointed out that personalised recommendation algorithms may create closed information cocoons by reinforcing users' pre-existing preferences. In cross-communication contexts, this means that algorithms may create differentiated content exposure pathways between Chinese and non-Chinese audiences, which in turn reinforces, rather than undermines, cultural consumption differentiation between ethnicities. However, Spilker & Colbjørnsen (2020) also point out that the personalised recommendation systems of streaming platforms also provide wider distribution opportunities for niche content, potentially driving new audiences for cross-cultural content that has previously struggled to reach mainstream markets. In this sense, the interaction between algorithms and cultural proximity is not linear, but rather a dynamic process full of multiple possibilities, which is in dire need of in-depth review by empirical research.

#### **2.4 Malaysia's Multi-Ethnic Media Environment: Structural Contexts**

Malaysia's unique multi-ethnic landscape has profoundly shaped the structural characteristics of its media ecosystem. At the policy level, Malaysia has long pursued a culturally dominant Malay media regulatory framework, with ethnic Chinese and Indian audiences relatively underrepresented culturally on mainstream television channels (Global Media Journal, 2015). This media-political landscape has contributed to the longstanding media consumption inertia of Chinese Malaysian audiences in search of 'cultural mirrors' across national borders - from early Hong Kong TVB dramas, to Taiwanese variety shows, to today's streaming content from mainland China, Chinese audiences' imaginations of their 'cultural homelands' continue to adapt as the centres of content production migrate (Sun et al., 2015). The Chinese audience's imagination of 'cultural homeland' continues to adapt as the centre of content production moves (Sun et al., 2002).

At the level of ethnic relations and cultural identity, the Malaysian Chinese community faces dual identity pressures: on the one hand, as a diaspora, it maintains emotional ties to Chinese culture; on the other hand, as citizens, it seeks to belong to a political community dominated by Malay culture (Matthews, 2022). This complex identity politics has led Malaysian Chinese audiences to display a psychological mechanism of 'selective affinity' when they are exposed to mainland Chinese media content - they may identify with the language and certain cultural symbols in the content, but keep a cautious distance from the political ideology embedded in the mainland culture (Asadipa, 2022). cautious distance from the political ideologies embedded in mainland culture (Asadipa, 2023; Radio Free Asia, 2023).

For Malay and Indian audiences, the cross-communication of Chinese variety programmes, on the other hand, relies primarily on more general entertainment appeals and curiosity rather than cultural proximity. In this dimension, the entertainment, visual spectacle, and global expression of the programme content (e.g., modern cityscape, international guest cast) may play a more critical attraction than cultural resonance (Appadurai, 1996). Katz et al.'s (1973) use and gratification theory provides a complementary perspective for understanding the motivations of non-culturally similar audiences - universal needs such as entertainment, diversion, social discourse, and cognitive gratification may drive audiences to engage with culturally different media content in the face of relatively low levels of cultural proximity.

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In summary, while existing studies have made important contributions to the industrial logic of Chinese media distribution abroad, the boundaries of cultural proximity theory, and the algorithmic mechanism of streaming media platforms, few studies have incorporated these three dimensions into a unified analytical framework and examined them in the context of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia. How to understand the interaction between algorithmic recommendation and cultural proximity, and how this interaction differentiates among different ethnic audiences, constitute the core theoretical problematic of this study, and the main contribution of this study to the existing literature.

**Table 1:** Overview of the Theoretical Framework and Core Concepts of This Study

Theoretical Framework	Core Concepts	Key Scholar(s)	Application in This Study
Cultural Proximity Theory	Cultural proximity; multiple proximities; selective affinity	Straubhaar (1991); La Pastina & Straubhaar (2005)	Measuring perceived cultural proximity across three ethnic groups (RQ1)
Uses and Gratifications Theory	Entertainment; identity; social utility; cognitive needs	Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1973)	Explaining cross-ethnic audience motivation differentiation (RQ1, RQ3)
Platform Algorithm Research	Algorithmic recommendation; filter bubble; discoverability; platformization	Pariser (2011); Fu & Wang (2025); Khoo (2023)	Examining algorithmic mediation of cross-cultural content exposure (RQ2)
Encoding/Decoding Model	Dominant, negotiated & oppositional reading; identity negotiation	Hall (1980, 1990)	Analysing three modes of cultural identity negotiation (RQ3)
Transnational Proximity	Universal themes; bypass of cultural expertise	Jin (2023)	Extending concept to Chinese variety shows for non-Chinese audiences
Integrated Contribution (This Study)	Algorithmically mediated cultural proximity	This study	Bridging platform research and cross-cultural communication theory

### III. RESEARCH METHODS (METHODOLOGY)

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design (explanatory sequential mixed methods design), using a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The basic logic of the design is: firstly, large-scale quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire survey to reveal the behavioural characteristics of Malaysian audiences of different ethnicities' exposure to and participation in Chinese variety shows and their influencing factors at the macro level; and then, using the quantitative results as a guide, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected typical respondents to explore in-depth how audiences negotiate their cultural identities in their daily media practices at the micro level. The data from the two phases complement and corroborate each other, and together they serve the core problematic awareness of this study.

The choice of mixed methods is well grounded in methodology. Cross-cultural audience research combines both measurable behavioural dimensions (frequency of exposure, platform usage

preferences, perceived cultural proximity, etc.) and difficult-to-quantify meaning construction dimensions (identity, cultural interpretation strategies, emotional involvement), which are difficult for a single research pathway to fully respond to (Brill & Schwab, 2019). In addition, the Malaysian multi-ethnic context itself requires researchers to maintain adequate sample representation in intergroup comparisons, while also needing to attend to nuanced differences at the individual level, and a mixed research design has significant advantages in fulfilling these dual needs (Bolin et al., 2022).

### 3.2 Study Population and Sampling Strategy

**Quantitative phase:** this study uses Malaysian online video users aged 18 to 45 years old as the target population. Considering the ethnic structure of Malaysia, the sampling frame intentionally covers the three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. A combination of quota sampling and convenience sampling was used to collect data through an online questionnaire platform (Google Forms) and student community networks in major universities in Malaysia, with a target effective sample size of 300 (approximately 120 Chinese, 120 Malays, and 60 Indians) to ensure ethnicity. 60) to ensure the statistical validity of inter-ethnic comparisons. The sample size was determined with reference to the prevailing standards of cross-cultural audience research (Hair et al., 2019) and benchmarked against the sample size of existing similar studies (Lu et al., 2019; Zhang, 2025).

**Qualitative phase:** after the quantitative data analysis was completed, representative in-depth interviewees were selected from the questionnaire respondents based on the principle of purposive sampling (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The selection criteria included (a) representation of all three major ethnic groups, (b) coverage of different levels of Chinese variety programme viewing frequency (heavy, medium, light), and (c) consideration of different age groups and genders. Twenty-four interviewees (eight from each ethnic group) were finally identified, covering different viewing frequencies and genders in each group of eight, with a view to achieving maximum sample differentiation under the premise of data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

### 3.3 Research instrument

**QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN:** The questionnaire for this study consisted of four modules. Module 1 contains demographic information (ethnic background, age, education, language proficiency, etc.); Module 2 measures media usage habits (type and frequency of streaming platform use, main device used, daily viewing hours, etc.); Module 3 is designed to measure media usage habits by adapting Straubhaar's (1991) Cultural Proximity Scale with Katz et al.'s (Katz et al., 1973) Use and Satisfaction Scale to measure respondents' perception of cultural proximity, viewing motivation, and engagement with Chinese variety shows; Module 4 examines respondents' perception and use behaviour of platform recommendation algorithms. All scales were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932; Taufique, 2024), and were verified for translation and content validity by a panel of bilingual (English-Chinese; English-Malay) experts before formal administration. A pre-test comprising 30 participants was administered prior to the formal administration of the survey to confirm the clarity and internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  target value  $\geq 0.70$ ) of the item presentation.

**Interview outline:** The semi-structured interview outline is structured around the following core themes: (a) respondents' paths and opportunities for exposure to Chinese variety shows; (b) the perceived impact of the platform's recommendation algorithms on their viewing behaviours; (c) the extent to which they understand and identify with the cultural content of the shows; and (d) the experience of ethno-cultural identities and strategies for negotiation in the viewing process. Each interview was limited to 60 to 90 minutes in length, conducted in a language familiar to the respondents (Mandarin, English or Malay), audio-recorded with the consent of the respondents, and transcribed into text.

**Table 2:** Research Instrument Dimensions and Measurement Indicators

Module	Dimension	Measurement Indicators	Scale / Source
1	Demographic Information	Ethnicity, age, gender, education, language proficiency	Researcher-designed

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Module	Dimension	Measurement Indicators	Scale / Source
2	Media Usage Habits	Platform type & frequency; device type; daily viewing hours	Researcher-designed
3a	Perceived Cultural Proximity	Language proximity; value proximity; aesthetic proximity (3 sub-dimensions, 12 items)	Adapted from Straubhaar (1991)
3b	Viewing Motivation	Entertainment; cultural identity; social utility; cognitive needs (4 sub-dimensions, 16 items)	Adapted from Katz et al. (1973)
3c	Audience Engagement	Continued watching intention; social sharing behaviour; platform interaction (3 sub-dimensions, 9 items)	Self-developed
4	Algorithmic Perception	Algorithm awareness; perceived personalisation; content discovery via recommendation (3 sub-dimensions, 9 items)	Adapted from Fu & Wang (2025)

### 3.4 Data Analysis Strategy

**Quantitative data analysis:** statistical processing was carried out using SPSS 26.0 software. Descriptive statistics presented the basic distribution characteristics of each variable; independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to test the between-group differences in the dimensions of cultural proximity perception, viewing motivation and platform algorithm perception among different ethnic groups; multiple regression analysis was used to explore the relationship between cultural proximity perception, algorithm perception and audience's perception of the platform, as well as the relationship between cultural proximity perception, algorithm perception and audience's perception of the platform. Multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the predictive relationship between perceived cultural proximity, algorithmic perception, and audience engagement; and partial correlation analysis was used to assess the net effect of core variables after controlling for demographic variables.

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** Braun & Clarke's (2006; 2021) six-stage reflexive thematic analysis was used to code and interpret the interview texts. The steps were, in order: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, retrieving themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and writing the report. Coding consistency was compared between the two researchers after independent coding, and inconsistencies were resolved through discussion and negotiation to improve coding reliability (Naeem et al., 2023).

**Hybrid Integration Strategy:** A "connecting integration" strategy was used, where quantitative findings drove qualitative sample selection and findings from both types of data were systematically compared and further explained during the discussion phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study followed the academic code of ethics. All participants were provided with written informed consent prior to participation and were informed of the purpose of the study, how the data would be used and their right to withdraw. Questionnaire and interview data were anonymised and personally identifiable information was kept confidential. Audio recordings and transcribed texts of qualitative interviews were stored on an encrypted server and accessed only by the research team. The study design was submitted to the ethics committee of the host university for review.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

## 4.1 Sample Description

A total of 327 questionnaires were collected, excluding 23 invalid questionnaires that were incomplete and logically contradictory, resulting in 304 valid questionnaires (valid recovery rate of 93.0%). The ethnic composition of the sample was 123 (40.5%) Chinese, 122 (40.1%) Malays and 59 (19.4%) Indians. The gender distribution was more balanced, with 47.4 per cent male and 52.6 per cent female. In terms of age distribution, 41.8 per cent were aged 18 to 25, 35.2 per cent were aged 26 to 35, and 23.0 per cent were aged 36 to 45. In terms of education, 68.4 per cent of the respondents overall had a Bachelor's degree or above, which is largely in line with the educational structure of the urban audience in Malaysia. All respondents were active online video users on smartphones or computers, with an average of 28.6 hours of online time per week (SD = 9.3).

The 24 qualitative interviewees were drawn from the valid questionnaire respondents mentioned above, of which 8 were Chinese, 8 Malay, 8 Indian, and 12 male and 12 female, with an age distribution covering the age range of 18 to 43 years old, and with varying proficiency in Mandarin, English, and Malay, which ensured the heterogeneity of the sample in terms of the linguistic and cultural dimensions.

**Table 3:** Summary of Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Category	Survey n (%)	Interview n	Total / Note
Ethnicity	Chinese	123 (40.5%)	8	n=304 (survey); n=24 (interview)
	Malay	122 (40.1%)	8	
	Indian	59 (19.4%)	8	
Gender	Male	144 (47.4%)	12	
	Female	160 (52.6%)	12	
Age	18–25	127 (41.8%)	10	
	26–35	107 (35.2%)	9	
	36–45	70 (23.0%)	5	
Education	Below bachelor's	96 (31.6%)	7	
	Bachelor's or above	208 (68.4%)	17	
Weekly online hours	Mean = 28.6 hrs	SD = 9.3	—	Range: 8–56 hrs

## 4.2 Ethnic Differences in Exposure Behaviour to Chinese Variety Programmes (RQ1)

The results of the quantitative analyses showed that there were significant differences in the frequency of contact with Chinese variety arts programmes among the three major ethnic groups ( $F(2, 301) = 47.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .241$ ). Post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) showed that the average weekly viewing hours of Chinese audiences ( $M = 6.34$  hours,  $SD = 3.21$ ) were significantly higher than those of Malay ( $M = 2.87$  hours,  $SD = 2.56$ ) and Indian ( $M = 2.41$  hours,  $SD = 2.18$ ), with no significant difference between the latter two ( $p = .312$ ).

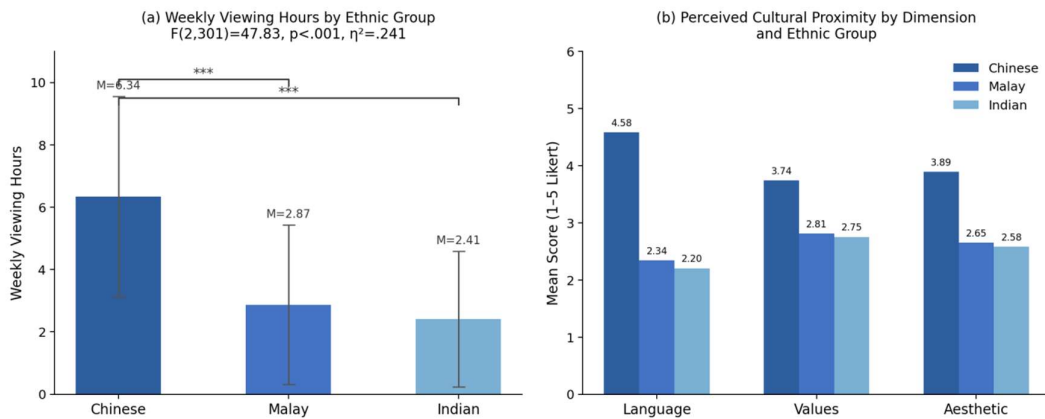
Mean comparisons for the Perceived Cultural Proximity scale similarly corroborated the above pattern. Perceived cultural proximity scores of Chinese audiences to Chinese variety programmes ( $M = 4.12, SD = 0.68$  out of 5) were significantly higher than those of Malay ( $M = 2.76, SD = 0.91$ ) and Indian

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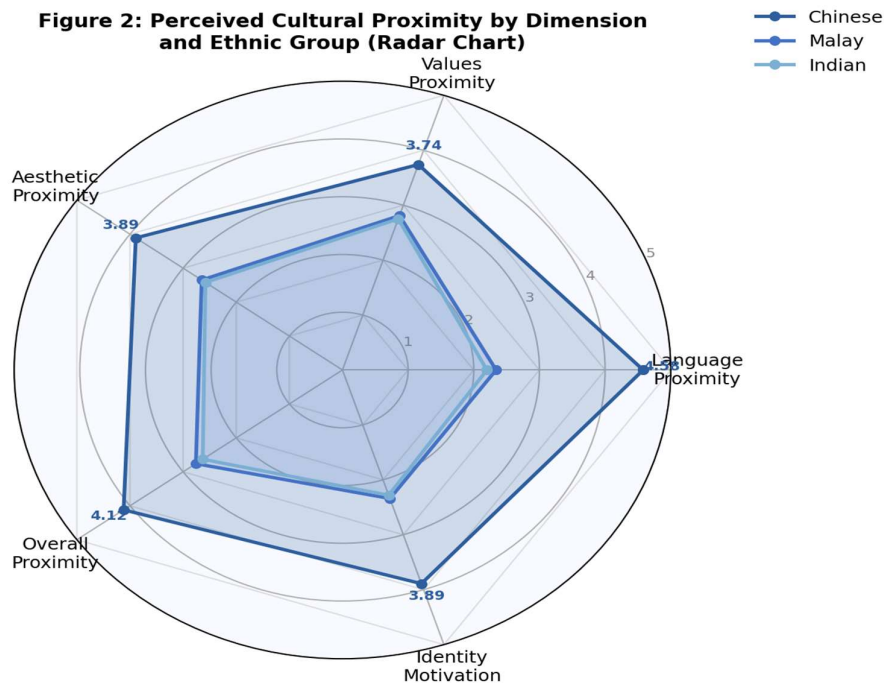
(M = 2.63, SD = 0.89) ( $p < .001$ ). Of note, the perceived cultural proximity of ethnic Chinese audiences was particularly prominent on the language dimension (M = 4.58, SD = 0.51), while it was relatively moderate on the values dimension (M = 3.74, SD = 0.84), implying that linguistic commonality is the core mechanism through which cultural proximity works, while differences in political values form a certain degree of resistance to acceptance.

In terms of viewing motivation, the three major ethnic groups differed the least on the entertainment motivation dimension (Chinese: M = 3.98; Malay: M = 3.67; Indian: M = 3.55;  $F(2,301) = 5.42, p = .005$ ) and the most on the cultural identity motivation dimension (Chinese: M = 3.89; Malay: M = 2.34; Indian: M = 2.28;  $F(2, 301) = 89.76, p < .001$ ). This finding reveals an important distinction: entertainment appeals are relatively universal among cross-ethnic audiences, whereas cultural identity motives are highly dependent on ethnic background, and are highly consistent with the basic propositions of use and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973).

**Figure 1 and Figure 2:** Audience Exposure and Cultural Proximity Perception by Ethnic Group



**Figure 2: Perceived Cultural Proximity by Dimension and Ethnic Group (Radar Chart)**



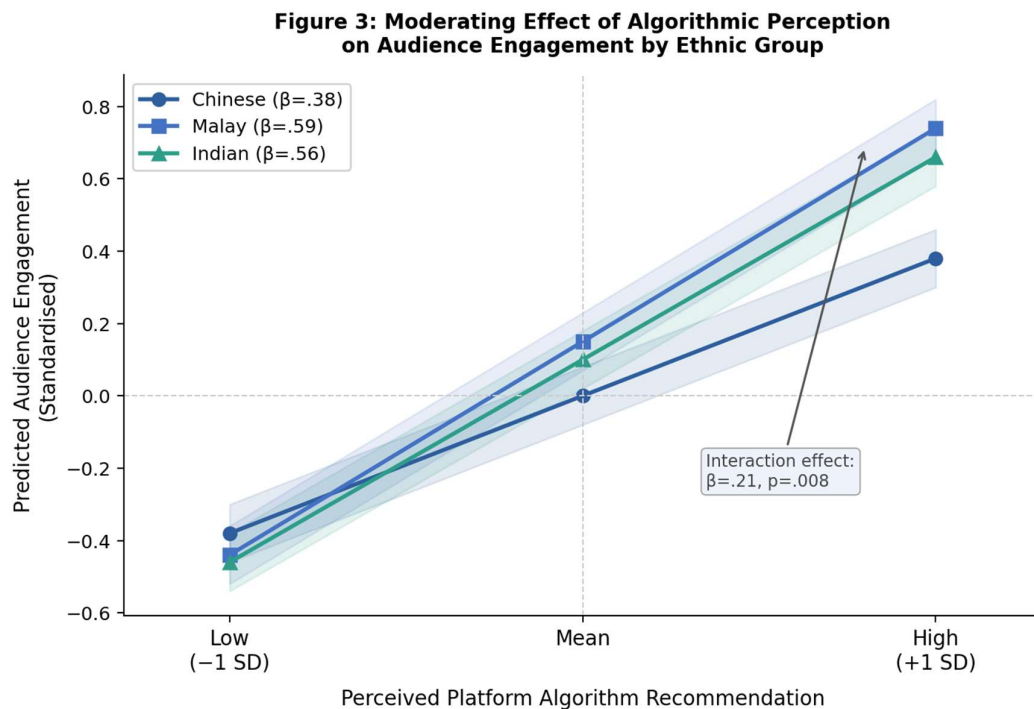
This interview accurately echoes the core findings below about the mechanism of action of platform algorithms.

### 4.3 Mediating Mechanisms of Platform Algorithms (RQ2)

Multiple regression analyses revealed that platform algorithm perceptions (i.e., the extent to which respondents perceived that recommendation algorithms ‘help discover content’) had a significant positive predictive effect ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) on audience engagement (including willingness to watch consistently and social sharing behaviours) after controlling for demographic variables such as ethnic background, age, and education, and the amount of variance explained ( $\Delta R^2 = .14$ ) was higher than the independent effect of perceptions of cultural proximity ( $\Delta R^2 = .14$ ), which was higher than the independent effect of perceptions of cultural proximity ( $\Delta R^2 = .14$ ). This result provides the first preliminary statistical support for the proposition that the algorithmic effect outweighs the cultural proximity effect.

Further moderation analysis revealed a more nuanced dynamic relationship: the positive relationship between algorithmic perceptions and audience engagement was significantly stronger among Malay and Indian audiences than Chinese audiences (interaction effect:  $\beta = .21, p = .008$ ). Specifically, algorithmic recommendation significantly increased the probability of exposure to Chinese variety programmes for Malay and Indian audiences with a low baseline of cultural proximity ( $\Delta$ mean viewing hours  $\approx +1.8$  hours/week), whereas the marginal incremental effect of algorithmic recommendation was relatively limited for Chinese audiences with an already high baseline of cultural proximity ( $\Delta$ mean viewing hours  $\approx +0.6$  hours/week). This pattern suggests that when cultural proximity provides sufficient ‘spontaneous’ engagement, the algorithm’s ‘guiding’ role is relatively minor, while when cultural proximity is insufficient to drive spontaneous engagement, the algorithm becomes a key variable in facilitating cross-cultural communication.

**Table 4:** Multiple Regression Analysis of Audience Engagement; Figure 3: Moderating Effect of Algorithmic Perception on Audience Engagement



**[ Figure 3: Moderating Effect of Algorithmic Perception on Audience Engagement by Ethnicity ]**

The positive slope of Algorithm Perception → Audience Engagement is steepest for Malay ( $\beta=.59$ ) and Indian ( $\beta=.56$ ) audiences, and moderate for Chinese audiences ( $\beta=.38$ ). Interaction effect:  $\beta=.21, p=.008$ .

*Note. Simple slopes plotted at 1 SD above/below mean algorithmic perception. Shaded bands represent 95% CI.*

The platform usage behaviour data further reveals the specific mechanisms of algorithmic intervention. Among all valid respondents, 42.3% said that their first exposure to a particular Chinese variety show was through the streaming platform's auto-recommendation ('Recommended for You' function), which is much higher than the proportion of those who were introduced to it through both friends/family (26.5%) and social media content (19.7%). Among Malay and Indian respondents, this proportion rose further to 54.6 per cent, reaffirming the key role of algorithms in crossing cultural boundaries and enabling unsolicited contact.

Qualitative interviews revealed complex attitudes towards algorithmic recommendations, presenting what scholar Sunstein (2017) describes as a tension between "passive acceptance" and "reflexive self-reflection". A 25-year-old male Indian respondent (IN-04) described his typical viewing path:

"It was after I watched Thai variety shows that the platforms started pushing Chinese variety shows for me. I didn't pay much attention to it at first, but then I got used to it and now I actively seek it out instead. I think the platform knows what I want to watch better than I do."

This account vividly demonstrates how algorithmic recommendation transforms the initial 'chance encounter' into a stable media consumption habit through gradual and cumulative exposure, which is a typical manifestation of what platform researchers Fu & Wang (2025) call 'platformized audiencing'.

#### **4.4 Three Modes of Cultural Identity Negotiation (RQ3)**

Thematic analysis identified three main strategies of cultural identity negotiation in the 24 interview texts. These three modes echo Stuart Hall's (1980) classic decoding triad (dominant reading, negotiated reading, and confrontational reading) to a high degree logically, but exhibit distinctive Malaysian contextual peculiarities in terms of their specific content and mechanisms of occurrence.

##### **Mode 1: Cultural Mirroring Identity** (Mainly seen in the ethnic Chinese audience)

Most of the Chinese respondents showed a pattern of identifying with Chinese variety shows as 'cultural mirrors', i.e., searching for elements in the programmes that match their own Chinese cultural memories, and reinforcing or re-activating their own ethnic cultural identities through this process of searching. This mode is not a passive acceptance of programme content, but an active practice of meaning filtering. Respondents were generally able to clearly distinguish which cultural elements belonged to 'our common Chinese culture' and which belonged to 'mainland-specific Chinese culture', which in itself constitutes a positive expression of discrete Chinese identity.

##### **Mode 2: Entertainment Consumption Exposure** (Mainly seen in Malay and Indian audiences)

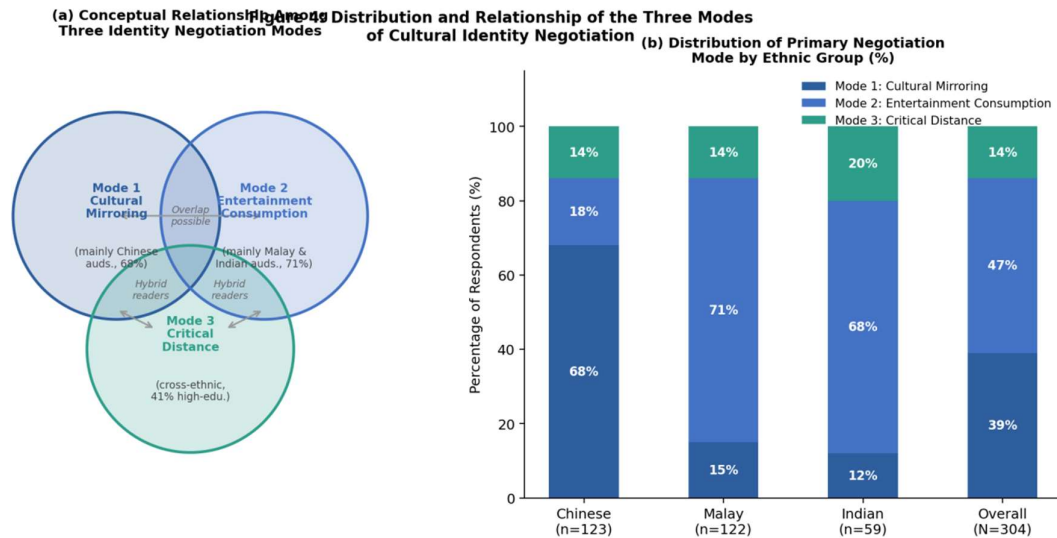
The dominant mode of exposure for Malay and Indian audiences is centred on entertainment consumption, with cultural factors taking a back seat. This group's evaluation criteria for programmes mainly revolve around entertainment (fun, visual impact, contest design) rather than cultural identity. They maintain a high level of cultural and psychological distance in the viewing process, and do not seek emotional identity, but rather position Chinese variety shows as an exotic spectacle, in line with Appadurai's (1996) theory on the role of media landscape in imagining exotic cultures.

##### **Mode 3: Critical distance reading** (distributed across all three major ethnicities, but in different proportions)

The third pattern was distributed across all three major ethnicities, but was particularly prevalent among the group of highly educated respondents. Respondents who hold this strategy maintain a distinct critical distance when watching Chinese variety programmes, and interpret the social images presented in the programmes (e.g. consumerism, star-worshipping culture, state ideological symbols) reflectively. This model is closest to Hall's 'negotiated interpretation', in which the

audience accepts the entertainment value of the programme while selectively resisting or questioning its ideological content. It is worth noting that the critical readers among the Chinese respondents are more likely to focus on the dimension of 'the difference between mainland culture and Malaysian Chinese culture', while the critical readers among the non-Chinese respondents are more likely to point to the dimension of 'the construction of China's image as a political entity'.

**Figure 4:** Distribution and Relationship of the Three Modes of Cultural Identity Negotiation



Taken together, the above three models suggest that audience acceptance of Chinese variety shows is not a simple binary choice of 'cultural acceptance or rejection', but a dynamic process of meaning construction full of subtle differences and strategic operations. Ethnic background, education level, language ability and platform algorithms together constitute multiple structural variables in this meaning construction process.

## V. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Cultural Proximity of Algorithmic Regulation: An Integrative Theoretical Framework

The central finding of this study - that the independent explanatory power of platform algorithmic perceptions of audience engagement exceeds that of cultural proximity perceptions, and that there is a significant moderating effect between the two - offers important corrective insights into the classic propositions of established cultural proximity theory. Straubhaar (1991) laid the groundwork for the theory that audiences actively choose culturally similar content, but the theory is based on the assumption of 'audience-led search' behaviour, which presupposes that audiences have reciprocal access to information. However, in the algorithm-driven streaming ecosystem, content discoverability has become a variable that is actively constructed by the technological system (Johnson et al., 2023; Khoo, 2023), which fundamentally alters the structural conditions under which cultural proximity can be effective.

Specifically, this study proposes the theoretical concept of 'algorithmically mediated cultural proximity' to describe the dynamic process whereby platform algorithms create a 'technological filter' between the audience's actual cultural preferences and the platform's content recommendations through the continuous collection and analysis of user behavioural data. The platform algorithm creates a 'technical filter' between the audience's actual cultural preferences and the platform's content recommendations through continuous collection and analysis of user behaviour data. This filter not only strengthens the existing cultural proximity preference (for Chinese audiences), but also gradually leads non-Chinese audiences, who originally do not have a cultural proximity basis, to Chinese variety content through the recommendation logic of 'similar content clustering'. This mechanism echoes Fu & Wang's (2025) assertion of 'platformised audience behaviour' and is in theoretical dialogue with Jin's (2023) notion of 'transnational proximity', which cites Korean dramas as a case study in which cross-cultural audiences can bypass the barrier of cultural expertise when the content presents sufficiently

universal emotional themes. This study further suggests that algorithms can play a functional role in this process by 'actively lowering the threshold across cultures'.

This theoretical proposition is corroborated by recent findings from comparative studies of OTT platforms. In a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis of Netflix streaming rankings in 75 countries, Park et al. (2022) found that a complex interaction of economic and cultural factors - rather than a single cultural proximity - determines cross-border TV streaming. - together determine the direction of transnational TV streaming; this study provides an additional account of the micro-mechanisms of this macro-finding at the level of audience behaviour. The algorithmic infrastructure of streaming platforms has become a new kind of "gatekeeper" for transnational media flows, in some cases even more important than cultural factors (Khoo, 2023).

## 5.2 The Paradox of Discrete Proximity of Chinese Malaysian Audiences

The patterns of cultural identity negotiation revealed in this study reveal an inherent complexity that cannot be simply summarised in terms of "cultural proximity". On the one hand, the interviewed Chinese audiences showed significantly higher perceptions of cultural proximity to Chinese variety shows than other ethnic groups, but on the other hand, they generally drew a clear boundary between 'Chinese culture' and 'Chinese (mainland) culture' in the interviews. This double gesture of 'both affinity and alienation' can be explained by Hall's (1990) theory of 'cultural identity and disassociation' - the cultural identity of discrete ethnic groups is not a direct copy of the 'culture of origin', but is constantly reconstructed in the continuous tension of continuity and rupture. It is the product of continuous reconstruction under the tension of continuity and rupture.

This finding adds to the existing research on Chinese Malaysian audiences. An earlier study by Sun et al. (Sun, 2002) documented the cultural identification of ethnic Chinese Malaysians with media content from Hong Kong and Taiwan, a period in which the basis of identification was largely based on linguistic commonality and political neutrality. However, the data in this study suggests that with the full-scale entry of mainland Chinese cultural products into the Malaysian market, there has been a subtle shift in the identification stance of ethnic Chinese audiences - while the linguistic dimension continues to be highly proximate, there has been an apparent selective acceptance of the values and political dimensions. This is consistent with the theoretical prediction of selective affinity in discrete communication research (Straubhaar, 2007), and confirms the observation of Radio Free Asia (2023) that Malaysian Chinese audiences construct an impression of China through Chinese media content, while maintaining a politically cautious distance. This observation is particularly noteworthy in the case of Malaysian Chinese audiences.

Of particular interest is the discrepancy ( $\Delta = 0.84$ ) between the language dimension ( $M = 4.58$ ) and the values dimension ( $M = 3.74$ ) of perceived cultural proximity among Malaysian-Chinese audiences, suggesting that researchers should disaggregate cultural proximity more finely in cross-communication studies, and avoid using this multidimensional construct as a single holistic variable. The weighting of linguistic commonality and value resonance in driving audience engagement behaviours may vary systematically according to content type (variety shows, TV dramas, documentaries), audience characteristics (age, education level, immigrant generation), and platform contexts (user-generated vs. professionally-produced content), which provides an important theoretical refinement for subsequent research.

## 5.3 Universal Entertainment as a Common Ground for Cross-Ethnic Communication

For Malay and Indian audiences, the appeal of Chinese variety programmes is mainly based on entertainment rather than cultural proximity. This finding echoes Zhang's (2025) suggestion that Chinese variety programmes should strengthen the 'expression of universal values' and transform 'cultural discounts' into 'cultural premiums' in international communication. Lin (2025) also points out that professionalism and cosmopolitanism are the two key cultural mechanisms driving the export of Chinese variety shows, and that the core logic of these two mechanisms lies in decontextualising the content of the shows from specific cultural contexts, thereby lowering the threshold of acceptance for non-culturally similar audiences.

The interview data in this study further revealed that for Malay and Indian audiences, visual spectacle, universal comprehensibility of the competition design, and celebrities' emotional labour across cultural boundaries are the three specific mechanisms that drive cross-ethnic acceptance. Together, these three mechanisms point to the logic inherent in Jin's (2023) notion of 'transnational proximity' - when media content is able to activate universal affective responses without requiring viewers to possess specific cultural expertise, cultural proximity is no longer a necessary condition for transnational communication. This finding has direct practical implications for the international communication strategies of Chinese variety shows: targeting the non-Chinese audience market, highlighting visual presentation, weakening culturally specific linguistic content, and strengthening the expression of universal human emotional themes may be an effective way to enhance communication effects.

However, this finding also implies a number of complexities that need to be approached with caution. The reception of Chinese variety shows by the Malay and Indian audiences in this study relied to a considerable extent on the quality of subtitle translation and the accuracy of cultural annotation. A number of interviewees explicitly stated that their viewing experience was significantly degraded when there were errors in subtitle translation or when the cultural stems were difficult to translate. This is highly consistent with Zhang's (2025) judgement that the quality of subtitles is one of the key variables in the success or failure of cross-cultural communication of Chinese variety programmes, and suggests that when assessing the effectiveness of cross-communication, linguistic and technical factors such as subtitling should not be regarded as neutral information transfer tools, but rather as a communication practice that actively intervenes in the construction of cultural meanings.

#### **5.4 Non-linear Relationship between Chinese Variety Programmes and China's Soft Power**

The findings of this study also question the simplistic narrative that 'Chinese media content dissemination = automatic soft power multiplication'. While the Chinese government and academia have long viewed cultural products such as variety shows as an effective tool for soft power dissemination (Lin, 2025; Zhang, 2025), the qualitative data in this study suggests that audiences' cultural consumption of the programmes does not automatically translate into positive perceptions of China's national image. While enjoying the entertainment value of the programmes, a significant proportion of respondents (especially those who adopt the strategy of "critical distance reading") maintain a clear resistance to the Chinese national narrative carried by the programmes. In examining global Chinese media discourse, Marsh et al. (2023) also observed a significant decoupling between audience reception of Chinese media content and identification with China's national image.

This finding corroborates with a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of China's soft power in Southeast Asia by the US-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2024) - although the reach of Chinese cultural products in Southeast Asia has continued to increase (with Chinese streaming platforms growing by around 40% in Southeast Asia between 2022 and 2023), this growth has not been reflected in the audience's perception of Chinese media content. However, this growth has not yielded a corresponding soft power dividend in terms of audience's political stance and national identity. This suggests that the frequency and depth of media exposure is a useful indicator of the effectiveness of entertainment and cultural communication, but equating it with a substantial increase in soft power requires more careful causal inference.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Summary of Key Findings**

Taking Malaysian multi-ethnic audiences as the object of study, this study systematically examines the interaction between platform algorithms, cultural proximity and audience engagement in the process of cross-communication of Chinese variety shows using a mixed research methodology, and summarises the following core findings:

First, among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, perceived cultural proximity is a significant predictor of audience engagement and participation behaviour in Chinese variety shows, but its effect is highly concentrated on Chinese audiences, and there is a significant internal differentiation between the language dimension and the values dimension. Second, the independent explanatory

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power of platform algorithmic perceptions of overall audience engagement was higher than that of cultural proximity perceptions, and its effect was particularly prominent among Malay and Indian audiences with lower cultural proximity, revealing the key mediating role of algorithms in crossing cultural boundaries and enabling non-initiated contact. Third, at the level of cultural identity negotiation, audiences showed three regular patterns of strategies: 'cultural mirroring', 'entertainment consumption', and 'critical distance', with systematic differences in the distribution of the three in terms of ethnicity and educational background, which revealed the richness of audience subjectivity in the process of cross-communication.

### 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The main theoretical contributions of this study are at three levels: first, the integrated theoretical concept of 'algorithmically-adjusted cultural proximity' is proposed, which puts streaming media platform research and cross-cultural communication research under the same analytical framework and bridges the gap of cultural proximity theory in the algorithmic era; second, the concept of 'transnational proximity' proposed by Jin (2023) is extended from the context of Korean dramas to the field of Chinese variety shows, and is applied to the Malaysian and Malaysian audiences in the context of Malaysian variety shows. Second, we extend Jin's (2023) concept of 'transnational proximity' from the Korean drama context to the Chinese variety show context, and test and enrich the theoretical boundaries of the concept in the Malaysian multi-ethnic context; third, we deepen the theoretical understanding of the inherent complexity of 'diasporic proximity' through the detailed portrayal of the mode of negotiation of the cultural identities of the discrete Chinese audiences, and provide new evidence for the study of discrete communication in the Southeast Asian non-immigrant first-generation contexts. The study provides new evidence for discrete communication research from non-migrant first generation contexts in Southeast Asia.

### 6.3 Practical Implications

For content producers and overseas distributors of Chinese variety programmes, this study provides a number of targeted practical references. First, for the non-Chinese audience market, priority should be given to strengthening the visual presentation of programmes, the general comprehensibility of the competition system, and the quality of subtitle translations and cultural annotations, in order to lower the threshold of cultural access; second, cooperation with platforms such as iQIYI and WeTV should be actively established to push content at the algorithmic level, and the algorithmic dissemination should be incorporated into the overall dissemination strategy planning, rather than relying on the traditional content licensing model; and, third, the audience's critical perception of the content should be taken into account and the audience's critical perception of the programme should be taken into account. face up to the audience's critical interpretation ability and avoid over-embedding political ideological symbols in the content, so as to avoid triggering a boycott response from non-Chinese audiences, which counterproductively compresses the effective space for soft power communication (Zhang, 2025).

The findings of this study also have policy implications for Malaysian media regulators. While algorithmic recommendation mechanisms are effective in crossing ethno-cultural boundaries, they may also further polarise the media consumption patterns of different ethnic groups, which poses new challenges for the formulation of multicultural media policies in Malaysia.

### 6.4 Limitations and Future Prospects

There are several limitations of this study that are worth pointing out. Firstly, at the sample level, the research sample focuses on highly educated audiences in urban areas of Malaysia, while rural audiences and low-education groups are under-represented, and the general generalisability of the study's findings needs to be verified on the basis of a more representative sample. Secondly, at the methodological level, the actual operation logic of the platform algorithm is still a 'black box' for external researchers, and this study can only measure the audience's perception of the algorithm but cannot directly observe the algorithmic mechanism itself, so future research can try to establish data cooperation with the platform to obtain more objective algorithmic behaviour data. Furthermore, the quantitative data in this study are cross-sectional data, which cannot track the dynamic evolution of the

relationship between audiences and Chinese variety shows, and a longitudinal tracking design would be a valuable direction for follow-up research.

Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, to compare the differences in the communication effects of different types of Chinese variety programmes (cultural, competitive, reality, talent show) among different ethnic audiences in Malaysia; second, to expand the research horizon to the whole of Southeast Asia and conduct a cross-national comparative study to assess the universality and specificity of the Malaysian experience; and third, to explore in-depth the algorithmic communication perspective of the Thirdly, we explore the structural differences in content recommendation logic between Chinese streaming platforms such as iQIYI and WeTV and Western platforms such as Netflix, and their impact on transnational media flows; fourthly, we examine the reshaping of cultural proximity mechanisms by localised productions against the backdrop of the rapid emergence of 'made-in-China' variety shows (e.g., Southeast Asian versions of *Youth With You* and *Create Camp Asia*) in recent years. The effect of localised production on the mechanism of cultural proximity is examined.

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