THE LOCALIZATION OF TV FORMATS:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM TRANS-CULTURAL AUDIENCE RESEARCH
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The Top Model-franchise as a trans-cultural media phenomenon:

Introductory statement:
Looking at television formats, the question of globalization versus localization becomes more complex. ‘Localizing’ a global television format happens not only just on the part of audience reception anymore (as former studies of global media products such as Dallas by Liebes/Katz (1990) suggest), but already on the level of production and text when the format concept is sold and adapted to different localities. Regarding the so called global-local problematic, I suggest and strongly support to overcome the dichotomy or binary between the two – as many scholars before me have done as well – and to understand television formats as a cultural phenomena ‘beyond’ or ‘across’ cultures. I would like to point out that localization shall be understood as an aspect of globalization, not as a counterpoint. Localization cannot only be regarded as a business strategy to adjust media content to local conditions and maximize audiences and thus profits; but also as a mode of audience reception to negotiate ambivalences in media content and everyday life experiences.

With reference to the results of my study, I argue that a trans-cultural mode of reception exists that is similar across national and cultural boundaries. Findings suggest that from an audience perspective no binary or dialectic between ‘the global and the local’ exists and that viewers at the same time localize and ‘re-globalize’ television formats. By referring to their everyday life experiences, viewers use the television format to negotiate ambivalences and thus make sense of the format within their particular ‘locality’. However, these ‘localities’ can be considered as trans-local because similar strategies of negotiation become evident in both contexts. Thus, differences in the adapted television shows do not necessarily lead to different decodings and similar modes of reception can be observed. The conclusion from this in my opinion is that audiences do not necessarily find global media products strange or consider them as foreign, but rather integrate knowledge and experiences from several contexts in their appropriation of a media product.
To make my argument clear, I want to stress the following points:

- The localization of TV formats should be regarded as a mode of audience reception, of how audiences appropriate and negotiate the TV show against the background of their everyday life experiences. (not only as a production technique or characteristic of the television text)
- Results from my audience research project in the US and Germany suggest that similar modes of reception exist across these cultural contexts.
- There is no contradiction between the Global and the Local from an audience perspective – instead viewers negotiate the television content across cultural contexts (= trans-cultural mode of reception).
- The success of television formats is based on their transculturality – meaning the possibility for audiences from different cultural contexts to relate to the show. The decisive moment of a successful TV format is therefore not the localization process itself, but its potential to combine and integrate both global and local elements.
- This means, localization is not a question of either or, or a question of standardization versus fragmentation, rather it is a question of how audiences can integrate the media offer into their everyday life.

**Evidence/examples:**

- **Example of similar reception modes when negotiating competition:**
  - Anita (25-year old college student, Germany): Yes, actually yes. Well, partly when playing sports, that you could consider your fellow students as competition, but you don’t. […] And especially at job interviews, you sit there together with other people and you know, o.k. either I’ll get the job or they will. And still, you are nice to people and don’t see it like that. Because it’s not like the other person says, don’t take her, well it’s not the other person’s fault when they get chosen.
  - Indira (19-year old college student, USA): And I think obviously it’s, on the crew team we have a much more friendly, like we get such good friendship out of it but when it does come down to it you are fighting against people on your, it’s a very weird sport because you are fighting against people on your team to get into a certain boat and you literally race in another boat against them to see who is faster and then kick some of your friends out of the boat and then at the end of the practice you go get lunch with them. And like you just kicked them out of the spot that they really wanted or something. […] I still don’t think I could cope to the extreme that they do in America’s Next Top Model. Because somehow we maintain our friendships.

Viewers from both contexts answer with reference to similar experiences when asked if they can relate to the competitive aspect of the modeling show. They both refer to situations in school, college or in job interviews when they compete against their friends – interestingly, in both contexts viewers prefer friendship and community over success and competition.

- **Example of similar reception modes when negotiating beauty ideals:**
  - Fiona (23-years old trainee in civil service, Germany): No. Well, I also think that in this show they communicate some wrong, wrong things about beauty. […] Well, also just now, this should be a role model for girls and many girls take this as a role model, they hear, oh, she weighs sixty kilos, she is too fat and such things (!: If sixty at all.). Exactly, if at all. And such things in fact, and then, through this, all those sick girls come from that, yes, those who are anorexic, and so on. And this is due, among other things, to this. (Everyone nods.)
Ivy (20-years old college student, USA): When Nigel was talking about like these beautiful girls, he’s like yes I mean her face is ok, her body needs a little work, and it’s like (opens her mouth widely and holds her hand in front of it), those girls are perfect, it’s like what? It’s just hard for me to like really understand where he is coming from but in that industry it’s like you need perfection, you know. It’s a little, it kind of freaks you out when you hear that.

Irina (20-years old college student, USA): And I feel like they also send like an awful message to all the girls that are watching the show.

These quotes show that viewers from both countries reproduce a simplistic conception of media communication and agree to the “common sense- discourse” which centers on modeling shows holding them responsible for eating disorders.

And even though, there are slight differences in the representation of beauty in the adaptions (Tyra Banks claims to expand the definition of beauty by having contestants of different ethnic, social and sexual background in the show), viewers criticize the show in very similar ways. Here, differences in the adaptations are assimilated by the interpretation by audiences.

Heather (25-years old psychology researcher, USA): I mean Tyra always is talking about she is expanding the definition of beauty, she is always talking about she is like, choses weird looking girls, so I mean I don’t know, her beauty is defined by like face and not necessarily by weight, that’s it. If you wanna say she defines, extends beauty definitions I don’t know if she does or not, I can’t really.

• Example of similar reception modes when discussing wishes for changes and improvements
  o Requests for more technical aspects, less drama
  o You can use focus group research for detecting trends in audience taste – less focus on competition and drama – The Voice (judges as coaches)

• Example of ‘re-globalizing’ a format: using foreign adaptations to make sense of local version

  o Greta (18-year old trainee in child care, Germany): […], in America’s Next Top Model they often have a little more chubby contestants. And they never won I think and I don’t know how serious, […] I don’t know if they actually had a chance with the judges, but I liked it better because in Germany’s next Topmodel they don’t have that.

  o Chun (25-years old PhD student from China): “I was thinking I have watched this season of China’s Supergirl. Actually, this season they had a special program every week. I think maybe it is influenced by the program in America, or in South Korea. It’s like a, they will show how the girls, they ask one girl to comment on each other’s advantages and disadvantages.”

Viewers use their knowledge of trans-local media offers in the appropriation of the local television show. Thus, there exists a trans-local frame of reference which viewers use to negotiate or even criticize the local show as well as to make sense of contradictions and ambivalences they detect in the television show.

For example, Chinese viewer Chun uses her knowledge of other foreign reality television show to make sense of the changes of one of the most popular television shows in China, Supergirl, the Chinese version of American Idol.

Chun articulates a dissatisfaction with the current changes in the program where contestants are asked to comment on each others’ performance and tries to explain this through the influence of foreign programs. Later, she also indicates that she feels that the programs push the competition although it doesn’t seem to be consistent with the Chinese cultural context.
Possible questions/limits of study:

- Validity of study is limited to western-industrialized contexts
- Consciousness for cultural differences is still important; no uniformity or standardization
- Example of focus group with Chinese women shows that local audiences still exist but that they not necessarily feel threatened by foreign influences; rather they integrate them in their negotiations.
- Theoretical framework of transculturality: investigating the increasingly global communicative connectivity – „It is able to cover both global and local, universalistic and particularistic aspects, and it does so quite naturally, from the logic of transcultural processes themselves. The globalizing tendencies as well as the desire for specificity and particularity can be fulfilled within transculturality.” (Welsch 1999: 205)
- Method: I used focus groups with young female viewers of America’s Next Top Model in the USA and Germany’s next Topmodel in Germany between 17 and 28 years. The sample consists of a total number of 12 focus groups with 50 participants in two countries. The majority of the participants were college students or trainees in vocational schools; minority groups within a cultural context were not explicitly addressed but were not excluded from the sample.
- ‘Globality’ of format/Knowledge of foreign adaptations: 5 out of 16 US-participants have knowledge of Top Model-versions other than ANTM (31.25 %), 15 out of 34 German participants know of ANTM (ca. 44 %) Overall, very little involvement with versions from other countries (no direct transcultural viewing practices)