

NARRATIVE HYBRIDITY, CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION, AND MARKET STRATEGIES IN HORROR CINEMA

HIBRIDIDADE NARRATIVA, AUTENTICAÇÃO CULTURAL E ESTRATÉGIAS DE MERCADO NO CINEMA DE TERROR

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Abstract

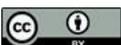
This study examines the hybrid narrative forms, cultural authentication strategies, and market adaptation mechanisms shaping Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema. Focusing on films from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, it analyzes how filmmakers blend indigenous spiritual systems—animism, Buddhism, Islam, and Catholicism—with global horror conventions. Using textual analysis, expert interviews, and industry mapping, the research reveals how ritual practices, sacred symbols, and historical settings function not only as markers of authenticity but also as epistemological anchors. A key finding is the emergence of "platform-oriented hybridity," where narratives are restructured to meet the demands of global streaming algorithms while preserving cultural specificity. These films thus serve as cultural texts negotiating identity, belief, and trauma within postcolonial contexts. The study contributes to discourses on global media, transnational genre flows, and the political economy of streaming by highlighting Southeast Asian horror cinema's dual role as a site of cultural expression and industrial innovation. Recommendations stress deeper ethnographic engagement and equitable digital representation.

Keyword: Southeast Asian Cinema. Supernatural Horror. Narrative Hybridity. Cultural Authentication. Streaming Platforms.

Resumo

Este estudo examina as formas narrativas híbridas, as estratégias de autenticação cultural e os mecanismos de adaptação de mercado que moldam o cinema de terror sobrenatural do Sudeste Asiático. Com foco em filmes da Tailândia, Vietnã, Indonésia e Filipinas, analisa como os cineastas combinam sistemas espirituais indígenas — animismo, budismo, islamismo e catolicismo — com convenções globais do terror. Utilizando análise textual, entrevistas com especialistas e mapeamento da indústria, a pesquisa revela como práticas rituais, símbolos sagrados e cenários históricos funcionam não apenas como marcadores de autenticidade, mas também como âncoras epistemológicas. Uma descoberta fundamental é o surgimento da "hibridização orientada à plataforma", onde as narrativas são reestruturadas para atender às demandas dos algoritmos globais de streaming, preservando a especificidade cultural. Esses filmes, portanto, servem como textos culturais que negociam identidade, crença e trauma em contextos pós-coloniais. O estudo contribui para os discursos sobre mídia global, fluxos transnacionais de gênero e a economia política do streaming, destacando o papel duplo do cinema de terror do Sudeste Asiático como um espaço de expressão cultural e inovação industrial. As recomendações enfatizam um engajamento etnográfico mais profundo e uma representação digital equitativa.

Palavras-chave: Cinema do Sudeste Asiático. Terror Sobrenatural. Hibridismo Narrativo. Autenticação Cultural. Streaming Plataformas.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Over the past two decades, Southeast Asian supernatural horror has transitioned from a regional genre to a globally visible form, integrating local spiritual traditions with global horror aesthetics. Films from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines reflect not only entertainment value but also complex negotiations of identity, belief, and media commodification (Bräunlein, 2016; Khoo, Ainslie & Barker, 2020).

These works, called "cinema-spiritualism" (Bräunlein & Lauser, 2016), act as cultural texts that connect old beliefs with modern worries, often touching on themes like postcolonial trauma, mixed spiritual identities, and social-political uncertainty (Derrida, 1994; Good, Chioyenda, & Rahimi, 2022). Scholarship (Zhang et al., 2024; Lovatt & Trice, 2021) highlights the genre's capacity to subvert Western norms while engaging global audiences. The way it connects with topics like gender and nationalism makes Southeast Asian horror a lively mix of different stories and cultural expressions.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Despite increasing global interest, scholarly understanding of how Southeast Asian supernatural horror articulates cultural authenticity, negotiates transnational aesthetics, and responds to market shifts remains limited. There is a need for more profound analysis of the genre's narrative structures, spiritual discourses, and industrial transformations.

1.3 Research objectives

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the hybrid narrative construction in Southeast Asian supernatural horror, focusing on the fusion of global horror tropes with local religious traditions (Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and animism).
2. Examine strategies of cultural authentication, such as ritual enactment, spatial-historical grounding, and institutional religious symbolism.

3. Investigate market adaptation across three phases—Foundation (2004–2013), Development (2014–2018), and Streaming (2019–2024)—and how industrial shifts influence narrative form and global circulation.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study contributes to genre theory, postcolonial media studies, and platform economics by framing Southeast Asian supernatural horror as both a cultural archive and a commercial strategy. Utilizing Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the “third space,” the research situates these films as sites of hybrid identity formation and transnational mediation. The study offers new insights into how regional cinema navigates global recognition while sustaining epistemic and cultural specificity.

1.5 Organization of the paper

This paper is structured into seven main sections. Section 1 (Introduction) outlines the background, research problem, objectives, and significance of the study, establishing the theoretical and contextual foundations. Section 2 (Literature Review) summarizes important research on how hybrid narratives are created, the process of cultural authentication, and the worldwide growth of Southeast Asian supernatural horror movies. Section 3 (Methods) details the mixed-methods approach, including textual analysis, expert interviews, and industry mapping. Section 4 (Results and Discussion) shows and explains the main findings of the study in three main areas: how stories are created in a mixed way (4.1.1), how culture is recognized and validated (4.1.2), and how businesses adjust to the market (4.1.3), followed by a thoughtful discussion (4.2) that places these findings in a larger theoretical context. Section 5 (Conclusion) summarizes the study’s contributions to genre studies, postcolonial theory, and media globalization. Section 6 (Implications) explores scholarly, industrial, and policy-related impacts of the research. Section 7 (Limitations and Recommendations) talks about the research methods that had some restrictions (7.1) and suggests new areas for future studies (7.2) to further explore Southeast Asian horror cinema.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A burgeoning corpus of research encompassing film studies, religious media, postcolonial theory, and cultural globalization has emerged from the ascendance of Southeast Asian horror films in the twenty-first century (Choi & Wada-Marciano, 2009; Lim & Yamamoto, 2011; Reyes, 2016; Ainslie, 2017; Ainslie & Ancuta 2018). Researchers have looked at how horror films from this area tell their own cultural stories while also dealing with modern life and city growth, showing local beliefs and pushing against international film limits.

Researchers have analyzed how Southeast Asian horror films interact with spiritual belief systems, including Buddhism, Christianity, and animism, and have established these films as crucial for understanding contemporary Southeast Asian spirituality. These narratives often exhibit complex interrelations between local concepts and global cinematic forms (Ancuta, 2016; Lauser & Bräunlein, 2016; Hoogervorst & Nordholt, 2017).

Sim (2020) explores the postcolonial dimension of Southeast Asian horror, analyzing how the genre's films undermine Western cinematic dominance by utilizing horror as a means of cultural resistance and reclamation. These works preserve indigenous narratives and generate counter-discourses that contest colonial legacies. In a similar vein, Galt (2021) examines the Pontianak, female vampire or ghost, as a decolonial emblem, illustrating how, in postcolonial Southeast Asia, horror transforms into a mechanism for reclaiming agency and reinterpreting gendered suffering. Maranatha (2019) analyzes Rizal Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* (2006), illustrating how the film contests colonial-era cultural and geographical paradigms by reclaiming postcolonial space using localized supernatural motifs.

Iwabuchi, Tsai, and Berry (2016) analyze the transnational influence of East Asian popular culture and explore cultural globalization, particularly the global dissemination of Southeast Asian cinema. Lee (2016) further examines the concept of "universal hybrids" in pan-Asian horror, illustrating how Southeast Asian films amalgamate regional cultural elements with global genre conventions to attract a wider audience. Decker (2021) asserts that the success of modern horror film is mostly due to the intersection of regional cultural identity and global cinematic trends, as he explores the transnational dimensions of genre hybridity. Moreover, Och and Strayer (2013) underscore the

interaction of transnational horror in visual media with fragmented bodies and locations, enhancing the genre's ability to transcend national boundaries while maintaining cultural distinctiveness.

Collectively, these scholars illustrate the diverse methods by which Southeast Asian horror films have transformed into a medium for exploring postcolonial narratives, religious beliefs, cultural identity, and the dynamics of global media exchanges.

2.1 Hybrid narrative construction and genre syncretism

Bhabha (2012) designates the "third space" as a conceptual realm for cultural negotiation, which is essential to the hybridity of narrative structures in Southeast Asian horror films. Researchers such as Chua (2012) and Teo (2013) have examined how Southeast Asian filmmakers employ genre hybridity to reintegrate indigenous spiritual traditions into familiar narrative frameworks while also localizing global cinematic genres. Chua's analysis of Thai horror illustrates how films such as *Shutter* (2004) amalgamate Buddhist cosmology with Western ghost tropes to elicit emotional responses rooted in spiritual continuity and karmic justice. In a similar vein, Teo (2013) highlights the utilization of family-oriented horror in *Satan's Slaves* (2017) as a method for integrating Islamic eschatological themes into a universally comprehensible framework.

Narrative hybridity also has a political function. Lim (2020) asserts that horror films, as exemplified by *The Housemaid* (2016) and *The Third Wife* (2018), can interrogate modernity, gender conventions, and historical trauma through the integration of folklore, myth, and religious symbolism. By employing genre fluidity, these films contest dominant historical narratives by recontextualizing colonial-era stories inside horror frameworks to articulate postcolonial anxieties (Schoonover & Galt, 2016).

2.2 Cultural authentication and spiritual realism

Cultural authenticity in horror fiction refers to the utilization of rituals, belief systems, and spatial symbolism to enhance story credibility and affirm cultural identity. Researchers such as Ji (2023) and Platt (2016) have examined the role of Southeast Asian horror films as ethnographic texts, elucidating animist, Buddhist, Islamic, and Catholic worldviews via the lenses of ethnography and media studies. Teo's assessment of *The*

Medium, as cited in Ancuta (2023), underscores the fidelity with which Northeastern Thai shamanic traditions are shown. He asserts that this level of detail promotes what he calls "spiritual realism" a form of narrative authenticity grounded in experienced belief systems.

Scholars have examined geographical and temporal anchoring as a significant method for cultural authentication. Scholars such as Tolbert and Keetley (2023) and Suryadi (2025) assert that rural communities, colonial estates, and wartime sites function as dynamic narrative agents that embody collective memory and spiritual significance, rather than only acting as settings. This is particularly evident in films such as *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022) and *Impetigore* (2019), which situate supernatural occurrences in culturally affluent and physically isolated settings.

Another significant element in cultural authentication is the utilization of institutional religious symbols. Films such as *Seklusyon* (2016) and *Eerie* (2019) prominently utilize Catholic iconography, including confessionals, convents, and exorcisms, to create atmosphere and to scrutinize moral degradation, institutional oppression, and colonial remnants in Filipino society, as noted by scholars like Sison (2015) and Shaw (2023). In this context, Catholic imagery functions as both a spiritual emblem and a cultural code embedded in the postcolonial psyche of the Philippines. It embodies what Sison (2015) describes as the "folk Catholic imaginary"—a syncretic realm where pre-Hispanic beliefs converge with Roman Catholic devotion.

2.3 Global expansion of southeast asian horror cinema through streaming platforms

The emergence of internet streaming services has markedly facilitated the internationalization of Southeast Asian horror cinema. A recent study indicates a shift toward emphasizing cultural distinctiveness as a marketable asset in horror genres, contradicting Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of "cultural odorlessness," which posited that Asian media were often devoid of cultural individuality for broader distribution. Currently, platforms such as Netflix deliberately seek "culturally distinct" material that, while adhering to regional values and aesthetics, resonates with a global audience through universal emotions such as suffering, terror, and familial disintegration.

Grgić (2024) examines the curation and marketing of Southeast Asian horror films by the Malaysian streaming service MUBI, positioning them as vital offerings that attract

global audiences seeking authentic cultural narratives. This method aligns with the findings of Hill and Lee (2022), who discuss how Southeast Asian audiences utilize diverse entertainment platforms, such as Netflix, to discover content that resonates with their cultural identities.

The evolution of distribution methods, particularly the rise of digital streaming platforms, has significantly influenced the admission of Southeast Asian horror films into foreign markets. Recent research underscores a contrasting trend in horror: cultural distinctiveness as a marketable asset. Iwabuchi (2002) coined the phrase "cultural odorlessness" to characterize the phenomenon in which Asian media lacks cultural distinctiveness to enhance its global marketability. Such an outcome is often achieved by removing specific local attributes to create a more generally appealing product. Grgić (2024) asserts that streaming services such as Netflix are progressively pursuing "culturally distinct" content—productions that preserve local specificity while resonating with a global audience through universal themes such as suffering, fear, and familial disintegration, despite adhering to regional norms and aesthetics.

Horror is particularly conducive to worldwide dissemination due to its emotive framework, or its capacity to elicit immediate emotional responses. Scholars such as Siddique and Raphael (2017) and Çakırlar (2025) assert that horror can surpass linguistic and cultural boundaries due to its ability to provoke visceral responses, including terror and anxiety. Alongside culturally embedded aesthetics, this emotional immediacy generates what Çakırlar describes as a "global/local folk horror" dynamic, enabling horror films to resonate with diverse audiences.

Collectively, these scholarly perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how Southeast Asian supernatural horror films negotiate the intersections of culture, narrative, and market. By drawing on theories of hybridity, spiritual realism, and global media flows, this literature review contextualizes the study's examination of how films from the region affirm cultural specificity while strategically adapting to the demands of global genre markets.

3 METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach to examine Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema (2004–2024) as a site of cultural negotiation and

industrial transformation. Positioned at the intersection of film studies, cultural studies, and media industry analysis, it integrates textual analysis, expert interviews, and industry mapping to explore (1) hybrid narrative evolution, (2) cultural authentication, and (3) market adaptation strategies.

Given the genre's symbolic and socio-cultural complexity, a qualitative paradigm enables contextualized interpretation of narrative structures and industry dynamics (Lobato, 2019). The research accounts for both local cosmologies and transnational influences, reflecting the dual pressures of cultural specificity and global media ecologies.

Sixteen films were purposively selected from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, based on cultural diversity, thematic significance, and critical or commercial impact. These were analyzed across three industrial phases—Foundation (2004–2013), Development (2014–2018), and Streaming Era (2019–2024)—to trace longitudinal changes.

Representative titles include *Feng Shui* (2004), *Satan's Slaves* (2017), *Shutter* (2004), and *The Housemaid* (2016), among others. These works reflect national mythologies while embodying regional trends in production and distribution. All were analyzed in English-subtitled form, accessible via streaming, DVD, or academic platforms.

This integrated framework advances a insightful understanding of supernatural horror as a dynamic cultural and industrial practice within contemporary Southeast Asian media.

This study utilizes a qualitative, multi-method framework comprising textual analysis, expert interviews, and industry mapping to investigate Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema (2004–2024) across Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

A purposive sample of sixteen films—selected for thematic relevance, cultural specificity, and critical or commercial impact—spans three industrial phases: Foundation (2004–2013), Development (2014–2018), and Streaming Era (2019–2024). All films, available with English subtitles, were analyzed for hybrid narratives, ritual symbolism, and the fusion of indigenous spiritualities (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and animism) with global horror aesthetics, drawing on narrative and genre theory.

Semi-structured interviews with eleven experts—including filmmakers, scholars, and distributors—provided contextual depth. Participants were chosen for their

professional or academic engagement with the genre. Interviews, conducted in English or with translators, were transcribed and coded using NVivo, with data collection concluding upon thematic saturation.

Industry mapping examined production and distribution contexts through trade reports, streaming interfaces, and box office data. Key foci include digital dissemination, transnational co-productions, and platform-driven strategies. This triangulated approach reveals how Southeast Asian horror navigates tensions between cultural particularity and global media economies.

This study adhered to institutional ethical protocols, with approval obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent, with anonymity maintained unless otherwise permitted. Ethical considerations extended to cultural sensitivity and data confidentiality.

Triangulation was employed to enhance analytical credibility. Methodological triangulation integrated textual analysis, expert interviews, and industry mapping to offer a multi-layered understanding of the genre. Data source triangulation involved cinematic texts, expert testimonies, trade media, and streaming platform data across four national contexts. Theoretical triangulation combined narrative and genre theory with postcolonial and political economy perspectives—particularly Bhabha’s hybridity and “third space”—to analyze cultural syncretism and media globalization (Bhabha, 1994; Lobato, 2019).

Following Lincoln and Guba’s trustworthiness framework (Alexander, 2019), the study employed prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity to ensure rigor. After eleven interviews, we achieved thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thick description further supports transferability and contextual depth.

This integrative approach establishes a reliable and theoretically grounded account of Southeast Asian supernatural horror as a dynamic intersection of ritual, identity, and transnational media flows.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Hybrid narrative construction in southeast asian supernatural horror cinema

This section presents the findings related to the construction of hybrid narratives in Southeast Asian supernatural horror films. The analysis focuses on how filmmakers strategically blend indigenous spiritual traditions—such as folklore, religious practices, and cosmological beliefs—with globally recognizable horror conventions. This fusion allows culturally resonant storytelling that retains local specificity while appealing to international audiences.

Hybrid narrative construction means combining local beliefs and ideas with global storytelling styles, allowing films to meet both local cultural norms and international audience preferences. These narratives often juxtapose animistic and religious motifs with cinematic tropes such as haunted spaces, vengeful spirits, and psychological suspense.

For example, Thailand's *Shutter* (2004) merges Thai ghost folklore with the globally familiar trope of spectral photography, creating a narrative that explores karmic retribution through the modern lens of photographic technology. As noted by one Thai filmmaker interviewed, “*We didn’t just want a scary ghost. We wanted to show how guilt and karma—very Thai concepts—could live inside something as modern as a camera lens.*” Similarly, *Pee Mak* (2013) reimagines the legend of Mae Nak by blending horror with romance and comedy, thus expanding its audience while preserving cultural authenticity.

In Vietnam, *The Housemaid* (2016) integrates Western Gothic tropes with the historical and colonial context of Vietnam, producing a culturally grounded ghost narrative. *Vietnamese Horror Story* (2022) further exemplifies this hybridity by combining traditional ghost lore with Western style jump scares, enhancing both its cultural specificity and global accessibility.

Indonesian horror cinema also demonstrates this narrative hybridity. *Satan’s Slaves* (2017) infuses Islamic eschatological themes into a family-horror structure familiar to international audiences. As one Indonesian director explained, “*The family home is sacred in Indonesian culture—so turning it into a space of horror automatically*

makes the audience emotionally vulnerable. But we also thought about how the movie would feel to someone watching in the West.” Impetigore (2019), similarly, blends village-based folklore with global suspense techniques, creating a film that is simultaneously regionally embedded and globally legible.

In the Philippines, *Seklusyon* (2016) fuses Catholic iconography with rural folklore to explore themes of sin, penance, and spiritual corruption. This combination of Christian religious symbolism with indigenous horror elements exemplifies the genre's capacity to localize global forms while exploring deeply situated moral and spiritual concerns.

Across these national contexts, hybrid narratives in Southeast Asian supernatural horror films function as both cultural texts and globally circulating commodities. By intertwining local belief systems with universal horror structures, these films articulate culturally specific anxieties while achieving cross-cultural resonance. The strategic blending of spiritual symbolism, genre conventions, and narrative form deepens emotional engagement and reinforces the region's distinct contribution to the global horror genre.

4.1.2 Cultural authentication strategies in southeast asian horror cinema

This section presents the findings on cultural authentication strategies in Southeast Asian supernatural horror films, with a focus on how filmmakers employ ritual practices, spatial-historical settings, and institutional religious symbols to reinforce narrative credibility and cultural specificity.

Cultural authentication means intentionally including local customs, sacred practices, and religious symbols in horror stories to make them more relatable and realistic. By embedding local traditions within familiar genre frameworks, these films maintain cultural integrity while remaining accessible to global audiences.

In Thailand, *The Medium* (2021) exemplifies this strategy through its detailed depiction of animist rituals specific to the Isan region. The use of a mockumentary format lends a documentary-like realism to spiritual possession scenes, while on-set collaboration with local shamans ensured ritual accuracy. As the producer noted, “*We filmed in actual village temples and worked closely with spirit mediums during scripting to avoid exoticizing the rituals.*”

Vietnam's *The Ancestral* (2022) situates its narrative in a colonial-era rural setting, drawing on the cultural association between old houses and spiritual unrest. According to one Vietnamese cinema scholar interviewed, the film's use of "historical haunting" evokes collective trauma, allowing the supernatural to serve as a metaphor for unresolved national memory.

In Indonesia, *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022) anchors its horror in rural isolation and community belief systems, portraying supernatural phenomena as emergent from localized folklore. A screenwriter explained, "*We knew international audiences might not understand the rural symbolism, so we used family dynamics and atmosphere to make the horror emotionally relatable.*"

In the Philippines, *Eerie* (2019) incorporates Catholic imagery, confession rituals, and convent settings to explore themes of guilt, repression, and trauma. The film's consultation with theological advisors ensured that religious elements were depicted with cultural and spiritual sensitivity, reinforcing its credibility for Filipino audiences while offering thematic accessibility to global viewers.

These case studies demonstrate that cultural authentication is central to the effectiveness of Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema. By connecting horror elements to local rituals, places, and symbols, these films find a way to be both culturally specific and understandable to a global audience, making them relatable stories that can be enjoyed worldwide.

4.1.3 Market adaptation strategies in southeast asian horror cinema

This section examines how evolving market dynamics—particularly the transition from theatrical and festival circuits (2004–2013) to digital streaming platforms (2019–2024)—have shaped the production, distribution, and narrative strategies of Southeast Asian supernatural horror films.

Market adaptation in this context refers to how filmmakers adjust aesthetic, structural, and thematic elements to meet the demands of digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Viu, and iQIYI. These platforms favor content that is visually polished, narratively engaging from the outset, and accessible to a broad international audience. As a Thai producer noted, "*When we pitched *Death Whisperer* to streamers, they wanted*

strong supernatural hooks in the first 10 minutes. That shaped the whole structure—less build-up, more immediate immersion.”

Thailand’s *Death Whisperer* (2023) exemplifies this trend. Designed for global streaming markets, it balances culturally specific themes—such as karmic retribution in Thai spiritual belief—with internationally recognizable horror tropes. Similarly, *Vietnamese Horror Story* (2022) adopts a fast-paced structure, and high-impact visuals tailored to streaming consumption. As one Vietnamese distributor explained, “*Streaming platforms measure engagement in minutes. Our edits and effects had to reflect that.*”

In Indonesia, *Satan’s Slaves 2: Communion* (2022) retains its rural, ritualistic horror foundation while enhancing technical aspects—sound design, cinematography, and pacing—to align with global platform standards. As one director remarked, “*We were targeting Netflix, so everything—from grading to sound—had to be elevated. But we insisted on keeping the prayer scenes—they’re central to Indonesian horror identity.*”

In the Philippines, *Seklusyon* (2016) and *Eerie* (2019) adopt a hybrid release strategy, leveraging both festival prestige and digital distribution. These films integrate Catholic symbolism and historical trauma into their narratives, appealing to niche festival audiences while remaining accessible to international viewers via streaming. A Filipino film programmer noted, “*Festivals still are relevant for artistic credibility, especially for religious horror. But now, if a film doesn’t stream, it doesn’t reach audiences.*”

Across the region, filmmakers are responding to the demands of global digital platforms by adjusting content structure, technical quality, and thematic presentation. This strategic adaptation allows Southeast Asian horror films to retain cultural authenticity while expanding their global reach, effectively positioning them within the competitive landscape of transnational horror cinema.

4.2 Discussion

The Southeast Asian supernatural horror film genre has evolved into a dynamic cultural phenomenon that merges indigenous spiritual beliefs with widely recognized cinematic conventions, garnering increased international recognition during the past two decades. This genre has arisen as a vital domain for analyzing cultural hybridity, spiritual symbolism, and the complex interplay of identity, belief, and commercial influences. It

has developed as a medium for local narratives and a platform for contesting colonial legacies while engaging with broader global media practices.

Southeast Asian supernatural horror films are crucial for understanding the intersection of traditional spiritual beliefs and modern globalized media. Bräunlein (2016) and Bräunlein and Lauser (2016) assert that these films function within the framework of "cinema-spiritualism," wherein cinematic narratives link contemporary genres with indigenous epistemologies. This link underscores the emotional and cultural specificity of ghosts and other supernatural entities in these films, challenging Westernized representations of the supernatural. The genre's capacity to provoke fear and anxiety interacts with local social and religious concerns, as seen by persistent themes of karmic retribution, trauma, and postcolonial identity (Siddique & Raphael, 2017). The supernatural elements are not just fabrications; they are embedded within genuine cultural contexts that reflect the collective worries and spiritual concerns of Southeast Asian countries.

The concept of "hauntology," first proposed by Derrida (1994) and then developed by scholars like Good et al. (2022), provides a significant framework for analyzing how these films address themes of trauma, displacement, and colonial legacies. The genre highlights eerie characters and ghostly narratives, often representing unresolved historical conflicts such as colonial trauma, religious syncretism, and the psychological effects of warfare. These supernatural myths confront Southeast Asia's tumultuous history, serving as a conduit for cultural memory and a mechanism for catharsis for contemporary audiences (Sim, 2020).

Moreover, modern study has progressively recognized the dual role of Southeast Asian horror films within the global media context. Khoo, Ainslie, and Barker (2020) contend that these films are valued not only for their cultural authenticity but also for their ability to captivate international horror enthusiasts. The worldwide allure is facilitated by the amalgamation of local cultural elements with universal horror motifs, making these films both culturally distinctive and globally accessible (Lovatt & Trice, 2021). Filmmakers in Southeast Asia amalgamate indigenous belief systems, including Buddhism, Islam, and animism, with internationally acknowledged genre elements such as haunted settings, vengeful apparitions, and psychological horror. This paradigm encapsulates Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space" of cultural hybridity, where indigenous and global elements coexist and generate new meanings.

Zhang et al. (2024) assert that the hybridization in Southeast Asian horror films exemplifies the influence of transnational media flows, wherein the fusion of global and local aesthetics engenders a dynamic genre appealing to both regional and international audiences. The tension between regional distinctiveness and global homogeneity is especially evident in the purposeful implementation of universal production standards and narrative structures to meet the demands of digital streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime (Grgić, 2024). This movement has altered the production and distribution methods of the genre, evidenced by the shift from theatrical releases and festival circuits to streaming optimization in the contemporary period of Southeast Asian horror cinema (2019–2024).

Cultural authenticity poses a significant challenge for filmmakers within this globalized framework. Using support from religious institutions, the historical setting, and modern cultural insights help make supernatural stories feel more culturally valid. Films such as *The Medium* (2021) and *Seklusyon* (2016) illustrate methods that genuinely represent local belief systems and religious practices, hence reinforcing the narrative's connection to the audience's lived experiences. This cultural uniqueness embodies local traditions and acts as a type of resistance to the homogenizing forces of global media markets, which often seek "culturally neutral" content for broader dissemination (Iwabuchi, 2002). Southeast Asian horror films, by embracing regional distinctiveness, offer a counter-narrative to the global mainstream, underscoring the importance of local spiritual knowledge and cultural authenticity within the transnational media framework.

The amalgamation of Southeast Asian supernatural horror and queer identities amplifies the genre's capacity to explore themes of hybridity, liminality, and cultural conflict (Pongpanit & Murtagh, 2022; Chotirosseranee & Pongpanit, 2024). These films offer innovative perspectives on gender, sexuality, and national identity, challenging the traditional frameworks of both local and global cultures. The genre's ability to address these complex intersections makes it a crucial field for analyzing contemporary societal issues, such as nationalism, postcoloniality, and the evolving roles of marginalized individuals in Southeast Asian society.

Southeast Asian supernatural horror films occupy a unique position in the global media scene. They represent not merely genre exercises but cultural texts that articulate the complexities of identity, belief, and historical pain within an increasingly globalized world. The hybrid narratives in these films integrate indigenous cosmologies with global

cinematic conventions, while the intentional inclusion of cultural authenticity and market adaptation ensures their significance and attractiveness to diverse audiences. By reconciling the discrepancies between local and global contexts, these films augment the understanding of how cultural artifacts can navigate the interplay between tradition and modernity and locality and universality, thus transforming the global horror genre.

5 CONCLUSION

This study explores how Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema negotiates cultural identity and global appeal through hybrid narratives, cultural authentication, and market adaptation. Films from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines demonstrate a strategic fusion of indigenous spirituality with global horror conventions, enabling dual resonance across local and international audiences. By embedding rituals, religious symbols, and historically charged settings, these films enhance narrative credibility and cultural intelligibility. A key finding is the rise of “platform-oriented hybridity,” where storytelling adapts to digital algorithms without sacrificing cultural depth. This positions Southeast Asian horror as both a site of decolonial expression and industrial innovation, reshaping the global horror genre through culturally embedded cinematic forms.

6 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research advances genre and postcolonial theory by reframing Southeast Asian horror as a culturally hybrid form that disrupts Eurocentric genre norms and articulates regional memory and identity. The study highlights supernatural horror as a medium for intercultural dialogue and decolonial resistance. Commercially, it demonstrates the viability of culturally rooted content within global streaming infrastructures. Methodologically, it underscores the value of combining textual, ethnographic, and industrial analysis in studying transnational media flows.

7 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Limitations of the study

The study is limited by its geographic scope (excluding countries like Malaysia and Laos), linguistic translation challenges, selective film sampling, and restricted access to streaming data and high-level industry stakeholders. Its temporal focus (2004–2024) may also obscure longer genre histories.

7.2 Recommendations for future research

Future research should expand regional representation and adopt longitudinal approaches to trace genre evolution. Ethnographic work with communities and spiritual practitioners can deepen cultural contextualization. Collaboration with digital platforms is essential to access algorithmic data and audience analytics. Finally, cultural policy should prioritize horror as a genre of expressive and commercial potential, supporting indigenous narratives and sustainable content ecosystems.

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Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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