**Research Article**

# Cultural narratives in Indonesian local films: Resistance to global homogeneity through representations of language and identity

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## Abstract

Global cultural homogeneity, driven by the hegemony of considerable culture, challenges the diversity and identity of local cultures in an increasingly connected world. This research explores the role of Indonesian local films as a space where local culture can survive, transform, and interact with global culture. Using a cultural philosophy approach, this research examines three local films Tilik (2018), Uang Panai (2016), and Yowis Ben (2018)-as a medium that not only represents but also maintains cultural values through language, narrative and vital visual elements. These films invite us to reflect on the relationship between local identity and global cultural forces and how media can be a tool of resistance against cultural hegemony that reduces diversity. The results show that local films can be a vehicle to celebrate differences and introduce the richness of Indonesian culture while opening space for a more inclusive intercultural dialog. This research recommends strengthening local film production and distribution strategies and the need for more in-depth policy support to balance globalization and preserve local culture.

**Keywords**: Cultural Narratives; Globalization; Local Films; Identity.

## 1. Introduction

The rapidly growing phenomenon of digital media development, with cultural uniformity being one of the significant challenges faced by local cultural heterogeneity. This cultural homogeneity is further accelerated by easy access to global entertainment platforms and social media. (Hermawan et al., 2024). Global cultural hegemony originating from developed countries such as the United States and South Korea through various digital entertainment media channels such as Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime, accelerating the spread of certain cultures through entertaining popular content. This phenomenon underlines that digital technology also strengthens the dominance of popular culture. For example, aesthetic standards, lifestyles, ideologies, and mindsets globally. This condition slowly threatens local cultures rich in unique values and authentic traditions (Jenkins, 2013), where homogenized global narratives tend to marginalize local narratives. The development of digital technology and globalization pose significant challenges to preserving local culture (Setyaningrum, 2018; Arifin, 2023). The spread of Western values and pop culture through digital media further exacerbates the threat to Indonesia's traditional customs and identity (Mubah, 2011; Nasution, 2017). Nonetheless, digital media has bargaining power as an opportunity to preserve and promote local culture

more broadly if utilized wisely (Arifin, 2023). Because the challenges to local cultural diversity are getting bigger, including in Indonesia. Indonesia is one of the countries with variety of tribes, ethnicities, languages, and beliefs spread in each region. In a global context, using media with the right approach can be the key to strengthening Indonesian cultural identity and heterogeneity amid globalization.

Local culture, one of Indonesia's greatest treasures, is often pressured to adjust to the influence of global trends. For example, in the context of media and culture, local films are used as media that have the potential to document and promote the cultural identity that exists in Indonesia. Movies do not only function as entertainment but also as a cross-cultural communication tool that can convey local values to a broader audience. Film elements such as narration, screenplay, language style, setting, characterization, use of local language, and visualization of cultural traditions become a means to convey semiotic messages that frame cultural locality in the global media space. For example, films such as *Tilik* (2018), which received the Official Selection of World Cinema Amsterdam in 2019; *Uang Panai* (2016), a film about a social phenomenon in Makassar that Asian countries can access through the Viu streaming platform; and *Yowis Ben* (2018), which was successfully screened cross-country, including in Thailand and the Philippines. The three films successfully elevate local phenomena into global entertainment while introducing the underlying cultural background.

The examples mentioned have clarified that the work of recorded media (read: film) has the potential as a cultural defense medium that can preserve and promote Indonesian local culture amid a narrative that glorifies Western Culture. Apart from their function as entertainment, films can also function as a tool of cultural diplomacy because they can communicate traditional values to a wider audience (Suryanto & Amri, 2018). For example, the movie *Tilik* displays Javanese local wisdom through rural daily life, language, and customs (Tamsil, 2021). The movie, which went viral on social media, shows that a simple story about everyday life has a meaning that can attract public attention. In contrast, *Uang Panai* depicts the unique Bugis-Makassar tradition of wedding dowry and local cultural values such as respect, responsibility, and family relationships. Meanwhile, *Yowis Ben* uses East Javanese humor and Javanese language as a strong local identity, providing a picture of young people's lives amid modernization. These three films show that local narratives with cultural values have great potential to contribute to Indonesia's cultural diplomacy.

On the other hand, the influx of foreign culture through digital media creates challenges in maintaining local identity (Mubah, 2011; Aprianti et al., 2022). In line with the use of film as a medium for cultural defense and diplomacy, several strategies that can be carried out to answer the challenges of globalization include developing national identity, protecting local culture through legislation, and using digital media to promote Indonesian culture globally (Mubah, 2011; Arifin, 2023).

Previous research has shown that movies can serve as an effective medium for cultural diplomacy. Jenkins (2013) emphasizes the importance of local narratives in digital media to counter global cultural homogeneity that threatens diversity. According to Bordwell (2008), depicting local traditions in films can strengthen a nation's collective identity and increase local culture's competitiveness internationally. However, this study analyzes how language elements and cultural narratives in Indonesian local films function as cultural diplomacy tools in the digital era, which is still limited.

Based on that rationale, this study aims to analyze the role of cultural narratives and the use of local language in Indonesian films as tools of cultural diplomacy. Using Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of cultural representation, this research focuses on how local films represent Indonesian cultural identity to global audiences. The films *Tilik*, *Uang Panai*, and *Yowis Ben* were chosen as case studies due to

their success in presenting strong and authentic local narrative elements and featuring the use of local languages that are an essential part of Indonesia's cultural identity.

This research is expected to contribute to cultural and media studies, especially in understanding the potential of local films as an influential cultural diplomacy tool in the era of globalization.

## 2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with content analysis methods to examine cultural narrative elements, the use of local languages in Indonesian local films, and the role of these elements in representing cultural identity within the context of cultural diplomacy. The research objects in this study consist of three local films, *Tilik* (2018), *Uang Panai* (2016), and *Yowis Ben* (2018). These films were chosen because they represent different local cultures, namely Javanese and Bugis-Makassar cultures. In addition, the researchers also used secondary data from journal articles, books, and research reports related to the research object.

Data was collected through observation (i.e., watching) films to identify elements of local culture, narratives, and the use of regional languages, as well as through a literature review to support film analysis with relevant literature. Data analysis was conducted using Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of cultural representation, which focuses on identifying critical narrative elements, the use of local language, and the visual representation of culture in the film. The research results are not intended to be generalized but rather to provide insights into the potential of local films as tools of cultural diplomacy in the era of globalization.

## 3. Results

Indonesian local films such as *Tilik, Uang Panai,* and *Yowis Ben* play a role in introducing and preserving local cultural values amidst the tide of globalization. These three films provide entertainment and serve as tools of cultural diplomacy. These three films convey Indonesian cultural narratives to local and international audiences through stories rich in local cultural elements. This film presents a depiction of social life and local traditions that are often marginalized by the dominant global culture. As works of art accessible to various audiences, these films educate and disseminate knowledge about Indonesia's culture, which is rich in local wisdom, symbolism, and historical values. (Suryanto & Amri, 2018; Mineri & Riyanto, 2023).

In building their narratives, *Tilik, Uang Panai,* and *Yowis Ben* utilize distinctive elements of Indonesian culture, such as local languages, customs, and cultural visuals that depict the richness of tradition. The use of regional languages enriches the viewing experience and introduces a global audience to the variety of languages that are an integral part of Indonesia's cultural identity. Additionally, visual aspects of culture, such as traditional clothing, traditional locations, and community rituals and customs, also serve to introduce the richness of local culture.

Through these elements, these films not only entertain but also strengthen the Indonesian cultural identity, even in a global context increasingly dominated by Western culture. The success of these films shows that entertainment media, especially films, can be an effective tool for preserving and introducing local culture in the global market (Tamsil, 2021; Puspitasari, 2021). Using digital media, Indonesian local films can more easily access international markets, educate global audiences, and build appreciation for Indonesia's cultural diversity. (Arifin, 2023).

**Figure 1.** Poster film *"Tilik"* 2018
Source: https://ravacanafilms.com/films/tilik/
(Accessed on November 1, 2024, at 11:37 PM WIB)

*Tilik* (2018) successfully captured public attention with its realistic portrayal of rural Javanese life, where the tradition of cooperation and social values such as solidarity and care are the main focus. Using the Javanese language in the dialogue strengthens the narrative's authenticity and creates a connection with the local audience. The popularity of the film *Tilik* on social media proves that local cultural elements can attract a wider audience when packaged in a relatable and authentic way. This film also depicts the social dynamics of rural communities often marginalized in modern cultural narratives, making it an effective tool for cultural diplomacy. However, the response to this film has been very varied. Many viewers find *Tilik* very *"relatable,"* reflecting everyday life with characters and events familiar to the audience. On the other hand, sharp criticism comes from a feminist perspective, arguing that this film reinforces negative stereotypes about women, especially related to gossip and slander involving female characters. (Ayomi, 2021).



**Figure 2.** Poster film *"Uang Panai"* 2016
Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5863772/
(Accessed on November 1, 2024, at 11:46 PM WIB)

The film *Uang Panai* (2016) highlights the Bugis-Makassar customary tradition, particularly in the wedding narrative, which requires the groom to give a large dowry called *"Uang Panai"* to the bride's family. This tradition not only illustrates the strength of local culture but also highlights fundamental values such as respect for family, commitment, and socio-economic responsibility. Through this depiction, *Uang Panai* introduces its local and international viewers to the importance of Indonesia's cultural diversity in preserving the values inherent in the social lives of specific communities. Visual elements such as traditional clothing, wedding ceremonies, and cultural backgrounds further strengthen the representation of Bugis customs, making this film an effective medium for introducing traditions rich in values of honor and dignity within the Bugis community.

The *Uang Panai* tradition in Bugis-Makassar weddings reflects social dimensions, including social status, cultural values, and economic responsibilities of the groom. This practice serves as a symbol of spirit (honor) that demonstrates the family's dignity and the acknowledgment of the commitment made by the groom in the marriage bond. (Alfariz, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2022). By depicting this tradition, the film *Uang Panai* not only celebrates the richness of local culture but also communicates the importance of maintaining honor and dignity in the social life of the Bugis-Makassar community. This shows how local films can serve as a channel to preserve culture while introducing traditional values to a global audience that is increasingly open to cultural diversity.



**Figure 3.** Poster film *"Yowis Ben"* 2018
Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8024712/
(Accessed on November 2, 2024, at 00:15 WIB)

The film *Yowis Ben* (2018) uniquely represents East Javanese culture by utilizing the Javanese language as a main element in its narrative. This film depicts the social dynamics of East Javanese youth with distinctive local humor, creating a solid connection with the young audience segment. According to Mineri and Riyanto (2023), the use of the Javanese language in this film serves as a medium of communication and a means to highlight local wisdom that is often overlooked in national film productions. This makes *Yowis Ben* a successful example of how local languages, in this case Javanese, can gain particular space to strengthen Indonesia's cultural diplomacy on the global stage through media.

The use of the Javanese language in the film *Yowis Ben* also highlights the sustainability of local languages in a multilingual context, reflecting the importance of preserving local identity in an increasingly global society. Wibowo (2024) adds that it shows how the Javanese language plays a role not only as a means of communication but also as part of the identity of the East Javanese community. Moreover, this film depicts celebrity culture in the context of *"Arek Jawa"* by blending elements of modernity with local solid wisdom. Safira and Wibowo (2024) state that *Yowis Ben* successfully combines popular culture with traditional values, making the film relevant for local and global audiences. From a linguistic perspective, this film also showcases code-mixing and code-switching practices between Javanese and Indonesian, which serve to respect the interlocutor and build distinctive humor. This technique is increasingly relevant in multilingual societies. (Wibowo, 2024).

Table 1. Representation of Cultural Elements in Indonesian Local Films

| Film | Cultural Elements Represented | Description of Representation | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Tilik* **(2018)** | The Tradition of Mutual Assistance, Javanese Language, Rural Life | We are showcasing the habits of the Javanese village community, which helps each other through the *"Tilik"* tradition (menjenguk). We are using the Javanese language as the primary medium to build local connections. | Damarjati (2020); Ayomi (2021) |
| *Uang Panai* **(2016)** | Bugis-Makassar Customary Traditions, Marriage Dowry, Concept of *Siri'* Honor | The Bugis-Makassar wedding tradition requires the giving of *"Uang Panai"* as a symbol of respect, dignity, and family commitment. | Alfariz (2020); Zainuddin et al. (2022) |
| *Yowis Ben* **(2018)** | Javanese Language, Local Humor, Javanese Youth Celebrity Culture, Code Mixing | Highlighting the use of Javanese language and local humor typical of East Javanese youth. Reflecting celebrity culture and blending modernity with local wisdom. | Mineri & Riyanto (2023); Safira & Wibowo (2024) |

Table 1 illustrates the representation of cultural elements in three local Indonesian films that highlight and introduce the diversity of Indonesian culture to both local and international audiences. Through these three films, local culture is not only represented but also empowered to introduce Indonesian cultural values to the world, making it an effective tool for cultural diplomacy on a global scale.

## 4. Discussion

Facing global cultural homogenization is a significant challenge in the context of local cultural diversity continually eroded by global culture's dominance. Amid the advancement of information technology and globalization, the cultures of major countries such as the United States, South Korea, and Europe have spread widely, forming global standards that often overlook or even erase existing cultural differences. This phenomenon creates a tendency towards homogenization, where global

popular culture becomes dominant while local cultures rich in traditions, languages, and unique values are often marginalized. In this case, the world witnesses major cultures dominating the global narrative, leaving little room for local identities to develop.

However, global cultural homogenization also allows local cultures to adapt and develop resistance strategies. Using media to combat the hegemony of global culture has become one of the effective ways to introduce and maintain cultural diversity. In this context, local films play an important role in cultural diplomacy. Films have the potential to bring authentic local stories to a global audience, thereby providing space for cultural identities to grow without being eroded by a uniform global culture. The use of local languages in films, for example, becomes one of the essential elements that not only enriches the story but also serves as a symbol of the existence of cultures that continue to thrive amidst globalization.

One way to overcome this challenge is by harnessing the power of solid narratives and cultural representation, as seen in several local Indonesian films. Films like *Tilik* (2018), *Uang Panai* (2016), and *Yowis Ben* (2018) show that Indonesia's local culture, with all its uniqueness, can be preserved and even promoted at the international level. These three films use elements of local culture, such as language, traditions, and social values, to introduce Indonesia to the world. Authentically, they not only convey cultural messages but also show that local identities can not only survive but also thrive amidst the overwhelming tide of global culture.

Overall, facing the homogenization of global culture requires a collective effort to celebrate differences, not to homogenize, and to appreciate every cultural identity in the world. In the digital era, with easy and quick access to various cultures around the world, maintaining cultural diversity becomes increasingly important. Film, as the most universal and accessible form of art, serves as a bridge connecting local identities with the global world. Therefore, strengthening the local film industry through government support, digital platforms, or international promotion is essential to ensure that local culture remains alive, relevant, and appreciated globally.

### 4.1. Strategy for Strengthening Cultural Diplomacy through Local Films

Strengthening cultural diplomacy through local films is one of the effective strategies to counter the increasingly substantial global cultural uniformity. Movies have the power not only to entertain but also to introduce and celebrate cultural diversity. In the face of globalization challenges that often threaten the existence of local cultures, local films can act as solid cultural representations, connecting traditional values with international audiences. Therefore, strengthening cultural diplomacy through local films should involve several integrated steps, including narrative, production, distribution, and collaboration with global platforms.

### 4.1.1 Integrating Cultural Elements in Film Narratives

Narratives that highlight local culture are critical in cultural diplomacy strategies through film. Local films that contain cultural values such as language, traditions, and daily habits can introduce a country's rich culture to a global audience. Films such as *Tilik* (2018), which uses Javanese language and depicts rural life, or *Uang Panai* (2016), which highlights Bugis-Makassar wedding traditions, are examples of films that successfully elevate local culture and make it the core of the story. In this way, movies are not only a means of entertainment but also a tool to educate audiences about the diversity of cultures in the world. According to Jenkins (2013), local culture-based narratives have great potential to counter the dominance of global culture, providing audiences with alternatives to understand people's

lives outside of mainstream stereotypes.

### 4.1.2 Utilizing Technology and Global Digital Platforms

In the digital era, the distribution of local films is no longer limited to cinemas or national television. Global streaming platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime offer opportunities for local films to reach a wider audience beyond their home countries. Collaboration with global digital platforms can help increase the visibility of local films and introduce local culture to international markets. Local films like *Yowis Ben* (2018), which use local humor and East Javanese language, can easily reach international audiences through subtitling while maintaining an authentic local atmosphere. By digitizing local films and distributing them through international platforms, Indonesian films can build more robust global recognition, introducing local values to audiences from various cultures.

### 4.1.3 Promotion through International Film Festivals

International film festivals are a highly effective channel for introducing local films to a global audience. By participating in film festivals such as Cannes, Berlinale, or Venice Film Festival, local films gain international recognition and engage in dialogue with the global film industry. Through proper promotion, local films can become strong cultural representations, highlighting a country's unique cultural and social aspects. For example, films like Laskar Pelangi (2008) and The Act of Killing (2012) show how local films can gain international attention while simultaneously opening discussions on broader social and cultural issues. Film festivals have become an essential means to strengthen cultural diplomacy by introducing films as an art form depicting the diversity and complexity of cultures worldwide.

### 4.1.4 International Collaboration and Local Filmmakers

Collaboration between local filmmakers and international filmmakers is also an equally important strategy. Collaboration in film production, whether in the form of international co-productions or joint projects, can enhance the quality of films while also introducing more diverse cultural perspectives. In addition, this collaboration opens up opportunities for local films to gain access to a larger international market. For example, films produced with synergy between various countries and cultures have greater appeal in the global market. They can convey universal messages while preserving the richness of local cultures. This collaboration also encourages a more profound cultural exchange between the involved countries, enriching the understanding of cultural diversity.

### 4.1.5 Empowerment of Human Resources and Local Film Infrastructure

Ensuring the success of cultural diplomacy strategies through local film support for the domestic film industry is very important. The government and the private sector need to collaborate to improve the quality of local film production. They are providing incentives for young filmmakers and strengthening film industry infrastructure. The development of training programs for filmmakers, the improvement of technical quality, and the provision of access to financing and modern technology are essential steps. In addition, improving the quality of subtitling and dubbing for local films can allow the international audience to enjoy Indonesian films more easily.

By strengthening these aspects, local films can serve as an effective tool for cultural diplomacy. Film will become a medium capable of conveying important messages about culture, social values, and local identity. Through authentic narratives, the appropriate use of technology, and strategic promotion,

Indonesian local films have great potential to combat the homogenization of global culture and introduce Indonesia's rich cultural heritage to the world.

## 5. Conclusions

Local Indonesian films such as *Tilik, Uang Panai,* and *Yowis Ben* show that local culture can adapt and remain relevant amidst the tide of globalization that tends to unify all differences, creating space for cultural identity to develop without losing its essence. The use of local languages in the film's narrative is a binding agent between the community and its traditions. To ensure that the dominant global perspectives do not erode cultural identity. This aligns with asserting that local cultures must be empowered to resist the hegemony of significant cultures that often regard smaller cultures as "backward." Local films can serve as a tool of resistance against the uniformity of global culture, providing space for pluralism to be appreciated.

However, in this context, we must also acknowledge that efforts to preserve and promote local culture can only happen with systematic and integrated efforts. In theories of cultural hegemony, preserving local culture requires cross-sector cooperation from the government, filmmakers, and the community. With policies supporting vital infrastructure and enhancing production quality, local films can compete with the more established dominance of global culture. Therefore, to strengthen cultural diplomacy, local films need to be viewed as part of a broader cultural strategy. Not only does it function as a representation of culture but also as a tool for creating intercultural dialogue. Thus, Indonesian local culture can maintain its authenticity by connecting with the outside world and ultimately play a role in building a more plural and open world.

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