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# FROM LOCAL TRADITION TO GLOBAL SCREENS: HOW NETFLIX REPACKAGED KRETEK GIRL

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**ABSTRACT**

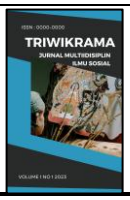
Global streaming platforms have reshaped how local cultures are produced, circulated, and consumed. This study examines how the kretek tradition is represented in Gadis Kretek (Kretek Girl), the Netflix Original series released in 2023, and how that representation is shaped by the commercial and technical logic of a transnational platform. Drawing on Vincent Mosco's Political Economy of Communication and Marshall McLuhan's Media Ecology, the study identifies three mechanisms of cultural commodification: aestheticization, simplification of meaning, and cultural datafication. Using qualitative content analysis, it examines selected scenes from Season 1, Episodes 1 to 5, coded into a theory-based matrix and interpreted against the history of the Indonesian clove cigarette industry and secondary scholarly literature. The findings show that the labor of hand-rolling cigarettes is turned into a graceful visual spectacle, that the 1965 political conflict and the capitalist, ethnically complex history of the industry are reduced to a decorative backdrop for romance and family drama, and that cultural elements are broken into metadata tags that fit the recommendation algorithm. These mechanisms operate selectively and hierarchically: visually photogenic and universally legible elements are amplified, while complex or controversial dimensions are obscured. Gadis Kretek therefore offers a packaged authenticity rather than a false representation, and streaming platforms emerge as active cultural agents rather than neutral distribution channels.

***Keywords**: commodification; streaming platform; Gadis Kretek; aestheticization; datafication*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Global streaming platforms like Netflix have fundamentally changed the landscape of cultural production and consumption. The Kretek Girl series (2023) is a relevant case study to examine how local traditions are packaged and represented in the logic of the global market. This phenomenon is not just a business statistic, but an indicator of the massive cultural influence that transnational platforms have. Each series produced brings with it a way of view, values, and narrative standards sourced from a global production center.

Netflix's presence in Indonesia since 2016 has opened up opportunities as well as caused problems. On the one hand, the Netflix Originals Indonesia scheme allows local filmmakers to reach a global audience. On the other hand, a study on cultural commodification in Indonesian Netflix films




reveals that representations of local traditions are often aestheticized, simplifying meaning, and culturally datafied to meet global market preferences. This process transforms cultural practices that were originally lively and dynamic into commodities packaged for cross-border mass consumption.

One of the most prominent and problematic productions in this context is the Kretek Girl series. Released on November 2, 2023, the series, which is adapted from Ratih Kumala's novel, has not only become a popular spectacle, but also won the Best Miniseries award in the International Competition Program category of the 2024 Seoul International Drama Awards (Tempo.co, 2024). This success makes Gadis Kretek an ideal case to examine how the kretek tradition that is full of Indonesian history, economy, and cultural identity is represented within the production framework of a global platform.

Kretek Girl reached its audience through a platform that entered Indonesia only in 2016. Netflix launched its service in the country in January 2016 as part of the company's global expansion (Hermansyah, 2016), and it began producing original content with Indonesian talent in 2018 (Sindoro, 2024). The series consists of five episodes, and The Jakarta Post described it as the first television series Netflix has produced in the country (Indra, 2023). Its directors, Kamila Andini and Ifa Isfansyah, were later named best directors at the Asian Contents Awards & Global OTT Awards held in Busan (Medcom, 2024).

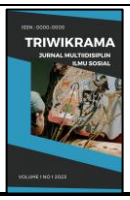
The series has been examined from several angles, including narrative adaptation (Hasanah & Sulastri, 2025), narrative structure (Khairunnisa et al., 2025), code mixing (Juniarti et al., 2024), and gender representation (Nathasya, 2024), while anthropological criticism has focused on how it romanticizes the cigarette industry (Welker, 2024c). This article instead foregrounds the commercial and technical logic of the platform itself. It asks how the kretek tradition is aestheticized, simplified, and datafied in the series, and what this shows about the role of streaming platforms as cultural agents rather than neutral channels of distribution.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural commodification refers to the process of transforming cultural practices, symbols, and values into interchangeable goods in the logic of the market. In the context of digital media, the framework of Communication Political Economy from Vincent Mosco (2009) and Media Ecology from Marshall McLuhan (1964) identifies three main mechanisms of cultural commodification on digital platforms: aestheticization, simplification of meaning, and cultural datafication. These three mechanisms do not work alone, but rather strengthen each other in forming a marketable representation globally.

Mosco (2009) describes commodification as the process of transforming things valued for their use into commodities valued for what they can earn in the market, and treats it as one of the main entry points for analyzing communication industries. McLuhan (1964) complements this view by arguing that a medium shapes the scale and form of human affairs apart from the content it carries, which makes the infrastructure of a platform, and not only the story it distributes, an object of analysis. More recent work on platformization extends both arguments: Poell et al. (2022) define platformization as the penetration of the economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions of digital platforms into the cultural industries, together with the reorganization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around those platforms.

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Aestheticization is the packaging of tradition into a visually beautiful spectacle. Cultural practices are processed to high cinematography standards to appeal to global audiences, but in the process experience a detachment from their original social context. Simplification of meaning is the reduction of cultural complexity into a narrative that is easily digestible by an audience that lacks contextual knowledge. Meanwhile, cultural datafication refers to the transformation of cultural elements into data that can be processed by algorithms, so that traditions are classified, recommended, and consumed based on user preferences that have been predicted computationally.

These three mechanisms work within a polyvalent production framework (Sindoro, 2024): local content is encouraged to dig into stories with strong cultural flavors, but must adopt global production practices such as standardized workflows and uniform technical requirements. Local culture is maintained at the level of narrative as a marketable, but production methods and aesthetic standards fully follow transnational logic. This condition suggests that cultural commodification is not a total destruction of tradition, but rather a selective transformation: elements that correspond to market tastes are maintained and strengthened, while elements that do not correspond are removed or obscured. In the Indonesian case, Sindoro (2024) identifies the global practices attached to Netflix Originals as including an intimacy coordinator, a globalized production workflow, standardized technical requirements, and a globalized system of paying workers.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

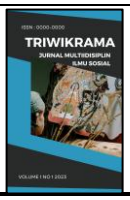
To scientifically dissect how local traditions are packaged into global commodities, this study applies the Qualitative Content Analysis method. This method is used to uncover the latent meanings, visual cues, and ideological messages hidden behind media impressions in a systematic way.

The analysis process is carried out through three main stages:

1. Unit Analysis Determination: The main object of this research is the series Kretek Girl (Season 1, Episodes 1 to 5) which airs on the Netflix platform. The analysis is focused on specific scenes that represent three conceptual dimensions: visual aestheticization, simplification of historical meaning, and narrative standardization.
2. Theory-Based Categorization: Each selected scene is grouped and coded into a matrix of Political Economy, Communication, and Media Ecology to see a commodification pattern in a structured manner.
3. Critical Interpretation: Visual and dialogue data from selected scenes are contextualized with historical data of the national clove industry as well as secondary literature from reputable scientific journals to produce an objective and in-depth analysis.

Because the series has five episodes in total (Netflix, n.d.), the analysis covers the entire series, although only selected scenes are coded. Contextual data on the kretek industry were drawn from anthropological research on the Indonesian cigarette market (Welker, 2024a, 2024b), and data on the reception of the series were drawn from critical reviews and news reporting (Indra, 2023; Welker, 2024c).

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## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Commodification dimensions, units of analysis, and findings of the qualitative content analysis

| Commodification Dimension | Unit Analysis (Episodes/Scenes) | Findings of Qualitative Content Analysis | Theoretical References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Visual Aestheticization | Episode 1: The process of turning hand cigarettes by female workers | The use of slow motion techniques and warm lighting transformed heavy industrial work into a poetic graceful dance. The sweat and fatigue of the workers are eliminated from the camera frame. | Visual Aestheticization and Media Spectacle (Fatonah et al., 2025) |
| Simplification of Meaning | Episodes 3 and 4: Background to the 1965 political conflict | Macropolitical tragedy is obscured and reduced to mere decorative settings (set dressing) to support cross-generational romance plots and family dramas. | Content Commodification and Historical Reduction (Mosco, 2009; Welker, 2024c) |
| Cultural Datafication | Overall Episodes 1 to 5: Narrative structure and characterization | Cultural elements (kebaya, cloves, emancipation) are separated into metadata tags (strong female lead, period drama) to match the structure of the global recommendation algorithm. | Platform Media Ecology and Datafication (Poulopoulos & Wallace, 2022) |

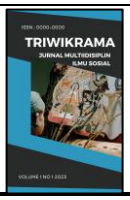
### Aestheticization: Transforming Cultural Practices Into Visual Spectacles

Aestheticization is the first and most visible mechanism in the commodification of the kretek tradition in this series. The cinematography of Kretek Girl features a very high level of visual finesse, with dramatic lighting and image compositions that follow global cinema standards. The scenes that show the process of making hand clove cigarettes are presented not as realistic documentation of industry practices, but as visually beautiful spectacles, complete with slow motion, artistic camera angles, and emotional background music.

This process transforms a truly repetitive and industrial production activity into an aesthetic experience that can be personally consumed by a global audience. Cigarette rolling workers who in reality work in strenuous and repetitive conditions, are shown through graceful and poetic visual choreography. The sweat and physical fatigue that is part of the work process is removed from the camera frame, replaced by the beauty of hand movements and the play of light. Slow movements make the curling of tobacco look like a graceful dance, rather than a grueling repetitive work (Khairunnisa et al., 2025).

The contrast with industrial reality is considerable. Welker (2024c) reports that only about twenty percent of kretek today are hand-rolled, that the women piece-rate workers who roll them face intense time pressure to produce between 300 and 600 cigarettes an hour, and that about seventy-five percent of kretek are made on machines that produce 10,000 cigarettes a minute. The hand-rolled kretek and the women who make it are also the figure around which kretek nationalist discourse and nostalgia are organized (Welker, 2024a). In this light, the slow-motion

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rolling scenes foreground a minority form of production that already carries strong symbolic value, and they do so in a way that removes the pressure and fatigue that define the work.

The storytelling style in this film is very aesthetically and culturally strong, where visual storytelling techniques are used to build emotion and nostalgia. With this approach, the audience is invited to appreciate the beauty, not to understand the social reality of the mitre workers whose sweat is removed from the camera frame. Cigarette rolling workers are transformed into dancers, and a simple factory is transformed into a dramatic theater stage.

Aestheticization touches not only the visual, but also the narrative aspect. The architecture of Javanese houses, the kebaya cloth worn by the main character, and the Javanese countryside landscape are presented not as an ordinary setting, but as an alluring exotic commodity. In this context, cultural representation is undergoing a transformation. Culture is no longer something alive and dynamic, but rather a collection of inanimate objects that are ready to be consumed (Hasanah & Sulastri, 2025). Through the analysis of cultural hybridity, Gadis Kretek is in the third space between indigenous (traditional Javanese) culture and the global cultural industry.

This process can indeed be a bridge of preservation, but it also has the potential to reduce meaning. Complex local wisdom is simplified into visual symbols that are easily digestible by international eyes seeking authenticity without having to face the discomforts of reality (Sandi & Purnama, 2025).

**Simplification of Meaning: Reduction of Historical Complexity and Social Structure**

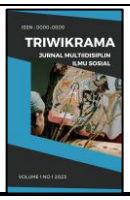
The second mechanism is the simplification of meaning. The clove tradition in the series is represented as pure original cultural heritage, while the more complex and problematic dimensions of the industry are obscured or eliminated altogether. The clove cigarette market in Indonesia actually has a long history of dominance of ethnic Chinese families and large-scale production of machine cigarettes (Welker, 2024a). However, the narrative of Gadis Kretek chooses to ignore this reality in favor of displaying the romanticism of kretek as an authentic and completely authentic traditional handicraft of Indonesia.

The narrative of the Kretek Girl showcases the romanticism of handicrafts: women with delicate mitre rolling tobacco, the fragrant scent of cloves, and a warm middle-class production house. In fact, the clove industry in Indonesia has very strong roots in macro capitalism and large-scale factory consolidation. The reality of the dominance of certain ethnic families and the conglomeration of capital in the large-scale production of machined cigarettes is an inseparable fact from the history of national clove (ELSA, 2025).

Welker (2024a) adds that by the 1990s the four largest kretek manufacturers, all owned by ethnic Chinese Indonesian families, controlled around 80 percent of the industry and produced most of their cigarettes in mechanized factories, and that foreign firms have since acquired kretek companies and now control around forty percent of the market. The founding story of Sampoerna, one of the largest kretek companies, also begins with a Chinese migrant, Liem Seeng Tee, who established the firm in 1913. This industrial history receives little attention in the artisanal, family-centered world that the series presents.

In the narrative of the Kretek Girl, this dimension is silenced. In doing so, the series implicitly constructs the romanticism that kretek is a pure, organic indigenous product. This simplification

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is not forgetfulness, but rather a narrative strategy to avoid sensitive issues about race and capitalism in the globally consumed public space. Director Kamila Andini openly admits that the narrative of traumatic events must be conveyed carefully in order to reach politically conservative conclusions (Frater, 2023). What does this mean in practice? The tragedies of 1965 to 1966 that are the setting of the story only appear as a faint shadow, not as a gaping wound. It is there to give an old feel to the story, but it is not explored in depth.

The simplification is also visible in how the series treats the health consequences of smoking. Welker (2024c) notes that these consequences appear only in passing, for example in brief anti-tobacco posters and in a character's illness, while cigarettes otherwise appear as pleasurable accompaniments to everyday life. In her reading, the series condemns the political massacres of the 1960s, in which about 500,000 civilians were killed, yet leaves the industry responsible for ongoing public health harm largely uncriticized; she cites around 290,000 deaths a year in Indonesia. She contrasts this with Netflix productions that are critical of Purdue Pharma and Juul in the United States, and interprets the difference as a sign that Indonesian audiences are treated differently. Reporting in The Jakarta Post likewise recorded the view of health workers that popular series such as Kretek Girl should be mindful of their audiences (Indra, 2023).

In fact, in the industrial context, the events of 1965 to 1966 brought dramatic political changes that affected economic and capital policies. However, the series chose to remain silent. As a result, the political complexity of the Old Order era and the transition to the New Order that directly affected the fate of the kretek industry were simplified into a dressing set that supported a romance plot. This confirms the finding that local cultures are often reduced to an unbalanced meeting and clash between traditional values and power, but in its screen adaptation, those clashes are smoothed out.

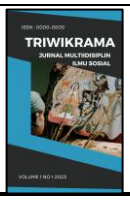
From a sociolinguistic perspective, this series is indeed rich in language variations. There is the use of code mixing between Indonesian, Javanese, English, and Dutch (Juniarti et al., 2024). However, in the context of commodification, the use of these regional and foreign languages serves more as a marker of authenticity and local colors to reinforce the exotic atmosphere for a global audience. Factors that cause code mixing such as speakers, counter-speakers, and situations are indeed present to build character, but not to explore the real identity tensions inherent in language practices in a multicultural society full of power inequalities. Language is used to show subtle ethics or modernity, not to display class conflicts or resistance that are actually embodied in everyday word choices.

One of the sharpest ironies in Kretek Girl is how it wraps up social criticism in export packaging. This series is quite daring to feature the character of Jeng Yah, a woman who fights against a deep-rooted patriarchal culture. She dared to enter the sauce compound room that is sacred to men, she had a big dream in an era that enclosed women (Nathasya, 2024). However, this resistance that was supposed to tear apart the status quo was neutralized by its format as a premium spectacle. Anger against patriarchy is smoothed out into a touching family drama, not a political agitation. Rebellious identities are instead repackaged to cater to a global market that favors a narrative of universal emancipation.

**Cultural Datafication: Adapting Tradition to Algorithmic Logic**

In the logic of streaming platforms, each content should be able to be broken down into units of data that can be recognized by the system. The cultural elements in Gadis Kretek ranging from

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kebaya, Javanese architecture, to batik processions are broken down into a series of tags such as period drama, romance, Asian historical, strong female lead, family drama, and social issues. Thus, cultural practices that are steeped in complex economic-political history are simplified into mere content attributes that can be matched to the global consumer profile (Fatonah et al., 2025).

Netflix's own presentation of the series illustrates this logic. In the versions of its title page consulted for this study, the series is placed in categories such as romantic drama series and series based on books, and its mood is described with labels including nostalgic, sentimental, historical, bittersweet, and social issues, alongside the descriptors 1960s and Indonesian (Netflix, n.d.). The exact labels differ slightly between regional versions of the page. What these labels share is that they describe genre, mood, and period; none of them refers to kretek, clove cultivation, or the labor of rolling cigarettes, which are the elements that make the story culturally specific.

This is not just a technical matter of classification. The classification practice carried out by digital platforms categorizes people and content by establishing a hierarchy. When the Kretek Girl was tagged Asian historical, it was placed in a metaphorical shelf with historical dramas from other Asian countries. The peculiarities of Indonesian culture with thick Javanese nuances and the looming historical wounds are at risk of being erased in a homogeneous Asian generalization. The algorithm sees patterns, not context; He matches similarities, not understands differences.

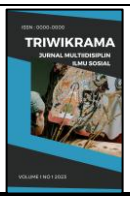
In the digital culture market, algorithms tend to value novelties that can be well understood by the general audience. This means that cultural elements that are too specific or foreign to the tastes of the majority will be left out because they do not have enough historical data to recommend. As a result, cultural representation is pushed to the point where it's exotic enough to attract attention, but not so bizarre as to disturb the comfort of a global audience.

The impact of datafication doesn't stop at distribution; It seeps backwards into the production process itself. Creators are faced with a contradictory demand: they must dig up stories with strong local flavors, but within a framework that is fully globally standardized. This standardization includes technical aspects such as episode length and image format, as well as more substantive narrative elements such as three-act story structure and certain themes that are considered selling. Creative producers, armed with data on what works in the global marketplace, tend to tailor their stories to proven blueprints. This leads to a subtle homogenization, where stories from different parts of the world begin to feel similar in structure, albeit wrapped in different costumes and settings.

The most fundamental consequence of datafication is the shift in the role of algorithms to active cultural agents. Recommendation algorithms shape cultural reality by determining what's worth seeing and what's buried in an untouched digital archive. The recommendation system encodes and maps identity markers, generating a community of flavors for a specific identity. When a viewer on another side of the world watches Kretek Girl, he experiences a movie that has been selected by an algorithm based on his profile—whether it is more emphasis on the romance aspect or the socio-political aspect. This creates a phenomenon of narrative fragmentation, in which a cultural work no longer has a single public reception, but rather millions of different personal receptions according to their respective algorithmic frames (Poulopoulos & Wallace, 2022).

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## Selectivity and Hierarchy in Commodification

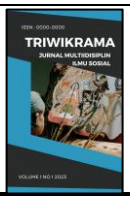
Cultural elements that are photogenic and easy to present visually receive a very strong portion of aestheticization. The architecture of Javanese houses with carved wood details, kebaya worn by female figures, the process of making batik and rolling hand cigarettes, and the Javanese countryside landscape are all prominent visual stars in every frame of the image. On the other hand, elements that require long and complicated contextual explanations tend to be simplified or even omitted. Culture no longer exists as a living and constantly changing system of meaning, but rather as a decorative backdrop that supports the main plot, namely romance and family drama.

The streaming platform serves as a global cultural environment that reconstructs the meaning of local culture to suit the preferences of the global market. This process of reconstruction is inherently selective because not all cultural elements can be easily translated into a universal visual language. Elements that are too specific locally will feel unfamiliar, while elements that are too controversial will jeopardize distribution. As a result, what remains is a purified and refined version of the culture (Fatonah et al., 2025).

This pattern is consistent with Sindoro's (2024) interview study of Netflix Originals in Indonesia. Drawing on interviews with filmmakers, critics, and academics, the study found that Netflix's collaboration with Indonesian creators pushes content strongly toward Indonesian culture and encourages producers to mine stories with strong local flavor, while the making of that content follows globalized practices. Cultural specificity is thus welcomed as a source of value, but within a production system whose terms are set elsewhere.

This selectivity pattern indicates a very pragmatic political economy logic. Creative decisions are driven by questions about what kind of stories will sell in hundreds of countries. Local culture within this framework is reconstructed into a product that meets two main conditions. The first condition is that it must be easily understood by an international audience that does not have contextual knowledge. Therefore, it is most economically rational to highlight universal elements such as love, family conflict, and women's struggles, and then wrap them in exotic local spices. The universal becomes the core, the local becomes the decoration. The second condition is that it must not cause controversy that may interfere with market distribution or acceptance. Sensitive issues such as structural inequality, past state violence, or sharp criticism of capitalism are unprofitable burdens from business to business. The series should reach a conclusion that is safe for all parties. History is reduced to an aesthetic setting, not a stage for real political struggle.

However, in the midst of this commodification process, Gadis Kretek still contains significant local wisdom values. At least the value of local wisdom such as religiosity, humanity, mutual cooperation, and the balance of human relations with nature can still be identified in the development of characters and conflict resolution. This shows that commodification does not necessarily mean the total destruction of cultural identity. It can take the form of conscious hybridization, which is a process in which local values persist, but in a form that has been adapted and reformatted to be compatible with the global narrative structure. What survives are values that are easily recognizable and appreciated across cultures, while what is missing are the complexity and ambiguity that make culture whole and human.




## 5. CONCLUSION

Through a qualitative content analysis of the Kretek Girl series, this study found that the representation of the kretek tradition in digital platforms is the result of a commodification process that takes place through three simultaneous mechanisms: aestheticization, simplification of meaning, and cultural datafication. These three mechanisms work selectively and hierarchically, reinforcing cultural elements that have visual and narrative value that suit global tastes, while obscuring dimensions that are more complex, problematic, or require deep contextual knowledge.

The Kretek Girl is thus not a completely false representation, but a packaged authenticity. The values of local wisdom remain present, but are packaged in an aesthetic, narrative, and algorithmic framework that is subject to the logic of the global market. The kretek tradition is represented not as it exists in its complex socio-economic-political reality, but as it can be sold to a global audience seeking authenticity in a safe, beautiful, and easily digestible format.

These findings confirm that global streaming platforms are not neutral channels that simply distribute local content to a wider audience. Platforms are active cultural agents that reshape that content through its technical infrastructure and business logic. Enjoying Kretek Girl means also reading it critically. This means recognizing the selection mechanisms at work behind the scenes, questioning what is invisible, and nurturing memories of more complex, torn, and not always beautiful versions of culture.

This study has several limitations. It analyzes a single series and selected scenes, and it reads the influence of the platform through the text and its reception rather than through interviews with producers or audiences. Future research could combine content analysis with interviews with filmmakers, as in Sindoro's (2024) work, or with audience reception studies, and could compare Kretek Girl with other Netflix Originals produced in Indonesia to test whether the same mechanisms operate across titles.

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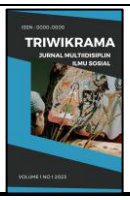
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