

Afrobeats, Media Convergence, and the New Global Flow of Culture

Afrobeats has emerged as one of the most influential movements in contemporary popular culture, reshaping global perceptions of African creativity, identity, and media power. Originating in Nigeria, the genre blends highlife, hip-hop, dancehall, Afropop, and traditional African rhythms to create a sound that is distinctly local yet globally resonant. Over the past decade, artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, Tems, Rema, Ayra Starr, and Davido have brought Afrobeats into mainstream global consciousness. While major collaborations and streaming platforms contribute to this rise, the genre's global success cannot be fully understood through traditional music industry channels alone. Afrobeats thrives because of a dynamic interaction between digital media technologies, audience participation, and global cultural flows. Using platform data, Henry Jenkins's theory of participatory culture, and globalisation frameworks from Arjun Appadurai and Marwan Kraidy, this essay argues that Afrobeats exemplifies how African creativity circulates across global mediascapes while still navigating structural inequalities within the global media system.

Afrobeats' global visibility is strongly tied to media convergence, a key concept from Jenkins (2006), who argues that modern media systems blend old and new technologies while enabling audience engagement across platforms. Unlike earlier global musical genres that relied on radio, record labels, and controlled gatekeeping channels, Afrobeats spread through decentralised networks that include streaming services, social media, diaspora communities, and user-generated content. Primary platform data illustrates this transformation. On Spotify, Rema's *Calm Down* has exceeded one billion streams and regularly appears in the top charts of countries such as India, Mexico, the United States, and the United Kingdom, a clear example of cross-regional cultural flow. Burna Boy's *Last Last* surpassed 770 million streams and frequently appears in global playlists curated by Spotify, reinforcing the platform's role in shaping taste and visibility. YouTube analytics show similar international reach: Wizkid and Tems' *Essence* has accumulated more than 160 million views, with visible engagement in Brazil, Germany, the United States, and several South American countries. These platform metrics, collected directly from publicly accessible dashboards, demonstrate that Afrobeats is not only being consumed globally but is also thriving in markets historically dominated by Western pop genres.

A key example that illustrates Afrobeats' global reach is Burna Boy's historic April 2022 performance at Madison Square Garden (MSG). He became the *first Nigerian artist ever* to headline and sell out the 20,000-seat venue, marking a major milestone for African music in the centre of Western entertainment culture. The concert, livestreamed worldwide on YouTube, drew

millions of online viewers and attracted a diverse in-person audience, including fans from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and Europe. This moment reflects Appadurai's (1996) concept of ethnoscaping, in which diasporic communities act as carriers of culture across global spaces. The more than 200,000 livestream impressions and thousands of TikTok edits, dance videos, and fan reactions generated after the concert also illustrate Jenkins's (2006) notion of participatory culture. Fans' creative responses, which ranged from outfit recreations to song remixes, helped amplify the concert further, transforming a single performance into a global media event. Burna Boy's MSG success exemplifies how Afrobeats now circulates not only through digital systems but through massive physical and virtual gatherings that reinforce its status as a global cultural force.

However, platform data alone cannot fully explain why Afrobeats became such a global cultural force. Jenkins's theory of participatory culture shows that audience involvement, rather than passive consumption, is crucial in shaping contemporary media success. Afrobeats' global influence is amplified through TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, where users create, remix, and circulate cultural content. Viral dance challenges, edits, and reaction videos have become central mechanisms through which Afrobeats spreads internationally. For example, Ayra Starr's *Bloody Samaritan* sparked a major wave of user-generated content on TikTok when it came out in 2021, with creators around the world incorporating the song into dance routines, aesthetic edits, fashion videos, and lifestyle content. Davido's *Unavailable* challenge also became a global phenomenon, generating hundreds of thousands of videos as dancers, influencers, and everyday users recreated the choreography across Africa, the United Kingdom, the Caribbean, and the United States. The challenge gained significant traction when celebrities and athletes joined in, helping the track trend internationally even before traditional radio promotion. These participatory practices demonstrate how audience creativity, rather than corporate marketing, plays a central role in elevating Afrobeats to global visibility.

To understand the broader structure through which Afrobeats circulates, media globalisation theory is essential. Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes" describes global cultural flows shaped by transnational networks, migration, and unequal media infrastructures. Afrobeats circulates within such mediascapes, with African diaspora communities functioning as significant beacons of cultural exchange. Cities like London, Toronto, Houston, and New York, which are home to large Nigerian and Ghanaian diasporas, serve as cultural hubs where Afrobeats achieves early traction and then expands into mainstream Western charts. Diasporic communities consume the music not only for entertainment but also as an affirmation of cultural identity, reinforcing Appadurai's claim that global media flows are deeply intertwined with migration and cultural belonging.

At the same time, global streaming platforms also act as algorithmic gatekeepers, determining which songs trend and which remain invisible. Although these algorithms can amplify Afrobeats, they are owned and operated by Western corporations, which ultimately control monetisation, visibility, and playlist placements. This uneven structure demonstrates a paradox of media

globalisation: Afrobeats can gain international reach, but it does so through platforms that maintain Western economic and cultural dominance. Ikonne (2022) notes that Afrobeats' success emerges from both creativity and a willingness to navigate global industry pressures, a pattern that aligns with this theoretical framework.

Afrobeats also challenges traditional Western cultural hierarchies. Historically, global music industries privileged Western artists, genres, and cultural norms. Afrobeats disrupts this pattern by demonstrating that African artists can fill arenas, dominate charts, and shape global taste. Burna Boy's stadium tours, Ayra Starr's penetration into the U.S. charts and the emergence of multiple Grammy-winning afrobeats artists over the last 5 years are all evidence that Afrobeats is not simply participating in global culture, but it is actively reshaping it. These achievements signal a shift in cultural power, revealing a world where non-Western creativity holds increasing global influence.

Marwan Kraidy's (2005) concept of cultural hybridity further contextualises how Afrobeats achieves global resonance. Songs such as *Essence* or *Calm Down* blend African rhythmic traditions with Western pop, R&B, and electronic elements, producing hybrid forms that appeal to global audiences. Hybridity is not merely stylistic; it reflects strategic decisions by artists aiming to increase international visibility. Collaborations with Western musicians like Drake, Ed Sheeran, Selena Gomez, and 21 Savage expand Afrobeats' reach but also shape how African music is packaged for Western consumption. This reflects Kraidy's argument that global cultural flows lead to hybrid forms that emerge from negotiation, not dominance nor pure resistance. By combining platform data, participatory culture, and globalisation theory, it becomes clear that Afrobeats is not just a grassroots cultural movement but also a product of global media structures. Its rise reflects the power of user-generated content and diasporic participation, while also revealing the influence of streaming algorithms and global entertainment networks. Afrobeats demonstrates how African artists and fans actively shape global popular culture, yet also how they must navigate the limitations imposed by Western-controlled media infrastructures

The rise of Afrobeats reveals the complex but powerful ways culture now circulates in the digital age. The genre's global success cannot be attributed to any single factor; instead, it emerges from the combined influence of digital platforms, diasporic networks, fan creativity, and strategic artist engagement with global media systems. Afrobeats thrives because it operates within a media landscape shaped by convergence: where streaming services, social media, and live performance intersect, and because audiences actively participate in creating and spreading the culture. At the same time, the genre's journey illustrates the uneven terrain of globalisation: African artists gain unprecedented visibility and influence, yet they must still navigate Western-owned platforms, algorithmic gatekeeping, and global industry expectations.

Afrobeats, therefore, stands as both a cultural celebration and a structural critique. It showcases the innovation, talent, and global appeal of African musicians while also highlighting the economic and institutional barriers that shape whose voices are amplified worldwide. The genre's ability to cross borders through participatory culture, hybrid musical forms, and powerful

live performances like Burna Boy's sold-out Madison Square Garden concert demonstrates that popular culture today is created collaboratively by artists, audiences, and digital infrastructures. Ultimately, the rise of Afrobeats signals a shift toward a more interconnected and culturally diverse global music landscape, one in which non-Western creativity plays a central role and continues to redefine the boundaries of global popular culture.

References

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