

The Brazilian way: cultural soft power in times of financial crisis and far-right administration

Carnival, telenovelas and bossa nova are Brazil's three greatest cultural soft powers. They kept the country in the world's spotlight during a decade of financial crisis and far-right Bolsonaro's administration. But there are new challenges ahead.

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One of Brazilians worst economic crisis began 10 years ago, in 2013, because of 20 cents raise in bus, metro and train fares in São Paulo, Latin America biggest city. The raise generated protests in several capitals, police repression, and the beginning of an enormous economic crisis that led to the political coup that removed Dilma Rousseff, the first female president of Brazil, from the presidency, in 2016. Two years before, Ms. Rousseff was booed at the opening of Brazilian 2014 World Cup and the 7 x 1 loss to Germany in the semifinals was the coup de grace in Brazilian soccer soft power, softened only by Rio's World Olympic Games of 2016, with its unprecedented gold medal in soccer, 18 other medals, and a spectacular 17 days event in one of the world's most beautiful city. But the economic crisis deepened, helping to elect the first far-right administration since the military 1964-1985 regime, when Jair Bolsonaro becomes president in 2019.

Has it been a terrible decade for Brazil? In terms of economy, political and social stability, definitely yes. But not in terms of culture. More precisely, cultural soft power. Soft power is the ability to attract rather than coerce (hard power), shaping the preferences of other nations through attraction of sport, arts, entertainment (culture), idiom, science, religion, diplomacy etc. Hollywood, the biggest soft power since the 20th century, destabilized closed regimes like the Soviet Union with its films. Renaissance art softened the image of invasive and indoctrinating (hard power) of the Catholic Church and made Italy one of the world's main touristic destinations. Japanese MAG

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(manga, anime and games) culture attracts the money and admiration even by historic enemies like South Korea and China.

Brazil is probably the country with the most diverse amount of cultural soft power in the world: Telenovelas, Carnival e Bossa Nova. And they were responsible for keeping the nation in international spotlight during the worst decade caused by economic and political hard power. Here's a look of how these great cultural manifestations helps the country to seduce other nations and brings profits in dark times.

Telenovelas: Brazilian's private cultural soft power

Telenovelas made TV Globo the second largest commercial TV network in the world, surpassing CBS in 2012. The network, whose scenic city in Rio, Projac, has 1,73 million square meters, dedicates four programming tracks to telenovelas since the 1980s'. TV Globo sells its finest product to over 100 countries, some of them with completely different culture from Brazil.

TV Globo's telenovela 'Tropicaliente' (1994) was a story shot in the paradisaical beaches of Ceará state, in the northeast of Brazil. It was sold to almost one hundred countries, and it was a particular success in Russia. Aired in 1996 with the name 'Tropikanka' (tropical women), it attracted over 25 million viewers for Russian state TV ORT and made Ceará one of the main touristic destinations for Russians and Scandinavians. And it might even decide a Russian presidential reelection. In the summer of 1996, Boris Yeltsin, running for reelection, was afraid that the election day would happen in a summer day like 'Tropikanka' and voters would run to their 'dachas' (chalets) instead of voting. Yeltsin then asked ORT to show a triple episode of 'Tropikanka' from 8am to 11am. Since few dachas had TVs, most people stayed and voted. Yeltsin won the election (Schott, 2020).



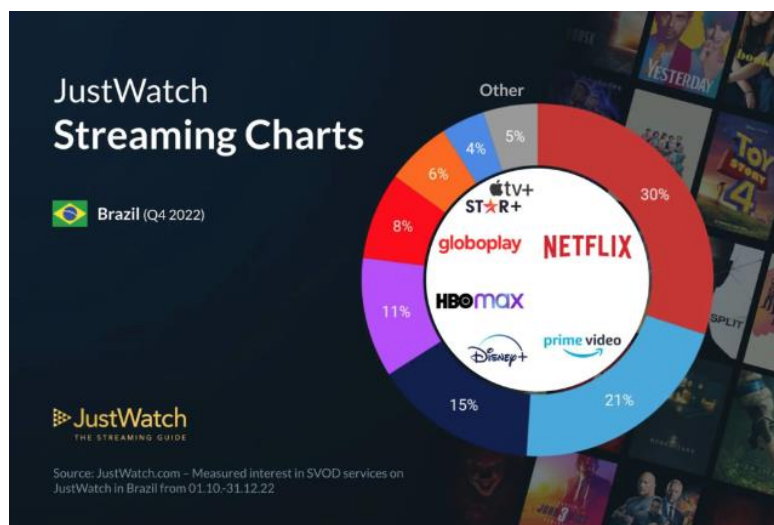
TV Globo 'Tropicaliente' as 'Tropikanka' in Russia. Credit: publicity photo

Brazilian telenovelas have other historical hits before it reaches the 21st century. 'Escrava Isaura' (1976), internationally known as 'Isaura: slave girl', premiered in China in 1984 and was watched by over 450 million in that year. The biggest street market of Luanda (Angola) was called Roque Santeiro because of the success of the homonym Brazilian telenovela in the African country. Paladar, the restaurant of Raquel (Regina Duarte) in the telenovela 'Vale Tudo' (Anything Goes, 1988) was also the name adopted by little private restaurants authorized to function after the economic opening of Cuba, in the 1990's. Some journalistic reports state that the first version of 'Sinhá Moça' (1986) interrupted war conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Nicaragua (Ballerini, 2017).

Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022) became internationally known for its disrespect to environmental laws and regulations. Austrian NGO All Rise accused Bolsonaro of environmental crimes in the International Criminal Court in Hague in 2021 after a significant increase in fires and deforestation in the Amazon forest and Pantanal, the world's largest flooded grasslands, located in in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, with portions in Bolivia and Paraguay. TV Globo's remake of the 1990's telenovela hit 'Pantanal', on air in 2022, was sold to over 100 countries in less than a year, showing the world love stories, land conflicts and the natural beauty of the area. Paramount paid US\$ 10 million for the rights to show the telenovela in other south American territories until 2025 (Vaquer, 2022).

Brazilian telenovelas helped shape the country's image abroad. With their melodramatic love stories set in beautiful landscapes, they sell an image of a friendly, open minded, sociable culture, open to diversity, mutual respect and happiness. The cultural soft power effect also brings profits in tourism and media business.

With its telenovelas as main products, TV Globo launched Globoplay, the streaming service in 2015, with all TV Globo's telenovelas portfolio, a vast catalog of Brazilian and international movies. But it's in the streaming business that the company faces its greatest challenges, in the 21st century, to keep its soft power strong in Brazil and grow overseas. After 7 years, and with all major streaming services operating in Brazil, Globoplay reached only 8% of the market share, even with a catalog most aligned to Brazilian cultural of them all.



The reason for the shy impact of TV Globo's streaming service may not be just because of the economic power of rivals like Netflix, Prime Video or HbO Max. It can also be related to a format crisis. Telenovelas shaped the preferences of the audience in a time where pay TV and pay per view didn't exist in Brazil, in the 1970's and 1980's. The popularity of the internet, in the 2000's, also brought new cultural content in social medias like Instagram and TikTok. New generations are being shaped by contents with less and less duration, 1-to-5-minute videos that can easily be discarded with a single touch. Telenovelas are enormous: 6 chapters per week, with 1 hour each, during 6-to-8-months. Format crisis not only impacts new generation consumption of Globoplay, but also the audience of the telenovelas in TV Globo. 'Pantanal's remake hit 29 rating points in 2022 in 9pm. In the 1990's, telenovelas used to hit 55 rating points at this time slot. But there's another short and seductive cultural soft power that keeps Brazil alive in the world: Bossa Nova.

Bossa Nova: Brazilian wave reconquers the world in the 21st century

Bossa Nova was the greatest Brazilian cultural soft power in the 21st century. After the historical show in the Carnegie Hall, on November 21st 1962 by singers and composers like Antonio Carlos Jobim, João Gilberto, Sérgio Mendes and others, the rhythm conquered the US market, with the US first lady Jacqueline Kennedy saying that ‘Maria Ninguém’ (‘Miss Nobody’) was one of her favorite songs. Hollywood movies, parties in Japan, bars in Australia, cafes in France all played versions of Bossa Nova recorded by local singers. In the US, Frank Sinatra, Stan Getz, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Quincy Jones, Paul Winter, Herbie Mann, Coleman Hawkins, Cannonball Adderley and Elvis Presley all sang bossa.

Bossa Nova helped to sell the image not only of a country with splendid nature and women, but also sold a sophisticated rhythm – a mix of jazz and samba – worshiped by the most important musicians on the international scene.

Reaching the 21st century, Bossa Nova was rebranded and reinterpreted in many different ways around the world, adding electronic music by DJs and producers like Nicola Conte, Gilles Peterson, Joe Davis, Robert Garza and Eric Hilton. Great hits like Guns N’Roses ‘Patience’ got a bossa version by Sixth Finger/Dew; Ben E. King ‘Stand by me’ in bossa by Pablo Cepeda; Coldplay ‘Fix you’ by Bossa Bros; and Ed Sheeran’s ‘Shape of you’ in bossa version by Nara and Bossa Bros.

Brazilian’s most successful artist in the world, Anitta, released her most expensive video for a new song, ‘Girl from Rio, in 2021, reshaping the cultural soft power of bossa nova and the internationally famous ‘Girl from Ipanema’, released in 1962 by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes. Dressed like Hollywood star in the 1950’s Rio and surrounded by white dancers, Anitta then shows the real city with trap beat drops with black people in the suburbs. Anitta embraced bossa nova cultural soft power, then reshaped it with new rhythm mixes and views of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, empowering Bossa in the 21st century and, also, her own cultural power.



Anitta in 'Girl from Rio' (YouTube/Reproduction)

During the Brazilian presidential election of 2022, Anitta wore blue, green and yellow clothes in Coachella festival, colors usually associated with Bolsonaro's voters. Anitta posted on twitter that those colors "belong to all Brazilians", not a specific political group. Bolsonaro, running for reelection, shared her tweet with a comment "I agree with Anitta", with several Brazilian flags. Anitta replied to the president by saying "Oh boy, go find something to do!" and blocked him, arguing that any manifestation against him will be used by artists and supporters as mockery in social media (G1, 2022).

Bossa nova knew how to circumvent Brazilian financial crisis and Bolsonaro's far-right administration and kept relevant as cultural soft power in the past decade, by promoting a positive image of Brazil, its people and artists. The challenge may lie in the emergence of new artists who maintain the relevance of the rhythm inside and outside of Brazil in times of crisis in the phonographic industry.

Brazilian carnival: the greatest spectacle on Earth is back

Brazilian carnival is internationally known by samba school parades in Sapucaí (Rio de Janeiro) and Anhembi (São Paulo), besides the "trios elétricos" (electric trio, truck with high-power sound system) carrying samba and axé artists in Barra-Ondina (Salvador/Bahia) during weeks of February and March. As cultural soft power, it sells the image of an enormous spectacle during which people put aside their differences, dance and party for days in harmony and happiness. And, as a result, this cultural soft power creates what's called "the Carnival economy".

The numbers are significant. During Carnival, 95% of hotels are full in Rio, with an increase of 15% of profits in bars and restaurants. Also, Carnival generates over 250 thousand temporary jobs, 25% only in samba schools. In 2008, Carnival generated a revenue of US\$ 500 million to Rio and, in 2016, 3,3 million tourists visited Rio during Carnival, with over 1,2 thousand carnival blocks across the city. It is estimated that 52 sectors of the economy are positively affected by Carnival every year (Ballerini, 2017).



Street carnival in Brazil. Image credit: Fernando Frazão/EBC

But before the Covid pandemic cancelled the party and caused a huge loss in profits, tourism and employment, Jair Bolsonaro tried hard to harm Carnival soft power. During the 2020 party – weeks before the pandemic – the president decided to talk about the event on his twitter. But instead of strengthening Carnival’s soft power, he posted a video of a man stripping naked and making obscene gestures during a street party in São Paulo, drawing international attention by creating an image of a pornographic and chaotic party. An unfortunate and isolated case got international dimension when the country’s president singled out this angle for comment.

But Carnival survived the pandemic crisis and Jair Bolsonaro far-right ideologies. The first party after the pandemic, in 2023, was greater than expected. Rio profited around US\$ 1 billion with the party, 12,5% higher than 2020. According to the National Confederation of Assets, Services and Tourism, Brazil profited more than US\$ 2 billion, attracting over 45 million people in Carnival destinations like Rio, São Paulo and Salvador (Simonetti, 2023).

Cultural soft power: the Brazilian way

The audiovisual sector occupies the fifth position in importance in Brazilian economy, overcoming the pharmaceutical, textile and electronic equipment industries (Toledo; Garcia, 2023). That sector involves not only movies, tv shows, the powerful telenovelas, but also the music industry, in the shape of videoclips and shows, and, of course, many intersections with Brazilian's most notorious popular culture: Carnival.

There's probably no other country that combines so many different cultural soft powers like Brazil. Together, telenovelas, bossa nova and carnival shapes the preferences of the world. With sugar stories in beautiful landscapes, telenovelas helps other people to forget about their current realities and dream for a couple of hours during the day. Bossa nova gives that dreams a soft rhythm, in many different languages and sound styles. Seduced by image and sound, people from all around the world then experiment a frenetic party that takes place in the whole country for days.

A decade of financial turmoil and all the damage caused by a far-right ideology administration were not enough to weaken any of Brazilian cultural soft powers. And now, they can be even more significant in Brazil's repositioning as a leader of the world. And culture may be the country's most efficient and seductive tool.

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