

KPop Demon Hunters: Cultural Representation in Contemporary Korean Animation

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Abstract

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has become a global cultural force, extending South Korea's influence through K-pop, television dramas, films, cuisine, language, tourism, and consumer products. While these cultural forms have been widely examined in live-action media, animation remains a relatively underexplored channel for Hallyu's cultural representation and soft power projection. Addressing this gap, this study investigates the KPop Demon Hunters, an English-language Korean animated film, to analyze how elements of Hallyu culture are embedded and communicated to international audiences. Guided by representation theory, this research employs a qualitative textual analysis, applying a multidimensional framework comprising idols, music, films/series, food, language, travel, and products. The analysis focuses on how cultural signs are encoded within the film's narrative, visuals, and sound design, shaping both the authenticity and accessibility of Korean culture for a global audience. Findings reveal that the film interweaves contemporary K-pop performance aesthetics such as choreography, costumes, and concert cinematography with traditional Korean mythology, attire, and symbolic landscapes. Iconic landmarks such as the Namsan Tower and vibrant urban streetscapes subtly promote Korea's image as a travel destination. Food scenes featuring *gimbap* (Korean rice rolls), *ramyeon* (instant noodles), and other street dishes highlight everyday culinary culture, while the inclusion of Korean terms such as *maknae* (youngest) and *hoobae* (junior) reinforces linguistic authenticity and cultural hierarchy. The soundtrack blends original K-pop-style tracks with well-known K-drama OSTs, fostering intertextual connections that deepen audience engagement. This study demonstrates that animation can serve as an effective medium for cultural representation, capable of merging entertainment value with strategic cultural promotion. By extending the analysis of Hallyu beyond live-action media, the research contributes to cultural and media studies scholarship while offering insights for creative industries on how animation can be leveraged to strengthen South Korea's global cultural presence.

Keywords: Hallyu, Culture representation, Animation, Korean wave culture, K-Pop

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has transformed from a regional media trend into a global cultural movement, elevating South Korea's entertainment industry into a central driver of cultural diplomacy and national branding (Jin, 2016; Lee & Nornes, 2015). Originating with the regional popularity of Korean dramas in the late 1990s, Hallyu has expanded to include a wide range of cultural forms (Oh & Lee, 2014). Among these, K-pop has shown as a particularly influential force, characterized by high

performances, transnational production networks, and global fan communities that actively participate in content creation and cultural dissemination (Lie, 2014; Oh & Park, 2013).

However, in terms of culture, which is inherently difficult to define, as it is multidimensional, complex, and all-pervasive (Samovar et al., 2012). According to the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS, 2003), the global rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has been propelled by popular cultural elements such as K-

music and K-dramas. Previous research has categorized Hallyu's cultural influence into seven dimensions: idols, music, films/series, food, language, travel, and products (Oh & Lee, 2014; Punnahitanond et al., 2025). These dimensions function not only as markers of cultural identity but also as strategic instruments of soft power (Nye, 2004), enabling Korean media products to promote both entertainment value and a positive national image. On the other hand, while K-dramas and Korean films have been extensively examined for their cultural representation and role in promoting Hallyu, animation remains a relatively underexplored medium. Examining how Korean Wave culture is portrayed in an animated film, therefore, offers a valuable opportunity to understand how Hallyu expands into new cultural forms and global markets.

On 20th June 2025, KPop Demon Hunters is an English-speaking animated film produced by Sony Pictures Animation Inc. and released by Netflix, exemplifies this expansion of Hallyu into global animation. The film blends K-pop idol aesthetics, Korean folklore, and urban fantasy, following the fictional girl group, the Huntr/x, as they balance their public artist careers with secret demon-hunting missions. Visually, it draws on the dedicated style of K-pop music videos, K-drama cinematography, and traditional cultural motifs such as Korean mythology, the tiger & the magpie, and protective talismans. Moreover, the film achieved a successful global reach, becoming Netflix's most-watched original animated feature and lead single "Golden" to the top of international music charts (Lee, 2025).

Although there is a rich body of research on the success of South Korean dramas and the entertainment industry (Lin et al., 2022), there remains a lack of scholarly attention to animated films as a medium for presenting cultural elements through the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture.

Therefore, this study focuses on examining the cultural representation in the animation film, the KPop Demon Hunters, with particular attention to the seven established dimensions of Korean Wave culture including idols, music, films/series, food, language, travel, and products (Punnahitanond et al., 2025). The aim of this study is to identify how these cultural elements are integrated into the film's narrative, visual design, and audio-visual composition, which were

communicated to global audiences. Building upon this objective, the study formulated the following research questions:

- 1) Which aspects of Korean culture reflected in the seven dimensions of the Korean Wave are portrayed in the KPop Demon Hunters?
- 2) How are these cultural elements represented in this animated film?

Literature review

Media portrayal

As Punnahitanond (2018) stated that media portrayal is shaped by ideological perspectives, which influence how topics are represented. At the same time, film and television can project soft power by crossing borders and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Fan & Komolsevin, 2024). In this study, media portrayal refers to how KPop Demon Hunters portrayed the Korean Wave culture towards seven aspects in terms of idols, music, films/series, food, language, travel, and products.

Korean soft power and cultural elements

South Korea's soft power, rooted in cultural influence, has increasingly become a central pillar of its foreign policy and international relations strategy. Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), refers to the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. South Korea's strategic deployment of cultural products, collectively known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave, exemplifies this framework, fostering positive perceptions and diplomatic influence worldwide (de Oliveira, 2025).

The institutionalization of Hallyu illustrates the systematic effort by the South Korean government and private sectors to promote K-pop, television dramas, films, and other cultural commodities as instruments of soft power (Bakytzhanova & Tuleshova, 2023). These cultural exports have generated significant social and economic benefits, enhancing South Korea's global image and facilitating wider cultural diplomacy (Kim, 2022). For example, studies examining the impact of Korean popular culture in China and Central Asia highlight how K-pop and Korean media content effectively build transnational cultural connections and improve bilateral relations (Zhang, 2024; Bakytzhanova & Tuleshova, 2023).

The relationship between cultural elements and soft power extends beyond entertainment products to include language promotion. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korea provided cultural-oriented export to support the industrial-oriented export which they found organizations such as KOICA (1991), Korea Foundation (1991), and KOCCA (2009) to support every aspects and elements of cultural export. Korean language learning in countries such as Thailand has been identified as a mechanism through which Korea expands its cultural influence, underpinning soft power by fostering deeper cultural affinity and improving international engagement (Onnom, 2018). This integration of cultural diffusion and language education demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Korea's soft power strategy.

Moreover, Korean soft power is endorsed by the normative appeal of Korea's democratic values and economic development, which amplify the attractiveness of Korean culture globally (de Oliveira, 2025). This synergy between cultural appeal and political-economic achievements has enhanced South Korea's standing as a soft power actor, capable of exerting meaningful influence on international public opinion and policy.

Despite extensive research on Korean soft power and its cultural elements such as K-pop music, dramas, and language, existing studies have yet to explore these phenomena within the context of fully animated feature films such as Kpop Demon Hunters. This Netflix animated film uniquely combines the dynamic cultural dimensions of K-pop with supernatural storytelling, vivid animation, choreography, and narrative depth, representing a novel cultural product in the Hallyu wave (Manalo, 2025; Hong, 2025). The film's use of animation technology and intricate world-building integrates traditional K-pop cultural elements such as idol aesthetics, music performance, and fan culture with a fresh narrative medium that has not been systematically studied from a soft power or cultural diplomacy perspective. Thus, investigating how Kpop Demon Hunters mobilizes cultural elements to extend Korea's soft power represents a significant research gap that this study aims to address.

Seven dimensions of Korean wave

Previous studies have identified seven core dimensions of Korean Wave (Hallyu) culture which includes idols, music, films/ series, food, language, travel, and products, as significant channels for cultural dissemination and consumer influence (Punnahitanond et al., 2025). Previous research has shown that the idol business model, introduced around 2017, plays a crucial role in the entertainment industry, commodifying idols as cultural products that drive repetitive consumption through fan-related activities (Maneechaeye, 2021). Admiration for K-Pop artists, including groups such as Blackpink and GOT7, is shaped by media exposure, influencing both idol and music preferences (Suebsaeng, 2020) and Korean series are preferred over others due to their perceived completeness in production quality, casting, cinematography, and soundtracks (Prasopsorn & Panmanee, 2019), while the Korean Wave has also encouraged the consumption of Korean food among audiences (Chuppunnarat et al., 2020).

Furthermore, exposure to Korean pop culture has been linked to increased motivation to learn the Korean language (Chan & Chi, 2011; Shim, 2006; Fu & Liew, 2008), and the portrayal of destinations through international media has been shown to influence travel intentions (Punnahitanond, 2018). Korean Wave products, including clothing and cosmetics, have also gained popularity among consumers (Prasopsorn & Panmanee, 2019).

Stuart hall's representation theory

Hall (2017) argues that mass media messages constitute a form of cultural production because they provide a means to create, challenge, reproduce, or transform cultural ideologies. Within cultural studies, the concept of representation has taken on a central role, as it links meaning and language to culture. Since all cultural objects convey meaning and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they necessarily make use of signs. As such, they operate in a manner like language and can be examined through the lens of Saussure's linguistic concepts, such as the signifier/signified distinction, langue/parole, underlying codes and structures, and the arbitrary nature of the sign. In the process of encoding, or creating a message, the sender draws upon the signs and symbols embedded in a particular cultural ideology. However, as Hall

emphasizes, the decoding or interpretation of a message by the audience is not fixed or guaranteed, since meaning is shaped by individual social and cultural contexts (Dainton & Zelle, 2022). In line with this framework, the present study analyzes the cultural symbols encoded within KPop Demon Hunters and theorizes the possible ways audiences may decode these representations, drawing on the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture as the analytical lens.

Research gaps

Although numerous studies have examined the global success of Korean Wave culture, most have focused on live-action formats such as TV dramas, films, and variety shows, reflecting their dominant role in Hallyu's international expansion over the past two decades (Jin, 2016), Korean animations have received comparatively little scholarly attention in the context of cultural representation despite the growing global popularity of Korean animated content in recent years. This gap is noteworthy given the Korean government's increasing investment in the animation sector as part of its cultural export strategy (KOFIC, 2024) and the medium's ability to integrate multiple dimensions of Hallyu, including idols, music, food, language, travel, products and the films/series, within a single creative narrative. With KPop Demon Hunters emerging as a high-profile example that blends K-pop aesthetics with animated storytelling, there is a timely need to investigate how such works encode and project Korean cultural symbols to global audiences. By applying the seven-dimension framework of Korean Wave culture, this study could address a current and underexplored area in Hallyu research.

Significance of this study

This study examines cultural representation in Korean animation, a medium less explored compared to dramas and films in Hallyu research. By analyzing KPop Demon Hunters through the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture, it highlights how animation can present cultural elements that enhance Korea's soft power. The findings could offer practical insights for content creators and cultural policymakers on using animation to engage global audiences while promoting national image and tangible and intangible cultural heritages.

Objectives

The objective of this study is 1) To identify the cultural elements represented in KPop Demon Hunters using the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture and 2) To analyze how these dimensions are portrayed in the animated film.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis to examine KPop Demon Hunters as a cultural medium. Focusing on the portrayal of the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture, the research explores how the film represents these cultural elements. Guided by Hall's representation theory, the analysis considers how meaning is encoded through cultural symbols in the film and how these may be interpreted by audiences. The full movie of the KPop demon Hunters is separately watched by 2 coders. Then each coder analyzed the emerged cultural symbols based on the seven dimensions of Korean wave guided by previous research (Punnahitanond et al., 2025), which consist of idol, music, food, travel, products, language, and film/series. The data were analyzed using the coding table, which later compared by cross-checking the data of the 2 coders to ensure the credibility and reliability.

Finding

Drawing on Hall's representation theory, this study identifies and analyzes the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture in KPop Demon Hunters. The findings reveal that these elements are not incidental, but deliberately embedded in narrative arcs, visual language, and symbolic cues, creating a layered cultural representation.

Idol

The director stated that the virtual boy/girl groups explicitly modeled inspired from real idols such as Twice, Cha Eun-woo and other artists (Kim, 2025), as well as demonstrating the Korean fandom culture through narrative, and scenes to reflect the real world's fandom culture. The idol dimension is strongly encoded through the fictional boy group, Saja Boy, and the girl group, the Huntr/x, featuring Rumi and Mira and Zoey. Their choreography, stage costumes, and makeup mirror real-world K-Pop styling, while performance scenes adopt live concert cinematography, tracking shots, rapid

cuts, and spotlight framing, to project glamour and energy. On the other hand, the name *Saja* (사자) carries different linguistic meanings such as “lion”, “envoy” or “death,” connecting idol identity to the film’s mythology themes to match the Korean myths regarding

demon- hunters. This multi-layered representation elevates idols beyond mere entertainer, portraying them as cultural heroes who embody discipline, charisma, and symbolic depth, an image consistent with Korea’s use of K-Pop as a soft power vehicle.

Table 1 Identified Hallyu Elements of the Seven Dimensions from the Film

Dimensions	Identified Hallyu Elements
Idol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Virtual boy & girl groups modeled on real idols such as Twice, Cha Eunwoo and more. <input type="checkbox"/> Named members (Rumi, Mira and Zoey). <input type="checkbox"/> Fandom culture such as the slogan.
Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> A total of 12 songs is included (Gloden, Soda pop, Free; Your Idol, How It’s done, What it sounds like, Takedown (by Twice and the Huntr/x), Strategy, “사랑인가 봐” Love, Maybe; Score Suite, “오솔길” Path). <input type="checkbox"/> Music style: Unique K-pop style. <input type="checkbox"/> Korean traditional musical instruments such as “월금” (Wolgeum). <input type="checkbox"/> OST are based on other popular Korean dramas such “사내맞선” (A business proposal).
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Korean Street Food: Kimbap, Fish Cakes, Ramen, Blood Sausage, Kimchi Soup, Icy Noodles, Soju, Korean Hotdog, Korean Snacks (Potato Chips, Pepero). <input type="checkbox"/> Korean Bingsu. <input type="checkbox"/> “삼계탕” (Ginseng Chicken Soup), “반찬” (Side Dishes).
Travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Korean street view such as Gangnam, Hongdae. <input type="checkbox"/> Namsan Tower appears multiple times (3 times in total). <input type="checkbox"/> South Korea’s ancient city landscape: stone lions, walls and other historical relics. <input type="checkbox"/> Korean sauna.
Products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Support light board & banner. <input type="checkbox"/> Korean iron chopsticks. <input type="checkbox"/> Korean style clinic “한의원” (Clinic). <input type="checkbox"/> Korean snacks “감자칩” (Potato chips) and “빼빼로” (Pepero). <input type="checkbox"/> Korean style bracelets.
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporating Korean words into the plot such as “혼문” (Soul gate). <input type="checkbox"/> Common Korean terms such as “막내” (Youngest), “후배” (Junior). <input type="checkbox"/> Food names mentioned in dialogue such as kimbap by Mira. <input type="checkbox"/> The Saja Boy band’s name has a double meaning for instead, Lion and Death. <input type="checkbox"/> Nanshan Tower is directly mentioned in the dialogue.
Films/Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> K-pop concert scene. <input type="checkbox"/> Korean supernatural themes (stories about the mysterious powers of women wearing hanbok, Demon wearing Death God's clothes). <input type="checkbox"/> Korean mythology “까치와호랑이” (The tiger & the magpie), “지하 세계” (the Underworld) and “도깨비” (Demon). <input type="checkbox"/> Classic Korean drama plot structure (music drives the plot after emotional foreshadowing). <input type="checkbox"/> Korean traditional heroic narrative (male protagonist rescues female character).



Figure 1 KPop demon hunter screenshot; 03:42

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)



Figure 2 The Saja boy

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)



Figure 3 The Huntr/x

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)

Music

There is a total of 12 songs played in this film. However, in KPop Demon Hunters, music serves as both a narrative anchor and a key vehicle for cultural representation, with songs such as “Golden” and “Takedown” standing out as prime examples. “Golden”, performed by the fictional girl group, the Huntr/x, functions as an emotionally charged that encapsulates the protagonists’ ambitions while fusing modern K-Pop production with subtle traditional elements. According to Havens et al. , (2025) , its anthemic quality and uplifting message propelled it to No. 1 on the Billboard Global 200, marking a rare achievement for a song originating from an animated film. Similarly, “Takedown” channels the story’s central conflict into an aggressive, high- energy track, later reimagined by Twice in the film’s end credits, blurring the line between fictional and real-world K-pop. “Soda Pop”, another song performed by the Saja Boy also became very popular, ranked 6th in the U.S. YouTube viewers (July – August 2025 ranking) behind “Golden” which ranked 1st, and ahead of “Take Down” which ranked 47th in the weekly chart (Choi & Yu, 2025). This strategic use of music not only deepens character development and audience immersion but also amplifies Hallyu’s soft power by presenting Korean pop music as both commercially competitive and culturally resonant. Additionally, a popular OST from another series called

A Business Proposal, “사랑인가 봐 Love, Maybe” were also played in the animation which helped led the international audiences into a deeper Korean pop cultural experience, linking the animation word with the real-world series.

Food

In KPop Demon Hunters, food is presented not just as a background detail but as part of the characters shared moments. The film features a wide range of everyday Korean dishes, such as *gimbap* (김밥, Korean rice rolls), *ramyeon* (라면, instant noodles), *kimchi jjigae* (김치찌개, kimchi stew), *bingosu* (빙수, shaved ice dessert), *eomuk* (어묵, fish cake), *sundae* (순대, blood sausage), Korean hot dogs, and snacks such as *Pepero* (빼빼로). These foods often appear in scenes of gathering and relaxation, whether its friends eating *ramyeon* after a long day or sharing *gimbap* on the go, highlighting how common and beloved these dishes are in Korean life. By showing that even the film’s celebrity characters crave simple street food, the story makes Korean cuisine feel approachable and familiar. This not only reflects the popularity and appeal of these dishes within Korea but also draws the audience closer to Korean food culture, making it part of the film’s warm and communal atmosphere.



Figure 4 Korean foods in the KPop demon hunters

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)



Figure 5 The Huntr/x eating ramyeon (라면, instant noodles)

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)

Language

As an English-speaking animated film, KPop Demon Hunters strategically retains Korean terms such as *maknae* (막내, youngest), *hoobae* (후배, junior), and *honmoon* (혼문, soul gate), ingrained layers of linguistic meaning that reflect both contemporary social structures and traditional cultural narratives. While *maknae* and *hoobae* convey nuanced hierarchies within the K-pop industry, *honmoon* (혼문) bridges the modern pop storyline with Korean mythology which is expanding the film's cultural scope. These untranslated terms serve as linguistic anchors, encouraging non-Korean-speaking audiences to familiarize themselves with Korean vocabularies and the cultural values they represent. Beyond dialogue, the film's music also weaves in Korean lyrics alongside English one, allowing the audience to experience the rhythm and emotional nuances of the Korean language through music. Moreover, verbal references by the Mira to craving Korean foods such as *ramyeon* and *gimbap* not only highlight the reliability of dialogue but also delicately integrate Korean culinary culture into the language experience. Together, these linguistic elements operate as soft power assets, inviting audiences to engage with Korean culture through its language in music, and everyday expressions, while sparking curiosity that may

lead to further language learning and cultural exploration.

Travel

Although KPop Demon Hunters is not a travel-focused film, it subtly promotes Korea's image as a destination through its visual background. The repeated appearance of the Namsan Tower and vibrant Korean street scenes embeds recognizable cultural landmarks into the narrative, evoking a sense of place. To ensure authenticity, the production team visited the Korean Folk Village and Seoul's Myeongdong district, capturing details of traditional and urban life (Lee, 2025). These settings do more than provide aesthetic appeal, they highlight Korea's cultural identity and may spark audience interest in visiting the country, aligning with Hallyu's soft power strategy of linking popular culture with tourism.

Products

Beyond its cultural and social role, Korean cuisine in the film also functions as a form of product placement, even without specific brands. The repeated presentation of iconic dishes such as *ramyeon* and *gimbap* elevates their recognition as marketable Korean products, mirroring real-world trends in which Hallyu exposure drives global demand for packaged Korean foods and snacks. In addition, the film also incorporates

aspects of K-pop fan culture through merchandise-like items such as idol posters, *bong* (봉, banded light sticks), and stage costumes. These fan-related products not only signal the economic ecosystem surrounding K-pop but also normalize the idea of purchasing cultural goods as part of audience identity expression. By

combining culinary representation with fan merchandise imagery, the film reinforces Korean products as desirable lifestyle items, thereby strengthening soft power by linking cultural enjoyment with tangible consumption.



Figure 6 Namsan tower in the Kpop demon hunters
Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)

Films/Series

KPop Demon Hunters combines familiar K-drama storytelling with Korean mythology. The Saja Boy wore black robes and hats resembling the *jeoseung saja* (저승사자, death messenger), while the Huntr/x appears in a traditional *hanbok* (한복, Korean traditional dress), embedding folklore and dress into the plot. These details function as cultural symbols, presenting heritage in a way that is accessible to global audiences. The romantic tension between the heroine and the male lead villains, ending with his sacrifice, follows a classic melodramatic trope where love and responsibility intertwine. By merging idol-centered narratives with mythological and traditional elements, the film reinforces Korean cultural identity while extending it to new audiences through animation.

Discussion

Guided by Hall's Representation Theory, this study addressed two questions: (1) What cultural elements are represented in KPop Demon Hunters? and (2) How are these elements portrayed through the seven

dimensions of Korean Wave culture? The findings show that animation, although less examined in Hallyu research, can effectively encode diverse cultural symbols in ways that resonate with both domestic and international audiences, thus contributing to Korea's soft power.

Idols and music form the narrative's core. The fictional groups the Saja Boy and the Huntr/x are carefully modelled on real K-pop acts, with choreography, stage costumes, and makeup reflecting contemporary idol aesthetics. Performance scenes mimic live concert filming styles, rapid cuts, tracking shots, and spotlights, projecting glamour and energy. Songs such as "Golden", "Takedown", and "Soda Pop" transcend their role as soundtrack pieces; they link the film's fictional world with real K-pop charts, demonstrating the commercial and cultural impact of Korean music. This finding is aligned with the popularity of the KPop Demon Hunters as these fictional bands, the Huntr/x and the Saja Boy, topping the music charts, beating real-life K-Pop bands such as the BTS (Hoskin, 2025). The animation itself has gained

immense popularity with 33 million views in just 2 weeks after the released, becoming Netflix most streamed globally (Hoskin, 2025). Not only the fans, but K-Pop stars such as Mamamoo’s Solar, Urban Zakapa’s Kwon Soon-il, Kwon Jin-ah, A.C.E.’s Junhee, and Epik High’s Tablo are reported to be obsessed with the KPop Demon Hunters, releasing covered soundtracks on social media (Park, 2025). As for the fans, the KPop Demon Hunters contents flooded social media platforms with vocal covers, instrumental covers, and dance covers. The notable dance cover content came from Cha

Eun-woo, who was the real-life inspiration of the fictional character creation of Jinu, performing a 20 seconds “Soda Pop” dance video, reaching over 1.5 million views on YouTube (Park, 2025). This phenomenon demonstrated that the Korean culture, fictional K-Pop idols, and K-Pop music portraying through animation could have a significant impact on global audiences, both the fans and the idols themselves and music has become an essential driver in delivering the cultural elements of Korean culture to international audiences.



Figure 7 The Huntr/x fans holding *bong* (봉, banded light sticks)

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)



Figure 8 The Tiger and the Magpie (까치와호랑이)

Source: Kang & Appelhans (2025)

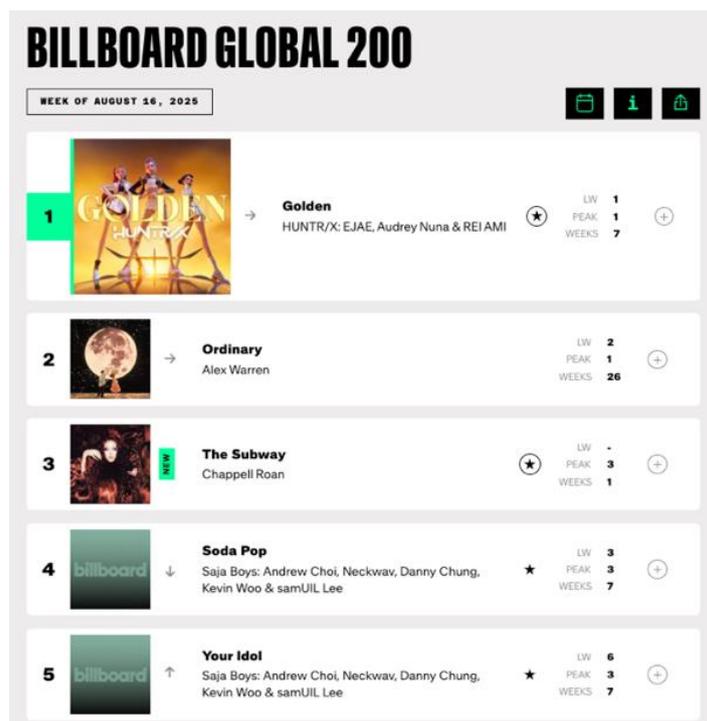


Figure 9 “Golden” Topping Billboard Global 200

Source: Billboard Global 200 (2025)

The song “Golden” from the animated film Kpop Demon Hunters achieved remarkable success in South Korea and beyond, exemplified by earning the coveted Perfect All-Kill status, one of the highest achievements in the nation’s music charts. Its powerful beats, empowering lyrics, and catchy hook embody themes of resilience and self-discovery, aligning closely with the performance-driven culture of K-pop. This resonance has inspired a wave of cover performances by a wide array of K-pop artists, spanning generations and levels of fame, from veterans such as Bada (S.E.S) and Ryeowook (Super Junior) to contemporary stars such as An Yujin (IVE) and Kim Junkyu (TREASURE). These covers serve as creative platforms allowing idols to re-interpret “Golden” through unique vocal, dance, and stylistic expressions, thereby deepening their connection with fans. Notably, the song’s dynamic range afforded artists the flexibility to personalize their renditions, which contributed to the song’s viral spread on social media and live events like KCON LA 2025. Beyond official covers, many idols including EXO’s Baekhyun, NMIXX’s Lily, and ATEEZ’s Jongho have performed informal versions, further amplifying its reach and cementing “Golden” as a modern anthem within the K-pop community. This phenomenon illustrates how

contemporary K-pop’s intertextuality and fan participatory culture play pivotal roles in amplifying the impact of musical hits, reinforcing Kpop Demon Hunters as a significant cultural and musical milestone (Rika-Go, 2025).

Regarding the fan reception of KPop Demon Hunters, it is evident that the animated feature has achieved phenomenal global success and critical acclaim. Since its release in June 2025, the film quickly became Netflix’s most-viewed film, amassing over 236 million streams and maintaining a weekly top position with 25.4 million recent streams. It also had a notable limited theatrical release, earning between \$18 to \$20 million, signaling a powerful hybrid model of streaming and box-office success (Morrison, 2025).

The fan reception has been remarkable, with audiences highly engaging with the fictional K-pop groups featured in the film, particularly the girl group Huntr/x. Their seven original songs have not only helped narrate the film’s story but also dominated music charts worldwide, even surpassing real-life K-pop giants like BTS and Blackpink on platforms like Spotify and Billboard. Critical responses have been equally enthusiastic, praising the film for its high-energy, thematic depth, and clever integration of K-pop

aesthetics with a compelling supernatural narrative (Lee, 2025; Stephan, 2025).

Fans have further elevated the film's cultural impact through viral social media clips, fan art, and sold-out sing-along screenings, thereby expanding the film's reach beyond typical animation audiences. The involvement of real K-pop artists from groups like Twice in the soundtrack added an authentic layer of credibility and connection to the existing global K-pop fanbase, bringing enhanced legitimacy and appeal (Stephan, 2025).

Language and food add layers of cultural familiarity. Untranslated terms such as *maknae* (막내, youngest) and *hoobae* (후배, junior) preserve the nuances of Korean social hierarchy, while *honmoon* (혼문, soul gate) connects the pop narrative with Korean mythology. Verbal references to craving *ramyeon* (라면, instant noodles) or *gimbap* (김밥, Korean rice rolls) integrate Korean cuisine into character interactions, making it part of the film's emotional and cultural landscape. These elements subtly encourage audiences to engage with Korean language and everyday culture.

The travel dimension appears visually through recurring landmarks such as the Namsan Tower, Korean Street markets, and the Korean Folk Village. These are not highlighted as tourist promotions, but their repetition builds a recognizable sense of place, potentially sparking interest in visiting Korea. Products are represented indirectly through iconic food items and fan merchandise like light sticks and posters, signaling the economic ecosystem surrounding K-pop fandom and Korean consumer goods.

At the end, the films/series dimension tied pop culture to heritage. The Saja Boy's *jeoseung saja* (저승사자, death messenger) robes and the Huntr/x's *hanbok* (한복, Korean traditional dress) bring mythology and traditional dresses into the animated format, while the melodramatic romance and sacrifice echo familiar K-drama tropes. This combination of idol-centered storytelling, mythological motifs, and traditional aesthetics allows the film to present a layered image of Korean identity.

In summary, KPop Demon Hunters is presented not only for its innovative fusion of music, animation, and storytelling but also for successfully mobilizing fan

enthusiasm and music chart dominance, which together underscore its role as a major cultural product within the Korean soft power landscape. Thus, the cultural elements in the KPop Demon Hunters are encoded in a way that is accessible to global audiences yet rooted in Korean traditions. This demonstrates how animation can be more than entertainment; it can be a strategic medium for transmitting cultural values and enhancing the global reach of Hallyu.

Implication

This study fills the gap in Hallyu research by examining animation as a medium often overlooked in cultural representation studies through the seven dimensions of Korean Wave culture. The findings show that animation can encode complex cultural elements, from idol aesthetics and K-pop soundtracks to food culture, language, and mythological motifs, in ways comparable to or even more layered than K-dramas and films. For academia, this broadens the scope of Korean Wave scholarship and invites further investigation into how animated texts are decoded by diverse audiences. For the industry, KPop Demon Hunters illustrates how deliberate integration of Korean terms, cuisine, and landmarks can stimulate interest in language learning, tourism, and cultural products while aligning with soft power goals, offering a model for cross-media cultural promotion.

Further suggestion

The KPop Demon Hunters became a global sensation with original songs topping the charts as well as becoming one of the hottest keywords in the Google Trend (Choi & Yu, 2025), while the user-generated contents (UGC) regarding the animation have flooded the internet with vocal covers, instrumental covers, and dance covers from both fans and K-Pop idols themselves (Park, 2025). Though is research examined the seven cultural dimensions implanted in the animation, it is interesting to explore the factors that make this animation became a global sensation and what aspects of these cultural elements have significant impacts on international audiences' perception and behaviors, which is subjected to future research.

Future research could conduct comparative studies between K-dramas, live-action films, and animated productions to assess differences in how each medium

represents Korean culture and shapes audience perceptions. Such studies could examine whether animation, with its flexibility in visual storytelling, conveys cultural symbols and narratives differently from live-action formats, and how these variations influence viewers' cultural understanding and engagement. Cross-cultural audience analysis would further reveal whether these differences hold across diverse global markets, offering valuable insights for both academic theory-building and industry strategy.

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