

# K-Pop Animation as a Global Cultural Brand: A Netnographic Study of K-Pop Demon Hunters

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This study employs a netnographic approach to examine audience engagement with animated non-human influencers in the film *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, analyzing online discussions to explore how K-pop-inspired animated characters captivate global audiences. Through analysis, the study identifies five key engagement themes. Findings reveal that source- and content-related factors foster parasocial relationships through K-pop-inspired personas, authentic cultural portrayals, and compelling narrative arcs. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how K-pop-based animated non-human influencers function as credible agents within the Hallyu wave, leveraging actor-network theory to highlight networked interactions among characters, cultural content, and global audiences. Practical implications suggest that media creators and entertainment professionals can enhance global engagement by designing culturally resonant animated characters and cross-media campaigns.

Keyword: K-culture, k-content, k-pop, non-human influencers, AI influencers, netnography, actor network theory, user engagement, k-pop demon hunters

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## 1. Introduction

The global rise of Korean popular culture, or K-culture, has transcended linguistic and geographic boundaries, establishing itself as a powerful cultural and economic force. While K-pop music has long been recognized as the flagship of this phenomenon, recent developments in cross-media storytelling, particularly the emergence of K-pop-themed animation,

suggest a further expansion of Korea's soft power. A notable example is the Netflix AI-generated animation *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025), whose theme song *Golden* achieved a historic milestone by reaching number one on the UK Official Singles Chart on August 1, 2025, and again on August 15, 2025 (Smith, 2025). This achievement has propelled the song to generate over US\$1.39 million in revenue from streaming, digital downloads, and airplay spins, according to Billboard esti-

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mates (Marshall, 2025). This unprecedented achievement not only underscores the global resonance of K-pop music but also exemplifies the increasing integration of Korean cultural narratives into diverse media formats (Park, 2022).

This paper explores the case of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* as a hybrid cultural product that merges animated characters with K-pop aesthetics, storytelling, and music. This animation offers a fertile site for examining how users form relationships with non-human characters, engage in fan discourse, and project their identities onto mediated cultural contexts. Existing literature on influencers and fan engagement has predominantly focused on human actors, leaving a gap in understanding how audiences interact with non-human influencers such as animated characters or AI-generated personas (e.g., Kwon et al., 2025; Wang and Kim, 2022). Drawing from the theoretical lens of Actor–Network Theory (ANT) and employing a netnography approach, this study investigates how K-pop-based animated characters and content foster user engagement among international audiences. Drawing from prior research on influencers, this study emphasizes source-driven (related to animated characters) and content-driven (related to narrative elements) factors as key catalysts for audience interaction with K-pop-based animated content on digital platforms. The aim is to expand the understanding of audience

engagement beyond traditional human-centered studies, enriching insights into animated media dynamics (Hudders et al., 2021).

As animated K-pop characters and virtual idols rise in prominence on digital platforms, studying audience interaction with these animated entities is crucial for grasping evolving online engagement. This study contributes to an emerging body of knowledge on the affective, symbolic, and communicative functions of K-pop as a global cultural brand (Laffan, 2021; Lee and Lau, 2025). It also sheds light on the evolving nature of digital fandom, the branding of K-culture in transmedia environments, and the symbolic power of music-driven narratives in shaping global cultural consumption (Kim and Park, 2024; Ko, 2025; Choi et al., 2024).

## II. Literature Background

### 2.1 Influencers

Researchers have investigated a wide range of elements influencing social media influencers (SMIs), focusing on both the attributes of the influencer and the nature of the content they produce (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Recent studies in this area often highlight the significance of source credibility, the compatibility between the influencer and the pro-

moted product, and the development of parasocial interactions. Source credibility refers to the traits of a communicator that persuade audiences to accept a message (Ohanian, 1990, p.14). Initially studied within the realm of celebrity endorsements, this concept has gained increasing attention in the context of influencer marketing (Reinikainen et al., 2020). It plays a pivotal role in enhancing consumer trust in a brand (Lou and Yuan, 2019) and in influencing their purchase decisions (Reinikainen et al., 2020). According to Ohanian's (1990) framework, source credibility is made up of three core dimensions: physical appeal, perceived knowledge, and trustworthiness. While attractiveness captures the visual charm of the communicator, expertise reflects the perceived capability to offer valid information, and trustworthiness conveys the audience's confidence in the source's statements. Importantly, the effectiveness of these traits depends less on their objective presence and more on how they are perceived by the audience.

The concept of product-endorser congruence highlights the importance of consistency between an influencer's personal traits and the nature of the product or service (including music) they promote (Schouten et al., 2020). Prior research has referred to this idea using varying terms, including match-up (Park and Lin, 2020) and fit (De Cicco et al., 2021), but the underlying principle remains the same. Empirical evidence consistently dem-

onstrates that when there is a high level of alignment between the endorser and the product, both the brand and the influencer stand to benefit. For example, Schouten et al. (2020) found that effective alignment leads to more positive consumer responses to advertisements and increases the likelihood of purchase. From the influencer's perspective, De Cicco et al. (2021) revealed that congruence with endorsed products can strengthen perceived credibility and encourage users to follow the influencer on digital platforms. On the contrary, when there is a disconnect between the influencer and the product they promote, it can diminish the influencer's trustworthiness in the eyes of consumers (Lee and Koo, 2015).

The notion of parasocial interaction refers to the imagined experience of a personal connection with a media personality, despite the interaction being one-directional (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011). Over time, these imagined engagements can mature into parasocial relationships that resemble real-world friendships or emotional attachments (Tukachinsky, 2010). They can even include interaction with fictional figures and critical dialogue (Sanderson, 2009). These bonds between influencers and followers offer several psychological and behavioral advantages. For instance, they can lead to increased receptivity to influencer content (Munnukka et al., 2019), foster emotional loyalty and a sense of closeness (Ko and Wu, 2017), and amplify the en-

tainment value of the influencer's posts (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011). Notably, such relationships may influence consumer behavior. In an experimental study, Reinikainen et al. (2020) demonstrated that when viewers perceived an influencer as highly credible, their parasocial ties with the influencer grew stronger, ultimately raising their intention to purchase the advertised brand.

## 2.2 K-Pop Animation as Non-Human Influencers

The global rise of K-pop has spurred research exploring its cultural, technological, and psychological dimensions (Lee and Kwon, 2021; Lee and Hoe, 2013; Yhee, et al., 2021). Studies have examined K-pop's digital transformation, highlighting how AI and big data analytics enhance content creation and global fan engagement. For instance, AI-driven tools have been used to generate K-pop choreography (Kim and Lee, 2024) and simulate idol voices for fan interactions, fostering parasocial relationships (Kang et al., 2025). Research also underscores K-pop's socio-cultural impact, with analyses of fan behavior revealing both positive community dynamics and issues like over-immersion or toxic fandom (Lee and Park, 2023). Additionally, platforms leverage AI to personalize fan experiences, revolutionizing K-pop marketing (Lee and Lau, 2025). These findings contextualize the current study's focus on *K-Pop Demon*

*Hunters*, an animated film that blends K-pop's cultural and musical elements to engage international audiences, contributing to the evolving discourse on K-pop's digital and global influence.

Despite growing academic interest in non-human entities, it is notable that research on non-human influencers within digital platform contexts remains limited. This may be attributed to the relatively recent emergence of these digital personas. In line with this, scholarly work on K-pop animations as media influencers is still in its early stages. While initial investigations have begun to explore categories such as pet influencers (Myers et al., 2022) and virtual characters, the literature is still scattered and often restricted to narrow subsets rather than offering a comprehensive view of non-human influencers. As Miao et al. (2022) emphasize, virtual agents and avatars are becoming increasingly influential in global audience engagement practices. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of how audiences interact with these non-human figures on digital platforms is critical for the effective application of such strategies. While some studies highlight the appeal of animated K-pop idols through aesthetic and technical sophistication, a deeper investigation is needed to understand how these characters fulfill fans' emotional needs and foster lasting engagement. One promising theoretical lens for this inquiry is ANT, which facilitates the examina-

tion of the relational dynamics between human users and non-human actors.

### 2.3 Actor-Network Theory

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) represents a diverse set of analytical approaches and conceptual tools that view entities, whether human or non-human, as the outcomes of ongoing relational processes embedded in complex networks (Law, 2009). Rather than a unified or rigid theory, ANT serves as a perspective that acknowledges how technologies, people, and symbolic practices co-shape social phenomena (Latour, 2007). A core tenet of ANT is that non-human entities possess agency and exert influence on par with humans within these interconnected systems (Latour, 2007). This viewpoint is increasingly relevant as digital and technological agents become more integrated into social life. For instance, with the growing influence of technologies like the Internet of Things, non-human agents have begun to actively participate in shaping communication and social behavior (Hoffman and Novak, 2018). In fact, nearly 50% of current online activity is attributed to automated agents such as bots, underlining the critical need to examine their impact (Ikeda, 2022).

Building on ANT principles, the methodology known as more-than-human netnography has emerged as a way to study digital interactions

involving both human and non-human participants (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018). This method accounts for how content is produced, shared, interpreted, and responded to by actors across the digital spectrum. It explores performative aspects (e.g., content creation), interactive elements (e.g., likes, comments), and interpretive moments (e.g., viewing, meaning-making) (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018). For example, this approach has been applied to explore how parasocial connections form between audiences and digital influencers during travel livestreams (Deng et al., 2022). Given the current research's focus on non-human influencers, such as animated or virtual K-pop characters, this methodological lens is particularly well-suited to exploring how these entities engage audiences, fulfill social roles, and shape user experience in digital spaces.

### 2.4 User Engagement

Engagement on digital platforms can be conceptualized along a continuum of interaction, typically categorized into three hierarchical tiers: passive observation, interactive participation, and active content generation (Schivinski et al., 2016). Passive observation involves activities like watching videos, scrolling through image feeds, or silently following trending topics without direct interaction. The next level, interactive participation, encompasses actions such as liking, reposting, or com-

menting on posts, signifying an elevated degree of user involvement. The most immersive form is content creation, where individuals produce and disseminate original materials, often as user-generated content (Schivinski et al., 2016).

From a broader perspective, user engagement is reflected through various dimensions of interaction, including conversation, electronic word-of-mouth, and participatory behavior (Perreault and Mosconi, 2018). Scholarly literature generally analyzes engagement by breaking it down into five communication-driven elements: source characteristics (e.g., Lou et al., 2019), content attributes (e.g., Cortez and Dastidar, 2022), channel mechanisms (e.g., Paek et al., 2013), audience-related factors (e.g., Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022), and resultant outcomes (e.g., Cao et al., 2021). Among these, source and content attributes are considered particularly influential in encouraging audience interaction with human influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Therefore, the present study focuses on identifying the most impactful source- and content-based determinants that foster user interaction with prominent non-human, K-pop-based animated characters and content.

### III. Research Method

To explore how audiences engage with K-

pop-themed animated characters in digital environments, this study employed a netnographic methodology, well-suited for analyzing cultural and behavioral patterns in online communities. Drawing on the six-phase model by Kozinets (2020): initiation (research preparation and design), investigation (data collection), interaction (data collection), immersion (data collection), integration (data analysis and interpretation), and incarnation (data communication), the research progressed through each stage. However, given the researcher's non-intrusive observer role, the interaction and immersion phases were merged for practicality.

Reddit was chosen as the primary netnographic platform for its vibrant role in hosting K-pop animation fan discussions and visual storytelling, aligning with the expressive and cultural dynamics of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* fandom. All the content collected and analyzed was publicly available. Following Kozinets's (2020) recommendations, user identities were anonymized, and direct quotes from followers were lightly edited for privacy (with one or two word substitutions), ensuring that individual users could not be identified. In contrast, one- or two-word content originating from the animated K-pop characters themselves was cited directly, as these figures do not pose the same concerns regarding personal privacy.

This study employed a non-participatory, observational form of netnography rather

than an immersive participant-observer role. While the researcher did not intervene, contribute, or engage in conversations, the analytical process extended beyond textual examination and incorporated the technological, cultural, and interactional context of Reddit as a meaning-making environment. In line with Kozinets' (2020) conceptualization of interpretive netnography, meaning emerged through iterative engagement with discourse and its platform-specific dynamics rather than from physical immersion alone.

To strengthen contextual depth, the analysis incorporated platform-specific characteristics that shape how discourse is produced, circulated, and interpreted. Reddit's anonymity norms, upvote/downvote visibility mechanisms, subreddit governance rules, moderation practices, meme-based communication patterns, and shared K-culture fandom etiquettes were considered as part of the cultural infrastructure of interaction. These socio-technical affordances informed how meaning was constructed within the community, demonstrating that fan discourse are interpreted within the broader platform ecology.

### 3.1 Data Collection

This research adopted netnographic data collection techniques to explore user interaction with K-pop-themed animated characters. Consistent with Kozinets's (2020) methodo-

logical framework, the study followed multiple interconnected stages. Fieldwork spanned from June to August 2025, since *K-Pop Demon Hunters* was released on Netflix on June 20, 2025. Immersion began when the researcher explored the evolution of K-pop animation character accounts, focusing on their visual storytelling styles, user interactions, and thematic shifts. A keyword strategy was developed to locate relevant digital traces, including hashtags, character names, and phrases commonly used in the K-pop animation digital community.

During the investigation phase, selection criteria were formulated to identify a suitable online community for this study. Reddit was selected as the primary netnographic platform due to its active communities, which host vibrant discussions on *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, reflecting diverse global fan perspectives. Its open-access nature ensured publicly available data, aligning with ethical research standards. The platform's threaded comment structure facilitated in-depth analysis of user interactions, capturing nuanced engagement with the film's K-pop and animated elements. Reddit's prominence in K-pop fandom culture made it ideal for studying the intersection of animation and music-driven fan discourse. Finally, the site's high engagement levels, evidenced by upvotes and comment chains, provided rich qualitative data for exploring international audience reactions.

To ensure depth, the study prioritized content that demonstrated strong user engagement. Posts were filtered based on metrics like likes and comments, drawing from Reid and Duffy's (2018) approach to social media sampling. Only public-facing content was included, and user identities were anonymized. Minor word substitutions were made in quoted comments to prevent traceability, while content from the animated influencers was cited directly due to the absence of privacy concerns.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The analytical approach followed a three-stage qualitative coding procedure, comprising open, axial, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, the researcher dissected the collected data into individual units of meaning. Each unit, be it a user comment or post caption, was assigned an initial label that captured its core sentiment, behavior, or concept. These first-order codes were inductively derived from the data rather than imposed a priori. For instance, comments like "Rumi, why do you have to make me cry like that? Your whole arc about accepting your demon side hit me right in the feels" and "Jinu, my man, those dance moves in the final fight were straight fire! How do you make demon-slaying look so cool?" were coded under emerging character related concepts.

Axial coding organized first-order codes in-

to broader conceptual themes by mapping relationships through thematic diagrams and hierarchical structures. For instance, comments such as "Rumi's struggle with her demon side feels so real" and "Jinu's dance moves are straight out of a BTS choreo" were clustered into second-order themes like character emotional authenticity and credibility, linking user expressions of empathy and admiration for K-pop-inspired traits to character-driven engagement.

In the selective coding phase, broader interpretive categories, termed aggregate dimensions, were constructed to form a cohesive narrative. One key aggregate dimension, Identity-driven engagement, encapsulated how users perceived *K-Pop Demon Hunters* characters as relatable figures embodying K-pop's emotional and cultural resonance, as evidenced by comments like "Rumi, girl, your throat patterns are iconic! Keep slaying those demons and insecurities." Findings narrated this process, highlighting divergent patterns, like debates over character design, to explain how user discussions revolved around key engagement mechanisms.

To bolster the trustworthiness of the analysis, findings were triangulated across multiple digital contexts, including Reddit, entertainment blogs, media articles, and fan-driven platforms. The researcher conducted the initial round of open coding, distilling raw data into emergent concepts and themes. To en-

sure rigor, the coding process was iteratively refined through repeated reviews and cross-referencing with the data and strengthening the consistency of the thematic framework. The coding process was continuously compared with prior literature to ensure theoretical consistency, and analysis was sustained until theoretical saturation was achieved. This structured, iterative process ensured that the resulting thematic framework was grounded in the data.

## IV. Findings

Exploration of the K-pop animation phenomenon through netnographic analysis of Reddit discussions revealed key factors driving international audience engagement with *K-Pop Demon Hunters*. Users' discussions captured source-related (animated character attributes), content-related, and source-content factors that drive international audience engagement with *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, while integrating platform and audience dynamics contextually within these themes. To reflect the analytic orientation of qualitative inquiry, the themes are framed as theoretically informed engagement mechanisms. Each theme integrates user discourse with theoretical constructs, ensuring that interpretations emerge through the interplay between fan expressions and conceptual

reasoning. The thematic structure representing audience responses as engagement mechanisms includes Identity-Driven Engagement, Performative Agency and Engagement, Aesthetic Engagement, Cultural Engagement, and Narrative Engagement.

To align the analysis more clearly with Actor - Network Theory (ANT), the Findings section explicitly examines how animated characters (non-human actors), the Reddit platform (technological actor), and global fans (human actors) co-construct engagement through networked interactions. Rather than treating user engagement as solely audience-driven, the analysis interprets characters' identities, performances, aesthetics, and cultural markers as forms of non-human agency that actively shape how fans respond, re-interpret, and circulate meaning. Reddit's platform affordances, such as anonymity, threaded discussions, and upvoting, are also understood as influential mediators that enable particular types of relational ties and visibility within the actor-network. Accordingly, each thematic subsection highlights how these assemblages of human and non-human actors jointly produce the observable patterns of engagement.

### 4.1 Identity-Driven Engagement

This theme demonstrates how audience engagement is mobilized through identity-based relational meaning-making, where Reddit users

attribute emotional depth, authenticity, and persona legitimacy to animated K-pop characters, reflecting early-stage parasocial attachment and non-human agency. From an ANT perspective, the characters in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* do not merely function as narrative devices but operate as non-human actors whose hybrid identities actively shape audience engagement. Their characteristics, such as Rumi's half-demon lineage and Jinu's K-pop idol-like persona, circulate as actants that prompt fans to form emotional, moral, and cultural interpretations. Reddit users repeatedly treat these animated characters as agents capable of expressing authenticity, vulnerability, and self-doubt. These interactions demonstrate that the characters generate meaning within the network, rather than simply receiving audiences' projection.

In source-related comments, Reddit users expressed fascination, empathy, and occasional skepticism about the identities of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* characters like Rumi and Jinu, particularly their hybrid (e.g., part-demon) and K-pop-inspired personas. For example, users' empathetic responses to Rumi's identity struggle illustrate how her hybrid identity acts as a node that mobilizes emotional resonance and identification. Comments such as "the point was specifically about Rumi accepting who she is" (Reddit user ID: dem<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) and "we sympathize with two beings with the same plight coming from two completely different paths" (bo<sup>\*\*\*</sup>)

reflect users' emotional investment in the characters' struggles with identity, mirroring the multifaceted personas of real K-pop idols. Similarly, confusion about whether the Saja Boys are a "real K-pop group" shows that their persona circulates as a credible entity within the network, blurring boundaries between fiction and real idol culture. A user remarked, "Rumi being half demon is not traditional" (Tra<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), highlighting curiosity about her non-traditional identity. The comment "no wonder poor Rumi struggled when she got throat patterns" (dra<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) underscores empathy for Rumi's emotional depth.

In content-related comments, Reddit users highlighted specific narrative elements and character interactions that deepened the relatability of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* characters' identities. For instance, a user commented, "Rumi's backstory about balancing her demon heritage with her idol life feels like a K-pop star navigating fame" (pec<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), emphasizing how her personal narrative resonates with real-world pressures. Similarly, a user noted, "The way Rumi and Jinu's bond grows through their shared outsider status is so touching" (unspecified user), highlighting how their relationship dynamics enhance emotional connection. Placing characters in culturally grounded contexts, such as scenes reflecting K-pop industry pressures, sparked engagement: "Rumi's struggle with her identity feels like a K-pop idol facing fan expectations"

(unspecified user).

In source-content related comments, Reddit users connected characters' identities to specific narrative moments, reflecting alignment between character portrayal and story context. For instance, a user remarked, "Rumi's half-demon struggle ties perfectly into her scenes confronting her past, it's so relatable" (ned\*\*\*), suggesting that the narrative's focus on her identity amplifies audience connection. Similarly, a user noted, "The way Rumi's K-pop vibe shines in her training scenes makes her feel like a real idol" (unspecified user), highlighting how story moments enhance her relatable persona. These comments indicate the development of parasocial-like relationships: "Rumi, you're my idol! Your journey through those tough scenes got me cheering for you" (unspecified user), suggesting that fans engage with characters as if they were real K-pop stars.

Identity-driven engagement emerges not only from character traits but also from how these traits interact with platform infrastructure. Reddit's affordances, such as anonymity, nested threads, and meme-based commentary, facilitate the collective stabilization of character identities, enabling users to negotiate and reinforce their interpretations. The character becomes real through these human - non-human - platform interactions. Thus, character identity operates as a distributed outcome emerging from negotiations among animated characters (non-human actants), Reddit's plat-

form mechanisms (technological actants), and global fans (human actants). This assemblage constitutes the relational network that produces perceptions of authenticity and relatability.

#### 4.2 Performative Agency and Engagement

Engagement in this theme emerges through the performative agency of animated characters, as users evaluate choreography, vocals, and stage presence using criteria normally applied to real idols, signaling how authenticity and expertise are constructed through technological actants and interpreted through parasocial and ANT lenses. Within the actor-network, the musical and performative attributes of the characters serve as material-semiotic forms of agency that activate specific audience responses. Jinu's choreography, Rumi's vocal sequences, and the Saja Boys' villain anthem function not merely as aesthetic choices but as performative actants that circulate through digital networks and mobilize user reaction. Reddit users frequently evaluate these performances as though they were assessing real K-pop idols. In source-related comments, users highlighted the perceived authenticity and skill of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* characters as K-pop performers, likening them to real idols. For instance, a user commented, "Jinu, my man, those dance moves in the final fight were straight fire! He's like a BTS member" (ser\*\*\*), praising Jinu's chor-

eography as emblematic of K-pop expertise. Similarly, a user noted, "Saja Boys' villain anthem feels like it could top real K-pop charts" (Rhe\*\*\*), emphasizing their credibility as a fictional K-pop group. When characters like Rumi and Jinu exhibited K-pop-style performances, such as synchronized dances or emotive vocals, users frequently treated them as genuine idols: "Rumi's stage presence in her solo scene is unreal, she's a total K-pop star" (unspecified user). These reactions reveal that performative elements act on users, prompting admiration, critique, and inter-user discussion. Their agency is not metaphorical, these musical cues exert force within the network by shaping how users comment, remix, interpret, and debate the characters' abilities. These comments suggest that the characters' ability to embody K-pop's performative charisma, akin to real idols, enhances their credibility and fosters engagement, encouraging fans to discuss their musical and performative roles as if they were authentic K-pop artists.

In content-related comments, users drew attention to specific musical elements and performance contexts that amplified the characters' K-pop-inspired appeal. For instance, a user noted, "Not every song is a show stopper, but each song perfectly represents the scene" (mai\*\*\*), highlighting how the soundtrack's integration with performance moments enhances engagement. A user remarked, "The Saja Boys' villain anthem in their battle scene

is so catchy, I'd stream it like a real K-pop track" (Rhe\*\*\*), emphasizing the song's role in immersing audiences. Characters' performances in stage-like or battle scenes, paired with K-pop-style music, sparked significant engagement: "Rumi's solo song in the training scene feels like a K-pop MV, it's so hype" (unspecified user). Users also engaged with each other's comments, fostering discussions, where one user tagged another, "@user, you'd love the Saja Boys' song, it's like K/DA vibes!" (unspecified user), with the reply, "Totally, it's stuck in my head!" (unspecified user). Additionally, comments referenced specific musical trends, such as "I'd recommend listening to K/DA, it's another fictional K-pop group" (Riv\*\*\*), indicating that the film's music resonates with fans familiar with virtual K-pop acts.

The platform itself also participates as an actant, such as performance clips, screenshots, and GIFs create media traces that stabilize certain interpretations. Through ANT, such digital traces are treated as non-human actors that co-produce meaning by enabling repeated visual or auditory reference points that fans circulate. Consequently, performative appeal emerges as a networked achievement, co-produced by character performances, fans' interpretive labor, and Reddit's circulation mechanisms. The performative charisma of the characters is therefore not inherent but constructed through a heterogeneous network

of actants that collectively shape perceptions of credibility and musical expertise.

#### 4.3 Aesthetic Engagement

Audience responses in this theme illustrate how aesthetic affordances, such as character design, fashion signaling, color palettes, and cinematic visual style, function as affective triggers that activate emotional response and fan discourse, demonstrating how visual elements operate as non-human actors shaping engagement. From an ANT lens, the visual aesthetics of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* function as non-human agents that materially shape engagement by acting upon viewers' senses, expectations, and cultural associations. Design features such as Rumi's glowing throat patterns, Jinu's stylized idol fashion, and the Saja Boys' coordinated villain imagery operate as visual actants that produce affective intensities and interpretive possibilities. In source-related comments, users frequently commented on the characters' appearance, highlighting their K-pop-inspired and fantasy-infused visual traits, which enhanced their appeal and credibility. For instance, a user remarked, "Rumi's glowing throat patterns are so iconic, she looks like a K-pop star crossed with a fantasy hero" (mor\*\*\*), emphasizing her visually striking design. Similarly, another user noted, "Jinu's sleek K-pop idol look with those demon vibes is just chef's kiss" (uns\*\*\*),

praising his aesthetic as a blend of modern idol fashion and fantasy elements. Users also highlighted the Saja Boys' distinctive style, with one commenting, "Saja Boys' outfits scream villainous K-pop group, I love their edgy aesthetic" (unspecified user). Characters' unique visual personas, such as Rumi's glowing markings or the Saja Boys' coordinated, rebellious fashion, set them apart from typical animated characters: "Rumi's design has this bold K-pop energy that makes her stand out" (unspecified user). These comments reflect not passive appreciation but relational activation, the visuals provoke certain reactions because they participate in a network of cultural signals tied to K-pop fashion, anime tropes, and contemporary digital aesthetics. These aesthetic components shape audience experience by exerting agency through color, motion, and symbolic form.

Importantly, Reddit's platform mediates this aesthetic agency. Visual affordances, such as embedded images, shared screenshots, and stylized fan edits, extend the reach of these non-human actants, enabling fans to reaffirm or challenge visual interpretations. In content-related comments, users drew attention to specific visual elements and scene contexts that amplified the aesthetic appeal of *K-Pop Demon Hunters*. For instance, a user commented, "The Spider-Verse style is the in-thing right now, and it makes the fight scenes with Jinu pop" (Cut\*\*\*), highlighting how the film's

modern animation style enhances character visibility. A user noted, “The urban fantasy setting with neon lights ties so well with the characters’ K-pop-inspired outfits” (mai\*\*\*), emphasizing how the visual backdrop complements character designs. Vibrant, K-pop-inspired visual contexts, such as stage-like battle scenes or urban settings, sparked engagement: “The way the Saja Boys’ outfits shine in the concert-like fight scene is so immersive” (unspecified user). Users also engaged with each other’s comments, fostering discussions, “check out Rumi’s glowing markings in the climax, it’s pure K-pop aesthetic!” (eci\*\*\*), with the reply, “Totally, it’s like a music video!” (dus\*\*\*). Comments noting discomfort, such as “There is something vaguely off-putting about the animation to me” (lum\*\*\*), illustrate that aesthetic actants can also destabilize interpretations, generating tension within the network.

Visual craftsmanship therefore does not act independently; it becomes meaningful as it circulates through the actor-network, influencing and being influenced by human interpretations, platform affordances, and broader cultural symbols. Aesthetic engagement arises through this assemblage of human observers and expressive non-human forms.

#### 4.4 Cultural Engagement

This theme highlights how cultural markers,

K-pop symbolism, Asian visual cues, and localized identity expressions shape user interpretations through processes of cultural alignment, symbolic consumption, and authenticity negotiation within global fan networks. Cultural elements in the film, including K-pop tropes, Asian cityscapes, and industry references, operate within the actor-network as semiotic-material actants that shape how users perceive authenticity. These cultural artefacts act upon viewers by invoking familiarity, national identity, or cross-cultural resonance. As ANT posits, culture is not a backdrop but an effect of relations among human and non-human actors.

Cultural elements rooted in K-pop and Asian identity resonate strongly with international audiences. In source-related comments, users’ comments praising authenticity, for instance, “Rumi feels so authentic, like a K-pop idol straight out of Seoul’s trainee system” (pec\*\*\*), show that cultural signifiers exert agency by triggering recognition and belonging. Similarly, another user noted, “Jinu’s vibe captures that disciplined K-pop star energy, it’s like he’s from a real idol group” (edu\*\*\*), underscoring his resonance with K-pop’s cultural framework. Users also praised the Saja Boys’ cultural authenticity, with one stating, “The Saja Boys feel like a legit K-pop group with that rebellious Asian pop vibe” (gol\*\*\*). Characters’ cultural personas, such as Rumi’s fan-engaging charm or the Saja

Boys' edgy idol aesthetic, aligned closely with K-pop and Asian cultural nuances: "As a Korean American, I appreciate how Korean culture is handled in a natural, non-criinge way through the characters" (spe\*\*\*). Conversely, criticisms, with some commenting, "Is Rumi's K-pop vibe a true reflection of Asian culture or just a Western spin?" (unspecified user) and "The Saja Boys' K-pop aesthetic in those urban scenes feels a bit like a Westernized version of Hallyu" (tio\*\*\*), indicate that cultural actants can generate tension when their resonance is unstable.

In content-related comments, users drew attention to specific cultural elements and settings that amplified the film's cultural resonance. For instance, a user noted, "A lot of the campy humor and characters' personality are clearly American, but the setting/world is set perspectively in Asia" (pos\*\*\*), highlighting the film's balanced fusion of Western and Asian cultural contexts. A user commented, "The urban Asian setting with its neon-lit streets makes the K-pop vibe feel so alive" (unspecified user), emphasizing how the cultural backdrop enhances engagement. Embedding characters in culturally rich contexts, such as scenes reflecting K-pop industry dynamics or Asian urban aesthetics, sparked significant engagement: "The K-pop training studio scenes feel so real, like they pulled it from a Seoul agency" (unspecified user). Users also engaged with each other's

comments, "The Asian city vibes in the film are so authentic, it's like a K-pop MV!" (unspecified user), with the reply, "Totally, it feels like Seoul!" (unspecified user). Some users critiqued the cultural execution, with one stating, "The Asian setting is cool, but some parts feel like a Western take on K-pop culture" (mat\*\*\*), indicating that while cultural elements drive engagement, they occasionally polarize audiences. Additionally, comments reflected emotional reactions to the cultural content, such as "As a Korean American, I felt so seen by how the film handles K-pop culture" (ras\*\*\*), suggesting that authentic cultural contexts evoke strong connections.

In source-content related comments, users connected the characters' K-pop and Asian-inspired identities to specific cultural contexts in the film, highlighting how these alignments amplify engagement. For instance, a user remarked, "Rumi's K-pop idol persona in the neon-lit Asian city scenes feels like she's straight out of a Seoul music video" (ede\*\*\*), showing how her cultural identity enhances the setting's resonance. Similarly, a user noted, "The Saja Boys' rebellious K-pop vibe fits perfectly in the competitive industry-like scenes, it's so clever" (Wee\*\*\*), linking their persona to the film's portrayal of K-pop's competitive dynamics. Such synergies often sparked curiosity about the authenticity of the characters' cultural portrayals: "Is Jinu's disciplined idol vibe in the training studio

scenes based on real K-pop culture? It feels so legit” (unspecified user).

Reddit’s structure intensifies this process by enabling users from diverse cultural locations (Korean diaspora, international K-pop fans) to negotiate authenticity collectively. The platform’s technical actants, comment visibility, upvotes, and community norms, shape which cultural interpretations gain prominence. Cultural resonance, therefore, is not simply embedded in the film: it is co-produced through interactions among cultural signifiers within the animation, fan identities and cultural backgrounds, and platform mechanisms that shape visibility. Through this relational process, cultural authenticity is constituted as a network effect, not an inherent property of the content.

#### 4.5 Narrative Engagement

Engagement in this theme is driven by narrative transportation and emotional investment, where redemption arcs, character conflicts, and thematic depth become actants that mobilize moral meaning-making, emotional bonding, and interpretive discussion in the networked fan environment. From an ANT viewpoint, themes are not abstract ideas but relational forces that act upon human viewers and structure how characters are perceived. Characters’ narrative functions, for instance, Rumi’s redemption, Jinu’s leadership, and

Saja Boys’ betrayal, demonstrate that animated figures can act as non-human agents whose narrative roles exert influence. Audience responses reveal that themes materially affect users within the network, prompting debate, identification, and emotional investment.

In source-related comments, users highlighted the authenticity and depth of the characters’ narrative roles, emphasizing their ability to embody thematic struggles that resonate with real-world complexities. For instance, a user noted, “Jinu’s leadership in the story feels like a K-pop group leader taking charge” (unspecified user), underscoring his compelling narrative persona. Users also highlighted the Saja Boys’ antagonistic roles, with one stating, “The Saja Boys are perfect villains, their menace drives the story’s tension” (Rhe\*\*\*). Characters’ narrative personas, such as Rumi’s introspective heroism or Jinu’s redemptive growth, differentiated them from typical animated characters. Some users expressed skepticism about the authenticity of these roles, with one commenting, “jinwu was a different case, he himself realized his wrongs & chose to make those new choices, but it feels a bit cliched” (Tur\*\*\*), suggesting that perceived narrative authenticity influences trustworthiness. These comments indicate that the characters’ compelling narrative roles, embodying themes like redemption and moral complexity, attract attention and foster engagement through discussions of their story-

driven personas.

In content-related comments, users focused on specific narrative arcs and thematic elements that amplified engagement. For instance, a user noted, “the film has just spent its entire runtime telling us that the evil is not necessarily evil” (pos\*\*\*), sparking debates on the theme of moral ambiguity. A user commented, “Message is secondary to the story, and flows naturally from it” (ain\*\*\*), highlighting the seamless integration of themes like self-acceptance into the narrative. Thematically rich story moments, such as scenes exploring redemption or duality, drove significant engagement: “the movie is just so incredibly interdisciplinary and multifaceted” (inp\*\*\*), reflecting the film’s layered storytelling. Users also engaged with each other’s comments, “the betrayal plot with the Saja Boys is such a wild twist, right?” (unspecified user), with the reply, “Totally, it kept me hooked!” (unspecified user). Additionally, comments reflected emotional reactions to thematic content, such as “The redemption theme in the climax made me tear up” (Tru\*\*\*), suggesting that universal themes evoke strong connections.

In source-content related comments, users connected the characters’ narrative roles to specific story arcs and thematic elements, highlighting how these alignments amplify engagement. For instance, a user remarked, “the markings as a metaphor for insecurities

and shame make Rumi’s role so powerful in her redemption arc” (Ups\*\*\*), showing how her narrative persona enhances thematic resonance. Similarly, a user noted, “The Saja Boys’ villainous charisma in the betrayal plot makes them iconic antagonists” (rai\*\*\*), linking their roles to narrative twists. Such synergies often sparked curiosity about the authenticity of the characters’ narrative portrayals: “Rumi’s half-demon struggle ties perfectly into the film’s message about embracing flaws, is it inspired by real K-pop pressures?” (ned\*\*\*).

Reddit’s communicative architecture also shapes how these themes circulate. Threaded conversations stabilize competing interpretations, allowing thematic actants to be negotiated, reinforced, or contested. Some users interpret themes positively (“message flows naturally”), while others perceive them as contrived (“feels a bit rushed”). These disagreements illustrate how thematic actants and human actors co-produce meaning. Thus, narrative engagement arises from an assemblage of character-driven thematic actants, fans’ emotional and interpretive contributions, and Reddit’s visibility algorithms and conversational structures. The narrative is therefore not a fixed property of the film but an emergent product of the actor-network.

## V. Discussion and Implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions. This study is among pioneering efforts to investigate the rising phenomenon of K-pop-based animated content and its impact on global audience engagement. Its theoretical contributions are threefold. First, this study enriches the conceptualization of non-human influencers by demonstrating how animated characters, such as Rumi, Jinu, and the Saja Boys, function as credible and relatable entities akin to human influencers, aligning with Ohanian's (1990) source credibility model of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Unlike previous studies on non-human influencers (e.g., Miao et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2022), this study highlights animated characters in a cinematic context, showing that their narrative roles and cultural personas drive engagement through perceived authenticity and emotional resonance (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Tukachinsky, 2010). For instance, users' comments on Rumi's K-pop-inspired authenticity and Jinu's leadership role illustrate how perceived expertise in embodying K-pop tropes enhances credibility, extending the applicability of source credibility to animated media (Lee and Koo, 2015; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Second, this study strengthens the theoretical utility of ANT by demonstrating how en-

agement with animated K-pop characters emerges through relational configurations among human and non-human actors. Rather than positioning ANT merely as a supplementary lens, the findings show how animated characters, platform affordances, and cultural artefacts operate as actants that shape audience responses and relational meaning-making (Latour, 2007; Lugosi and Quinton, 2018). The analysis shows that animated characters, Reddit's technological features, and global fans form a dynamic actor-network in which each actor exerts influence. For example, Rumi's hybrid identity and Jinu's idol-like persona did not merely reflect narrative design but acted as non-human agents that mobilized emotional attachment, authenticity discourse, and parasocial tendencies among fans. Likewise, Reddit's platform architecture, such as threaded discussions, anonymity, upvoting mechanisms, and meme circulation, functioned as technological mediators that amplified or constrained interpretive visibility. These network interactions illustrate that audience engagement is not solely a psychological or cultural outcome, but a distributed effect co-produced by heterogeneous entities interacting within a digitally mediated assemblage. By demonstrating how agency is shared across characters, audiences, and digital infrastructures, this research extends ANT applications in media and influencer management studies, positioning animated cultural

products not as passive entertainment objects but as active nodes in a dynamic socio-technical network.

Third, this approach extends Kozinets' (2020) netnographic framework by integrating ANT to explore how non-human entities act as agents within global media networks (Law, 2009). Unlike prior research on non-human influencers (e.g., pet influencers), this study focuses specifically on animated characters, proposing that their narrative and cultural authenticity positions them as unique agents in the global K-pop phenomenon (Kim and Park, 2024; Lee and Lau, 2025). This ANT-centred interpretation reframes how non-human influencers function within global fandom ecosystems. Rather than treating audience engagement as a unilateral reception process, the study shows that animated characters and platform affordances actively participate in shaping how meaning stabilizes, circulates, and becomes emotionally consequential. This provides a conceptual shift from influencer studies that privilege human agency, contributing instead to emerging discussions on more-than-human media ecologies, digital fandom infrastructures, and hybrid forms of cultural identity production. These contributions pave the way for future research to explore how animated non-human influencers in global media contexts, particularly within the Hallyu wave, shape audience engagement and cultural resonance, offering a nuanced perspective

on the interplay between narrative, culture, and digital fandom (Cao et al., 2021; Miao et al., 2022).

An additional interpretive consideration arises when examining how fandom discourse reflects a playful or performative stance toward animated idols. While many comments in the dataset appear to treat the characters as if they were real influencers, this interaction does not necessarily indicate full belief in the characters' authenticity. Rather, consistent with research on online fandom performance and role-play discourse (Booth, 2015; Williams, 2022), such expressions may operate as a form of community participation in which users knowingly engage in a shared 'as-if' mode. In this sense, the act of treating animated idols as real can be understood not only as evidence of parasocial attachment or perceived authenticity, but also as a playful enactment of fandom norms, humor, and collaborative world-building within the community. This interpretive layer suggests that engagement may emerge not solely from the perceived realism of the characters, but from the enjoyment of participating in a collectively maintained fiction.

The insights from this study offer practical implications for media creators, animators, marketers, entertainment professionals, and cultural industries aiming to leverage K-pop based animated content within the global K-pop and entertainment landscape to captivate

global audiences. First, media creators should design animated characters with authentic K-pop-inspired personas and narrative roles that resonate with global audiences to foster strong parasocial relationships. The study shows that characters like Rumi and Jinu engage audiences through their perceived authenticity as K-pop idols, blending cultural nuances with relatable narrative arcs like self-acceptance (Kim and Lee, 2024; Laffan, 2021). By embedding characters in storylines that reflect K-pop's competitive dynamics or emotional depth, creators can drive emotional investment and repeat engagement, as evidenced by Reddit users' responses to Rumi's redemption arc (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Reinikainen et al., 2020). This approach can enhance audience loyalty and encourage fan-driven discussions on digital platforms (Lee and Lau, 2025).

Second, entertainment professionals can capitalize on the cultural authenticity and visual appeal of animated K-pop characters to create cross-media promotional strategies that amplify global reach. The study's findings highlight how the film's K-pop-inspired aesthetics and settings, such as neon-lit urban scenes, resonate with fans familiar with K-pop's visual culture (Kim and Park, 2024). Professionals and marketers should integrate these elements into music videos, merchandise, or social media campaigns to mirror successful K-pop marketing tactics, as seen with vir-

tual groups (Marshall, 2025; Smith, 2025). By aligning animated characters' visual and cultural elements with real-world K-pop trends, professionals can attract diverse audiences and boost engagement across digital platforms (Cao et al., 2021; Miao et al., 2022).

## VI. Conclusion and Future Research

This netnographic study of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* provides valuable insights into how animated non-human influencers engage global audiences through their character identities, musical and performative appeal, visual and aesthetic craftsmanship, cultural authenticity, and narrative and thematic depth, as observed in Reddit discussions. The findings demonstrate that characters like Rumi, Jinu, and the Saja Boys resonate with audiences by embodying K-pop-inspired personas that align with real-world idol culture, fostering parasocial relationships through authentic cultural portrayals and compelling narrative arcs. Practically, the study offers guidance for media creators and entertainment professionals to leverage these engagement factors in designing animated content and cross-media campaigns that amplify global reach within the Hallyu wave.

While Reddit provides rich, naturally occurring qualitative data, this study acknowl-

edges the inherent limitations of relying on a single platform. Reddit's user base tends to be younger, more digitally savvy, and more engaged in online community discourse compared to the broader population. These demographic and behavioral characteristics may influence patterns of expression, topic emphasis, and the intensity of sentiment observed in the dataset. Furthermore, Reddit's platform norms, such as upvoting mechanisms, anonymity, and community-specific rules, may shape how users articulate experiences and concerns. By recognizing these platform-specific dynamics, the contextual boundaries of findings and the credibility and transparency of the study's qualitative insights are clarified. Future research incorporating participatory or longitudinal ethnography could more explicitly distinguish between affective attachment and cultural play behavior.

The exploration of user engagement with K-pop-based animated content opens several avenues for future research. First, future studies could investigate the applicability of the identified engagement themes—character identity, musical appeal, visual craftsmanship, cultural authenticity, and narrative depth—across specific subgenres of animated K-pop content, such as fantasy-driven narratives. Given the marketing potential and creative flexibility of such subgenres (Marshall, 2025; Smith, 2025), research could explore whether these themes resonate differently in contexts

like dystopian or historical K-pop animations, potentially using mixed methods like surveys or experiments to quantify audience preferences (Cao et al., 2021).

Second, the relative significance of the identified engagement themes remains underexplored. Future research could assess whether certain themes, such as cultural authenticity or narrative engagement, are more critical in driving audience interaction, particularly across diverse audience segments like youth or diaspora communities (Laffan, 2021). Quantitative approaches, such as structural equation modeling, could test the weight of each theme on engagement outcomes, building on frameworks like Schivinski et al. (2016) to refine strategies for animated content creation.

Third, examining the role of platform-specific features in shaping engagement with animated K-pop content could yield new insights. For instance, investigating how Netflix's recommendation algorithms influence audience interactions with *K-Pop Demon Hunters*-style content could extend the understanding of digital engagement (Lee and Lau, 2025; Perreault and Mosconi, 2018). This could involve comparative studies across platforms like TikTok or YouTube to explore short-form video content's impact on engagement (Park, 2022).

Finally, the study's framework could be applied to interactive media, such as K-pop-themed video games or virtual reality experi-

ences, to examine how engagement factors translate to immersive digital spaces. Given the growing popularity of interactive formats (Kwon et al., 2025), research could explore how animated characters' cultural and narrative roles foster engagement in these contexts, potentially using ANT to analyze networked interactions (Latour, 2007; Lugosi and Quinton, 2018). These directions offer robust questions to guide future studies, enhancing the global appeal and impact of animated K-pop content.

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