

Special Issue: Circuits of K-content: Co-productions, Collaborations, and Connections

K-Style Content on Netflix: Assembling ‘Korea’ in the Platform Era

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ABSTRACT

This article theorises the term ‘K-style content’ to describe Western produced televisual media that mobilises Korean popular culture as a resource to attract global streaming audiences. Focusing on *XO, Kitty* and *KPop Demon Hunters*, it defines K-style content as media texts that are not produced in, by, or for South Korea, but strategically assemble K-pop, K-drama, tourism, and lifestyle signifiers to read as “Korean” to global audiences. Building on scholarship on the Korean Wave, cultural appropriation, and platform studies, the article explores how these texts assemble stylised and affectively charged visions of ‘Korea’ that are both saturated with Korean Wave imagery and easily slotted into transnational Netflix genres. Using textual and paratextual analysis, it proposes that K-style content functions as a new form of cultural capital for global platforms by translating K-pop’s industrial practices and aesthetics into globally legible formats, while flattening local complexities and relocating symbolic and economic power away from South Korean media industries. The article argues that this platform era reconfiguration of Korean popular culture complicates existing accounts of *Hallyu* as national soft power, raising new questions about authenticity, ownership, and the future of K-content when “Korea” is produced outside South Korea’s media system.

KEYWORDS

K-style content, Netflix, K-content, Korean Wave, cultural appropriation, transnational television

In August 2025, ‘Golden’ was lauded as the first song by a female K-pop group to top the Billboard Top 100 (Branigin, 2025). Sung by HUNTR/X, the trio from the Netflix animated film *KPop Demon Hunters* (Sony Pictures Animation, 2025), the song achieved unprecedented mainstream popularity. *KPop Demon Hunters* is Netflix’s most popular movie ever; a global smash hit in over 40 different languages, with a soundtrack that has surpassed the chart position of any K-pop group to date. Yet HUNTR/X is a fictional group. The film was produced in the United States and distributed

globally by Netflix, and while the singers are Korean, the project largely bypasses South Korean capital, strategy, and industrial “formula” of K-pop. What does this mean for K-pop as audiences have typically defined it; popular music, produced in South Korea, for a global market?

This question extends beyond music to how Korean popular culture more broadly is being repackaged by global media platforms. *KPop Demon Hunters* and series such as *XO, Kitty* (Netflix, 2023) signal a new stage in “Netflix imperialism” (Davis, 2023) and the global circulation of South Korean cultural content. To put it simply, these productions are *not* Korean, but they are emphatically *about* Korea. Both foreground Korean popular culture (particularly K-pop) and are created outside South Korea, by Western-based production teams, for international audiences. These productions exemplify what Jenner (2024, p. 1478) calls the ‘transnational text’ peculiar to Netflix; media targeting a “transnational middlebrow”, integrating aesthetic, narrative, and industrial strategies designed to appeal to a global audience while avoiding national specificity or political complexity. In this emerging configuration, Korean popular culture becomes a repertoire of signifiers and affects that can be mobilised by global platforms as a form of cultural capital.

It is clear that this is the ‘platform era’ of popular culture. These cultural shifts are occurring within broader processes of platformisation, in which cultural production becomes progressively contingent on platform companies, and increasingly organised through platform dependent markets, governance, and infrastructures (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). Platforms have been instrumental to the Korean Wave; after regional growth through broadcast and music distribution partnerships, online platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and social media facilitated the global circulation of South Korean cultural content. South Korea’s

screen industries have enjoyed remarkable success over the past three decades, beginning with domestically produced K-dramas, scripted television serials typically centred on melodramatic or romantic storylines, that gained traction through international syndication and online portals. This televisual globalisation was accelerated by Netflix’s entry into the Korean market in 2016, initially as a licensing and distribution partner acquiring finished K-dramas, and later through co financing and commissioning original dramas such as *Kingdom* (2019), *Hellbound* (2021), *Squid Game* (2021), *The Glory* (2022), and reality-competition shows including *Physical:100* (2023) and *Single’s Inferno* (2021) (J. H. Park et al., 2023; S. Park & Hong, 2023). Global media today operates through the infrastructures, data regimes, and governance logics of platforms like Netflix, whose branding discourses “have consistently emphasised the geographic diversity of its content” (Edmond et al., 2024, p. 1316). Platforms now act as “new mediators for the circulation and consumption of local cultural content” (Jin, 2023b, p. 6897) and have fundamentally altered the conditions under which Korean media is produced.

This aggressively globalising strategy has reshaped local and regional media practices. Ju (2021) describes Netflix as a “significant promoter of K-dramas inflowing to North America and Europe,” which expands their “speedy distribution and shareability” to broader Western audiences (p. 172), but cautions that collaboration with Netflix also “influence[s] and change[s] K-dramas’ production style [and] textual strategy” (p. 182). Korean drama producers are now deeply entangled with Netflix’s financing and distribution structures, to the point that producers see collaboration with the platform as “the new normal” (J. H. Park et al., 2022, p. 79). Jin (2025) similarly outlines how Netflix’s arrival in Korea has “fundamentally influenced cultural production in the South Korean cultural system,” to the point where “local cultural creators

[must] follow Netflix's demand in order to gain global visibility" (pp. 89–90), conceptualising this as a form of platform imperialism. Davis (2023, p. 1144) defines this condition as "Netflix imperialism", a broader condition in which U.S.-based FAANG corporations use their technological and economic power to create transnational monopolies.

This article examines a newer phenomenon, in which Netflix and allied global producers now use Korean popular culture signifiers in offshore content production, and what this reveals about cultural power in the platform era. Focusing on *XO, Kitty* and *KPop Demon Hunters*, it pursues three aims. First, it offers a textual and paratextual analysis of how these shows mobilise K-pop, K-drama, tourism, and lifestyle signifiers to construct a "K-style" fantasy for global audiences. Second, it relates this to debates on cultural borrowing and appropriation to consider how K-style productions subvert or reproduce Western media hegemony. Third, it articulates the conceptual boundary between "K-content" and "K-style content," arguing that K-style content should be understood as a platform driven evolution of 'Made in Korea' K-content that depends on and perhaps displaces South Korea's domestic media industries. By situating this new type of content within broader discussions of platform imperialism, soft power, and transnational media flows, the article contributes to ongoing debates about ownership and definition of Korean culture in the platform era (Han, 2023; J. H. Park et al., 2023; Jeon, 2023; Jin, 2025; S. Park & Hong, 2023; Tanter, 2024).

THEORISING K-STYLE CONTENT

Earlier accounts of the Korean Wave emphasise how Korean popular culture first travelled within Asia before becoming a global commodity. Shim (2006) argues that the rise of Korean dramas and pop music across East and Southeast Asia marked

a shift from a U.S.–Japan dominated mediascape to more complex intra Asian exchanges, as Korean industries "[appropriated] global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment and culture" (p. 27) while retaining recognisably Korean elements. Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) similarly conceptualise East Asia as a network of "cross border regional flows" (p. 10) in which audiences turn to Japanese and Korean screen cultures to negotiate a sense of "Asian ness" (Huat, 2006: 83) beyond the nation state, precisely because these texts are hybrid yet still legibly Korean. Building on this regional foundation, the Korean Wave has now generated a globally legible set of hybridised but culturally specific signifiers that international audiences can readily interpret as 'Korean.' Yoon's account of K-pop trans/nationalism (2022) underlines this point: K-pop is "inherently transnational in its origin," built through continual references to Japanese idol systems, Western pop, and digital platform circulation, even as its global success is folded back into nationalist discourses of soft power.

In this discussion, the term "K-content" is used to refer to cultural products that originate in South Korea's media industries and are produced within South Korean industrial structures, including K-pop, K-drama, film, variety shows, and related formats. By contrast, I theorise "K-style content" as foreign produced texts that neither originate in South Korea, nor target the South Korean domestic market, but that strategically assemble K-pop, K-drama, tourism, and lifestyle signifiers so that they read as 'Korean' to global audiences. This draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of assemblage, describing how heterogeneous elements are arranged into provisional wholes that have particular capacities and effects. I argue that K-style content can be understood as a platform era evolution of K-content, and one that is particularly evident in global television. These texts represent what Lotz and Potter (2022) describe as "stories that travel": content designed to circulate across multiple

territories by minimising cultural specificity and occupying a middle ground between placeless and place based storytelling. K-style content is a distinct form of globalised “placed” (Lotz & Potter, 2022) production: hybrid series and films that recombine Korean Wave signifiers with globally familiar genres, that leverage North American narrative formats and audiences, and can travel across multiple regions while still signalling cultural specificity. This extends on and problematises Lotz and Potter’s “placed” content (2022). K-style content leverages signifiers and cultural capital that have already been established by South Korea’s existing cultural industries, consolidating power within Western dominated streaming platforms without value meaningfully flowing back to South Korean industries or producers.

A recurring set of industrial and textual practices characterise K-style content, which typically exhibits most or all of the following features:

1. Foreign funding and revenue flows:

Productions are typically owned, developed, and produced outside South Korea by global streaming platforms, with revenue flowing mostly outside the South Korean economy.

2. Global (Western) audienceship: Productions are developed in English and target a global audience familiar with Western media.

3. Western media formats: Productions adopt media genres and formats (family animation, teen romance) with strong precedents in the West, rather than locally specific formats like the prime time K-drama, which typically follows a finite 16–20 episode arc.

4. Korean wave signifiers: Productions incorporate signifiers of the Korean Wave, including K-pop, touristic images, symbols of traditional culture, and tropes drawn from K-drama, as well as recurring motifs of Korean food, beauty culture, and iconic landmarks.

5. Diasporic creative talent: Productions often include diasporic Korean- or Asian-American talent in creative roles.

6. Partial South Korean cast and locations:

Productions selectively employ South Korean actors and settings to confer cultural legitimacy.

Cultural appropriation provides a useful theoretical lens for considering K-style content. Rogers (2006, p. 474) defines cultural appropriation as “the use of one culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome,” emphasising that it is an active process of “taking” or “making one’s own”. This typology distinguishes conditions of cultural exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation, highlighting how power, voluntariness, and reciprocity shape acts of borrowing. Cultural appropriation has been explored at length in K-pop; for instance, Ahn (2023) shows how fans define racial and national boundaries of K-pop, deciding “who is allowed to perform” (p. 95) the “K” in K-pop. Likewise, C. Oh (2023) theorises K-pop cover dance as an intercultural practice in which fans “fandom” themselves through embodied borrowing of Korean choreography and style. This is a circular borrowing; C. Oh (2014) also outlines K-pop’s incorporation of African American hip hop as a selective appropriation that both draws on and “desemiotizes the stereotypical and often criminalized image of hip hop,” (p. 123). While these accounts articulate how appropriation in K-pop is bound up with histories of race, nation, and cultural capital, this article extends these debates to platform produced K-style content, arguing that Netflix and global platforms mobilise Korean Wave signifiers as cultural capital while marginalising their industrial and national origins. It proposes that K-style content, produced by U.S. based platforms drawing on Korean popular culture (including K-pop, K-drama, and tourism driven imaginaries), can be viewed as an industrialised form of appropriation that exemplifies what Rogers (2006) calls

transculturation. Here, platforms mobilise Korean symbols as commodified resources within transnational capitalism, while also participating in more complex, hybridising circuits of appropriation that blur the boundaries of cultural “ownership.”

INTERPRETING K-STYLE CONTENT

The advent of K-style content invites competing interpretations within the broader context of South Korea’s cultural strategy. On one hand, such productions may be seen as a dilution or failure of Korea’s own culture-exporting mission. Produced outside Korea and tailored for Western audiences, K-style content risks commodifying and homogenising Korean culture, reducing it to a set of aesthetic signifiers detached from its socio-historical context. This extends what Nye and Kim describe as the “partial and distorted picture” (2013, p. 38) of South Korea that emerges when soft power is narrowly constructed through popular culture alone, rather than its political or cultural complexity. Conversely, K-style content can be read as a triumph of South Korea’s cultural diplomacy. The embrace of Korean aesthetics and cultural expression by international producers and audiences suggests that Korean culture has achieved a level of global desirability that transcends national boundaries. It also confirms South Korea’s soft power as an instrument of attraction. As H. K. Lee (2013) observes, overseas success has legitimised the K-culture project, with government agencies routinely reporting on foreign fans’ “enthusiastic engagement with K-pop and TV drama” (p. 195). In terms of promoting K-culture as a brand capable of enhancing national prestige, K-style content achieves this aim.

These competing interpretations rest on several assumptions. First among these is the notion of cultural purity. The idea that K-style content disrupts a “pure” form of Korean culture overlooks the long-standing hybridity

of South Korea’s media industries, documented in explorations of intra Asian flows and regional exchange (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Shim, 2006). The assumption that K-pop must retain linguistic, ethnic, or geographic markers to remain ‘Korean’ is also complicated by the genre’s transnational evolution. As Jin (2023a, p. 22) notes, “globally popular Korean culture relies on both local authenticity and global familiarity”. Indeed, Korean popular culture has consistently integrated and adapted to global media trends, from modifying drama production formats to suit Chinese censorship requirements (Kim, 2016), to incorporating foreign songwriting talent, to debuting K-pop stars like BoA in Japan. Groups including BTS (and more recently KATSEYE) are now described as “global” artists, shedding the country-specific label of K-pop (Keith, 2022, p. 162). These examples show that South Korean popular culture is already transculturalised, illustrating what Rogers (2006, p. 493) calls “the lack of “authenticity,” “purity,” and “essence” in the elements being appropriated and in the appropriations themselves”.

A second assumption relates to asymmetries of power, capital, and technology. The rise of K-pop is sometimes framed as a ‘David vs. Goliath’ narrative, where Korean content triumphs through inherent appeal or cultural uniqueness. However, K. Lee (2008) cautions against overly celebratory readings of the Korean Wave, suggesting that K-pop’s soft power mythology can obscure the “pervasive and rampant neoliberal market thinking” that underpins Hallyu’s expansion (p. 188). In other words, a culture-focused approach ignores the economics, structural dependencies, technologies, and strategic alignments that underpin the Korean Wave. In the global context, YouTube has been widely examined as an enabling technology; Yoon (2022) emphasises that global expansion of K-pop depends on platform driven corporate logics, noting that YouTube has “contributed to shaping the transnational universe of K-pop,

which would otherwise not have been possible” (p. 394). Ono and Kwon (2013: p. 200) similarly outline that YouTube “plays an indispensable role” in K-pop’s worldwide spread, acting as both a media archive and marketing engine that situates Korean culture within global capitalism. They argue that K-pop’s global diffusion via YouTube must be read through the lens of “worlding” and “re worlding,” asking whether it extends hegemonic cultural flows or participates in a more complex, multidirectional reconfiguration of cultural power (Ono & Kwon, 2013). Platforms’ visibility, transnational reach, and participatory affordances are thus crucial, and highlight the continued reliance of Korean content on Western originating digital infrastructures and on platform logics. The Korean Wave, including K-style content, must be therefore be understood as a product of platform capitalism and transnational media logistics, rather than as evidence of victory over global media hierarchies.

The final assumption relates to competition and distinction. The relationship between K-style content and domestically produced South Korean content is unclear; in other words, whether K-style content dilutes or expands the market for South Korean cultural exports. While some viewers may discover South Korean content through gateway texts like *KPop Demon Hunters*, others may consume K-style content without (or instead of) engaging further with Korean media. As Jin (2023a) argues, the global popularity of Korean culture increasingly relies on transnational proximity; shared sociocultural experiences such as inequality, youth struggle, and late-stage capitalist anxieties, rather than linguistic or geographic affinity. K-style content may therefore resonate with global audiences regardless of its geographical connection to South Korea. As noted at the outset, the soundtrack to *KPop Demon Hunters* has been described as the “#1 K-pop album ever,” despite its origin outside the K-pop system. The question is then: what is the distinguishing feature of Korean-

produced cultural content today? If the only consistent factor is that capital flows back to South Korea, then the genre is defined by industrial logic, not culture. The ambivalent positioning of K-style content within South Korea’s cultural discourse is illustrated by an Arirang TV panel titled ‘K-pop: The Next Chapter’ (ArirangTV, 2025) held two months after the release of *KPop Demon Hunters*. The panel featured cultural commentators, TWICE members, producer RT, critic Kim Young-dae, Canadian-Korean director Maggie Kang, and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung. Although the film was produced outside Korea, it was discussed by the panellists as a leading example of Korean culture. President Lee praised the film for showing “the excellence of Korean culture,” asserting that “the most Korean things are often the most universal” and remarking that Korea’s cultural strength lies in its ability to transform hardship into creativity and humour. This framing is consistent with policy discourses in which Korean government agencies explicitly position *Hallyu* as a vehicle for national soft power, for example in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism’s *Hallyu* White Papers and related reports (KOFICE, 2026). The panel largely sidestepped the industrial and platform dynamics behind the film’s success; only critic Kim Young-dae briefly acknowledged the role of platforms, asking “as platforms dominate, who controls cultural power?” and raising concerns about intellectual property and the sustainability of Korea’s creative ecosystem. This selective framing echoes responses to *Squid Game*, another Netflix-commissioned production that was rapidly absorbed into national branding efforts despite its critique of Korean society. Overall, the state appears willing to approve the symbolic capital of K-style content, raising questions about how Korean popular culture will continue to exist as a local industry.

The following sections analyse two examples of K-style content, using the features outlined above as a framework. Each case study adopts

a qualitative textual analysis approach (McKee, 2003; Mittell, 2015), attending to narrative, characterisation, genre, and visual and musical elements to map deployments of Korean cultural signifiers from K-pop, K-drama, and tourism. Discussion also references paratexts such as interviews, press coverage, and industry commentary (Gray, 2010), to examine how producers, platforms, and journalists identify these texts as strategic uses of Korean popular culture or as evidence of diversity within global streaming catalogues. Each case study starts by defining the text as K-style content, then examines how the text strategically assembles Korean Wave signifiers, before concluding by considering what each case reveals about cultural borrowing and power, especially the asymmetrical relations between Korean media industries and Western based global platforms.

XO, KITTY

XO, Kitty illustrates K-style content within the frame of a U.S.-produced teen romance that strategically remakes Korea as an aspirational setting, through borrowed K-drama and K-pop conventions. The show is a Netflix original comedy-drama series that premiered in May 2023. It is a spin-off of Korean-American author Jenny Han's popular teen romance novel series *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2014), adapted by Netflix in 2018. *XO, Kitty* focuses on Lara's younger sister, Kitty, and was commissioned by Netflix in 2021 with Han serving as creator, writer, and executive producer. The series uses travel to Korea as a narrative device, similar to other romance-fantasy productions such as *L-Pop* (Disney+, 2023), which follows an aspiring Mexican K-pop star, and *Koreaboo* (Audible, 2023) which tells the story of an American woman who "decides to chase the fantasy and heads for South Korea in the hopes of kindling a relationship with [a K-pop] star" (IMDB, 2023).

On release, *XO, Kitty* became the most-streamed Netflix show in over 50 countries. Because the show is produced by Netflix for a global teen audience outside the Korean drama system, it is not 'K-content' nor a Korean drama in the industrial sense; but it qualifies as *K-style content* because it adopts K-drama narrative tropes, K-pop references, and Seoul tourism imagery to frame itself as a Korean influenced coming of age romance.

Season 1 of *XO, Kitty* constructs a narrative of cultural self-discovery through the lens of its Korean-American protagonist, Kitty. Kitty's journey to Seoul is motivated by her wish to reconnect with her long-distance boyfriend Dae, whom she met while on vacation in Korea with her family. Discovering that her late mother "got this cool scholarship for Koreans living abroad to help them learn about their culture" (Episode 1), Kitty manages to secure the same scholarship to the Korean Independent School of Seoul (KISS). The series foregrounds Kitty's linguistic and cultural challenges, allowing the audience to experience Korea from an outsider's perspective. The school setting itself is portrayed as cosmopolitan ("There are a ton of American kids at KISS ... Half the school's foreign") reinforcing the transnational orientation of the series. According to lead actor Anna Cathcart, the series was initially envisioned to be set in Portland, Oregon, then an international school in Europe, before finally settling on Seoul, a decision that "everyone was really excited about" (DiDario, 2025). Billed as an "international boarding-school adventure" (LeSavage, 2023), the show was filmed on location in Seoul, an aspect prominently highlighted in the series poster which features landmarks such as Lotte World Tower and the IFC Seoul Office Tower, alongside cherry blossoms and signage in Hangeul. Filming locations also highlight touristic points of reference, including landmarks like the Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Han River. The show's frequent inclusion of Korean food

(e.g., *japchae*, *gochugaru*, Pepero) and cultural references (Chuseok) add further local texture. These elements serve as aesthetic markers of 'Koreanness' deployed within a narrative structure aligned with Western genre conventions of teen romance.

The series makes frequent reference to elements of the Korean Wave. Both K-pop and Western pop music feature in the soundtrack, especially in the opening and closing sequences of multiple episodes, and as a mechanism for character introduction. K-pop fandom slang is used, including phrases like "Later, sasaeng," showing an attempt to engage with global K-pop fans through vernacular terms. Season 2 introduces an explicit K-pop narrative element through the character of Min Ho, a wealthy playboy with familial connections to the entertainment industry; his father is a prominent talent manager and his brother, Joon Ho, is a K-pop star portrayed by American K-pop idol Peniel Shin of the group BTOB. The show also makes direct intertextual reference to K-dramas ("Come on, life ain't a K-drama"), and reproduces K-drama tropes such as family reputation, social hierarchy, and parental pressure. For example, Kitty first meets Yuri Han in a luxury boutique where staff nervously worry about "getting in trouble with Mr Han," and she reminds them that what they really fear is "his only daughter," a brief exchange that establishes the Han family's status and the deference it commands. The family's ownership of a "hotel empire" is introduced through shots of luxury lobbies and corporate boardrooms, mirroring the *chaebol* (conglomerate) family archetype frequently depicted in Korean drama narratives. A further narrative point is the Han family's provision of Dae's scholarship, foregrounding class hierarchy and the risks of jeopardising a wealthy patron's favour. Korean beauty culture is also represented, with remarks such as "Korean skincare really is the best," accompanied by visual references to skincare gadgets and products. These illustrate *XO, Kitty*'s representation of

South Korea through the territory of the Korean Wave. While Korean commentators have noted inaccuracies in the portrayal of food, fashion, and cultural norms (Sng, 2023), the series was nonetheless globally popular, presenting a stylised version of Seoul that serves as the backdrop for a coming-of-age romance.

Interpreted from a Western perspective, the show appears to reverse the Orientalising gaze by centering female, Asian agency and perspective. Simultaneously, it foregrounds an outsider's perspective on South Korea through the Korean-American return narrative and private international school setting, reinforcing the transnational framing that characterizes K-style content. Within this genre, fantasy is to be expected; few would anticipate a teen romance series, whether American or Korean-made, to offer a gritty depiction of South Korean society. Just as hit Netflix shows like *Bridgerton* (2020) and *Emily in Paris* (2020) offer fantastical depictions of the English regency period and current-day France, *XO, Kitty* constructs an imaginary space akin to what Burge (2016) calls the "romance East [...] a fantasy [that] works as exotic synaesthesia, blending sensations of sound, sight, and smell" (p. 34). Seoul in *XO, Kitty* is a site of "exotic secrets" and "dream worlds" that dazzle both heroine and viewer, functioning "to support the development of the romantic relationship" (p. 34). This is evident in sequences where Kitty walks through lantern lit streets or dates by the Han River, framed with soft lighting and romantic pop ballads on the soundtrack, which construct Seoul as a dreamlike backdrop for her self-discovery. Within this stylised geography, *XO, Kitty* extends what Keovorabouth (2025) describes in observing the growing genre of romance literature centering Asian female protagonists: Kitty "uses love as a catalyst for self-discovery, while their cultural heritage serves as a driving force to intertwine narratives of cultural negotiation and personal growth" (p. iii). Kitty's move to Seoul literalises this dynamic; she

discovers herself through romance and cultural immersion, while South Korea acts as affective background space for that discovery.

XO, Kitty can be read as both resisting and reproducing an Orientalist fantasy. It centres the diasporic Asian female gaze, yet situates her empowerment within a picturesque, idealised “romance East” that is “placed” using selective representations of South Korea that are commodified and pre-packaged by K-drama and K-pop. Using Lotz and Potter’s (2022) typology, this is a “placed” setting, where “imagery of landmarks and well-known symbols locate the story so there can be no doubt as to where the action is taking place, and yet these signifiers provide minimal cultural specificity” (p. 689). The late decision to situate *XO, Kitty* in Seoul suggests a realisation by the show’s creators that South Korea affords narrative possibilities, opening up space to hybridise Korean-American media forms, and potentially attract global audiences familiar with K-content. The show updates K-drama tropes established in classic ‘Cinderella’ romance dramas such as *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *Secret Garden* (2010), *Heirs* (2013), and *Reply 1994* (2013); melodramas in which working or middle class heroines enter relationships with wealthy heirs or professionals, navigating class and workplace hierarchies. As Singh (2025) notes, Season 2 “perfects the American K-drama,” incorporating greater diversity and “storylines that might not always show up in traditional K-dramas,” including LGBTQIA+ elements. However, *XO, Kitty* was not popular among South Korean viewers, possibly because the popularity of ‘Cinderella’ dramas is waning domestically; “Korean viewers have seen enough stories featuring a bright female lead from a poor (or ordinary) background falling in love with a prince-like male lead” (S.-J. Lee, 2025) with audiences increasingly favouring revenge thrillers and action. Nonetheless, K-pop and K-drama provide a ready-made ‘lingua franca’ to signify South Korea through tropes such as the wealthy chaebol family

and love triangles, K-beauty routines, a K-pop soundtrack and plotline, and the overall depiction of Seoul as a glossy and cosmopolitan city. Here, K-drama and K-pop are used as genre conventions to be adapted by non-Korean producers, to create K-style content that capitalises on Korean trendiness while situating ownership firmly within Netflix’s global ecosystem.

KPOP DEMON HUNTERS

KPop Demon Hunters is a North American made animated feature that assembles Korean Wave signifiers into a self-contained K-pop universe for Netflix’s global catalogue. Released in June 2025, the film is the most-watched in Netflix history (Roeloffs, 2025). Its soundtrack has also achieved unprecedented popularity; “Golden” topped the Billboard Hot 100 for eight non-consecutive weeks and the soundtrack has been certified Platinum (RIAA, 2025). Another song from the film, Saja Boys’ “Your Idol,” reached No. 1 on the U.S. Spotify chart, surpassing BTS as the highest-charting male K-pop act in the platform’s history (Gheciu, 2025). The film was originally developed by Sony Pictures Animation before being sold to Netflix in what Sony CEO Ravi Ahuja described as a “pandemic-era safety play” noting that “Netflix paid the whole cost, plus a profit premium” (McGowan, 2025). This framing reveals the film as a relatively low risk vehicle through which Sony and Netflix could test the global appeal of a K-pop themed animated feature. Like *XO, Kitty*, *KPop Demon Hunters* seems to have integrated K pop as a strategic choice, leveraging the global popularity of K-pop and related Korean popular culture to ensure the marketability of a U.S. produced film. Co-director Maggie Kang has explained, “It’s known as ‘the KPop movie,’ but that was the last thing folded into the concept,” saying she “wanted to just make a movie that was set in Korean culture” with a focus in mythology and demonology (Kang,

cited in Gaur, 2025). As the film came to being pitched, “Kpop just came to mind and became the pitching point of the movie” (Kang, cited in Gaur, 2025). Emphasising the role of K-pop in the film’s success, Kang has said, “Just like K-pop and K-beauty, anything with a ‘K’ in front seems to excite American audiences now” (Korea Times, 2025). *KPop Demon Hunters* not K-content, as it is a U.S. financed and U.S. produced animated feature originating outside the Korean media industry. It qualifies as K-style content by centering a fictional K-pop group, drawing extensively on K-pop fandom practices, K-drama conventions, and highly recognisable Seoul landmarks and traditional motifs to construct fantasy “K-pop universe” for global viewers. This section reads the film’s narrative, aesthetic, and industrial choices as an example of transcultural appropriation under platform capitalism, in which K-pop is reworked as a set of strategically deployed signifiers and a market strategy.

KPop Demon Hunters incorporates globally recognisable elements of the Korean Wave across music, narrative, and visual design. At the level of K-pop, the film amplifies aspects of idol fandom that are most distinctive and legible to non Korean audiences. These include the playful portrayal of obsessive fans; multigenerational fans (including “uncle fans”); biases; idol variety shows; competitive chart positions and audience voting; awards ceremonies; inter-group rivalries; fan meetings and fan service; shipping (fans imagining a romantic relationship between idols); lightsticks; and Zoey’s status as an American-Korean idol. The narrative also draws on established K-drama conventions, such as the slow-motion ‘meet-cute’ directly referencing popular K-drama *Business Proposal*. Adding to this cultural specificity is the film’s visual approach; Sony Pictures Imageworks’ head of character animation Josh Beveridge explains, “when we go hyper-ridiculous, there’s a thing we call Chibi, or demi-Chibi, that’s super-cute and exaggerated features,” (Gaur, 2025).

This aesthetic is widely used in Japanese anime (Berndt, 2021) and South Korean webtoon and children’s cartoons to punctuate comic moments. The film also refers to locations that are frequently used in tourism campaigns and K-dramas. Locations include the Naksan Fortress Wall Trail, promoted by BTS (VisitSeoulTV, 2020); N Seoul Tower, reimagined with a concert venue attached; Cheongdam Bridge over the Han River; Myeongdong; Bukchon Hanok Village; and Gyeongbokgung Palace. The inclusion of these well-known sites, cultivated through the global circulation of K-pop, K-drama, and K-tourism, signals that audiences are expected to recognise and appreciate them. For instance, a pivotal scene shows Rumi and Jinu meeting on the Naksan trail before cutting to a wide shot of the city wall and nighttime skyline; later a climactic performance atop a reimagined N Seoul Tower includes a panoramic city view, turning the landmark into a visual shorthand for Seoul. This approach differs from Korean-produced Netflix originals like *Squid Game*, which avoids iconic geography, and K-dramas that use ordinary spaces (such as 2021’s *Vincenzo*) or intentionally spotlight regional attractions (such as 2025’s *When Life Gives You Tangerines*). *KPop Demon Hunters*’ use of touristic imagery creates a Seoul that feels appealingly exotic, yet familiar and accessible. Similarly, cultural markers are foregrounded from the opening sequence showing *nongak* and *hanbok*, while motifs drawn from folk art, traditional craft, and royal iconography appear throughout the film, colourfully presented for a family audience. Food is a further theme, ranging from convenience items like *ramyeon* and *kimbap* to traditional dishes such as *seollongtang*; herbal medicine and *jjimjilbang* culture are also highlighted, including the iconic sheep-towel trope. These details, however, are mostly aesthetic. The protagonists are portrayed as strong and independent, but goofy, young adults, reminiscent of teens from Western youth-oriented media; their characters are detached from Korean familial

and social context.

The music of *KPop Demon Hunters* is another layer demonstrating the ‘K-style’ approach. Transnational songwriting teams and K-pop talent collaborated on tracks that sound plausibly “K-pop” while conforming to Western pop and musical theatre structures, illustrating Rogers’ (2006) notion of transculturation. The soundtrack includes narrative songs, such as “This Is What It Sounds Like” and “Free”, and pop-oriented tracks like “Soda Pop” and “How It’s Done”, produced by K-pop songwriter EJAE and musical theatre songwriter Mark Sonnenblick (Jones, 2025). Further soundtrack personnel include multinational K-pop composers Teddy Park, Melanie Fontana, and Lindgren, as well as established K-pop group TWICE. The soundtrack incorporates Korean cultural signifiers, including occasional incorporation of Korean language lyrics, which reverses K-pop’s tendency to insert English catchphrases. For example, the chorus of “Golden” features the line: “*Yeongwonhi kkaejil su comneun* (Unbreakable forever)/ Gonna be, gonna be golden”. The film’s opening theme, “Hunter’s Mantra,” likewise illustrates K-style by combining conventional Western cinematic scoring with Korean traditional instrumentation and EJAE’s pansori-influenced vocal ornamentations. Existing K-pop tracks also feature, including EXO’s “Love Me Right” and TWICE’s “Strategy”. On a metatextual level, the media narrative surrounding EJAE as an ex-idol trainee who found unexpected success as the singing voice of Rumi has garnered significant attention. Her trajectory from trainee to chart-topping songwriter aligns with the film’s thematic emphasis on perseverance and transformation, and has been widely noted in media coverage (Sirikul, 2025).

Despite its title, *KPop Demon Hunters* is not a film about K-pop. Rather, it is a fantasy film that mixes many established genres, using K-pop as an aesthetic and affective background. The film was a ‘safe bet’ for Sony and Netflix, aligning

with culturally specific animated features such as Pixar’s *Coco* (2017), *Luca* (2021), and *Turning Red* (2022), or Disney’s *Moana* (2016), *Encanto* (2021), and *Iwájú* (2024), which centre on the hero’s journey within culturally distinct settings (Anjirbag, 2018). It also incorporates familiar elements from ‘magical girl’ fantasy texts such as *Jem and the Holograms* (1985), *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1992), *Sailor Moon* (1992), and *Hannah Montana* (1996); animated superhero features such as *Teen Titans* (2003) and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023); teen-oriented musical theatre such as *Descendants* (2015); and the trope of the genetically exceptional heroine with latent powers, as seen in *Wicked* (2003) and *Frozen* (2013). On top of these narrative structures and character arcs that are deeply familiar to global audiences, *KPop Demon Hunters* applies markers of cultural difference drawn from K-pop and K-drama to create something new for a global viewership. This is, for example, evident in its use of ‘chibi’ animation, which functions as a deliberate “Asianisation” of the visual language. As Anjirbag (2018, p. 7) argues in relation to *Moana* and *Mulan*, “the animation style itself is utilized to convey a sense of otherness connected specifically to a cultural aesthetic meant to add to the interpretation of that culture by the viewer.” Similarly, the film foregrounds elements of K-pop such as idol culture, fandom, and performance, while glossing over other aspects of the industry. For instance, the three members of HUNTR/X are depicted as independently responsible for songwriting, choreography, and lyrics. In reality, such creative processes in K-pop are distributed across teams of creative personnel. Overall, the film’s strategic use of K-style elements allows it to resonate with a broad audience in a way that other culturally specific animated features like *Turning Red* did not; in *Turning Red*’s portrayal of female Chinese-Canadian adolescence in Toronto, some critics found the film too “detailed, specific and idiosyncratic” (Yang, 2022). *KPop Demon*

Hunters, by contrast, leverages broadly intelligible cultural references established by the Korean Wave.

Audiences worldwide have evidently been drawn to what co-director Maggie Kang calls, “the KPop movie” (Gaur, 2025). The film has been praised for its representation both internationally and within Korea, where it has sparked renewed interest in traditional iconography featured in the film (Ku, 2025). Yet the film’s audience goes far beyond Korea or diasporic Asian communities. Its global popularity, evidenced by its Netflix chart position, suggests that audiences are fundamentally drawn to a familiar narrative structure infused with culturally distinctive elements, mirroring a longstanding strategy in Western animation. However, *KPop Demon Hunters* distinguishes itself by grounding its story in contemporary Korean popular culture rather than a mythologised past. Cultural boundaries are highlighted but relevant and familiar, in contrast to films like the Chinese animated film *Ne Zha 2*, which achieved massive success in China but did not resonate internationally. *KPop Demon Hunters* is ‘Korean enough’ to attract global audiences, especially with K-pop in the title, but ultimately delivers a familiar story using K-style elements. As Kang puts it, the film is a “love letter” to K-pop (Donnelly, 2021); it is a work of fan fiction blending genres and cultural references. Reviewing the film, Hong (2025) praises this aspect, proposing that it reflects a uniquely Gen Alpha identity in which cultural elements are freely remixed and recontextualised. This may signal a new kind of cultural flattening in the platform era, where content circulates on platforms like Netflix or TikTok with few identifiable markers or context for country of origin. If Korean content is produced for global consumption, and global audiences embrace it as part of their identity, then it follows that ‘Korean’ content can be produced by global audiences as well.

DISCUSSION

The rise of K-style content on global streaming platforms prompts a consideration of the structural and cultural conditions that have enabled its emergence. One explanation lies in platforms’ growth strategies, which increasingly seek to integrate non-Western cultural forms into globally marketable formats. As Jeon (2023, p. 7062) points out, Netflix’s global strategy “is far more invested in global production (not just global distribution)”, incentivising the production of mass-appeal content for a worldwide audience. For now, it seems that there is consensus among US cultural producers that South Korea, as known through K-pop and other elements of the Korean Wave, offers a context that is accessible and appealing to global audiences; yet comparatively underexplored, at least through a Western lens. This makes K-style content a logical choice for commissioning platforms such as Netflix, but also places South Korea’s nation image in the hands of foreign producers. Yin (2011, p. 54) describes “the U.S. culture industry’s appropriation of non-Western cultural materials [...] that (re)shapes the imagery of non-Western cultures [...] in the mind of world audiences.” Likewise, as Anjirbag (2018) writes of Disney, U.S. producers are able to “fit different aesthetics into their formula and thereby sell the narrative as something ‘new’ to its target audience, simply by playing to Western predispositions to fascination with the ‘exotic.’” Strategic production decisions show how this fascination has been leveraged: *XO, Kitty* was relocated to Seoul late in development, while *KPop Demon Hunters* adopted its K-pop element only at the pitching stage. These choices reflect the perceived marketability of Korean cultural aesthetics within global media environments. In this context, the concept of “cultural odour” becomes particularly salient. While Iwabuchi (1998) originally theorized cultural odour in relation to Japanese media’s tendency toward “odourlessness”, the deliberate removal of

national markers to facilitate global circulation, K-style content operates in reverse. Rather than suppressing cultural specificity, these productions add and amplify Korean 'odour' as cultural capital. Platform power thus consolidates not only capital, but the cultural authority of entities like Netflix, Apple TV, Disney+, and others.

K-style content must also be situated within the broader cultural dynamics of diasporic media production. Diasporic Korean and Asian creators have played a central role in recent K-style texts, often acting as cultural intermediaries who translate Korean popular culture for global audiences in line with platform imperatives to deliver "diverse" but widely marketable content (Yoon, 2023). Rather than drawing from lived diasporic experiences, these creators are cultural interlocutors for Korean popular culture, adding a culturally specific flavour to formats developed within Western owned media systems. Ma's (2000) notion of the "deathly embrace" is useful here: Asian American identity is constructed in opposition to Orientalist stereotypes, yet this resistance often requires invoking those very stereotypes in order to be recognisable within dominant cultural frameworks. In the context of K-style content, diasporic creators may be caught in a similar bind, asked to mobilise familiar images of "Korea" and "Asian ness" that fit platform expectations. This dynamic intersects with what Jenner (2024, p. 1486) calls the "quantification of diversity," a tendency within Netflix's transnational production to treat visible markers of difference, such as Asian or diasporic casts and settings, as countable signifiers of inclusion; a superficial metric that "relies more on the counting of bodies of 'others' as visual signifiers of diversity rather than stories associated with it" (Jenner, 2024, p. 1486).

It is unclear whether "K-style" content competes with, or enhances the market for, cultural contents originating in South Korea. While such content may not yet pose direct competition to domestically produced Korean

media, its growing visibility suggests potential tensions. As Ju (2024) points out, despite South Korea's prolific output, its media is increasingly subject to the capital inflow and gatekeeping mechanisms of Western media platforms. *KPop Demon Hunters* exemplifies this shift, introducing countless international audiences to K-pop through a U.S.-made narrative framework. The positioning of HUNTR/X as a K-pop act shows how K-style content is culturally legitimised, while operating outside the structures of the Korean entertainment industry. Even so, the film may deliver domestic benefits; it has been credited with "strengthening the lure of Korea" to international tourists, driving inbound tourism to an all-time high (Korea Now, 2025).

Revisiting the idea of cultural borrowing, we might again ask: does the rise of K-style content produced outside South Korea constitute cultural appropriation? As Oh (2024: 44) states, "the problem of borrowing resides not in the act of borrowing itself but rather in the claim of ownership; i.e., who gets to 'own' the cultural practice or artifact". At a literal level, the 'ownership' of the texts discussed above lies with global platforms, but the *affective* ownership of Korean cultural content is more complex. K-content is inherently globalised at the production level; it is designed for export, and includes foreign producers, songwriters, and distributors. To this end, 'ownership' may also be claimed by foreign audiences, particularly by diasporic audiences. For instance, as Cruz et al. (2023) note, non-Korean K-pop fans often mobilize a shared Asian identity to position themselves as "quasi-insiders," thereby circumventing the moral scrutiny typically associated with cultural appropriation (pp. 969–970). Oh's ethnography of K-pop dance fandom (2023) likewise shows how fans use cover choreography to inhabit a flexible, mobile identity position that is neither fully "Korean" nor "foreign," as they work through racialised and national markers while aligning their bodies with

K-pop idols. This tension between literal and affective ownership highlights the complexity of defining appropriation in a transnational media landscape. As Jenner (2024, p. 1486) outlines, Netflix's efforts to promote diversity on the platform "often runs counter to its efforts in transnational production since marginalisation is produced and counter-acted by different national and cultural discourses". These blurred boundaries complicate definitions of cultural appropriation, which rely on fixed identities and clear power differentials. K-style content highlights newly transculturalised cultural flows under platform capitalism. Rogers argues that transculturation "questions the bounded and proprietary view of culture embedded in other types of appropriation" (2006: 474), and instead posits culture "an ongoing process of absorption and transformation rather than static configurations of practices" (2006: 495). K-style content emerges from ongoing, circular appropriations between Korean and Western media systems, rather than from a one-way 'taking' that leaves the cultures themselves intact and separate. The question is not whether such content is 'authentically Korean,' but how K-style content reinforces or challenges hierarchies of cultural power in the platform era.

CONCLUSION

These analyses of *XO, Kitty* and *KPop Demon Hunters* show that Korean popular culture has entered a new phase in which it is not only exported from South Korea but also re engineered as K-style content by global platforms. Although this discussion has focused on Netflix originals, similar content is also evident across other global streaming platforms, such as the Apple TV competition series *KPOPPED!* (2025) and Disney+ teen series *L-Pop* (2023). By distinguishing K content from K-style content, this article suggests a typology for texts that are *about* Korea but not of the Korean media

system. The success of *KPop Demon Hunters*, and its acknowledgement as a paragon of Korean culture in public forums such as the Arirang TV panel, illustrates the growing symbolic power of K-style content within the global mediascape and South Korea's soft power strategy. This convergence of global platform productions and national interest also reveals a disjuncture between domestic cultural producers and the mediated image of Korea circulating via foreign controlled infrastructures. Reading K-style content as an assemblage underscores that the 'Korea' these texts present is a platform driven recombination of signifiers, whose arrangement produces globally legible forms of Koreanness. These case studies illustrate platform imperialism as the key structural condition enabling Netflix to appropriate Korean Wave signifiers as cultural capital, consolidating symbolic and economic power while increasingly controlling Korean cultural production. Returning to cultural borrowing, K-style content's reappropriation of K-pop aesthetics by American media platforms complicates this transcultural dynamic in ways not fully captured by appropriation or exchange. Regardless of the specific borrowing typology, mimetic formats like K-pop are now being re copied and recontextualised by global producers, pointing to a wider trend in which specific deterritorialised cultural forms are deployed as market strategies. This article highlights K-style content as both an asset and a risk: it amplifies the soft power visibility of Korean culture, but it also shifts control over the global image of 'Korea' towards foreign platforms, raising questions about how Korean media industries and policymakers should respond.

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