

Multimodal Rhetoric and Global Engagement in KPop Demon Hunters: An Analysis of Narrative, Emotion, and Cross-Cultural Appeal

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Abstract. *KPop Demon Hunters* rapidly achieved global popularity, but the mechanisms through which its multimodal design facilitates audience immersion and cross-cultural engagement remain underexplored. This article examines how the film coordinates multiple rhetorical resources to sustain narrative transportation in a hybrid K-pop animation. Drawing on Narrative Transportation Theory and multimodal rhetorical analysis, the study focuses on fifteen minutes of emotionally intensive sequences selected from across the film, analyzing the interaction of visual, sonic, narrative, and industrial cues. The analysis identifies four interrelated dimensions through which the film organizes viewer understanding and emotional investment: music-driven narrative structuring, the visual articulation of globally shared youth growth struggles, recurring color schemes and symbolic patterns that stabilize interpretation, and the integration of supernatural mythology with recognizable K-pop industry realities. These dimensions form an organizational logic that aligns perceptual rhythm, emotional resonance, and narrative readability, reducing counterarguing and lowering the threshold for entering the fictional world despite cultural and generic difference. The findings indicate that the film's global appeal depends less on viewers' prior cultural knowledge than on the experiential coherence produced by coordinated multimodal rhetoric, and they invite further theorization of how specific rhetorical mechanisms differentially shape audience immersion and the evolving configurations of Korean soft power in virtual idol-centered media.

Keywords: KPop Demon Hunters, multimodal rhetoric, narrative transportation, Korean Wave

1. Introduction

Released in June 2025, *KPop Demon Hunters* became a global phenomenon. After a record-breaking sing-along theatrical weekend in late August, it topped Netflix's all-time rankings with over 236 million views [1]. Songs from the film sent its fictional groups, Saja Boys and Huntr/x, to the top of the US Spotify chart, surpassing real-life K-pop leaders BTS and Blackpink [2]. TIME credited the film's mix of comedy, action, music, and supernatural horror for its rewatchability, calling it one of the season's biggest hits [3]. The film also drew cross-generational audiences:

parents and children alike embraced its story [4]. Meanwhile, global fans generated large amounts of creative content on social media, including art, covers, cosplay, and choreography [5]. The film's rapid worldwide success underscores the need to examine the factors behind its impact. As the first full-length animation built around a K-pop concept that combines musical performance, supernatural narrative, and Korean aesthetics, *KPop Demon Hunters* offers a new model of cross-cultural entertainment. Understanding its global reception can illuminate how culturally specific animation achieves mass engagement.

Existing scholarship has examined audience immersion through narrative transportation, emotional identification, visual metaphor, animation aesthetics, and cross-cultural K-pop media circulation. These studies provide insights into how viewers engage with fictional worlds, interpret multimodal cues, and build emotional connections across cultures. However, these approaches are often examined separately or applied mainly to live-action media, fandom practices, or individual communicative elements. Consequently, little attention has been paid to how multiple rhetorical strategies work together within a single animated K-pop text to sustain immersion, organize audience interpretation, and support global engagement. This gap is especially relevant for *KPop Demon Hunters*, whose global resonance depends not on a single narrative or aesthetic device but on the coordinated interaction of music-driven storytelling, symbolic visual systems, emotionally recognizable growth struggles, and familiar K-pop industry realities inside a highly integrated multimodal structure.

Addressing this gap, this study argues that *KPop Demon Hunters* generates strong global audience engagement through coordinated multimodal rhetorical strategies. Rather than relying on any single device, the film sustains immersion via four interconnected dimensions: music-driven narrative organization, visual depictions of shared growth struggles, recurring symbolic color systems, and the integration of fantasy with recognizable K-pop industry realities. These rhetorical resources together form a coherent interpretive framework that enhances narrative accessibility across diverse cultural contexts.

The article first situates the study within existing work on narrative transportation, multimodal rhetoric, animation, and cross-cultural media engagement, then outlines the methodological approach. It proceeds with a rhetorical analysis of selected film sequences, guided by Narrative Transportation Theory, to examine how multimodal coordination shapes immersion, emotional resonance, and audience interpretation in a globally circulating animated text.

2. Literature review

The reviewed literature shows that audience engagement depends on several factors: narrative transportation, metaphorical and multimodal meaning-making, animation's unique affective and stylistic capacities, and the narrative, emotional, and sensory drivers of cross-cultural appeal. It highlights how different expressive modes work together to engage viewers, offering conceptual tools for analyzing animated films.

2.1. Narrative transportation process

Narrative transportation is a multi-stage process. It explains how audiences get absorbed in stories and how that immersion shapes their responses.

Green and Brock [6] define transportation as a unified experience of focused attention, vivid imagery, and emotional involvement. Their experimental studies show that deep immersion reduces vigilance and counterarguing. This is relevant to *KPop Demon Hunters*: it helps explain how

viewers who initially see the film's mix of K-pop idols and demon-hunting as implausible can still become absorbed in its world, which is key to understanding its persuasive and emotional impact.

Green and Clark [7] then outline what initiates transportation. Emotional cues, visual imagery, and character identification work together to draw viewers into a story world. These studies clarify how narrative immersion develops and why audiences become absorbed, offering a useful context for understanding *KPop Demon Hunters*'s global appeal.

Wang and Tang [8] shift attention to the outcomes of transportation. Immersion generates arousal and pleasure, which then encourage sharing and positive word-of-mouth. Their findings help explain why audiences often spread stories through interpersonal and digital channels.

Gebbers, de Wit, and Appel [9] experimentally manipulated transportation levels. Higher transportation promotes internalization of narrative meanings and triggers follow-up motivations like sustained attention, discussion, and anticipation of later events.

Within K-pop fandom, Yoon [10] used qualitative interviews with transnational audiences. Immersive engagement often appears as participatory practices: translation, reinterpretation, and user-generated content. Fans use these to negotiate and reproduce narrative meanings.

Collectively, these works show that transportation is important and that immersive engagement can extend into ongoing interpretive and participatory behaviors beyond initial exposure. This research line suggests that *KPop Demon Hunters* draws viewers into an immersive, affective state, and that such immersion then unfolds into broader engagement: online sharing, creative participation, and sustained enthusiasm for the film.

The literature outlines a developmental path for understanding transportation as a communicative process. Early work focuses on what initiates immersion; later research traces how immersion leads to cognitive shifts, emotional responses, and expressive behaviors. The reviewed studies converge on one central idea: transportation is a pathway from narrative strategies to audience immersion and subsequent engagement. As both a communication theory and the conceptual framework for this study, transportation helps explain how audience involvement develops and how engagement may shape the circulation and reception of a globally distributed animated film.

2.2. Metaphorical cues

Metaphor functions as a mode of meaning-making that links multimodal cinematic design to viewers' emotional and narrative understanding. Interpreting visual metaphor requires attention to how animation organizes recurring signs. Cahyani and Hasbi [11], drawing on Peirce's triadic semiotics, show that animated narratives rely on patterned visual elements such as color schemes, animal motifs, totemic shapes, and lighting rather than dialogue. For *KPop Demon Hunters*, this means attending to recurring symbols, color logics, and character-associated motifs to see how they guide viewers' readings of character, emotion, and plot.

Chung [12] develops a systematic multimodal framework for identifying visual metaphors, separating visual elements, text, camera sequences, and compositional layout as distinct units and analyzing their narrative functions. His coding-based method makes metaphor analysis more structured and less subjective. Though focused on comics, the framework transfers well to film and supports a multimodal analysis of how *KPop Demon Hunters* organizes its visual motifs, verbal cues, compositional rhythms, and shot sequencing.

Metaphor can also engage audiences through camera movement. Morgan and Schonig [13] show that meaning in animation depends on how the camera moves, not just on what appears in the frame. Tracking shots, lateral moves, follow shots, obstacle passes, and accelerated pushes shape viewers' bodily perception and immersion, making camera motion a rhetorical and narrative device. This

extends metaphor research by highlighting the dynamic aspect of meaning-making and offers a lens for analyzing camera movement in *KPop Demon Hunters*.

In summary, these studies show that animated meaning is intentionally constructed, not simply presented. They provide a useful framework for understanding how *KPop Demon Hunters* may use visual metaphors, color symbolism, spatial arrangement, and camera moves to shape narrative intensity and viewer engagement.

2.3. Engagement mechanisms of animation

Animation is a distinctive communicative form that shapes audience experience through multilayered mechanisms. Through an interdisciplinary historiographical review, Bieberstein and Feyersinger [14] argue that animation functions as a flexible cultural technology embedded in advertising, interface design, scientific visualization, music videos, and artistic installations. Its significance lies in its capacity to circulate across media rather than serve as a single narrative form. This perspective suggests that the rhetorical strategies of *KPop Demon Hunters* may activate this adaptability, encouraging viewers to engage with its world and use animation's flexibility to recreate and circulate content across platforms, broadening its reach.

Kang [15] shifts focus to animation's internal dynamics. Through textual analysis and creator interviews, she argues that South Korean works such as *TOBOT* and *BIKLONZ* function as affective-performative assemblages where emotions, gender roles, and family values are continually negotiated. Animation is not only visual storytelling but also a performative medium that generates emotional resonance through rhythm, color, sound, and character movement. This insight clarifies how *KPop Demon Hunters* conveys cultural meaning through these affective and symbolic elements, creating connections with viewers. It also explains why many audiences extend the film's affective energy through fan art and other creative practices.

Fan and Supalakwatchana [16], using qualitative textual analysis, show that animation's flexible visual style and world-building enable *KPop Demon Hunters* to integrate multilayered cultural symbols into a unified audiovisual space. In contrast to Kang's [15] emphasis on affective performance, their analysis shows how the film transforms Hallyu symbols into emotional and aesthetic experiences that international audiences readily recognize, helping explain why *KPop Demon Hunters* is easily understood and embraced across cultural boundaries.

The reviewed studies indicate that animation operates as a culturally flexible and affectively rich medium capable of engaging audiences across diverse contexts and circulating through multiple communicative channels. This understanding informs the present study by highlighting why a film like *KPop Demon Hunters*, as an animated work, can generate strong global engagement.

2.4. Narrative, emotion, and sensory mechanisms of global appeal

Contemporary audiovisual works can reach diverse audiences by activating multiple mechanisms at once. Drawing on theoretical modelling and an interdisciplinary review, Dubourg and Baumard [17] argue that audiences are drawn to information-dense, structurally complex fictional worlds that invite exploration. Learning a world's rules and conflicts produces continuous cognitive gain and intrinsic pleasure, making such worlds cross-cultural attractors. This helps explain why the conflict in *KPop Demon Hunters* holds broad appeal: viewers stay motivated by the satisfaction of making sense of the system.

Building on world-building, Shahid et al. [18] use cross-cultural comparison to show the hero's journey remains a widely recognizable pattern. Its structure of call, ordeal, and return absorbs local

meanings while staying rooted in shared emotional themes of growth and responsibility. Thus, heroic narratives engage audiences through emotional and existential themes that everyone recognizes. This explains why Huntr/x's mission to protect humanity through their voices in *KPop Demon Hunters* is quickly understood across languages and elicits immediate emotional resonance.

Jin [19] introduces transnational proximity, arguing that global youth share social conditions, emotional pressures, and identity confusion, fostering cross-cultural emotional projection. Through qualitative analysis, he shows many Korean Wave works express class anxiety, identity tension, and emotional intensity, enabling diverse audiences to project their feelings onto the narratives. Emotional structures cross borders more easily than cultural ones, helping explain why *KPop Demon Hunters* resonates through themes of guardianship, betrayal, and friendship repair.

While these studies emphasize narrative and emotional alignment, Malik [20] examines K-pop's global diffusion, highlighting how sensory form and narrative framing work together. Using construal level theory and industry data, he shows that visually driven music gains broader appeal when paired with concrete, process-oriented narratives that reduce psychological distance and enhance perceived feasibility. This frames *KPop Demon Hunters* as a K-pop-inflected animated text whose global appeal is reinforced by aligning visually rich animation, performance-based music, and concrete depictions of training, sacrifice, and collective responsibility.

At the sonic level, Miroudot [21] uses large-scale Spotify audio analysis to show K-pop scores higher than Western pop in rhythm, energy, and emotional valence, creating a more stimulating listening experience. K-pop's success lies not in converging with Anglo-American pop but in amplifying its distinctive, cross-culturally recognizable sound. Even without cultural familiarity, viewers may feel an immediate emotional pull, so music in *KPop Demon Hunters* can serve as a widely accessible entry point for engagement.

Taken together, these studies suggest cross-cultural appeal emerges from multiple dimensions: expansive fictional worlds, recognizable heroic patterns, shared youth emotional orientations, alignment of sensory form with narrative framing, and music's affective immediacy. Global attraction is shaped by layered narrative, affective, and sensory design, not a single cultural cue. This informs the present study's approach to the global reach of *KPop Demon Hunters*.

Across the reviewed studies, audience engagement arises from narrative transportation, broader narrative structures, metaphorical cues, emotional triggers, and multimodal design. These studies clarify how animated works generate immersion and travel across cultures. In this study, they motivate the rhetorical method used next to analyze how *KPop Demon Hunters* organizes its multimodal cues to engage viewers.

3. Methodology

Before the analysis, this study proceeds from the premise that emotionally intensive sequences contain denser concentrations of rhetorical strategies that directly contribute to audience engagement. Guided by this approach, the study selects fifteen minutes of footage from throughout *KPop Demon Hunters*. These segments are intentionally selected because they most clearly display the film's core rhetorical strategies. All selected segments align closely with the study's thematic focus, and most capture key moments of narrative transition, conflict, and emotional climax. In these scenes, rhetorical devices across visuals, dialogue, soundtrack, and camera movement are densely coordinated, making them especially suitable for analyzing how the film constructs immersion and audience engagement. The approach combines rhetorical analysis with Narrative Transportation Theory to investigate how these strategies shape viewers' perception, emotion, and immersion.

Rhetorical analysis is suitable here, as prior work confirms that multimodal strategies shape audience engagement. Research on K-pop shows how emotional appeals and performance cues (e.g., vocal tone, gesture, visual atmosphere) construct idol–fan bonds [22]; Huntr/x and Saja Boys rely on such cues in the film, and analyzing them helps reveal the film's idol–fan dynamics and emotional resonance with real audiences. Broader rhetorical studies further support this approach: Overington [23] focuses on dramatistic modeling of meaning attribution, Breen [24] on film form's rhetorical force (rhythm, symbolic density, camera movement), and Plomp and Forceville [25] conceptualize the animetary (a term combining animation and documentary) as a visual rhetorical genre that uses metaphor, analogy, and visual narration to make abstract ideas perceptible. These perspectives justify using rhetorical analysis to examine how *KPop Demon Hunters* organizes multimodal cues for viewer engagement.

Narrative Transportation Theory further provides an interpretive lens for explaining how emotional and cognitive engagement reduce counterarguing and support immersion across cultural contexts [6, 7]. This theory is particularly suitable for analyzing *KPop Demon Hunters* because it helps explain how the film's multimodal rhetorical cues transport global viewers into its idol–fan and supernatural world, fostering emotional immersion and cross-cultural resonance.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, an inductive coding process identifies segments with prominent rhetorical cues. For each selected timestamp, the analysis documents what exists in the scene (characters, setting, sound, camera movement); what is happening in terms of narrative action; and what meanings or ideas are promoted through the multimodal composition. After open coding generates preliminary categories, a deductive phase organizes these categories within the analytical structures of rhetorical analysis and Narrative Transportation Theory. This includes identifying how visual, auditory, and narrative patterns correspond to established rhetorical functions and examining how emotionally intensive sequences strengthen transportation processes that sustain audience engagement and shape interpretation. The aim is not to generalize about all audience responses, but to identify how the film's textual design makes particular forms of immersion and engagement available to viewers.

4. Results and discussion

This section examines four interrelated findings to analyze how *KPop Demon Hunters* coordinates multiple rhetorical strategies to organize audience understanding, emotional resonance, and engagement with on-screen action, affect, and worldview, thereby supporting its cross-cultural circulation. It focuses on four ways these resources operate during viewing: music as a structuring force for narrative immersion; the representation of shared growth-related struggles that foster cross-cultural emotional identification; the interpretive function of recurring color schemes and symbolic patterns; and the blending of realism with fantasy to increase narrative accessibility.

These findings are based on systematic scene coding and rhetorical analysis of selected film segments, including musical sequences, visual cues, camera movement, and narrative transitions. Drawing on Narrative Transportation Theory and related research, the discussion explains how these rhetorical processes intensify global audience engagement and foster emotional investment across cultural contexts, allowing *KPop Demon Hunters* to remain intelligible, affectively compelling, and rapidly popular in global circulation.

4.1. Music as an organizing rhetorical logic for narrative immersion

KPop Demon Hunters transforms music from emotional accompaniment into a central rhetorical resource that organizes narrative progression and action comprehension. Through tight synchronization of rhythm, lyrics, and character movement, music directly participates in plot development and meaning construction, guiding audiences to follow the narrative on an affective level.

Before the concert begins, music and spatial design function as emotional orientation rather than mere atmosphere-building. Electronic synths, heavy bass, and rapid hi-hats align with synchronized movement of audience light sticks, transforming rhythm into a unified affective entry point. LED screens repeatedly displaying Huntr/x members anchor visual attention on the girl group, while the crowd is framed as a cohesive collective responding in unison, emphasizing fans' supportive power as a community. In this sequence, music generates immersive anticipation: even before the idols appear, rhythm, crowd noise, and spatial cues position viewers inside the concert environment, producing an embodied, in-the-scene perspective.

The film further uses musical rhythm to align sound with character actions, organizing the interpretation of these actions. Rather than first inferring motivation and then evaluating behavior, audiences anticipate action through the stability and repetition of musical beats. When Huntr/x defeats a demon aboard a private jet, the song *How It's Done* plays, and as the lyric "Beating you is what I do, do, do, yeah" is heard, Mira strikes the demon in exact synchrony with the "do, do, do" rhythm. This alignment frames the action as intentional and controlled rather than chaotic, allowing viewers to grasp character agency instantly without reliance on dialogue or internal monologue.

This rhythmic logic recurs throughout the film. In *Free*, the progressive musical structure remains synchronized with the leads' shared movement, culminating in their joint ascent as the lyrics articulate release and confrontation with the past. The scene frames emotional transformation as a mutual process of understanding. Similarly, in the climactic *What It Sounds Like*, the shift in lyrics from "cowards" and "liars" to "survivors" and "fighters" guides viewers through the protagonists' recovery of confidence and fearlessness, visually reinforced when Huntr/x members embrace during the line "But dive in the fire, and I'll be right here by your side."

These observations align closely with Narrative Transportation Theory. Prior research shows that when emotional cues, sensory rhythm, and narrative action are tightly coordinated, audiences are more likely to enter sustained states of focused attention and emotional involvement, thereby reducing vigilance and counterarguing and significantly enhancing immersion [6]. In *KPop Demon Hunters*, music provides a stable and predictable structure that guides emotional response, enabling viewers to "enter the story through sound." This process softens skepticism toward certain plot elements or world-building choices, encouraging audiences to engage actively and affectively rather than distancing themselves critically from aspects that might otherwise appear childish, implausible, or exaggerated.

Research on K-pop further indicates that its high rhythmic intensity, emotional energy, and structural clarity possess strong cross-cultural perceptibility [21]. Rather than diluting these musical characteristics, *KPop Demon Hunters* embeds them deeply within its narrative logic, allowing music to function as a primary entry point through which global audiences access the story world, understand character relationships, and develop emotional investment. This design helps explain why the film generates high levels of emotional engagement and positive reception across audiences with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

4.2. Visualizing shared growth struggles to enable cross-cultural emotional identification

Across multiple key sequences, the film repeatedly visualizes narrative structures associated with global youth growth struggles. Through themes of identity conflict, relational rupture, and self-reconstruction, it guides audiences toward cross-cultural emotional resonance.

In the Golden music video, Zoey's solo references her Korean-American identity through the lyric "I lived two lives, tried to play both sides / But I couldn't find my own place." As the line is sung, the MV shows Zoey's two hands being pulled in opposite directions, one left, one right. This visual moment echoes the lyric and translates its meaning into a concrete visual metaphor, depicting her experience of being torn between competing identities marked by confusion and anxiety about belonging. By rendering internal conflict through bodily tension and spatial opposition, the scene visualizes Zoey's struggle without culturally specific explanation, allowing viewers to project their own identity negotiation experiences onto the narrative and activating a pathos-driven appeal grounded in widely shared pressures of youth identity formation. At the same time, the video uses the transition of the three female protagonists from shadow into light as a visual metaphor. This repeated lighting transition externalizes an internal growth trajectory, mapping a shift from self-doubt toward resilience. A similar visual and emotional logic appears in Rumi and Jinu's third nighttime meeting during *Free*. As they move from the dark forest to a rooftop beneath a luminous purple sky and rise into the air together, the transition from darkness to light signals a psychological movement from hesitation toward trust and hope.

As the narrative approaches its climax, the film intensifies its portrayal of rupture and emotional cost as integral to growth. After Jinu's betrayal, Rumi walks alone into a deep blue space where widening cracks open beneath her feet and dominate the frame. As her figure recedes in a long shot, the expanding fissures intensify her sense of abandonment and helplessness, functioning as layered metaphors for multiple forms of collapse: the breaking of the Honmoon, the rupture of friendship, the destabilization of belief, and the erosion of self-confidence. These experiences of betrayal and self-doubt are not culturally specific but widely shared, giving the scene strong cross-cultural intelligibility. This theme deepens in Rumi's confrontation with her mentor, Celine. A dark blue and black palette creates an oppressive visual space, while camera movement performs a key rhetorical role. The camera pushes toward Rumi's face, intensifying her emotional breakdown, while pulling away from Celine to visualize their growing emotional distance. Background elements such as the withered sacred tree and the shattered Honmoon echo the collapse of relational and identity order. The line "If this is the Honmoon I'm supposed to protect, I'm glad to see it destroyed" articulates a clear value stance, rejecting self-erasure and conformity as conditions for love. Courage is thus redefined as confronting rejection, dismantling false wholeness, and reclaiming an integrated self.

The film further shifts its focus on shared struggle to the fan community through demon mythology. The Saja Boys survive by consuming fans' souls, transforming emotional devotion into demonic energy. This act functions as a social metaphor. Fan identity may provide belonging and recognition, yet it also risks emotional overinvestment and self-depletion. Through this metaphor, the film invites viewers to reflect on their own modes of idol attachment in ways grounded in shared lived experience.

Across these sequences, the film mobilizes a coordinated system of visual rhetoric that translates evolving growth-related conflicts into directly perceivable emotional signals and interpretive cues. This supports Jin's [19] concept of transnational proximity, whereby audiences connect to narratives through shared identity anxieties, relational pressures, and emotional experiences rather than cultural

knowledge. Consequently, even viewers unfamiliar with Korean cultural specifics can be drawn into the film's depiction of growth and reconciliation.

The use of this system aligns closely with Narrative Transportation Theory, which holds that sustained emotional involvement helps maintain attention and immersion [6]. As viewers encounter multiple resonance points across different scenes, layered emotional impact strengthens identification and memory, making these moments more likely to be shared, reinterpreted, and recreated. Such processes increase sharing intention and positive word-of-mouth [8] and align with participatory practices observed in transnational K-pop fandoms, where audiences engage in meaning-making through commentary, reinterpretation, and user-generated content [10].

4.3. Recurrent color schemes and symbolic patterns guiding audience interpretation

A key feature of the film's visual rhetoric is its consistent system of recurring color schemes and symbolic motifs across multiple narrative stages and spatial settings, enabling viewers to orient interpretation and form a coherent framework of meaning.

Purple-blue hues recur across key visual elements, including sunset and twilight lighting, the Honmoon's ripple patterns, Rumi's hair, Jinu's Chinese knot bracelet, the color palette of Huntr/x members' bedrooms, and intermediate settings between major narrative locations. Although these elements appear in different contexts, their chromatic consistency makes purple-blue a recognizable visual marker associated with themes such as hope, emotional calm, cyberpunk aesthetics, and technological sensibility.

Alongside this color system, demonic patterns function as a second visual motif. Appearing on demons and recurring during Rumi's awakening, these patterns maintain consistent color and line structure across scenes. Through repetition, they move beyond signaling demonic identity and acquire psychological significance, operating as internalized markers of characters' shame toward their own dark sides. In *KPop Demon Hunters*, the repeated use of demonic motifs assumes the metaphorical function of marking identity tension and internal conflict, thereby lowering the interpretive threshold for understanding character situations.

The repeated use of color and pattern translates abstract psychological states into visible forms, enabling rapid recognition and comprehension, consistent with findings in visual metaphor research [25]. Because these visual cues remain highly consistent across scenes, the resulting color system and symbolic repetition also provide support for narrative transportation. Narrative Transportation Theory holds that when story worlds offer clear and coherent perceptual cues over time, audiences are more likely to enter and remain immersed in the narrative [7]. This claim is further supported by animation semiotics research [11], which shows that meaning in animated narratives often depends on repeated organization of color, form, and patterns to guide emotional and psychological interpretation. As a result, repeated visual cues function as interpretive anchors that help maintain engagement and immersion across scenes.

4.4. Integrating fantasy with K-pop reality to increase narrative accessibility

By blending a fictional demon-hunting mythology with highly realistic K-pop idol culture, the film weaves fantasy and reality into a unified narrative structure that makes the story world easier to enter and follow, guiding audiences between familiarity and novelty, encouraging curiosity and exploration.

Before Huntr/x's concert begins, the stage is partially veiled in purple-pink smoke, with lighting and color dominating the frame while spatial detail is minimized. The image then cuts to black,

leaving only music and sound. In this moment of visual absence, a solemn female voice declares, "The world will know you are pop stars, but you will be much more than that. You will be hunters." Addressed in the second person, the line assigns the protagonists' dual identity to both characters and the audience, positioning viewers alongside the female leads and drawing them into the fictional world without prior exposition.

The film further deepens its mythology by tracing the cultural origins of demon hunting, depicting mudang shamans in ancient Korean villages and the founding of the first Honmoon. Through cross-cutting between past and present hunters, demon fighting is framed as ritual continuity and intergenerational responsibility, lending the fictional world historical depth and cultural grounding. This design supports sustained engagement, as audiences are more likely to invest in worlds perceived as internally coherent and enduring rather than arbitrarily constructed [7]. When a story world appears to have already existed, its credibility, intelligibility, and exploratory appeal are significantly enhanced [17].

In the subsequent scene where Huntr/x and Saja Boys participate in a TV variety show, the film emphasizes its integration of real K-pop industry elements. The lively stage design in light blue and pink, the Korean host's presentation style, and props like high chairs and chili paste closely resemble real Korean variety shows, allowing viewers to easily connect with the current K-pop industry. Additionally, in the shots where the two idol groups bow to each other, the symmetrical medium-close framing gradually highlights differences in their bowing angles, pointing to the seniority hierarchy within K-pop culture. By blending these elements, the film enhances world-building realism, grounding fantasy in recognizable experiences, making it easier for viewers to engage with and understand the narrative. In addition to enhancing world-building realism, the strength of this mixed-reality setting, as explained by Dubourg & Baumard [17], lies in its ability to tap into human curiosity and the reward of new information, which helps sustain long-term attention and engagement.

In summary, the film constructs a rhetorical structure that intertwines reality and fantasy by placing a fictional demon-hunting world alongside highly realistic K-pop idol industry settings, significantly enhancing its appeal to global audiences. As the narrative progresses, the film continuously shifts between the demon-hunting world and real-world entertainment industry spaces, creating a blended effect. For example, at the same moment, the film presents both the scene of using song to defeat demons and reinforce the Honmoon, and elements of the real K-pop industry, such as idol fandom culture, fan signings, rehearsal rooms, and pre-release practices. As Malik [20] notes, in K-pop-centered texts, embedding highly visualized performances within familiar industry contexts such as fan signings, rehearsal rooms, and TV variety shows effectively reduces psychological distance between the audience and the narrative, enhancing their understanding of narrative logic and perceived feasibility. This further supports the core idea of Narrative Transportation Theory, which posits that when audiences are steadily guided into a story world, their counter-arguing is significantly reduced [6], making them more likely to accept the world-building and value frameworks presented by the narrative, ultimately improving the film's narrative accessibility.

5. Conclusion

Based on a systematic analysis of multiple rhetorical resources in *KPop Demon Hunters*, this study concludes that the film's sustained global engagement does not result from the exceptional power of any single strategy, but from an organizational logic produced through coordinated operation of multiple resources. By aligning narrative, emotional, and perceptual cues, this logic offers audiences

a coherent framework for understanding the story world and character actions, enabling smooth entry and sustained immersion despite genre hybridity and cultural difference. Within this structure, music, visual design, symbolic systems, and lived experience function not as isolated attractions but an integrated meaning-making system that supports cross-cultural comprehension and acceptance.

This organizational logic operates across four interrelated dimensions: music structures narrative progression and comprehension through synchronized rhythm, lyrics, and action; shared growth struggles are rendered through clear visual and narrative forms that enable cross-cultural emotional identification; recurring color systems and symbolic patterns provide consistent interpretive cues for identity tension and internal conflict; and the integration of fantasy with recognizable K-pop industrial reality lowers the threshold for entering the fictional world. Through their interaction across perceptual, emotional, and interpretive levels, it becomes clear that immersion relies less on prior cultural knowledge and more on emotional rhythm, narrative readability, and experiential coherence. This dynamic helps explain the film's broad acceptance, high engagement, and active participatory practices in global circulation. Building on these findings, the analysis points to two directions for further theoretical expansion. On one hand, the observed process of multimodal rhetorical coordination highlights the need to distinguish the relative weight of different rhetorical resources in shaping audience immersion and engagement, and to examine whether a dominant mechanism organizes the operation of others. On the other hand, the success of the virtual girl group Huntr/x invites a reconsideration of Korean soft power in digital media environments, raising the possibility that cultural export may increasingly shift from human idols to virtual figures. Future research may further explore how such transitions reshape fan practices, cultural identity, and the production logic of global popular culture.

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Appendix

Table 1. Coding table for film footage analysis

Timestamp	Multimodal Features	Rhetorical & Transportation Functions
00:34–00:50	A circular concert arena at night; central stage with three walkways; LED screens loop Huntr/x images; camera pans then dollies to fan close-ups; glowing light sticks; electronic synth music, medium-high pace.	Collective participation and emotional synchronization: circular stage and unified cheering frame fans as a cohesive collective; walkways connect stage to crowd; LED screens keep Huntr/x central even before they appear; camera shifts from overview to fan close-ups builds anticipation. Creates embodied concert perspective; synchronized cheering, light sticks, and music create shared emotional rhythm; delayed reveal intensifies anticipatory immersion; collective fandom energy becomes early transportation device.

Table 1. (continued)

00:50–00:54	Silhouettes of three girls in purple-pink smoke; then black screen with only off-screen sound; deep adult female voice.	Second-person "you" assigns identity directly; mission-based entry without background; fuses celebrity with heroic protection; deep female voice legitimizes the role; globally inclusive. Lowers entry threshold; black screen intensifies focus on voice; "You will be hunters" works as immersive cue; converts exposition into emotional invitation; positions viewer as inducted into heroic framework.
00:55–02:06	Three mudang (Korean female shamans) in ancient Korea singing under dark blue-black sky; ancient village, demons, sacred tree, first blue-purple Honmoon/Soul Gate; cross-cutting between ancient hunters and modern performers; blue-violet light forms protective gate.	Hunter tradition as inherited social responsibility; music as sacred protective force; singing as communal defense; hope embedded in coordinated vocal action; sacred tree, ritual singing create historical depth; cross-cutting connects K-pop to inherited sacred duty; female lineage as transmitters of memory. Gives fictional world cultural depth and credibility; sacred song, survival, and Soul Gate make music meaningful world-building; ritualized emotional resonance; stimulates curiosity; strengthens transportation through coherent, enduring world.
13:49–16:24	Large 3D screen on mall plays "Golden"; fans watch MV in streets, subways, homes; TV studio interview; MV shows each member moving from shadow to light; studio line: "This song is the story of us"; lyrics reference Zoey's divided belonging and Mira's "problem child" reframing.	Song as autobiographical identity discourse; Zoey's divided belonging as emotional tension of mixed-cultural identity; Mira turns stigma into agency; shadow-to-light symbolizes self-doubt to confidence; all three protagonists in parallel spaces; fandom as dispersed but synchronized. Connects selfhood, music, and media circulation; citywide circulation shows Huntr/x as pop-cultural figures; Zoey's conflict and Mira's reframing make song accessible through recognizable youth struggles; shadow-to-light transitions simplify internal conflicts; encourages emotional identification and narrative accessibility.
29:16–31:07	Variety show set: "Spicy Challenge" on *Play Games with Us*; Saja Boys in pink outfits, baby bibs, chili sauce; light-blue background, pink stools, production cameras, fan audience; close-ups of bowing angles showing sunbae–hoobae hierarchy.	Reality-fantasy blending through K-pop industry rituals; bowing angles encode senior-junior hierarchy; contrast between demonic reality and cute TV image; pink outfits, chili sauce, bowing create playful disjunction; Saja Boys not flat villains; industrial realism as narrative accessibility. Reduces psychological distance by placing fantasy characters in recognizable K-pop media environment; contrast between demonic identity and cute persona creates tonal flexibility; comic contrast heightens memorability; sunbae–hoobae ritual adds cultural specificity without interrupting flow; sustains immersion through recognizability, humor, and character complexity.
40:02–41:35	Night scene, deep blue palette; Korean houses on hillside with traditional eaves; Rumi with glowing long blade; Jinu's body has visible demonic markings.	Demonic patterns as externalized shame: visual metaphors for hidden wounds; Jinu's line makes Rumi's markings a mirror of his own shame; collapses moral opposition between hunter and demon; both emotionally damaged; links visible marks to fear of exposure; foreshadows mutual salvation. Translates internal wounds into visible bodily markings; demonic patterns as reminders of hidden shame; opens reflective space for audience to connect to fears of exposure and rejection; shifts scene from confrontation to mirrored vulnerability; strengthens transportation through relational tension and anticipation of redemption.

Table 1. (continued)

48:56–49:18	Fans idolizing Saja Boys; soda brand, vending machines, light sticks, news of disappearances; blue drained souls fly across sky; Jinu watches with cat Derpy; then deep blue netherworld; demon boss Gwi-ma consumes stolen souls; classical-electronic fusion music (gayageum, pipa, synthesizers); eerie atmosphere.	Draining souls as metaphor for emotional overinvestment and self-depletion; soda endorsement places fan exploitation within celebrity commodification; missing persons parallel loss of individuality; contrasts exploitative attachment with later protective fan power; traditional-electronic soundtrack and blue imagery create seduction-turning-into-danger; Jinu's passivity reinforces complicity. Invites reflection on idol attachment becoming extractive; translates abstract social concern into vivid visual metaphor; coexistence of endorsements, light sticks, missing reports, and demonic consumption creates uneasy engagement; encourages reassessment of emotional costs; later restorative fan power makes contrast more powerful.
49:44–51:50	Purple-blue Chinese knot bracelet (blessing, continuity, good fortune); traditional and modern Korean roofs; bamboo, trees, flowers, sloped road; purple sunset; auntie selling bracelets; Jinu says "hopeless"; Rumi replies: "That choice belongs to you."	Hope as personal agency; Rumi insists right to hope is Jinu's own; bracelet as symbol of being seen, remembered, chosen; unsolicited kindness counters belief of exclusion; purple-blue palette connects hope and calm to film's wider system; Jinu marked by shame but not fixed by it; compassion reopens choice. Supports emotional resonance through agency, despair, recognition, renewal; bracelet gives concrete visual form to emotional argument; dialogue, object, and purple-blue atmosphere create reflective pause; encourages identification with low self-worth; deepens transportation by binding emotional intimacy to symbolic continuity.
55:32–59:50	Traditional and modern Korean roofs; Jinu's pet Derpy with crow; bamboo and trees sway in dim night; after singing, magical bubble barrier (pink, blue, white) lifts them hand in hand; song "Free" about release, confronting past, shared "dark side."	Liberation as facing what has been avoided; both half-demons with painful histories; shame becomes shared condition; companionship when concealed shame becomes shareable; duet stages mutual understanding; music dissolves isolation; joined hands and upward movement symbolize loosening of internal barriers; floating imagery as redemptive release, not just romance; connection transforms shame from proof of unworthiness to ground for mutual support. Generates affective transportation through song, levitation, confession, mutual recognition; duet lets emotion unfold musically; externalizes emotional release; grounded in wish to be understood without self-erasure; offers identification with loneliness, hidden flaws, longing for companionship; sustains engagement through intimate emotional absorption.
1:10:50–1:10:57	Rumi with visible wounds and torn costume; deep-blue empty otherworldly space; large crack under her feet; purple points of light inside fracture; violet-blue ripple waves; crack and ripples form abstract Honmoon/Soul Gate; shot expands from feet to full body to long shot.	Crack externalizes inner despair; emotional crisis becomes shape of the world; self-negation and collective fragmentation linked; turned body and empty space intensify abandonment; purple-blue shifts from hope to rupture; when Rumi cannot affirm her value, protective world fails; minimalist space as emotional amplifier. Visualizes despair rather than naming it; back-facing posture, isolation invite viewers to experience breakdown through spatial distance; internal self-doubt becomes external world collapse; fusion of psychological pain and symbolic destruction intensifies transportation; makes emotional fracture materially visible; encourages reading collapse as personal sadness and communal statement.

Table 1. (continued)

1:12:35–1:14:55	Withered sacred tree amid wreckage of destroyed Honmoon/Soul Gate; dark background with black clouds; camera moves closer to Rumi's face while pulling away from Celine; intensifies Rumi's emotional force and Celine's guilt, fear, retreat.	Centers on whether love requires fragmentation of self; Celine's demand for secrecy is corrosive; Rumi rejects peace built on false identity; push toward Rumi, retreat from Celine; withered tree and broken Honmoon echo collapse of ideological order; disclosure as resistance; dismantling oppressive structures, not preserving them. Intensifies immersion through close camera movement, damaged landscape, explicit dialogue; gives verbal form to recognizable question: can one be fully loved without suppressing disowned parts? Camera movement aligns viewers with Rumi's clarity and Celine's moral retreat; frames growth as painful assertion of integrated self; transportation effect turns personal confrontation into morally charged climax.
1:17:43–1:24:20	Namsan concert arena: circular, central stage, three corridors; demon-controlled fans hold Saja Boys light sticks; mind-controlled Mira and Zoey among them; Huntr/x, Saja Boys, Gwi-ma on stage; Huntr/x wear black, change to white after defeat; song "What It Sounds Like"; close-ups, top-down shot of three fighting demons; ends with rotating embrace in rhythm.	Awakened fans contribute to restoration (reverses exploitative fandom image); movement from separate corridors to center-stage embrace makes reunification visible; song moves from self-condemnation to survival; lyrics from shame to bravery; saving power in female collective; black-to-white signals renewed selfhood; fans' resonating souls help build new Soul Gate; Jinu's sacrifice resolves shame-redemption arc; emotional reconnection as climactic victory. Strongest convergence of music, action, symbolism, emotional resolution; cathartic immersion through rhythmic combat, lyrical transformation, collective movement; separate corridors and embrace let viewers experience reconciliation as movement; awakening of fans transforms earlier anxieties into redemptive participatory model; black to white, sacrifice, and final embrace generate closure across arcs of shame, division, hope, redemption; maximizes engagement by joining narrative payoff with musical uplift.