

AI-Mediated Visual Narratives and the Construction of South Korea's Cultural Identity in K-pop Music Videos

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Abstract

This study examines how artificial intelligence (AI) mediated visual narratives in aespa's music videos construct and circulate South Korean cultural identity within the global digital sphere. Grounded in Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the research adopts an interpretive qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design. Two official music videos, *Next Level* (2021) and *Savage* (2021), are analyzed as cultural texts rather than entertainment products. Through systematic visual analysis, the study investigates how AI-driven aesthetics such as digital avatars, metaverse environments, glitch effects, and posthuman imagery interact with traditional Korean cultural symbols, including hanbok-inspired costumes, mythological references, architectural motifs, choreography, and linguistic hybridity (Konglish). The findings reveal that AI functions not as a neutral production tool but as a representational system that actively articulates meaning. By strategically combining tradition and futurism, aespa's visual narratives produce a hybrid form of "Koreanness" that is simultaneously locally rooted and globally legible. This hybrid identity is encoded by the entertainment industry through AI-mediated visuals and decoded by global audiences within digital platforms, enabling the effective circulation of South Korean cultural identity without erasing cultural specificity. The study contributes to digital cultural studies by demonstrating that AI operates as a cultural agent within popular media, shaping how national identity is negotiated, commodified, and reimagined in contemporary global culture.

Keywords: *Visual Narratives; AI-Mediated Communication; Hybrid Identity; Representation; Digital Culture*

1. Introduction

Cultural identity is not understood as a fixed and objective reality, but as a social construction shaped through systems of representation, symbols, and discursive practices within visual media (Hall, 1997). In this context, South Korean cultural identity as depicted in aespa's music videos is approached as a symbolic reality articulated through AI-mediated visual narratives and interpreted in multiple ways by global audiences (Hall, 1997).

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the assumption that knowledge of cultural identity is produced through the interpretation of visual meanings, symbols, and narratives embedded in media texts, rather than through quantitative measurement (Creswell, 2013). Representation analysis is employed to examine how artificial intelligence functions in framing, encoding, and communicating meanings of South Korean cultural identity in aespa's music videos, drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation (Hall, 1997).

Previous research by Kim demonstrates that identity formation and social influence are significantly shaped by the interplay of media, economics, and technology (Kim & Nicolau, 2025). Her findings indicate that approximately 68.8% of global respondents engage positively with cultural content promoted by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), reflecting the extensive reach and cultural impact of South Korean cultural production on a global scale.

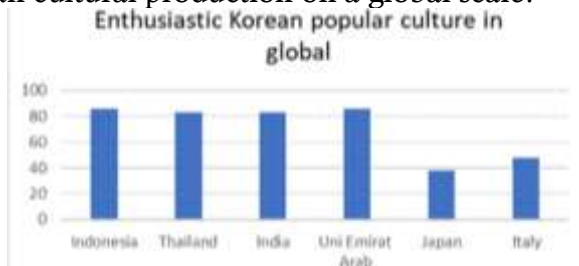


Figure 1. Global Survey Respondents Interact Positively with South Korea's Cultural Content.

Source: South Korea Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, (2025)

In this study, two main conceptual variables are identified. The first variable is AI-mediated visual narratives, which refers to the use of artificial intelligence in the construction of music video visual narratives, including digital avatars, virtual worlds, futuristic aesthetics, and AI-based visual techniques that frame and organize cultural meaning. This variable

is understood not merely as a technological tool, but as a system of representation through which meaning is produced and communicated. The second variable is the construction of South Korean cultural identity, which denotes the process through which South Korean cultural identity is formed and interpreted via the symbols, visuals, and narratives presented in aespa's music videos, as well as how this identity is circulated and negotiated within the global digital context.

Previous studies have extensively examined K-pop as an instrument of cultural globalization and South Korea's soft power, with a primary focus on industrial structures, global audiences, and the economic impact of cultural production (Iwabuchi, 2015; Jin, 2016; Oh, 2021). Other research has emphasized the role of digital technology and media platforms in shaping identity and social influence on a global scale, yet these studies largely remain at the macro level and rely on quantitative data (Y. (Erin) Kim & Nicolau, 2025). Meanwhile, visual cultural studies tend to analyze K-pop aesthetics without explicitly positioning artificial intelligence as a system of cultural representation. Consequently, there remains a lack of qualitative research that critically examines how AI-based visual narratives in aespa's music videos actively construct and circulate South Korean cultural identity within the global digital sphere. This study holds critical significance in revealing that AI technology is not neutral, but is embedded with cultural, industrial, and ideological interests in the production of global meaning (Manovich, 2020). By employing a qualitative approach grounded in representation theory (Hall, 1997), this research explores how AI-mediated visual narratives in aespa's music videos contribute to the construction and global dissemination of South Korean cultural identity. The findings are expected to offer an academic contribution to digital cultural studies and to foster critical awareness of the role of artificial intelligence in shaping global perceptions of South Korean cultural identity (Iwabuchi, 2015).

2. Research Method

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln), which understands cultural reality as socially constructed through systems of meaning rather than as an objective given. Within this paradigm, cultural identity is viewed as a representational process shaped by discourse, symbols, and media practices. Accordingly, the study employs an interpretive qualitative approach designed to explore how meaning is produced rather than to measure causal relationships. The research design follows an intrinsic case study model (Stake), focusing on a single, context-specific case examined for its inherent analytical value. The case selected is the AI-mediated visual narratives in the music videos of aespa, which

present a distinctive convergence of artificial intelligence, popular culture, and the construction of Korean cultural identity in the global digital sphere. This design allows for an in-depth examination of representational practices within a bounded cultural artifact. The study is situated within the context of global digital culture, where K-pop circulates primarily through online platforms and functions as a transnational media form. The primary data consist of two official music videos, Next Level (2021) and Savage (2021), selected through purposive criteria: the explicit integration of AI-driven visual aesthetics, the presence of symbolic references to Korean culture (e.g., costume, mythology, language), and their centrality to aespa's narrative universe. These videos are treated as cultural texts rather than entertainment products.

Data collection is conducted through systematic visual analysis. Each video is viewed repeatedly to identify key scenes, recurring visual motifs, narrative structures, and technological aesthetics. Visual elements such as costume design, digital environments, avatars, choreography, and special effects are documented using screenshots and timestamped notes. Lyrics are analyzed alongside visual sequences to examine how linguistic hybridity supports visual meaning. Data analysis follows an interpretive thematic approach grounded in Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Visual signs are analyzed across three levels: denotation, connotation, and ideology to examine how AI-mediated visuals articulate a hybrid construction of Korean cultural identity. Analytical rigor is ensured through transparent coding, theoretical triangulation, and reflexive interpretation. As the study analyzes publicly available media texts and involves no human participants, ethical considerations are addressed through accurate citation, respect for intellectual property, and culturally sensitive interpretation.

For greater clarity, the research process is illustrated in the following flow figure 1 below:



Figure 2. Research Flow Diagram
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Ethical Considerations in this study analyze publicly available cultural texts (official music videos). No human participants were recruited, and no personal data were collected. Accordingly, the ethical focus concerns responsible interpretation, avoiding culturally reductive claims, and ensuring that analytic conclusions are supported by transparent evidence trails. (Rose, 2023)

3. Result

The concept of aespa made through SM Entertainment marks a newer direction in which South Korean popular culture is ever more mediated by artificial intelligence to build a hybrid cultural identity. In the music videos “Next Level” and “Savage”, virtual worlds and digital aesthetics are not merely backdrops but active agents shaping symbolic meaning. These videos emphasise futurism and interactivity, strengthening the perception of Korea Selatan as both technologically innovative and culturally rooted.

Table 1. Analysis of Cultural Elements in Aespa's Next Level Music Video

Analysis Unit	Music Videos & Scenes	Denotation (What is shown)	Connotation (Cultural meaning)	Ideology (Underlying discourse)	Thematic Code
Costume	Aespa wore futuristic outfits mixed with hanbok elements (stage and metaverse scenes).	Hanbok-inspired costumes with modern materials and digital effects	Cultural hybrid: South Korea traditions wrapped in global modernity	South Korea's cultural nationalism, tradition, and technology can coexist	Cultural Hybridity; Globalization
Setting & Architecture	Geometric Architecture	Endless spatial corridors, cosmic pathways, and bright portals.	Entrance doors inspired by hanok palaces	Affirming adaptive hybrid identities in the metaverse era	Transdimensional Cultural Passage
Konglish Lyrics	The lyrics of the song Next Level use South Korea + English ('I'm on the Next Level')	A mixture of South Korean and English is heard in the music and choreography	Language globalisation : accessibility across international audiences	Korea Selatan's soft power through language and K-pop music	Linguistic Hybridization; Cultural Globalism

Analysis Unit	Music Videos & Scenes	Denotation (What is shown)	Connotation (Cultural meaning)	Ideology (Underlying discourse)	Thematic Code
AI Aesthetics	The use of motion capture, metahuman facial rigs, voxel glitch effects, and avatars in the metaverse scene	Visual avatars of aespa (æ) resembling digital humans with realistic movements	Representation of the future of AI-based entertainment; digital identity as part of life	Technology as a cultural force: the dominance of AI in artistic production	Techno-Orientalism: Posthuman Identity
Cultural Symbols	Dance scenes featuring traditional South Korean gestures; mythological motifs (Naevís, KWANGY A)	South Korea's choreography and mythology are presented in a futuristic format	Affirming South Korea's cultural roots amid global sci-fi narratives	Revitalising South Korea's myths as symbols of power	Myth-making; Cultural Nationalism

(Source: author's analysis)

Table 2. Analysis of Cultural Elements in Aespa's Savage Music Video

Analysis Unit	Music Videos & Scenes	Denotation (<i>What is shown</i>)	Connotation (<i>Cultural meaning</i>)	Ideology (<i>Underlying discourse</i>)	Thematic Code
Costume	Cyberpunk-style outfits and AI-powered avatars	Members wear modern costumes like a bodysuit hologram	Fusion of feminization of aesthetics with qualities of resilience	Represents South Korea's vision of engaging in global techno-cultural production.	Cultural Aesthetic
Setting & Architecture	Virtual KWANGY A cityscape	Digital futuristic city as background	An alternate world as aespa's symbolic existence	Technology as a cultural identity for the future of K-pop	Metaverse Narrative

Analysis Unit	Music Videos & Scenes	Denotation (<i>What is shown</i>)	Connotation (<i>Cultural meaning</i>)	Ideology (<i>Underlying discourse</i>)	Thematic Code
Konglish Lyrics	Mixing South Korea & English (이게 내 savage)	Lyrics combine South Korean and English words	Representation of global-local hybridity, bridging K-pop with international fans	Glocalization: K-Pop as a global product rooted in South Korean culture	Linguistic Hybridity
Visual Effects (AI Aesthetics)	Motion capture, voxel glitches, and facial rig effects	Digital transitions with glitch and hyper-realistic AI aesthetics	Aestheticization of AI and the digital world in music videos	Posthuman discourse: merging humans and AI in cultural production	AI Aesthetics
Mythological Symbol	Appearance of Nævis & avatar characters	Presence of mythological-like figures in the narrative	Symbolization of new myth-making through digital characters	Global myth production with South Korea's cultural roots	Digital Myth-making

(Source: author's analysis)

3.1 Representation through Costume: The Semiotic Circuit of Fashion

3.1.1 Denotative to Structural Analysis

In *Next Level*, the futuristic *hanbok* costumes represent a structural shift in K-pop fashion. Rather than simply viewing these garments as "clothes," our analysis reveals them as a "semiotic circuit." The flowing white fabrics and asymmetrical cuts denote the *hanbok*, but the metallic textures and holographic details reconstruct the garment as a "cybernetic skin." The relationship here is not one of erasure (replacing the old with the new), but of remediation, the traditional silhouette provides the *form*, while the synthetic material provides the *function* (suitability for the metaverse).

3.1.2 Connotative Analysis: The Dual Identity Mechanism

The costumes exemplify hybridisation, preserving Korean heritage while ensuring innovation coexists within K-pop. Keith (2024) argues that the use of AI and digital aesthetic styles in K-pop influences audience perception of future global entertainment. While Keith's study focuses primarily on the general futuristic perception, the current findings diverge by identifying a specific 'Dual Identity Mechanism'. Within this mechanism, the futuristic *hanbok* visually negotiates two opposing forces:

1. Ancestral Rooting: Signals "Korean-ness" to domestic and niche global audiences.
2. Futurist Projection: Signals "Technological Competence" to the mass market.

The use of shiny surface materials and armour-like details suggests adaptability, reflecting the group's narrative as they navigate KWANGYA.

3.1.3 Theoretical Impact: Non-Human Agency

Costumes in aespa's performances serve as active agents. Jeong & Kim (2023) Utilising the Network Theory (ANT), explain that aespa's achievements result from the interaction between humans, digital platforms, and physical items. Our analysis aligns with Jeong and Kim regarding the active role of non-human actors; however, we extend this by arguing that these costumes specifically mediate 'national heritage' rather than solely serving the performance network (Masset & Decrop, 2024). From a practical perspective, this proves that AI-based costume design is a branding strategy where heritage elements are reframed to appeal globally without losing symbolic meaning (Hwang, 2024)

3.1.4 Ideological Analysis: Preservation via Commodification

The analysis reveals a tension: once the *hanbok* is transformed for the metaverse, its historical context risks being overwhelmed by brand imagery. However, the dress represents the contradiction of preservation through globalisation (Lee, 2022). While warning of commodification, the current analysis suggests a more generative ideological function. The futuristic *hanbok* demonstrates that Korean heritage is being renegotiated in digital aesthetics to remain relevant. This approach places Korean culture at the centre of global cultural invention. Distinguishing our findings from (Smith, 2022) focus on pure aesthetics, we highlight the ideological implication: that tradition is not confined to the past but is flexibly adaptable to the digital future.

3.1.5 Costume as Symbolic Mediator in Savage

In *Savage*, the relationship between the human body and the digital avatar is mediated through "cyberpunk" fashion. The metallic elements and structural designs emanate readiness for cyber battles. Consistent with Keith (2024), who identifies these visual elements as a 'sociotechnical imaginary,' this study finds that these uniforms depict aespa members in an empowering relationship with technology. Ahn, Kim, and Oh (2025) describe the connection between idols and avatars as "seams" where the distinction dissolves. Our findings support (Ahn et al., 2025) but attribute the success of this 'seamlessness' specifically to the shared choreographic and sartorial codes. Ideologically, these costumes represent Korea's ambition in global techno-cultural production. Comparing this to Yoon

and Labarta Garcia (2024), who focus on fan reception, our analysis emphasises the production side: these styles reinforce soft power and establish aespa as key cultural representatives (Gutierrez-Jauregi et al., 2025)

3.2 Representation through Setting: Architecture as Cultural Interface

The architectural analysis of *Next Level* and *Savage* reveals that the setting functions as a Cultural Interface, a boundary object that translates traditional Korean spatial concepts into digital vernacular.

3.2.1 From Hanok to Hyper-Reality

In *Next Level* (2021), infinite corridors and glowing portals reinterpret traditional palace gateways and *hanok* entranceways (Paek & Zoh, 2025). This transforms digital spaces like KWANGYA from mere stage designs into complex cultural media. While Permatasari (2022) This study focuses on the negotiation of heritage, and it further posits that this techno-futuristic space specifically mediates a 'glocal' identity, aligning with Hall (1997) view of identity as a mediated system of meaning.

The conceptual relationship identified here is:

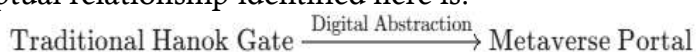


Figure 3. Conceptual relationship

3.2.2 The Ideology of Spatial Dominance

In *Savage*, the glitch-ridden arenas support the narrative of conflict. Sriwahyuni (2023) suggests that virtual members foster emotional involvement, while Vania (2021) notes a paradox of authenticity. Our analysis synthesises these views, arguing that the architectural setting validates this paradox.

Anwar (2025) argue that virtual architecture expresses culture; our findings confirm this and add that it normalizes Korea's ambition to lead global techno-cultural production. The virtual environment constructs Korea's soft power, positioning the nation not as a passive consumer of the metaverse, but as its builder.

3.3 Representation Through Lyrics: Linguistic Articulation

The use of 'Konglish' in aespa's tracks is not merely stylistic but a form of Linguistic Articulation Hall (1997).

3.3.1 Strategic Hybridity

'Konglish', as Jin and Ryoo (2014) explain is a cultural affirmation. However, unlike Jin and Ryoo's earlier focus on general linguistic mixing, this study identifies that in aespa's world, this blend is specifically enhanced by digital, AI-powered narratives. The lyric "I'm on the next level" demonstrates hybridity, connecting Korea's regional identity with global communication.

3.3.2 The Glocal Feedback Loop

While Kiaer and Ahn (2024) view this as linguistic hybridity in fans, our analysis suggests it serves a dual function: appealing to Western fans while representing modernity for Koreans. This allows young audiences to engage with global trends while retaining a Korean cultural core (Jamie, 2004). Towards the end of *Savage*, lines such as ‘My naevis we love U’ illustrate Hall’s practice of articulation, where identity, AI, and virtual reality intersect. This confirms that linguistic design is not merely communicative but a marketing tool for global positioning, distinct from purely artistic expression.

3.4 Representation through AI Aesthetic: The Posthuman Feedback Loop

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of a Posthuman Feedback Loop (Figure 4) within aespa’s visual strategy. This loop describes the reciprocal relationship between the human members and their digital avatars.



Figure 4. The Posthuman Feedback Loop in Aespa

3.4.1 Analysis of the Loop

This finding contrasts with traditional views of separation between human and machine, suggesting a new dynamic in AI-based entertainment. Instead, technologies such as motion capture and avatars redefine how the self is represented (Bae et al., 2025). The virtual avatars (æ) illustrate how boundaries between physical and virtual identities blur (Freund, 2025). While Freund (2025) focuses on ethical considerations, this study highlights the cultural phenomenon: AI shapes new concepts of humanity.

3.4.2 Digital Myth-Making

Aespa integrates traditional Korean hand gestures and myths into futuristic choreography. By combining nationalist themes with an international genre, the authors reinterpret nationalism, differing from the view of nationalism as purely historical. Aespa presents Korean mythology in a modern form, intertwining digital media with global futurist discourse

(Yoon, 2022). Ghvinjilia (2025) discusses human-machine integration in posthumanism; our analysis applies this to the specific aesthetic of glitch transitions, showing how these enhance visual interpretation. For comparison, artists such as Andrea Ciulu use AI to evoke nostalgia (Tolerance Ca, 2024). In contrast, aespa uses AI to construct a forward-looking posthuman identity. This distinction is crucial, whereas Western AI art often looks *back*, Aespa's Korean AI aesthetic looks *forward*, asserting a Techno-Orientalist dominance over the future imaginary.

4. Discussion

AI-mediated visual narratives in aespa's music videos cannot be understood merely as expressions of futuristic aesthetics or technological innovation; rather, they function as representational practices that actively construct meanings of South Korean cultural identity within the global digital sphere. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) framework, cultural identity in this context is not conceived as a pre-existing reality that is simply displayed, but as a product of meaning-making processes generated through systems of representation, namely, through configurations of visual signs, narratives, and media production practices. This analysis positions artificial intelligence, the entertainment industry, visual texts, and global audiences as interrelated entities that collectively participate in the production and circulation of cultural meaning.

In Next Level and Savage, AI operates as a mediating medium that enables the formation of a distinctive visual grammar, including digital avatars, the KWANGYA metaverse, glitch effects, and posthuman aesthetics that challenge the boundaries between the human body and virtual identity. Representatively, these elements do not function in isolation; instead, they interact with recognizable South Korean cultural symbols such as hanbok-inspired silhouettes, architectural references to hanok or palace gates, traditional dance gestures, the mythological figure of Naevis, and the use of Konglish. Through the process of articulation as described by Hall, these traditional and futuristic elements do not possess an inherent or natural connection, but are strategically assembled to produce a hybrid and fluid notion of "Koreanness" that is compatible with global imaginaries of the future. From this perspective, South Korean culture is represented not as a static heritage but as an identity capable of adaptation and transformation within digital landscapes.

The relationship between technological and cultural entities is central to this process of meaning construction. AI does not operate as a neutral tool; rather, it both constrains and enables particular modes of representing South Korea, especially the image of the nation as technologically advanced and relevant within global cultural production. Within Hall's

encoding–decoding framework, AI-based visual strategies produced by the entertainment industry encode South Korean identity through signs that possess dual readability: they are recognizable as local cultural symbols for audiences familiar with South Korean culture, while simultaneously functioning as globally legible aesthetics for international audiences. This condition helps explain why South Korean cultural identity in aespa’s music videos can be effectively disseminated within the global digital sphere without relinquishing claims to cultural distinctiveness.

Previous studies have conceptualized K-pop primarily as an instrument of cultural globalization and South Korean soft power, emphasizing industrial structures, global audiences, or the economic impact of cultural production. In contrast, this study diverges from earlier approaches by focusing on how identity meanings are constructed at the visual and symbolic level through the role of AI as a system of representation. The absence of substantive differences in conclusions regarding K-pop’s function as a global medium of identity can be attributed to a shared context: K-pop as a cultural product deliberately designed for international circulation. However, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that AI is not merely a production tool, but a cultural actor that actively participates in negotiating identity between the local and the global.

Finally, the representation of South Korean culture through AI-mediated visuals in aespa’s music videos reveals an inherent tension between cultural preservation and commodification. The transformation of hanbok into futuristic costumes or traditional mythology into digital narratives illustrates that cultural elements are preserved precisely through processes of recontextualization and adaptation to global market logics. From Hall’s perspective, this practice underscores that cultural identity is always produced within particular relations of power, in which industry, technology, and audiences collectively shape dominant meanings. Consequently, AI-mediated visual narratives in aespa’s music videos do not merely represent South Korean cultural identity, but function as discursive arenas in which that identity is continuously negotiated, constructed, and disseminated within contemporary global digital culture.



Figure 5. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This diagram illustrates that AI-mediated visual narratives serve as the foundational basis for the construction of visual texts in aespa's music videos. These visual texts are not understood as reflections of reality, but as cultural texts operating within Stuart Hall's (1997) system of representation. Through processes of signification at the levels of denotation, connotation, and ideology, various visual elements construct a hybrid form of Korean cultural identity, one that integrates traditional symbols with AI-based futuristic aesthetics. This identity is subsequently circulated and interpreted by global audiences through decoding processes within digital spaces, such that Korean cultural identity is not only constructed but also disseminated and continuously negotiated on a global scale.

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that artificial intelligence in Aespa's music videos functions as a representational mechanism that structures how Korean cultural identity is read and received globally. Within Hall's theoretical framework, AI-based visuals

do not represent culture in a neutral manner; rather, they actively articulate the relationship between tradition and futurism within a coherent narrative. The consistency of this hybridity indicates that Korean cultural identity is produced through visual strategies deliberately designed to align with the logic of global digital media while simultaneously maintaining cultural differentiation. In this way, AI emerges as a strategic medium for negotiating local–global identity within contemporary popular culture.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that AI-mediated visual narratives in aespa’s music videos play a decisive role in constructing South Korean cultural identity within global digital culture. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, the analysis demonstrates that cultural identity in these videos is not a pre-existing essence that is merely displayed, but a meaning actively produced through visual signs, narrative structures, and technological mediation. AI-driven elements such as avatars, metaverse spaces, glitch aesthetics, and posthuman imagery operate as representational mechanisms that shape how South Korean culture is framed, articulated, and circulated internationally. The findings show that traditional cultural symbols, including hanbok-inspired designs, mythological figures, architectural references, and embodied choreography, are not abandoned but recontextualized through AI-based aesthetics. This process produces a hybrid cultural identity that integrates tradition, futurism, and global media logic. Rather than diluting cultural authenticity, this hybridization enables South Korean cultural identity to remain recognizable while adapting to the expectations of transnational digital audiences. Within Hall’s encoding-decoding framework, these AI-mediated visuals are encoded by the entertainment industry to project South Korea as technologically advanced yet culturally grounded, while global audiences decode and negotiate these meanings across diverse cultural contexts. Importantly, the study highlights that AI is not a neutral technological instrument but a cultural actor embedded in relations of power, industry interests, and ideological framing. The transformation of cultural heritage into futuristic visual narratives reflects both preservation and commodification, underscoring the tension between cultural continuity and global market demands. By positioning AI as a system of representation, this research extends existing K-pop and soft power scholarship beyond macro-level economic or audience analyses, offering a micro-level examination of how cultural meaning is visually constructed. Overall, the study affirms that AI-mediated visual narratives function as a strategic medium through which South Korean cultural identity is negotiated between the local and the global. These narratives do not merely

represent culture but actively participate in its ongoing production, making AI a central force in shaping contemporary cultural identity within global popular media.

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