

FROM BIRMINGHAM TO GLOBALIZATION: THE ODYSSEY OF CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE HYBRID IDENTITY OF K-POP

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Abstract

This study aims to explain the history and development of cultural studies from the Birmingham School to the global context, and examine its application in case study analysis. The main focus of this study is how theories of cultural studies, which are interdisciplinary and always dynamic, develop along with the cultural changes that are continuously reproduced every day. The method used in this study is a qualitative-descriptive analysis with a historical approach and case studies, which also focuses on the phenomenon of K-pop as a representation of a hybrid culture that negotiates with global capitalism. The results of the analysis show that although the basic theories of Hoggart, Williams, and Hall remain the main pillars, cultural studies has evolved in accordance with the dynamics of technology, digital media, and transnational communication. From the case study analysis conducted, it is also clear that K-pop has succeeded in creating a hybrid cultural identity that is widely accepted in the international market by combining traditional Korean values with global production strategies. This shows how cultural practices can maintain their local characteristics while adapting to the development of globalization. This study further argues that contemporary culture, which originated from the classical ideas of Hoggart, Williams, and Hall, now emphasizes the formation of meaning and the dynamics of cultural exchange in the digital era.

Keywords: Birmingham school; Cultural studies; Globalization; Hybrid identity; K-pop

BACKGROUND

Cultural studies emerged as a critical cultural study that challenged the traditional view of how culture, long considered a guide to noble values containing aesthetic values possessed only by the elite (Arnold & Leavis, cited in Storey, 2021). For those who uphold elitism, mass culture is shallow. Cultural studies itself emerged at the Birmingham school in England, known as the “Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies” (CCCS). Through the thoughts of important figures in cultural studies such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, they rejected this view. Instead, they argued that culture is something moving and dynamic, inherent in human daily activities. Through this development, a movement occurred

between understandings of the shift in dominance of elite culture (high culture) to mass culture. The role of the Frankfurt School also contributed to the emergence of Cultural studies, namely, by analyzing culture, ideology, and capitalism.

In this modern era, digital media is a tool used to strengthen popular culture (Lubis et al., 2025). This is because digital platforms generate structured dynamics. For example, algorithms created in social media serve as tools for commercial expansion and user engagement. Digital media, becoming the primary platform for spreading trends, lifestyles, and creative expressions in today's society, serves as a tool for strengthening popular culture. Through websites like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, as well as OTT (Over-The-Top) streaming services like Netflix, Disney+, and Viu, popular culture can develop rapidly and reach audiences worldwide.

The focus of digital cultural studies is how culture, power, and identity are shaped, negotiated, and represented through digital technology and space. This approach views digital media not only as a means of communication but also as a new cultural space where ideologies, values, and social practices develop. In such situations, digital media becomes a place where cultural meanings are created, shared, and debated. In the digital era, cultural studies emphasize cultural hybridity, as the boundaries between local and international cultures are increasingly blurred. Phenomena such as K-pop, anime, or global fashion trends that are recreated locally by media users in various countries are examples. Therefore, cultural studies in digital media discuss not only content but also the relationship between technology, ideology, economics, and identity, making digital media a site of active cultural contestation.

In digital media, the relationship between cultural studies and K-pop demonstrates how popular culture is not only produced and consumed but also becomes a site for discussions about meaning, power, and identity. From the cultural studies perspective, digital media is considered a cultural space where ideologies and representations develop, and K-pop is a clear example of how this space is used to shape and disseminate culture worldwide. K-pop is not just an entertainment product, but it is also a cultural expression that combines Korean values with international trends through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter. Furthermore, K-pop also utilizes the logic of digital media to create a participatory culture where fans participate in meaning-making by creating artwork, fan-cams, response videos, and translating content into various languages.

This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) argument on the encoding/decoding model, which states that audiences have an active capacity to interpret cultural messages according to their own ideologies and social backgrounds. Furthermore, as explained by Jin & Yoon (2022). *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, the K-pop industry employs the concept of "manufactured hybridity," where entertainment companies employ and train artists to create content that simultaneously feels "foreign" (with global musical styles) and "familiar" (with collectivist values and a structured idol system). This reflects the concept of cultural hybridity, where local Korean elements (such as language, aesthetics, and collectivist values) are combined with global musical styles and productions to achieve widespread acceptance in the international market.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, aiming to gain an understanding of contemporary cultural dynamics within the context of the globalization of popular culture. This method combines case studies and historical analysis to provide a conceptual and contextual foundation for tracing the evolution of theories in cultural studies. Historically, cultural studies is rooted in the Birmingham school tradition, which focuses on the relationship between culture, power, and identity, and how mass culture reflects and discusses meaning amidst social change over time. In this research, the K-pop phenomenon in general is chosen as the primary case study to analyze the concept of cultural hybridity, namely, how Korean culture changes as a result of interactions with other cultures around the world.

To support this analysis, the “K-pop Demon Hunters” animation film is used as secondary data, demonstrating a concrete hybrid identity through the medium of animated film. Therefore, this film is positioned not as a K-pop strategy to penetrate the global market, but as a result of the cultural hybridization strategy that has been ongoing within the K-pop industry. The method used in this research is qualitative content analysis. Researchers use this method to understand the symbolic meanings, cultural representations, and hybrid practices found in the “K-pop Demon Hunters” film animation. It is hoped that this approach can provide a deeper understanding of how K-pop developed into a transnational phenomenon while explaining how the process of growth and negotiation of cultural identity takes place dynamically in the era of media globalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Emergence of Cultural Studies

Cultural studies at the Birmingham school, through the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in England in 1964, emerged as a rejection of previous cultural thinking as the dominance of elite culture, where culture is a high and civilized value. Matthew Arnold & F.R. Leavis define culture as something elite (high culture), where culture is the result of culture formed by groups with high social status and education. For them, culture is something that can improve morals, but only if the culture uses an elitist perspective. Arnold viewed that mass culture (popular culture) can cause cultural decline, through his famous phrase “The Best That Has Been Thought and Said in The World” (Arnold, 1867-9 cited in Storey, 2021). Leavis then continued this elitist idea with the view that “mass civilization” gives birth to a uniform culture that is considered shallow, because only a minority (elite) can maintain it (Leavis & Thompson, 1977, cited in Storey, 2021). Moving on to the Frankfurt school, Adorno & Horkheimer, in Lubis et al. (2025), explain that the Frankfurt school focuses on the analysis of culture, ideology, and power structures in elite (capitalist) societies. The Frankfurt school also introduced the existence of a cultural industry. Its function is to maintain the social status quo and also the economy, because popular culture formed by the masses is seen as an ideology to dominate, create strong stereotypes, public perceptions, and manipulate desires.

Cultural studies emerged here and acted as a theory that countered old elitism.

This is what then led to the development of cultural studies in England in the late 1950s and early 1960s through the establishment of cultural studies through the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), at the Birmingham school, in 1964. Richard Hoggart's work "The Uses of Literacy" (1957) became one of the initial frameworks in culturalism that had a major impact on the birth of cultural studies through the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Hoggart explained the focus of his research on working-class culture by trying to distinguish between culture "of the people," which is culture that grows in society, and culture "for the people," namely, mass culture produced for public consumption by industry. Hoggart also explained that the working class are not passive consumers, but also active users and adapt it to their own needs and values (Hoggart, 1957 cited in Storey, 2021). Then there is the work of E.P. Thompson's "The Making of the English Working Class" (1963) argues that the working class, as a social and cultural formation, did not emerge suddenly, but was shaped by historical processes and collective consciousness. Therefore, the working class can be concluded as a moving and living social relation. Hoff (2025), in the study using Raymond Williams's cultural studies framework, criticized how the relationship between economics and culture is too rigid and culture is considered passive, while economics is the determining factor.

According to Williams, culture also plays an active role in shaping social and economic life, influencing how people think and even how they work, as outlined in his 1958 study "Culture & Society," with the phrase "a whole way of life" (Storey, 2021). Therefore, culture is not limited to high culture or elite culture, but also encompasses everyday human life, from community culture, popular culture, and everyday activities. Then, when the CCCS was led by Stuart Hall (late 1960s-1970s), he adopted Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, through "The Prison Notebooks" (1929-1935), as a posthumous work, which shows how elites in society fight for their control through cultural approval of the public (the masses). Hegemony used in Cultural Studies can see popular culture not as a forced culture, but as an arena where it is used for continuous struggle (Gramsci, cited in Storey, 2021). Stuart Hall introduced the theory of encoding and decoding, explaining that human communication isn't that simple. The context isn't linear, especially in the present day, when encoders (e.g., directors or producers), consciously or unconsciously, want to set expectations for decoders (the audience) to understand the message they're trying to convey.

However, because decoders (audiences) come from diverse backgrounds, it can be concluded that they will have more diverse abilities in interpreting the messages being conveyed (Lewis, 2024). This process occurs due to different knowledge and cultural backgrounds. This is what the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has seen and observed. Mansouri et al. (2025) stated that the technological revolution also encourages transnational life, as evidenced by the young generation of migrants who live today, are bound and connected globally, so that their culture is no longer limited to the culture of their own country, but has blended with new cultures. Popular culture relies heavily on digital platforms and social media to make its communication complex. Thus, cultures that were previously marginal and closed can rise and become popular internationally through recommendations, algorithms, or online tag features, making digital media a tool used in the dissemination of

transnational culture to disseminate information and ideas to a wide audience (Wang, 2025).

Cultural Studies and Globalization

Continuing the previous movement that only discussed its history, cultural studies, which was initially considered a classical method, now plays a role in critically examining culture as part of the theory, methods, and literature that critically examine popular culture (Storey, 2021). Cultural studies is also required to expand its research and adapt to new cultural streams. Lewis (2024), in the study, emphasized that in contemporary studies, it is time to move away from the theory that states the world is dominated by the West. Although initially imperialism was tied to Western influence, society often holds the view that “if a cultural change occurs, it is always associated with the West.” The reason is none other than the phenomenon of “parallel modernities,” where these cultures occur in every country outside the West.

They may develop separately, but their characteristics remain the same, such as economic or political structures formed independently through diplomatic relations or foreign intervention. In the modern era, this cannot be seen in terms of who dominates whom, but rather in how culture can move freely transnationally, due to mass consumption that creates a global market. Cultural studies also examine the role of culture as something that continues to reproduce. Something that should be local feels global, and something global feels local (Lewis, 2024). Cultural hybridity can be a suitable theory to investigate how media, as a fusion tool, is the combination of two elements (cultures) into a more substantial whole (cultural mixing). This raises questions about the idea of local (national) culture, because it has obscured the view of culture itself (Yoon & Garcia, 2024).

K-Pop as a Global Cultural Phenomenon

Popular music phenomena like K-pop, demonstrate how popular culture can evolve into a complex transnational force. When the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, emerged, it marked a pivotal moment in the shift in global cultural currents from Western dominance to a more polycentric approach to cultural studies. Hallyu affirmed the role of East Asian culture in the global context and demonstrated the strategic expansion of the Korean entertainment industry. K-pop facilitates the expression of Korean national identity through music, dance, lifestyle, and cross-cultural interactions. This phenomenon is the result of South Korea's deliberate and conscious efforts to merge local culture with global values, making it a key export commodity and instrument of soft power (Glodev et al., 2023). K-pop's production and distribution strategies are crucial to expanding this culture onto the global stage. The Korean entertainment industry has built a professional production system that combines international standards of technology, music, and choreography with local values such as discipline, Korean cultural aesthetics, and narratives of national identity. Productions can compete in the global market by collaborating with foreign musicians, producers, and choreographers. This method produces a hybrid culture that reflects Korean characteristics and has a global appeal that transcends cultural and geographic differences. Furthermore, K-pop's distribution strategy aims to spread this culture worldwide through digital media and platforms. This rapid and

interactive content distribution can be achieved through the use of channels like YouTube, global music streaming services, and social networks.

Through intense sharing, translation, and engagement in digital spaces, the global pandemic has also served as a tool for cultural dissemination. K-pop has become not only an entertainment product but also a crucial tool for the globalization of Korean culture. K-pop is now more than just a local expression of Korean culture. It has evolved into a form of popular culture that has spread worldwide, creating a global social and cultural network. International fandoms are growing because they are not just passive consumers; they also create meaning and disseminate culture. K-pop fandoms are transnational cultural actors crucial in spreading Korean culture worldwide. They are not just consumers of entertainment but also agents of cultural dissemination. Fandoms directly increase K-pop's popularity and appeal worldwide, evidenced by ongoing concrete actions such as translating lyrics, sharing content on social media, organizing international streaming projects, creating reaction videos, and holding community events. K-pop can spread quickly and effectively worldwide thanks to the cultural network formed by these activities. More than just a form of support, fandom participation also functions as a mechanism for cultural reproduction; This transforms Korean values and identity into a global cultural product that is easily accessible and accepted by a wide range of audiences (Mo Koo J. & Mo Koo H, 2022). K-pop has also developed into a strategic instrument for South Korea to enhance its national image and international power.

Unbeknownst to the widespread reach of K-pop, South Korea has used this opportunity to promote its cultural values through various means, including international cultural programs and cross-border collaborations in education and the creative sector. This demonstrates the South Korean government's active integration of the cultural industry into its foreign policy. Hallyu serves as a channel for cultural communication, creating an image of Korea as a modern, creative, and open nation, while simultaneously bridging cultural differences and strengthening diplomatic relations. As Oliveira (2025) emphasizes in the article "The Hallyu Wave as a Strategic Soft Power Tool: South Korea's Cultural Diplomacy in the 21st Century," Hallyu is no longer viewed simply as a cultural trend; it has evolved into a planned and directed state diplomatic project with tangible political and commercial impacts. Furthermore, Hallyu reflects a strategic model of soft power that integrates cultural appeal, institutional support, and global market dynamics, strengthening South Korea's position in the international cultural and diplomatic arena (Kasmahidayat et al, 2025). The results of these efforts include enhanced relations and economic growth through cultural exports and tourism, as well as the establishment of a strong Korean identity globally.

Case Study: K-pop Demon Hunters



Figure 1. K-pop Demon Hunters official Netflix Trailer in June 2025
(Source: Netflix, 2025)

Quoted from the TUDUM by NETFLIX website, this film was directed by Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, with a story written by Kang herself. Released on June 20, 2025, this film immediately received lots of attention on NETFLIX because of the collaborative project between NETFLIX and Sony Pictures Animation, which also produced the famous animated film, "Spider-Man: Across the Spider-verse," which was released in June 2023 ago. The K-pop Demon Hunters animation film also involves various voice actors, especially from South Korea, namely Ahn Hyo-seop and Lee Byung Hun who play the voices of the characters Jinu and Gwi-ma. Members of the famous girl group, Jihyo, Chaeyoung, and Jeongyeon from the girl group TWICE, also participated in filling the soundtrack for this film. Other actresses and actors, who are indeed South Koreans living in America, are also involved in the work on this film project (Korean Diaspora). This project then became a trend and popular. Initially aimed at children, it eventually attracted a lot of attention because of the fans of the artists involved, as well as the K-pop culture that became the project of this film (Hatchett, 2025).

The K-pop Demon Hunters animation film is an example of a product resulting from the presence of popular culture. This product can then be analyzed using the concept of hybrid identity, because in fact, new identities will always develop through the mixing of various cultural elements. The context of hybrid identity in this film is also clearly visible, where there is a combination of global identity of K-pop with local identity, which can be seen through elements of South Korean folklore about the guardians and the demons. This culture is then combined with the characteristics of Hollywood animated films, which then forms a cultural hybridity. The context includes the combination of South Korean and American elements. The author will

describe the findings of this hybrid identity process in 3 (three) most visible aspects, namely:

a) Visual hybridity

The K-pop Demon Hunters animation film combines modern animation with the concept of demon hunters. Putting our view on the visual effects, which are characteristic of K-pop, the visuals will be made as attractive as possible to attract the audience. In the K-pop Demon Hunters animation film itself, it is shown that three hero characters who are demon hunters, namely Rumi, Mira, and Zoey, disguise themselves as K-pop girl group superstars while protecting their fans from the dangers of evil powers brought by demons who also disguise themselves as K-pop boy group stars (Hatchett, 2025). Through this contrast, the film depicts how a Superstar does many difficult things simultaneously, such as dancing, singing, and maintaining their image as an idol. To reach the global market, K-pop spreads its spread into all aspects, one of which is by emphasizing visual effects, by using catchy song melodies, choreography, and attractive group visuals (Yixuan, 2023).

b) Narrative Hybridity

Hatchett (2025), explains that the narrative contained in The K-pop Demon Hunters animation film also includes two intersecting genres, which tell about South Korean mythology related to hunters and demons, directly addressing how, at the beginning of the story, demons terrorize the village community, then are driven away by the presence of hunters. This traditional theme is then narrated again with a typical theme from Hollywood stories, with the theme of the superhero and villain. HUNTR/X (who are told as guardians) must fight Saja Boys (demons disguised as boy group members). Both are then combined into a hybrid form, where this narrative forms a new culture, between K-pop and Hollywood, which produces a product that can be accepted by the wider community, because of the acceptance from that cultural crossover itself.

c) Audio Hybridity

K-pop has its own unique characteristics, especially when it comes to music. The most obvious distinctive musical structure of K-pop is the blend of Korean rhythms with Western music genres, such as R&B, hip-hop, and EDM, found in their songs (Anggraini, 2021; Aziz, 2025, cited in 'Ouelya & Muniroch, 2025). In the K-pop Demon Hunters animation film, the soundtrack is predominantly English, but still uses Korean. The use of English in K-pop song lyrics is intended to attract a global audience (El Farabi, 2020, cited in 'Ouelya & Muniroch, 2025). The soundtrack and voice actors were created and filled by songwriters, composers, and also famous artists such as EJAE (Korean-American female songwriter), Kevin Woo (former member of the boy group U-KISS), Ahn Hyo-seop (Korean-Canadian actor and singer), and Jihyo, Jeongyeon, and Chaeyoung (girl group TWICE), who have contributed to the creation of audio in this film, thus receiving five Grammy Nominations in 2026 (Hatchett, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Initially, culture, which belonged exclusively to the elite, was a structured and learned culture. However, this culture did not exhibit a continuous movement of change. This was inconsistent with how human life is constantly changing over time.

Culture then moved to be further criticized by intellectuals, leading to the emergence of cultural studies. The emergence of cultural studies emphasized the importance of noting that the culture that continues to develop is the culture created and produced by the working class. Over time, culture then entered the realm of popular culture, which is only temporary, but its movement is massive and spreads rapidly, due to the influence of technology. This finding proves that the idea that emerged, about the criticism of culture that is only owned by the elite, actually reproduces more in society, because it encompasses their daily lives and will continue to change, following existing movements.

The condition, in the contemporary era is now very visible, where through a thought of cultural studies which is an interdisciplinary branch of science, it shows that culture which was initially only held by the elite, then moved to the working class, the emergence of the colonial era, criticism of postcolonialism, until today, the era where humans live side by side with the era of globalization, giving rise to the era of soft power and cultural hybridity which can be directly accepted in the wider community, indicating that cultural studies, studies the theory of hegemony using popular culture as a battle arena that will occur continuously, which is controlled by the elite without any coercion, but fighting for their control over society through hegemony itself.

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