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Music

KPop Demon Hunters is storming the charts — but is K-pop's popularity slipping in its homeland?

Netflix's animated musical film has had cross-discipline success but labour conditions and price points raise questions about the health of the genre



Perfect overkill: the fictional girl group, Huntr/x in 'KPop Demon Hunters' © NETFLIX

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"Perfect all-kill" is the name in South Korea for a hit song that reaches number one in every major music chart, of which there is a bewildering profusion. The home of K-pop measures musical success by aggregated data from streaming platforms, updated on a real-time, daily and weekly basis. The perfect all-kill notches the top spot in every category. But a new term might need minting for the commercial juggernaut that is KPop Demon Hunters.

Netflix's animated film about a Korean girl group battling a demonic boyband came out in June. Since then it has become the streamer's most watched movie. It was Netflix's first number one in the North American box office charts after a brief release in cinemas. The three members of the fictional girl group, Huntr/x, feature in the online video game Fortnite this month. And their songs are duking it out in the real pop charts with those of their boyband adversaries, Saja Boys.

Fifteen weeks after the single first charted, the heroic girls of Huntr/x are at number one in the US singles chart with "Golden", a dance-pop anthem in the motivational mould of Frozen's "Let It Go". The soul-sucking Saja Boys are at number seven with the infernally catchy "Soda Pop" and also number 10 with bombastic stomper "Your Idol". Meanwhile, the film's soundtrack has the top spot in the album chart.

KPop Demon Hunters's multi-tentacle success across different media deserves an even more hyperbolic phrase than perfect all-kill. Ultimate all-kill, perhaps, or perfect overkill. But it is not quite the coup for K-pop that it seems.

Although set in Seoul, the film has not emerged from South Korea, at least not directly. It was made for Netflix by another US company, Sony Pictures Animation. Its cast and production team are led by members of the Korean diaspora in Canada and the US. The songs are pitch-perfect exercises in classic K-pop, a mix of sugar, schmaltz and steel — but they mask the extent to which today's K-pop industry is faltering.

Korean pop announced itself to the world with "Gangnam Style" by the singer Psy in 2012, a brash comedy song about the highlife whose video was the first to reach 1bn views on YouTube. The global rise of K-pop followed later in the decade. The boyband BTS played the spearhead role of The Beatles in this Korean invasion, while Blackpink established themselves as their girl group opposite numbers.

There are echoes of both acts in KPop Demon Hunters. Huntr/x's "How It's Done" is a Blackpink-style warrior dance, like a glittery haka, while the Saja Boys ape their toothsome counterparts in BTS with a melange of sweet croons and brisk rapping. The musical style is pan-global, borrowing as freely from Bollywood as Britney Spears, with lyrics blending English and Korean.

This export-friendly sound has turned South Korea into a major musical hub. But K-pop's popularity in its homeland appears to be slipping. After almost a decade of growth, album sales dropped by almost 20 per cent in 2024 and have continued declining. There are suspicions that young fans have been rinsed too effectively with costly meet-and-greets, merchandise and numerous editions of the same recordings. K-pop's labour conditions have also come under criticism.

The girl group trio in KPop Demon Hunters work constantly, but their manager is a flustered, kindly figure who only charges three per cent on their earnings. In reality, at least 15 per cent is typical. So is micromanagement of careers, looks and private lives. K-pop training is arduous, beginning at a tender age. K-pop: Idols in Wonderland, a new book by Korean journalist Jeon Da-hyun, depicts a bootcamp regime of 21-hour working days, neglected schooling and unhealthy dieting.

A glut of samey performers has slowed K-pop's momentum. Its biggest names have also had their progress checked. BTS will return to action in 2026 after a four-year hiatus caused by its members doing military service. Girl group NewJeans, the fastest Korean act to reach 1bn Spotify streams, are mired in a contract dispute with their record label. A court ruling is due at the end of this month.

One answer to the difficulty of fitting real people into K-pop's cartoonish fantasyland of girlish women and boyish men is to dispense with flesh-and-blood humans. The animated singing stars in KPop Demon Hunters are doll-like visions of unreal K-pop perfection. They have impossibly long legs, cutely shrunken torsos, neat mouths, expressive big eyes and elaborately styled hair, like the Saja Boy whose pink locks frame his flawless face in the shape of a heart.

Animations are appealing to children, an important constituency for K-pop. Other virtual acts include Plave, a cartoon boyband that has had several hit albums. A future in which computer games, anime, fictional groups and AI become entwined isn't unimaginable. But it will risk turning K-pop into a siloed branch of kids' music, losing any emotional or imaginative connection with the older teens and young adults who also make up its mostly female fanbase. In that respect, KPop Demon Hunters is an all-conquering distraction from current challenges, not the solution.