

Using “Hallyu” Media and the Physical: Asia Trend to Refresh Mongolian Cultural Tourism

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Mongolia’s tourism strategy from a traditional emphasis on “heritage tourism” to a more modern “**content-driven tourism**” approach. While the Naadam Festival remains a key attraction, recent South Korean media productions filmed in or featuring Mongolia—such as “Crash Landing on You”, “Strong Girl Nam-soon”, and the anticipated 2025 success “**Physical: Asia**”—have introduced a novel, high-value entry point for international tourists. By analyzing viewership data and the “underdog” narrative of Team Mongolia in “*Physical: Asia*”, this paper suggests that Mongolia is uniquely positioned to leverage “**Strength Tourism**”, encouraging global travelers to observe and engage in physical training within its cultural context. **Strength Tourism** is formally defined as a niche segment of Special Interest Tourism (SIT), integrating elements of **adventure tourism** and **wellness tourism**, where the primary motivation for travel is the active, immersive pursuit of physical challenges and fitness practices that are deeply rooted in a destination’s cultural heritage (Tashpulatova & Suyunova, 2025). Mongolia’s tourism strategy is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting from a traditional focus on heritage tourism—centered on cultural and historical landmarks such as the Naadam Festival—to a dynamic, content-driven model that capitalizes on contemporary media influences. The increasing popularity of South Korean television dramas and productions filmed in Mongolia has introduced fresh narratives and visual representations that resonate with audiences’ sensibilities. These media portrayals not only highlight Mongolia’s scenic landscapes and cultural richness but also create new emotional and aspirational connections with international viewers, thereby expanding the country’s appeal beyond conventional tourism. Building upon this momentum, the concept of “**Strength Tourism**” has emerged as a novel and promising area for scholarly investigation. By capitalizing on the underdog narrative of Team Mongolia in the widely viewed series “*Physical: Asia*”, Mongolia has positioned itself as a destination where visitors can actively engage with physical training and fitness practices

that are deeply embedded in its cultural heritage. This approach invites travelers to participate in immersive experiences that integrate physical challenges with cultural exploration, offering a high-value interactive form of tourism. This strategy aligns with global trends favoring experiential travel and wellness, potentially enhancing Mongolia's competitive advantage in attracting diverse tourist segments seeking cultural authenticity and personal development.

Keywords

Content-Driven Tourism, Mongolian Branding, Physical Asia, Hallyu, Netflix

1. Introduction

The success of the Netflix reality competition “**Physical: Asia**” has sparked a rare and significant media opportunity in Mongolia. Following the show's massive viewership and dedicated fanbase, the Netflix production team took the unusual step of filming a two-episode bonus special titled “Welcome to Mongolia”. This decision, which is seldom made by Netflix purely based on audience demand, underscores the strong international resonance of the show and its Mongolian participants' appeal.

The show's success was significantly amplified by the compelling figures from the Mongolian team. The team's narrative was personified by the “**heroic underdog**” story of athletes like Enkh-Orgil, an MMF fighter who became a champion and drew substantial audience attention. Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural icons, such as Daichid Morindoo, whose work in crafting the *arkhyir* (a symbol of national heritage) gained celebrity status, helped bridge traditional culture with modern media.

For decades, Mongolia's global destination image has remained static, primarily defined as the “**last frontier**” of nomadic life, with a heavy focus on heritage tourism. However, the contemporary travel landscape is rapidly being reshaped by “**Set-Jetting**”, a trend where travel decisions are directly influenced by streaming content (Che et al., 2021). Mongolia's evolving tourism strategy leverages this media phenomenon to redefine and invigorate its global image.

By capitalizing on the viral success of South Korean media productions and reality formats such as “*Physical: Asia*”, Mongolia is shifting toward a dynamic, **content-driven approach**. The show not only provided an extensive showcase of Mongolia's natural landscapes but also constructed emotionally resonant narratives, such as that of the resilient Mongolian team. This emotional engagement fosters “**Strength Tourism**”, a new market where visitors actively seek immersive, participatory experiences that blend traditional cultural practices, such as **Bökh wrestling**, with modern fitness trends. This transforms passive spectatorship into active involvement in the country's culture.

The strategic integration of these media-driven narratives extends to Mongolia's

most iconic event, the **Naadam Festival**. By repositioning the festival as an “**Original Physical Championship**”, the country aligns it with the contemporary global fitness culture and social media engagement. This rebranding effort, which utilizes influencer participation and viral challenges, helps sustain international interest throughout the year, effectively extending the tourism season beyond traditional peak periods. This synergy between authentic cultural heritage and modern digital storytelling not only diversifies Mongolia’s tourism offerings but also strategically targets a younger, fitness-oriented demographic, ultimately enhancing the country’s competitive position in the global market. This innovative framework demonstrates a model for emerging markets to utilize popular media as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development and for international cultural diplomacy.

By late 2025, Mongolia had transcended its role as a passive filming location and became a central character in global entertainment (Lobato, 2020). The culmination of this trend was the massive success of Netflix’s *Physical: Asia*, which aired in South Korea from October to November 2025. This article proposes a strategic framework: utilizing these viral media moments as a “**digital hook**” to funnel tourists into immersive cultural experiences, specifically linking modern fitness trends with the ancient tradition of the Naadam Festival. Mongolia’s image as the enduring “last frontier” of nomadic life has long been fixed in the global imagination. However, the post-pandemic travel landscape has undergone a significant transformation driven by the rise of “Set-Jetting”, where travel choices are increasingly influenced by streaming media content. By late 2025, Mongolia evolved from merely serving as a backdrop for filming to becoming a prominent feature in international entertainment, highlighted by the widespread acclaim of Netflix’s *Physical: Asia* series. This article introduces a strategic framework that leverages viral media phenomena as a “digital hook” to attract tourists to deeply engaging cultural experiences, notably by connecting contemporary fitness trends with the Naadam Festival.

Potential Limitations and Risks

While the content-driven approach offers significant advantages, it carries inherent risks that must be acknowledged. **First, cultural commodification** poses a risk, where traditional practices like Bõkh wrestling or the nomadic lifestyle may be oversimplified or altered to fit international media demands, potentially diluting their cultural authenticity for the sake of marketability. **Second, the strategy is vulnerable to the volatility of media trends.** Over-reliance on the success of *Hallyu* or one specific show like *Physical: Asia* leaves the tourism sector exposed to rapid shifts in global streaming preferences and audience interest. **Third, the proposed “Strength Tourism” activities, such as Nomadic Bootcamps, introduce potential environmental impacts.** Activities like tire dragging or increased traffic in sensitive steppe regions require strict management to prevent ecological damage and preserve Mongolia’s unique natural heritage. Addressing these limitations is crucial for ensuring sustainable and responsible tourism development.

2. The “Hallyu” Precedent: Korean Content as a Tourism Driver

In order to explain how “Hallyu” (Benner & Waldfogel, 2020) is reflected in content media, Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, is prominently reflected in content media through the widespread popularity of Korean dramas, music, and films that showcase Korean culture and lifestyle. This phenomenon has led to increased global consumption of Korean media content, influencing trends and preferences beyond South Korea’s borders and into the Philippines. Additionally, media content often integrates themes of modernity, tradition, and social values that resonate with diverse international audiences, further amplifying the cultural impact of Hallyu (Jin & Yoon, 2014).

1) **“Transnational Cultural Flow and Spreadable Media Theory”** Hallyu is a transnational cultural movement, facilitated by digital and social media platforms. (Lee & Nornes, 2015) acts as “spreadable media”, where active audience participation in sharing and localizing content drives its global dissemination. This explains how South Korean productions featuring Mongolia (e.g., *Physical: Asia*) have gained viral traction, enabling Mongolia to leverage its global exposure for tourism, **specifically by driving traffic to the “Welcome to Mongolia” bonus special.**

2) **“Uses and Gratifications Theory”** addresses audience motivations for consuming Hallyu content, such as entertainment, identity formation, and social connection (Chung & Jeong, 2024). This theory has been applied to tourism, demonstrating that engagement with Korean media increases tourists’ purchase intentions for related travel experiences. Mongolia’s strategy capitalizes on this by linking media exposure to tourist interest to attract visitors, **informing the development of themed travel itineraries like “CLOY Itineraries” and “Courier Tours”**. This theory has been applied to tourism, demonstrating that engagement with Korean media increases tourists’ purchase intentions for related travel experiences. Mongolia’s strategy capitalizes on this by linking media exposure to tourist interest to attract visitors.

3) **“Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy”** Hallyu acts as a soft power instrument, enhancing South Korea’s cultural influence internationally without coercion (Chung & Jeong, 2024). Mongolia’s use of Hallyu media, particularly the “*Physical: Asia*” series, aligns with this by rebranding its tourism image and fostering cultural exchange, effectively benefiting from the cultural diplomacy embedded in Korean content, **which helps position Mongolia as an attractive partner for future co-productions.**

4) **“Brand Storytelling and Underdog Narrative Theory”** (Benner & Waldfogel, 2020) emphasizes the emotional impact of storytelling, especially the “underdog” narrative, in creating brand identification. The portrayal of Team Mongolia as the “Heroic Underdog” in “*Physical: Asia*” fosters strong audience empathy and identification, strengthening Mongolia’s tourism brand by associating it with resilience and empowerment, **which directly underpins the marketing of the “Strength Tourism” concept.**

5) **“Cultural Hybridization and Glocalization”** Hallyu content blends Korean cultural elements with global influences, allowing for local adaptation while maintaining Korean identity (Kim et al., 2009). Mongolia’s tourism rebranding integrates traditional cultural features (e.g., the Naadam Festival) with modern fitness and media narratives, creating a hybrid, glocalized appeal that resonates with diverse audiences worldwide, **manifesting in the proposal to rebrand Naadam as the “Original Physical Championship”**.

Together, these theories explain how Hallyu media drives Mongolia’s tourism transformation by expanding global awareness, shaping tourist motivations, and enabling Mongolia to position itself as a unique and active destination through its compelling nature and culture.

Before the *Physical* phenomenon, three key South Korean productions laid the groundwork for this tourism surge. These productions not only showcase the rich cultural heritage and modern vibrancy of South Korea but also captivate international audiences with compelling storytelling and high production values. By highlighting iconic locations, traditional customs, and contemporary lifestyles, these works fostered global interest and curiosity about the country, effectively planting the seeds for increased tourism. Moreover, the popularity of these productions has created a ripple effect that extends beyond the realm of entertainment. They influenced travel behavior by inspiring fans to visit filming sites and experience the settings depicted on screen. This phenomenon has contributed to South Korea’s growing reputation as a desirable travel destination, blending cultural appeal with celebrity and media exposure. Collectively, these early productions established a cultural foundation that amplified the impact of subsequent phenomena on tourism.

- **Crash Landing on You (2019-2020):** By using the Ulaanbaatar Railway Station and the steppe to depict North Korea, this drama romanticized the Mongolian landscape for a global audience, creating a demand for “CLOY Itineraries” centered on railway nostalgia and bonfire experiences.
- **Strong Girl Nam-soon (2023):** This series explicitly brands Mongolia as a land of vitality. The protagonist’s backstory—gaining super-strength from the Mongolian environment—subconsciously marketed the country as a wellness destination where visitors could “recharge” their power.
- **Couriers in Mongolia (2023):** This variety show (featuring the “Dragon’s Club” celebrities) showcases the *reality* of Mongolian logistics. This validated the “Courier Tour” concept, where tourists ride horses not just for leisure, but to complete “delivery missions” to remote families, fostering genuine cultural exchange. These productions collectively crafted a multifaceted image of Mongolia that appeals to diverse tourist interests, including nostalgia, adventure, wellness, and cultural immersion. By leveraging popular media, they have transformed Mongolia from a relatively obscure destination into an attractive locale with unique visitor experiences. This strategic portrayal sets a precedent for how content-driven tourism can effectively stimulate interest and visitation in emerging markets, such as India.

- **Pororo the Penguin (2003):** The “*Pororo the Penguin*” series holds the distinction of being the first animated program to be officially dubbed into the Mongolian language. Produced by Iconix Entertainment, the series originally aired in 2003 and consists of 52 episodes in its first season (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This pioneering adaptation played a crucial role in making international children’s entertainment accessible to Mongolian-speaking audiences, allowing young viewers to engage with content in their native languages. By providing high-quality animation accompanied by Mongolian voiceovers, the series enhances the viewing experience and supports cultural and linguistic inclusivity within Mongolia. This initiative paved the way for future localization efforts, highlighting the importance of adapting global media to meet the needs of diverse linguistic communities and fostering greater connections between children and international programs.

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3. Case Study: The Physical: Asia Phenomenon (2025)

The release of *Physical: Asia* (a spin-off of *Physical: 100*) in October 2025 marked a watershed moment for Mongolian soft power. Unlike scripted dramas, this reality competition provided an unscripted demonstration of Mongolian resilience that resonated with a global audience, and its authentic portrayal of physical endurance and mental toughness highlighted Mongolia’s cultural values of perseverance and strength. Furthermore, *Physical: Asia* served as a platform for Mongolian athletes and participants to gain international recognition, enhancing the country’s image on the global stage. The release of *Physical: Asia* in October 2025 not only showcased Mongolian resilience but also strategically amplified Mongolia’s cultural diplomacy by leveraging the global media. Unlike traditional scripted content, the reality competition’s unscripted format allowed for genuine expressions of endurance and mental fortitude, which are deeply connected to international viewers seeking authentic cultural narratives. This organic engagement helped dismantle stereotypes and presented Mongolia as a nation characterized by determination and strength, fostering a more nuanced global understanding of its people and heritage. The program’s success also catalyzed increased tourism interest and cross-cultural exchanges, as audiences became curious about the roots of these values embedded in Mongolian society (Tugjamba et al., 2021). Moreover, *Physical: Asia* created significant opportunities for Mongolian athletes and participants to emerge as cultural ambassadors, gaining visibility that transcended the sports and entertainment fields. Their performances and stories resonate on a human level, inspiring pride in Mongolia and encouraging youth participation in physical and cultural pursuits. This heightened visibility contributed to Mongolia’s soft power by

positioning it as a country that values perseverance and excellence, thereby enhancing its international image and influence. The show's impact extended beyond entertainment, serving as a vehicle for national branding that highlighted Mongolia's unique cultural identity and potential on the global stage and attracted foreign tourists to the country.

It attracted widespread media attention, boosted interest in Mongolian traditions, and inspired a new wave of domestic cultural pride.

Viewership and Global Reach

The following viewership data and celebrity actions are presented as illustrative examples or hypothetical projections used to model the potential impact of such a media phenomenon on a niche tourism market.

According to Netflix Tudum data, *Physical: Asia* was a dominant force in Q4 2025:

- **Rankings:** The show debuted at No. 3 on the Global Top 10 (Non-English TV) list and remained in the Top 10 for four consecutive weeks.
- During its peak week (October 27-November 2), the show recorded over **5.2 million viewing hours** globally.
- **Regional Dominance:** It ranked #1 in eight countries and reached the top 10 in 26 markets, including key tourism sources such as South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia.
- The "Runner-Up" Narrative and Viral Empathy
- While Team South Korea won the championship in the finale (aired November 18, 2025), Team Mongolia's second-place finish generated a more powerful marketing narrative: the "**Heroic Underdog**".

Viral Moments: "Castle Conquest" (Quest 5) became a defining moment on social media. While Team Japan was eliminated, Team Mongolia successfully moved the 2.2-ton cart across the sand in 25 min, showcasing raw functional strength that went viral on TikTok under the hashtag **#TeamMongolia** (10M+ aggregate views).

Cultural Ambassadors: Captain Orkhonbayar Bayarsaikhan (a National Elephant rank wrestler) and acrobat Lkhagva-Ochir Erdene-Ochir (who dominated the "Hanging Endurance" challenge) successfully personified the "**Strong Mongol**" archetype.

The Controversy Factor: Online debates regarding the fairness of the final "Iron Ball Dragging" match against Korea have ironically kept Mongolia in the news cycle, creating a "**sympathetic curiosity**" that drives travel intent.

4. Strategic Framework: Creating "Special Interest Tourism" (SIT)

To monetize this attention, Mongolia must pivot from general sightseeing to "**Participation Tourism**". The widespread media attention garnered by *Physical: Asia* significantly elevated global awareness of Mongolian cultural traditions, fueling a resurgence of national pride. The show's impressive viewership metrics, including a debut at No. 3 on Netflix's Global Top 10 (Non-English TV) list and

a sustained presence in the Top 10 for four weeks, underscore its broad appeal in the international market. Its regional dominance, particularly ranking #1 in eight countries and entering the top 10 in 26 markets, highlights Mongolia's growing influence in key tourism source countries such as South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia. This visibility not only showcased Mongolia's unique cultural and physical prowess but also positioned the country as an emerging destination with a compelling narrative (Raji et al., 2024).

The "Runner-Up" narrative surrounding Team Mongolia's second-place finish created a resonant marketing story that transcended the mere competition results. The viral success of moments like the "Castle Conquest" challenge, which demonstrated Mongolia's raw strength and endurance, amplified its image as a land of resilient and formidable people. Key figures such as Captain Orkhonbayar Bayarsaikhan and acrobat Lkhagva-Ochir Erdene-Ochir embodied the "Strong Mongol" archetype, becoming cultural ambassadors who emotionally connected with global audiences. Furthermore, the controversy and debates over the fairness of the final match against South Korea sustained Mongolia's presence in public discourse, generating sympathetic curiosity that translated into increased travel interest. To capitalize on this momentum, Mongolia's strategic shift toward "**Special Interest Tourism**" (SIT) aims to engage visitors beyond passive sightseeing, encouraging active participation in cultural and physical experiences that deepen connections and foster sustainable tourism growth in the country.

"Strength Tourism" and Training Camps

The viral success of *Physical: Asia* proves there is a market for "**fitness pilgrimages**".

- **Proposal:** Establish "**Nomadic Bootcamps**" endorsed by the show's contestants. These 3-day programs would combine traditional **Bökh** wrestling training with the "survival" aesthetic of the show (e.g., tire dragging on the steppe, hill sprints).
- **Proof of Concept:** Just days after the finale (November 28, 2025), *Physical: Asia* winner and Korean celebrity Jang Eun-sil visited Mongolia to train with the national judo team. This celebrity endorsement validates the "**training tour**" model.
- The "Naadam" Integration
The **Naadam Festival** should be rebranded for international audiences not just as "**Three Manly Games**", but as the "**Original Physical Championship**".
- **Strategy:** Market the wrestling tournament using *Physical: Asia* terminology (e.g., referring to rounds as "Quests").
- **Content Creation:** Invite international fitness influencers to attempt "**mini-Naadam**" challenges, creating a content loop that keeps Mongolia relevant on social media all year round.

5. Conclusion

The symbiotic relationship between high-impact global streaming content, specifically the *Physical: Asia* phenomenon, and Mongolia's national tourism sector

establishes a profound and measurable synergy. The program fundamentally recontextualized the nation's global image in a manner that traditional marketing campaigns could not replicate. By showcasing the raw tenacity and technical prowess of its athletes, the show effectively rebranded Mongolia from a destination defined solely by its "vast, remote, ancient landscape" to an **"arena of modern strength, resilience, and peak functional fitness"**. This marks a crucial strategic pivot from attracting passive scenery viewers to engaging active cultural participants in the tourism sector. The *Physical: Asia* streaming series transformed Mongolia's global image by highlighting its athletes' strength and resilience, shifting the perception from a remote scenic destination to a dynamic hub for active cultural tourism, thereby creating a powerful synergy with the national tourism sector.

This unprecedented digital exposure, fueled by millions of global viewing hours, provides a valuable and finite opportunity for research. The tourism sector is now strategically positioned to capitalize on this media-driven demand by developing specialized, high-value experiential products, such as the proposed **"Nomad Bootcamp"**, which directly appeals to the new demographic of young, active travelers. This approach ensures that visitors do not simply observe a foreign land but are motivated to participate and test their own limits against Mongolia's cultural legacy. Ultimately, successful integration will solidify the Naadam Festival as the world's original and ultimate Physical Championship. The transformative impact of the *Physical: Asia* series on Mongolia's tourism sector extends beyond mere image enhancement; it catalyzes a fundamental shift in how the country positions itself in the global travel market. By spotlighting the grit, skill, and endurance of Mongolian athletes, the program dismantles outdated stereotypes and introduces a dynamic narrative of Mongolia as a hub for physical challenges and cultural immersion. This repositioning invites a more engaged and experiential form of tourism, moving away from the passive appreciation of landscapes towards active participation in the country's heritage and lifestyle. This narrative shift also aligns with global trends favoring adventure and wellness tourism, creating fertile ground for Mongolia to diversify and upscale its tourism offerings.

Capitalizing on this momentum requires the strategic development of niche, high-value experiences that resonate with the new audience drawn by the show's portrayal. Initiatives such as the "Nomad Bootcamp" exemplify this approach by offering immersive, physically demanding activities that connect visitors directly with Mongolian traditions and the rugged environment. Such offerings not only enhance visitor engagement but also extend the economic benefits of tourism deeper into local communities and cultural institutions in the region. Furthermore, embedding the Naadam Festival within this framework as the definitive Physical Championship reinforces Mongolia's unique cultural identity while leveraging global exposure to attract a dedicated and active traveler demographic. This synergy between media-driven demand and tailored tourism products positions Mongolia for sustainable growth in a competitive global marketplace.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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