LEVERAGING 'HALLYU' MEDIA AND THE *PHYSICAL: ASIA* PHENOMENON TO REBRAND MONGOLIAN CULTURAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of Mongolia's tourism strategy from the traditional focus on "heritage tourism" to a more contemporary "content-driven tourism" approach (Chung & Jeong, 2024). Although the Naadam Festival continues to be a central 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" Physical: Asia —have introduced a novel, high-value entry point for international tourists. (*Domestic Tourism in Asia*, 2009) By analyzing viewership data and the "underdog" narrative of Team Mongolia in "Physical: Asia," this paper posits that Mongolia is uniquely positioned to leverage "Strength Tourism," encouraging global travelers to observe and engage in physical training within its culture.

Keywords: Content-Driven Tourism, Destination Branding, Physical: Asia, Hallyu, Special Interest Tourism (SIT).

1. INTRODUCTION: THE DIGITAL REINVENTION OF THE NOMAD

For decades, Mongolia's destination image has been static, defined by the "last frontier" of nomadic life. However, the post-pandemic travel landscape has been reshaped by "Set-Jetting" a trend in which travel decisions are driven by streaming content. (Hannonen, 2023) Mongolia's evolving tourism strategy exemplifies how contemporary media phenomena can be harnessed to redefine and invigorate a nation's global image. By shifting from a static portrayal centered on heritage tourism to a dynamic, content-driven approach, Mongolia capitalizes on the viral success of South Korean media productions and reality competitions such as "Physical: Asia." These not only showcase Mongolia's natural landscapes but also construct compelling narratives, such as the "Heroic Underdog" of Team Mongolia, that resonate emotionally with international audiences. This emotional engagement creates fertile ground for "Strength Tourism," where visitors seek immersive, participatory experiences that blend traditional cultural practices like Bökh wrestling with modern fitness trends, thus transforming passive spectatorship into active involvement in the event.(Mongke et al., 2024)The strategic integration of media-driven narratives with Mongolia's iconic Naadam Festival further amplifies this effect by repositioning the event as an "Original Physical Championship," aligning it with contemporary fitness culture and social media engagement. These rebranding leverages influencer participation and viral challenges to sustain interest year-round, effectively extending the tourism season beyond traditional peak periods. The synergy between authentic cultural heritage and modern digital storytelling not only diversifies Mongolia's tourism offerings but also targets a younger, fitness-oriented demographic, thereby broadening the country's appeal and enhancing its competitive position in the global tourism

market. (Tuomi et al., 2023) This innovative framework demonstrates how emerging markets can utilize popular media as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development and international cultural diplomacy.

By late 2025, Mongolia had transcended its role as a passive filming location to become a central character in global entertainment. The culmination of this trend was the massive success of Netflix's Physical: Asia, which aired 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. (Mongke et al., 2024) 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. (Kokas, 2018) 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 centuries-old Naadam Festival tradition.

2. THE "HALLYU" PRECEDENT: KOREAN CONTENT AS A TOURISM DRIVER

Before the *Physical* phenomenon, three key South Korean productions laid the groundwork for this tourism surge.

- **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. (Jin & Yoon, 2014)
- **Couriers in Mongolia (2023):** This variety show (featuring the "Dragon's Club" celebrities) showcases the reality of Mongolian logistics. It 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, from nostalgia and adventure to wellness and cultural immersion. By leveraging popular media, they have transformed Mongolia from a relatively obscure destination into an attractive locale with unique experiences. (Connell et al., 2021) This strategic portrayal sets a precedent for how content-driven tourism can effectively stimulate interest and visitation in emerging markets.

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 in Mongolian soft power. Unlike scripted dramas, this reality competition provided an unscripted demonstration of Mongolian resilience that resonated with a global audience.

3.1 Viewership and Global Reach

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.
- **Volume:** 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.

3.2 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."(Delgado-Ballester, 2020)

- **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 the travel intent.

4. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: CREATING "SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM" (SIT)

To monetize this attention, Mongolia must pivot from general sightseeing to "Participation Tourism."

4.1 "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.

4.2 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.

This unprecedented digital exposure, fueled by millions of global viewing hours, provides a valuable and finite window of opportunity. 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"—that directly appeal to the new demographic of young, active travelers. This approach ensures that visitors are not simply observing a foreign land, but are motivated to participate in and test their own limits against Mongolia's cultural legacy. Ultimately, successful integration will solidify the Naadam Festival's place as the world's original and ultimate **Physical Championship** (Kim et al., 2024)

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