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RECEIVED 06 August 2025  
REVISED 26 November 2025  
ACCEPTED 18 December 2025  
PUBLISHED 07 January 2026

CITATION  
Lee KH, Kim KCH and Kim YB (2026)  
Expanding the concept of transnational  
cinema through branded content in the  
digital age.  
*Front. Commun.* 10:1680855.  
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1680855

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# Expanding the concept of transnational cinema through branded content in the digital age

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This perspective article offers a conceptual and exploratory framework for understanding how branded content expands the conceptual boundaries of transnational cinema in the digital age. Rather than offering empirical generalizations, it encourages theoretical discussions and future research. While previous studies focused on auteurism and art films, this article argues that branded content shaped by hybridity, technology, and layered narratives can be a distinct cinematic form that crosses borders. Moving beyond Jenkins's triad of immersion, convergence, and extension, this article proposes an affective, technological, and interpretive lens to reframe the global circulation of branded narratives. Hyundai Motor Company's short film *Night Fishing* (2024) was used as a conceptual illustration that demonstrates how branded content engages transnational audiences through emotional immersion, narrative hybridity, and dual distribution across theatrical and digital platforms. Ultimately, this article suggests that branded content bridges commercial intentions and artistic experiences, thus offering new grounds for conceptualizing transnational cinema in the digital era.

## KEYWORDS

transnational cinema, branded content, audience experience, emotional immersion, narrative hybridity

## 1 Introduction

Today's media ecosystem expands cultural and linguistic boundaries through digital connectivity, reorganizing regional stories into hybrid narratives across global streaming and short-film platforms. Amid this transformation, branded short films are evolving into narrative-driven cultural works that internalize brand meanings, while adopting cinematic forms. In addition, they have been gradually recognized as a distinct mode of cultural production. For instance, BMW's *The Hire* (2001–2002) inspired global automakers to communicate their identity and technology through short-form storytelling, indicating that branded films transcended their promotional origins and invited theoretical consideration as a new form of cinematic practice.

Traditionally, transnational cinema has been defined as a multinational production, industrial collaboration, and global distribution (Shaw, 2013). However, these approaches often overlook the emotional, interpretive, and intercultural dimensions of audience experiences. As Berry (2010) cautions, knowledge of transnational cinema is always situational and perspectival, meaning that its definition is based on the observer's position and context. Ezra and Rowden (2006) further highlighted that transnational cinema involves ongoing negotiations between global capital, local culture, and cinematic forms. In line with Higbee and Lim's (2010) notion of critical transnationalism, more recent scholarship has critiqued the limitations of industry-oriented paradigms emphasizing instead interpretive processes, intercultural negotiation, and audience agency in the production of meaning.

Given these theoretical developments, this article recognizes that branded content, often generated for commercial purposes, now functions as both a site of cultural meaning and a medium for esthetic experiences, especially as audiences become active interpreters in the digital era. Instead of presenting empirical generalizations, this perspective article proposes a conceptual and exploratory framework that reconsiders the place of branded content in transnational cinema as a product of industrial logic and affective/interpretive audience engagement.

Building on Jenkins' triad of immersion, convergence, and extension, this article reframes these principles as affective, technological, and interpretive dimensions to better explain how branded content functions as a hybrid form of transnational cinema. Rather than proposing a definitive theory, this framework is presented as a starting point for future comparative, empirical, and reception-focused research.

To illustrate these conceptual claims, the analysis focuses on Hyundai Motors' short film, *Night Fishing* (2024), treating this case strictly as illustrative rather than generalizable evidence. Any broader claim regarding its cultural effects remains tentative, and future studies should validate these hypotheses through comparative case selection or empirical reception studies.

This article does not promote any brand but conceptually examines how corporate creative production generates cinematic meaning and reshapes the interface between industry, art, and audience experience. It aligns with recent film and media research, which recognizes branded content as a legitimate site for cultural and cinematic analysis (Horrigan, 2009; Dhote et al., 2014; Gupta et al., 2020; Skhiereli, 2021; Osemwegie, 2025). In this regard, it contributes to expanding the concept of transnational cinema by situating branded content within global cinematic discourse, while remaining attentive to the interpretive and evidential limits inherent in conceptual inquiry.

## 2 Expanded functions of branded content in defining transnational cinema

Today, brand content has increasingly transcended traditional one-way message delivery and has evolved into participation-based media centered on immersion, interaction, and emotional resonance. Waqas et al. (2022) demonstrate that branded storytelling strategies heighten consumer immersion by providing cognitive, sensory, and affective experiences through multimedia. Similarly, Kotler et al. (2023) argue that in the era of Marketing 6.0, brands must prioritize experiential value and emotional engagement rather than relying solely on functional appeals. These findings suggest that immersive brand content evokes hybrid emotions and fosters cultural resonance beyond national identity, aligning with the esthetic and cultural logic of transnational cinema.

Recent research in East Asia further indicates that branded content increasingly operates as a legitimate cinematic medium within digital platforms. In China, microfilms driven by digital transformation employ concise storytelling and highly interactive viewing environments (Shao et al., 2016; Xu, 2025). These works also generate strong emotional resonance, as illustrated by the success of branded microfilm such as Pepsi's *Bring the Fun Home* (Liu et al., 2023). Similar developments are observed in Korea, where branded

web dramas utilize transmedia storytelling and platform-specific formats to create immersive viewer experiences that blur the boundaries between film and branded entertainment (Yoon and Lee, 2025). Narrative transportation in branded web series further enhances emotional engagement and audience participation, reinforcing their cinematic potential and experiential value (Sulestarini et al., 2020).

Collectively, these studies indicate that microfilms and short form branded content now function as cinematic media in which cultural meaning is produced through experiential interaction in the digital era. They foster emotional participation and cross-border circulation, a central concern in transnational cinema (Berry, 2010).

Building on these experiential and participatory qualities, Jenkins (2010) provided the principles of immersion, convergence, and extension as a framework for analyzing how branded content functions as transnational cinema. Immersion refers to the emotional depth and engagement experienced by audiences, mirroring the affective storytelling of branded content. Convergence encompasses the blending of technology, artistry, commerce, and culture, and reveals how branded content cultivates new cultural practices through narrative experimentation. Extension involves ongoing reinterpretation and circulation of stories across platforms and cultures. This process enables the transnational movement and participatory recontextualization of branded narratives.

Higbee and Lim (2010) proposed that transnational cinema should be broadened to include economic, symbolic, and intercultural dimensions, moving beyond linguistic and industrial boundaries. Subsequent scholarship extends this critical perspective, recognizing transnational cinema as a dynamic medium reflecting diversity and interconnectedness in the era of globalization and digital transformation (Al-Maliki, 2025).

Drawing on these theoretical developments, this article considers branded content as a site on which brands function as cultural texts that facilitate shared emotional experiences and cross-cultural circulation. Through narrative resonance and fluid distribution, branded content can transcend commercial origins and become a source of collective cultural experiences across languages and national contexts, similar to transnational films distributed through festivals and diasporic networks.

Accordingly, this article examines Hyundai Motor's *Night Fishing* as a conceptual case study. This example is used not as empirical proof, but as an illustrative case, demonstrating how branded content operates as a form of transnational cinema and how its boundaries can be productively redefined. The broader applicability of these claims requires further comparative and empirical validation in future research.

## 3 The case of Hyundai Motor's short film *Night Fishing* (2024)

*Night Fishing*, a 13-min short film released in 2024 in collaboration with the Hyundai Motor Company and its advertising agency Innocean, actor Son Sukku, and director Moon Byounggon. Blending science fiction thriller elements with branded messaging, the film depicts the special agent Romeo tasked with capturing the alien F32-1 at an electric vehicle charging station. Notably, the film was screened

at CGV, South Korea's largest multiplex chain, at a low-ticket price of KRW 1000 (USD 0.70).

According to official [Korean Film Council Statistics \(2025\)](#), *Night Fishing* will be screened on 34 screens nationwide, attracting 46,423 admissions and grossing KRW 50.8 million in 5 weeks. The majority of viewers were in Seoul (63.6%), followed by Gyeonggi (12.3%) and Busan (7.0%), indicating substantial theatrical engagement within its short runtime.

These industrial outcomes provide a basis for the narrative analysis. The film structure demonstrates how branded content can adopt cinematic techniques to create tension and emotional immersion. The opening sequence establishes a conflict between Romeo and F32-1, eliciting the audience's curiosity regarding their motives and relationships. The narrative rapidly unfolds with the camera gaze, which is mediated through the technical devices of IONIQ 5, leading to a reversal that redefines character roles and deepens thematic complexity.

Significantly, the entire narrative is constructed not through conventional film cameras, but via in-vehicle technologies such as the Built-in Cam, Digital Side Mirror, and Surround View Monitor of the IONIQ 5. This technical approach places the audience in an immersive audiovisual perspective from the vehicle, embodying a new narrative strategy in which "the story unfolds from the car's viewpoint" ([Hyundai News, 2024](#)). Cinematic hybridity is further reinforced by combining local motifs (night fishing, gas stations, riverside) and global codes (special agents, aliens, English dialog), blurring genres and national boundaries. This hybrid composition facilitates complex emotional responses across cultures and aligns with [Jenkins' \(2010\)](#) concepts of immersion, convergence, and extension.

### 3.1 Immersion and convergence for hybridity

*Night Fishing* induces intense emotional immersion and audience engagement through restrained dialog, the regional background of the Korean river, and a vehicle-mounted camera perspective. From the viewpoint of the vehicle, cinematography generates real-time tension and offers a multisensory experience that reflects a hybrid quality by combining technical direction with narrative sensibility.

In contemporary branded content, such sensory immersion serves as a device for brand differentiation and adds tangible value beyond simple viewing ([Schmitt, 1999](#)). Hyundai Motor Company visualized the digital technology of the IONIQ 5 by designing a narrative in which the vehicle interacts with an alien, presenting it as a short film to be experienced cinematically. This approach shows that narrative and directorial immersion extend beyond eye-catching techniques, functioning instead as a device for cultivating "an experience of falling deep into the story world" ([Jenkins, 2010](#)).

Branded content creates a new audience-oriented experiential structure that extends beyond single media formats or explicit advertising purposes, and it is closely linked to convergence dynamics in the digital media environment. Media convergence is reshaping the relationship between technology, industries, markets, genres, and audiences ([Jenkins, 2006](#)). It transforms not only how content is consumed and participated in but also production and financing methods ([Sousa et al., 2016](#)). With these changes, digital technology has integrated production and expression styles, while audiences

increasingly seek creative and sensory content experiences. Consequently, content is no longer restricted to one medium or national culture but evolves into a flexible, open structure that can be reinterpreted and expanded across multiple platforms and contexts. Planning, production, distribution, and audience interpretation are multilayered processes.

In this context, *Night Fishing* is not merely an advertisement for IONIQ 5. It occupies the emotional and cultural interface of transnational cinema and provides a complex experience for global audiences, allowing active interpretation, emotional immersion, and imaginative reconstruction within cultural frames. The physical setting of the story stems from local Korean culture, including riversides, gas stations, and fishing rods, but the narrative incorporates global science fiction elements, such as special agents, aliens, and English dialog. This blending of local and global codes embodies hybridity central to transnational cinema theory ([Higbee and Lim, 2010](#)).

Additionally, *Night Fishing* demonstrates hybridity not only in storytelling, but also in media production methods. The film's artistic merit and esthetic value have been formally acknowledged, having received the Grand Prix in the Entertainment Branded Content category and the Silver Lion for Innovation in Film at the 2025 Cannes Lions ([Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, 2025](#)), and the Best Editing award at the 2024 Fantasia International Film Festival ([Fantasia International Film Festival, 2024](#)). These achievements, documented in official sources, illustrate that branded content can reach the international festival stage based on artistic completeness and creativity.

Overall, this complex narrative content, which combines digital technology, emotional direction, and brand strategy, strongly suggests that branded content is evolving into a form of transnational cinema by expanding the horizons of sensory and cultural interpretations.

### 3.2 Narrative extension for transnational cinematic literacy

[Jenkins \(2010\)](#) defines extension as "an attribute that motivates individuals to share or explore specific content." Scalability describes a structure in which a single narrative is not limited to a single medium or temporality. Instead, the narrative expands through continuity and seriality, allowing various characters and storylines to emerge. Within this framework, the audience is transformed into active participants by becoming immersed in multiple layers of the narrative, beyond the passive role of a spectator.

*Night Fishing* features three central subjects: the special agent Romeo, the alien creature F32-1, and the electric vehicle IONIQ 5. The vehicle is not merely a prop or background but is established as the observer's point of view and functions as a character in the story. As the narrative center shifts from focusing on "what is seen" to "who is watching," the film constructs a distinct structure where the story unfolds from the vehicle's perspective.

This shift introduces not only deeper immersion, but also greater scalability of the story. For example, new episodes centered on Romeo or F32-1 may be developed, and the narrative can be extended toward feature-length adaptation or new forms, such as participatory online discussions and reviews. Ultimately, branded content requires cinematic literacy because it utilizes a

participation-based narrative structure, as Jenkins (2010) emphasizes. This extension is interconnected through media convergence and intertextual relationships, resulting in branded content that constitutes a complex text rather than being confined to a single genre.

It should be emphasized that *Night Fishing* is presented here as a conceptual illustration and does not serve as a generalizable case for all branded content. Future comparative and audience-centered studies are necessary to address broader questions regarding the link between branded content and transnational cinema.

## 4 Discussion

Transnational cinema thrives on hybridity and replaces monolithic national audiences by influencing cinematic literacy, consciousness, and culture (Rizvi, 2014). In this respect, *Night Fishing*, a short film and branded content produced by Hyundai Motor Company can be interpreted as practical examples of the simultaneous implementation of the core features of transnational cinema: hybridity, dissolution of the national audience, and the transformation of cinematic literacy and cultural sensitivity (Ezra and Rowden, 2006; Higbee and Lim, 2010).

First, the film blurs the boundaries between traditional film genres and industries by combining brand messages with artistic narratives, digital technology experimentation, and the interplay of commercial and artistic purposes. This reflects the negotiation process of global and local forces central to transnational cinema (Dhote et al., 2014). It induces sensual immersion through vehicle-mounted cameras and reinterprets the science fiction thriller genre as a film experience within the framework of advertisements, aligning with discussions of hybridity and narrative innovation.

Second, *Night Fishing* does not function as a one-way communication targeting audiences in specific countries. Instead, it operates as an intercultural communication model tailored to the senses and languages of the digital-native generation, through a global digital platform (Shao et al., 2016). Dual distribution strategies via movie theaters and online streaming suggest that branded content has the potential to be a form of cultural consumption, rather than merely a marketing tool (Gupta et al., 2020).

Third, *Night Fishing* requires cinematic literacy and fosters both emotional immersion and narrative interpretation. The brand name is not directly revealed, and the narrative design centered on the viewpoint of the vehicle encourages a multi-layered interpretation and participation based on the structure of expandability discussed by Jenkins (2010). It shows that branded storytelling can enhance engagement through cognitive, sensory, and affective experiences.

The core argument is that *Night Fishing* presents an expanded conceptual landscape by applying the traditional idea of transnational cinema to practical and hybrid genre, branded content rather than representing an artistic advertisement. If earlier discussions focused predominantly on auteur or art films, this article demonstrates that commercial branded content can also function as a cinematic space where global emotions, technologies, and artistic expression mix in a hybrid manner (Skhiereli, 2021). It repositions branded content as a cultural platform that generates global discourse through technical experimentation, universal narrative elements, and cross-regional viewing practices.

In addition, *Night Fishing* highlights the potential of branded content to contribute to the revitalization of theatrical attendance during the ongoing evolution of traditional cinema. While dual distribution through theaters and digital platforms has formed part of its strategy, culturally resonant and narratively sophisticated branded content may re-engage digital audiences with physical cinema venues.

Ultimately, *Night Fishing* has demonstrated that branded content can reconstruct the definition and cultural boundaries of cinema by fulfilling the essential criteria for transnational cinema—hybridity, a transnational audience, and participatory literacy. In this sense, branded content not only reflects but also extends the conceptual boundaries of transnational cinema. Thus, it reframes transnational cinema as a hybrid cultural practice that connects industry, art, and audience experiences in the digital age.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

KL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KK: Writing – review & editing. YK: Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Editage ([www.editage.co.kr](http://www.editage.co.kr)) for English language editing.

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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