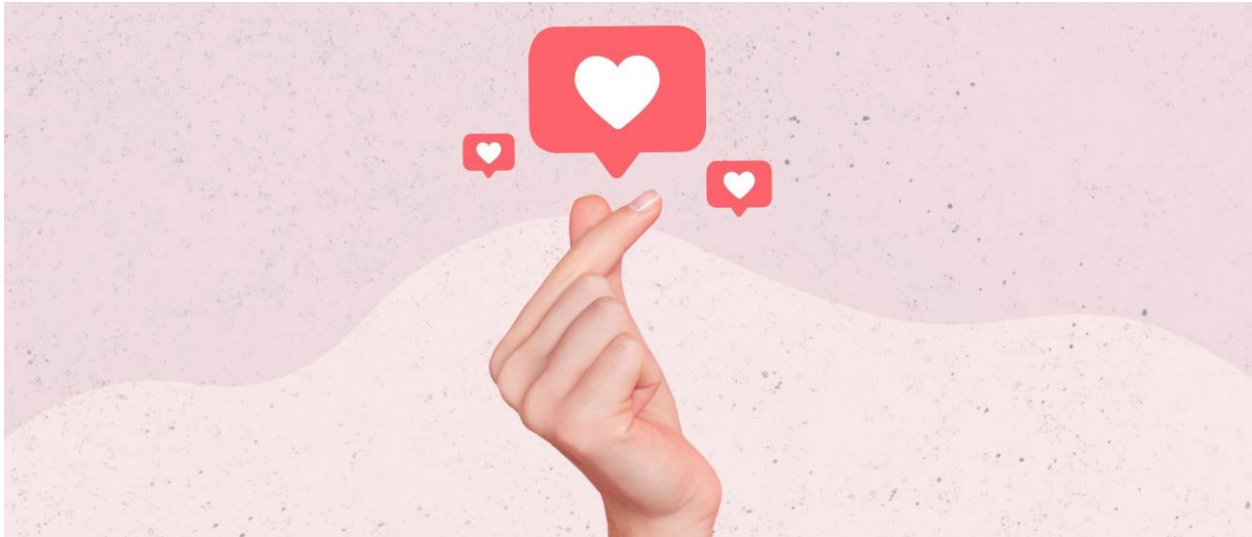


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# How Successful South Korean Brands Create Value Through Immersion



By [David Dubois](#) , INSEAD

**South Korean brands - be it K-pop groups, eyewear or fashion - outpace competitors through transformative customer experiences, from discovery to retail.**

When American brand Warby Parker entered the eyewear scene in 2010, it was **heralded as a game changer** for the industry. By championing a direct-to-consumer approach, it cut out the middleman and offered a wide array of affordable, high-quality glasses without the sizeable markup characteristic of traditional retail channels. The brand cleverly leveraged mobile to digitalise part of the eye examination process, while enabling customers to try on up to five pairs of eyewear for free in the comfort of their home before making an online purchase - a best-in-class “**phygital**” experience.

Style played a pivotal role in helping the brand stand out. Warby Parker’s product lines drew design inspiration from the eyeglasses sported by music luminaries Buddy Holly and Bill Evans, as well as John Lennon’s hallmark

round frames. To complement its e-commerce operations, it eventually opened showrooms in locations including New York, San Francisco and Seattle, some of which became among the **most profitable retail operations** of global city centres.

In 2024, Warby Parker is an established eyewear player. Its first-quarter 2024 earnings notched **US\$200 million** and full-year sales are expected to reach **US\$761 million**. But disruption in the eyewear scene looks different today and may have a new epicentre: fast-growing South Korean brand Gentle Monster. It took seven years for Warby Parker to attain an estimated **US\$250 million** in revenue. Within the same time, Gentle Monster's revenue **almost reached twice this amount**. What powered such growth?

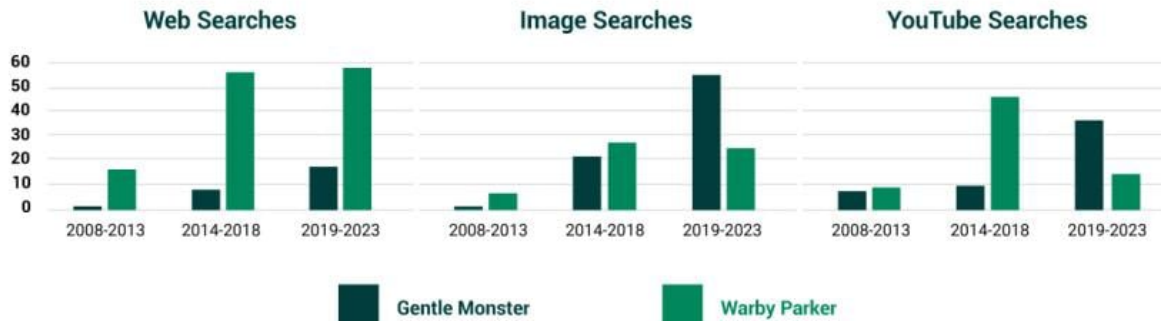
### **Gentle Monster: the perfect retail immersion storm**

Inspired by its CEO and co-founder Hankook Kim's conviction that "**retail is driven by humans' curiosity**", Gentle Monster rapidly grew into one of the East Asian region's leading eyewear brands. **Revenue jumped** from US\$140 million in 2017 to **US\$440 million** in 2024, driven partly by surging global demand from China, Japan and beyond.

Besides the brand's stylish frames, which have been seen on K-pop idols including BLACKPINK's Jennie and BTS' J-Hope, it stands out for its commitment to providing immersive experiences, including using concept stores as discovery tools. In fact, Gentle Monster **employs** more spatial designers than product designers. The brand's dazzling retail outlets feature art exhibitions and eye-catching, highly Instagrammable installations that make visitors feel as if they're stepping into an art gallery. These unique, captivating spaces offer powerful differentiators from the brand's challengers by deepening customers' relationships through immersion.

This competitive advantage is perhaps most apparent when comparing global searches – a **powerful measure** of how consumers approach and engage with brands digitally – for Gentle Monster and Warby Parker (Figure 1). Although Warby Parker still leads in overall web searches, Gentle Monster increasingly dominates on image and YouTube searches, a testament to its superior visual and animated appeal among global audiences.

Figure 1:  
**Comparison of web, image and YouTube search intensity for Gentle Monster and Warby Parker**



Source: Google data, 2008–2023, worldwide (normalised search intensity on Y axis).

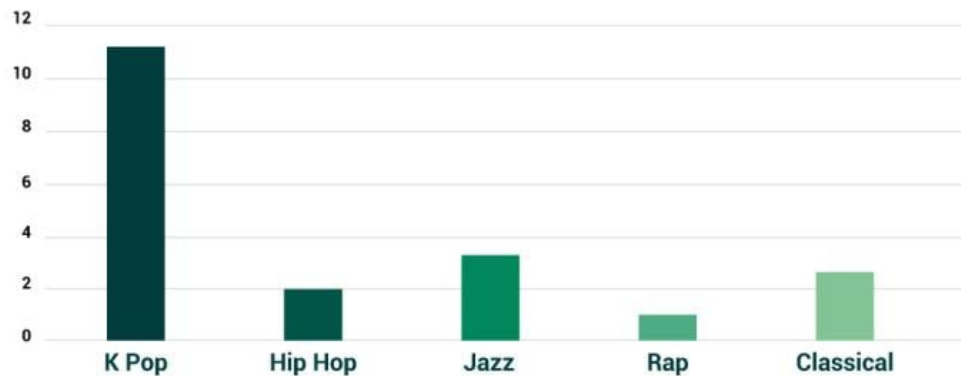
### Doing things differently: immersion through the senses

Gentle Monster is not an isolated case. It’s an example of a much more systematic approach to brand-building that is shaking up many industries – from retail to music to fashion – by adopting a brand approach that features unparalleled immersion, from discovery to purchase.

This focus on immersion – that is, being imbued in a sensory experience – is central to the entire ecosystem of South Korean brands (or K-brands) and is a key driver of the country’s emergence as a cultural powerhouse on the international stage. Take K-pop, an industry valued at over **US\$5 billion**. Beyond catchy choruses and riffs, the genre is known for its TikTok-friendly choreography and arresting visual performances that appeal to touch and sight respectively, boosting fans’ experiences and overall brand appeal.

An analysis of global searches reveals that K-pop departs from other musical styles with respect to visual value (Figure 2). Like Gentle Monster, the genre stands out for being recognised on another dimension aside from its core auditory value.

Figure 2:  
Image/YouTube ratio for different music types



Source: Google data, 2023, worldwide.

In 2023, K-pop triggered 11 times more image searches than YouTube searches. It also triggered over twice the image searches compared to web searches globally, far higher than the 1:1 image-to-web search ratio for hip hop. This explains why many luxury and fashion brands – which also rely on their visual appeal – have **aggressively sought out** sponsorship deals with K-pop idols to gain traction among younger consumers.

### **K-brands' strategies for engaging the senses**

Be it fashion, music or comics, South Korean brands are adding value to the customer experience and furthering their worldwide appeal by creating immersive experiences that engage consumers on a deep, multisensory level. Other brands that want to elevate their offerings can employ a similar strategy in the following ways.

#### **1. Deepen the sensory experience**

Brands can trigger immersion by providing customers with a rich and heightened experience focused on one of the senses. Doing so means enriching the palette (i.e. variations) of a *single* sensory dimension. Think about chefs adapting their cuisine to local tastes by blending different flavours and ingredients, or fashion houses rolling out clothing in either bright, saturated hues or a monochromatic colour palette. A prime example is South Korean unisex fashion label Ader Error, known for its minimalist and

oversized streetwear.

In the South Korean gaming industry, “phygital” participatory culture helps deepen the overall sensory experience for gamers. The presence of gaming cafés throughout the country, coupled with the fact that e-sports is considered an **official course specialisation** at university, has powered the growth of local gaming companies like NCSoft (behind “Lineage”) and Krafton (behind “PUBG”) by boosting fan engagement, which helps the brands produce world-class games.

South Korea has also deepened the understanding of its culture among audiences abroad, thereby boosting its relevance on a local level and creating opportunities to engage with K-brands on a sensory dimension. Consider India, where South Korean culture has gained traction and where Korean is the language **in greatest demand** on Duolingo after Hindi, English and French. This momentum stems in large part from significant cultural brokerage efforts that have made South Korean products more accessible and relatable to other consumer cultures.

Concretely, the emergence of kimchi curry and kimchi pakora (variations of kimchi mixed with staple Indian dishes), and the adaptation of graphics and characters in K-dramas to appeal to an Indian audience, have facilitated the especially strong adoption of K-brands in India. These are just two of the ways in which South Korean brands and businesses are boosting their relevance among foreign audiences to facilitate customer immersion and deepen the sensory experience.

## **2. Broaden the sensory experience**

Another way for brands to boost immersion is by adding one or several other senses on top of the sense that is core to their products. For instance, culinary ventures that deal primarily with taste can grow guests’ auditory or visual experiences – be it by decking out the dining area in art installations or publishing a food-related podcast.

Real-life examples include fast-growing South Korean fashion brand Ader Error, which opened **pastry shops** next to its stores to augment its business’ sensory universe through taste, or cosmetics company Amorepacific, which launched an art museum to boost its visual identity.

South Korean webtoons **reshaped** the comic reading experience by employing a similar approach. The industry is powered by companies including Naver's Webtoon, Daum and Kakao Page and was valued at around **US\$3.9 billion** in 2022 (about one-fourth the size of the global comic industry). What the companies did was include sound effects as part of short stories created for mobile-only formats. These sensory additions augment the narrative. As readers turn the page, the sound of a kiss, the splash of water or the bang of an explosion add value to the reading experience by blurring the lines between reading and listening.

### **The immersion economy: hyper-industrialisation, not post-industrialisation**

These innovations are more than digital technologies per se or a post-industrial response to rising pressure on South Korea's manufacturing-based economy. Perhaps a logic of "hyper-industrialisation" best captures the country's recent impetus when it comes to brand-building.

This involves focusing on a few high-value cultural domains (e.g. music and fashion), with production characterised by emotionally and sensorially intense offerings that enable K-brands to occupy focal attention on the global stage. This is bolstered by a coordinated approach by different economic actors – *chaebols* (family-run conglomerates), national tech players and entertainment mavericks – that help brands scale and become global household names.

In today's world, where the most valued brands are those that help consumers build and develop their identities, the South Korean textbook is rich in many teachings. By focusing on the role of the senses, brand embodiment and storytelling, other businesses can devise an immersive strategy to grow their appeal and reinforce their competitive advantage.

*This is an adaptation of an **article** published in Harvard Business Review.*

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