



Multimodal Metaphors through Visual, Verbal, and Aural Modes in Animated Film K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the multimodal metaphors in the animated film K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025). The film employs creative audiovisual strategies through the integration of visual, verbal, and aural elements to construct metaphorical meaning, represent abstract concepts, and evoke emotional engagement among viewers. This research addresses two questions: (1) What types of multimodal metaphors are represented in the film? and (2) How are these metaphors constructed through the interaction of visual, verbal, and aural modes? This study employs a qualitative descriptive method supported by multimodal content analysis. The data consist of 52 selected scenes containing metaphorical meaning, collected through purposive sampling from the official Netflix version of the film. The findings reveal four types of multimodal metaphors: contextual metaphor (65.4%) as the most dominant, followed by integrated metaphor (19.2%),

pictorial simile and hybrid metaphor are same (7.69%). The results indicate that metaphorical meaning is primarily constructed implicitly through contextual cues rather than explicit visual comparison. Furthermore, the interaction of visual and aural modes plays a dominant role in shaping metaphorical meaning, while the verbal mode functions as a supportive element. This study demonstrates that multimodal metaphors in animated film are dynamically constructed through cross-modal interaction across time.

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INTRODUCTION

Film can be understood as a multimodal audiovisual medium that constructs

meaning through the coordinated interaction of moving images, sound, language, and editing techniques, functioning as a system in which visual composition, narrative structure, and audio elements operate together to guide interpretation and emotional engagement (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Within this domain, animated film represents a distinct form in which motion and representation are not recorded from reality but are deliberately constructed frame by frame, allowing for a high degree of creative control in visualizing abstract concepts such as emotion, identity, and conflict through stylized imagery, movement, and sound (Bendazzi, 2016). This capacity makes animation particularly suitable for multimodal metaphor analysis as meaning is inherently produced through the interaction of visual, verbal, and aural modes. In the contemporary Indonesian context, film consumption has increasingly shifted toward digital streaming platforms, reflecting broader changes in media engagement. A national survey conducted by Jakpat reports that more than 70% of Indonesian respondents regularly watch films or series via streaming platforms, with young adults constituting the most active audience segment. Notably, within this group, approximately 40-50% of respondents consume animated content, indicating that animation is not limited to children's entertainment but functions as a widely consumed cultural form among adolescents and adults in Indonesia. This growing engagement highlights the relevance of analyzing animated films as complex multimodal texts that actively shape meaning, emotion, cultural representation in contemporary media environments.

Metaphor is widely recognized as a fundamental mechanism of human cognition through which abstract concepts are understood in terms of more concrete experiences. Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor is defined as a systematic mapping between a source domain and a target domain, enabling individuals to structure and interpret complex or intangible phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This perspective shifts the understanding of metaphor from a purely linguistic ornament to a cognitive process that shapes everyday thinking and perception. From a semiotic standpoint, meaning is not inherently fixed but is constructed through systems of signs operating within specific cultural and communicative contexts. In contemporary media, this meaning making process is inherently multimodal, involving the interaction of various semiotic modes such as visual,

verbal and aural elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Building on these foundations, multimodal metaphor theory as proposed by emphasizing that source and target domains may be distributed across different modes. In this framework, metaphorical meaning emerges not from a single semiotic channel but from the dynamic interaction of multiple modes working together within a unified text. This approach is particularly relevant for audiovisual media, where images, sound, and language operate simultaneously to construct meaning, making multimodal metaphor a crucial analytical tool for understanding how abstract ideas are represented and communicated in film.

Despite the growing body of research on multimodal metaphors, most previous studies have predominantly focused on static or short-form media such as advertisements, public service announcements, memes, and social media content, where metaphorical meaning is often analysed within limited temporal structures. While these studies have provided valuable insights into cross-modal meaning construction, relatively little attention has been given to the systematic analysis of multimodal metaphors in feature-length animated films, particularly within contemporary streaming contexts where narrative, performance and audiovisual design unfold dynamically over time, moreover, existing research tends to examine isolated metaphorical instances rather than exploring how metaphors develop and interact across extended cinematic sequences. This indicates a methodological gap in understanding how multimodal metaphors operate within complex narrative structures. To address this gap, the present study investigates multimodal metaphors in the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)*, focusing on both the types of metaphors and their construction through the interaction of visual, verbal, and aural modes. Specifically, this study aims to identify the dominant types of multimodal metaphors and to examine how cross-modal interactions contribute to the realization of metaphorical meaning in a feature-length animated film.

The animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)* serves as the primary data source for this study due to its significant cultural impact, widespread audience engagement, and rich multimodal construction. Produced by Sony Pictures Animation and distributed globally through Netflix, the film achieved sustained popularity by remaining in the Top Ten most-

watched titles on the platform for several consecutive months following its release, indicating consistent global viewership rather than short-term virality. In addition, the film has been included in the 2026 Oscar nomination cycle, reflecting its recognition within international cinematic discourse and positioning it among globally visible animated productions. Set in fictional world where demons prey on human energy, the narrative centers on K-Pop girl group, Huntr/x whose members secretly function as demon hunters tasked with protecting humanity. The film integrates elements of fantasy, action, and musical performance. Allowing complex themes such as identity, emotional conflict, and self-acceptance to be expressed through stylized audiovisual representation.

K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025) follows the story of Huntr/x, a globally famous K-Pop girl group whose members Rumi, Mira and Zoey lead a double life as demon hunters tasked with protecting humanity from supernatural threats. Set in a fictional world where demons prey on human energy, the narrative revolves around the weakening of the Honmoon, a mystical barrier originally created through music to repel demonic forces. Under the guidance of their mentor Celine, the group must restore and transform this barrier into a more powerful form known as the Golden Honmoon. At the center of the story is Rumi, a half-demo idol who struggles with her dual identity and internalized fear of rejection, creating a parallel between her personal conflict and the larger battle between humans and demons. The antagonists, the Saja Boys are a rival boy band composed of demons who attempt to gain influence by capturing the loyalty of fans, thereby weakening the protective power of music. Through its combination of action, musical performance and fantasy elements, the film explores themes of identity, self-acceptance and the relationship between emotional energy and power, which are frequently expressed through stylized visual transformation, sound design, and performance sequences.

The following shows an example of data that can be extracted:

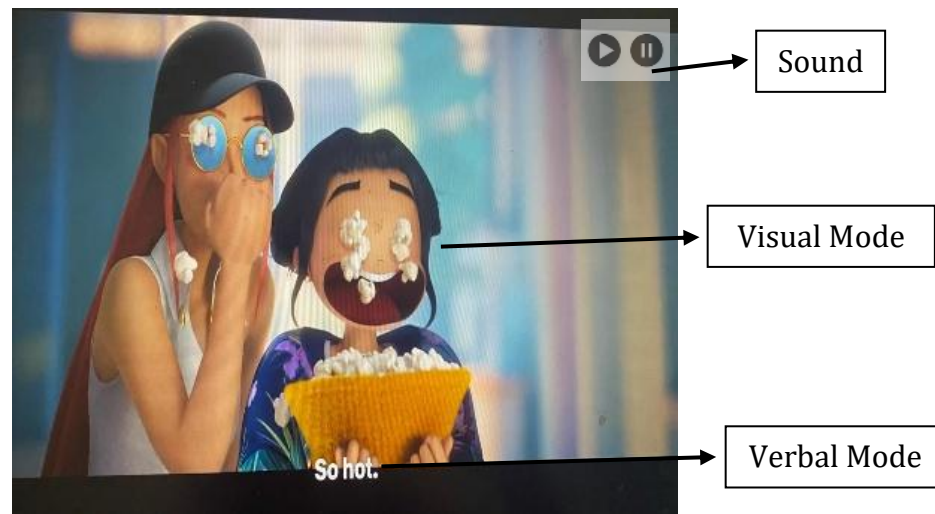


Figure 1. Sound, Visual Mode, and Verbal Mode in K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)

Based on the figure 1, this scene was selected at timestamp 24:37 in K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025). The scene represents an integrated multimodal metaphor in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual, verbal and aural modes. In this case, the source and target domains are fused within a single representation. The target domain is the character's emotional and physical attractive member of the Saja Boys, while the source domain is popcorn, particularly its qualities of heat and explosive popping. This metaphor is realized across three modes. Visually, the character's eyes transform into popcorns like shapes, supported by bright warm colours and close-up framing that emphasize their exaggerated facial expressions, thereby externalizing their intense reaction, verbally, the expression "so hot: reinforces the metaphor by linking physical attractiveness with heat. Aurally, the rapid popcorn popping sound effects create a rhythmic escalation that mirrors the build-up of emotional intensity. The interaction of these modes' functions through reinforcement and elaboration, where each mode strengthens and specifies the same conceptual mapping. As a result, the scene constructs the metaphor emotional attraction is a heat-included explosive reaction, demonstrating how multimodal elements work together to make abstract emotion perceptible through sensory experience.

Previous studies have explored multimodal metaphors across various media, particularly in advertising and short audiovisual content. Pérez-Sobrinó (2020) examined

how multimodal metaphors operate in digital communication, highlighting the interaction between metaphor and metonymy in constructing meaning beyond language, where visual cues activate broader conceptual domains. Similarly, Ikere, Novica, and Liepa (2021) demonstrated that multimodal metaphors and metonymy function as key cognitive tools in interpreting hidden messages in non-commercial advertisements, emphasizing their role in conveying abstract concepts such as modernization and globalization. In the context of audiovisual media, Bort-Mir (2021) developed the Film Metaphor Identification Procedure (FILMIP) to analyse how visual, verbal, and aural elements interact in television commercials, concluding that metaphorical meaning often emerges implicitly through contextual multimodal coherence. Furthermore, Ge, Sui Zhou, and Li (2021) highlighted the importance of audiovisual form, including visual style and sound patterns, in shaping audience engagement in short video advertisements.

While these studies provide valuable insights into multimodal meaning-making, they primarily focus on short form or commercial media and tend to analyse isolated instances of metaphor rather than examining how multimodal metaphors develop dynamically across extended narrative structures such as feature-length films. Therefore, a gap remains in understanding how multimodal metaphors are constructed and function within complex cinematic texts. To address this gap, this study investigates multimodal metaphors in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) by focusing on two research questions: (1) what types of multimodal metaphors are represented in the film? and (2) How are these metaphors constructed through the interaction of visual, verbal and aural modes?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyse multimodal metaphors in the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025). Qualitative research focuses on interpreting meaning within its context and emphasizes in depth understanding of phenomena rather than numerical measurement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2021). The analysis is supported by multimodal content analysis as proposed by Serafini and Reid (2019), which provides a systematic framework for examining how meaning is constructed through

interaction of multiple semiotic modes. The data consist of visual, verbal, and aural elements extracted from the official Netflix version of the film. a total of 52 metaphorical scenes were selected through purposive sampling based on the presence of symbolic imagery, expressive sound, and verbal cues indicating metaphorical mapping. The data were collected through repeated viewing, scene identification, and documentation including timestamp recording, dialogue transcription, and descriptive notes of visual and aural element. The analysis was conducted using Forceville's (2009) multimodal metaphor framework by identifying source and target domains and classifying the metaphors into pictorial simile, hybrid, contextual and integrated types. Furthermore, the study examines how these metaphors are constructed through the interaction of visual, verbal and aural modes focusing on cross-modal functions such as reinforcement, complement and elaboration.

RESULTS

The data analyzed in this study consist of 52 selected scenes from the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) each containing multimodal metaphorical representations constructed through visual, verbal and aural elements. The data were examined to identity the types of multimodal metaphors and to understand how meaning is conveyed through the interaction of different semiotic modes. The analysis reveals that the film employs various types of multimodal metaphors, including pictorial simile, hybrid metaphor, contextual metaphor, and integrated metaphor. These findings indicate that the film utilizes diverse multimodal strategies to represent abstract concepts such as emotion, identity, and conflict through audiovisual storytelling.

Table 1. The Types of Multimodal Metaphor

No	Types of Multimodal Metaphor	Frequency (F)	Percentages
1	Pictorial Simile	4	7.69%
2	Hybrid Metaphor	4	7.69%
3	Contextual Metaphor	34	65.4%
4	Integrated Metaphor	10	19.2%
Total (N)		52	100%

Table 1 presents the distribution of multimodal metaphor type identified in the analysed data. Contextual metaphor is the most dominant type identified in this study, occurring in 34 out of 52 instances (65.4%). This dominance indicates that the film primarily constructs metaphorical meaning implicitly through contextual cues rather than explicit representation. In these cases, the source domain is not directly shown but inferred from elements such as visual atmosphere, lighting, colour, and sound design. This suggests that the film relies heavily on immersive audiovisual context to convey abstract concepts, allowing viewers to interpret meaning through the overall cinematic environment.

Integrated metaphor appears as the second most frequent type, with 10 instances (19.2%). This indicates that the film also frequently employs fused representations in which the source and target domains are combined into a single unified form. Such metaphors are often used to depict intense emotional states, where abstract meanings are directly visualized through transformation. The use of integrated metaphor demonstrates the film's tendency to present metaphorical meaning in a more immediate and visually striking manner.

In contrast, pictorial simile occurs in only 4 instances (7.69%), making it one of the least frequent types. This suggests that the film rarely relies on direct visual comparison between separate elements to construct meaning. Instead of presenting source and target domains side by side, the film tends to embed metaphorical meaning more implicitly or through transformation. As a result, explicit comparison is not a dominant strategy in the film's multimodal storytelling.

Similarly, hybrid metaphor also appears in 4 instances (7.69%), indicating limited use of composite forms that combine elements of source and target domains while maintaining recognizable features of both. This suggests that the film does not heavily emphasize dual-identity visual representations, but instead prefers either implicit contextual cues or fully integrated forms to convey metaphorical meaning. Below is a detailed comparison based on each type.

a) Pictorial Simile

According to Forceville (2009), pictorial simile is a type of multimodal metaphor in which source and target domains are presented as separate elements but invite comparison through visual similarity. In this study, several scenes in *K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)* are categorized as pictorial similes. One example is shown:



Figure 2. Aural Mode, Visual Mode, and Verbal Mode in *K-Pop Demon Hunters (2025)*

In Figure 2, which occurs at timestamp 00:07:14. In this scene, the characters move rapidly through the air during a performance, with their body posture and movement resembling birds in flight. The visual mode highlights this comparison through the direction and formation of the characters' movement. The verbal mode is expressed through song lyrics such as "from sun up to sundown," which suggests continuous action and reinforces the theme of strength and persistence. Meanwhile, the aural mode is supported by fast-paced music that enhances the energetic and intense atmosphere. In this case, the source domain is birds in flight, while the target domain is the characters' courage and readiness to confront demons. The metaphor is constructed through visual resemblance rather than fusion, showing how meaning is created through comparison between two separate domains.

b) Hybrid Metaphor

According to Forceville (2009), a hybrid metaphor occurs when elements of the

source and target domains are combined into a single visual form. Unlike pictorial simile, which presents two separate domains, hybrid metaphor merges characteristics of both into one unified representation. In this study, several scenes in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) are identified as hybrid metaphors. One example is shown:

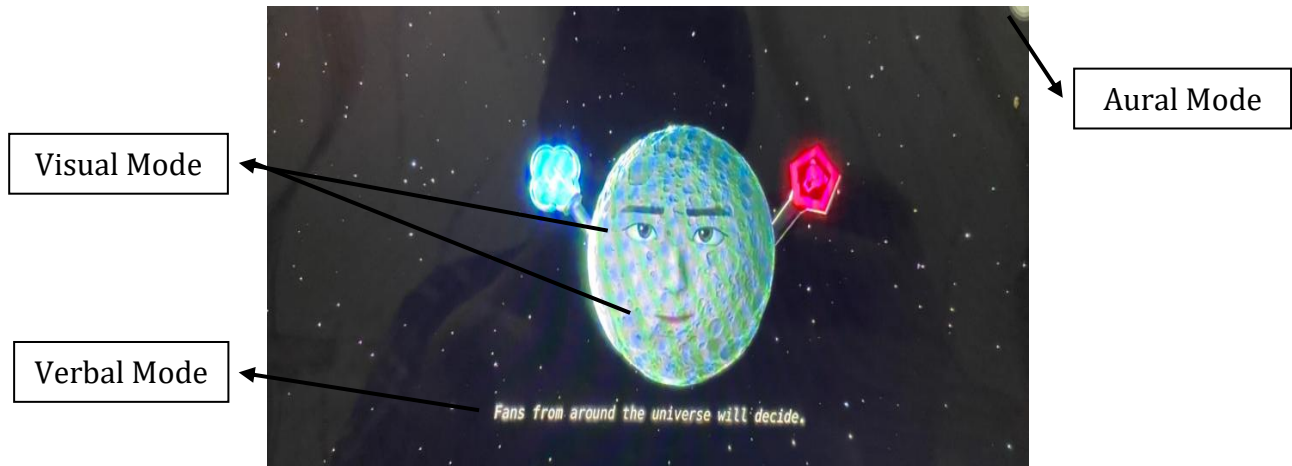


Figure 3. Aural Mode, Visual Mode, and Verbal Mode in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025)

In Figure 3, at timestamp 01:03:36. In this scene, a planet is combined with a human face, forming a single composite image that represents a large-scale and collective presence. The visual mode highlights this fusion through the integration of planetary and human features. The verbal mode is expressed in the statement, “Fans from around the universe will decide,” where the phrase “around the universe” metaphorically refers to a global audience. The aural mode is supported by a dramatic announcement sound that emphasizes the importance of the moment. In this case, the source domain is a vast, universe-like entity symbolizing scale and inclusivity, while the target domain is the worldwide audience. The metaphor is constructed through the combination of visual elements and supported by verbal and aural cues, demonstrating how hybrid metaphor blends two domains while still retaining recognizable features of both.

c) Contextual Metaphor

Forceville (2009) explains that a contextual metaphor occurs when the target domain

is visually presented, while the source domain is not explicitly shown but implied through contextual elements such as atmosphere, setting, and sound. In this type, viewers infer the metaphorical meaning from the overall environment rather than direct representation. In this study, contextual metaphor is the most dominant type found in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025). One example is shown in:



Figure 4. Aural Mode, Visual Mode, and Verbal Mode in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025)

From Figure 4, at timestamp 00:01:05, where the demon king Gwi-ma appears with a threatening presence. Visually, he is surrounded by glowing red energy resembling flames, with sharp features and a dominant posture that emphasize danger and power. The verbal mode is delivered through Celine's narration, including expressions such as "haunted our world," "stealing our souls," and "channeling strength," which metaphorically describe the destructive influence of demons rather than literal actions. The aural mode is supported by dark background music, echoing sound effects, and sinister laughter, which reinforce the sense of fear and tension. In this case, the source domain of a destructive and supernatural force is not directly shown but implied through the visual and aural context, while the target domain refers to the threat posed by demons in the human world. The metaphor is constructed implicitly through the interaction of modes, demonstrating how contextual cues guide the interpretation of meaning.

d) Integrated Metaphor

According to Forceville (2009), an integrated metaphor occurs when the source and target domains are fused into a single unified representation, making them inseparable. In this type, the features of the source domain become part of the target's appearance, allowing meaning to be understood directly through visual integration. In audiovisual media such as film, this integration is often reinforced by elements such as color, lighting, and framing, which help emphasize the metaphorical meaning. In this study, several scenes in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) are identified as integrated metaphors.

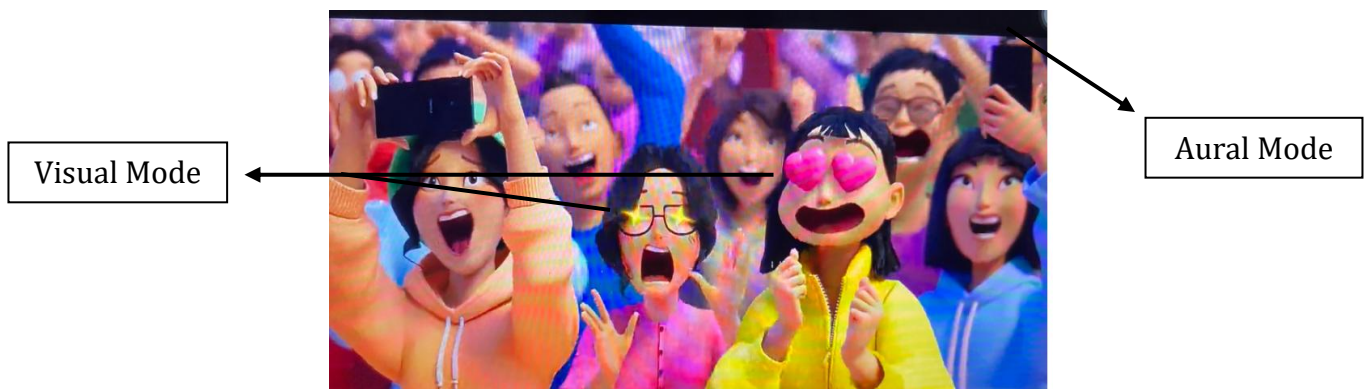


Figure 5. Aural Mode, and Visual Mode in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025)

In Figure 5 at timestamp 00:28:57. In this scene, fans are depicted cheering enthusiastically, with one fan's eyes transforming into heart shapes, visually embedding the concept of love into the character's appearance. The use of bright and vibrant colors further enhances the joyful and energetic atmosphere. The verbal mode is expressed through Jinu's line, "my little soda pop," in which "soda pop" metaphorically represents something sweet, enjoyable, and exciting. The aural mode includes energetic performance music and loud crowd reactions, which intensify the emotional atmosphere. In this case, the source domain is sweet and refreshing soda, while the target domain is the fans' affection and emotional excitement. The metaphor is constructed through the integration of visual transformation, supported by verbal and aural elements, demonstrating how abstract emotions are directly represented through a unified multimodal form.

DISCUSSION

The construction of multimodal metaphors in *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) is realized through the interaction of visual, verbal, and aural modes, which work together to represent abstract meanings. Across the analyzed data, the visual mode plays the most dominant role by providing the primary representation of the target domain, while the verbal and aural modes function to reinforce and elaborate the metaphorical meaning. In pictorial simile, meaning is constructed through visual resemblance between separate entities, as seen in the depiction of characters moving like birds in flight, where body posture and movement create a comparison that suggests courage and agility. The verbal and aural modes support this meaning by emphasizing energy and intensity through lyrics and fast-paced music. In hybrid metaphor, meaning emerges from the combination of source and target elements within a single composite form, such as the fusion of a planet and a human face representing a global audience. Here, the visual mode establishes the metaphor through fusion, while verbal expressions and dramatic sound effects reinforce the scale and significance of the representation.

In contextual metaphor, the construction of meaning relies heavily on implicit cues, where the source domain is not directly shown but inferred through atmosphere, setting, and sound. For example, the representation of Gwi-ma as a destructive force is constructed through dark visuals, red lighting, and ominous sound, supported by metaphorical language that describes his influence. This demonstrates that contextual metaphors depend on the integration of visual and aural elements to guide interpretation without explicit comparison. Meanwhile, integrated metaphor constructs meaning through the complete fusion of source and target domains into a single representation, as seen in the transformation of characters' eyes into heart shapes or the use of "soda pop" to symbolize emotional excitement. In this case, the visual transformation directly embodies the metaphor, while verbal and aural modes intensify and specify its meaning. Overall, the findings indicate that multimodal metaphors in the film are constructed through cross-modal interaction, primarily functioning through reinforcement and elaboration, where each mode contributes to strengthening and enriching the same conceptual mapping.

The findings of this study both align with and extend previous research on multimodal metaphors across media contexts. Consistent with Pérez-Sobrino (2020), the present study confirms that multimodal metaphors are constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, where visual elements play a central role in activating broader conceptual meanings. Similarly, the findings support Ikere, Novica, and Liepa (2021), who argue that multimodal metaphors function as cognitive tools for conveying abstract concepts, as demonstrated in this study through the representation of emotions such as attraction, fear, and admiration. In line with Bort-Mir (2021), this study also finds that metaphorical meaning in audiovisual media is often constructed implicitly, particularly through contextual metaphor, which emerges from the coherence of visual atmosphere, sound design, and narrative context rather than explicit comparison. Furthermore, the importance of audiovisual form highlighted by Ge, Sui Zhou, and Li (2021) is reflected in this study, where elements such as color, movement, and sound patterns significantly contribute to shaping metaphorical meaning and audience interpretation.

However, this study differs from previous research in several important aspects. While earlier studies primarily focus on short-form media such as advertisements and digital content, this study examines a feature-length animated film, allowing for the analysis of multimodal metaphors as dynamic and evolving across extended narrative sequences. Unlike prior research that often analyzes isolated metaphorical instances, the present study demonstrates how metaphors are developed and reinforced over time through continuous multimodal interaction. Additionally, this study highlights the dominance of contextual metaphor, suggesting that animated film relies more heavily on implicit and immersive meaning construction compared to the more explicit strategies commonly found in advertising. Moreover, the findings reveal that visual and aural modes play a more dominant role than verbal elements in constructing metaphorical meaning, emphasizing the importance of audiovisual integration in cinematic texts. Therefore, this study not only supports existing theories of multimodal metaphor but also expands them by showing how metaphor operates dynamically within complex narrative structures in animated film.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated multimodal metaphors in the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025) by identifying their types and examining how they are constructed through the interaction of visual, verbal, and aural modes. The findings reveal that four types of multimodal metaphors are employed in the film, namely pictorial simile, hybrid metaphor, contextual metaphor, and integrated metaphor, with contextual metaphor emerging as the most dominant type. This indicates that metaphorical meaning in the film is primarily constructed implicitly through contextual cues rather than explicit visual comparison. Furthermore, the analysis shows that multimodal metaphors are realized through cross-modal interaction, in which the visual mode serves as the primary carrier of meaning, while verbal and aural modes function to reinforce and elaborate the metaphorical mapping. These findings highlight the importance of audiovisual integration in representing abstract concepts such as emotion, identity, and conflict in animated film.

This study contributes to the field of multimodal discourse analysis by extending the application of Forceville's framework to feature-length animated film, demonstrating that multimodal metaphors operate dynamically across extended narrative structures rather than as isolated instances. However, this study is limited to textual analysis and does not examine audience interpretation. Therefore, future research is recommended to explore how viewers interpret multimodal metaphors across different cultural contexts, as well as to investigate other forms of audiovisual media to further develop understanding of multimodal meaning construction.

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