

IRENE LUSTRISSIMI

SOUTH KOREAN SOFT POWER BETWEEN
WEBTOON AND WEBNOVEL:
THE *SOLO LEVELING* CASE

ABSTRACT

In recent years, South Korea has consolidated its soft power through new forms of digital popular culture, particularly webnovels and webtoons. These formats, distributed via platforms such as Naver Webtoon and KakaoPage, have taken on a central role within the Hallyu wave, standing alongside K-pop and K-drama as instruments of global cultural influence. This study focuses on *Solo Leveling* as a paradigmatic case, aiming to analyze how its evolution from webnovel to webtoon, anime, and finally video game represents an effective manifestation of South Korean soft power. The analysis highlights transmedia strategies, localization processes, and the role of fan communities. *Solo Leveling*, originally a webnovel by Ch'ugong published on KakaoPage (2016–2018), was adapted into a webtoon by DUBU (2018–2021), an anime (2024), and a video game (*Solo Leveling: ARISE*, 2024), becoming a global transmedia phenomenon. Its ability to move across different media underscores its strategic value in terms of OSMU (One Source Multi-Use), a model typical of the South Korean cultural industry. The work's success has been strengthened by the effectiveness of digital distribution platforms and by the active participation of fan communities, which have contributed to its international popularity through fan translations, fan art, and fan fiction, enhancing its global virality. The analysis adopts a qualitative cultural

and media-oriented approach, examining the production and distribution stages of *Solo Leveling*, its transmedia transformations, international reception data, and online fan engagement dynamics. Particular attention is given to localization strategies in different markets and to editorial examples from Europe and the United States. The *Solo Leveling* case demonstrates how webnovels and webtoons have become strategic tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy, contributing to redefining South Korea's international role as a hybrid and innovative cultural powerhouse.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of South Korea into a global cultural powerhouse in recent years is closely linked to the phenomenon of the “Korean Wave”, or *hallyu* (Kim 2022), which has had a profound and lasting impact internationally. This phenomenon began in the 1990s with the spread of Korean dramas and movies (*Hallyu 1.0*) and later evolved through music, fashion, and lifestyle trends (*Hallyu 2.0* and *3.0*). Nowadays, it has reached what is referred to as *Hallyu 4.0*. In this latest wave, new digital forms such as web *sosŏl*¹ (or web novels) and webtoons² are gaining increasing prominence, emerging as key drivers in the future expansion of *hallyu*.

These “korean waves” have become the main sources of South Korea's soft power. It has grown increasingly influential over the past decades through a strategic and intelligent use of cultural influence. This soft power is particularly effective in the realm of pop culture, and web novels and webtoons now represent some of its most potent forms, especially among younger generations and in international markets. Therefore, in addition to well-established media such as K-pop and dramas, South Korea has successfully leveraged the most recent *hallyu*'s new forms of digital entertainment like webtoons, generating over 1.053 trillion won in 2020 and becoming a rapidly expanding sector on a global scale (Korea Creative Content Agency 2021). Thanks to the intensive work of the cultural industry, which has been increasingly transformed by digital technologies, particularly today in the era of the digital creative economy, cultural content is produced within a globalized and digitalized market,

1 The transcription used in this article is McCune-Reischauer.

2 Web novels are novels that are both written and published on digital platforms, such as *Naver Series*, *Kakao Page* and *Munpia*. Most of these literary works are genre fiction, particularly fantasy and science fiction. Web novels are published in instalments, usually once or twice a week, by the author's management company. Webtoons are digital comics usually published on popular platforms such as *Naver Webtoon* or *Kakao Page*. Often, webtoons are not original works, but transmedia adaptations (OSMU) of web novels: examples include *Under the Oak Tree*, *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint* and *Touch Your Heart* and many more (Lustrissimi 2023).

operating according to economic models that emphasize visibility and virality (Hemondhalgh *et. al.* 2011: 14-22). Web novels exemplify this transformation: distribution, audience engagement, and commercial success are increasingly dependent on digital platforms that amplify visibility and promote virality.

The case of *Solo Leveling* is a particularly illustrative example: a work that has successfully crossed formats, languages, and countries, blending traditional and innovative narrative elements while fully integrating into the logic of digitalization and global consumption. Over the past five years, the international growth of web novels has been very promising, culminating in 2024³, a year marked by the fruits of this international expansion. The popularity of *Solo Leveling*, which was already huge thanks to its webtoon, increased after the release of its anime adaptation, video game, and other media.

This paper aims to analyze the case of *Solo Leveling*, a transmedia phenomenon that originated as a web novel and evolved into a webtoon, anime, and video game, exploring how its success represents a manifestation of Korean soft power. Beginning with its origins, the analysis will examine its cultural impact, adaptation dynamics, and global dissemination, with particular attention to the role of fan communities and product localization, in order to understand the significance and influence of these new digital and cultural products as instruments of soft power.

2. SOLO LEVELING: THE MULTI-PLATFORM TRIUMPH

Solo Leveling (*na honjaman rebeoröp*; 나 혼자만 레벨업), originally a web novel written by the author Ch'ugong⁴, represents one of the most emblematic cases of South Korea's evolving digital publishing ecosystem as aforementioned. First serialized on *Kakao Page* from the 25th of July 2016, to 2018, the narrative follows Söng Chinu, a dungeon hunter who, through the acquisition of a mysterious power, gains the ability to grow stronger and “level up” in a manner analogous to characters in role-playing video games (RPGs). This metafictional mechanism situates *Solo Leveling* within a hybrid narrative framework that merges elements of fantasy, action, and video game logic, embodying a distinctly postmodern interplay between digital culture and storytel-

3 In terms of the exponential growth in the international popularity of South Korean web novels, 2024 and 2025 are key years. For example, Penguin Random House established Inklore, a publishing imprint dedicated to web novels. In Italy, the launch of Narae, a web novel platform owned by the Mondadori Group – one of the country's largest publishing houses – marks another significant milestone. Narae aims to capitalise on the growing market by translating some of the most successful international web novels for Italian readers. Furthermore, in June 2025, Mondadori published its first Korean web novel in print: *Semantic Error*. Besides, the Korean web novel *Under the Oak Tree* achieved the notable feat of entering the New York Times Best Seller list for hardcover fiction at number seven.

4 Although the author is commonly known as Chugong, in this article the name will be transcribed according to the McCune-Reischauer romanization system (as the original Korean is 추공), therefore Ch'ugong. This strategy will be applied also for other authors name.

ling. In 2018, the web novels was adapted into a webtoon, illustrated by the artist DUBU of the REDICE Studio⁵. Serialized from the 4th of March 2018 to the 29th of December 2021, the webtoon’s aesthetic dynamism and serialized accessibility contributed to the establishment of *Solo Leveling* as a global cultural phenomenon. It has garnered over 430 million views and 5 million unique readers on platforms such as Kakao Page. By 2020, its total sales, including revenue from the webtoon adaptation, surpassed \$30 million, demonstrating rapid growth in the global market⁶. This international success has not only led to a sequel, *Solo Leveling: Ragnarok*, and other spin-off products, but has also facilitated the webtoon adaptation’s release in print internationally. The print license for the English-language edition was acquired by Yen Press – publishing both the webtoon and the web novel print format⁷ –, while in Italy the webtoon series began publication through Star Comics in April 2021. Furthermore, the franchise has expanded into an audiobook on Audible, video game and an anime series. The subsequent release of the anime adaptation, produced by A-1 Pictures and premiered on Crunchyroll in January 2024, marked a decisive phase in the internationalization of the franchise, consolidating its status as a transnational cultural brand.

Beyond its individual success, *Solo Leveling* functions as a paradigmatic example of the One Source Multi Use (OSMU) model, illustrating the systematic repurposing of a single intellectual property across multiple media formats. The franchise’s trajectory – from web novel to webtoon, anime, merchandise, and forthcoming video

5 REDICE Studio (*redūaisū sūt'yudio*; 레드아이스 스튜디오) is one of the most prominent and influential Korean art studios specializing in the adaptation of popular web novels into webtoons. Among its most notable titles are *Return of the SSS-Class Ranker*, *Returned by the King*, *The Return of the Disaster-Class Hero*, and many others. The studio was founded in 2018 by the artist DUBU (real name Chang Chōngsuk; 장정숙), who tragically passed away on the 23th of July 2022, due to a cerebral hemorrhage caused by a chronic illness. Despite his untimely death, DUBU’s artistic legacy continues to exert a profound influence on the global webtoon industry, with *Solo Leveling* standing as his most celebrated work.

6 Che, Ŭnchu, “Leveling Up Alone, Just Like the Title: 'Solo Leveling'... Surpassing 'One Piece' to Take First Place” [“제목처럼 혼자 레벨업하는 '나 혼자만 레벨업'... '원피스' 제치고 1 위”]. Kookje, December 25, 2019.

7 The recent growing popularity of Korean web novels on an international scale is closely linked to the proliferation of English-language translations, which have facilitated their integration into Western publishing markets. Initially, many of these works circulated through unofficial fan translations distributed on unauthorized websites, a phenomenon that reflected both the global demand for Korean digital literature and the lack of formal publication channels. Over time, however, this informal circulation evolved into a legitimized publishing practice, with the release of officially licensed physical editions featuring professional translations intended for English-speaking audiences. Among the leading actors in this process, Yen Press, through its Yen On imprint, has specialized in translating and publishing prominent Asian web and light novels, including *Solo Leveling* and *Omniscient Reader’s Viewpoint*. Established in 2006, Yen Press has played a crucial role in mediating the circulation of Asian popular culture within Western contexts, thereby enhancing both the accessibility and cultural legitimacy of digital-born narratives.

game – demonstrates the scalability and flexibility inherent in South Korea’s digital cultural industries. Within this context, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how webtoons have become one of the nation’s primary cultural export commodities, bolstered by global platforms such as Naver Webtoon, which currently reports over 82 million monthly active users (ANI News, 2022). This success was significantly amplified by the webtoon adaptation, whose international distribution drew a global readership back to the original novel. The franchise’s subsequent expansion into video games, collectable merchandise (including action figures), animated adaptations, and planned live-action projects reflects a comprehensive strategy of transmedia commodification. At present, *Solo Leveling* remains among the most widely disseminated and internationally recognized Korean web novels. From a theoretical perspective, the international trajectory of *Solo Leveling* can be understood within the framework of soft power, as articulated by Joseph S. Nye (2008: 94-109). Actually, Nye defines soft power as a nation’s ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion, grounded in cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative. In this sense, the export and reception of Korean digital narratives, of which *Solo Leveling* is emblematic, represent a strategic cultural instrument in the projection of South Korea’s international image and influence. And therefore, the *hallyu* phenomenon, originally tied to K-dramas and K-pop, has now expanded into the digital domain through webtoons and web novels. This is described as “platformized soft power”, where national branding and creative industries converge through digital ecosystems (Dal Yong Jin, 2024: 94-109). The *Solo Leveling* franchise, mediated by global platforms such as Kakao Page, Naver Webtoon, and Crunchyroll, exemplifies this modern transformation from cultural content that functions both as entertainment and as a vehicle for national prestige, and its transmedia success reflects South Korea’s model of a “hybrid nation”. As Chung Min Lee observed in an interview, South Korea represents “an advanced economy mixed with an ancient civilization that is at once irrevocably democratic, technologically innovative, and culturally vibrant”, able to influence, without any obligation, through its powerful soft power (Park, 2024).

Another factor that has contributed recently to the franchise’s worldwide resonance is the continued expansion of its transmedia architecture. As already mentioned, beyond its webtoon and anime adaptations, *Solo Leveling* has extended into the gaming sector with the release of *Solo Leveling: ARISE* in May 2024. Developed by Netmarble, the game surpassed five million pre-registrations prior to launch, illustrating how a single cultural property can mobilize heterogeneous audiences – from readers to gamers – within a unified media ecology. This diversification further exemplifies the logic of OSMU-driven cultural production, where intellectual properties are strategically redeployed across multiple platforms to maximize cultural reach and economic value. This dynamic reinforces the idea that South Korea’s digital cultural industries operate within an increasingly integrated transmedia system, where nar-

rative worlds circulate fluidly across formats while expanding the nation’s soft-power reach. In this context, Iwabuchi’s (2002: 256-273) notion of “cultural odorlessness” is particularly relevant: while cultural products may downplay explicit national markers to enhance global circulation, they can never fully erase the “cultural odor” of their origins. Even the most seemingly “odorless” products retain subtle traces of the cultural contexts that shape them, an aspect that becomes especially evident when examining *Solo Leveling* and its depiction of contemporary Korea⁸.

2.1. *Solo Leveling and the representation of modern Korea*

Solo Leveling is set in a world profoundly altered by the sudden appearance of mysterious gates that lead to dungeons filled with dangerous monsters. These gates first emerged ten years before the events of the story, transforming society and giving rise to a new class of people known as “hunters.” These individuals possess supernatural abilities and are tasked with protecting humanity by venturing into the dungeons to combat the creatures within. The story begins in South Korea, specifically in Seoul, and centres on Sǒng Chinu⁹, an E-rank hunter widely regarded as the weakest of his kind. Despite his dedication and experience, his scarce abilities earn him the title “the World’s weakest hunter”, and he struggles to make a living or support his family. During a raid on a low-level dungeon, Sǒng Chinu’s party stumbles upon a hidden “double dungeon”, a perilous environment filled with deadly, deific statues and unforgiving rules. Most of his party perishes, and Chinu, gravely injured, sacrifices himself to allow the survivors to escape. However, instead of dying, he awakens in a hospital bed, greeted by a mysterious interface resembling a video game notification. He learns that he has become a “Player,” endowed with a unique ability to gain levels and grow quickly stronger. This is considered an unprecedented phenomenon in the world of hunters, whose capabilities are otherwise fixed from the moment they awaken. Sǒng Chinu’s transformation from the “world’s weakest hunter” to a near-divine being encapsulates the Korean developmental myth: a narrative of resilience, discipline, and self-determination that echoes both traditional Korean storytelling and the historical experience of modern South Korea. For example, the foundational Tan’gun myth, where Ungnyǒ attains humanity through strict self-discipline, and also the parallels to South Korea’s own historical ascent during the “Miracle on the Han River,” a period marked by collective sacrifice, rapid modernization, and extraordinary national self-strengthening. Sǒng Chinu’s individual progression mirrors the collective trajectory of South Korea’s modernization, from vulnerability to global prominence. Furthermore, the hero’s empowerment operates as a symbolic projection of the na-

8 In this paper, whenever the term ‘Korea’ is used, it always refers to South Korea.

9 The most widely known English name of the character is Song Jinwoo. However, the transcription used in this paper follows the McCune–Reischauer system, and thus it is rendered as Sǒng Chinu. The same approach will be applied to all subsequent names.

tion's economic and cultural ascent, translating macroeconomic development into the idiom of personal achievement. Additionally, another key aspect that reveals *Solo Leveling's* Korean cultural imprint is its levelling system, based on an effort to be measured and improvement to be quantified. This system resonates with both the Confucian work ethic and the neoliberal meritocratic ideal, which are foundational in the construction of the modern Korean self. To this extent, it reflects the way in which South Korea tells its own story of modernization: as a process of progressive and measurable accumulation of human capital.

These key elements of Korea's cultural and developmental trajectory continue to resonate throughout the narrative. In fact, determined to make the most of this opportunity, Söng Chinu begins to train and complete quests, unlocking new skills, abilities, and weapons while concealing his transformation from others. His initial motivation is simple: to protect his family, particularly his younger sister and his debilitated mother who is afflicted with an incurable condition. As he quickly levels up, his power grows exponentially, surpassing even the strongest S-rank hunters and catching the attention of influential international organizations and individuals. Söng Chinu discovers that his newfound abilities are tied to a larger cosmic conflict between two factions: the destructive "Monarchs" and the balance-seeking "Rulers". As the gates grow increasingly unstable, unleashing catastrophic threats, the conflict between "Monarchs" and "Rulers" spills into the human realm, pushing Earth to the brink of destruction. Söng Chinu, now a being of extraordinary strength, fully embraces his role as humanity's last hope. In the final battle, Chinu faces the "Absolute Being", the creator of both "Monarchs" and "Rulers", who views humanity as mere pawns in a cosmic game. In a climactic act of self-sacrifice, Söng Chinu chooses to reset the timeline, erasing the gates, hunters, and dungeons from existence. The world returns to a peaceful state, and Chinu resumes a quiet life with his family, free from the dangers that once plagued him. Though stripped of his powers, remnants of his memories and inner strength remain, a quiet testament to his extraordinary journey.

In *Solo Leveling*, as aforementioned, the world's transformation through the sudden emergence of "gates" and supernatural abilities metaphorically echoes South Korea's rapid transition from a war-torn nation to a worldwide technological power. The concept of "leveling up" functions as a narrative embodiment of meritocratic aspiration: a recurring theme in contemporary Korean cultural production that valorises individual perseverance and self-improvement. This also mirrors the cultural aspect of the *ppalli ppalli* (빨리빨리)¹⁰, positioning the protagonist's progression as a symbolic reflection of the nation's developmental narrative. Moreover, the story's integration of game-like systems and technological interfaces resonates with the techno-utopian vision that underpins much of South Korea's digital culture, aligning with the nation's

10 In simple words, the Korean drive for speed and efficiency.

image as a hub of innovation and competitiveness promoted through its global soft power.

Through its intricate worldbuilding, hybrid aesthetic, and meritocratic hero narrative, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how Korean digital media operate as vehicles of soft power, projecting national values through globally resonant storytelling. Its success reveals the mutual reinforcement between narrative globalization and cultural identity, positioning *Solo Leveling* not only as a commercial triumph but also as a textual embodiment of Korea's cultural modernity and digital diplomacy.

3. GLOBAL DIFFUSION AND THE “JAPANESE” ADAPTATION

As a culturally specific product, *Solo Leveling* carries a strong Korean identity that can challenge or even unsettle foreign audiences, who may adapt its narrative, altering names, settings, or cultural references, to make it resonate within their own national contexts. These shifts highlight the extent of Korean soft power, but also the negotiations required for its reception.

As the narrative of Ch'ugong spread through different media, it was the release of the anime adaptation that received widespread international acclaim. South Korea's soft power strategy relies on cultural authenticity. However, this cultural specificity is reduced in the Japanese domestic version of the anime. The anime adaptation of *Solo Leveling* shows how, despite being based on cultural authenticity, South Korean soft power is negotiated and sometimes diluted when it encounters culturally sensitive markets. Produced by the Japanese studio A-1 Pictures, they produced two versions of the same narrative: one for Japanese viewers, which is only streamed in Japan, and the other for the international public, which is streamed on the platform Crunchyroll. While the international version is a faithful adaptation of the original story, notable changes were made to the Japanese version to appeal to the local audience. For instance, character names were altered: Sōng Chinu becomes Shun Mizushino, Yu Chinho is renamed Kenta Morobishi, and C'ha Haein becomes Shizuku Kousaka. In fact, according to the show's producer, scenes were re-recorded with both Japanese-localized and original Korean names to cater to different markets¹¹. Yet, This strategy reduces the visibility of Korean identity. It also reflects a form of latent cultural resistance within the Japanese market. This choice is not merely aesthetic. It aims to minimize the work's Korean “cultural odor” (Iwabuchi, 2002: 256-273) and to make it more easily accepted in a market that has historically resisted explicit Korean references. Also, the setting was shifted from Seoul to Tokyo. This localization strategy was intended to make the content more familiar and acceptable for Japanese viewers, in a

11 Aniplex. *Interview with the Producers of “Solo Leveling” – Part 1*. Cocotame – Sony Music Group, 28 Mar. 2025. Cocotame.
<<https://cocotame.jp/en/series/110047/>>

context shaped by complex historical and cultural relations with South Korea. These changes do not appear in the international release, where the original Korean names are maintained, preserving the work's authenticity and reinforces its soft power value.

The anime series, directed by Shunsuke Nakashige with scripts by Noboru Kimura, has sparked debate regarding these adaptations. Nevertheless, the series has achieved substantial success, leading to the announcement of a second season. Moreover, a feature movie is planned to provide a comprehensive overview of the first season, incorporating the first two episodes of the upcoming one.

However, in the Japanese market, where historical tensions and a tradition of minimizing Korean elements persist, the localization avoids explicit displays of Korean cultural symbols. This case demonstrates that soft power is never fully unidirectional. It is filtered, reshaped, and at times diluted by the cultural expectations of the receiving audience.

3.1. The Fandom: the silent helper of Korean Soft Power

The worldwide phenomenon of *Solo Leveling* demonstrates that the success of a webtoon or novel can extend far beyond commercial achievement, becoming a vehicle of cultural influence. In fact, fans played an active role through unofficial translations, fan art, fan fiction, and social media promotion, transforming audiences into co-creators and cultural ambassadors. Their engagement amplified the reach of Korean popular culture, exemplifying how participatory fan communities contribute to soft power in the digital age. Fans contribute actively through social media platforms such as Reddit, Discord, Twitter, and TikTok, generating “word-of-mouth” promotion, creating unofficial products, and thus playing a key role in the series’ international circulation. For example, some fans spend hours creating personal interpretations of major characters, such as the “Shadow Monarch”, reflecting deep emotional engagement with the story. “It’s been a long time since I picked up a pen to draw ... I tried to bring my own interpretation ... I even added my own original Shadow Monarch version ...”¹² This shows how some fans don’t just consume the story, but actively celebrate and reinterpret it with personal artistic creations. Fans also expand the narrative universe through fanfiction and crossover stories, effectively co-creating content that extends the original plot¹³. Others engage in collaborative projects, such as 3D modeling and printing characters from the series, turning their appreciation into

12 User WebEven620 on the sub-hub Reddit “r/sololeveling”, July 2025. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/1lgad7p/my_solo_leveling_fan_art_pen_on_paper/>

13 User the_omnipotent666 on the sub-hub Reddit “r/sololeveling”, March 2025. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/1jd68wj/any_fanfiction_recommendations/>

tangible creative work¹⁴. All these activities align with Jenkins' (1992)¹⁵ concept of “textual poaching,” framing fans as active participants who appropriate, reinterpret, and redistribute cultural texts, effectively becoming co-creators rather than passive consumers. This qualitative participation demonstrates how fandom engagement functions as a transnational cultural network, amplifying *Solo Leveling*'s reach and impact. Fans become voluntary cultural ambassadors, extending the international influence of Korean culture and exemplifying soft power in practice. However, reliance on fandom engagement introduces certain challenges. The success of cultural products increasingly depends on the tastes, expectations, and creative interventions of international audiences, which can diverge from creators' original intentions. Moreover, participatory fan culture can lead to hybridization or distortion of content, particularly when unofficial translations or derivative works circulate widely before authorized releases¹⁶. This tension between maintaining cultural authenticity and maximizing worldwide reach mirrors broader debates in *hallyu* studies, which emphasize how fan-driven dissemination amplifies soft power but complicates control over national cultural representation. Social media platforms intensify this dynamic by serving as hubs for collaboration, discussion, and anticipation. Active fan engagement transforms consumers into co-creators, but also subjects cultural products to continuous reinterpretation and critique, sometimes pressuring producers to adapt content to fan preferences rather than the original narrative vision. Despite these potential challenges, the *Solo Leveling* case demonstrates the strategic value of participatory culture for soft power: the interplay of transmedia storytelling and highly engaged fandoms significantly enhances the global visibility of Korean cultural products. Therefore, *Solo Leveling* phenomenon illustrates that contemporary soft power operates not only through institutional strategies but also through complex networks of audience participation.

4. CONCLUSION

The case of *Solo Leveling* represents a paradigmatic example of how South Korean popular culture, particularly webtoons and web novels, has become a powerful instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Through a targeted cultural strategy,

14 User Maomaobadmonkey on the sub-hub Reddit “r/sololeveling”, November 2019. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/fsjlah/are_you_a_solo_leveling_fan_who_is_also_a_3d/>

15 Meyer, M. D. E. / Tucker, M. H. L. (2007). *Textual Poaching and Beyond: Fan Communities and Fandoms in the Age of the Internet*, in «*Review of Communication*», 7.1, pp. 103-116.

16 A key example is the spin-off, *Solo Leveling: Ragnarok*. Although this is an official series created by the same publisher, it is not recognised by the author, Ch'ugong, as it was created solely for fans as a form of “fan service”. Ch'ugong declared this narrative useless and non-canonical.

South Korea has succeeded in promoting its international image while simultaneously strengthening economic and diplomatic relations globally. The webtoon and web novel industries, especially webtoons supported by digital platforms such as Naver Webtoon and KakaoPage, have been central to the expansion of the *hallyu*, contributing significantly to the country's geopolitical projection. South Korea's modern soft power strategy relies not only on the promotion of national culture and traditional values but also on active state involvement in the distribution of popular cultural products. Korean pop culture combines elements of traditional Asian culture with Western influences, creating a hybrid appeal that has been key to its global success since the 1990s (Bakytzhanova/Tuleshova 2024: 14–28). Similarly, Nye (2008: 94–109) emphasizes South Korea's exceptional potential for soft power, grounded in its economic development, technological innovation, democratic system, and cultural modernity, which together provide a fertile basis for exporting cultural influence.

Solo Leveling embodies these strategies through its OSMU model, successfully expanding from web novel to webtoon, anime, video games, merchandise, and physical publications. Its narrative reflects Korean cultural values while resonating with international audiences, illustrating how Korean digital media can convey national ideals through compelling storytelling. Fan engagement, from translations to fan art and social media promotion, further amplifies the series' reach, turning international audiences into co-creators and cultural ambassadors. The European market demonstrates the tangible impact of this strategy: in France, the first six volumes of the *Solo Leveling* webtoon sold over 900.000 copies, establishing webtoons as a significant cultural export and supporting the national creative economy. In Italy, publishers like Gaijin (Renoir Comics), Jundo and J-Pop¹⁷, have launched dedicated webtoon collections, while events such as Lucca Comics and Games foster interaction between authors and audiences, by inviting several webtoon authors over the last few years¹⁸.

17 Gaijin (Renoir Comics) has published several Korean webtoon titles in Italy, including *Navillera*, *The Great*, *Horizon*, *A Heartfelt Andante*, and others (see <<https://www.gaijin.it/>>).

Jundo is known for distributing Korean webtoons such as *Itaewon Class* (see <<https://jundo.it/home>>).

J-Pop also releases Korean webtoon adaptations for the Italian market, *True beauty*, *Tower of God* (<<https://j-pop.it/it/>>).

18 For example at Lucca Comics and Games 2024, Korean authors such as Paskim (creator of *Lost in the Cloud*), Kim Myöngmi, and Gendry Kim Künsuk were present, participating in panels and showcases dedicated to webtoons. At Lucca Comics and Games 2025, Na Yunhüi and Pyöndük were confirmed as guests, representing webtoon creators at the festival. (For more information, see *Lucca Comics & Games Archive 2024–2025*, [LuccaComicsAndGames.com](https://archivio2.luccacomicsandgames.com/it/2024/ospiti/dettaglio/paskim/) <<https://archivio2.luccacomicsandgames.com/it/2024/ospiti/dettaglio/paskim/>>). Similarly, at Milan Games Week & Cartoomics 2025, Korean webtoon artist Kim Chimin (better known as Jimmy), creator of *Navillera* and other popular works, was officially invited as an international guest, providing further opportunities for audience interaction. (See Milan Games Week & Cartoomics 2025 guest announcements on AnimeClick.it <<https://www.animeclick.it/video-intro?r=/news/107521-milan-games-week-2025-jimmy-di>>).

Parallel developments in web novels, including the Italian publication of *Semantic Error* by Soori and the establishment of Penguin Random House's Inklore label, show a growing openness to Korean digital narratives. Internationally, Korean-inspired formats have influenced authors such as Rachel Smythe (*Lore Olympus*), whose webtoon adaptation of the Persephone myth has achieved over 1.7 billion views in seven languages and received multiple prestigious awards, illustrating the global circulation of Korean-style digital storytelling.

Through its adaptability, hybrid aesthetics, and multi-platform expansion, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how webtoons and web novels function as vehicles of soft power. They allow South Korea to project cultural values, technological innovation, and narrative artistry to international audiences, creating a global cultural brand while navigating diverse markets. The franchise demonstrates the capacity of Korean digital content to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, consolidating the nation's reputation as a leader in cultural innovation and digital media diplomacy. The *Solo Leveling* phenomenon is not only a commercial success but also a strategic instrument of South Korea's cultural influence. It illustrates the broader dynamics of the webtoon and web novel ecosystem as a central component of the country's soft power, showcasing how storytelling, transmedia expansion, and participatory fandom converge to create a globally resonant cultural and diplomatic force.

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