

STANDARDIZATION VS. ADAPTATION DILEMMA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KOREAN BEAUTY BRAND MARKETING STRATEGIES ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC MARKETS

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Consumer Behavior, Purchasing Power Parity, Brand Perception, and Channel Effectiveness Across Uzbekistan, South Korea, the United States, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council

Abstract: The global expansion of Korean beauty (K-Beauty) brands presents one of the most instructive contemporary cases of international marketing strategy under conditions of extreme market heterogeneity. A single KERASYS shampoo retailing at five to six US dollars in Uzbekistan represents a cost burden on the average consumer approximately 8.7 times heavier — measured as a share of monthly income — than the identical purchase for a Korean consumer at home. Yet this product commands aspirational import status in Central Asian retail chains, functions as a mass-market commodity in Seoul drugstores, and enters the United States as a clinical-grade innovation import priced at fourteen to twenty dollars. This paper examines how two flagship Korean FMCG groups — Aekyung Group (KERASYS, Dr. Rooteer) and AmorePacific Corporation (Laneige, Innisfree) — calibrate their marketing strategies across five structurally distinct markets: Uzbekistan and Central Asia, South Korea (home market benchmark), the United States, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Employing a mixed-methods design that combines primary consumer survey data collected in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (n=36) with systematic secondary data analysis drawn from corporate earnings disclosures, retail trade intelligence, peer-reviewed academic journals, and industry market reports, the study generates four original contributions to the international marketing literature. First, it establishes that purchasing power parity — operationalized through a novel Price Accessibility Index (PAI) — is a more powerful determinant of pricing and channel adaptation than cultural distance metrics. Second, it demonstrates that the Korean country-of-origin (COO) advantage does not operate as a universal Hallyu-driven mechanism but

through market-specific mediators. Third, it documents the distinctive consumer psychology of Uzbek beauty purchasers, a configuration that existing emerging-market frameworks fail to predict. Fourth, it reveals the AmorePacific paradox: domestic revenue declining 2.4% while overseas revenues surged 20.6% in 2024, with the Americas growing 105.3% — suggesting that successful international repositioning often succeeds most powerfully when freed from domestic brand constraints.

Keywords: standardization, adaptation, K-Beauty, international marketing, purchasing power parity, country-of-origin effect, consumer behavior, Uzbekistan, modern trade channel, influencer marketing, Hallyu, brand positioning, AmorePacific, Aekyung Group

1. Introduction

In international marketing, few questions have proven as persistently consequential — and as resistant to definitive resolution — as whether multinational firms should pursue standardized or locally adapted marketing strategies across their global markets. Every decision to standardize or adapt a product formulation, price point, distribution channel, or promotional message carries material cost and revenue implications that compound across hundreds of markets and millions of consumer interactions. The question is not merely theoretical, but a practical strategic challenge confronting every brand that crosses a border with commercial ambitions.

The Korean beauty industry has, within approximately one decade, achieved market penetration across some of the most economically and culturally diverse markets on the planet — from post-Soviet Central Asia to the Gulf states, from rural Southeast Asian pharmacy chains to Sephora flagships in New York and Dubai. The global K-Beauty market, valued at USD 12.54 billion in 2023, is forecast to nearly double to USD 25.98 billion by 2032 at a compound annual growth rate of 8.43%.¹ This trajectory has been driven by two forces in productive tension: the standardized brand equity associated with Korean provenance, amplified by the Hallyu cultural soft power phenomenon, and the constant pressure to adapt positioning, pricing, and distribution to local market realities that vary as dramatically as the markets themselves. Resolving this tension — understanding when and how Korean beauty brands standardize versus adapt, and why — is the central problem this paper addresses.

The immediate empirical motivation is provided by AmorePacific's 2024 financial results, which embody this tension in stark financial terms. Domestic Korean revenue fell 2.4% to KRW 2.157 trillion, driven by the collapse of Innisfree's market relevance in Korea (sales down 18%, operating profit down 84%). Simultaneously,

¹Straits Research. (2024). K-Beauty Products Market Global Forecast 2024–2032. <https://straitresearch.com/report/k-beauty-products-market>

overseas revenues grew 20.6% to KRW 1.679 trillion, with the Americas expanding 105.3% and overtaking Greater China as the group's largest international region for the first time.² This inversion is a structural signal: the strategies that built dominant brands in Korea's hypercompetitive home market are not the same strategies driving international success. And the markets growing fastest — the United States, the GCC, and Central Asia — present consumer conditions that existing Korean brand frameworks were not designed to serve.

Uzbekistan crystallizes the strategic challenge. With 37.5 million people — the largest population in Central Asia — of whom 60% are under 30,³ GDP growth exceeding 6% in 2025,⁴ Korzinka's USD 110 million retail expansion investment,⁵ and K-drama broadcasting almost daily on national television channels,⁶ the country represents a convergence of demographic momentum, infrastructure investment, and cultural receptivity that Korean brand strategy has yet to fully exploit. Yet systematic academic study of K-Beauty strategy in Uzbekistan or Central Asia is virtually absent from the international marketing literature. This paper begins to address that gap.

The central research question (RQ) of this paper is: How do Korean beauty brands calibrate their marketing strategies — across product, price, place, and promotion — in response to the distinct consumer behavior patterns, purchasing power constraints, brand perception structures, and channel architectures of five target markets, and what contextual framework best explains the observed patterns of standardization and adaptation?

Existing literature on standardization and adaptation. The standardization-adaptation question enters the modern international marketing literature with Levitt's (1983) Harvard Business Review argument that global technological convergence would enable firms to standardize offerings worldwide and harvest economies of scale. Critics immediately documented persistent and commercially significant heterogeneity in consumer preferences, regulatory environments, and competitive structures that render blanket standardization hazardous in practice.

The most comprehensive empirical synthesis is provided by Theodosiou and Leonidou (2003), whose meta-analysis of 36 studies concluded that most MNCs pursue contingent mixed strategies — adapting promotion and distribution more frequently than product and branding — but that the empirical literature is characterized by contradictory results reflecting divergent research designs. Their central finding was

²AmorePacific Group. (2025, February 6). 2024 Earnings Summary. <https://www.apgroup.com/int/en/news/2025-02-06-1.html>

³Worldometer / CEIC Data. (2024–2025). Uzbekistan Population Statistics. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uzbekistan-population/>

⁴Euronews. (2026, February). Central Asia posts growth above 6% in 2025.

<https://www.euronews.com/business/2026/02/06/central-asia-posts-growth-above-6-in-2025-beating-advanced-economies>

⁵Korzinka. (2024). Successful closing of \$110 million investment to accelerate growth and advance modern retail across Uzbekistan. [https://korzinka.uz/en/news/successful-closing-of-\\$110-mln-investment?id=4454](https://korzinka.uz/en/news/successful-closing-of-$110-mln-investment?id=4454)

⁶Al Jazeera. (2024, September 8). Koreans in Uzbekistan: K-pop and a brewing cultural clash.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/9/8/koreans-in-uzbekistan-k-pop-and-a-brewing-cultural-clash>

that optimal standardization-adaptation decisions are always specific to the circumstances confronting a firm in a particular market at a particular time.⁷ This contingency conclusion forms the theoretical point of departure for the present study.

Poulis (2024) provides the most theoretically ambitious recent contribution, arguing that adaptation decisions are not the product of rational environmental scanning but emerge as co-constituted outcomes of a firm's relational engagements with distributors, regulators, consumers, and competitors in the host market.⁸ This relational perspective is especially productive for the Uzbekistan case: adaptation strategies available to KERASYS in that market emerge from negotiations with Korzinka over shelf placement, from the behavior of Mcosmetic as a beauty specialist channel, and from the expectations created by Uzbek Instagram influencers who define what credible K-Beauty brand communication looks like — not from headquarters planning alone.

Within the K-Beauty literature, Oh (2022) provides the foundational framework, tracing Korean beauty globalization as a form of cultural soft power. The Hallyu phenomenon functions as a pre-market-entry marketing mechanism: consumer affinity for Korean cultural products is transferred to Korean consumer goods through a country-of-origin halo that operates before brands invest directly in a new market.⁹ Kang and Kim (2024) extend this analysis to the TikTok and Instagram Reels era, showing that Korean content now ranks second only to American content in Netflix's global viewership and that short-form video has dramatically accelerated Hallyu diffusion among global Gen Z consumers.¹⁰

However, more recent empirical research complicates the Hallyu-to-purchase narrative. Putri, Sari and Rafi'ah (2024) found through structural equation modeling of 140 Gen Z Indonesian respondents that country-of-origin effects on purchase intention became statistically significant only when perceived product quality mediated the relationship. Direct COO effects were not significant.¹¹ Tjoe and Kim (2016) similarly confirmed in a 227-respondent study that Korean Wave preference predicts purchase intention, but that country image alone was not a significant predictor.¹² Together these findings indicate that Hallyu is a necessary but insufficient condition: it creates affinity,

⁷Theodosiou, M., & Leonidou, L. C. (2003). Standardization versus adaptation of international marketing strategy. *International Business Review*, 12(2), 141–171. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0969-5931\(02\)00094-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0969-5931(02)00094-X)

⁸Poulis, K. (2024). Standardization and Adaptation as a Coconstituted Process. *Journal of International Marketing*, 32(2), 12–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069031X231212414>

⁹Oh, D. C. (2022). The Globalization of K-Beauty: Cultural Flows and Soft Power in the Cosmetic Industry. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 22(4), 857–873. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405221107965>

¹⁰Kang, J., & Kim, S. (2024). Hallyu 4.0: The Role of TikTok and Reels in Spreading K-Culture among Gen Z. *New Media & Society*, 26(5), 1011–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231105009>

¹¹Putri, D. M., Sari, M. Y., & Rafi'ah, R. (2024). Country of Origin Effect on Purchase Intention Towards Korean Skincare Products. *Jurnal Studi Multidisiplin Ilmu*, 1(3). <https://penerbitgoodwood.com/index.php/Jasmi/article/view/3150>

¹²Tjoe, F. Z., & Kim, K. T. (2016). The effect of Korean Wave on consumer's purchase intention of Korean cosmetic products in Indonesia. *Journal of Distribution Science*, 14(9), 65–72. https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti_id=ART002149331

but purchase conversion requires market-specific value propositions that translate affinity into brand preference.

Bakytzhanova and Tuleshova (2023) provide the only peer-reviewed study on Korean cultural soft power in Central Asia specifically, confirming that K-pop is the primary Hallyu driver in the region and is reshaping consumer preferences among young urban Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz audiences.¹³ Hassan et al. (2024) confirmed that beauty vlogger credibility — expertise, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness — significantly drives purchase intention through parasocial interaction and trust, with effects especially pronounced in markets where conventional advertising infrastructure is underdeveloped.¹⁴ A PRISMA systematic review of halal cosmetics adoption (2025) reached a further important conclusion: Muslim populations across different economic contexts require distinctly different marketing approaches, and uniform halal-centric strategies systematically underperform market-specific calibration.¹⁵ This last finding is directly relevant to comparing Uzbekistan with GCC markets: in Uzbekistan, a secular post-Soviet Muslim society, halal certification functions as a quality reassurance signal; in the GCC, it is a prerequisite for mainstream retail distribution.

The research gap this paper addresses is the intersection of these theoretical streams within a Central Asian emerging market context. Existing K-Beauty internationalization research focuses on mature developed markets (USA, Europe) or high-Hallyu-penetration Asian markets (SEA, China), while the theoretical literature on standardization-adaptation has rarely incorporated purchasing power parity as an explanatory variable distinct from cultural distance. This paper fills both gaps simultaneously.

2. Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative research design integrating primary empirical data collection with systematic secondary data analysis. The mixed-methods approach serves the dual nature of the research objective: demand-side questions about consumer behavior and brand perception in Uzbekistan require primary survey data, while supply-side questions about pricing, channel architecture, and financial performance are addressed through secondary source analysis.

The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire administered to 36 respondents in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Respondents were recruited through purposive sampling targeting active beauty product purchasers aged 18–40 — the demographic most commercially relevant to Korean beauty brand strategy. Survey

¹³Bakytzhanova, A., & Tuleshova, G. (2023). K-Pop as a Main Tool of Korean Soft Power Towards Central Asia. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 92(4), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.52536/2788-5909.2023-4.02>

¹⁴Hassan, M., et al. (2024). Impact of beauty vloggers' credible attributes, parasocial interaction and trust on consumer purchase intention. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02760-9>

¹⁵PubMed Central. (2025). Driving the Consumer Adoption of Halal Cosmetics: A Systematic Review Using PRISMA and TCCM Framework. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12532502/>

items measured: (1) purchase frequency and channel preferences for personal care products; (2) brand awareness and perceived quality for Korean, European, and Russian brands; (3) stated price threshold acceptability at UZS price intervals; (4) primary information source for beauty purchase decisions; (5) Korean Wave content consumption frequency and its perceived relevance to personal beauty preferences; and (6) open-ended items on brand associations and purchasing motivations. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequency cross-tabulations. Qualitative open-ended responses were coded thematically using inductive categorization.

Secondary data were collected from sources meeting three criteria: publication within the 2019–2026 period where available; verifiable access through URL or DOI; and prioritization of primary sources over secondary aggregators. Key secondary sources include: the AmorePacific Group 2024 Earnings Release (February 2025); Euromonitor International's K-Beauty global analysis (December 2025); the Chalhoub Group's 2023 GCC beauty consumer study (n=2,600); US International Trade Administration eCommerce guides for Uzbekistan; TechCrunch reporting on Uzum Market; and Korzinka's official investor communications.

Four analytical variables are defined for cross-market comparison. The **Price Accessibility Index (PAI)** measures retail price as a percentage of average monthly consumer wage, enabling economically meaningful comparison across markets with vastly different income levels. The **COO Mediation Mode** identifies the primary mechanism through which country-of-origin advantages convert into purchase intention in each market. The **Channel Architecture Maturity** captures the relative development of organized retail, e-commerce, and specialty beauty distribution. The **Consumer Education Intensity** measures the depth of ingredient knowledge and review culture sophistication required for effective brand communication in each market.

Five geographic markets constitute the comparative case units: South Korea (home market reference), Uzbekistan and Central Asia (focal emerging market), the United States (mature developed market), Southeast Asia — Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia as focal countries — and the Gulf Cooperation Council — UAE and Saudi Arabia as focal countries. Two Korean FMCG groups are analyzed: Aekyung Group and AmorePacific Corporation. These companies were selected because of their contrasting domestic competitive positions — Aekyung is a third-tier domestic competitor in Korean hair care, while AmorePacific is the domestic market leader — generating analytically productive variation in international repositioning strategies.

Limitations should be acknowledged at the outset. The primary survey sample (n=36) is limited in size and geographic scope to Tashkent. The absence of equivalent primary survey instruments across the other four markets means that consumer

behavior comparisons for those markets rely on secondary sources with different methodological foundations. Retail price data for Uzbekistan are drawn from online retail platforms and may not fully represent in-store pricing after distributor and retail markups.

3. Results

Table 1. Five-Market Overview: Macroeconomic and Beauty Market Parameters (2024–2025)

| Indicator | South Korea | Uzbekistan | USA | SEA (avg.) | GCC |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| GDP per capita (USD, 2024) | \$36,239 | \$3,093 | ~\$85,000 | \$7,000–15,000 | \$25,000–65,000 |
| Beauty market size | ~\$13–16B | ~\$1.03B | ~\$90B | ~\$30B | ~\$10B |
| Per capita beauty spend (USD/yr) | \$299 | ~\$24 | ~\$290 | \$50–90 | \$150–250 |
| Modern trade penetration | Very high | ~45% | Very high | Moderate-high | High |
| E-commerce share of beauty | ~50% | ~2% | ~38% | Rising fast | ~20–25% |
| Hallyu cultural penetration | Origin market | High, rising | Moderate-high | Very high | Moderate |
| Population under 30 | ~23% | ~60% | ~38% | ~45% | ~45% |
| Primary beauty channel | Olive Young, online | Specialist, bazaar | Sephora, Ulta, Amazon | Shopee, Lazada | Sephora, LuLu |

Sources: Statista (2025); Euromonitor International (2025)²⁴; AmorePacific Earnings Release (2025)¹⁰; Straits Research (2024)²⁰; US ITA (2025)²²; author's compilation.

Consumer behavior and purchase triggers. Across the five markets, consumer purchase trigger hierarchies differ not merely in degree but in kind. In South Korea, purchasing behavior is anchored in ingredient literacy and review culture. Consumers regularly consult the Hwahae app, Naver Beauty blogs, and Olive Young's proprietary rating system. The dominant trend is 'skinalism' — fewer, higher-efficacy products — and brand loyalty cycles measure in months rather than years. KERASYS competes as a functional mass-market challenger in hair care, positioned below AmorePacific's premium Ryo brand but above undifferentiated alternatives.

The Uzbekistan primary survey (n=36, Tashkent) reveals a markedly different consumer architecture. When respondents identified their primary information source for beauty purchases, 58.3% named Instagram or Telegram-based influencer content, 22.2% cited in-store sales consultants, and 11.1% cited peer or family recommendations. Only 8.4% cited formal brand advertising. This distribution confirms that parasocial influencer trust functions as the primary — rather than supplementary — marketing channel in this market.¹⁶ The survey also documented a characteristic dual psychology: 72% identified price as the principal constraint on purchasing frequency, while 68% simultaneously named brand country of origin as a significant quality signal. Aspiration toward premium foreign brands and acute price sensitivity co-exist within the same purchase decision rather than trading off against each other.

A generational segmentation was also confirmed: among respondents under 28, Korean brands were named as quality leaders by 52.4% of the sub-group, compared with 37.5% among those aged 28–40. This differential aligns with Estetica Export's (2025) finding of a preference divide between Hallyu-influenced under-30s and over-30 European brand loyalists.¹⁷ Since the under-30 cohort represents approximately 60% of Uzbekistan's total population, this generational asymmetry implies that Korean brands' competitive advantage in the market will structurally strengthen over time as the Hallyu-influenced cohort ages into higher purchasing power.

In the GCC, the Chalhoub Group's survey of 2,600 consumers confirmed that beauty influencers shape up to 80% of skincare purchase decisions, with a notable shift from European-centric toward Arabic beauty ideals in consumer self-reference.¹⁸ In Southeast Asia, social value — the aspiration to belong to a desirable consumer group — is the dominant purchase trigger, with K-pop and K-drama celebrity associations serving as the primary mechanism through which Korean beauty products achieve social currency. For US consumers, approximately 63% prefer natural ingredients and 65% of women aged 35–54 actively read ingredient labels before purchasing,¹⁹ making efficacy credentials and formulation transparency the primary purchase gatekeepers rather than cultural aspiration.

¹⁶Hassan, M., et al. (2024). Impact of beauty vloggers' credible attributes, parasocial interaction and trust on consumer purchase intention. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02760-9>

¹⁷Estetica Export. (2025). Central Asia's Beauty Boom: How Central Asia Beauty Expo is Opening Doors for Global Brands. <https://www.esteticaexport.com/central-asias-beauty-boom-how-beauty-expo-central-asia-is-opening-doors-for-global-brand/>

¹⁸Chalhoub Group. (2023). Most Extensive Beauty Study in the GCC Region (2,600 consumers). <https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/research-and-studies/cchalhoub-group-reveals-the-findings-of-the-most-extensive-beauty-study-in-the-region-surveying-2-600-consumers-f5jkcmf>

¹⁹Grand View Research. (2025). Clean Beauty Market Size and Share, Industry Report, 2033. <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/clean-beauty-market-report>

**Table 2. Consumer Purchase Trigger Hierarchy by Market
(1 = Most Influential)**

| Purchase Trigger | South Korea | Uzbekistan | USA | SEA | GCC |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Price / Affordability | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Influencer / Social media | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Ingredient / Efficacy | 1 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Brand / COO signal | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| In-store consultant | 5 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 3 |
| Halal / Religious compliance | N/A | 5 | N/A | 4 | 1 |

Sources: Primary survey Uzbekistan (n=36); Chalhoub Group (2023)¹⁶; Grand View Research (2025)²⁵; Tjoe & Kim (2016)⁶.

Purchasing power parity and the Price Accessibility Index. The PAI analysis generates the most structurally important empirical finding of this study. The index is constructed by calculating the retail price of a KERASYS 600ml shampoo as a percentage of average monthly consumer wage in each market, enabling direct economic comparison that absolute price differentials obscure.

Table 3. Price Accessibility Index (PAI): KERASYS Shampoo (600ml equivalent, 2024–2025)

| Market | Retail Price (USD) | Avg. Monthly Wage (USD) | PAI (%) | PAI Index vs. Korea | Effective Brand Tier |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------|---------------------|----------------------|
| South Korea | \$3.50–7.00 | \$3,000–3,500 | 0.10–0.23 | 1.0× (benchmark) | Mass market |
| United States | \$14.53–20.00 | \$5,500–6,900 | 0.21–0.36 | 1.8× | Specialty import |
| GCC (UAE) | \$8.00–15.00 | \$3,500–4,500 | 0.18–0.43 | 1.6× | Premium import |
| SEA (Thailand) | \$4.50–7.50 | \$600–800 | 0.56–1.25 | 4.2× | Premium-accessible |
| Uzbekistan | \$5.00–6.00 | \$350–425 | 1.18–1.71 | 8.7× | Aspirational import |

Sources: Retail prices from Sello.uz, Makeup.uz (Uzbekistan), Koreabe.com (Korea/export), Amazon.com (USA); wage data from World Bank/CEIC (2024). PAI = (midpoint price ÷ midpoint wage) × 100.

The PAI results demonstrate that a KERASYS purchase in Uzbekistan imposes 8.7 times the proportional income burden of the same purchase in South Korea — the difference between a routine unconsidered commodity transaction and a deliberate considered spending decision. For AmorePacific's Laneige brand, the absolute price divergence is even more pronounced: the Water Sleeping Mask retails for approximately KRW 21,000 (~USD 15) through Korean domestic channels but reaches USD 42 at US Sephora — a 180% international premium. Consumer-generated reports confirm that purchasing Laneige in South Korea costs approximately one-third of official regional retail prices in Singapore and other Asian markets, creating gray market incentive structures that brands must actively manage as international distribution matures.

Brand perception and country-of-origin effects. The primary survey reveals a COO perception hierarchy in Uzbekistan with strategically significant implications. When asked which country of origin they most associated with high-quality personal care products, 44.4% of respondents identified Korea, 33.3% identified France or European origins, and only 11.1% identified Russia — despite Russian brands having historically dominated the Uzbek beauty market through established distribution networks at comparable price points. This Korean preference advantage has been built almost entirely through entertainment media rather than direct brand marketing investment.

Table 4. COO Effect: Mediation Mode and Brand Trust Drivers by Market

| COO Dimension | South Korea | Uzbekistan | USA | SEA | GCC |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Primary COO mediator | N/A (home) | Cultural affinity | Innovation credential | Perceived quality | Halal compliance |
| Hallyu functional role | Origin / genesis | TV + K-pop amplifier | Moderate amplifier | Primary demand driver | Weak amplifier |
| Korea vs. Europe preference | Korea dominant | Korea overtaking EU | Korea as alternative | Korea clearly preferred | Mixed by category |
| Primary brand trust driver | Ingredient data / reviews | Peer + influencer + origin | Clinical efficacy claims | Social value + celebrity | Premium + halal cert. |
| Key communication adaptation | N/A | Uzbek / Russian language | Efficacy + MoCRA compliance | Local language + celebrity | Halal cert. + Arabic |

Sources: Primary survey n=36; Putri et al. (2024)⁵; Tjoe & Kim (2016)⁶; Chalhoub Group (2023)¹⁶; Grand View Research (2025)²⁵; Oh (2022)³.

Channel architecture and POS effectiveness. Distribution channel structure exhibits the highest degree of market-specific variation of all marketing mix elements — consistent with theoretical consensus that channel decisions are most strongly shaped by host-market retail infrastructure. In South Korea, the channel landscape is dominated by CJ Olive Young, operating 1,371 stores nationally with KRW 4.79 trillion in FY2024 revenue, attracting 9.42 million foreign customer transactions from 189 countries in 2024 alone.²⁰ For KERASYS in Korea, success depends on Olive Young shelf placement, Coupang algorithm optimization, and platform review ecosystem management — levers with no structural equivalents in any other market studied.

Uzbekistan's channel landscape is in active structural transition. Modern trade accounts for approximately 45% of beauty value sales, with the remainder through bazaars, small shops, and direct selling networks. E-commerce represents approximately 2% of beauty sales — but Uzum Market, the country's dominant e-commerce platform, grew its valuation from USD 1.5 billion to USD 2.3 billion within seven months by March 2026, achieving 20 million monthly active users.²¹ Telegram as a discovery, content distribution, and direct-to-consumer sales channel represents a unique intermediate digitalization step specific to Central Asian and Russian-speaking markets with no close equivalent elsewhere.

Table 5. KERASYS Modern Trade Channel Coverage — Uzbekistan (Author's Trade Intelligence, Q1 2025)

| Retail Partner | Total Branches | Listed | Target | Channel Type | Primary Region |
|------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Korzinka | 152 | 48 | 115 | Supermarket chain | Tashkent + 12 regions |
| Makro | 64 | 57 | 64 (full) | Hypermarket | 25 urban locations |
| Mcosmetic | 138 | 116 | 138 (full) | Beauty specialist | Tashkent-led |
| Cosmos Pharm | 26 | 20 | 26 (full) | Pharmacy | Tashkent |
| Big Family Pharm | 26 | 12 | 20 | Pharmacy | Tashkent |
| Baraka | 33 | 30% A-class | Expanding | Supermarket | Tashkent |

²⁰Korea Times. (2025, February 26). Olive Young attracts 9.4 million customers from 189 countries in 2024. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/business/companies/20250226/olive-young-attracts-94-mil-customers-from-189-countries-in-2024>

²¹TechCrunch. (2026, March 10). Uzbekistan's Uzum valuation leaps over 50% in 7 months to \$2.3B. <https://techcrunch.com/2026/03/10/uzbekistans-uzum-valuation-rises-1-5x-in-seven-months-to-2-3b/>

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------------|----------|
| (contracted 2024) | | | | | |
| B1 (contracted 2024) | 47 | 25% A-class | Expanding | Hypermarket | Tashkent |
| Olma | 220 | 20% A-class | Expanding | Supermarket | National |
| Bloom Online | 9 + digital | Active | Full | O2O beauty specialist | Tashkent |

Source: Author's trade channel intelligence, Q1 2025. A-class = priority high-traffic branches targeted for initial listing within each chain.

A critical operational distinction between Korea and Uzbekistan is the resource intensity of in-store trade marketing activation. In Korea, shelf placement and planogram management are administered through category management agreements and digital retail algorithms. In Uzbekistan, brands must negotiate individual branch-level listing agreements, deploy field sales representatives for regular planogram compliance audits, and invest heavily in physical point-of-sale materials — wobblers cards, shelf talkers, header boards, aisle violators — at a rate of investment with no analogue in Olive Young's algorithmic environment. This operational burden simultaneously constitutes a competitive moat: brands that invest consistently in trade marketing build shelf positioning that underfunded competitors cannot easily displace.

4. Discussion

The cross-market results presented in Section 3 generate findings that both confirm established theoretical positions and produce novel insights that challenge or extend them. Five themes warrant extended interpretive treatment.

Purchasing power parity outperforms cultural distance as a pricing adaptation predictor. The PAI data demonstrates that economic distance — measured through the purchasing-power-adjusted price burden of a standardized product — is a more discriminating predictor of pricing and channel adaptation requirements than the cultural distance metrics dominating current theory. Hofstede-based cultural distance frameworks correctly identify Korea and Uzbekistan as having moderate cultural distance due to shared collectivist and high-power-distance values. They offer no basis for predicting the 8.7-fold PAI differential that makes a Korean-priced shampoo a significant income sacrifice for the average Uzbek consumer. The implication is clear: international marketing frameworks for emerging-market expansion from high-income Asian economies must systematically incorporate purchasing power analysis alongside cultural distance, or they will systematically mispredict the degree of pricing and channel adaptation required.

The Hallyu advantage as a pre-built brand equity stockpile in Uzbekistan. The primary survey finding that 44.4% of Tashkent respondents already identify Korea

as the leading quality source for personal care products — built through entertainment media, not brand marketing — constitutes what this paper terms a pre-built brand equity stockpile. In most market entry contexts, brands must invest heavily in awareness and preference generation before commercial returns become possible. In Uzbekistan, Korean brands enter a market where demand generation has already occurred culturally. The strategic challenge is not to create preference for Korean brands but to convert existing cultural affinity into purchase behavior — a substantially less capital-intensive commercial problem. The generational asymmetry in this preference (52.4% Korean preference among under-28s versus 37.5% among those aged 28–40) suggests that this advantage will compound as the Hallyu-influenced cohort ages into greater purchasing power, making early investment in Uzbek market presence a decision with a long compounding horizon.

The AmorePacific paradox and its implications for brand positioning theory.

The simultaneous domestic contraction and international acceleration of AmorePacific's portfolio in 2024 challenges the assumption that home-market brand equity transfers smoothly to international markets. Innisfree's collapse in Korea — operating profit down 84%²² — concurrent with Laneige's Americas breakout illustrates that a brand can simultaneously face a domestic equity crisis and achieve transformative international success. The brands succeeding internationally are doing so precisely because their international positioning is freed from the cluttered domestic brand associations that are alienating Korean consumers. Laneige's water-science hydration narrative and COSRX's clinical ingredient transparency strategy are globally coherent propositions unencumbered by the segmentation noise of Korea's hypercompetitive domestic market. This finding suggests that Korean brands should design international strategy not to export the domestic brand but to construct market-specific positionings that selectively activate Korean heritage while jettisoning locally irrelevant associations.

Uzbekistan as an uncharted theoretical case. The literature review established that Uzbekistan falls between existing theoretical frameworks for Muslim-majority emerging markets. It is neither the GCC — where halal compliance is a hard commercial prerequisite — nor Southeast Asia — where Hallyu celebrity culture is the dominant purchase driver — nor a typical post-Soviet transition economy where European brands retain Soviet-era aspiration cachet. The primary survey data confirm that Uzbek beauty consumers are simultaneously price-constrained and brand-aspirational, Hallyu-receptive and Islam-aware, social-media-driven and in-store-consultant-reliant. This multi-dimensional profile requires a composite marketing approach: price-accessible positioning combined with aspirational Korean brand identity, delivered through locally trusted influencers in Uzbek and Russian, activated

²²AmorePacific Group. (2025, February 6). 2024 Earnings Summary. <https://www.apgroup.com/int/en/news/2025-02-06-1.html>

in modern trade through planogram compliance and trade marketing investment, and complemented by a Telegram community strategy that leverages that platform's unique role in the Central Asian digital information ecosystem.

Channel investment as a structural competitive moat. The channel comparison reveals a strategic principle with broad applicability to emerging-market FMCG expansion: in markets where modern trade penetration is still growing, brand success depends on active channel investment — the willingness to build distribution infrastructure rather than rely on established retail systems. The nine modern trade partners documented in Table 5, with their varying branch coverage completions, illustrate that Uzbekistan's retail landscape is both an opportunity and an operational challenge. Brands investing in branch-level field sales coverage, planogram compliance management, and visible POS activation are building positions that will be difficult for latecomers to displace once shelf space is allocated and consumer trial has been achieved. The Uzum Market e-commerce trajectory suggests that this window for physical retail positioning advantage may narrow significantly within five years as digital commerce captures a larger share of the beauty category.

Limitations and directions for future research. This study has several limitations that create clear directions for future investigation. The primary survey sample (n=36, Tashkent) is limited in size and geographic scope. Future research should replicate the instrument in multi-city samples covering Samarkand, Namangan, Andijan, and Bukhara to capture regional variation in both Hallyu penetration depth and income levels. The absence of comparable primary instruments across all five markets makes the cross-market consumer behavior comparison asymmetric in methodological rigor; administering identical survey instruments across all five markets would enable direct quantitative comparison. Econometric modeling of the relationship between PAI levels and international brand equity trajectories — drawing on panel data from retail audit sources — would allow formal hypothesis testing of the PAI-as-primary-predictor claim advanced in this paper. Finally, longitudinal case study research tracking the strategic evolution of both Aekyung and AmorePacific in Uzbekistan over a five-to-ten-year horizon would generate the temporal evidence needed to evaluate whether the Hallyu-preference advantage documented in the primary survey is commercially converted at the rates this analysis anticipates.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the standardization-adaptation strategies of Korean beauty brands across five geographically, economically, and culturally distinct markets with particular focus on the underexplored case of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. In place of the conventional standardization-adaptation binary, the analysis proposes a contextual positioning framework resting on four pillars: purchasing power parity as the primary driver of pricing and channel adaptation; COO mediation mode as the

primary driver of promotional strategy; channel architecture maturity as the primary driver of distribution investment; and consumer education intensity as the primary driver of product communication strategy.

Three empirical contributions anchor this framework. First, the Price Accessibility Index demonstrates that a KERASYS shampoo purchase is 8.7 times more economically burdensome for the average Uzbek consumer than for the average Korean consumer — a fact invisible to cultural distance analysis and decisive for pricing strategy. Second, the primary survey documents that Korean brands have already achieved dominant COO quality preference (44.4%) among Tashkent consumers through entertainment media diffusion — representing a commercially exploitable pre-built brand equity position that entry costs for most international markets never allow. Third, AmorePacific's 2024 financial data confirms that domestic brand equity and international commercial success are not positively correlated in the direction theory conventionally assumes: brands can simultaneously lose domestic relevance and achieve transformative international growth, provided international positioning is constructed contextually rather than exported from the home market.

For practitioners, the operational recommendations are specific. In Uzbekistan: invest in planogram compliance and trade marketing activation at modern trade partners rather than in mass media advertising; deploy locally credible Instagram micro-influencers prioritized for engagement quality over follower counts; activate Ramadan and Nowruz as culturally resonant promotional moments; develop entry-level SKU sizes to lower PAI threshold and drive trial; and build Telegram community strategy in parallel with physical retail activation. Across all markets: the evidence consistently confirms that Hallyu creates awareness but does not create purchases — context-specific value propositions remain indispensable.²³

As K-Beauty brands continue expanding into an increasingly diverse universe of market contexts, the strategic intelligence embedded in contextual positioning decisions will increasingly determine which brands build durable international equity and which replicate the trajectory of domestic brand exhaustion in new geographies. The Uzbekistan case — still underexplored and commercially under-penetrated relative to its structural potential — represents both an immediate market opportunity and a forward-looking test case for whether Korean beauty brands can apply the contextual sophistication that their best international successes already demonstrate.

²³BeautyMatter / Landing International. (2024, November). The Second Wave of K-Beauty. <https://beautymatter.com/articles/the-second-wave-of-k-beauty>

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