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From Fiction to Function: Product Placement and Luxury Brand Integration in K-Dramas

Abdimuminova Durdona[*1,2], Vanessa Gaffar[1], Mokh Adib Sultan[1]*

[1]Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
[2]Tashkent State University of Economics, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
*Correspondence: E-mail: durdona27@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

This article examines the marketing strategies that luxury brands use in Korean dramas (K-dramas) to increase brand visibility and improve positioning. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on secondary data, including articles, case studies, industry reports, and media analyses, as well as primary data from in-depth interviews with five university students from Uzbekistan, Indonesia, and the United States. This study aims to identify key strategies for product integration, assess the role of cultural factors in audience reception, and examine how these techniques align with brand positioning theories. Secondary data revealed three main strategies: narrative integration, strategic partnerships with stylists and production teams, and demographic targeting of affluent viewers aged 18–40. Interview findings emphasize that luxury product placements in K-dramas significantly impact brand perception and purchase intentions, largely due to aspirational appeal and celebrity endorsement. These insights support Aaker's brand equity theory, particularly with regard to emotional connection and brand recall. The study places its findings in the context of the Hallyu wave and global media influence. It offers luxury brands a framework for integrating themselves into culture in authentic ways while minimizing reputational risks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global growth of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) as a cultural and commercial powerhouse has redefined luxury brand marketing, merging aspirational storytelling with transnational consumer engagement. With Netflix committing to more than 40 K-dramas by 2022, streaming platforms are expanding their reach to more than 190 countries (Ju, 2020). These narratives have become strategic vehicles for luxury brands to cultivate prestige, visibility, and emotional resonance among affluent audiences. From Roger Vivier's slingback pumps in “The King: Eternal Monarch” to Jimmy Choo's sold-out heels in “My Love from the Star” product placements in K-dramas are no longer mere advertisements, but cultural artifacts that shape consumer behavior and brand equity (Forbes, 2021).

The present article seeks to address three fundamental research questions to understand the mechanics of luxury brand integration in K-Dramas.

1. What marketing strategies do luxury brands employ when integrating their products into K-Dramas, and how are these strategies reflected in brand visibility and positioning?
2. How have cultural factors, such as national identity and local audience preferences, shaped the marketing outcomes of luxury brand placements in K-Dramas, as observed in notable case studies?
3. What do luxury brands in K-Dramas use the most common integration techniques, and how do these techniques align with established marketing theories of brand positioning?

The shift toward K-Drama marketing is indicative of broader industry trends. According to a report by McKinsey & Company 63% of luxury consumers in the Asia-Pacific region identify media influences as being essential to their purchasing decisions. According to a BCG-Altagamma survey, Millennials and Gen Z accounted for nearly 37% of total luxury spending in 2022. On average, Millennials spent 10–15% more than the typical 25-year-old in 2015.

However, achieving this balance between commercial objectives and cultural authenticity remains a significant challenge. This balance is demonstrated by prominent brands such as Sulwhasoo and Dior, which incorporate traditional Korean art, including moon jars, into their product design and flagship stores. This integration aligns with the global "Hallyu" wave while respecting local heritage. Rather than engaging viewers through rational arguments (the central route), luxury brand placements in K-dramas engage consumers through the use of aesthetics, aspirational values, and emotional cues (Gangadharbatla & Daugherty, 2013). These findings support *Consumer Culture Theory* (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which posits that consumers use media as cultural texts to construct identities.

However, challenges persist. For example, in 2021, the inclusion of the Chinese instant food "Zihaiguo bibimbap" in the K-drama Vincenzo sparked a strong nationalist backlash in South Korea. Many viewers decried it as cultural appropriation, warning that it could mislead global audiences into believing that bibimbap is a Chinese dish. It serves to underscore the risks associated with overlooking geopolitical sensitivities. In a similar vein, overt placements have been shown to risk alienating audiences seeking narrative authenticity. This phenomenon has been previously observed in critiques of early Montblanc integrations Times

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(2021). The present article posits that luxury brands must adopt culturally adaptive frameworks, integrating data-driven show selection (e.g., Netflix's audience analytics) with co-creation strategies involving local stylists and cultural consultants.

1.1. On the Zihaiguo Bibimbap Controversy and Geopolitical Sensitivities

The Straits Times reports that Vincenzo faced major backlash after two lead characters were shown eating instant bibimbap from the Chinese brand Zihaiguo. The scene, which clearly showed the brand name, caused outrage on Korean social media. Netizens accused the show of allowing Chinese appropriation of a beloved Korean dish. The controversy was fuelled by ongoing cultural tensions between China and Korea over traditional foods and attire. TV N's decision to contact Zihaiguo to discuss the cancellation of the sponsorship contract was a clear-cut move to highlight the risks of ignoring geopolitical sensitivities in product placement. The controversy was not just about product placement; it was also about the packaging, which was mostly in Chinese. This made the scene feel unnatural and problematic to Korean viewers. Critics are concerned that these scenes could give foreign viewers the false impression that bibimbap is a Chinese dish, further fuelling cultural disputes.

According to the *Korea JoongAng Daily*, pop culture experts have confirmed that Chinese product placements are often irrelevant to Korean audiences. This particular case is especially sensitive due to its potential to be leveraged in China's ongoing efforts to claim elements of Korean culture.

AsiaOne and *The South China Morning Post* also wrote about the negative reactions. People were worried that international audiences might be misled about the origins of bibimbap. They thought that the network was prioritizing money from sponsors over cultural authenticity. The controversy led to a lot of criticism and calls for the scene to be removed. The producers eventually agreed to remove the scene from all streaming platforms, both domestic and international.

1.2. On the topic of product placement and whether a story is real or not.

The Korea Times and discussion forums say that when a product is being promoted, like when Montblanc is mentioned early on or when there are other obvious ads, it can sometimes make the audience not like the story. When placements seem unnatural or forced, they can lead to negative feedback and reduce the immersive experience of the drama. *The South China Morning Post* says that luxury brands like Montblanc, Miu-Miu, and Roger Vivier have used product placement in K-Dramas successfully. But how well this works depends on how naturally the products fit into the storyline. If a product is in the wrong place, people might not pay attention to it. This could make the product seem bad to people, which would make the marketing efforts for the product unsuccessful (Perwitasari & Paramita, 2020).

1.3. On Culturally Adaptive Frameworks and Data-Driven Approaches

Research and industry studies show that luxury brands need to combine data-driven show selection (like using Netflix's audience analytics) with co-creation strategies that involve local stylists and cultural consultants. This makes sure that placements are both effective and culturally sensitive (Hardy, 2021).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Product Placement Theory: Subtle vs Overt Strategies

Subtle Placements

Product placement in K-Dramas can be subtle or overt. Each type has its mechanisms and outcomes. Luxury brands need to understand this difference. They need to balance being honest in their stories with making money.

Products are placed in a way that subtly persuades people to buy them. They are placed in scenes in a way that doesn't make them stand out. For example, Kopiko coffee candies in Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha were shown but not talked about, which makes people more familiar with the brand over time (Ivena & Natalia, 2023). This approach is in line with viewers' desire for authenticity because it doesn't disrupt the story. Studies show that subtle placements (like putting products into a character's environment) make people more emotionally invested in a story than obvious product placements (Abiola & Phd, n.d.).

The cafe chain's placement in “Goblin” used visual and gestural cues (close-ups of beverages, and cozy interior shots) to convey quality and lifestyle without explicit dialogue. This strategy, which was not stated directly, made the product more appealing by linking it with the positive and ambitious tone of the drama. Theoretical Support (Gangadharbatla & Daugherty, 2013) explain that passive tactics depend on "strong content display." This means that products become a part of the story, and people are encouraged to consume them because the products make them feel something, instead of being advertised directly.

2.2 Overt Placements: High Visibility and Immediate Impact

Overt placements are when a product is the main focus of a scene, like when it's shown close-up, mentioned in dialogue, or has a big role in the plot. Laneige's Two-Tone Lip Bar in “Descendants of the Sun” is a good example. The main character, Song Hye-Kyo (who also represents the brand), uses lipstick in many scenes and talks about how nice the two colors together look. This obvious combination caused sales to increase by 400% and made the product a top seller in the area (see Table 1).

Measures of Effectiveness: Overt strategies make people remember brands 40% more often, especially when they're linked to celebrity recommendations or important plot points (Advincula et al., 2021)

Risks of Overexposure: The Kahi Multi Balm in “Goblin” was initially successful, but it later caused the audience to lose interest because it was used too many times. This shows that moderation is needed to avoid being annoying.

Contextual Alignment: The secret to success

The success of either strategy depends on how well it matches the story and the culture. For example:

a. Here's an example of a positive outcome: The watches Breitling sells in “Memories of the Alhambra” were important to the main character, who is a tech CEO. This made the watches more appealing to people who wanted to be like the main character, but it did not change the story.

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b. Here's an example of a negative outcome: Zihaiguo's bibimbap placement in “Vincenzo” caused people in the country to be upset. They thought that Zihaiguo was taking their culture for itself. This caused people to like the brand less. It caused a 42% decrease in brand favourability despite high visibility.

Table 1. The Difference between Subtle vs Overt Strategies

Strategy	Description	Outcomes & Risks
Subtle Placement	Background integration, minimal attention drawn	Positive attitudes, authenticity, and lower recall
Overt Placement	Focal point, verbal mention, plot-central	Higher recall, risk of backlash, and possible disruption

2.3 Luxury Branding in Media: Role of Aspirational Storytelling

Luxury brands in K-Dramas use storytelling to make products seem like symbols of status and desire. This matches Aaker's brand equity theory, which focuses on emotional connection and symbolic value(Aaker, 1995).When they include items like Breitling watches in the stories of their shows, “Memories of the Alhambra” can appeal to viewers' dreams and make them think that the products match the main characters' style. For example, the Breitling Navitimer was more than just a prop, it became a storytelling tool. Its technical features were shown in important scenes, which made the brand more popular among viewers (Advincula et al., 2021).

This strategy is similar to the way Dior presents its products in Dior Magazine. There, luxury products are shown as part of culture and art, not just as something you can use. Korean dramas, called "K-dramas" in Korea, have made Korean culture popular around the world. This is called the "Hallyu" (Korean Wave) effect (Shim, 2006). For example, Jimmy Choo's Abel pumps in My Love from the Star are popular. The shoes sold out internationally after the drama was broadcast, showing that what's on TV can make people want to buy it Forbes (2021).

To make their brands feel more authentic, companies like Sulwhasoo use traditional Korean designs, like moon jars, in their branding and stores. Sulwhasoo's main store in Seoul, for example, combines a traditional Korean house from the 1930s with a Western-style building from the 1960s. This symbolizes the combination of traditional Korean culture and modern luxury. This approach is popular with viewers and consumers who care about keeping the same cultural traditions and also having a modern, stylish look (Chen, 2011).

Strategic Insights

Narrative Integration: Breitling's appearance in “Memories of the Alhambra” made the brand more visible and increased its technical credibility, appealing to consumers who aspire to have the brand and to watch enthusiasts. Jimmy Choo's placement in “My Love from the Star” connected the brand to the main character's elegance and helped increase global sales (Forbes, 2021).

Cultural Authenticity: Sulwhasoo uses traditional Korean moon jars and works with Korean artisans. This makes Sulwhasoo seem like a luxury brand that is connected to its culture.

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However, the attempt to place Zihaiguo's bibimbap in Vincenzo, which disregarded Korean nationalist feelings, led to a major decrease in brand popularity Rahma Praminia, 2024)

Global-Local Balance: Korean TV shows like Descendants of the Sun help brands reach wealthy, culturally interested people aged 30–40, who spend 60% more on luxury goods than younger groups (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Theoretical Alignment

Aaker's brand equity framework is clear in these strategies:

Brand Awareness: When people are exposed to emotionally charged scenes like Laneige lipstick in "Descendants of the Sun" more than once, they remember it more (Perwitasari & Paramita, 2020).

Perceived Quality: When a company works on big-budget movies, it can make the company seem more prestigious.

Brand Loyalty: Cultural authenticity helps build strong emotional connections over time. We can see this in Sulwhasoo's loyal customer base. Korean dramas (K-dramas) give luxury brands a special chance to combine storytelling with cultural details. To be successful, you have to balance stories that motivate people with local stories that resonate with them. This is shown by Breitling's smart use of stories and Sulwhasoo's designs based on their history. Brands that can do this well can take advantage of the Hallyu wave's global reach while avoiding problems caused by cultural differences (Shim, 2006).

2.4 Cultural alignment is a critical determinant of product placement success in K-Dramas, as evidenced by contrasting case studies of Kopiko and Zihaiguo.

Kopiko, a coffee candy from Indonesia made by PT Mayora Indah Tbk, has used product placement in popular Korean TV shows like Vincenzo, Mine, Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha, and Doctor Slump. Kopiko's strategy was to make the product fit into the story naturally, without needing to say that it was part of the story. This approach, combined with the product's alignment with Korea's fast-paced culture and a Korean-friendly brand name, fostered a sense of familiarity and comfort among viewers. As a result, Kopiko became a well-known brand in South Korea. Studies show that when products are placed in popular places, people become more aware of the brand. This makes them more likely to buy the product, especially younger people. The positive audience response is further supported by Kopiko's appearance in multiple dramas, which reinforced its image as a convenient and relatable product (Ivena & Natalia, 2023).

In stark contrast, the Chinese brand Zihaiguo was heavily criticized for its placement of instant bibimbap in the popular drama Vincenzo. The scene, which featured the lead characters eating and the camera focusing on the Chinese brand, upset Korean viewers. They saw it as an attempt to appropriate their national dish. The disagreement became more intense because of ongoing problems between China and South Korea regarding cultural heritage. These problems include disagreements about kimchi, hanbok, and other traditional elements. The public strongly criticized the broadcaster and asked for the cancellation of its contract. This shows that product placements that ignore local cultural sensitivities can cause

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strong negative reactions and damage both the brand and the production's reputation. (Wulandari et al., 2024).

These cases show how important it is to tell stories that reflect local culture and to work together with Korean stylists and cultural consultants. This helps make sure that the places chosen fit with the values of the society and avoid causing any problems because of politics. Kopiko does a good job of balancing ethics and popularity around the world. This is very different from Zihaiguo, which tried to fit in but didn't consider how this affected Korean national identity and pride. These examples show that international brands can't just focus on being seen when trying to enter the Korean market through K-dramas. They also have to consider how well their brand fits with Korean culture, how well their story matches up with Korean culture, and how they can be sensitive to local feelings.

2.5 Consumer Behaviour: Celebrity Endorsements and Narrative Integration

Celebrities and their stories are very important in influencing what people want to buy. Korean TV stars like Song Hye-Kyo (who is an ambassador for Laneige) can make people 67% more likely to buy products because people trust them and find them attractive (Perwitasari & Paramita, 2020). This matches what's known as the Source Credibility Model. In this model, how much people trust a celebrity ($\beta = 0.73$, $p < 0.01$) directly affects how loyal they are to a brand (Jumpakita Pinem & Kim, 2023).

Using stories makes people more interested. Breitling's watch was important in the story of “Memories of the Alhambra”. It helped the audience feel more connected to the plot and increased how much they remembered the ad by 34%. Winter Sonata's strong story also increased sales of related products by 50%. This shows that when products are a part of a brand, it can help the brand become more valuable over time (Cannon & Xu, 2021).

Synthesis and Gaps

While existing literature emphasizes how well actors blend in (subtle vs. obvious) and how well they adapt to different cultures, few studies address geopolitical risks or whether fans will continue to like a drama series over time in the context of Korean dramas. Also, there are still ways to measure cultural dissonance (for example, Zihaiguo's backlash). This shows that there are opportunities for more research in the future. By connecting these ideas, this review offers a plan for making luxury brand integrations in international media the best they can be.

Consumer Behaviour: Impact of Celebrity Endorsements and Narrative Integration

How well luxury brands work in K-Dramas depends a lot on how well they use famous people to promote the brand and how they weave the brand into the story. These two factors work together to increase the immediate and long-term impact on brand awareness, purchase intention, and loyalty.

Celebrity Endorsements: Trust, Aspirational Value, and Purchase Intention

Celebrities in K-Dramas have a lot of influence on what consumers buy, especially in the Korean Wave (Hallyu) context, where drama stars often represent brands. According to the Source Credibility Model, a celebrity's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness can

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make their brand messages more persuasive(Jumpakita Pinem & Kim, 2023)When a famous actor or idol is seen using a luxury product on screen, viewers are more likely to think of the brand positively. This can make the brand more trustworthy and desirable.

For example, when Laneige partnered with Song Hye-Kyo in “Descendants of the Sun”, it made the brand more popular and increased sales of the Two-Tone Lip Bar by 400% in Asia. The same thing happened when Roger Vivier's shoes appeared on Kim Seo-hyung in “Mine” and Jimmy Choo's Abel pumps on Jun Ji-hyun in “My Love from the Star”. This led to global sell-outs and a big increase in online search traffic for these brands.

A recent study found that when people see celebrities in K-Dramas, they're more likely to want to buy the product. This effect is especially strong among millennials and Gen-Z viewers, who are more likely to follow celebrities on social media and copy their consumption choices (Godey et al., 2016).

Narrative Integration: Emotional Engagement and Brand Recall

Integrating a brand or product into a story, character development, or the emotional journey of a drama is called narrative integration. Unlike traditional advertising, which interrupts the viewing experience, narrative integration uses the power of storytelling to create meaningful connections between the brand and the audience's emotions.

Studies show that products that play a key role in the story or the journey of a character are more memorable and can evoke stronger emotions. For example, in “Memories of the Alhambra”, the Navitimer watch by Breitling was more than just a fashion accessory. It was also a way to tell the story and represent the main character's identity and important moments in the plot. This type of integration makes people remember the brand 34% more often than brands that are in places that have nothing to do with the plot.

Also, using stories can make people loyal to a brand for a long time. When people see a brand a lot and it makes them feel good or think about having a certain lifestyle, they start to like the brand more and more. This can lead to more people talking about the brand to their friends and using social media to share it (Godey et al., 2016).

Synergistic Effects and Theoretical Alignment

Researchers have documented how well celebrities and stories work together. Brands that use both of these strategies, like having a famous person use the product in an interesting story, are seen as the most valuable and well (Aaker, 1995). This approach follows the Meaning Transfer Model, which says that the meaning associated with a celebrity and a story is passed on to the brand, making it more symbolic (McCracken, 1989).

Implications for Luxury Brands

For luxury brands that want to make the most of K-Drama placements, the evidence shows that:

a. It's important to choose the right celebrity. The celebrity's image should match the brand's values and the target audience.

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b. Making sure the story is relevant to the product and that the product helps the story move forward or makes the characters more interesting makes the consumer more interested.
c. To avoid making viewers feel tired or thinking that something isn't real, places should be placed in a way that feels natural and fits in with the surroundings.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Research on luxury brand integration in K-Dramas shows that product placement, when done in a way that is relevant to the story and respectful of the culture, is a very good marketing tool for increasing brand visibility, equity, and consumer engagement (Godey et al., 2016). Placing them in subtle ways is usually better at creating emotional connections and making customers loyal over time. On the other hand, placing them in obvious ways can lead to immediate sales increases, as long as it makes sense in the context. In Korea, celebrities need to endorse products. In Korea, drama stars can have a big effect on what consumers think and what they want to buy (Jumpakita Pinem & Kim, 2023).

A company needs to adapt to the culture of the country where it does business. Brands like Kopiko have shown that making products more relatable to local people and using storytelling can make brands more well-known and liked. But some companies have made mistakes. For example, Zihaiguo's bibimbap placement in Vincenzo shows that there are risks of not understanding cultural differences and geopolitical tensions (Ivena & Natalia, 2023). Research show

s that including products in emotionally charged or plot-advancing scenes can make people more likely to remember the brand and be more interested in it.

Identification of Research Gaps

There is a lot of evidence that product placement in K-Dramas is effective, but there are still some gaps in the research.

Impact on Brand Loyalty Over Time: Many studies show that K-Drama placements can immediately increase brand awareness and sales. However, there is not much research on the long-term effects of these placements on brand loyalty and whether people will make repeat purchases (Godey et al., 2016).

Quantitative Metrics for Cultural Dissonance: Most analyses of cultural backlash, like the Zihaiguo incident, are based on stories or are qualitative. We need to come up with ways to predict and measure the risk and impact of cultural differences in product placements.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Most studies look at the Korean market or Korean audiences. Research is needed to understand how international viewers (in Southeast Asia, China, or the West) respond to luxury brand placements in K-Dramas. This is important because K-Dramas are popular all over the world.

Digital and Social Media Amplification: We don't know enough about how digital platforms and social media increase the impact of K-Drama placements. Research should look into how digital engagement interacts with on-screen placements to shape how consumers think and behave.

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Theoretical Integration: Aaker's brand equity theory and the Meaning Transfer Model are often mentioned, but these frameworks are rarely combined with real-world findings from K-Drama contexts. Aaker (1995) need to do more research to adapt and extend well-known marketing theories to account for the unique dynamics of transnational media and cultural branding (McCracken, 1989).

Rationale for the Present Study

This article aims to provide a thorough, theory-based analysis of luxury brand integration in K-Dramas. The analysis will focus on:

a. The ways luxury brands sell their products and bring together different parts of their business.
b. The role of cultural awareness and storytelling in affecting placement results.
c. The effects on how a brand is presented, how consumers act, and how marketing works in different cultures.

By combining secondary data from industry reports, academic research, and well-known case studies, this study aims to improve both the theoretical understanding and practical advice for luxury brands looking to enhance their presence in K-Dramas.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods exploratory design that combines a qualitative content analysis of secondary sources with the collection of primary data through semi-structured interviews. This dual approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how luxury brands use K-Dramas for marketing and how viewers perceive and intend to purchase. Combining document analysis with direct consumer insights enhances the study's validity and contextual relevance (Moeller et al., 2016).

Secondary and Primary Data

The secondary data were collected through a comprehensive review of the following:

1. Academic journals: Peer-reviewed articles on product placement, celebrity endorsements, and consumer behavior in K-dramas.
2. Industry reports: Market trend analyses and audience behavior reports.
3. Media coverage: News articles and interviews from reputable sources, such as Forbes.
4. Case studies: Brand campaigns in specific K-dramas such as Laneige in “Descendants of the Sun”, Kopiko in “Vincenzo”, and Roger Vivier in “Mine”.

To complement the secondary analysis, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five university students from Uzbekistan, USA, and Indonesia between the ages of 20 and 24. The students were selected using purposive sampling based on their familiarity with and regular viewing of popular K-dramas. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were conducted individually.

Interview Instrument

The interview questions were grouped into four categories:

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1. General Experience and Motivation:
   a. How participants discovered K-dramas and what initially attracted them to the genre.
   b. Whether they had seen specific dramas (e.g., Vincenzo or My Love from the Star).
   c. Their social media engagement and interest in Korean culture.
2. Critical analysis:
   a. Their perceptions of storytelling and social themes compared to dramas from other countries.
   b. They also observed differences in brand use between Korean and Chinese dramas.
   c. Notable examples of appealing or poorly executed product placement.
3. Marketing techniques and brand positioning:
   a. Common placement methods (props, plot, background).
   b. The effectiveness of brand recall and aspirational appeal.
   c. Examples of positive or negative brand association.
4. Cultural factors and audience impact:
   a. The influence of placements on discussion, interest, and purchase behavior.
   b. Cultural alignment and its impact on brand perception.

Analytical Framework

Data from secondary and primary sources were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the interview data, emergent themes were identified and coded. These themes included:

a. Brand recall and desirability
b. Influence of celebrity and narrative association;
c. Purchase intent or substitution behavior;
d. Cultural resonance and authenticity.

These themes were then compared with trends and insights from the secondary literature, enabling triangulation of the findings.

The primary data set is limited to five participants and may not be fully representative of the broader K-drama audience. While the findings provide insight into luxury branding within K-Dramas, they may not be applicable to all product categories or international markets. Some conclusions may be constrained by the availability of, and biases inherent in, pre-existing literature and media reports.

4. FINDINGS

This study examined the influence of luxury brand placements in Korean dramas (K-dramas) on the consumer behavior of university students. The study was based on in-depth interviews and supported by secondary data. The analysis reveals significant theoretical and practical insights organized around four themes: marketing strategies, cultural dynamics, integration techniques, and consumer outcomes.

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4.1. Integration of Marketing Strategies and Media Influence Theories

A study of secondary data shows that luxury brands use a variety of strategies to place their products in K-Dramas. These strategies change over time to make the products as visible as possible and to fit the story. The most common tactics are:

a. Narrative Integration: Well-known brands like Breitling and Laneige play an important role in the stories, helping the characters and the plot move forward. For example, Laneige's Two-Tone Lip Bar was used by the main character in “Descendants of the Sun”. It also became a symbol of her character's elegance and modernity.
b. Celebrity Endorsement: Korean TV stars, who are often already brand ambassadors, use or wear luxury products on-screen. This makes people want to buy the brand. This teamwork is clear in the partnership between Song Hye-Kyo and Laneige, which led to a big increase in product sales and online engagement.
c. Strategic Partnerships and Stylist Collaboration: Brands work with drama stylists and production teams to make sure their products are shown in scenes that are easy to see and that match the drama's style and audience.
d. Demographic Targeting: The selection of dramas is based on data that shows what appeals to wealthy viewers aged 30–40. These people are more likely to buy luxury goods (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

These strategies are a deliberate effort to balance the obvious presence of the brand with being true to the story. This makes the shows more emotional for the viewers and makes them popular all over the world.

The interviews confirm that luxury brands in K-dramas use sophisticated marketing strategies, such as narrative integration, celebrity endorsements, collaboration with stylists, and demographic targeting, to maximize visibility and resonance. Examples include Laneige’s Two-Tone Lip Bar in “Descendants of the Sun” and Breitling watches in plot-critical scenes.

These strategies closely align with (*Bandura_SocialLearningTheory*, n.d.)Social Learning Theory (1977), which asserts that individuals imitate admired figures. Participants expressed admiration for K-drama characters and reported that their appearance, behavior, and possessions inspired purchasing desires. For instance, (Participant 4 from Indonesia UPI) expressed a desire to own the necklace that was featured in an emotional scene of “Descendants of the Sun” demonstrating how symbolic consumption can stem from parasocial relationships with characters.

These practices are also consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model(Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Rather than engaging viewers through rational arguments (the central route), luxury brand placements in K-dramas engage consumers through the peripheral route, using aesthetics, aspirational values, and emotional cues. (Participant 5 from USA), for instance, was not captivated by the product details, but rather by the deeper symbolic associations of a lighter used by a character in “Vincenzo”, which was linked with power and mystique.

4.2. Cultural Factors Shaping Placement Outcomes

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Cultural sensitivity is a key factor in whether luxury brand placements are successful or not. The different situations of Kopiko and Zihaiguo show this change.

Kopiko's popularity in Korean dramas and its adaptation to Korean tastes and branding led to high brand recognition and positive reviews from consumers (Ivena & Natalia, 2023). The brand's connection to Korea's traditional culture and its simple incorporation into everyday life helped it become popular.

However, Zihaiguo's decision to feature Chinese bibimbap in “Vincenzo” was seen as cultural appropriation, which led to criticism and the end of the sponsorship. This case shows how important it is to understand local cultural values and geopolitical sensitivities.

Successful placements are made when there is close collaboration with Korean cultural consultants and stylists. This ensures that products resonate with societal values and avoid contentious issues.

The importance of cultural congruence was evident in both the interviews and the secondary literature. Kopiko succeeded due to its seamless integration with and resonance in Korean culture, while Zihaiguo faced backlash for perceived cultural appropriation. This highlights how cultural sensitivity directly impacts the success of product placement. (Participant 2 from Uzbekistan) and (Participant 3 from Indonesia) noted a clear distinction between the approaches of Korean and Chinese dramas: Korean dramas were praised for their realism and character-driven narratives, which foster brand authenticity. In contrast, Chinese dramas were perceived as forced or stylized.

These findings support Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which posits that consumers use media as cultural texts to construct identities. The interviewees wanted more than just products; they wanted to experience the Korean lifestyle, as demonstrated by (Participant 1 from Uzbekistan) and (Participant 3 from Indonesia) interest in Korean food, fashion, and tourism. These findings reflect the concept of brand cosmopolitanism and the global influence of Korean soft power through drama.

4.3. Integration Techniques and Alignment with Brand Positioning Theory

The most common and effective integration techniques observed include: Put it in a way that isn't obvious and fits in with the rest of the surroundings. Products are placed in the background or used by characters, which helps people remember the brand without disrupting the story.

Storytelling that Inspires a luxury brand is associated with characters who embody success, sophistication, and modernity. This reinforces the idea that luxury brands are aspirational, which is a central part of luxury marketing.

Multi-Channel Amplification: Successful placements are often supported by digital campaigns, partnerships with influencers, and social media engagement, which extend the impact beyond the screen (Godey et al., 2016).

These techniques are similar to Aaker's brand equity theory, which says that it's important for people to know about a brand, think it is high-quality, and feel a strong connection to it if you want to build a strong luxury brand.

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The findings reveal that the effectiveness of brand placement depends on how naturally products are embedded into the storyline. (Participants 1 and 2 from Uzbekistan) emphasized that brand appearances feel more authentic and persuasive when they align with character routines or emotions, reinforcing this idea, arguing that subtlety and congruency are vital for brand acceptance (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Such placements also align with Brand Equity Theory, particularly about enhancing perceived quality and emotional attachment. Characters often embody traits such as sophistication, resilience, and ambition, which are transferred to the brands they use. This tactic strengthens brand positioning by associating products with key character archetypes and pivotal scenes. (Participant 3 from Indonesia) Noted, fashion items worn during pivotal moments in the narrative become symbolic and memorable, which echoes the assertion that scenes in dramas can act as emotional anchors for brand recall.

Furthermore, according to secondary sources, strategic collaborations with stylists and production teams ensure that product placements match the drama's aesthetic and target demographic, which is typically affluent viewers in the 20–40 age range (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Product Placement Outcomes

Brand	Drama	Placement Type	Outcome
Laneige	Descendants of the Sun	Overt	400% sales surge
Kopiko	Vincenzo, others	Subtle	65% brand recognition in Seoul
Zihaiguo	Vincenzo	Overt	89% rejection, contract ended
Jimmy Choo	My Love from the Star	Overt	Sold out globally

4.4. Consumer Behaviour Outcomes

Studies show that when celebrities promote a product, people remember the brand more and are more likely to buy it. People are more likely to be emotionally engaged and loyal if... When stories are put together in a way that feels natural and connects with a culture, they can create stronger emotional bonds. This can lead to more long-term loyalty and positive reviews (Godey et al., 2016).

Brand placement in K-dramas does more than just advertise; it actively shapes consumer behavior and identity. Several participants admitted to searching for or following brands after watching dramas, even if they could not immediately afford the products. This behavior aligns with the findings of (Godey et al., 2016), who discovered that exposure to luxury brands fosters brand recall and purchase intent.

Thematic analysis also revealed that emotional storytelling fosters long-term loyalty. Product appearances that felt meaningful, such as sharing a skincare routine or gifting a luxury item, deepened emotional engagement. This emotional branding enhances attitudinal loyalty and affective resonance, making products part of consumers' narratives.

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Finally, K-dramas serve as conduits for cultural diplomacy. (Participant 4 from Indonesia) and (Participant 5 from the USA) emphasized that the appeal of luxury goods extends beyond aesthetics; they symbolize Korean values of elegance, resilience, and ambition. Thus, product placement in K-dramas acts as both a marketing tool and a vehicle for cultural export, embedding brands within a compelling national identity (see Table 3).

Table 3. Core Themes and Insights on Luxury Brand Placement in Media

Theme	Core Insight
Marketing Strategies	Use of narrative integration, celebrity endorsements, and demographic targeting
Cultural Influence	Success depends on alignment with local values and avoidance of appropriation
Narrative and Branding	Authentic storytelling enhances brand equity and symbolic positioning
Consumer Behavior	Media-triggered desire leads to increased brand recall and aspirational loyalty

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Strategic Integration of Luxury Brands in K-Dramas

The findings suggest that K-dramas are highly effective platforms for integrating luxury brands (Aaker, 1995). The Brand Equity Model which highlights the importance of brand awareness, perceived quality, and emotional associations. When luxury products are naturally embedded within the storyline and associated with well-known actors, they gain emotional appeal and enhance brand perception among viewers.

In the Korean media landscape, the influence of celebrities is especially strong. Interview participants indicated that they were emotionally drawn to characters and often aspired to emulate their lifestyles, including the products they used. For example, (Participant 4 from Indonesia) expressed a strong desire to own a necklace seen in Descendants of the Sun because of its association with a romantic scene (see Table 4). This reflects (*Bandura_SocialLearningTheory*, n.d.) Social Learning Theory, in which individuals imitate the behaviors of their role models.

Table 4. Appendix A: List of K-Dramas Analyzed

Drama Title	Year	Notable Brands Featured
Descendants of the Sun	2016	Laneige, Breitling
Mine	2021	Roger Vivier, Delvaux
Vincenzo	2021	Kopiko, Zihaiguo
My Love from the Star	2014	Jimmy Choo, YSL
Memories of the Alhambra	2018	Breitling
Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha	2021	Kopiko
Doctor Slump	2024	Kopiko

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5.2. Balancing Subtlety and Visibility

Effective product placement in K-dramas requires striking the right balance between visibility and subtlety. Products that are seamlessly integrated into the narrative tend to be more positively received. (Participants 1 and 2 from Uzbekistan) expressed a preference for placements that feel "natural" and do not disrupt the story. These findings emphasize the importance of contextual congruency in successful product placement.

However, when placement aligns with emotionally charged or pivotal scenes, the impact can be profound. For instance, the Two-Tone Lip Bar by Laneige in “Descendants of the Sun” went viral and greatly increased sales. This is consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, particularly the peripheral route, in which emotional cues and visual appeal are more influential than rational persuasion.(Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)

5.3. The Importance of Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity has emerged as a key factor in the success or failure of product placement. The Kopiko case study exemplifies the effectiveness of adapting to local tastes and seamlessly integrating into the narrative (Ivena & Natalia, 2023). In contrast, Zihaiguo's portrayal of bibimbap in a Chinese context in Vincenzo triggered a backlash, accusations of cultural appropriation, and diplomatic tension. These examples highlight the need for brands to understand the local culture and the geopolitical implications of international.

These findings align with consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which explains how consumers derive identity from products that align with their cultural values and collective narratives.

5.4. Emotional Engagement and Social Amplification

Consumer behavior in response to K-drama product placements is heavily influenced by emotional engagement. Respondents noted that they remembered and searched for products associated with meaningful or iconic moments. For instance, (Participant 5 from the USA) mentioned being intrigued by the lighter used in Vincenzo, as it symbolized the protagonist’s strength and charisma. This finding aligns with (McCracken, 1989) Meaning Transfer Model, which posits that symbolic meanings from characters and narratives are transferred to the products they use.

Furthermore, the effects of product placement extend beyond the screen due to social amplification. The rise of streaming platforms and global fandom has increased the reach and impact of K-dramas. Social media platforms play a key role in amplifying interest, generating buzz, and encouraging user engagement (Godey et al., 2016). Thus, well-executed product placements can contribute to both sales and long-term brand loyalty.

5.5. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study support and expand upon existing theoretical frameworks in media and marketing studies. Aaker’s Brand Equity Model and McCracken’s Meaning Transfer Model remain relevant for explaining the brand-consumer relationship fostered through media. K-dramas serve as more than just entertainment; they are also powerful tools of cross-cultural marketing and symbolic communication.

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Additionally, Consumer Culture Theory helps explain how global youth, including Indonesian university students, adopt Korean-inspired lifestyles rather than merely consuming products. (Participant 1 from Uzbekistan) and (Participant 3 from Indonesia), for example, expressed a desire to visit Korea to experience its fashion, cuisine, and culture firsthand.

Based on these findings, several strategic recommendations can be made to brand managers:

a. Invest in narrative integration. Collaborate with scriptwriters and producers early in the production process to ensure that product placements are seamlessly embedded into the plot and character development.
b. Prioritize cultural adaptation. Work with local cultural consultants and stylists to ensure that product placements resonate with the target audience and avoid potential backlash due to insensitivity or misrepresentation.
c. Leverage celebrity influence. Choose drama stars whose public persona aligns with the brand's image and values to increase the placement's credibility and relatability.
d. Amplify through digital campaigns. Combine on-screen exposure with social media campaigns, influencer partnerships, and interactive content to expand your reach and strengthen brand engagement.

5.6. Challenges and Risks

Despite the opportunities, there are still challenges. If you put too much of it in one place, or if it doesn't fit with the rest of the content, people might get tired of it or think it looks too commercial. Geopolitical tensions and cultural appropriation controversies, like the one seen in the Zihaiguo case, can quickly get worse and hurt a brand's reputation. Also, there is a lack of standard ways to measure long-term brand loyalty and the impact of brands in different cultures. This is a problem in practice and in research.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the integration of luxury brands in Korean dramas (K-dramas), emphasizing the strategic, cultural, and psychological dimensions contributing to effective product placement. The findings confirm that K-dramas are a powerful marketing platform that blends compelling storytelling, celebrity influence, and global accessibility into a unique promotional ecosystem.

When executed with cultural sensitivity and narrative coherence, product placement can enhance brand visibility, stimulate emotional engagement, and influence consumer purchasing behavior. Successful examples, such as Kopiko, demonstrate the effectiveness of adapting to local tastes and values. However, negative reactions to Zihaiguo demonstrate the consequences of cultural insensitivity in international contexts (Ivena & Natalia, 2023).

Student interviews revealed that brief or subtle placements within emotionally resonant scenes can significantly shape brand perception and desire. These results underscore the relevance of the (Aaker, 1995)Brand Equity Model and (McCracken, 1989) Meaning Transfer Model, as emotional meaning and perceived quality are often transferred from admired characters to the products they use on screen.

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This research confirms that narrative-driven product placement in K-dramas is an effective marketing strategy for luxury brands, especially when paired with cultural awareness, strategic celebrity alignment, and transmedia engagement through social platforms.

Implications for Future Research

While the current research synthesizes a wide range of secondary data, there are still several areas that could be studied in the future:

a. Longitudinal Impact: Future studies should use longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of K-Drama product placements on brand loyalty and repeat purchase behavior (Godey et al., 2016).
b. Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Researchers need to compare how people in different cultures respond to luxury brand appearances in K-Dramas, especially as K-Dramas become more popular worldwide.
c. Digital and Social Media Dynamics: The interaction between where things are placed on the screen and how much they're promoted online through social media, influencers, and online communities should be studied more.
d. Quantitative Metrics for Cultural Sensitivity: Creating tools to measure and predict the risk of cultural differences in product placement can help brands avoid negative reactions and improve their strategies.

Practical Applications

The findings offer several actionable recommendations for luxury brand managers and marketers.

a. Focus on the story and cultural fit: Work closely with drama producers, writers, and local consultants to make sure that the places chosen fit into the story well and are meaningful to the culture being portrayed.
b. Make the most of a celebrity's popularity: Choose brand ambassadors who truly represent the brand's values and can easily include products in the characters they play on screen.
c. Pay attention to what your audience thinks and respond to their feedback. Use tools that track social media and real-time analytics to see how the audience reacts and quickly deal with any problems that come up.

Final Thoughts

As K-Dramas continue to influence global pop culture and consumer trends, luxury brands that understand how to place their products in a way that is sensitive to different cultures and stories can increase their sales and improve their reputation. The good and bad experiences of these companies can teach us how to deal with the tricky relationship between storytelling, celebrity, and cultural meaning in today's global media marketing.

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