

Beauty without Borders: How Grey Markets Reconstruct Korean Skincare Branding in Sanctioned Russia

Pontus Liubov

B.A., Independent Researcher, formerly Russian State Social University, Department of International Relations, Moscow, Russia

Abstract:

This paper examines how Korean skincare brands sustain market presence and brand meaning in Russia after the withdrawal of official distributors following 2022 sanctions. Based on digital ethnography (2022–2025), archival tracing, and participant observation across major e-commerce platforms (Ozon, Wildberries), specialist retailers (HeyBabes, Hollyshop), Instagram micro-shops, and Telegram resale groups, the study analyzes over 200 screenshots, seller artifacts, and direct purchasing interactions. Empirically, five recurring dynamics are documented – credibility without certification, structural scarcity, marketplace ambiguity, parasitic branding, and persona-based legitimation – which together enable a resilient parallel branding ecosystem. Analytically, the paper isolates three strategic mechanisms through which brand authority is reconstituted: affiliative sourcing networks (informal supply chains and provenance narratives), parasitic branding (reused corporate imagery and semiotic hijack), and persona-based trust signaling (influencer-run para-brands and group-buy coordination). These mechanisms redistribute governance from firms to decentralized intermediaries, sustaining demand and price resilience while generating consumer vulnerability and quality uncertainty. The study contributes to global marketing and advertising strategy by offering a framework for understanding brand governance, authenticity signaling, and managerial responses in geopolitically fragmented markets.

Keywords:

K-beauty, grey markets, brand governance, consumer trust, digital ethnography.