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Cultural legitimacy in transnational beauty communication: developing the IMCu framework from K-beauty negotiations in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands

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K-Beauty has become highly influential in Southeast Asia's global aesthetic scene. Yet, little is known about how its gentle messaging is understood in Muslim-majority areas, some of the fastest-growing beauty markets. This research explores how young, digitally engaged consumers in Indonesia's Urban Heartland, guided by religious values, perceive K-Beauty messaging. Using a mixed-methods approach, including 15 interviews, a focus group of six participants, 16 months of digital ethnography, and observations of e-commerce behaviour, the results show that audience reactions are shaped more by cultural legitimacy than by persuasive messages. This legitimacy arises from two decades of Hallyu's presence in Indonesia, normalizing Korean aesthetic cues, lowering symbolic barriers, and making K-Beauty's soft tone emotionally and culturally familiar. The study identifies four mechanisms of cultural negotiation: Cultural Mediation, Ethical Localisation, Emotional Co-Creation, and Selective Hybridisation. These are ways in which Korean signals are aligned with Islamic ethics, social norms, and daily beauty routines. Additionally, four structural factors, Long-Term Cultural Familiarity, Ethical Sensitivity, Emotional Coherence, and Algorithmic Hybridisation, explain a shift from traditional Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to a new model called Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu), which prioritizes cultural resonance over persuasion. This study provides a theory-based, context-specific framework for understanding communication in Muslim-majority digital spaces. By showing how transnational, soft-aesthetic messages acquire meaning and legitimacy, the IMCu framework enhances transcultural communication studies. It offers practical strategies for global beauty brands aiming for culturally sensitive approaches in emerging Muslim markets.

KEYWORDS

cultural hybridisation, cultural legitimacy, glocalisation, IMCu (integrated marketing cultural), integrated marketing communication (IMC), intercultural communication, K-beauty, urban Muslim consumers

1 Introduction

South Korea's cultural presence has expanded significantly over the past decade, driven by the global diffusion of K-Beauty's soft-aesthetic communication, an aesthetic characterised by minimalist palettes, gentle tonalities, sensorial calmness, and intimate forms of digital storytelling. Studies on cultural hybridity and K-Beauty acculturative labour (Seo et al., 2020) and cross-national analyses of Hallyu reception in Indonesia and Malaysia (Lee et al., 2018) show that these soft-aesthetic cues travel seamlessly across digital infrastructures and shape emerging ideals of self-care, aspirational identity, and affective belonging. Within Southeast Asia, and particularly in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands, K-Beauty has evolved into a transnational aesthetic language, a symbolic repertoire through which audiences conceptualise skincare routines, relational identity, and the emotional experience of visibility in everyday life (Sari et al., 2022).

However, the circulation of beauty communication in Muslim majority societies cannot be understood solely through the lens of global media diffusion. Islamic norms, halal regulatory regimes, modesty expectations, and religiously informed everyday practices fundamentally shape how beauty, the body, and self-presentation are interpreted. Research on halal consumption and Muslim consumer ethics (Herjanto, 2022; Nasir, 2022) demonstrates that aesthetic cues are routinely filtered through ethical and spiritual repertoires, including modesty, halal integrity, moral propriety, and embodied piety. Complementing these insights, Ünal (2019) analysis of Muslim women's beauty practices shows that beauty is never merely visual; it is embedded within socio-religious expectations that regulate visibility, propriety, humility, and moral comportment. Taken together, these studies reveal that beauty communication, far from being aesthetically neutral, acquires meaning through religious, relational, and moralised interpretive frameworks.

These interpretive dynamics intensify within digital environments. Research on Muslim identity negotiation highlights that global lifestyle content is mediated by religious ethical repertoires, affective norms of relational harmony, and collective expectations surrounding humility and moral safety (Boland, 2020; Zaid et al., 2022). In such contexts, audiences do not merely evaluate whether beauty messages are appealing; they assess whether these messages align with community expectations of ethical appropriateness, social acceptability, and moral resonance. These culturally grounded negotiations help explain why K-Beauty communication often succeeds not simply because of global exposure, but because audiences recalibrate its meanings through local emotional and ethical logics.

A phenomenological orientation further strengthens this understanding. Drawing on Schutz and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social constructionist tradition, Mulyana et al. (2019) argue that audiences do not process messages as isolated cognitive units but as subjects embedded within symbolic worlds structured by emotional schemas, normative expectations, and taken-for-granted cultural realities. In this view, symbols associated with softness, purity, glow, or calm expressiveness do not carry universal meanings. Instead, they acquire significance through lived experiences, embodied moralities, and culturally sedimented interpretive frames. This phenomenological stance reframes K-Beauty reception in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands as an emotionally mediated and morally guided process, shaped by how audiences feel, discern, and evaluate global aesthetic cues within their own cultural and religious lifeworlds.

This perspective aligns with contemporary media and cultural theory, which emphasises that global beauty narratives are actively recontextualised rather than passively absorbed. Studies on Hallyu and Southeast Asian consumer culture (Ainslie et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2018) show that audiences negotiate, resist, adapt, or selectively hybridise aesthetic cues depending on cultural proximity, moral expectations, and context-specific logics of legitimacy. These dynamics are particularly salient in Muslim majority digital ecosystems, where beauty practices intersect with standards of modesty, halal permissibility, relational propriety, and moralised self-presentation. Rather than replicating Korean soft aesthetics, audiences recompose them into forms that are emotionally resonant, ethically acceptable, and culturally consonant.

While Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) remains a dominant explanatory framework for message coordination, persuasive integration, and brand coherence, its classical formulations (Butkouskaya et al., 2021; González-Ros, 2021; Keller and Kotler, 2016) are limited in their ability to account for moral filtering, cultural mediation, and emotional co-creation in religiously layered and culturally hybrid markets. Existing calls for culturally sensitive IMC adaptations acknowledge environmental complexity but stop short of offering an explanatory model for how audiences negotiate soft-aesthetic messages within Muslim majority contexts. Moreover, IMC implicitly assumes that communication effectiveness stems from managerial design rather than culturally situated audience interpretation, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding communication responses in non-Western, ethically plural consumer environments.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining how consumers in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands interpret, evaluate, contest, and selectively hybridise K-Beauty communication. It investigates how soft-aesthetic cues acquire meaning within religiously informed digital ecosystems, identifies the cultural, ethical, and emotional mechanisms that shape these negotiations, and demonstrates how these mechanisms collectively constitute the conceptual foundations of the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework.

Drawing on 15 in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion with six participants, 16 months of digital ethnography (2024–2025), and e-commerce behavioural analytics, the study identifies four interlocking negotiation mechanisms: Cultural Mediation, Ethical Localisation, Emotional Co-Creation, and Selective Hybridisation. These mechanisms reconceptualise communication effectiveness in culturally sensitive markets as the attainment of cultural legitimacy, rather than persuasive impact. Grounded in hybridisation theory (Kraidy, 2009), Islamic consumption and moral-aesthetic scholarship (Herjanto, 2022; Nasir, 2022), soft-aesthetic communication studies (Park et al., 2023; Seo et al., 2020), and interpretive phenomenology (Mulyana et al., 2019), the IMCu framework offers a coherent theoretical scaffolding that explains how transnational beauty messages become meaningful, acceptable, and emotionally resonant within Muslim majority, hybrid digital environments.

2 Literature review

2.1 Transnational cultural flows and beauty communication

K-Beauty has emerged as one of the most dynamic cultural exports in contemporary media circulation, travelling not merely as a

set of cosmetic practices but as a distinctive affective aesthetic form. Studies on acculturative labour and Hallyu diffusion (Lee et al., 2018; Seo et al., 2020) show that its global resonance is anchored in a "soft-aesthetic" communication style, with minimalistic visuals, gentle tonalities, and emotionally soothing atmospheres that contrast sharply with more performance-driven Western beauty advertising. Industry analyses further confirm the rise of naturalistic, calming, and sensorially intimate visual formats across Asian digital beauty markets (Revieve, 2024), illustrating how this aesthetic becomes embedded within transnational beauty infrastructures.

Rather than operating as persuasion-oriented advertising, this soft-aesthetic modality functions as a relational and affective communicative form. Algorithmic platforms such as TikTok and Instagram intensify this dynamic by privileging intimate, personalised, and emotionally warm content patterns also evident in research on influencer-mediated youth cultures (Kanai and Zeng, 2024; Williams and Connell, 2021). These algorithmic logics allow soft-aesthetic cues to circulate widely while retaining their emotional texture, reinforcing K-Beauty's visibility within everyday digital life.

However, hybridisation theory reminds us that transnational aesthetic flows do not circulate intact. As Kraidy (2009) argues, global cultural forms undergo interpretive negotiation, shaped by local histories, moral sensibilities, and identity projects.

Southeast Asian research, including emerging analyses of Indonesia's beauty sector (Ainslie et al., 2017; Cosmax Global Report, 2023), demonstrates that aesthetic cues such as purity, femininity, aspiration, or glow are never adopted wholesale. Instead, they are re-evaluated through culturally situated frameworks that calibrate their meaning, desirability, and legitimacy.

These negotiations are especially pronounced in Muslim majority societies. Studies on halal consumption, Islamic revivalism, and Muslim women's beauty practices (Herjanto, 2022; Nasir, 2022; Ünal, 2019) consistently show that beauty communication is interpreted through ethical repertoires, including halal integrity, modest representation, moral propriety, and religiously informed identity performance. In these contexts, audiences assess beauty cues not only for aesthetic appeal but for their ethical resonance, whether they are morally appropriate, socially acceptable, and spiritually consonant. Evidence from Indonesia's halal beauty market reinforces this pattern: moral acceptability often exceeds persuasive messaging in determining consumer judgment (Sari et al., 2022).

Taken together, these insights reveal a structural blind spot within classical Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). Although IMC accounts for message consistency and channel coordination, its persuasion-centric assumptions do not explain how communication acquires cultural legitimacy in environments shaped by moral, emotional, and religious expectations. Existing IMC adaptations acknowledge cultural complexity but do not offer an explanatory model for how audiences morally filter, emotionally recalibrate, or selectively hybridise soft-aesthetic cues within religiously layered digital ecosystems.

This analytical gap underscores the need for a communication framework that situates meaning-making within cultural embeddedness, treating ethical resonance, emotional attunement, and aesthetic familiarity as core determinants of communication effectiveness. These conceptual requirements provide the theoretical foundation for the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework developed in this study, which reconceptualises communication not as persuasive transmission but as cultural negotiation within hybrid, Muslim majority digital spaces.

2.2 Cultural hybridisation and local meaning-making

Hybridisation provides a foundational lens for understanding how global beauty communication is interpreted within culturally layered societies. Across the literature reviewed, including studies on halal consumption, Islamic moral ethics, digital beauty cultures, and K-Beauty's transnational movement, scholars consistently emphasise that global aesthetic forms do not enter local markets intact. Instead, they are reworked through a culturally situated process of negotiation in which audiences blend global cues with religious values, emotional dispositions, and everyday routines. This aligns with Lopez Rocha and Ryzhkov's (2023) argument that cultural meaning arises from the interplay between global cultural flows and local structures of practice, as well as with Kraidy's (2009) assertion that hybridisation is an inevitable outcome of continuous transcultural encounters.

Within the Indonesian context, particularly Muslim majority settings, recent scholarship highlights several recurring patterns. First, local moral filtering shapes how beauty communication is evaluated. Research on halal consumption, Islamic revivalism, and Muslim consumer ethics (e.g., Novandhika et al., 2025; Nasir, 2022) indicates that audiences assess global products through notions of purity, modesty, and ethical permissibility. The symbolic visibility of halal certification, modest representation, and communicative humility plays a decisive role in determining whether beauty content is perceived as ethically acceptable.

Second, studies in the digital beauty domain (Jia et al., 2018) show that audiences frequently engage in emotional reinterpretation, attributing culturally resonant meanings such as healing and calming to aesthetic cues originating in Korea. These emotional translations mirror broader patterns identified in Indonesian beauty and self-care ethnographies, where emotional comfort, spiritual reassurance, and relational harmony are prioritised over assertive or individualistic expressions.

Third, selective aesthetic adoption emerges as a prominent mechanism. Scholarship on Southeast Asian beauty practices (Harizi and Trebicka, 2023; Herjanto, 2022; Park et al., 2023) demonstrates that consumers rarely adopt global beauty ideals wholesale. Instead, they adapt them, embracing, for instance, the Korean "healthy glow" while rejecting excessive whitening, or adopting multi-step routines while modifying texture, fragrance, and finish to align with tropical climates and Muslim modesty norms. These selective adoptions underscore the agency of Indonesian consumers in shaping hybrid beauty practices that feel locally grounded.

Fourth, hybridisation is equally identity-driven. Research across journals (Boland, 2020; Dayani, 2023; Kraidy, 2009; Lee et al., 2020; Novandhika et al., 2025; Sungnoi and Soonthonsmai, 2024; c; Zaid et al., 2022), particularly those examining Islamic identity, halal lifestyles, and Muslim femininities, shows that Indonesian audiences incorporate global beauty cues into broader projects of self-development, piety, and social belonging. Beauty routines function not merely as aesthetic practices but as identity practices through which Muslim consumers negotiate their place within global modernity while maintaining religious integrity.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship reveal that hybridisation in Indonesia is not a superficial mixing of styles but a deeply layered cultural process involving moral reasoning, emotional attunement, aesthetic negotiation, and identity work. This locally driven meaning-making complicates assumptions that global beauty communication succeeds primarily through aspirational persuasion. Instead, the literature suggests that global messages are rendered meaningful only when they align with cultural values, ethical expectations, and affective norms embedded within everyday life.

This body of evidence underscores the need for a theoretical model, such as the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework, that accounts for the conjoint roles of aesthetics, morality, and emotion in shaping audience engagement with global beauty communication. The following section extends this foundation by situating these hybridisation processes within the digital beauty cultures that have transformed Southeast Asian media environments since 2018.

2.3 Digital beauty cultures in Southeast Asia (2018–2025)

Between 2018 and 2025, digital platforms radically reshaped the cultural circulation of beauty in Southeast Asia, transforming aesthetic engagement into continuous, algorithmically mediated, micro-influencer-driven experiences. Scholarship on regional digital beauty cultures (Kanai and Zeng, 2024) demonstrates that TikTok, Instagram, and e-commerce live streams do more than distribute content; they cultivate aesthetic habits, moral expectations, and affective relationships that structure how audiences learn to see, feel, and evaluate beauty communication.

A first transformation concerns the rise of aesthetic socialisation, whereby platforms normalise particular aesthetic standards through repetitive exposure to short-form calming routines, ASMR skincare demonstrations, "morning reset" sequences, and before-and-after transformations. These algorithmic loops familiarise users with soft-aesthetic registers, glow, and moisture that closely mirror the stylistic codes of K-Beauty.

A second transformation has been the intensification of moral and ethical negotiation. Hijab wearing influencers, Muslim beauty educators, and halal skincare vloggers actively reinterpret Korean techniques through frameworks of modesty, purity, and ethical comportment. Their content does not merely replicate Korean practices; it recalibrates them to align with Islamic norms regarding bodily care, modest representation, and everyday moral safety. This recontextualisation reflects a broader shift in which digital beauty practices increasingly function as ethical performances rather than purely aesthetic ones.

A third transformation involves emotional co-presence, in which audiences form affective bonds with influencers who present beauty as a source of healing, calmness, and emotional grounding. K-Beauty's relational tonality, soft, intimate, and gently expressive, aligns with these affective registers, enabling users to interpret beauty routines as emotionally meaningful rituals rather than technical practices. This dynamic resonates with theories of mediated co-presence (Choo and Xie, 2023; Lopez Rocha and Ryzhkov, 2023), which emphasise that digital influence is produced relationally, through shared emotional atmospheres, rather than through linear persuasion.

These intertwined dynamics of algorithmic aesthetic socialisation, ethical localisation, and affective co-presence constitute the socio-technical foundation upon which IMCu's emphasis on emotional co-creation becomes intelligible. They reveal that Southeast Asian beauty audiences do not encounter K-Beauty communication as external influence but as part of a lived digital ecology that shapes how global aesthetics are interpreted, adapted, and emotionally inhabited.

2.4 Gaps in existing theorizations of beauty communication

Although scholarship on Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has expanded in recent years (González-Ros, 2021; Keller and Kotler, 2016; Suay-Pérez et al., 2022), existing models continue to privilege persuasive integration, message consistency, and managerial control as the primary determinants of communication effectiveness. Such perspectives assume that audiences respond to coherent brand narratives in relatively uniform ways, paying insufficient attention to the culturally mediated processes through which meaning is negotiated. This assumption becomes particularly limiting in Muslim majority contexts, where communication is filtered through ethical expectations, moral sensibilities, and relational emotional cultures that shape how audiences interpret global beauty narratives.

Across the broader literature, Muslim majority societies remain underrepresented, with most IMC and beauty communication models developed in secular, individualistic, and Western consumer environments. As a result, the theoretical tools available often overlook the role of halal assurance, modest representation, and moral propriety in shaping communicative legitimacy. Moreover, despite the growing recognition of affect in media and cultural studies, IMC frameworks rarely integrate emotional or affective theory, leaving unexplored how audiences attune to the soft-aesthetic emotional registers characteristic of K-Beauty communication.

Existing theories also offer limited engagement with hybridisation processes, even though global beauty cultures routinely blend with local ethical, climatic, and lifestyle realities. Hybridisation is often acknowledged descriptively (Kraidy, 2009) but seldom theorised within communication models that explain how such hybrid meanings acquire authority and resonance in everyday life. Likewise, although research on globalisation, Hallyu soft power, and cultural proximity has advanced significantly, these perspectives do not fully explain how transnational soft-aesthetic communication achieves legitimacy in culturally layered, religiously informed digital environments.

Taken together, these gaps indicate an absence of a comprehensive framework capable of accounting for the cultural negotiation, ethical filtering, emotional resonance, and hybrid adaptation that shape the reception of K-Beauty in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands. This theoretical omission underscores the need for the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework, which reconceptualises communication effectiveness not as persuasive impact but as the attainment of cultural legitimacy within complex socio-cultural ecosystems.

3 Methods

3.1 Research design

The study adopts an interpretive qualitative design appropriate for exploring culturally embedded meaning-making processes. Given the

complexity of aesthetic interpretation, ethical filtering, and emotional responses, qualitative methods allow deep engagement with personal narratives and cultural reasoning. As Mulyana (2010) argues, qualitative inquiry is necessary when researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret symbolic experiences, construct social realities, and negotiate meanings within their cultural contexts. Such an approach aligns with the phenomenological commitment to studying lived experience and the communication practices through which people make sense of their world.

3.2 Sampling strategy

To capture the nuanced ways in which K-Beauty communication is interpreted across Indonesia's Urban Heartlands, a purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy was adopted. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the approach prioritised conceptual relevance, identifying individuals capable of articulating the cultural, ethical, and emotional dimensions underpinning their encounters with Korean beauty communication. As Patton (2002) emphasises, purposive sampling is appropriate when researchers aim to select "information-rich cases" that illuminate the phenomenon in depth rather than breadth. Maximum variation further strengthens this logic by intentionally incorporating diverse perspectives to reveal shared patterns across heterogeneous experiences (Patton, 2002). This sampling logic aligns with qualitative traditions, which assert that analytical insight arises not from numerical representativeness but from the depth and relevance of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2009).

Three broad clusters guided recruitment. The first includes industry actors, such as senior managers and technical specialists from multinational manufacturers, alongside founders of local brands utilising Korean maklon expertise; their perspectives illuminate how cross-cultural communication is operationalised and strategically crafted within the beauty industry. The second cluster encompasses cultural intermediaries, particularly those affiliated with institutions such as the Korean Cultural Center Indonesia (KCCI), whose roles straddle cultural diplomacy and the everyday circulation of aesthetic narratives. The third and broadest cluster comprises consumers, including Muslimah users, K-pop fans, and general urban beauty users who actively engage with K-Beauty through digital platforms, e-commerce ecosystems, and everyday routines.

These consumer subgroups were intentionally recruited because they represent the primary interpretive communities through which K-Beauty derives cultural meaning in Indonesia. Muslimah users reveal how beauty communication is negotiated through religious ethical considerations; K-pop fans illustrate how affective fandom accelerates aesthetic adoption and message circulation; and general beauty users capture mainstream pragmatic interpretations shaped by routine digital consumption. Their inclusion enables triangulation across ethical reasoning, affective cultural attachment, and everyday aesthetic pragmatism, ensuring a holistic understanding of consumer meaning-making processes.

The sample composition summarised in Supplementary Table 1 was intentionally diverse in age, gender, and socio-religious background. This diversity supported robust cross-perspective triangulation and reduced the risk of over-reliance on any single consumer group. Data saturation was reached when no new conceptual categories emerged after the twelfth interview.

3.3 Data collection procedures

A multi-method data collection design was employed to reflect the layered nature of meaning-making in beauty communication. Each method illuminates a different facet of cultural negotiation, from personal reasoning and emotional resonance to collective discourse and digital behaviour. This design follows Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) principle of methodological triangulation, which argues that complex cultural phenomena are best understood through multiple, complementary sources of data. By combining interviews, focus group discussions, digital ethnography, and e-commerce observations, the study captures both the subjective meanings articulated by individuals and the publicly circulating narratives that shape everyday interpretive practices.

3.3.1 In-depth interviews

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2024 and June 2025. Each conversation lasted 60 to 90 min, allowing participants sufficient time to articulate their experiences, beliefs, and emotional responses. The interview guide covered ten thematic domains, including: exposure to Korean culture; perception of aesthetic cues; emotional tone and affective responses; ethical and religious filtering; attitudes toward halal and ingredient transparency; negotiation of identity; cross-cultural comparison; and adaptive skincare routines.

The interview format was deliberately flexible, enabling participants to narrate their interpretations organically. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuance, pauses, and emotive expressions, elements critical for interpretive analysis.

3.3.2 Focus group discussion (FGD)

To complement individual narratives, a single FGD with six female users aged 21–35 was conducted. Participants were recruited from Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, and Bekasi locations central to Indonesia's Urban Heartlands. The FGD created an interactive environment in which participants conversed, contested, and built on each other's ideas. The conversation focused on emotional resonance, communal perceptions of K-Beauty, expectations around modesty and halal assurance, and collective forms of hybridisation.

The discussion lasted approximately 90 min and resulted in 56 pages of transcript material. The dynamic group interaction provided insights into how beauty communication circulates socially within peer networks and how meanings are reinforced, negotiated, or challenged.

3.3.3 Digital ethnography

Recognising the central role of digital platforms in circulating K-Beauty content, the study incorporated 16 months of digital ethnography across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Observations centred on highly engaged content under hashtags such as #KbeautyIndonesia and #skincareroutine, influencer-generated material, comments, and viewer interactions.

Fieldnotes documented not only the visual aesthetic cues but also the tonal qualities of Korean communication, softness, calmness, and relational warmth that users frequently referenced in interviews. This method provided ecological validity, enabling the analysis to situate personal interpretations within broader digital discourses.

The decision to conduct a 16-month digital ethnography (February 2024–June 2025) follows established methodological guidance that meaning-making in transcultural digital environments cannot be captured through short-term observation. Ethnographic research that seeks to understand symbolic interpretation, emotional resonance, and cultural negotiation requires immersion across multiple temporal cycles in which aesthetic preferences, platform behaviours, and conversational norms evolve. Prolonged engagement enables the researcher to observe not only stable interpretive patterns but also subtle shifts influenced by seasonal purchasing cycles, religious moments (such as Ramadan and Eid), algorithmic fluctuations, and platform-driven visual trends. Scholars such as Rajput and Gandhi (2024) emphasise that extended ethnographic duration strengthens ecological validity by capturing the repetition, variability, and contextually situated meanings that constitute everyday digital life. In the present study, the 16-month duration provides a sufficiently deep temporal field to track how K-Beauty communication is interpreted, morally evaluated, and emotionally negotiated across multiple online spaces, allowing the analysis to identify patterns that are culturally sedimented rather than episodic or reactive.

3.3.4 E-commerce analytics

Given the dominance of online beauty consumption in Indonesia, e-commerce observations were conducted on Shopee Mall and Tokopedia Official Store pages. Data collected included best-selling product categories, halal-label presence, review sentiment (from ~12,500 user reviews), pricing patterns, and discount structures. Publicly accessible dashboards, such as compas.co.id, were used to validate sales trends and ranking consistency, where applicable.

These data facilitated a behavioural cross-check linking what consumers articulated in interviews to how they acted on marketplace platforms, thereby reinforcing analytic triangulation.

3.4 Mixed-methods integration

The research followed a staged empirical sequence, allowing earlier insights to shape subsequent data collection. The study began with exploratory interviews with industry actors to understand upstream communication decisions. Consumer interviews followed these to reveal the depth of interpretation and emotional resonance. The FGD then served to refine emerging themes by examining how meanings circulate within group dynamics.

Digital ethnography provided contextual grounding for how users encounter K-Beauty communication in real-time online environments, while e-commerce data offered behavioural validation. Documentary materials such as advertisements, packaging, and brand narratives were analysed last to contextualise interpretive insights within the communicative artefacts that shape users' experiences.

3.5 Data analysis

Analytical procedures were guided by a reflexive thematic analysis approach as articulated by Braun (2006), which emphasises iterative interpretation, researcher reflexivity, and active meaning-making rather than mechanical code aggregation. This approach is epistemologically congruent with the study's interpretivist stance, which assumes that reality is constituted by culturally shaped subjectivities and that knowledge emerges from the interaction between participants' lived experiences and the researcher's interpretive engagement. Ontologically, the study adopts a constructivist understanding of meaning as fluid, relational, and embedded in socio-cultural worlds, making reflexive thematic analysis an appropriate methodological bridge between theoretical commitments and analytical practice.

The coding process unfolded in three interconnected, recursive stages, supported by NVivo 14. The first stage involved open coding, informed by Juliet Corbin's (1990) grounded procedures, in which the data were examined line by line to identify recurring semantic patterns, moral evaluations, emotional descriptors, and culturally specific expressions. Indonesian terms such as *halus* (gentle), *cerah* (glowing), *sopan* (modest), and *aman* (safe) were retained in their original form during coding to preserve the cultural nuance embedded in participants' meaning-making. The second stage, axial coding, organised these initial codes into relational clusters by identifying conceptual connections across categories. Patterns such as aesthetic compatibility, ethical filtering, emotional resonance, and hybrid routine adaptation emerged as participants negotiated Korean beauty communication through Islamic sensibilities, affective rhythms, and digital platform logics. The third stage, selective coding, synthesised these clusters into the four overarching cultural negotiation mechanisms that form the conceptual architecture of the IMCu framework. This stage involved iterative movement between raw excerpts, mid-level codes, and theoretical constructs, ensuring that abstraction remained grounded in the lived realities of Urban Heartland consumers.

Reflexivity played a central role throughout these stages. As an Indonesian communication scholar familiar with the linguistic, cultural, and religious nuances of Muslim-majority contexts, my positionality facilitated deep interpretive access to participants' symbolic language and moral registers. However, this proximity also required continuous reflexive vigilance to avoid normalising or over-interpreting culturally familiar expressions. Reflexive memos documented instances in which my assumptions aligned with or diverged from participants' accounts, allowing analytic decisions to be interrogated and refined. Peer debriefing sessions further strengthened interpretive rigour by introducing critical distance and challenging emerging theoretical patterns.

The analytic flow in NVivo followed a systematic yet flexible progression. Raw data from interviews, the focus group discussion, digital ethnography, and e-commerce observations were first imported, cleaned, and organised into case classifications. Initial codes were generated inductively, after which NVivo's matrix-coding queries

and clustering functions were used to explore latent connections across datasets. These computational tools did not replace interpretation but supported abductive reasoning by highlighting patterned relationships in the data. As themes became more coherent, higher-order analytic categories emerged, culminating in the identification of four cultural negotiation mechanisms and the structural drivers of the IMC-to-IMCu shift. This iterative movement from data immersion to meaning extraction to theoretical integration mirrors the epistemological assumption that meaning emerges through sustained engagement with participants' narratives rather than purely procedural coding.

Through this reflexive, theoretically informed, and systematically supported analytic process, the IMCu framework was elaborated as a culturally grounded model that explains how communication acquires meaning, authority, and legitimacy within Indonesia's Muslim-majority Urban Heartlands.

3.6 Triangulation procedures

Analytic triangulation was essential for capturing the multi-layered nature of cultural negotiation. Themes identified in interviews were cross-checked against FGD interactions, digital content patterns, and marketplace behaviours. A triangulation matrix summarising these relationships is provided in Supplementary Table 2.

Where interpretive tensions emerged, such as differing perceptions of Korean aesthetics between Muslimah users and K-pop fans, these were explored rather than smoothed over, in line with constructivist inquiry. This approach ensured that the resulting conceptual framework was grounded not only in convergence but also in productive divergence across data sources.

3.7 Verification strategies

To ensure qualitative rigour, multiple verification strategies were employed. Selected participants (M3, M5, M7) were consulted for member checks to confirm interpretive accuracy. Peer debriefing with an experienced qualitative researcher was used to refine thematic distinctions and avoid over-interpretation. Cross-platform checks between interview themes and digital observations ensured ecological consistency. An audit trail comprising analytic memos, coding files, and decision logs strengthened transparency.

3.8 Researcher positionality

The researcher's professional background in marketing communication offered valuable contextual insight but simultaneously necessitated careful reflexive practice. Throughout the study, regular reflexive journaling was employed to bracket pre-existing assumptions related to K-Beauty, Indonesian consumer behaviour, and strategic communication frameworks. The researcher affirms that no commercial organisation influenced the processes of data collection, analysis, or interpretation. This explicit attention to positionality strengthens the study's methodological credibility and aligns with contemporary standards of transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research.

4 The integrated marketing cultural (IMCu) framework

4.1 Conceptual positioning of IMCu

The Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework emerged inductively as the empirical materials revealed that Indonesian audiences engage with K-Beauty communication in ways that extend far beyond the assumptions embedded in traditional managerial integration models. While classical IMC foregrounds message consistency, channel coordination, and strategic alignment (Butkouskaya et al., 2021; Keller and Kotler, 2016), this study's findings demonstrate that these principles only partially explain how communication acquires meaning within Indonesia's culturally layered, ethically attentive, and emotionally expressive beauty landscape. The interpretive labour performed by audiences points to processes that IMC does not theorise, namely, the cultural, ethical, and affective negotiations that underlie how transnational aesthetics become locally resonant.

Listening closely to the narratives of consumers, industry actors, and cultural intermediaries revealed that K-Beauty communication resonates not simply because of its promotional coherence, but because it feels culturally safe, emotionally familiar, and morally consonant. Participants repeatedly evaluated messages not for their strategic integration but for their alignment with Islamic ethical norms, affective expectations, and local identity scripts. These dynamics echo broader scholarly debates in cultural branding (Holt, 2004), hybridisation (Kraidy, 2009), glocalisation (Robertson, 1995), and consumer culture theory (Arnould et al., 2019), all of which emphasise that global cultural forms are not passively absorbed but actively negotiated within local moral and emotional worlds.

The emergence of IMCu also aligns with interpretive traditions that conceptualise meaning as culturally mediated rather than managerially produced. Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model illustrates that messages are interpreted through socially situated frameworks. At the same time, Asad's (1986) theory of Islamic moral formation foregrounds the embodied ethical sensibilities shaping evaluation in Muslim contexts. Bhabha's notion of the third space highlights how audiences inhabit hybrid cultural zones in which global soft-aesthetic cues are recontextualised, localised, and morally recalibrated. Meanwhile, Ahmed's affective economies and Bourdieu's habitus help explain how emotional tonalities and long-term cultural exposure shape dispositions of familiarity, comfort, and legitimacy.

Taken together, these insights position IMCu as a framework that conceptualises communication not merely as integrated but as a culturally mediated, morally filtered, and emotionally co-created process. Within Indonesia's Urban Heartlands, global aesthetic cues are interpreted through religious values, affective norms, and identity projects that determine whether communication is experienced as appropriate, trustworthy, and resonant. By foregrounding these mechanisms, IMCu extends the theoretical boundaries of IMC and redefines communicative effectiveness in culturally sensitive markets as a function of cultural legitimacy rather than persuasive impact alone.

4.2 IMC and IMCu: a comparative understanding

To situate IMCu within existing theoretical literature, it is essential to contrast it with the assumptions underpinning traditional Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). IMC primarily focuses on coordinating brand messaging to ensure that advertisements, packaging, influencer endorsements, and digital channels convey a unified, strategically consistent narrative. Coherence, in this framework, is treated as the principal indicator of communication effectiveness (Keller and Kotler, 2016).

While this remains relevant, the accounts gathered in this research reveal that such managerial coherence captures only a fraction of the communicative dynamics at play in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands. Participants did not evaluate K-Beauty communication solely on message consistency; instead, they interrogated whether the communication felt culturally correct and aligned with their ethical sensibilities, cultural expectations, and affective rhythms. This shift reflects a deeper interpretive and culturally mediated process through which audiences negotiate meaning.

Where IMC assumes relatively stable decoding across audiences, IMCu acknowledges, following Hall's encoding-decoding paradigm, that messages are interpreted through culturally specific frames of reference. IMCu further recognises, consistent with Asad's formulation of moral formation, that interpretation is filtered through embodied ethical commitments rather than abstract or purely cognitive criteria. The hybrid nature of cultural reception, illuminated by Bhabha's concept of the third space and Kraidy's work on hybridity, shows that global aesthetics are not simply received but recontextualised within local sensibilities. As such, IMCu reframes communication effectiveness as a function of cultural legitimacy, an outcome shaped by moral consonance, affective alignment, and hybrid cultural integration.

Thus, the analytical centre of gravity shifts from message integration to cultural congruence, foregrounding not how well communication is coordinated, but how deeply it harmonises with the audience's symbolic world.

4.3 Core components of the IMCu framework

Four interlinked cultural processes emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis, each revealing how Indonesian Muslim audiences engage with K-Beauty communication through culturally situated mechanisms of meaning-making. These processes form the conceptual core of the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework and reflect the convergence of several major theoretical traditions. Following Hall's encoding–decoding model, audiences do not receive soft-aesthetic messages as fixed textual intentions but actively negotiate them through local symbolic repertoires. At the same time, Asad's conception of Islamic moral formation underscores that interpretation is filtered through embodied ethical sensibilities rather than abstract doctrinal rules. Bhabha's notion of the third space illuminates how audiences inhabit hybrid cultural zones in which global aesthetic cues are recontextualised, localised, and morally recalibrated. These dynamics unfold within Bourdieu's affective habitus, where long-term exposure to Hallyu shapes embodied dispositions of softness, restraint, and relational warmth, and within Ahmed's affective economies, where emotions circulate and accumulate as shared cultural grammars. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that the four cultural processes identified, cultural mediation, ethical localisation, emotional co-creation, and selective hybridisation, do not merely describe audience behaviour; they reveal the deeper cultural logics through which communication acquires legitimacy in Muslim-majority, hybrid digital environments. Through these mechanisms, IMCu reframes communication effectiveness as an outcome of cultural negotiation rather than persuasive coherence (table summarising conceptual distinctions is placed as Supplementary Figure 1 placeholder).

4.3.1 Cultural mediation

Cultural mediation explains how audiences interpret global K-Beauty communication through locally embedded symbolic repertoires. Participants did not decode Korean soft-aesthetic cues as universal signals; instead, they filtered them through Indonesian Muslim relational norms, emotional expectations, and everyday cultural scripts. Across the dataset, respondents described this process as an act of "mencocokkan" or "menyelaraskan" (to align or to harmonize), suggesting that meaning is produced through interpretive negotiation rather than passive reception.

One interviewee articulated this clearly: *"Kami lihat dulu apakah gayanya cocok sama budaya kita. Kalau Korea banget, kayanya engga deh"* ("We first see whether the style fits our culture. If it feels too Korean, there's a sense of distance") (M2). Another participant added, *"Kita liat dari cara produk/brand memperlakukan konsumen. Kalau menyentuh, sopan, janjiin produknya bs bikin kulit halus, itu lebih kena buat kita"* ("We look at how the product or brand treats consumers. When it feels gentle, respectful, and promises smoother skin, it resonates more with us") (M1). In the FGD, several participants emphasised interpretive matching: *"Produk-produk ala Korea itu udah kaya menjiwai kita banget, mereka tahu apa yang kita butuhin buat bikin kita cantik"* ("Korean products feel like they really connect with us; it's as if they know exactly what we need to feel beautiful") (FGD3).

These dynamics align with Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model, which posits that audiences do not simply receive meaning but actively negotiate it based on cultural experience and symbolic familiarity. Cultural mediation was particularly visible when participants evaluated expressions of softness. As one respondent noted, *"Punya Kulit halus itu bukan hanya keliatan kulitnya yang halus, tp bagaimana setiap perempuan yang punya kulit halus jadi kaya orang korea, kelakuannya juga kaya orang korea, enak banget kalau diliat dan enak dengerin kalau dia lagi ngomong, drama korea banget lah"* ("Having smooth skin is not just about the skin looking smooth. It's how women with smooth skin start to feel like Korean women, the way they behave, the way they speak. It's so pleasant to look at and listen to, very much like a Korean drama") (M5). Through such interpretive filtering, audiences render foreign aesthetic forms emotionally legible and culturally coherent.

This mechanism highlights how meaning-making in Muslim-majority contexts is grounded in a culturally conditioned relational habitus. Visual cues that align with modesty, politeness, and relational harmony are more readily decoded as trustworthy and morally acceptable. In this sense, cultural mediation underscores that communication effectiveness depends not on persuasive clarity but on symbolic resonance within local cultural worlds.

4.3.2 Ethical localisation

Ethical localisation refers to the moral filtering through which Indonesian Muslim audiences evaluate beauty communication. Across interviews, the FGD, and digital ethnography, participants repeatedly emphasised that aesthetic attractiveness alone does not determine acceptance. Instead, communication must align with Islamic ethical expectations surrounding halal transparency, modest representation, humility, and emotional gentleness. This moral filtering operates as a lived evaluative process grounded in religious sensibility and culturally embedded ethical intuition rather than a formalised checklist.

Halal assurance emerged as one of the strongest ethical thresholds in the dataset. Participants described immediate hesitation when product ingredients or certification were unclear. As one interviewee stated, *"Kalau belum jelas halal-nya, aku ngga beli. Cantik itu penting, tapi harus aman juga secara agama"* ("If the halal status is unclear, I instantly hesitate. Beauty is important, but religious safety comes first") (M8). Another participant explained, *"Saya lihat dulu komposisinya. Kalau ada yang meragukan komposisi kehalalannya saya skip, meskipun packagingnya bagus"* ("I always check the ingredients first. If anything makes me doubt its halal status, I skip it even if the packaging is nice") (M7). These insights show that halal transparency serves as a moral precondition for trust.

Visual modesty was equally central to ethical evaluation. Many respondents expressed discomfort with imagery perceived as overly sensual, loud, or excessive. One participant noted, *"Kalau bintang iklannya terlalu vulgar atau terlalu seksi, saya langsung tidak nyaman. Bukan kita banget"* ("If the endorser appears too vulgar or overly sexy, I feel uncomfortable right away. It does not feel like 'us'") (M11). Another added, *"Saya fans produk-produk yang bernuansa korea, tapi kalau modelnya terlalu lebay dan vulgar, saya merasa itu ngga cocok untuk saya"* ("I'm a fan of Korean-inspired products, but when the model appears too over-the-top or vulgar, it feels unsuitable for me") (M9). The FGD reinforced this sentiment: *"Yang apa adanya, itu yang bikin kita merasa nyaman. Kalau terlalu heboh, rasanya tidak sesuai sama kebiasaan kita"* ("What feels natural is what makes us comfortable. If it's too over the top, it does not fit with our usual way of doing things") (FGD3).

Tone and narrative style were also scrutinised through the lens of moral expectations. Participants associated gentle communication with sincerity and ethical propriety. One interviewee commented, *"Kalau produk/brand cara ngomongnya emosional, tidak berlebihan, itu terasa jujur dan lebih bisa dipercaya"* ("If a brand communicates softly, emotional without exaggeration, it feels honest and more trustworthy") (M8). In contrast, boastful or hyperbolic communication produced moral discomfort. As one FGD participant put it, *"Kami nggak suka yang arogant. Yang penting humble, tidak memamerkan diri"* ("We do not like messaging that feels arrogant. What matters is humility, not showing off") (FGD1).

These empirical insights align with Asad's (1986) conceptualisation of Islamic ethical formation, in which moral dispositions are cultivated through embodied sensibilities rather than abstract doctrinal adherence. Participants' evaluations of beauty communication reflect this broader ethical life and everyday moral attentiveness, where modesty, humility, and clarity serve as indicators of moral safety. Contemporary studies on Muslim consumption similarly note that halal and modesty discourses shape perceptions of authenticity, trust, and relational comfort.

In communication theory terms, ethical localisation illuminates how audiences decode global beauty messages through culturally sedimented moral repertoires. Hall's (1980) encoding–decoding model helps explain why symbolic cues perceived as ethically incongruent are rejected, even when aesthetically appealing. At the affective level, Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies suggests that emotions such as discomfort, reassurance, or moral ease circulate these ethical cues, informing how communication is felt and integrated into everyday life.

Across the dataset, ethical localisation consistently emerged as a foundational interpretive mechanism. Participants repeatedly framed ethical comfort as a prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation, demonstrating that communication succeeds only when it aligns with the moral infrastructures that organise Muslim-majority beauty consumption. In this context, persuasive strength is insufficient; cultural legitimacy must be rooted in ethical consonance, moral clarity, and emotionally respectful communication.

4.3.3 Emotional co-creation

Emotional co-creation captures the process through which audiences internalise, reshape, and emotionally inhabit the narratives offered by K-Beauty communication. Participants consistently described Korean beauty content as *halus* ("gentle"), *tenang* ("calm"), and *menghangatkan* ("warm"), emphasising its soothing relational tone and its soft, emotionally contained expressiveness. This soft aesthetic register resonates strongly with Indonesian Muslim emotional culture, which places high value on warmth, restraint, modesty, and interpersonal harmony. Rather than merely recognising these cues, audiences interpret them through their own affective expectations, creating a sense of emotional compatibility that extends well beyond visual appeal.

In this sense, emotional engagement is not a passive reaction but a site of affective agency, reflecting what Ahmed (2004) conceptualises as affective economies, where emotions circulate across cultural contexts and acquire shared social meaning. Many participants described skincare not simply as a functional routine but as an emotionally meaningful practice often framed as *"healing," "relaxing,"* or a ritual that restores equilibrium after daily stress. One participant explained during fieldwork, *"Skincare itu healing buat saya"* ("Skincare is healing for me"), highlighting how emotional interpretation becomes embodied in daily routines. Such accounts illustrate how audiences co-author emotional meanings, transforming global soft-aesthetic messages into practices that affirm emotional balance, spiritual mindfulness, and social confidence.

This form of co-creation aligns with Illouz's (2007) notion of emotional capitalism, in which commercial narratives become intertwined with personal emotional management. Yet in the Urban Heartlands, this process is shaped by culturally embedded relational ethics, producing what may be understood as localised emotional scripts. Audiences decode Korean emotional cues through frameworks of modesty, familial warmth, and Islamic sensibility, thereby reshaping global affect into practices that align with local emotional expectations. Hall's (1980) encoding–decoding model further clarifies this process: the emotional tone encoded in K-Beauty communication is not absorbed as a universal affect, but instead decoded as a culturally legible resource that can be selectively embraced and repurposed in everyday life.

Emotional co-creation also intersects with Maton's (2008) concept of affective habitus. Through repeated exposure to Korean soft-expression styles, participants cultivate emotional dispositions in which gentleness, calmness, and relational subtlety become desirable and embodied. Several respondents reported that such emotional styles "fit" their communicative tendencies, suggesting that the affective rhythms of K-Beauty content are incorporated into embodied behavioural repertoires.

Overall, emotional co-creation demonstrates that the appeal of K-Beauty communication lies not only in its aesthetic softness but in its ability to harmonise with deeply rooted affective norms in Muslim-majority Indonesia. Through this process, audiences do not simply consume emotion; they produce emotion, embedding global affective cues into personal rituals, social identities, and culturally meaningful emotional practices that sustain the legitimacy and felt resonance of K-Beauty within the Urban Heartlands.

4.3.4 Selective hybridisation

Selective hybridisation captures how consumers integrate global K-Beauty cues into practices anchored in local religious, climatic, and lifestyle realities. Rather than adopting Korean routines wholesale, participants described adapting skincare steps, aesthetic sensibilities, and product meanings into culturally and environmentally appropriate forms. Interviewees frequently combined Korean multistep routines with halal-certified local products, adjusted application techniques to accommodate Indonesia's humid tropical climate, and reinterpreted Korean beauty ideals through Muslim modesty norms. Some consumers embraced the visual appeal of Korean-inspired packaging while deliberately foregrounding halal identity or local ethical assurances, signalling a conscious blending of global aesthetics with religious and cultural commitments.

This pattern reflects what transnational media theorists such as Kraidy (2009) identify as strategic hybridity, a deliberate merging of global and local that enables cultural continuity rather than replacement. Participants' narratives indicate that hybridisation is not a passive outcome of global influence but an active cultural negotiation shaped by moral expectations and lived routines. In line with Bhabha's notion of the third space, these hybrid forms emerge between global aesthetic flows and local moral worlds, allowing audiences to inhabit a space where foreign cues can be appropriated without compromising religious identity or cultural comfort.

From a phenomenological perspective, selective hybridisation also reveals how consumers mobilise embodied knowledge to filter and reformulate aesthetic routines. Decisions to modify, combine, or localise elements of K-Beauty reflect a broader interpretive reflex that aligns with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, where global beauty messages are decoded not as fixed meanings but as flexible resources that can be re-authored within local symbolic systems. The resulting hybrid expressions demonstrate that global beauty cultures do not displace local interpretations; instead, they are reworked into locally grounded, morally coherent, and environmentally attuned practices that reinforce cultural legitimacy rather than undermine it.

4.3.5 Drivers of the IMC to IMCu shift

Beyond the four cultural negotiation mechanisms outlined earlier, the analysis reveals a set of deeper structural forces that explain why communication effectiveness in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands is anchored in cultural legitimacy rather than the coherence-oriented logic of traditional IMC. These drivers, consistently reflected across interviews, the FGD, and longitudinal digital ethnography, demonstrate that the emergence of IMCu is not merely conceptual but materially grounded in the lived experiences and socio-technical infrastructures through which audiences encounter global beauty communication. Their patterned consistency echoes major theoretical traditions that view meaning-making as relational, embodied, and structurally mediated.

A first structural force concerns long-term cultural familiarity, which reduces symbolic distance and eases interpretive engagement. Participants described Korean aesthetics as part of their everyday symbolic environment, reinforcing Hall's (1980) notion of preferred meaning positions in which decoding becomes more intuitive when symbolic forms feel familiar. As one participant shared, *"Aku udah kenal Korea dari SMP, jadi ya udah biasa aja"* ("I've been familiar with Korean culture since middle school, so it feels quite normal to me") (M9). Another added, *"Sekarang kalau lihat produk/brand Korea itu udah biasa aja, kaya brand lokal aja"* ("Now when I see Korean products or brands, they just feel normal, almost like local brands") (FGD2). This cumulative exposure, rooted in more than two decades of Hallyu circulation, mirrors Kraidy's (2009) theory of cultural proximity and transnational hybridity, in which repeated contact creates a "softened boundary" between global and local forms. Familiarity thus becomes a precondition for legitimacy, resonating with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, in which long-term symbolic environments shape what individuals perceive as natural, tasteful, or emotionally resonant.

A second structural driver involves ethical sensitivity, reflecting the centrality of moral evaluation in Muslim-majority consumption. Participants consistently foregrounded halal assurance, modest representation, and respectful tonality as conditions for trust. One interviewee stated, *"Yang penting halal, bisa bikin kulit lembut, dan aman dari sisi agama"* ("What matters is that it's halal, gentle in tone, and does not contradict religious values") (M8). This aligns with Asad's (1986) framework of Islamic moral formation, which emphasises that ethical life is produced through embodied sensibilities rather than doctrinal abstraction. In this perspective, beauty communication is assessed not merely as aesthetic discourse but as a moral practice embedded in everyday religious consciousness. Such tendencies challenge IMC's assumption that persuasion is the dominant evaluative mechanism and align more closely with moral anthropology and ethical consumption scholarship, in which legitimacy emerges through moral–cultural congruence rather than strategic integration.

A third driver arises from emotional synchronisation, where Korean soft-aesthetic communication aligns with locally embedded affective norms. Participants repeatedly characterised Korean expressions as calm, warm, and *halus* ("gentle") terms that closely resonate with Indonesian Muslim relational ethics. As one respondent observed, *"Ekspresinya halus, kayak cara orang sini kalau mengekpresikan perasaan"* ("The expressions are gentle, similar to how people here express emotions") (M3). This dynamic reflects Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies, where emotions circulate across social bodies and form patterned attachments. Emotional resonance thus functions as a cultural bridge, rendering Korean affect intelligible within local emotional grammars. This affective compatibility underscores a key limitation of traditional

IMC: managerial coordination cannot account for the embodied affective harmonies that underpin legitimacy in culturally dense environments.

A fourth structural force is algorithmic hybridisation, which emerged strongly across the digital ethnography. TikTok, Instagram, and e-commerce platforms routinely blend Korean soft-aesthetic content with local cues, halal markers, Indonesian creators, modest fashion, or religiously inflected beauty routines. One participant described this process seamlessly: *"Di TikTok banyak konten Korea tapi dibawakan kreator lokal. Jadi natural, nyampur"* ("On TikTok, there's a lot of Korean content, but local creators deliver it, so it feels natural, mixed") (M6). FGD members similarly noted, *"Algoritma kasih kombinasi produk Korea yang sesuai sama kita"* ("The algorithm gives a Korea–Indonesia product combination that fits us") (FGD1). This phenomenon aligns with platform studies and Kraidy's concept of technological mediation, illustrating how hybridisation is not only cultural but also algorithmically produced. Here, Bourdieu's notion of cultural fields intersects with digital infrastructures: platforms shape which aesthetic forms are visible, repeated, and normalised, making hybrid cultural negotiation appear effortless and intuitive.

Taken together, these structural drivers articulate the systemic foundations of the IMC–IMCu shift. They demonstrate that communication effectiveness in Muslim-majority, digitally saturated environments is shaped by long-term symbolic conditioning, moral–ethical expectations, affective compatibility, and platform-mediated aesthetic flows. In this sense, IMCu emerges organically from audience experience and aligns with broader theoretical insights across cultural sociology, anthropological ethics, transnational media hybridisation, and affect theory. These drivers clarify that the shift from IMC to IMCu is not merely a refinement of terminology but a deeper reconfiguration of how communication acquires meaning, authority, and emotional traction within culturally layered ecosystems.

4.4 Boundary conditions of IMCu

While IMCu provides a culturally grounded explanation of communication effectiveness, its applicability is shaped by several boundary conditions that clarify the contexts in which its explanatory power is strongest. The first concerns the presence of cultural affinity zones, where global and local aesthetic norms converge in relational, emotional, or modesty-oriented domains. IMCu operates most effectively in environments where soft-aesthetic cues can be culturally reinterpreted rather than outright rejected, enabling audiences to integrate transnational aesthetics into existing symbolic repertoires.

A second boundary condition involves religious–ethical sensitivity. Because IMCu foregrounds moral filtering and ethical congruence, the framework resonates most strongly in Muslim majority contexts and other communities where ethical commitments, ritual norms, and modesty expectations shape aesthetic judgment. In more secular, highly individualistic, or morally pluralistic settings, IMCu's emphasis on ethical emotional consonance may be less salient, and communication effectiveness may rely more on personal preference than collective moral evaluation.

A third condition relates to digital convergence environments. The mechanisms identified in IMCu cultural mediation, ethical localisation, emotional co-creation, and selective hybridisation emerge most visibly in online ecosystems that enable rapid aesthetic circulation and algorithmic amplification, such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. These environments facilitate the formation of shared aesthetic norms, emotional grammars, and relational viewing practices that make cultural negotiation possible at scale.

A fourth boundary condition is the cultural preference for subtle, non-assertive aesthetic styles. IMCu presumes communicative settings where softness, restraint, and relational warmth are valued forms of affective expression. In markets where assertiveness, provocation, or hyper-individualism dominate the visual field, the framework's emphasis on soft-aesthetic negotiation may carry less explanatory weight.

Finally, IMCu is shaped by contexts characterised by low tolerance for moral dissonance. In settings where modesty norms, ethical propriety, and communal expectations remain strong, violations of these norms, whether through overt sensuality, immodesty, or perceived disrespect for religious values, can quickly undermine cultural legitimacy. In such contexts, the interpretive mechanisms that sustain IMCu function as both enabling and constraining forces.

Together, these boundary conditions do not limit the usefulness of IMCu; instead, they clarify the contours of its originality by identifying the socio-cultural terrains in which cultural legitimacy becomes the primary arbiter of communicative acceptance. By delineating these contextual parameters, IMCu positions itself as a theoretically precise and contextually grounded framework for understanding how transnational beauty communication acquires meaning and resonance.

4.5 Theoretical propositions

The analysis reveals a deeper set of conceptual principles that articulate IMCu's theoretical architecture. The first insight concerns the cultural reframing of global aesthetics: communication becomes acceptable not merely when its visual cues are appealing, but when these cues can be re-read through locally embedded relational norms and modesty-oriented cultural scripts. In Muslim majority contexts, aesthetic meaning is filtered through socio-religious expectations of propriety, restraint, and interpersonal harmony. This means that soft-aesthetic signals are not passively received but actively domesticated through symbolic frameworks that prioritise relational ethics over individualistic expression. Such alignment demonstrates that aesthetic persuasion operates only to the extent that it resonates with the audience's pre-existing social imaginaries.

Second, the findings foreground ethical–moral congruence as a decisive precondition of legitimacy. Halal assurance, modest representation, ritual cleanliness, and humility serve as cultural gatekeepers that determine whether a global message is deemed morally acceptable. This extends existing communication theory by showing that legitimacy is not an auxiliary evaluative layer but a structuring principle that shapes the very possibility of reception. Within Muslim majority digital environments, audiences mobilise moral repertoires to assess not only the content of communication but the ethical orientation of the aesthetic form itself. This underscores that cultural legitimacy is inseparable from moral legitimacy.

Third, emotional resonance, particularly narratives of calmness, gentleness, sincerity, and relational warmth, emerges as a key mechanism through which audiences internalise global beauty communication. Rather than functioning as affective embellishments,

these emotional tones serve as culturally recognisable markers of ethical comportment. They enable audiences to perceive soft-aesthetic communication as emotionally compatible with Islamic sensibilities that emphasise balance (*tawazun*), tranquility (*sakinah*), and relational empathy (*rahmah*). This finding suggests that emotional resonance operates not only as an affective response but also as an aesthetic-moral bridge that enhances interpretative compatibility.

Fourth, hybrid adoption illustrates how global signals are selectively adapted into local routines, creating blended cultural expressions rather than direct replication. Consumers integrate Korean skincare steps, product textures, or aesthetic philosophies into practices mediated by Indonesia's climatic conditions, religious obligations, and emotional repertoires. Hybridisation, therefore, becomes an active cultural practice rather than a passive consequence of exposure. This insight situates IMCu within broader debates on transcultural flows, demonstrating that cultural negotiation is fundamentally a process of selective appropriation shaped by material, ethical, and affective constraints.

Finally, the analysis establishes that cultural legitimacy, rather than persuasive strength, is the primary communicative outcome in culturally sensitive environments. Legitimacy emerges when communication aligns simultaneously with cultural memory, moral expectations, and emotional scripts. This repositions the theoretical centre of communication effectiveness away from managerial coherence and toward sociocultural consonance. In effect, IMCu reframes communication not as a transfer of messages but as a negotiation of meaning across culturally asymmetrical terrains.

Collectively, these insights deepen the theoretical grounding of IMCu and position it as a framework capable of explaining how transnational soft-aesthetic communication acquires meaning, authority, and emotional traction within Muslim-majority societies. They also open pathways for future empirical testing and conceptual refinement, particularly in comparative contexts in which cultural legitimacy may operate differently across religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic configurations.

4.6 Contribution of IMCu to communication theory

The IMCu framework advances scholarship in communication, cultural studies, and marketing in several profound ways. First, it reorients the conceptual core of communication theory from a model centred on persuasion and managerial coherence to one grounded in cultural negotiation. Classical IMC, despite its influence, remains rooted in an instrumental logic that privileges message consistency, channel coordination, and strategic intent. IMCu challenges this paradigm by demonstrating that, within culturally dense and religiously informed environments, audiences do not receive messages as linear persuasive stimuli. Instead, they actively interpret, reframe, and morally evaluate aesthetic signals through locally sedimented symbolic repertoires. This shift aligns communication theory more closely with cultural sociology and symbolic interactionism, where meaning emerges from social interaction, contextual interpretation, and embodied moral orientations.

Second, IMCu extends and integrates multiple theoretical domains that have rarely been brought into direct conversation with one another. It draws on cultural branding (Holt, 2004), hybridisation and transcultural flow theories (Kraidy, 2009), affect theory (Ott, 2017), and Islamic consumption and moral-aesthetic studies (Ben and Bouaghi, 2017). By weaving these strands together, IMCu offers a holistic conceptualisation of how global beauty messages travel, settle, or fracture within Muslim majority digital ecosystems. It contributes to hybridisation scholarship by clarifying why certain aesthetic forms acquire legitimacy, demonstrating that hybridisation is not merely a stylistic blending but a deeply moral-emotional negotiation shaped by religiously informed identity structures. In doing so, it bridges a gap in the literature by integrating moral anthropology with communication studies, showing that aesthetic global flows are always entangled with ethical commitments.

Third, IMCu posits that cultural legitimacy is the central evaluative outcome of communication in culturally sensitive markets. Legitimacy is a multidimensional construct that emerges at the intersection of cultural memory, moral expectations, emotional scripts, and everyday practical routines. Unlike persuasion, which assumes rational evaluation or emotional inducement, legitimacy reflects a broader socio-cultural alignment and an intuitive sense that a message is appropriate, respectful, familiar, and morally consonant. This redefinition challenges dominant models in IMC and strategic communication by arguing that effectiveness must be assessed not by behavioural response or recall, but by the degree to which a message resonates with audiences' lived moral worlds. IMCu thus provides a more culturally grounded mechanism of evaluation, particularly relevant for non-Western contexts in which moral authority and relational harmony significantly shape consumption.

Fourth, the framework advances affective communication theory by emphasising that emotional resonance is not an accessory to persuasion but a central pathway to cultural acceptance. K-Beauty's calm, gentle, and relational aesthetic is interpreted not only as affectively pleasing but as signalling ethical comportment compatible with Islamic sensibilities such as restraint (*iffah*), tranquility (*sakinah*), and relational empathy (*rahmah*). IMCu therefore theorises emotional tone as a culturally meaningful aesthetic one that anchors global communication within local affective ecologies. This contributes to affect studies by showing that emotions circulate within culturally mediated social fields, shaping how transnational messages are embodied, felt, and integrated into daily routines.

Finally, IMCu reconfigures the relationship between culture and commerce by demonstrating that cultural negotiation is not external to market communication but integral to its operation. In Muslim majority contexts, the route to communicative success lies not in amplifying persuasive strength but in cultivating consonance across moral, emotional, and cultural dimensions. This insight challenges the normative assumption that global marketing strategies can rely on message standardisation or surface-level localisation. Instead, IMCu shows that effective communication requires engaging deeply with the symbolic universes of audiences' worlds shaped by religious ethics, local aesthetics, algorithmic curation, and long-term cultural familiarity.

Through these contributions, IMCu offers not only a theoretical innovation but a conceptual bridge across disciplines. It illuminates the processes through which transnational soft-aesthetic communication acquires meaning, authority, and emotional traction in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands, while offering a model applicable to broader Muslim majority and culturally hybrid markets. In doing so,

it positions cultural legitimacy as a pivotal construct for future research and provides a foundation for rethinking communication effectiveness beyond Western-centric paradigms.

4.7 Cultural power, soft-aesthetic imperialism, and ethical implications

While the IMCu framework illuminates how audiences make sense of global beauty communication, the findings also surface broader questions about cultural power, soft aesthetic imperialism, and the ethical tensions that accompany transnational influence. Korean beauty communication circulates not merely as a commercial message but as a cultural force with asymmetrical visibility and emotional appeal. Its aesthetic dominance, highly visible across digital platforms, celebrity endorsements, and algorithmically curated feeds, creates a form of "soft-aesthetic pressure," in which particular standards of beauty and conduct appear more desirable, modern, or emotionally elevated.

Because this section presents empirically grounded meanings directly voiced by participants, these excerpts appropriately remain within the Findings chapter, consistent with the conventions of reflexive thematic analysis (Munsch, 2021). The quotations substantiate the emergent interpretive tensions before they are theorised further in the Discussion. Several participants articulated this ambiguity explicitly. One respondent reflected, *"Aku suka skincare Korea, tapi kadang terasa standar karena semua orang pakai. Jadi kayak semua pengen glowing"* ("I like Korean skincare, but sometimes it feels too standard because everyone uses it. It's like everyone wants to have that glowing look") (M15). Others expressed moral discomfort, noting the dissonance between Korean aesthetics and Muslim modesty norms: *"Kalau mukanya terlalu Korea banget, kadang aku merasa itu bukan aku. Apalagi kalau look-nya terlalu glowing untuk Muslimah"* ("When the face looks too 'Korean,' I sometimes feel it's not me—especially when the look is too glowy for a Muslim woman") (M8).

These reflections point to a subtle ambivalence and admiration for Korean aesthetics coexisting with a quiet resistance to perceived aesthetic uniformity or cultural overshadowing. The emotional tone characteristic of K-Beauty communication also raises ethical questions about whether soft-aesthetic styles might obscure the commercial interests underpinning them. Participants noted that the calm, intimate, and relational style of Korean communication can foster an authentic sense of emotional closeness, even when strategically constructed. Such affective alignment blurs the boundaries between genuine emotional resonance and commercially engineered sentiment.

Furthermore, the dominance of Korean beauty communication risks marginalising local aesthetic traditions and religiously grounded beauty practices, particularly when globalised content receives stronger algorithmic amplification than local expression. As one participant observed, *"Kadang beauty influencer Indonesia ikutin gaya Korea, jadi aku jarang lihat gaya lokal yang kuat"* ("Sometimes Indonesian beauty influencers imitate Korea so much that I rarely see strong local styles anymore") (FGD2). This concern speaks to broader issues of cultural overshadowing, where transnational content exerts disproportionate symbolic influence within digital ecosystems.

By acknowledging these tensions, the IMCu framework functions not only as a model of cultural harmony but also as a lens for identifying where influence becomes uneven and where ethical considerations must be foregrounded. This bridging section, therefore, prepares the ground for the broader theoretical reflections in the Discussion, in which these empirical insights are conceptually integrated into debates on soft power, cultural hybridity, aesthetic governance, and the ethics of global beauty communication.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a culturally situated and affectively rich pattern of meaning-making that extends beyond existing explanations of K-Beauty's global rise. Rather than encountering Korean beauty communication as an external aesthetic import, consumers in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands engage with it through interpretive processes grounded in long-term cultural exposure, Islamic moral expectations, relational emotional norms, and adaptive local practices. This dynamic meaning-making ecology provides the empirical foundation for the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework advanced in this article.

A central insight concerns how participants described K-Beauty's soft-aesthetic communication as "fitting" or "feeling right" rather than as persuasive or strategically constructed. One participant noted, "Kesannya muka jadi halus, enak dilihat… cocok sama kita sehari-hari" (M13) — "The face is soft and pleasant… they match how we express ourselves here". Such language reflects affective proximity rather than persuasion, challenging the assumptions within classical IMC that locate effectiveness in message coordination and channel integration. Instead, these findings suggest that global communication becomes compelling when it harmonises with culturally sedimented emotional and relational norms.

Ethical localisation also emerged as a defining dimension of reception. Participants filtered K-Beauty content through Islamic moral expectations regarding halal certification, modest representation, and communicative humility. As one respondent explained, "Kalau ingredientnya jelas, halal, dan cara komunikasi iklannya sopan, baru terasa aman" (M12) — "If the ingredients are clear, halal, and the ads communication polite, then it feels safe". Others expressed discomfort when aesthetics were too assertive or visually provocative, noting, "Kalau look-nya terlalu glowing untuk Muslimah, jadi kurang nyaman" (M7) — "If the look is too glowing for a Muslimah, it feels less comfortable". These empirical patterns demonstrate that ethical resonance is a prerequisite for legitimacy, extending scholarship on Islamic consumer ethics by showing how moral expectations shape aesthetic judgment and emotional acceptance in beauty communication.

Emotional co-creation further illustrates the entanglement between aesthetic cues and identity practices. Participants frequently described skincare and beauty routines as calming, comforting, or emotionally restorative. One interviewee shared, "Ritual skincare itu healing setelah capek seharian" (M9) — "Skincare rituals are healing after a tiring day". Such sentiments align with affective theories conceptualising emotion as a socially circulated resource that shapes how individuals relate to global narratives. K-Beauty's calm, warm, and understated emotional register resonates strongly with Indonesian

relational scripts, enabling audiences to integrate global affective cues into local emotional repertoires.

Selective hybridisation adds another layer of agency. Rather than copying Korean routines wholesale, consumers adapt them to tropical climatic conditions, halal requirements, financial constraints, and everyday lifestyle demands. As one respondent explained, "Saya ikutin step perawatan muka ala Korea tapi tetap pilih produk halal dan sesuai cuaca sini" (M14) — "I follow Korean facial maintenance steps but choose halal products and adjust them to our climate". These hybrid practices reveal that global aesthetics become meaningful through negotiation rather than imitation, underscoring hybridisation as an identity-driven process rather than a passive adoption of external cues.

Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate that communication effectiveness in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands is grounded in cultural legitimacy rather than persuasive coherence. Two decades of Hallyu exposure, algorithmic reinforcement, and the normalisation of soft aesthetics within digital ecologies have domesticated Korean beauty communication, making it feel emotionally compatible rather than foreign. As one FGD participant described, "Sekarang kosmetik Korea itu terasa dekat, kaya lokal produk. Udah tahu dari dulu lewat drakor" (FGD2) — "Korean cosmetics now feel close, like local product. We've known them for a long time through dramas". Such long-term cultural proximity helps explain why soft aesthetics outperform more assertive Western styles in religiously attentive and relationally oriented digital environments.

These patterns generate several theoretical implications. First, they challenge IMC's foundational assumption that message integration is the primary determinant of communication effectiveness. The Indonesian case demonstrates that audiences evaluate communication based on moral clarity, emotional harmony, and cultural congruence rather than message coherence. Second, the findings contribute to hybridisation scholarship by showing how soft-aesthetic cues are transformed into locally meaningful forms through religious ethics, emotional repertoires, and climatic adaptations. Third, the results advance Islamic consumer studies by providing empirical evidence that moral expectations serve as interpretive lenses that shape aesthetic judgment, emotional engagement, and behavioural responses.

This study advances transcultural communication scholarship by introducing the Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework, which conceptualises communication effectiveness as cultural legitimacy rather than persuasive integration. IMCu deepens the theoretical landscape of IMC by integrating hybridisation theory, Islamic moral–aesthetic frameworks, affective communication, and phenomenological meaning-making. It responds to long-standing gaps in communication theory by explaining how global soft-aesthetic signals acquire meaning, authority, and emotional resonance within religiously shaped digital ecosystems.

Furthermore, the IMCu framework contributes a novel interpretive model by articulating how cultural legitimacy arises from the interaction of four negotiation mechanisms and four structural drivers: long-term cultural familiarity, ethical sensitivity, emotional synchronisation, and algorithmic hybridisation. This model clarifies not only how K-Beauty is interpreted, but why its soft-aesthetic communication resonates more profoundly in Muslim majority contexts than more assertive or claim-driven forms of beauty communication. It also demonstrates how global aesthetics become embedded in local symbolic worlds through sustained cultural circulation, affective attunement, and platform-mediated visual training.

Digital ethnography and e-commerce analytics indicate that audiences consistently reward brands that integrate soft emotional tonality with halal transparency, modest representation, and culturally grounded aesthetic cues. These behavioural patterns reinforce IMCu's central proposition: communication succeeds when it achieves cultural legitimacy by being experienced as ethically safe, emotionally resonant, and culturally familiar. For practitioners, this means that persuasive consistency alone is insufficient. Brands entering Muslim-majority digital markets benefit from designing communication strategies that foreground ethical integrity, relational warmth, and aesthetic humility—attributes strongly aligned with Indonesian moral–emotional norms. Brands that embed these principles are better positioned to cultivate sustained trust, affective closeness, and long-term identification within Indonesia's expanding beauty economy.

Taken together, the discussion demonstrates that meaning-making in Muslim-majority digital environments operates through cultural negotiation rather than persuasive force. The IMCu framework thus provides a culturally grounded model for understanding how global beauty communication becomes meaningful, legitimate, and resonant within Indonesia's Urban Heartlands. The following Conclusion builds on these insights by outlining the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of IMCu and by identifying opportunities for future research.

6 Limitations and future directions

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged to contextualize the scope and transferability of its findings. First, although the research included 15 in-depth interviews, a 6-participant focus group, and 16 months of digital ethnography, the sample remains limited in size and diversity. The study, therefore, offers conceptual rather than statistical generalizability. Second, the empirical focus on Indonesia's Urban Heartlands and Muslim majority cultural environments introduces contextual specificity; the mechanisms of cultural mediation, ethical localisation, emotional co-creation, and selective hybridisation may manifest differently in non-Muslim or Western markets. Third, the digital ecosystems observed TikTok, Instagram, and e-commerce platforms, particularly, undergo rapid shifts in algorithms and behaviours. The interpretations offered here reflect the platform dynamics during the period of observation (2024–2025) and may evolve as digital infrastructures transform. Finally, although multimethod triangulation was employed, the study did not examine in depth brands that failed to achieve cultural legitimacy; future research could compare successful and unsuccessful cases to refine the boundary conditions of the IMCu framework. These limitations open opportunities for cross-cultural validation, longitudinal studies, and quantitative operationalisation of IMCu components.

7 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how K-Beauty communication is interpreted, negotiated, and transformed within Indonesia's Urban Heartlands, a context shaped by the interaction of Muslim majority ethical norms, relational emotional cultures, and digitally hybridised

beauty ecosystems. The findings indicate a complex interpretive ecology rather than a linear pattern of cultural adoption. Consumers actively evaluate transnational soft-aesthetic messages through aesthetic, moral, emotional, and identity-based lenses. The Integrated Marketing Cultural (IMCu) framework was developed to capture this culturally grounded meaning-making process and to explain how global beauty communication acquires legitimacy within such environments.

The results suggest that communication effectiveness in Indonesia is governed less by the managerial coherence emphasised in traditional IMC and more by cultural attunement. Korean soft-aesthetic communication resonates not merely because of its global circulation, but because audiences decode it through locally embedded relational norms and Islamic ethical expectations. Ethical localisation highlights the importance of moral clarity, halal assurance, modest representation, and communicative humility as a basis for trust and comfort. Emotional co-creation shows that audiences do not simply recognise Korean emotional tonality; they integrate it into local affective scripts that support identity, balance, and self-care. Selective hybridisation further demonstrates consumers' agency in adapting global routines to local climatic, ethical, and lifestyle realities.

Taken together, these mechanisms strongly point to cultural legitimacy rather than persuasive force as the operative logic of communication effectiveness in Muslim majority digital environments. The IMCu framework, therefore, provides a theoretically informed and empirically grounded extension to existing communication models. While not intended as a universal theory, the framework clarifies how ethical resonance, emotional compatibility, and cultural negotiation collectively shape message reception in culturally layered markets. It positions consumers not as passive recipients but as active cultural interpreters who reshape global aesthetics into morally consonant and locally meaningful forms.

Beyond its empirical insights, this study offers conceptual contributions to broader discussions on cultural hybridisation, IMC, consumer culture, and the movement of global aesthetics into religiously informed societies. Although the Indonesian case is context-specific, the mechanisms identified here may have analytic relevance for other Muslim-majority or relationally oriented markets in which soft-aesthetic communication intersects with ethical and emotional expectations. The IMCu framework thus provides a productive basis for future research interrogating how transnational communication negotiates cultural, moral, and affective boundaries.

Future studies could further refine IMCu through quantitative validation, multi-market comparisons, and longitudinal designs to explore its applicability across domains such as fashion, wellness, entertainment, or food. Such work would help assess the transferability of IMCu beyond this empirical setting and clarify the extent to which its mechanisms generalise across diverse cultural contexts.

In sum, this study suggests that cultural legitimacy shaped by long-term cultural familiarity, Islamic ethical sensibilities, and local emotional grammars forms the foundation of communication effectiveness in Indonesia's Urban Heartlands. After more than two decades of exposure, Korean aesthetics are increasingly interpreted not as foreign influences but as emotionally compatible and morally interpretable resources. The IMCu framework captures this broader shift from managerial integration toward culturally negotiated meaning-making, offering a future-oriented model for understanding how transnational soft-aesthetic communication will continue to evolve across hybridised and ethically attentive digital landscapes.

Taken together, the IMCu framework provides a theoretically grounded and empirically actionable lens for understanding how global aesthetics circulate in culturally complex markets. By foregrounding cultural legitimacy as a central communication outcome, this study invites scholars and practitioners to rethink how transnational messages are crafted, evaluated, and sustained in Muslim majority digital environments, marking a meaningful step toward a more culturally attuned paradigm of global communication.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because this research did not involve any vulnerable populations, clinical interventions, or collection of sensitive personal data. All participants were adult professionals (e.g., company executives and consumers) who were fully informed about the study's purpose and use of data prior to participation and gave their consent voluntarily. Based on national research policies and the institutional norms at Universitas Padjadjaran, formal approval from an ethics committee is not required for non-clinical, non-sensitive social science research involving informed adult participants. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

WA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization. DM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. SD: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. NA: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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