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The role of digital platforms in scaling Korean startups internationally

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Abstract
In recent years, startups have been in demand and supported in numerous countries. Countries like South Korea are using digital marketing tricks and strategies to make their presence beyond the local market. They have started to target the international market by using their recently developed worldwide popularity of the Hallyu wave. These startups are using platforms like YouTube, Amazon, and SEO to optimise their websites so that they can reach audiences beyond South Korea. This paper explores how the startup sectors of South Korea, including beauty and cosmetics, technology, fashion, FinTech, edtech, healthcare, and Genentech. How do they utilise the digital tools to build brand visibility among the global audience? Through case studies and real-world examples, the study also concentrates on the challenges businesses face, like global competition and cultural localisation with limited resources. This research paper also examines the significant role of influencer marketing, particularly through K-pop and K-Drama artists and how this strategic marketing move has contributed to South Korea's economy and its presence at the world level. Analysing these trends, the study reveals Korean entrepreneurs' extensive use of digital globalisation, inspiring emerging startups seeking international growth.

Keywords: South Korea, Hallyu wave, startups, digital marketing, influencer marketing, global expansion, cultural localisation

Introduction

In recent years, the Western market has shown a significant interest in the Asian markets, and many foreign investors are investing due to their growing economic importance. South Korea plays a major role as a hub for promoting digital innovation and cultural exchange of their traditional food, K-culture, K-Fashion and K-pop and these are highly consumable by consumers not only from Korea but from worldwide so many foreign investors have invested in Korea due their uniqueness of marketing and the way they attract the customers. This country places a strong emphasis on its top-notch technology and quality, hence leading the way in industries such as beauty, electronics, edtech, fashion and entertainment, drawing the attention of global markets and investors alike. All these have, therefore, made South Korea rank among the fastest-growing countries in Asia.

These global developments have put a spark on the further development of South Korea's startups. But the credit goes to the government of Korea for providing good internet facilities with high technology, due to which many new businesses are launched. But as we know, Korea's local market is small, if many startups promote their business in local markets, they cannot grow; they have to promote it in other countries to survive and succeed. Reaching global markets is necessary for them. To do this, many Korean startups started using digital platforms with the help of the fastest internet service and promoted their business on all online sites to get reach. They relied on online platforms like YouTube, Amazon, and SEO have help them promote their products and services all over the world without having physical stores there. With that, they have shifted their focus to influencer marketing, teaching their language by using apps, and organising cultural programs for international people so they know how to grab attention in a world full of competitors. Sidewise, they played their card by using their soft power, like the Korean entertainment industry, to connect with the fans and customers worldwide. This paper aims to explore how Korean startups have used digital platforms as a game-changer to spread their business, culture and entertainment around the world.

It also explores the areas where initially they face challenges like global competition and cultural localisation with limited resources, and will focus on some real-life case studies and how their strategy works, and they have recognition in the entire world.

The Korean Startup Ecosystem

Countries around the world attract high-potential startups, meanwhile, South Korea has actively strengthened its policy frameworks related to entrepreneurial ventures over the past decade. Seoul has climbed to the 9^{th} position globally in launching startups. This has happened due to the immense support from the government because they are providing programs which are helpful for people to grow their businesses. One of the most important government initiatives is the K-Startup Grand Challenge (KSGC). It is meant to bring foreign businesses to Korea, but at the same time, they can also open their business to a wider Asian market. They provide resources such as products and services, localisation and support, and business matchmaking opportunities. They offer free office space for their business along with a monthly stipend, which is very important. Further, Government bodies like KOTRA (Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency) are also useful for the growth and expansion of Korean businesses on a global platform. They are providing services like trade consultancy and market research, along with assistance in foreign regulation and market entry strategy, and arranging trade events. South Korea's education system is referred to as a cherry on top of the cake when it comes to building a startup ecosystem. The country has got recognition for offering the world's best education in the field of science, technology and innovation. This solid academic foundation generates an extremely digitally capable and entrepreneurial labour force. It is combined with the country's high-speed internet facility, mobile-first consumer behaviour, and technological innovation.

South Korea offers the best possible climate where startups can develop, adjust, and innovate quickly. Most startups in South Korea focus on sectors related to beauty and cosmetics, technology, fashion, FinTech, edtech, healthcare, and Genentech. There is a lot of demand seen by the local market and international market from these startup industries, and they are paired with the global popularity of K-culture, such as K-pop and K-drama.

Global Digital Marketing Strategies

Global digital marketing strategies are the methods businesses use to promote their products and services across global markets through digital platforms. Digital Marketing strategies also help companies to target different international audiences through tools like.

- Social media marketing (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok).
- Influencer partnerships.
- E-commerce platforms (e.g., Amazon, Shopify, regional marketplaces).
- Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).
- Multilingual content and website localization.
- Email marketing.

How South Korea is using global digital marketing strategies

South Korea is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world in using digital marketing strategies.

Influencer marketing and YouTube

Influencer marketing is quite popular in South Korea. Around 93 per cent of people use social media. (Statista, 2025) [10]. Around 71 per cent of South Korean consumers are likely to come from social media references. Influencer marketing in South Korea is projected to reach US$489.24 million in 2025, and almost double by 2030-US$786.28 million (Statista, 2025) [10]. They know how to attract customers, as in recent years they have been using the hallyu wave reluctantly. They appoint actors and K-pop idols as a brand ambassador for their products. Fans also show a lot of enthusiasm to purchase those particular products like apparel, bags, food and drinks, makeup, shoes and jewellery which are worn by the actors and K-pop idols. A recent example is of BTS V, who has sold out his Celine perfume within seconds, highlighting the tremendous influence of celebrities in sales and brand awareness worldwide. Like this, YouTube and Instagram are used heavily by Korean companies to reach an international audience through visually appealing content. Furthermore, platforms such as U-Connec have introduced products specifically for YouTube Shorts, where startups can get multiple reviews and secondary ad materials for a reasonable fee, which further strengthens their online marketing strategies (U-Connec, 2024) [12].

E-commerce Platforms

Online platforms like Amazon, Coupang, Shopify, Naver Shopping and Gmarket enable Korean start-ups to efficiently manage international transactions. These platforms made sure that key tools are made available to the startup in the form of multilingual listings, global shipment facilitation through shipping companies, and secure payment processes that contribute significantly to establishing credibility and making cross-country transactions without any issue. Coupang is known as the “Amazon of Korea”, known for its fast delivery service within the same day or the next day. It increased to 15% after its 2023 operating profit of $473 million. The company's customer base has grown substantially (Bloomberg, 2024) [1].

SEO & Multilingual Web Strategies

Search engine optimisation is an important part of digital marketing tools. The startups have been using this tool to have a good reach among the international markets. They have developed multilingual websites, localised content and blog posts with targeted keywords. So that international consumers can find it easy to know about Korean brands on Google. Mobile responsiveness and culturally sensitive messaging are also crucial for reaching an international audience. Platforms such as Wadiz have facilitated overseas expansion of successful companies through partnerships with international platforms, including Japan's Makuake and Taiwan's Zeczec, to help locally crowd funded items enter overseas crowd funding markets (Wadiz, 2024) [14].

Notable case studies

Kooding or Marpple (Fashion/Lifestyle): Global E-commerce Model

Kooding and Marpple are popular for their niche in fashion and lifestyle. They have strategically implemented e-commerce to reach the international markets. Kooding has a wide range of Korean fashion, beauty, and lifestyle products, and targets global customers by providing localised online shopping experiences, including multiple payment facilities and country-based shipping processes. The active social networking presence of the platform ensures its connectivity with global K-fashion interests and makes Korean style available universally (Forbes, 2023) [4].

Marpple, on the other side, specialises in customised t-shirts and accessories. It capitalises on global ecommerce through an easy online buying experience and customisation possibilities that cater to international buyers who demand uniqueness in products. The flexibility in meeting e-commerce trends has enabled the platform to penetrate countries outside Korea (TechCrunch, 2024) [11].

SaaS/Tech Startup-SEO and YouTube Explainers for Visibility

Many Korean Saas companies have successfully used SEO-driven landing pages and YouTube explainer videos. For example, startup businesses such as SendBird (a Saas for chat messaging) and Makuake (a crowd funding platform) used a combination of content marketing and SEO optimisation to target global markets. These sites have been optimised for several different languages and strategically use blogs and video tutorials to demonstrate their products in action, which resonates with global businesses (TechCrunch, 2024) [11].

Challenges in Going Global

Korean startups going for global expansion encountered a number of serious problems in online marketing. These problems are due to shifting global legislations, technological changes, and more competition.

- **Cultural Adaptation and Localisation:** Entering international markets successfully involves more than simply translating content; it involves a deep understanding of local cultures, consumer preferences and behaviour. Missteps during localisation can lead to misunderstanding or even offence, weakening the brand reputation. For example, a marketing campaign that is similar to South Korea may not have the same impact in Western countries because of different cultural values and norms.
- **Budget constraints for early-stage startups:** Most of the Korean startups face limited financial resources, making the global market a major challenge. Expanding businesses into multiple regions involves a wide range of investments, including content creation of high-quality, multilingual advertisements, localised websites, influencer partnerships, and logistic infrastructure for cross-border shipping and returns. These things require continuous spending to maintain their brand visibility and customer engagement. Additionally, ad prices for social media have increased over the past years. Google, Meta (Facebook/Instagram), and YouTube platforms are now more competitive and costly due to a shift in algorithms and increasing demand from advertisers. The average cost-per-click (CPC) and average cost-per-thousand-impressions (CPM) increased by more than 20% worldwide from 2023 through 2024, compelling smaller companies to maximise every dollar allocated (Rana, 2024) [9].
- **Navigating global competition in saturated sectors:** Beauty, fashion, and technology are industries where many Korean businesses are active. Global brands such as L'Oréal, Nike, and Apple make it hard for emerging entrants to draw attention. These players tend to enjoy considerably bigger marketing budgets, prevalent recognition and established customer loyalty. To compete, Korean startups must rely on cultural branding, distinct looks and innovation in products. However, even those things are insufficient. SNS sites such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok keep updating their algorithms, promoting paid content or content with a lot of engagement, making organic exposure even less for newer or smaller firms (Rana, 2024) [9]. Furthermore, customer acquisition costs (CAC) in these industries are rising continuously all over the world, with D2C (direct-to-customer) brands paying more to reach the same number of customers. Korean startups are urged to be unique among the competitors with a good message. But it also maintains competitive pricing, quick delivery and supportive customer service. Emerging startups are now increasingly resorting to niche communities, regional targeting, and value-based marketing, such as sustainability, cruelty-free, and local craftsmanship, to distinguish themselves within this competitive marketplace.
- **Building Trust and Credibility in International Markets:** New brands which got launched in the market often face challenges in building trust in the global market. At first, foreign consumers may show reluctance to purchase a product from new brands. Trust must be created through customer reviews, transparent policies, quality service assurance, secure payments, and typically, collaborations with approved trusted locals or platforms. In today's digital world, data privacy and adherence to regulations such as GDPR and CCPA are now paramount issues and failure to comply can result in hefty fines and loss of consumer trust (CyberX Studio 2024) [3].

Strategic Insights

What's working for Korean Startups

Korean startups have successfully used digital transformation and cultural branding as their main weapons to enter and succeed in international markets. Their reason for success is that they can adapt quickly to digital trends, particularly by the way of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and global e-commerce stores. They prioritise mobile–first strategies and create visually engaging short video content that perfectly aligns with today's paced consumer (Statista, 2025; Jin, 2016) [10, 5].

One of the most prominent methods is the collaboration with celebrities like kpop idol or a K-drama artist. They have an immense fan following around the world. As the actors and idols have already created a special bond with their fans so fans felt that warmth with them. Whatever they use or advertise, it always sells out within a minute due to their huge popularity. As a consequence, the majority of the startups and brands attempt to seek chances to have their deal done with the respective artist. Korean startups also apply AI-driven brand campaigning tools and data platforms to enable personalisation, budget optimisation, and insight into customer behaviour. Moreover, they have the advantage of cross-border endorsement from both the local and international markets, owing to crowd funding platforms like that of Wadiz (Wadiz, 2024) [14].

Role of Korean Culture and Branding Power

One of the major competitive benefits Korean startups have in the global market is the power of Korean culture, commonly known as the Korean wave or hallyu wave. This term is used to describe Korea's dominance around the world inform of K-pop, K-music, k-drama shows, films, fashion, makeup and cuisine (Jin, 2016; KOTRA, 2023) [5]. These cultural products have generated not only entertainment but also substantial emotional bonds and aspirational lifestyles among global buyers. Startup businesses whose products and brands align with the elements of Hallyu find it easier to build trust and generate interest abroad. For example, K-beauty brands sell traditional Korean skin care routines and natural, high-tech and skin-safe formulations. These brands appeal to customers in countries like the US, Southeast Asia and Europe who are interested in strong yet gentle skin care. Korean fashion is also popular abroad, specifically in Asia. It attracts to young generation who are interested in trendiness and uniqueness. Korean start-ups are not simply adopting cultural symbols as a marketing ploy they are expressing everyday Korean values, taste, and ingenuity in terms of product design and communication. As a result, products branded as "Korean" carry an implicit promise of quality, uniqueness, and cultural value.

Furthermore, the emphasis on globalisation and export orientation, Korean startups gain the halo effect of Korean celebrities. In case a product is used or endorsed by an actor or K-pop idol, it becomes desirable because of the emotional and cultural association with fans all around the world.

Korean startups are not just selling their goods physically, but they are exporting their lifestyle and identity. This is especially relevant to Millennial and Gen Z consumers who are more interested in storytelling, cultural authenticity and a sense of identity than price or utility (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). They wish to buy products from brands which share their brand and values.

Lessons Other Countries Should Learn from Korea

- **Embrace Inclusivity to Broaden Global Reach:** Korean brands have been actively venturing worldwide in recent years. They are expanding their product lines to reflect a diverse global demographic. For example, TIRTIR, a Korean skincare and makeup brand popular for its foundation, has increased its shades from 3 to 40 in response to feedback from global influencers and customers, highlighting a shift toward inclusivity in K-beauty. This approach not only appeals to a wider population but also makes the brand prominent in the international market (Vogue, 2024) [13].
- **Leverage Cultural Soft Power (Hallyu) for Global Branding:** South Korea is ranked 12th in the global soft power index, as a result of the appreciation worldwide of its music, media, food, and fashion. Startups also integrate aspects of Korean culture into their offering, like the beauty routines or minimal tech design, to create an emotional bond with their global customers (Brand Finance, 2025) [2].
- **Use Crowd funding Platforms for Market Validation:** Platforms like Wadiz aid Korean startup businesses to test new products and build communities before their official launch. Wadiz has surpassed ₩1.3 trillion in cumulative funding by 2024 and joined hands with Makuake (Japan) and Zeczec (Taiwan) to assist in cross-border crowd funding and minimise investment risk whilst achieving wider brand significance (Wikipedia, 2024) [15].
- **Prioritise Influencer Marketing with Authentic Storytelling:** A Korean startup has prioritised influencer marketing a lot. Startups usually approach influencers based on their number of followers and their preferences. They mostly depend on micro and macro influencers as they know with a balance budget they can promote their products through them and for dealing with idols and actors a huge range of time, money and investments are required because these big celebrities are often dealt with by big brands like Chanel, Celine, Gucci and Louis Vuitton.
- **Adopt the super app model to increase engagement:** Korean tech companies like naver have developed super apps like social networking, e-commerce, maps, naver news and content services integrated into a single platform. An example is Naver adding interest communities by topic (e.g., sports and K-dramas) to enhance engagement and retain users (Punch Korea, 2024) [8].

Conclusion

Korea's startup success is not a result of product and innovation, but it reflects a deep partnership between its cultural identity, digital fluency, and entrepreneurial adaptability. Korean startups not just focus on exporting goods but also export narratives, aesthetics and lifestyle that connect with the international audience. This mixture of soft power and digital strategy is what differentiated them on the world stage. The global appeal of K-culture through the Hallyu wave is expected to remain strong, especially as Gen Z and Gen Alpha consumers look for brand reputation, authenticity, community and cultural experiences through products. As immersive digital tools with AI personalisation, AR, and localised shopping experiences become more prevalent, Korean start-ups are poised to capture the opportunities because of their early tech adoptions and design-focused mind-set.

But sustaining it will involve active backing. This involves building stronger financing pipelines to support global expansion, global marketing education for founders, and infrastructure to support cross-border shipping and consumer services. Policymakers and academe also need to invest in research on models of sustainable globalisation and long-term branding concepts for SMEs. A Korean model shows that when paired with smart data-focused marketing, it can serve as a powerful engine for a startup. Other countries wanting to grow their startups internationally may find better success by learning not only from Korea's tools but also from their mind-set.

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