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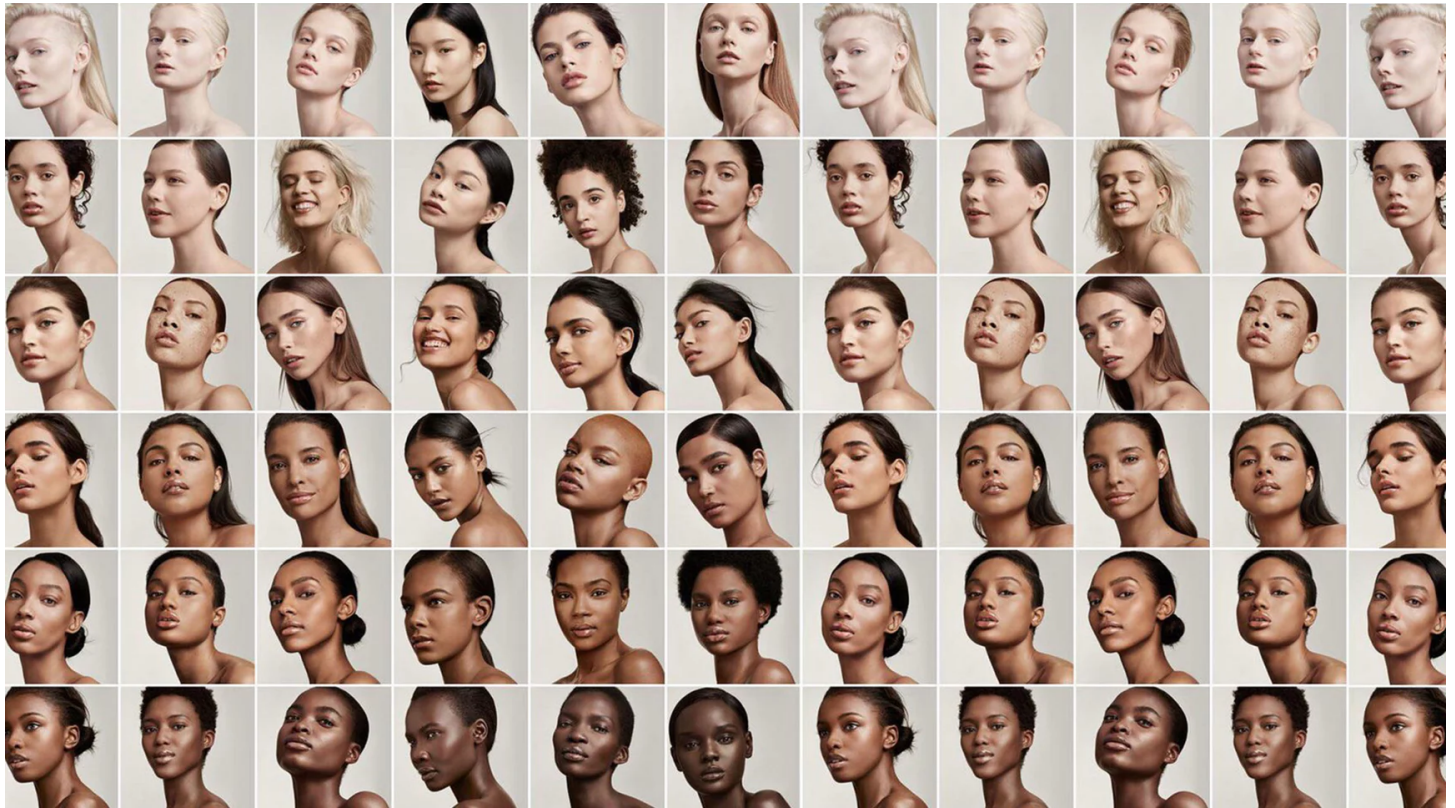
THE BUSINESS OF BEAUTY

Does Fenty Beauty Have a Future in Asia?

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Rihanna's two-year-old cosmetics label ignited an inclusive beauty movement and has generated massive sales. But as the brand prepares to enter Asia for the first time, it will need to adapt its messaging and product mix to find the same success.



HONG KONG, China — Fenty Beauty took to Instagram last week to announce that it was finally entering the Asian market in September. A video featured founder [Rihanna](#) and a diverse cast of models sporting equally diverse makeup trends, from dramatic, winged cat eyes to slick, glossy lips.

The line's entry into Asia comes two years after the brand exploded onto the beauty scene with its 40 shades of foundation, generating nearly €500 million in sales for parent LVMH in its first year and igniting a global conversation around inclusivity in the beauty industry. But though the brand launched in thousands of Sephora stores worldwide, Asia was left out.

The September launch includes Hong Kong and Seoul — two cultural hotspots that influence trends across the continent — as well as Macau and the Korean resort island of Jeju. The expansion may prove to be a dry run for a far bigger milestone: Fenty's eventual entry into China, the world's second-biggest beauty market after the US.

The brand has teased Chinese consumers since May, when it created official accounts on local social media platforms Weibo, WeChat and social e-commerce app Xiaohongshu. On Xiaohongshu in particular, influencers and everyday beauty consumers — having purchased Fenty products abroad or through unofficial cross-border sellers — have mentioned the brand in over 30,000 reviews and demos. Last week's video featured Wang Ju, a Chinese musician heralded for defying traditional beauty standards.

Mainland Chinese consumers are drawn to Fenty's products, rather than Rihanna herself, as they have achieved cult status on platforms like Xiaohongshu. Mainland shoppers frequent beauty counters in Hong Kong for brands they can't find at home. Once it's more widely available in Hong Kong it will likely boost demand in China.

Fenty declined to comment.

While it sounds like an eternity in a digital age that's breeding Instagram-first beauty lines and new product launches by the day, two years isn't long for a Western brand to make its way to Asia. [Charlotte Tilbury](#) waited five years after debuting in the UK to launch in Hong Kong last April. Success can be transformative; In May, shares of [The Estée Lauder Companies](#) hit a record high after the company reported flourishing sales in Asia. Bobbi Brown generated 35 percent of its \$1 billion in retail sales in Asia last year.

"Brands have different strategies and often they conquer their native markets first before heading overseas," said South China Morning Post's Senior Fashion Correspondent Divia Harilela. "For any brand, it's just a matter of finding the right partner and timing."

For Fenty, there's plenty of pent-up demand in its four newest markets: unofficial cross-border sellers do a brisk business in supplying Asian customers with their Fenty fix, and last week's video has nearly 2,800 comments beneath its "the wait will be worth it" caption. Rihanna is one of the most famous Western musicians there. A search of "Rihanna" on Baidu, China's biggest search engine, yields 11.8 million results, and according to Chinese entertainment web site Shangzhichao, Rihanna ranked as the most influential Western singer last year (followed by Bruno Mars, Linkin Park, Justin Bieber and Avril Lavigne).

But Fenty may need to tweak its messaging to ensure lasting popularity. Fenty's inclusivity campaigns have mainly focused on women of colour who feel underrepresented by the beauty industry in terms of both products and visuals. But such messaging hasn't penetrated as deeply in Asian beauty markets.

"Traditional beauty stereotypes and perceptions still prevail in Hong Kong," Harilela said. "Diversity is not celebrated in local [or] regional beauty ad campaigns."

Even so, Fenty is pushing forward with its "Beauty for All" mantra. According to a brand representative in Hong Kong, it will carry its full shade range of foundations and concealers — spanning 50 shades — in the city. This is unusual, and even brands known for their foundations such as Armani Beauty don't offer their full shade ranges there, Harilela said.

Fenty's current brand identity is a "super US version of inclusion" focused around showing that beauty comes in all skin tones — an idea that is "quite Western" in its execution, said Lucie Greene, a trend forecaster. The beauty ideal in Asia is less about diverse skin tones — it's centred on achieving porcelain, dewy skin and emphasises lip colours.

"Fenty may need to expand or reframe its inclusive messaging to reference more regional ideas of beauty, inclusion-needs and cultural touchpoints," Greene said.

This less diverse "Asian beauty standard" applies mainly to northeast Asia — inclusive of China, Korea and Japan — but as Fenty widens its distribution and enters more countries, a vast shade range is going to become increasingly useful in Southeast Asia where more people have darker skin.

Getting the messaging right is only the beginning. Many customers in Hong Kong or Seoul prefer a radiant finish — a potential obstacle for Fenty, which sells a matte formula as its hero product. And purchases through social media, still a niche market in the US, are much bigger drivers of sales in Asia. Selling through these new channels can challenge even the most sophisticated global brands.

Even finding the right model to convey a brand's messaging can be tricky.

[Zara](#) experienced a backlash earlier this year when it photographed top Chinese model Jing Wen in a campaign without retouching her freckles. There was intense debate online because the visuals weren't representative of the country's beauty ideals, which favour porcelain skin.

Rihanna is no stranger to this struggle. Just last week, the star's Harper's Bazaar China cover shoot was both lauded and attacked for styling her in traditional Chinese and Japanese garb, a move some interpreted as cultural appropriation. In April, the brand apologised after receiving complaints that its "Geisha Chic" highlighter fetishised Japanese culture. The name was also changed.

"Most of the time [brands] will try to find an Asian model, but the model might be too Chinese for the Koreans, too Japanese for the Chinese. If you use a Caucasian model then someone will say it's too far from an Asian ideal of beauty," said Florence Bernardin, chief executive and founder of Information-Inspiration, a Paris-based marketing intelligence firm that specializes in Asian beauty markets. "It's really difficult."

Fenty is likely to benefit from shifts underway in Asia's beauty market, however.

As a plethora of YouTube videos reveal, Western beauty trends, from contouring to "baking," have long been at odds with more delicate looks sported by influencers in South Korea and Japan. But a cultural exchange is underway, with K-Beauty booming in the West and some Asian consumers embracing elements of Western beauty looks.

"There's definitely more experimentation with Western techniques and vice versa," said Gina Chan, a publicist and avid beauty consumer living in Shanghai, noting that highlighting and "modified versions" of contouring are gaining steam.

Fenty's matte foundation may be a bridge too far for many women. Bernardin called the reliance on a matte finish a "weak point" for Fenty because Asian customers generally seek a "3D effect... to catch the light [and] create volume on the face."

There's variance in makeup preference within the region, said Elisa Harca, co-founder and Asia chief executive of Shanghai-based digital marketing agency Red Ant. With lipstick, a far less complex category than foundation, colours that attract Chinese consumers might not appeal to Korean or Japanese shoppers.

Chatter on social media has hinted that the brand is going to release another foundation this fall, likely in a dewier finish.

Rihanna's star power isn't guaranteed to translate into sales.

In spite of Fenty's popularity abroad, the reception to news of its Asia launch has been tepid in Hong Kong.

"There is zero hype," said Harilela, adding that Rihanna's star power should eventually generate more interest.

"They won't be buying the brand because it celebrates diversity... they will be buying it because it reflects Rihanna's styles, tastes and aesthetic," she said.

Chan said Chinese consumers are already "quite excited," noting that Fenty's highlighters are already a vlogger favourite. Chinese vloggers even inspired Chan to buy her own Fenty highlighter — the "Diamond Bomb" — while travelling abroad. She said the inclusivity message increased the brand's appeal.

"I saw it looked really good on all skin tones," she said of the highlighter. "I appreciate how Fenty tries to be inclusive of a global community."

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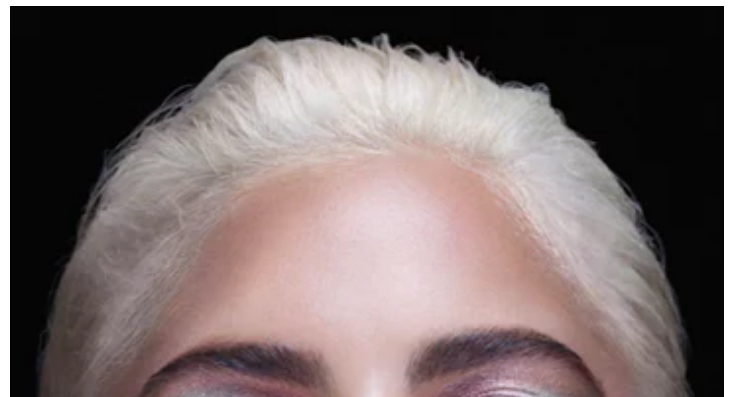
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