

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Is hip-hop the new K-pop for luxury brands in China?

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In China, K-pop is viewed as a more natural fit for luxury than hip-hop. Image credit: Sandro

By [Glyn Atwal](#)

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Hip-hop is a cultural phenomenon that has expanded the possibilities of music via an innovative use of language and technology.

Like many subcultures before it, more than just a genre, it represents a series of attitudes and perhaps even beliefs. Growing in popularity from its revolutionary origins, it is now arguably the soundtrack of the world today particularly, of that world's youth. As a result, luxury brands are leveraging the traction of hip-hop to connect with Gen Zs.

Despite this, it is K-pop that has always been viewed as the natural fit for luxury makes in China.

According to the [Statista Global Consumer Survey](#), 53 percent of Chinese digital listeners are pop fans versus 40 percent in the United States.

Despite a series of high-profile scandals, K-pop is still considered a "safer" option given that hip-hop has been the target of a government crackdown. Yet, companies should not write the style off prematurely. Such shortsightedness could mean a missed opportunity for luxury outfits looking to stay relevant and appear part of a cultural force for change.

Streetwear boom

The global popularity of many streetwear brands is rooted in hip-hop culture.

Now, the data shows that only 25 percent of homegrown digital listeners are hip-hop/R&B fans versus 34 percent in the U.S. But what the survey does not reveal is either a breakdown of the age of listeners the survey is for 18-64 years or the "intensity" of the fanhood. This is a critical shortcoming because streetwear has become synonymous with youth culture in the mainland.

Nielsen and OFashion reported that domestic spending on [streetwear increased](#) nearly four times more versus non-streetwear apparel between 2015 and 2020.

Likewise, the growing Chinese obsession with must-have sneakers, such as Kanye West's Yeezys line by adidas demonstrates an expression of key hip-hop signature trends.

Streetwear is all about identity and the cultural codes of hip-hop are crucial to how it creates meaning.

Mainstream vibes

Hip-hop in China was long considered a niche or even underground music genre. This changed with the breakthrough premier of the 2017 TV talent show, *The Rap of China*, that brought hip-hop music and many of its associated labels into the mainstream. The first season enjoyed more than three billion views.

The format has since moved to be more in step with other popular talent shows, and in 2021, *New Generation Hip-Hop Project* a rebrand of the original show included rap mentors GAI, VaVa, Tizzy T, Wang Yitai, and DamShine.

The irony is that hip-hop in China is less about taking an "anti-establishment" standpoint and has increasingly become a song sheet for patriotism. The talent show, *China New Rap*, is set to launch sometime 2022.

K-pop alternative

The 2021 arrest of **Kris Wu**, one of the most prominent Chinese hip-hop pop star/rapper artists and former Louis Vuitton brand ambassador, is a stark reminder of the risks of collaborating with music celebrities.

However, a new generation of local hip-hop artists has the potential to differentiate labels from the more conventional K-pop collaborations.

VaVa otherwise known as "China's Rihanna" (6.8 million followers on Weibo) has been the face for advertising campaigns for numerous global businesses including Sandro, while GAI (11.2 million followers on Weibo) was a brand ambassador for Li-Ning.

Lexie Liu (8 million followers on Weibo), who admittedly has somewhat diverged from her original rap territory, recently became a brand ambassador for Miu Miu.

A point of difference for luxury groups is to focus less on the number of followers, and more on the lifestyle the personality projects.

Hip-hop in the mainland may have some distinct cultural differences to elsewhere, but it still contains a sense of subculture, community and belonging.

Younger consumers who are "in the know" view hip-hop as something that breaks down the boundaries between music, lyrics, fashion and lifestyle. It can give luxury brands credibility in a market that is looking closer to home for inspiration and identity.

Executives should perhaps listen to the lyrics of one of the most successful Chinese hip-hop exports, Higher Brothers, to feel the pulse of a swiftly evolving country: "my chains, new gold watch, made in China."

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