

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

China's luxury brand exhibitions proliferate. But are they about to lose their luster?

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Luxury labels have mounted a growing number of exhibitions in China over the past few years. Image courtesy of Gucci

By [Lisa Nan](#)

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Spurred by China Gen Z's "daka" (打卡) craze (the term translates as "punching in"), which centers on consumers publicizing that they have been to popular destinations, offline exhibitions have grown to become a powerful way for brands to drive organic traffic.

Last year, **34,000 offline activations** were held across the country, receiving more than 578 million visitors.

In the past few years, mounting large exhibitions in China has become the norm for luxury brands as a new one pops up nearly every month.

In March, Prada presented an exhibition on neurodegenerative diseases titled **Preserving the Brain** at its Rong Zhai Shanghai cultural hub, and Gucci chose Shanghai as the first stop for its touring Gucci Cosmos exhibition launched last month. And earlier this month, Fendi kicked off its **hand in hand** exhibition in Beijing, which presented reinterpretations of Fendi's signature Baguette bag by regional craftspeople.

Danni Liu, general manager at Chinese creative agency iBlue Communications, explains that the frequency of exhibitions is increasing because consumers in China have demonstrated a greater affinity for and enjoyment of these showcases as a form of consumption.

"Chinese consumers actively seek out the latest and highest standard experiences. They often desire novel and cutting-edge attractions," she said.

What is in it for luxury brands?

Luxury houses infuse artistic and cultural meaning into their lines when holding an exhibition. By doing so, they further fuel the 'upper class dream' they want people to aspire to through consuming their products. The idea is to make their product collectible in the eyes of shoppers, just like a piece of art, so that consumers are eager to pay a premium.

Exhibitions also serve as a powerful tool to reach, educate and engage with potential consumers, as they showcase the brand in a visually captivating and immersive way.

"Art exhibitions can turn ordinary consumers into passionate brand fans by creating a strong connection and emotional resonance," Ms. Liu said. "Brand fans make purchases and become advocates who spread the word, share their positive experiences, and foster long-term loyalty."

The impact of an exhibition extends beyond a single consumer making a purchase. It is about building brand awareness and loyalty among a wider audience.

Exhibit, and they will come?

Awareness of art and fashion is increasing among China's Gen Z, making exhibitions an increasingly efficient platform to engage young consumers.

"Younger generations in China are obsessed with *daka* and sharing their pictures on social media," said Joey Sheng, a Westminster University master's student from Hong Kong who likes spending her free time visiting art and brand exhibitions. "The aesthetics of these exhibitions serve as an attractive background for their feeds."

On microblogging app Weibo, the hashtag #GucciCosmos# has attracted more than 770 million views and more than 100,000 related posts. Similarly, Fendi's recent hand in hand' exhibition has accumulated more than 140 million views to date. KOLs and users have been sharing pictures on Xiaohongshu of themselves visiting the installation.

Chinese fashion blogger Ava Foo, who boasts 3.5 million followers on Weibo, believes that art exhibitions enable brands to tell their story to a new generation of consumers and subtly increase their influence among this cohort.

"They [exhibitions] showcase unique aesthetics, craftsmanship, and the heritage of luxury goods, which are the most attractive elements for Chinese consumers," Ms. Foo said.

Another factor is fear of missing out (FOMO).

Ms. Sheng points to the cultural phenomenon in China known as *juan' O*, which reflects a fear of being left behind in a conversation due to a lack of knowledge.

"Exhibitions that provide educational or informative content, such as workshops or lectures, can be especially attractive to consumers and stand out in this competitive market," Ms. Foo said.

Flash in the pan or here to stay?

Shoppers in China still highly value face-to-face interactions and personal relationships, despite the pandemic, and exhibitions are an opportunity for brands to make and deepen those connections. But, as the field becomes increasingly competitive, consumers are being presented with more choice, and that could impact the level of attendance.

While aesthetic curation is essential, today's shoppers are more attuned to the value of art installations' interactivity, and maisons are responding by taking a more exciting and innovative approach to their showcases' visual journey.

For instance, the Feeling Chanel' fragrance exhibition by French house Chanel included the drawing of Tarot cards for visitors to help them find a scent.

Additionally, by scanning QR codes, attendees could hear Chanel's Chinese brand ambassadors explain the various aspects of the perfumes on display.

Ms. Foo notes that products incorporating Chinese cultural elements are particularly popular. A case in point is Fendi, which invited artisans Axi Wuzhimo and Legu Shari from Southwest China's Yi ethnic group to recreate its iconic baguette bag. As Chinese audiences become more accustomed to branded exhibitions, will tapping trends like this keep them engaged?

Personalization is crucial to ensure exhibition attendees feel seen and valued. Recognizing and catering to consumers' diverse preferences and tastes can create a sense of exclusivity, Ms. Liu said.

A well curated and executed exhibition is all well and good. But to move beyond the power of edutainment, brands can leverage customer data and insights to develop targeted follow-up communications, personalized offers or recommendations, and ongoing engagement through digital platforms or loyalty programs.

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