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Asia's coming sustainable beauty revolution

Eco-conscious consumers are rewarding brands that reduce plastic use, adopt circular models, and disclose their sustainability practices. **By Lawrence Loh and Belle Tran**

ASIA'S beauty industry stands at a pivotal crossroads. It may lead with sustainable innovation or risk falling behind in an increasingly regulated, values-driven market.

The continent is already the world's beauty powerhouse. Total sales are projected to hit US$249 billion by 2028, growing at 4.8 per cent compound annual growth rate and outpacing both North America and Europe. For brands competing in this dynamic region, sustainability is no longer a side project. It's the foundation for future growth and the key to long-term market leadership.

The continued hovering threat of Donald Trump's tariffs has become an unexpected catalyst, accelerating the shift towards regional self-sufficiency and giving sustainability practices a sharper competitive edge. In Asia's fast-growing beauty sector, this moment presents a powerful opportunity.

Consumer imperative

Sustainability for beauty isn't just good ethics – it's good business. This precept is deeply aligned with regional consumer values. Clean beauty in Asia is not a trend, but a reflection of cultural ideals rooted in harmony, balance and respect for nature.

The Chinese concept of "liang" celebrates natural, effortless radiance, while the Indian Ayurvedic traditions tie physical beauty to internal wellness through herbal rituals and detox practices. These are not surface-level preferences – they reflect a lifestyle and mindset that prioritises well-being, transparency and environmental integrity. Today's consumers expect products to reflect these values, from ingredient sourcing to ethical manufacturing. These expectations are now reshaping the market. According to Euromonitor, 31 per cent of Asia-Pacific beauty consumers prioritise all-natural ingredients, while 25 per cent demand sourcing transparency.

Clean beauty in Asia extends far beyond formulation – it encompasses packaging, production methods, and waste reduction. Eco-conscious consumers are rewarding brands that reduce plastic use, adopt circular models and disclose their sustainability practices. The results speak for themselves: sustainable beauty products in Asia grew at 9 per cent compound annual growth rate between 2020 and 2023, nearly double the market's average. By 2027, the continent is expected to contribute over half of new sales in such products.

For beauty brands, the message is clear. Sustainability is no longer a differentiator – it is the precursor of entry. Winning in this market means localising not just language, but values.

Asia moves ahead

In the West, sustainability is being met with increasing hesitation. "Green hushing" has emerged in the US, particularly with the return of Trump-era deregulation, where brands are downplaying sustainability efforts for fear of political or consumer backlash. In Europe, too, brands are treading carefully due to rising scepticism and anti-greenwashing scrutiny.

Legacy systems, especially in packaging, still rely heavily on plastic. Sustainable materials can be heavier and more expensive.
ILLUSTRATION: UNSPLASH

By contrast, Asia is stepping up. Governments are enacting clear, enforceable sustainability policies – pushing brands towards greener practices:

- China has made "green consumption" part of its national strategy. Its e-commerce platforms must meet green packaging standards, and beauty imports are subject to new cosmetic safety and environmental labelling laws;
- India has implemented Extended Producer Responsibility rules for plastic packaging, making companies accountable for collection and recycling;
- Japan introduced its Plastic Resource Circulation Act, mandating corporate reporting on plastic usage and requiring eco-friendly product design;
- Singapore has launched the Zero Waste Masterplan, offering tax incentives for sustainable packaging and R&D grants for eco-product innovation;
- South Korea passed the K-Eco Labeling Act, requiring disclosure of recyclability and pushing refillable product formats. It also banned microplastics in rinse-off cosmetics;
- Thailand is banning single-use plastics in phases and offers subsidies for companies switching to biodegradable packaging.

Green growth areas

To seize this moment, brands must think beyond compliance and redesign their business around sustainability. Here are a few ways how leading brands are stepping up their sustainability agenda.

1. Packaging that protects the planet: Lightweight bioplastics and biodegradable materials are the future. Companies like Sulapac in Japan and Veolia in China are leading the charge with innovative packaging alternatives. Even Chanel is getting in the game, using 3D-printed mascara brushes to cut plastic use. Local sourcing will also help brands manage costs while reducing carbon footprints.

2. Smarter manufacturing and supply chains: Eco-consciousness starts behind the scenes. Shiseido's use of AI to forecast demand cut overproduction by 17 per cent – saving US$10 million a year. Blockchain is helping trace ethical ingredient sourcing. Cleaner operations mean fewer resources wasted, lower emissions and leaner operations.

3. Responsible consumption in the digital age: The digital tools that once fuelled hyperconsumerism can now help reverse it. Virtual try-ons reduce product returns, and artificial intelligence-powered recommendations encourage smarter buying. Sephora and Tmall are already using these tools to reduce waste while keeping customers happy.

4. Circular beauty models: Brands such as The Body Shop are normalising refill stations, and AmorePacific's AMORE:CYCLE initiative aims for 100 per cent recycled bottles. Waterless products – like Kao's shampoo sheets – are also gaining ground. These aren't gimmicks; they reflect real shifts in consumer behaviour towards more mindful consumption.

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Paying off and futureproofing

Legacy systems, especially in packaging, still rely heavily on plastic. Sustainable materials can be heavier and more expensive. Small beauty players, in particular, may find it hard to scale eco-friendly solutions.

But the payoff is significant: lower long-term costs, loyal consumers and reduced regulatory risk. The shift will require upfront investment but so did e-commerce, and no brand today would trade that back.

Asia's beauty market isn't just large – it's influential. Trends born in Tokyo, Seoul and Shanghai often set the pace for the rest of the world. That means what happens here matters globally.

Consumers are sending a clear signal: they want products that are effective, ethical and in harmony with their values. Eco-consciousness, once a niche concern, is now mainstream. Brands that align with this movement – by investing in sustainable sourcing, transparent storytelling and responsible packaging – will thrive.

It's not just about perfection. It's about progress and intention. And in Asia, where cultural values, consumer demand and regulations are converging, the time to be future-proof is now.

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