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Asianfishing: What It Is, And When The Line Is Crossed

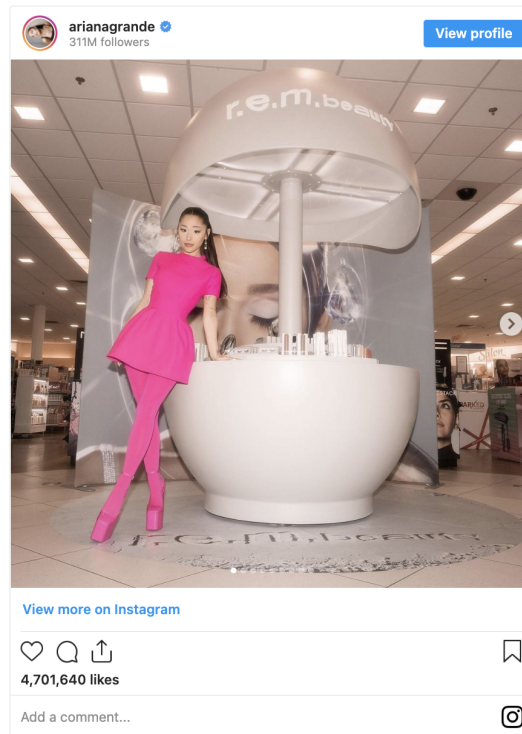
Alexa Lee | May 19, 2022



ROSDIANA CIARAVOLO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Models and celebrities can often be seen wearing makeup that accentuates an uplifted almond eye shape.

For the second time in six months, pop artist Ariana Grande faced accusations of “Asianfishing” and yellowface. In April, she celebrated the debut of her R.E.M. makeup line at Ulta by posting a photo on Instagram showing her sporting elongated, nearly mono lidded eyes and uncharacteristically light skin. While many fans were quick to cheer on Grande’s new look, others were quick to criticize her for Asianfishing, or mimicking Asian features as a style choice.



This isn't the first time Grande has been accused of masquerading as a different race. The singer has been called out on numerous occasions for appropriating Black and Latina culture, so much so that she's spawned her own category of memes. (It's worth noting here that "Asianfishing" is derived from the term "Blackfishing," which was coined by Wanna Thompson to address white people capitalizing off of Black culture and beauty.)

But Grande's racially ambiguous take on East Asian aesthetics is part of a relatively new trend — adopting Asian physical traits to achieve an ethnically ambiguous, vaguely "exotic" look.

How looking Asian and ethnically ambiguous became 'cool' in the West

Beauty techniques and products from Asia have been popular abroad for several years now, but the trend of physically resembling an Asian person has only gained steam somewhat recently.

"Our team of AAPI women and allies in the field of plastic surgery noticed the recent resurgence of the 'fox eye' amongst Western social media influencers in early 2021," Waverley He, an incoming plastic surgery resident who researches the intersection of cosmetic surgery and racial diversity, told HuffPost. Since April 2018, Google search interest for the term "fox eye," a cosmetic procedure or makeup look that creates a slanted eye shape, has roughly

doubled. Same for the phrases “brow lift” and “brow surgery,” which refer to a procedure designed to elevate eyebrows and expand eyelid space.

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- WAVERLEY HE

While elongated eyes and unhooded lids aren’t exclusively Asian traits, the overall effect of non-Asians adopting these features creates an ethnically ambiguous look, one that’s both recognizably racial and disconnected from the aesthetic’s cultural origins.

Multiple experts HuffPost spoke to cited the global rise of K-pop, along with the prevalence of social media, as key factors in the West’s fascination with Asian aesthetics. “Pop culture has evolved our idealization of beauty standards,” plastic surgeon **Dr. Kimberly Lee** said.

Lee also noted that over the last few years, there’s been heightened interest among Asians in looking, well, Asian. “In the past, there was an interest in Westernizing Asian faces, as that was thought to be desirable. However, as time has evolved, most patients seek to preserve their ethnicity while enhancing their appearance,” Lee said. “These features are what makes us all unique but are also thought of as being exotic and attractive.”

When do you cross a line into Asianfishing?

Because Asian people are not a monolith — the umbrella term “Asian American” encompasses about 50 different ethnic groups, for example — it can be tricky to clearly delineate when someone is adopting an “Asian” look. Even in the case of Grande’s controversy, people online defended the pop star and argued that those who said she looked Asian were the racist ones, not her.

And Grande’s defenders do have a point, sort of: There are a million different ways to “appear Asian,” and it can feel reductive to claim that a lightened complexion and swipe of eyeliner is enough to make Florida-raised, Italian American Grande appear East Asian.

“It feels like Western society decided foxy eyes and brow lifts are ‘Asian,’” said Anna Ling, the model and creative director behind Maruchi House.

But while there’s no objective threshold for when something becomes Asianfishing, ignoring public outcry over appropriation perpetuates Asian people’s long-standing problems with erasure in the U.S.

“Dismissing racial motivation just reinforces the fact that so much of the racism and microaggressions that we face as Asians is largely unknown or invisible to the general population,” said Melissa Magsaysay, a fashion and beauty journalist who leads content on Thirteen Lune, an e-commerce site elevating beauty brands by people of color. “To tell an Asian person that emulating our eyes is not racist is the same kind of gaslighting we experienced across the board for so long.”

Additionally, He noted that “while those pursuing an ‘ethnically ambiguous look’ may be motivated by cultural or aesthetic appreciation, I would consider the impacts these trends have on minority populations rather than the intentions of mainstream adopters.”

Asianfishing and anti-Asian hate crimes are both on the rise

For many Asian Americans, it’s hard to see Asian features becoming trendy while anti-Asian stigma and violence continue largely unchecked in the U.S.

According to He, Asian women’s exoticization in the U.S. dates back to the Page Act of 1875, which banned Asian women from entering the country under the assumption that they were prostitutes and laborers. Centuries later, biases against Asian women as outsiders persist. During a time where a growing number of Asian Americans — particularly Asian women — report being victims of hate crimes, the idea of non-Asians gaining cultural cachet for the same traits that people of color are penalized for can spark anger and disillusionment.

“As Asian women continue to experience discrimination and harassment related to their features, I am reminded that despite almond-shaped eyes being vogue, Western cultural and beauty standards dominate,” He said.

“Historically, we have been celebrated for certain things, but ignored, criticized and stereotyped for other things,” Magsaysay said. “Picking what suits you about an entire people is not just hurtful, it perpetuates the notion that we are not considered or useful in our fullness and beauty.”

Ethnically ambiguous beauty trends are a far cry from deadly attacks on Asian Americans. But as Stacy Lee Kong argued in a [recent newsletter](#), “it’s hard not to think about how these different types of dehumanization inform one another.” In order to imagine a future where Asians aren’t struggling with racist threats and discrimination, Asian people’s humanity must be accepted in full — not just as piecemeal trends that lack deeper cultural understanding.

“There will always be a group of people that imitate, but don’t appreciate the culture, heritage and traditions regarding beauty,” Ling said. “However, as ... beauty standards diversify, I hope more people can appreciate and relate to the ‘new’ trends in the mainstream. I want to see Asian people as a part of the bigger picture rather than a token for others to excel.”

Magsaysay echoed her point. “We are beautiful in our entirety at all times, not just when it’s most convenient,” she said.

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