Luxury Daily®

The News and Intelligence You Need on Luxury

MARKETING

The taboo topics that brands need to avoid in China

May 14, 2020

As anti-China sentiment is meeting China's rising nationalism head-on, new taboo topics have surfaced in China that international brands need to avoid. Image credit: Commission

By Jiaqi Luo

Fashion in China, much like everything else, is closely tied to politics. And as China gradually enters a version of post-virus normalcy, the government is tightening its grip on the citizenry through Internet censorship and ideological control to keep the peace.

This increasingly sophisticated censorship, paired with a rising tide of nationalism, should result in higher stakes for foreign brands that try to operate in the country.

Winning or losing this consumer battle will primarily determine any luxury brand's path to recovery over the rest of 2020.

According to the consultancy firm Bain & Company, China has become more of a luxury stronghold thanks to the pandemic. Chinese shoppers will represent 50 percent of the total market by the end of the next five years, up from 35 percent in 2019.

Meanwhile, online censorship and digital nationalism are only deepening after China's speedy retail recovery.

As a first-quarter report from the research firm Kantar points out, Chinese consumers' national identity and cultural confidence were greatly enhanced during the pandemic.

This surge of patriotic identity has led to a growing level of sensitivity, which has been perceived as a threat to foreign business.

Across the Chinese internet, discussions related to "insulting China ()" a term often attached to boycotts of international brands after they commit PR blunders reached new heights this year.

On the Baidu Index, a social listening tool similar to Google Trend, the average search volume of "insulting China" was around 150 over the past 10 years.

In 2020, that number more than doubled, rising to 339. During this moment of extreme stress and change, the way a

brand is perceived in China will be crucial to its relevance and survival there.

In 2018, *Jing Daily* listed 10 taboo topics that brands should avoid for risk-proof communications in China's cyberspace. They were: China's territorial borders, Tibet and the Dalai Lama, Xinjiang, Tiananmen Square, unflattering depictions of Xi Jinping, human rights, environmental degradation, Japan, K-Pop and vulgar Western culture.

Now, in China's post-virus world, more topics need to be added to that list. Although there are no official rules about what should not be said, these three issues seem to be the most nerve-racking for China's consumers:

Innuendos about COVID-19's "Chinese origin"
In April, Lululemon found itself in a PR crisis because of a "Bat Fried Rice" T-shirt posted on a former employee's social media page.

The post stirred up a lot of anger in Lululemon's Chinese fans because the joke further cemented the Western stereotype that Chinese people's eating habits were "disgusting" while also blaming the virus outbreak on China.

A similar incident occurred last month with Italian designer Elisabetta Franchi and her eponymous brand.

After the founder made a post criticizing China's treatment of dogs while claiming that 15 percent of China's population eats dogs hundreds of Chinese netizens rushed to her feed to leave negative comments that were later deleted by the brand.

Screenshots of the brand's initial posts and deleted comments were soon translated and circulated on Weibo.

Now, there have already been thousands of boycott posts under the #ElisabettaFranchi# hashtag.

Screenshots of Elisabetta Franchi's controversial posts and deleted comments have circulated on Weibo. Source: Weibo screenshots

These two PR blunders are the same product of different narratives about the COVID-19 virus inside and outside of China.

Inside China's Internet firewall, most view China as a responsible global power in a pandemic, emphasizing that "Wuhan is where the outbreak started, but not where the virus is from."

In the international press, however, stories linking the virus back to Chinese eating habits are abundant.

This discrepancy explains why Chinese netizens take virus-related criticisms very personally. To them, any critical comment that refers to China as the origin of the virus stems from racial presumptions born out of how the West sees the East.

In their minds, these gaffes expose what Western brands really think of them.

"Tainted" stars
In China, "tainted stars ()," or celebrities with a record of being morally questionable, will get brand partners in

trouble.

Once a star has been declared "tainted," all forms of campaigns and media appearances will be censored, causing both financial and reputational damage to brands. And over the past two years, the definition of "tainted" has grown stricter and broader.

The concept of "tainted stars" was born in 2014, when China's National Radio and Television Administration issued a ban on celebrities who set bad examples (taking drugs, prostitution, etc.) for young people.

In 2018, the ban extended to include stars who represent hip-hop, subcultures and a "decadent, do-nothing culture ()."

David Beckham's tattoos were blurred during a CCTV travel show transmission, May 2020. Source: Bilibili's CCTV recording

Today, celebrity scrutiny has become even more severe.

In a May transmission of a David Beckham travel show on CCTV, Mr. Beckham's upper body and arms were intentionally blurred to hide his tattoos.

In April, actress Li Xiaolu faced a strong wave of online criticism after she appeared in a livestreaming session because she had allegedly cheated on her ex-husband with a rapper.

In China's media landscape, a qualified celebrity should be patriotic, diligent, family-oriented and morally upright.

Public figures who stray from these ideals risk facing different degrees of backlash that could morph into brand boycotts.

A Beijing-based marketing executive who asked to remain anonymous for this article said that anti-patriotic celebrity behavior causes the most damage.

"There's an unspoken order [for bad behavior] in the PR world," she said. "[It goes] pro-Taiwan, pro-Hong Kong > drug problems > prostitution > extramarital affairs. These are the rules we play with now."

As a contemporary Chinese saying goes, "There is no idol at the face of our homeland ()."

Allusions to China's inglorious past (intentional or not)
At a time when the world's anti-China sentiment is meeting China's rising nationalism head-on, content making even the slightest reference to China's inglorious past will turn off netizens.

In April, a BBC documentary on the Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu stirred up controversy.

To many, the fact that the BBC chose to commemorate a poet known for his social critiques during a pandemic felt like an allusion to possible civil discontent in China today.

Days later, the Japanese manga series Detective Conan was accused of "insulting China" after netizens discovered that the author once used the name of a World War II criminal as his gaming ID, causing netizens to see him as a supporter of Japan's invasion of China.

But there are contextual reasons behind this hypersensitivity.

Today's millennials and Gen Zers have grown up in a world where the default thinking is that "China endured a century of humiliation against the West."

Any discussion of the nation's decline, even in its distant past, makes them feel ridiculed and defensive.

On Weibo, a community called #China Anti-defamation Stop (), which has a 471k following and over 5.39 billion views, has been continuously monitoring brand statements or campaigns deemed insulting to China's reputation.

At this complicated time, brands must be hyperconscious about how to navigate China's carefully constructed political and cultural worlds all while staying on-brand. It is not easy to pull off.

The lingering effects of Dolce & Gabbanas PR disaster are still being felt a year-and-a-half after the incident.

But with nearly half of the luxury industry's future sales tied to China, winning its market and people over might be a brand's only chance for survival. This requires empathy, bridge building and lots of cultural auditing.

A good place to start is by asking empathic questions.

Yingying Li, a cross-cultural communications coach, says brands should ask questions like: Do I know this country well? How big is China? Under what cultural or social changes did my customers grow up? Do I know the historical contexts before commenting on China's policies or cultural norms?

"China is a huge book," Mr. Yingying said, "and it's dangerous to judge before reading more about it and understand its different regions."

Ray Ju, associate director of Labbrand New York, said empathy should always lead a brand's content creation.

"Right now is the time for brands to be compassionate, not provocative and serious or caring in tone, not overly humorous," Mr. Ju said.

"Be straightforward and avoid motifs or symbols that may feel creative but can be unintentionally misinterpreted in a different context," he said.

The next step should be to find common ground and build bridges.

"Brands, particularly Western brands, shouldn't impose their values on Chinese consumers and expect them to accept those values," Mr. Yingying said. "There's a convergence point where a Chinese audience will like what a brand wants to express."

It is also important to think about things we can all agree upon, Mr. Ju said.

"[Things like] gratitude for our frontline and essential workers, love for our family and friends, and mourning for our losses," he said.

Lastly, but most importantly, brands should undergo constant cultural auditing.

Paul Wong, director of the branding agency Kollektiv, stressed that cultural auditing is a key business aspect. It means being aware of what is happening in a country's culture, news and viral hashtags on a daily or weekly basis.

"Anything a brand releases needs to go through stages of local auditing and essentially a cultural-proofing process," Mr. Wong said.

"Many brands have been guilty of putting out content that makes consumers ask, Don't they have a Chinese person in the company?'" he said.

In an era of increasing complexity, brands would be nave to assume that a concept will mean the same thing in different parts of the world.

Even a few simple questions could go a long way in safeguarding a brand's reputation in China.

Published with permission from Jing Daily. Adapted for clarity and style.