

MARKETING

Can Instagram ever crack Weibo's hold on Chinese millennials?

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Instagram and Weibo are staple apps of globally minded Chinese millennials. Which platform should luxury brands choose to reach this lucrative fanbase? Image credit: Shutterstock

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During 2019, the average Chinese consumer spent four hours daily on mobile devices. Over two hours of this was on social media.

According to a white paper published in 2019 by American management consulting firm Boston Consulting Group and Chinese tech giant [Tencent](#), social media penetration in China is at 97 percent.

The report further outlined the growing buying power of young social media users, stating that 48 percent of Chinese luxury consumers are under 30 years old. Moreover, it noted that "prior to final purchase, over 60 percent of consumer touch points are on social media."

Given this, it is now more important than ever for luxury brands to connect with the next [generations of consumers](#) in China through social media.

In the battle for young consumers' attention, Instagram and Weibo are both strong players in this market. But how well is the U.S.-based Instagram performing with Chinese millennials when compared to China's domestic giant Weibo? *Jing Daily* compares both from the perspective of young Chinese consumers.

Instagram and Weibo are photo and video sharing applications. Users open accounts and upload multimedia content photos, videos and gifs and text, which is shared with other users on the platform.

Alongside posting stand-alone content, users can also hold live-streaming sessions. Both platforms have a share function option that allows users to upload a 15-second video or story that disappears after 24 hours, much like popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Snapchat and [WeChat](#) Time Capsule.

However, when it comes to the type and number of users on each platform, the similarities are less clear-cut.

China's Weibo, launched by the Sina Corporation in 2009, shows that in the [third quarter of 2019](#) it has a total of 497 million monthly active users (MAU).

According to **IResearch**, Weibo has a significantly younger user demographic, for which more than 50 percent of mobile and PC users are below 30 years old. More importantly, it is commonly referred to as the Chinese version of Twitter.

As a global platform, **Instagram** holds a total number of 1 billion users worldwide. There were 3.6 million Instagram users in China in September 2018, which accounted for only 0.3 percent of the application's entire user number.

Instagram, however, is banned in mainland China. It can only be accessed using a VPN making it less convenient for people to use than local apps.

Be that as it may, the number of Instagram users is increasing rapidly in China every year, despite the accessibility issue. Moreover, users ages 25-34 are the largest user group, totaling 1.8 million, as noted by social analytics firm **NapoleonCat**.

These Chinese users are generally from niche areas such as fashion and are globally minded people interested in the latest happenings outside of mainland China. Notably, the young generation makes up the biggest user group of both Instagram and Weibo.

Weibo and Instagram both have innovative strategies to help brands socially market themselves to this **young demographic**.

Weibo earned \$1.5 billion in marketing and advertising revenue last year and has excelled in providing advertising solutions for businesses on the platform.

Advertising packages, which include display ads, search engine promotion, newsfeed ads and video ads, have proved particularly popular among companies in different industries.

For the past few years, a decentralized distribution trend has been established among major Chinese social media including Weibo.

With this new trend, users decide what information can be distributed, which is particularly popular among young netizens.

Instagram, on the other hand, looks to attract young consumers by making it possible to virtually "try on" products. Its new **Shopping with AR** feature allows brands to build product catalogs in 3D, as well as offering the use of AR lenses.

The new feature allows users to interact with experiences and receive personalized services for their skin color or body shape. This endeavor in the augmented reality arena is allowing Instagram to test out a dynamic new way to advertise and drive ecommerce to younger audiences, which appears to be overshadowing Weibo's efforts.



Instagram's new Shopping with AR feature allows users to virtually "try on" products. Image credit: Instagram

KOL and influencer marketing also play an important role in winning the hearts of young consumers.

Most Chinese celebrities have personal accounts on both platforms. The country's younger consumers are increasingly drawn to internationally minded influencers known for attracting fans with exotic landscapes and luxury brands in their posts. Very often, these products are available to purchase from a direct link embedded in the post.

Additionally, possessing a large following on Instagram is considered currency for Chinese celebrities.

Moreover, for Chinese millennials who have experienced living abroad or have **returned from studying abroad**,

Instagram has opened up a window to a global world of fashion influencers that do not have accounts on Chinese social media.

To make up for that, young Chinese netizens have built their own Instagram community using Weibo's "Super Topic." This feature allows users to create and join interest-based content community pages that are separated from the main homepage.

One trending topic in the category is #instagramfashionwear that often includes foreign influencers who are popular on Instagram. There are also fan-accounts on Weibo that share the daily outfit of chosen trendsetters on Instagram.

As leading international luxury brands' strategies indicate, social media is the driving force behind launching an overseas brand in China.

Weibo is one of the main platforms high-end that brands can use to capture younger Chinese audiences.

French luxury powerhouse **Dior** was the first luxury brand to use the new Weibo Story feature to release social media content, according to [the local Chinese site Social Beta](#).

The brand used a high profile KOL, **Angelababy**, as its Chinese brand ambassador. Angelababy has more than 100 million followers on Weibo and brought much attention to the brand among younger audiences.

Similarly successful was the collaboration between Armani Beauty and **Jackson Yee**, a member of the Chinese boy band TFBoys.

Two Weibo posts with the same promotional content indicated the power of celebrity in China: the image posted by the young superstar received more than 1.4 million likes, while Armani Beauty's post had 30,000 likes.

The journey of Chinese brands to attract attention on Instagram is less obvious, and those that want to launch in the international market are more tentative.

For example, the local lifestyle conglomerate JNBY Group has been exploring the international market since 2005. Yet the brand has only 11,300 followers on Instagram and no consistent brand ambassador.

China's Mukzin, a fashion brand established in 2014, is faring better with global audiences and has 63,400 followers on Instagram.

The brand caught international attention when it showed at New York Fashion Week 2020, but again is not using overseas ambassadors. Mukzin and JNBY have very different target consumer groups from Dior. However, international brands are taking a much more radical approach on Weibo.



The Instagram post page of two Chinese brands that look to expand overseas market Image credit: Instagram

ATTRACTING GEN Z consumers is undoubtedly the main objective of these platforms.

For now, Weibo is the mainstream social media platform in China and is therefore winning the battle.

However, Instagram is gradually gaining in attractiveness among China's millennials and Gen Z audiences.

While it might never achieve the numbers of Weibo in particular, if it remains blocked by the government it is still

surely an important rival that Weibo needs to watch.

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