

MARKETING

Can fashion in China get woke?

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By investing in the "woke" activities driving to day's youth fashion scene in China, brands can resonate with young Chinese consumers and boost consumers spending. Image credit: RoaringWild

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Protests against social injustices have galvanized millions of people around the world, and this cultural pressure is helping to build a new standard for how brands approach social issues.

Over the past few weeks, major luxury and fashion brands have collectively pledged to make their notoriously insular industry more diverse and more "woke."

However, while many brands are launching playbooks to support [#BlackLivesMatter](#) or are hiring diversity councils, corporate activism usually remains on the sidelines when it comes to companies in China, the world's biggest luxury market.

China's increasingly sophisticated Internet censorship and surveillance are perhaps the most obvious reasons for its industry-wide silence.

There is also a misconception regarding China's "apolitical, purely pragmatic" consumers. The deep-seated idea that "[Chinese shoppers](#) don't care about social issues," which is mostly due to a lack of serious fashion reporting on China, simply is not true.

In fact, clothes are one of the only legitimate ways Chinese youths can express their identities in a society that is only becoming more restricted.

Brands must start researching and investing in the "woke" activities that drive today's youth fashion scene in China.

By addressing current issues, brands can resonate so strongly with [young Chinese consumers](#) that they will create long-term attachments. And despite [the country's political limits](#), some issues are relatively safe to address. They include sustainability, women's bodies and inclusivity.

Sustainability matters

"Since the outbreak of [COVID-19](#), we have seen an acceleration in consumer interest for sustainable brands," said Chloe Reuter, founder of the luxury intelligence agency Reuter Communications, now renamed Gusto Luxe.

"This trend of conscious consumerism is here to stay," she said. "Brands that can showcase provenance, transparency, and a commitment to a social cause will resonate with an increasingly self-aware audience."

In the wake of 2020's disastrous events, voices championing environmental causes have multiplied in both China's government campaigns and within the fashion media.

The Shenzhen-based cult brand RoaringWild even used Rachel Carson's "The Silent Spring (1962)" the book that ignited the modern environmental movement as the central theme of its spring/summer 2020 collection. Through photo imagery and a dedicated music video, the brand has made exhaustive inquiries into the fragile relationship between humans and nature.

In Pre-COVID-19 China, such expressions of ecological awareness were relatively rare, and once made public, would often face skepticism. But as issues such as climate change have proven to be undeniable facts, even the harshest skeptics have come to acknowledge the worsening environment as a real problem.

Women's bodies matter

A reckoning on women's roles and bodies has also dominated Chinese social media spheres lately.

During China's **COVID-19 peak** in February, several scandals exposing the unfair treatment of female medical workers **set the millennial Internet on fire**.

A chain of high-profile sexual assault cases soon followed, further revealing a national system that protects powerful men from being held accountable.

In late May, the drafting of China's first-ever Civil Code fueled outrage from the younger generations' about the state's oppression of women. Containing more than 1,000 articles, the Civil Code essentially suggests that Chinese women should divorce less and birth more often.

Ironically, China's heightened conservative policies have come at a time when more young women are opening feminist social media accounts.

On Twitter-like platform **Weibo**, hashtags advocating the normalizing of women's bodies, such as **#SayNoToPeriodShame#** and **#Don't HideThePeriod#**, have gained a lot of momentum. When political policy increasingly equates women's bodies with reproductive tools, a growing number of women will refuse to identify with this goal.

In May, feminine care brand Libresse aired China's first ad showing period blood in red instead of blue. The ad video reached more than 200 million views on Weibo in less than a week.

Earlier, in March, **Chinese DTC brand Neiwai** launched one of the nation's first body-positivity campaigns. Its campaign with the "No Body is Nobody" slogan, which shows women with flat-chests, stretch marks, belly fat and scars, was a provocation against the picture-perfect beauty standards that prevail in Chinese media.

NO BODY IS NOBODY
没有一种身材,是微不足道的。



NEIWAI

Underwear brand Neiwai's "NO BODY IS NOBODY" campaign slogan challenged China's picture-perfect beauty standards. Image credit: Neiwai's Weibo.

In a Western context, discussions surrounding body positivity might already seem banal and could even be accused

of "woke-washing." But in China, where the female body is still primarily seen as a reproductive device needing aesthetic improvements, women need representations that normalize their female conditions.

Inclusivity matters

Under mounting pressure from the younger generations, the Chinese state has slightly relaxed its stance on matters such as [the LGBTQ+ community](#).

Censorship of open celebrations of different sexuality has significantly reduced during June (Pride Month).



Italian brand Diesel partnered with ShanghaiPRIDE this June. Image courtesy of ShanghaiPRIDE

Recently, Italian brand Diesel partnered with ShanghaiPRIDE on a rainbow-themed collection that aims to normalize the [LGBTQ](#) community, and ENG Concept Store, a Shanghai-based buyer shop, has been trending on Weibo because of its openly PRIDE-themed decor and events.

In an environment where anything other than a traditional family model can draw public ire, these small steps should not be taken for granted.

Despite a rising level of "woke" discourse, brands cannot equate Western-style woke consumerism with China's current situation.

"There is a range of social issues in China's public consciousness such as income inequality, gender equity and pollution," said Michael Norris, a China consumer insight researcher.

"But the range is perhaps narrower than what you'd expect to see in overseas markets," he said. "Still, they tie in closely with China's current development stage."

LIVE LOVE & SLAY



与 ENG 一起加入彩虹护旗队

LOVE WITH #PRIDE!

Shanghai-based ENG Concept Store openly displayed PRIDE-themed decor and events. Image credit: ENG's official Weibo

Unlike their Western counterparts, most Chinese youths do not think that luxury and fashion brands becoming "woke" is an imminent moral imperative. They believe it is a worthy issue for brands to take an instrumental role in shaping public discourse, but it does not need to be their priority.

This attitude does not mean that the industry will necessarily stick to an old model of selling without provoking. After all, consumers of every background, even the wealthy, live in dynamic times.

As an industry that occupies such a unique place in the zeitgeist, luxury and fashion should and can make meaningful strides.

Brands have responded to the #BLM movement with a strong commitment, but they should do the same with issues that matter to a Chinese audience as well.

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