

RETAIL

How mixing art and retail can work in China and how it cannot

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In China's retail scene, art and curation have the ability to tap into Gen-Z shoppers, and they could be remedies for brands and retailers' after COVID-19. Image credit: SKP Beijing

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In December 2019, one of China's leading retail shopping malls had a flock of sheep in its lobby. But why was the just-opened [Beijing SKP-S](#) shopping mall introducing a flock of woolly four-legged friends to its elite shoppers?

Initially, a big debate about whether the sheep were real or simulated went viral on Chinese social media, and thanks to this social chatter, the mall earned countrywide recognition for its innovative environment.

But who was behind this deception? It was the creative eyewear brand [Gentle Monster](#) and its CEO Hankook Kim who had livened up [SKP-S](#) with his bizarre visual aesthetic and artistic merchandising.

Under the theme, "Digital-Analog Future," the retail space came as close as possible to a spacious contemporary art gallery by featuring wild and futuristic installations. Since then, the trend of art-inspired retail space has been growing in popularity among China's department stores.

But this hybrid approach of art and commerce is not new in retail.

In December 2009, Adrian Cheng founded the "museum-retail" concept K-11, which became China's first art mall. First launched in Hong Kong, the [K11](#) project now has sites in Shanghai, Wuhan, Shenyang and Guangzhou and is now expected to open branches in Tianjin and Ningbo.

The art mall concept is rooted in displaying local emerging artists from the collection of the [K-11 Art Foundation](#) and allowing the public to appreciate artworks during their shopping journey. That has led to curatorial approaches that visually and conceptually connect artworks and mall merchandise.

The Shanghai TX Huaihai | Youth Energy Center, which was launched by local retail conglomerate Bailian Group and the Urban Revitalization Force Group, propelled this curatorial model even further by highlighting unique curatorial approaches.

The concept of "curetail," as proposed by the mall's founder, Dickson Sezto, considers art and culture as auxiliaries

that can help brands develop better storytelling.

The terminology has intrigued local shoppers and retail insiders and has driven enormous buzz on social sites such as Little Red Book and WeChat.

Originally borrowed from the art world, curation has been applied to both fashion retail merchandising and content development for over a decade now.

The key for brands and retailers is how to localize curation strategies, so they resonate with Gen Z consumers looking for emotional engagement. *Jing Daily* takes a qualitative approach to analyze the impact curating has had on China's retail landscape.

Curatorial strategies offer consumers alternative visual identities

When **K11 Shanghai** opened the Claude Monet solo exhibition in 2014, the world-renowned artist's work drove incredible offline traffic and was the perfect way for the mall to gain awareness in the city.

Though sales increased by 20 percent during that period, most of the profits came from art-related gifts and merchandise rather than brands and retailers, and this offline traffic disappeared once the exhibition ended.

Therefore, retailers learned the lesson that leaning on blockbuster exhibitions for in-store traffic wasn't sustainable.

Since then, retail strategies have paid more attention to curatorial strategies that contextualize artworks within retail space and engage customers.

According to Gentle Monster's Kim, the design of stand-alone stores and shopping malls are identical in terms of evoking emotive resonance.

"It's about how to break away from consumer expectations and constantly surprise them with new ones," he said.

In the case of SKP-S, its theme introduced a theatrical shopping experience by showcasing a digital-driven future but executed with a nostalgic twist. But the surreal journey included brand merchandising and interior design, as the visual presentation of each brand name was uniformly rendered on a black LED lightbox in red font, staying visually consistent within this fabricated world of absurdity.

Here the overall curation is telling brand stories in the language of young consumers, enticing them to spend more time in mall stores.

While brands have their varying values and identities, the distinct personality of a curated mall can be used to rejuvenate brands and enrich their storytelling.

Lifestyle-driven retail scenarios fulfill consumers' social needs

Despite immersing themselves in social media environments, Gen Zers maintain high levels of physical and social interaction.

According to the 2020 Generation Z Fashion Consumer Insight Report released by China's largest independent agency Hylink Digital Solutions and Weibo, shopping tops all other offline social activities.

Activities such as shopping at stores have become popular on Little Red Book, visiting immersive art exhibitions, and seeking out "Instagrammable" locales motivate consumers to "da ka O," which means going to unique places to capture social media moments that signal savvy and high-end tastes.

The "Wild Cinema" project in Shanghai TX Huaihai, which opened June 12, is one of the trendiest "da ka" destinations currently in the city. Mounted in tandem with the Shanghai-based contemporary art fair ART 021, the project features public artworks and installations from established local artists such as Lu Pingyuan and Xu Zhen who is already known for his retail-inspired installations as well as international artists such as Anish Kapoor and Amalia Pica.

In addition to posting selfies taken with the art objects, visitors have noted how impressive the retail curation has been.

The multi-brand **streetwear** shop Innersect and the "China Now" section that features homegrown independent fashion labels have been highlighted in several social posts on Little Red Book. And even though offline retail is probably a risky bet during the early stages of **COVID-19** recovery, the project drew more than 11,000 visitors on its opening weekend, according to a TX Huaihai spokesperson.

Unlike other demographics and tourists, the "da ka" culture that is specific to **Gen Z** reveals how younger consumers highly value self-verification via social posts.

Whether it is the mixture of luxury and futurism at Beijing SKP-S or the youth culture spectacle created by Shanghai TX Huai, a distinctive lifestyle conveyed through a retail scenario allows Gen Z to access the sociocultural confirmation they crave.

Chinese Gen Zers tend to regard consumption as a combination of expressions, belongings, and verifications of their personalities or interests, and fashion is one of the most substantial vehicles for making these statements.

As brands continue to try and understand Gen-Z consumers' value aspirations, market players can use curation to help make them relevant to this group. But they must build a culture-driven community that goes beyond the usual social media hype and offers young consumers their preferred social drivers.

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