

MARKETING

China's hottest trend, Ins Style, was influenced by banned Instagram

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Photo-sharing platform Instagram has been blocked in China for years, but that does not mean tech-savvy Gen-Zers cannot access what the app has to offer. Image credit: Dealmoon.com

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

Term/phrase

Ins Style (Ins)

About the trend

Photo-sharing platform Instagram has been blocked in China for years, but that does not mean tech-savvy Gen-Zers are not able to access what the app has to offer.

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Netizens who bypass The Great Firewall a term for the regulations China has placed on its domestic Internet share popular posts and styles on social media, giving audiences insight into what is going on outside the country.

Despite their limited interaction with popular posts on the app, this Chinese audience has created an aesthetic they have aptly named the Ins Style.

A term widely used across social media channels by KOLs and **KOCs**, Ins Style has come to reference the positive feelings coming from images of clothing, home furnishing and even photo filters found on the Western app.

On China's microblogging site Weibo, #InsStyle has more than 79 million views and 110k discussion posts. These posts generally incorporate styles such as Parisian Chic or designs that use consistent colors and tones, including the new monochromatic style, Sexually Frigidity.

But not all the commentary has been upbeat.

As the trend has gained steam over the past three years, many netizens have questioned whether Ins Style followers use the real app, while also challenging the vague definition of the term itself.

The most common argument has been that a Chinese counterpart such as Weibo Style or **WeChat** Style could not exist, as technically, there is no single overarching aesthetic on these apps, given that they attract such a diverse audience.



According to Mike Golden, president of brand strategy company Brandigo China, the Wanghong aesthetic can be used on anything with a flourish of flamingos or a hint of oversaturation. Image credit: cbnweek.com

Why Gen Z consumers like it

Recently, Ins Style posts have overlapped with another term: Wanghong Style, which refers to any aesthetic that becomes Internet-famous.

Young Chinese people are thirsty for experiences that separate them from the general public, and one way to do this is by being one of the first to jump on an influencer style.

China marketing consultant Xinyao Qiu pointed out that the rise of the phrase is a sign that Gen-Zers may subconsciously lack confidence in their tastes or styles.

Ms. Xinyao agreed with a 2019 viral Wechat article that explained why the trend was popular. "Ins Style took off because businesses started selling a fantasy, where people can live the same Western Wanghong lifestyle beneath a filter," the article states.

The Gen Z verdict

For Gen-Zers, visuals of Airbnb homes, [Urban Outfitters'](#) clothing and Hallmark cards are considered the best examples of this aesthetic.

However, 22-year-old college graduate Xu Han noted a difference between high fashion and Ins Style.

"Although many young people wear luxury items in their Ins Style posts," she said, "these brands have long existed without pandering to the trend. I think anything a Wanghong wears can be called Ins Style."

According to Mike Golden, president of brand strategy company Brandigo China, the Wanghong aesthetic can be used on anything with a flourish of flamingos or a hint of over-saturation.

"Although I tip my hat to the original [Instagram](#) style and where it's taken the world, it may have come to be overrated by local Chinese and taken on a negative connotation," Mr. Golden said.

Indeed, the aesthetic can either be worshipped or despised depending on the context, and Gen-Zers hold vastly different opinions on this craze.

Some [Gen-Zers](#) who constantly re-evaluate trends went from idolizing a particular aesthetic to finding it outdated and cliché.

Commentators have complained that the overuse of Ins Style in marketing, social media posts and store decor has cheapened the concept.



Urban Outfitters' clothing is considered one of the key carriers of the Ins Style aesthetic. Image credit: bilibili.com

How luxury brands should approach the trend

Regardless of how Ins Style is perceived by China's youngest demographic, the heated debates around it proves that Instagram even though it is banned is still the center of Chinese Gen-Zers' attention, whether they are users or not.

"Instagram is a great place for ideas and following key fashion and lifestyle **KOLs**," Mr. Golden said, "surely overshadowing other Western social media among Chinese fans."

Gen-Zers are always finding new and exotic things attractive, but Mr. Golden has seen recent signs of Ins Style exhaustion.

"I think brands should do their own thing, as the Chinese are too smart and will identify brands that are trying too hard' to win China and will avoid them," he said. "They want original brands, whether foreign or Chinese."

International brands should understand that every app whether Western or Chinese inevitably builds different impressions on different user groups, and it is essential for them to stay abreast of domestic perspectives.

As such, maybe the time is right for a local competitor to take over Instagram's reign.

"We have to admit that there is a certain hard-to-define but easy-to-identify style on **Little Red Book** or **Douyin**, as well," Ms. Xinyao said.

Therefore, the challenge is not only for luxury brands to keep creating fresh design aesthetics for their core customers, but also to keep an eye on domestic competitors. Because as local apps keep maturing, foreign attractions may no longer satisfy Gen Z's ever-changing demands.

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