

MARKETING

Why sex does not always sell in China

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Sexual imagery has been used to create sensory impressions since marketing began. But today, what societies want to see has changed, especially in China. Image credit: Shutterstock

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Sexual imagery has been used to create sensory impressions since the beginning of marketing.

The logic is simple and based on the hardwired human behavior that sexualized images evoke a subconscious reaction by creating a momentarily accessible idealized fantasy world.

The openly sexual promotional imagery that **Victoria's Secret** employs was always an effective selling instrument that is until an unanticipated and dramatic **consumer backlash** happened. This revolt was a convincing challenge against the ideal of feminine sexuality, and it forced the brand to abandon its "perfect body" advertising methods.

And although brands clearly need to reassess the meaning of sexuality in today's evolving market, they are still willing to conjure images of women in stereotypical roles, even if these are less explicit than in the past.

An analysis of the 2019 Cannes Lions Work by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDIGM) found that female characters are four times more likely to be shown in revealing clothing than male characters and nearly twice as likely to be shown partially nude.

Unfortunately, the distinction between femininity and sexualization is still a grey area for many luxury brands. But luxury brand executives need to accept that changing attitudes about sexuality and gender will determine which brands resonate with society's values, and more specifically, their target markets.

China, for example, is witnessing **changes in gender relationships**, even if there is still a wide gap between women and men.

According to a YouGov study, 53 percent of respondents in 2021 strongly agree with the statement that "women and men are equal" versus 42 percent in 2015.

Below, we have outlined some key considerations that luxury brands need to consider when aligning with the changing values that now influence Chinese society and consumer behavior.

Inner self

An Ipsos Chinese survey reported that happiness, dignity, confidence and kindness were the most important attributes in making a woman beautiful.

"Sexiness" was not ranked highly. Just 55 percent of respondents considered sexiness to be an attribute that made a female attractive.

The Japanese beauty brand **SK-II** emphasizes the significance of the inner self with its ongoing Change Destiny campaign.

One short film featured the world-record swimmer Liu Xiang facing a sea monster that represented social media's obsession with her physical appearance rather than her performance in the pool. The film's catchphrase? "Our looks can be judged in a second, but our achievements last a lifetime."

SK-II STUDIO: VS Obsession' featuring Liu Xiang #CHANGEDESTINY

Youthfulness

The same study also revealed that 65 percent of Chinese respondents considered youthfulness to be important in rendering female beauty almost double the global average. That can help explain the massive growth of the **cosmetic beauty industry** in China, which is ironically being driven by a very young female population, which sees beauty as a way to boost career prospects.

According to Deloitte, the Chinese market was valued at \$27 billion in 2019 and is expected to reach \$48 billion by 2023.

However, cosmetic surgery is less about "perfecting" the body, as with breast or buttock augmentations. In fact, double-eyelid surgery accounts for half of all treatments.

Functionality

Looking good for oneself as well as others is a motivating factor behind many luxury brand purchases.

The growth of **China's lingerie market** is certainly a reflection of that, and self-confidence amongst Chinese shoppers has grown.

Yet comfort is also of primary importance in purchase decisions and has also resulted in the growing popularity of wireless bras that define this market's evolution.

Functionality is also an important feature of the beauty market.

Interestingly, the Chinese color cosmetics market is about five times **smaller than skincare** by retail value.

Yet, the growing **demand for health products** is also boosting Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which supports the philosophy behind the L'Oral-owned brand, Yuesai.

Of course, outward appearance does matter, and marketers will need to consider generational differences.

Angelababy, the alleged "Chinese Kim Kardashian," now has more than 100 million followers on social media.

However, luxury brands in China need to recognize that sexualization is not a shortcut to market success.

Against the backdrop of inclusion and diversity, luxury brands must avoid the risk of being out of sync with evolving consumer sentiment.

So, if you think all sex sells equally, think again.

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