

MARKETING

Have China's "traffic stars" become toxic for beauty brands?

August 5, 2021



Chinese "traffic stars" once offered beauty brands massive growth in China, but an explosion of idol scandals is tarnishing this strategy. Image credit: Shiseido's Weibo

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Tapping "traffic stars," the Chinese term for hyped celebrities who drive high digital traffic, has made big beauty brands' ambitious growth in China possible over the past few years. But now, after an explosion of idol-industry scandals, brands and marketing agencies alike are rethinking the viability of this strategy.

In 2016, Guerlain took the unusual step of appointing Yang Yang, a Chinese actor who rose to fame overnight through the Chinese drama, "The Lost Tomb," as its brand ambassador, even naming a lipstick "the Yang Yang shade." The lipstick quickly sold out, and Mr. Yang's massive base of superfans had to shop the product from retailers abroad.



Guerlain's KissKiss lipstick #344 sold out so quickly that it was dubbed "Yang Yang's shade." Image credit: Guerlain's Weibo

Guerlain's experiment with Yang Yang, one of the first "traffic stars" in China's new digitally-empowered fandom culture, ended the traditional celebrity hierarchy in China's brand ambassador system. Its success made it evident that young, media-hot "traffic stars" are much more effective in triggering consumer purchasing decisions than

Oscar-winning artists.

Since then, traffic stars who rose to fame via popular talent shows and TV dramas became the go-to media strategy for big-name brands in beauty but luxury, fashion and fast-moving consumer goods, as well. By 2018, more than 40 international beauty brands switched their female celebrity ambassadors for male "traffic stars" in their marketing campaigns.

Also referred to as "little fresh meat," these pretty-faced male stars come with a massive young female fanbase who are especially attuned to spending money on the brands that their idols promote. Because of how fans see themselves as responsible for their idols' commercial value, these brand appointments have been able to bring about both media buzz and immediate business results.

Fast forward to today, and beauty brands have only intensified their strategies of fast-tracking these new traffic stars.

In March of 2021 alone, Armani beauty, L'Oréal and Elizabeth Arden appointed Chinese rising star Gong Jun known for his role in a "Boys Love" genre TV drama as its new face.

In fact, Louis Vuitton has also worked with Mr. Gong on several PR events. And in less than six months, Mr. Gong has jumped from being a little-known actor to the most coveted poster child for the world's biggest beauty names.

Fan Chengcheng, a singer who rose to fame from C-pop talent shows, is another example of how brands have quickly embraced China's idol culture for their marketing agendas. With more than 25 million fans on Weibo, Mr. Fan is now the face of Givenchy, Christian Louboutin Beauty, Fenty Beauty and Shiseido.



Fan Chengcheng promoted Fenty Beauty's blush during last year's 520 holiday. Image credit: Fenty Beauty's Weibo

In many ways, beauty brands' all-consuming desire for young Chinese idols makes perfect business sense.

Inspired by K-pop, modern Chinese fandom culture adheres to a pragmatic ethos that fans must help their idol's career through concrete contributions (aka sales) toward their idol's promotions.

Therefore, beyond showing appreciation for their idols on social media, fans take even greater pleasure in becoming active participants in their idol's ascent to greatness.

This direct link between star appointment and fan sales makes China's ambassador program unique and particularly attractive to beauty brands that traditionally operated with a seasonal/regional business model through their young, female clientele. However, an over-reliance on pop celebrities for business growth can be a honey trap for brands.

First, the short-lived nature of "traffic stars" in China's ever-changing entertainment industry means that brands must keep changing ambassadors to stay up to date with market trends. Young idols tend to own a fanbase that intensely engages for a short period yet turns to the next star in short order.

For brands that want to cultivate a solid CRM strategy in the Chinese market, using idols to recruit their fans is only a short-term move.

More significantly, a potential government crackdown on China's current idol system could pose an even greater danger for this strategy, which exclusively relies on hype.

Since last year, the country appears to be embarking on a great reckoning for toxic fandom culture.

In January 2021, actor [Zheng Shuang's surrogacy scandal](#) forced Prada to cut ties with the star after only seven days of collaboration, propelled by Chinese state broadcasts condemning her negative influence on the country's youth.

And in July, Chinese-Canadian idol Kris Wu set off some of the most explosive scandals in the history of China's entertainment.

Following several sexual misconduct allegations, [Mr. Wu lost endorsement deals](#) with more than 10 high-end brands, including Louis Vuitton, Bulgari and Lancme, in less than a week. And since then, many Chinese state media accounts have issued public pledges to commit to a "media cleaning" project, promising a crackdown on morally tainted stars that corrupt younger generations.

With the number of "traffic star" scandals rising, China's official hard-line stance against "bad influence" idols implies that brands will likely face more marketing restrictions in appointing stars for future campaigns.

Today, brands and agencies must consider whether a star's character aligns with Beijing's national objectives to avoid getting caught up in the next ambassador scandal.

"The best kind of idols to appoint should be role models," said Susanna Cheng, an independent KOL consultant based in Shenzhen. "Brands need to make sure that the idol posts patriotic words, show the right attitude towards social issues, and have a morally acceptable personal life."

If China is, in fact, undergoing an idol industry shakeup, it will quickly change the evaluation metrics of the beauty ambassador landscape.

Beyond popularity, brands would also have to look at an idol's moral reputation and make sure it fits the cultural norms Beijing is promoting.

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