

MARKETING

What China's changing "996" culture means for luxury

September 17, 2021



Although China has outlawed excessive overtime, burnout culture continues to prevail. As more youth "lie flat" in protest, how should luxury brands respond? Image credit: ByteDance

By [Julienna Law](#)

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released **State of Luxury 2019** **Save \$246 ▶**

As the rest of the workforce sat bleary-eyed through yet another Zoom meeting, Nike employees were eagerly powering down. Last month, the sportswear giant made headlines when it gave its employees a week off to de-stress in an effort to combat pandemic fatigue. According to a [LinkedIn post](#) by a senior manager at Nike, "It's an acknowledgement that we can prioritize mental health and still get work done."

This is in stark contrast to what some of China's tech billionaires have said about work.

Alibaba founder Jack Ma, for one, incited backlash when he called China's grueling "996" schedule which means being available to employers from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week a "[huge blessing](#)" for young workers.

"If you don't put out more time and energy than others, how can you achieve the success you want?" Mr. Ma posted on Weibo, referencing the early days of building his ecommerce empire.

However, the tides are turning on the mainland.

Following [several deaths](#) linked to these excessively long shifts (some Pinduoduo employees reported working over 300 hours each month), the Chinese government has increasingly cracked down on private corporations to improve worker conditions and prevent social instability.

On Aug. 27, Chinese workers saw a victory when the [Supreme People's Court declared "996" illegal](#), limiting overtime to 36 hours a month.

So, how exactly is China's infamous corporate culture changing and what effects will this have on luxury? Below, *Jing Daily* gives the 411 on "996" and what brands can do to reach the country's burnt out consumers.

Big tech responds to Beijing's regulations

Amid mounting regulatory pressures, Chinese tech companies have been revising their policies.

In July, short-video platform Kuaishou formally ended its "big week/small week" arrangement, whereby staff were forced to work an extra day every two weeks. ByteDance, Meituan and Vivo soon followed suit.

Meanwhile, ride-hailing giant Didi recently established a union for its staff after being criticized for not paying its drivers fairly setting a precedent for fellow tech giants.

But despite these landmark moves, Arnold Ma, founder of Qumin, points out that it "feels like fixing the symptoms rather than the cause."

As he explained, China's problems with burnout stem deeper than just late nights in the office.

"[Chinese youths] are aware of the toxic work culture and long hours but they will still endure it, because they can earn more money to relieve the pressures from other aspects of life such as marriage, housing, raising children and looking after elderly relatives," he said.

A mixed bag of reactions

That is why, when ByteDance ended its weekend overtime, some employees actually bemoaned the change. Not only did their workload remain the same, but their wages were slashed by nearly 20 percent.

"They're not capitalists if they don't suck your blood," one netizen posted on Weibo, where the hashtag #SalaryDropsAfterByteDanceCancelsBigSmallWeek has garnered 500 million views.

Others welcomed the stronger labor protections.

A former wealth manager at Bank of Ningbo, who wishes to remain anonymous, told *Jing Daily* that he typically worked from 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. on weekdays, plus overtime on Saturdays, without any extra pay which is legally required for over eight hours of work.

"I am not very healthy physically or mentally," the Shanghai-based millennial said. "The pressure is too high and depressing. I don't have time to do my own things."

Long hours, low pay and little room for personal growth ultimately drove him to quit his job.

And he is not the only one waving the white flag. In response to high living costs and lack of upward mobility, Chinese youth have become increasingly vocal about rejecting societal pressures to work hard and compete, choosing to "lie flat" (or "tangping") instead.

According to Andrew Atkinson, a senior marketing manager at China Skinny, this is more than just the latest Gen Z trend: it is an extension of the long-established realities of life for this generation.

"I mean you look at median house price to annual income ratios in a place like Shenzhen and it's 45:1," Mr. Atkinson said. "What's the point in grinding away for not much marginal benefit if you can take things a bit easier and have a much happier life?"

From buying property to starting families, some people have opted to reduce their material desires and consumption in pursuit of a more zen lifestyle.

How luxury should approach

Although the number of Gen Zers truly living a "lying flat" lifestyle is low, the disillusionment remains.

As such, Mr. Ma believes that marketing to these consumers is about finding the root problem and trying to fix it.

"Talk about work-life balance, finding your passion, being more efficient and effective," he said.

This is the approach Avne took when it appointed the icon of "lying flat," *Chuang 2021* contestant Lelush, to be the new face of its skincare products. On the idol competition show, Lelush rose to fame for, ironically, not wanting to be an idol. After realizing that a boyband career was not for him, he gave the absolute bare minimum so viewers would vote him off the show.

By recruiting the sulky Russian, Avne touched on the message of being yourself and enjoying freedom in its campaign.

Additionally, as Chinese youth express their desire to slow down and destress, this could mean a shift from one-off indulgences to spending more on well-being products, services or experiences.

"Instead of spending all their money on buying a luxury bag, young people may want to spend the money more

wisely on things that can give them genuine freedom and a sense of happiness and fulfillment, such as healthy food and educational services that help them to develop a stronger body, mind and soul," said Sally Maier-Yip, founder of [11K Consulting](#).

However, what brands should not do is directly reference the "lying flat" movement, especially as state media outlets regard it as ["shameful."](#)

Not only has the phrase "lying flat" been removed from Douban and Baidu, but clothing branded with a "tangping" slogan has been [removed from Taobao](#) due to concerns about its influence on young people's self-motivation.

While the days of [glorifying overworking](#) may be near the end, the bustle and burnout persists.

With companies expecting the same amount of work for less pay, these new policies seem to have amplified stress, if anything.

Brands that want to speak to these weary souls should focus on bringing vigor and wellness back into their lives inspiring them to reach their own life goals rather than win the rat race.

Or, in Ms. Maier-Yip's words, brands should be "non-judgmental and show empathy and kindness towards the young generations."

By doing so, they can keep momentum going even after "lying flat" no longer trends.

"If brands can even help young people to achieve their personal goals, that would help build the loyalty of the younger consumers in the long term," Ms. Maier-Yip said.

Published with permission from [Jing Daily](#). Adapted for clarity and style.

© 2021 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your [feedback](#) is welcome.