

MARKETING

The birth of China's cultural opinion leaders

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Brands should use insights from cultural opinion leaders (COL) during the product development phase. Image credit: Rui Zhou

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Highsnobiety just released a white paper titled, *The New Key Opinion Leader Is Here: Long Live the Cultural Opinion Leader*, on influencer marketing and digital commerce shifts in China.

According to the paper, a new generation of image-makers and creative tastemakers are pioneering the latest digital trends. These young influencers, called cultural opinion leaders (COLs), have hard-won core values and beliefs, setting them apart from previous generations.

Like Europe's original cultural pioneers, these COLs are not frivolous, self-absorbed youngsters who have not developed cultural intelligence. In fact, they earned their credibility and authority from their **deep well of cultural experiences**.

As such, COLs are early adopters of new social media sites and show culturally responsive behavior.

Highsnobiety explains how these qualities have set COLs apart from China's traditional influencer: the **key opinion leader**.

The paper also mentions how various fashion brands continue to collaborate with the "same list of 50 or so KOLs that have grown large on platforms like Weibo and WeChat" instead of reaching out to this new branch of influencers.

Unfortunately, this common influencer marketing mistake gets expensive because the price paid for the engagement rate is too high and focuses mostly on a formula measuring the number of followers rather than engagement. Most marketers understand that disengaged followers cannot bring value to a brand.

As such, *Highsnobiety* disclosed that the engagement rates for the top 50 traditional fashion KOLs on Weibo, WeChat and Douyin have consistently been stagnating or declining over the last year-and-a-half.

Additionally, some industry experts mentioned that "influencer fatigue" has become a risk to the influencer marketing industry.

By contrast, less popular social media sites such as Xiaohongshu, [Bilibili](#) and [Poizon](#) have registered strong engagement. These platforms are also popular with the Gen Z consumers whose annual spend per capita on luxury goods is already on a par with those of Gen X.

The unique consumer behavior of Gen Z has positioned them as leaders in a world where gaudy displays of affluence or social status are no longer tolerated.

"They are less interested in showing an aspirational and manicured representation of their lifestyle and are more driven by fostering community around specific topics, niches and aesthetics that interest them," the paper states.

As such, *Highsnobiety* proposes new audience engagement strategies.

For instance, it suggests using insights from COLs during the product development phase. Crocs, which worked with influencers on limited-edition products, developed an initiative in this vein.

Equally important, *Highsnobiety* recommends working with COLs outside of the fashion context, who gets brought into a fashion context. The Prada collaboration with *League of Legends* Esports host Duan Yushuang is a perfect example of this direction.

Reaching out to meet COLs in their natural habitat emerging social media platforms creates viral content that spreads a brand's message to the correct consumer groups.

Highsnobiety highlights the case of Rui Zhou, who leveraged the power of real customers and fans to cross-post community-generated content.

Brands should also pursue partnerships with influential micro-influencers who have firm control over their followings.

For example, French jewelry brand [Chaumet](#) grew awareness in China through a partnership with an anonymous socialite who documented the lives of herself and her friends on Weibo, creating a short story series that gained traction amongst other high-net-worth-individuals (HNWIs).

Lastly, brands should not underestimate the power of the Chinese diaspora as many COLs come from the ranks of Chinese expats and have a "multi-hyphenate lens that bridges global and Chinese culture into a single perspective."

On the whole, *Highsnobiety* encourages brands to prioritize engagement over reach, authority over aspiration, and community over following.

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