

HEALTHCARE

With burnout on the rise in China, how can brands offer help?

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Chinese citizens undergo a lot of stress. But younger generations have started openly acknowledging their growing anxiety levels and brands must, as well. Image credit: Hemis

By [Glyn Atwal](#)

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In a country where mental wellbeing has always been considered a taboo subject, Chinese citizens undergo a lot of stress. But younger Chinese generations have started openly acknowledging their growing anxiety levels.

According to [Deloitte's Global Millennial 2020 Survey](#), an average of more than one-third of Chinese millennial and Gen Z respondents said they experience anxiety or stress "all or most of the time." And this may only be the tip of the iceberg as consumer research often fails to factor in the prevalence of "saving face."

These self-reported cases of stress have been attributed to a combination of factors, including financial concerns, social affairs, family matters and professional situations.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has highlighted the fragility of psychological wellbeing.

According to [NielsenIQ's Future Pulse Survey \(Q2 2021\)](#), 35 percent of global consumers stated that COVID-19 has hurt their mental health.

[Deloitte](#) reported that career prospects were the biggest sources of heightened respondent stress levels and anxiety for China's millennials and Gen Zers in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The emotional impact of everyday stress is not compatible with the hedonistic lifestyle traits of younger generations, which has been the driving force of China's luxury goods market growth. Are luxury brands failing to understand the seismic shift in the psychology of consumer behavior?

Feeling good

A McKinsey Future of Wellness 2020 study found that 67 percent of Chinese respondents (versus 48 percent in the United States) said they increased their prioritization of wellness compared to two to three years ago, which has fueled a boom in the Chinese wellness industry. But wellness should not just be looked at through a purely physical lens anymore.

Most now agree that conventional self-care is also linked to mental wellbeing.

For example, "[Peace on Purpose](#)" is a partnership between the UN Foundation and lululemon that provides a series of mindfulness tools six meditation audio guides in Mandarin that reduce the anxiety levels of listeners.

Likewise, hospitality wellness offerings have expanded beyond traditional beauty treatments. Wellness retreat Six Senses Qing Cheng incorporates Taoism into various treatments. But feeling good even reaches into categories outside of traditional wellness realms.

For instance, [Herms launched yoga tutorials](#) through a WeChat Mini Program, reinforcing that China's consumers want to pursue healthy lifestyles today.

Being good

The de-stigmatization of mental health would likely resonate well with consumers, based on intimate consumer insights.

A McKinsey report states that women in China, India and Brazil are two to three times more likely to say they face acute challenges from mental health issues than their peers in the US and Europe.

The [SK-II Studio VS Obsession campaign](#), featuring the Chinese female swimmer Liu Xiang, is a bold move toward highlighting the social pressures women face in modern society.

However, [Zegna](#) has taken an even more unconventional approach with its Men in My Imagination campaign, featuring actor Li Xian and exploring underlying male anxieties.

Brands that advocate for self-care can demonstrate that being good is a positive luxury brand attribute that is meaningful.

Doing good

Mental health is increasingly a key component of a purpose strategy for many luxury companies.

[McKinsey](#) found in an 11-country study that Chinese employees were more concerned with their mental health during the COVID crisis as compared to Western countries, including the U.S.

But doing good can supposedly make a tangible difference.

For example, Farfetch's 2020 CSR Report highlights the company's need to support its employees' mental wellbeing across a range of initiatives.

Meanwhile, Nike's corporate employees were given a week off in the summer of 2021 to de-stress, which will now happen annually.

Although China may represent a different cultural setting, these types of actions should still be fostered.

Porsche, for example, was recognized as a "[2021 Top Employer in China](#)" because it supports measures that deal with emotional stress in a greater context. [Porsche's Art Healing Project](#), for instance, uses art to channel a therapeutic massage.

Mental wellbeing in China is unquestionably a sensitive and complex subject. However, luxury brands need to accept that consumers and employees have reassessed their priorities.

The bottom line is that luxury brands should adopt a positive and holistic stance on emotional wellbeing for the sake of everyone involved.

Glyn Atwal is an associate professor at Burgundy School of Business (France). He is co-author of "Luxury Brands in China and India" (Palgrave Macmillan).

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