

MARKETING

Je t'aime: "French Girl Style" wins hearts in China

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Niche brands pushing a feminine French aesthetic are winning over Chinese shoppers' wallets with the help of savvy social media strategies. What is next? Image credit: Rouje

By Meng Meng

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Dainty floral dresses from Parisian label Rouje are having a moment on the streets of Shanghai as "French Girl style" () captures the hearts of China's celebrities and netizens alike.

Amid ongoing COVID-19 restrictions that have effectively halted global travel for Chinese consumers, it makes sense that retro, holiday-ready Parisian chic sun dresses and separates are trending.

"In [cities that were locked down](#) mere months ago, the look offers a respite from urban life," said Wingo Xue, senior editor at the consumer trend forecast agency WGSN.

According to Ms. Xue, the consumers are attracted to "French retro looks" because they can achieve "a careless feel and delicate balance between formal and casual something that comforts a shopper burnt out or fatigued by lockdowns."

French contemporary brands turned big such as Maje and Sandro from the SMCP group arguably bridged the gap first, expanding through bricks and mortar.

But newer niche names such as Rouje, created by Parisian "It girl" Jeanne Damas, Ralisation Par (which is actually Australian) and Californian label Den can all hold their own.

A thriving online community

On Xiaohongshu, netizens have generated more than 1.4 million posts under the hashtag, "the French look book," which features styling inspiration incorporating these brands. For fans such as Rola Liu, a consumer based in Yueyang, Hunan, the trend's appeal is more than skin deep.

"French femininity is not just about red lips or the iconic [woven] market basket it is more of an attitude to please yourself," Ms. Liu said. "I was amazed by the comfort of a Den dress it felt so soft and looks great,"

Also a fan of Rouje, she started a Xiaohongshu account, @Rola_vintage, dedicated to these labels while on maternity

leave.

Beyond raising brand awareness for the labels, thousands of consumers like Liu are using social media to share reviews for specific pieces from recent collections, or ask questions on sizing and shipping.

"The question I get most is how the product looks on a real person," Ms. Liu said. "There are so many questions, I don't have enough time to answer them."

On Xiaohongshu, there are also how-to guides for netizens to place orders and handle customs and logistics, with many users becoming experts.

What is more, KOLs are also forming groups where fans of the brands can combine their orders for reduced shipping and customs charges.

Fanny Zhang, a London-based KOL on Xiaohongshu, had 500 people join her group hoping to purchase shoes from Parisian label Carel sadly, the order did not go through due to COVID-19 related restrictions.

The trouble with bricks-and-mortar

The league of French-style brands and those that are Parisian in spirit are characterized by their lack of physical retail channels in China.

However, a few have made a noticeable splash to raise brand awareness since last year: Rouje's Jeanne Damas has started making China-focused content and the label has become more widely available through flash retail collaborations with multi-brand store LookNow.

Meanwhile, Ralisation Par has ventured into online retailing through Taobao, and Carel has launched a WeChat store. All three have opened official brand accounts on Xiaohongshu.

"We notice that the Chinese girls make up an incredibly large share [of Rouje's sales], which motivated us to focus more on the Chinese market," Pengyu Xu, Asia marketing manager of Rouje, said.

A number of Rouje-related hashtags, including #RoujeGirl, #RoujeFrenchWardrobe and #RoujeChinaOnlineStore#, have garnered more than 8 million views and 5,000-plus mentions on Weibo.

Rouje was mounting up efforts on its first bricks-and-mortar boutique in mainland China, however, according to Ms. Xu, the plan was postponed due to pandemic-related controls and the subsequent slowdown in the retail sector.

"Europe and the United States command the largest sales share in the global market," Ms. Xu said. "As for China, it showcases the most unstable sales growth. We would say it has the greatest potential."

Temporary setbacks have befallen the cosmetic line of Rouje. The company is still waiting to get a sales certificate through a lengthy application process and is unable to deliver beauty products through Chinese customs clearance, Ms. Xu said.

In the meantime, Chinese consumers have been seen paying a premium for Rouje's face palettes and lip glosses from online private Taobao shops.

Despite the challenges, exclusivity wins out

Meanwhile, WSGN's Xue points out that part of the allure of these brands lies in the difficulty of getting ahold of their pieces, which also makes it a win-win when they seed clothing to local KOLs.

Ms. Xue thinks online marketplaces and cross-border shopping apps could be the winning path for labels looking to improve profitability and visibility in the China market while cultivating better shopping experiences for consumers.

Plus, the presence of leading French "It girls" including Jeanne Damas, Camille Yolaine, and Sabina Socol on Xiaohongshu will broaden the market for the emerging designers.

"From a marketing perspective, these labels could further increase their brand rigorization in China with physical retail channels and cross border platforms," Ms. Xue said. "The arrival of well-known French-style influencers on Chinese social media means local consumers are now on the fast track to accessing the original taste and flavor of this effortless trend."

Shihoo Koo, a Shanghai-based independent branding and creative director who advises Chinese cosmetic brand Maysu and gallery E Space, adds that a moderate pace of expansion has been their priority.

"They are also called niche because they are not mature enough for the China market," Ms. Koo said. "Their social media campaigns in the mainland have, so far, been replicas of what they do on Instagram. They'll also need market segmentation as they grow."

But, with the first chills in northern China on the horizon, there is renewed interest in items from *La Parisienne* for that perfect autumn silhouette. French girl style has durability all year round not just summer.

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