

MARKETING

## Living in the present': What Chinese individualism means for luxury brands

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*Luxury brands need to embrace individualism to connect with younger consumers, whether it is collaborating with local artists or taking bold social stances. Image credit: Miu Miu*

By **Glyn Atwal**

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China has generally long been recognized as a more collectivist society. This sentiment has helped to forge a perception that consumer behavior is driven by desires to conform to societal norms.

Indeed, the market success of many established luxury names has traditionally been centered on peer approval.

However, a collective psyche is being increasingly influenced by traits of individualism, where many younger people, predominantly in urban areas, are in fact challenging more traditional societal norms.

In terms of brands, commerce and marketing, today's generation is "different from the era of outdoor ads and traditional media advertising," said Linda Yu, China general manager of Red Ant digital marketing agency.

"Word of mouth is ever more important with KOLs and livestreaming stealing the show and young people can each find their own like-minded idols, brands and values through different sources," she said.

The rise of individualism in the mainland is a movement that may not be entirely consistent with Western narratives but is redefining the expression of self-image. It is a game changer that could potentially transform the future of the luxury industry in China.

### Individual choice

A greater acceptance of independence reflects a need to exert individual choice.

In this regard, the single-person household is altering how many young Chinese individuals choose to live. The share of single-person households is more than **15 percent, which has more than doubled since 1999.**

Similarly, the individualist mindset has accelerated the breaking of social conventions.

For example, women searching for social, economic and emotional independence is no longer a taboo subject a trend that has been identified by labels such as **SK-II** and **Victoria's Secret.**

The loosening of such social constraints is a subtle reminder that individual choice is gaining traction in China. Indeed, the choice for professionals to opt out is exemplified by the social movements such as "lying flat" and the "great resignation."

According to the [Mintel](#) research, 42 percent of respondents claimed work-life balance was a key feature of an ideal job in 2021.

### Individual lifestyles

Sub-cultures that share similar lifestyle traits represent the need for individuals to stand out but also to belong to a community.

The proliferation and fragmentation of subcultures in China are often a mark of a defined and distinct lifestyle that can be expressed through diverse codes such as hair coloring, makeup artistry and designer clothing.

Music is just one signifier of subculture, as showcased at music festivals such as the Strawberry Music Festival. Since the first edition, 118 festivals have been held across 35 Chinese cities.

The two-day 2022 Chengdu Strawberry Festival featured a line-up of artists from electronic to hip-hop to rock. This need to belong to a community can be enabled by brand association, and luxury lines are indeed collaborating with local rap and [hip-hop](#) music artists.

For example, singer Lexie Liu, who gained mainstream media exposure after appearing in *The Rap of China* in 2018, is now a brand ambassador for Miu Miu.

### Individual identity

Almost half of the Chinese respondents in the [2019 Streetwear Impact Report](#) indicated that they see streetwear as a political statement.

However, the growing mainstream appeal of streetwear makes it less about individuals taking an anti-establishment stance and more of an opportunity to express one's personal identity.

This phenomenon is consistent with the broader need for individuals to experiment with new branded inspirations. According to [Accenture](#) 2021 survey data, 80 percent of Chinese respondents "have tried new brands recently," and 45 percent "have tried new brands more frequently in the past year."

The growing popularity of niche luxury brands is an expression of individual identity that embodies both uniqueness and exclusivity.

"Income has increased but life pressures have increased, too." Red Ant's Ms. Yu said.

"Essentially, people shop more to secure a lifestyle that brings a sense of security, while the younger ones choose a more decadent way by living in the present," she said. "Therefore, the luxury and niche sectors are noticeably on the rise with the young generation,"

For their part, luxury groups have been quick to recognize the growing significance of individualism in China by offering [customization services](#), limited-edition collections and brand collaborations.

However, if houses are to truly cultivate a spirit of individuality that is off-limits to the mainstream customer, businesses need to be prepared to push creative boundaries further.

Street art, for example, is an artistic influence that is regarded as a representation of individualistic expression. [The North Face x Kaws](#) and the [Vans collaboration with Chen Yingjie](#) are demonstrations that the Chinese consumer is ready for a different touch. The crucial question is whether luxury is ready to deliver it in an authentic way.

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

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