

Insight & Strategy: Marriage market takeover

How a Japanese beauty brand has increased sales by standing up for single women in China

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Luxury cosmetics brand **SK-II** recently released an online film about the pressure on single women in China to settle down and start a family. An unmarried woman over the age of 27 is labelled a 'leftover woman' (Sheng nu) and many parents seek to get their daughters married by posting personal ads about them in outdoor 'marriage markets'.

Marriage market takeover, created by **Forsman & Bodenfors**, Gothenburg, shows how the brand subverted the famous marriage market in Shanghai's People's Park. SK-II used it as a platform to celebrate the single women's independence, rather than attract suitors. The film shows the parents' emotional reactions to the

takeover, as well as heartfelt interviews with the single women themselves.

The video has been viewed **37 million** times globally since it launched in early April, appeared in **2,000** articles and increased sales in China. We spoke to Forsman & Bodenfors planner **My Troedsson** about how local insights opened up a global conversation.



What is SK-II's position in the marketplace?

SK-II is a Japanese prestige skincare brand. It is available internationally but with a stronghold in the Asian markets. It's not available all over the world, but the Asian and the US markets are big. You can find the products in airports all over the world since there are a lot of Asian travellers who want to buy the products. In China, which is the focus for this campaign, SK-II is right behind market leaders Estée Lauder and Lancôme in terms of market shares. We know it is really trusted among customers. The products are believed to work, the brand has a long history and it has quite a scientific approach to skincare.

What were the business objectives behind this campaign?

We were briefed to create buzz and win shares in China. We also wanted to strengthen the emotional connection to SK-II and break the beauty and skincare category language. What we see especially in China's cosmetics or skincare advertising, is that it is often very rational and celebrity-focused. It's like, 'Use this cream and get flawless skin just like this movie star.' With SK-II we're looking to do

something with a much higher emotional quality that can break out of that cluttered world where the advertising all looks exactly the same.

Who is the target audience?

The core audience for SK-II in China is urban and progressive women. As a prestige skincare brand, it's quite expensive. Those women often have a global outlook, they are really well-educated and they have successful careers. They are independent, strong-minded women who want to live their life on their own terms. They want to break free from conventions. They are more focused on self-fulfilment than older generations.

But they are pressured and held back by society and tradition.

There's a lot going on and powers dragging them in different directions. Traditionally, Chinese women are expected to stay at home and care for the family. That's the expectation from society. Whereas these women are trying to balance their own aspirations with getting married and having a family. That doesn't mean that they don't want to find true love and get married. They do want that, but they want to do it in their own time and for the right reasons. From the research we've done, they often feel like they have reached a certain financial status and they are now looking for what more life can give.

Things are changing very quickly in China and women are progressing like never before. Their lives and priorities are very different from their parents'. The quick changes in society are leading to huge gaps between generations. Our impression is that it is actually these women who are currently driving the progress in China, which is really amazing and inspiring. We also saw growing interest in equality and female empowerment.

If you look at how many women are actually of that age and unmarried in China today, there are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions in the same situation. But they feel lonely because this is not something that they openly discuss. We realised that if we can open up the conversation around this topic, we would actually have the potential to make a difference in the lives of those women and their parents.

– My Troedsson, Forsman & Bodenfors

What are their attitudes to beauty?

In terms of beauty and skincare, they almost see it as a hobby. They are extremely

interested in it, and it's a very important way to express success. It's quite different from how it is in Sweden, and I think many Western countries. We also learned that it's a lot about inner beauty, which to them is about being confident, calm, wise and also about going your own way. It's about having a strong mind and not caring too much about conventions and expectations. So the insights about the audience's lives are closely connected to what beauty is for them.

What research did you do for this campaign?

We went to China a couple of times. I would like to emphasise the experience of doing this campaign in China when we are a Swedish team based in Gothenburg! We've worked hard to get to know the audience and really understand the context in which they live.

'Sheng nu' has been used as a term since around 2007 by state media to stigmatise unmarried women over the age of 27. Since then, the Chinese women [we spoke to] described an even bigger pressure to marry young and to take a step back from their careers and focus on their family life, instead of accomplishing their own dreams. Many women view the pressure to marry as one of the biggest problems in their life. This is a top of mind problem both for daughters, and for the parents or mothers, which is really interesting.

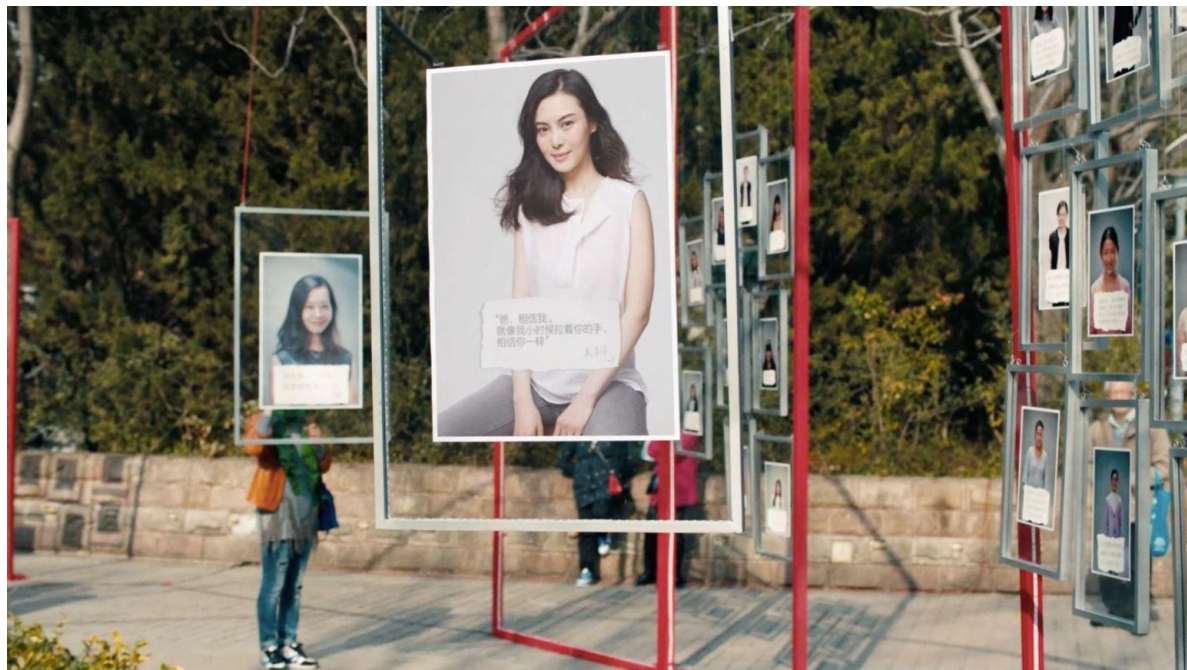
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We also learned that this pressure is something that these Chinese women don't openly discuss. They don't talk about how it makes them feel. As a consequence, the women feel very lonely in their situation. If you look at how many women are actually of that age and unmarried in China today, there are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions in the same situation. But they feel lonely because this is not something that they openly discuss. We realised that if we can open up the conversation around this topic, we would actually have the potential to make a difference in the lives of those women and their parents. It was evident from our research that women and mothers needed a platform to start that conversation.

Another thing was that the audience was longing for brands that stand for something. They're looking for brands that have a much more emotional, personal approach and show that they truly understand customers rather than only talking

about the rational benefits of the products. That's true for the world right now, but in China a lot of brands have been really focused on selling. Value-based communication is quite new or at least only maturing right now in China.



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What was the creative brief?

During our research we realised the power of the ‘sheng nu’ phenomenon and how well it connects to the Change Destiny platform that SK-II is working from. We wanted to show our audience that SK-II recognises the pressures it faces and that we are on the same side as brave, hard-working Chinese women. We wanted to encourage them to keep fighting. Our brief was to make Change Destiny mean something more to them and to elevate that to the next level, building a much more emotional connection.

How did you come up with the idea?

We wanted to give single women in China the possibility to send their parents – and society – a message. A message saying that they are not leftover but strong, independent women who want to decide when and if they want to get married.

When we came across with the marriage market phenomenon, we were quite

baffled by it. If you were to apply it to Western culture, it would be like letting your parents control your Tinder profile. The marriage market is a place where the pressure materialises into a physical form. Hence, it seemed fitting that the woman would stand their ground there.

So we decided to take over the biggest marriage market if them all, Peoples park in Shanghai, a strong symbol of the pressure.

Many women feel alone in facing this pressure, as I mentioned. By letting real women tell their stories, we could combat that notion as well, making them feel less alone. The film was created as a tool that people could use to raise awareness. That's also based on the fact that it's tough because it's really hard to talk about. If you have a film that they can share, that would be easier than to start a debate on your own. You can use the voice of those four women in order to get your own message out there.

Was the campaign aimed only at the Chinese market?

Mainly it was aimed at the Chinese market. We decided to take an inside-out, outside-in approach, a digital strategy that was developed together with BeOn. It means that the outside world had to be made aware of the 'sheng nu' issue, and that the people in China had to be made aware that the outside world has taken notice. This could increase the momentum in China. When something specific for a country gets known abroad, it gets even more interesting within that country. When the world is paying attention to you, then you pay extra attention to yourself.

In the research phase we realised that single shaming or pressure to marry is a global issue. It is something that a lot of people around the world can relate to. It's expressed in different ways in different cultures. In the 'sheng nu' case, it's extreme because you have a label on it that is used by state media.

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Where was the content seeded?

It was premiered on Chinese video hosting sites Youku, Tencent and on YouTube. China also has many more social media platforms than the Western world. We supported the launch with influencers who helped spread the word on blogs, Twitter and Chinese microblogging site, Weibo. We knew that word-of-mouth is really important in China, and that 48% aren't likely to view branded content unless it comes from a trusted circle. We really needed to utilise influencers to spread the message.

We needed to avoid looking at the situation in China from a Western perspective, if we were to create the buzz and conversation that we were aiming for. Also, it's a question of tonality and understanding what kind of tone is right if we want to be progressive. We wanted to start a discussion but not be too aggressive, we wanted to get the right balance. We're approaching these topics in a sensitive way.

What results do you have so far?

People are reacting to the campaign [on social media]. They're saying, 'Now I feel like you really understand me. This makes me so much more interested in trying out your products.' We were actually a bit stunned about that. Are they really saying this? We are still only a few weeks into the campaign and we have had 37 million views around the globe. We have been featured in 2,000 editorial pieces including on Forbes, BBC, CNN, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Elle, Cosmopolitan, stories on Weibo and WeChat and so on. This has generated more than 4 billion PR

impressions. The story has spread to at least 54 countries on all continents and it's also been featured on news channels. It became the first ever advertisement to make the top 10 list on Weibo, which has over 500 million users, with more than 7 million social actions as a result. And we've just received the first sales figures from China, showing a clear increase in sales both in-store and online following the campaign launch.

The breakthrough has been huge but also maybe even more importantly, we have thousands of social media posts from women talking about how the campaign. Some of the posts have more than 100,000 shares in China. It created so much fuss that the state-owned media promoting the 'sheng nu' term had to endorse the campaign. It has also been written about and appeared on Chinese state television.